Testimony of Nancy Nowell
Vice President for Clinical Services, West Central Behavioral Health
Lebanon, New Hampshire

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Congressional Briefing
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
Nancy Nowell

Good afternoon.

My name is Nancy Nowell. I am a licensed, doctoral-level, clinical psychologist with over 25 years of experience in the mental health field. For the last 15 years, I have worked in the community mental health system. Currently, I hold the position of Vice President of Clinical Services at West Central Behavioral Health - the community mental health center serving a 2-county region in the State of New Hampshire. I also am an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College.

As many of you know, the nationwide community mental health system was designed in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the deinstitutionalization movement. All over the country, community mental health centers continue to operate with the mission of providing mental health care to adults with serious mental illness and to children with severe emotional disturbance. In addition, we see community members with mild and moderate impairments and provide community education and supports to schools, other social service agencies, law enforcement, and correctional facilities around topics of mental health. Working in the community mental health field, I know how important it is to have a close relationship between the community mental health center and local public safety officers.

In my region of New Hampshire, we see every day the challenges of mental health crises. We see individual with long-standing psychiatric illnesses with acute flare-ups in symptomatology. We see untreated mental illness. We see people struggling with issues of suicide or rage toward others. We see people dealing with the aftermath of traumatic events. Often, law enforcement personnel are on the front lines of these situations. Many police officers have never been trained to deal with mental health challenges, whether that means de-escalating a volatile situation or helping to connect someone with treatment, and law enforcement looks to mental health agencies such as mine to assist their officers. Historically, though, we have not had an appropriate, tested training tool to offer. A few years back, we heard about Mental Health First Aid, and we now see this program as the ideal tool to bring knowledge and skills around mental health challenges to key members of the community - particularly law enforcement.

In the past year, our State went from having one Mental Health First Aid certified trainer to having approximately 35 certified trainers. I have been certified to teach both the Youth and the Adult versions of the curriculum and have taught approximately 100 residents in my region so far - including teachers, sports coaches, older teens with concerns about peers, staff working in nursing homes and homeless shelters, and other interested community members. They all reported two primary lessons learned from the training: 1) they left with a better understanding of mental illness and 2) they felt more empathy for people living with mental health challenges. Their fears and beliefs regarding people with mental illness were addressed, and they completed the course feeling more prepared to safely respond in a mental health crisis.
In my experience with Mental Health First Aid, I have seen the direct impact it can make on a group just aching for the tools to deal with mental health challenges. Recently, our local schools have seen multiple student suicides and the homicide of a beloved teacher. Bringing Mental Health First Aid to those schools has been a rewarding and enlightening process.

We have plans this summer to train staff at a local correctional facility. It is our hope to bring the Mental Health First Aid training to local law enforcement agencies soon.

The future impact of Mental Health First Aid will be exponential. As more public safety officers - men and women sworn to protect our communities each and every day – learn the strategies taught in Mental Health First Aid classes, I absolutely believe our community will be both safer and healthier.

Mental Health First Aid is the best program I know to help mental health advocates and law enforcement personnel learn from and support each other. I am proud of the work we are doing in New Hampshire, and I hope that more communities are able to experience the benefits of Mental Health First Aid.

I thank Senator Kelly Ayotte for her tireless work in supporting the Mental Health First Aid Act, and thank the Congress for appropriating $15 million for Mental Health First Aid training in the 2014 budget. This funding will help train thousands more Mental Health First Aiders in New Hampshire and around the country. I encourage Congress to expand upon this important initial investment by enacting the Mental Health First Aid Act.

Thank you.
Biography

Nancy Nowell is a licensed, doctoral-level clinical psychologist with over 25 years of experience in the mental health field. For the last 15 years, she has worked in community mental health at West Central Behavioral Health (WCBH). WCBH serves about 4,000 individuals and families per year in a two-county region in New Hampshire. She holds the position of Vice President of Clinical Services. In that role, she oversees clinical programs in adult, child, elders, emergency services, and substance abuse. In addition, Dr. Nowell is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College. For the last 12 years, she has served as the Director of The Dartmouth Psychology Internship Program. She is a certified instructor in both the Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid programs.