

 Arizona Daily Star

Training focus: giving 'first aid' to people with mental illness

Stephanie Innes Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Thursday, February 3, 2011 12:00 am

It's training not unlike learning CPR or standard first aid, only this public class focuses on administering first aid to people with mental illness.

In response to the Jan. 8 shootings, a local agency is expanding a "mental health first aid" program that teaches members of the public how to intervene when someone shows signs of a behavioral-health problem.

Much speculation on what could have prevented the Jan. 8 massacre, which left six people dead and 13 injured, has focused on the mental health status of suspect Jared Lee Loughner, 22.

From his late teens into his early 20s, Loughner grew stranger and stranger, shouting about his constitutional rights, getting fired from jobs and kicked out of classes, and posting nonsensical messages online, said friends, former classmates and co-workers.

In the wake of the shootings, some mental health experts have said that Loughner appeared to have the symptoms of a paranoid schizophrenic.

The Community Partnership of Southern Arizona will begin its community push for mental health first aid by offering a five-day "train the trainer" session this month, when 30 community members, including teachers, professors, faith-based leaders, first responders and parents, will learn how to become mental health first aid instructors.

After that session, instructors will be asked to go out in the community and hold at least three annual free mental health first aid sessions of their own.

Another training, for members of the public, is scheduled for March.

Part of the goal of the program is to help remove the stigma of mental illness, said Vanessa Seaney, chief clinical officer of the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, known as CPSA.

One in four adults in the U.S. population contends with a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year, Seaney said.

A key to removing stigma is listening non-judgmentally and being reassuring, she said.

"It's like a CPR class. Mental health is like any other medical condition. If someone has diabetes or heart disease, they get better when they receive treatment," Seaney said. "If we can train our community to recognize mental-health issues and have early intervention skills, we're more likely to get people into treatment. And treatment can make a big difference."

The key to mental health first aid, which is based on an Australian model, is a five-step action plan that involves assessing risk of suicide or harm; listening non-judgmentally; giving reassurances and information; encouraging appropriate professional help and encouraging self-help and other support strategies.

The program takes into account the possibility that some people with mental health problems do not want any help.

The Arizona Department of Health Services and the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare are partnering with CPSA in the effort.

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