Testimony of David Johnson
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Lawrence Kansas

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Congressional Briefing
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
David Johnson

I am David Johnson, CEO of the Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center in Lawrence, Kansas, and one of the first 14 Certified Mental Health First Aid Instructors in the United States. As you can see from my shirt, I am a proud graduate of the Douglas County Sheriff’s Citizen Academy. It is an honor to be with these public servants, including once again with Captain Coffey, and I want to thank Congresswoman Lynn Jenkins for co-sponsoring this briefing today.

I am also proud of my challenge coins from the Sheriff, the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center, and the Chief of Police. I received this one from the Chief after helping to train the entire officer and civilian staff at the Lawrence Police Department in Mental Health First Aid. In addition to those officers, I have had the opportunity to teach Mental Health First Aid to University of Kansas police officers, to correctional officers at our county jail, and to dispatch staff.

The first feedback I heard from patrol officers was that they were very comfortable already with the first part of the Mental Health Action Plan – the “A” for assess risk for suicide or harm. They did it a lot and, in fact, dealing with any immediate risk of harm was usually the extent of their interaction. At first, they said they didn’t know whether they would use the other important Mental Health First Aid information – such as understanding signs and symptoms of mental illness and knowing how to direct people to help – in their jobs. But they all said they thought the training would be very helpful personally when family or friends were experiencing problems. We had an example of that when we later heard from a police officer who lost a child that he felt the training helped him cope with that unimaginable tragedy.

Now that our officers have been trained in Mental Health First Aid, they fully realize how important and helpful it is as they interact with community members experiencing a mental health crisis. We hear every day about how they put Mental Health First Aid into action – and how it has helped save lives. I have a board member, Elizabeth, who has a serious and persistent mental illness. She became friends with an Iraq war vet who lived in her same apartment complex and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He lost control one weekend and Elizabeth and others called the police. She was so impressed with how they handled the situation that after it was under control she sought out an officer to thank him. His response – “I was trained well by Bert Nash.”

With the number of people we’ve trained in my community and with 200,000 now trained in the United States, we are seeing another important impact on law enforcement. Here is an example. I have another board member, Doug, who is a businessman. He was meeting with another businessman and he sensed something was wrong. In fact, due to his training Doug sensed something was seriously wrong. Where previously he would not have said anything, this time he asked “Are you thinking about suicide?” Turned out it was the anniversary of the death of the man’s child, he had lost his job and hadn’t told his wife yet, and yes, he was planning on killing
himself that day. The man excused himself to use the restroom but left the building instead. Because he had questioned him about his plan, Doug had a good idea where the man was headed. Doug called the sheriff’s department and the officers arrived in time to stop the man and get him to the hospital. When more members of the public have been exposed to Mental Health First Aid, law enforcement agencies are engaged earlier and are better able to address the situation, saving lives and making our communities healthier.

You know, as resources have been taken away from community mental health, law enforcement agencies are often the de facto mental health provider for people in trouble. That has to change. Still, I consider it to be one of the great parts about my job that I get to work with people dedicated to public safety.

I want to thank Congresswoman Jenkins for all of her work to promote Mental Health First Aid and especially for working with Congressman Barber to cosponsor the Mental Health First Aid Act. With the funding outlined in this bill, we can expand our Mental Health First Aid training activities throughout the great state of Kansas and throughout the entire country, allowing millions more Americans to benefit from this important program.

Thank you.
Biography

David E. Johnson, M.S. has been the CEO of the Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center in Lawrence, Kansas since 2001. In 2012, Bert Nash provided services to 5,600 Douglas County residents. The Center has 190 employees who range from medical doctors to paraprofessionals who focus on child, adolescent, adult and geriatric mental health care.

Mr. Johnson’s current related activities include: Board of Directors, Tower Mental Health Foundation; Board of Directors, Lawrence Community Shelter; Treasurer, Board of Directors, Kansas Health Information Network; Appointee, Kansas Health Information Technology Advisory Council; Member, Community Corrections / Juvenile Justice Advisory Board; Past Chair, Community Health Improvement Project Leadership Group; Board of Directors, Lawrence Chamber of Commerce; and Douglas County Sheriff’s Citizen Academy Class of 2013.

Previously, Mr. Johnson has served as the President/Chief Executive Officer, Behavioral Health Resources of Central Iowa, Westminster House, Inc. and Eyerly Ball Community Mental Health Services, Des Moines, Iowa from 1979 to 2001.