

## Statement of Alyssa Fruchtenicht

May 24, 2016

Good afternoon. My name is Alyssa Fruchtenicht and I am the School-based Mental Health Coordinator with UnityPoint Health – Black Hawk Grundy Mental Health Center in Waterloo, Iowa. I work with children and adolescents in our school system, as well as with the adults – teachers, coaches and administrators that are part of their lives. I am also a Youth Mental Health First Aid instructor and in that role, I train school staff and community members on how to recognize and appropriately respond to the mental health needs of youth.

Teachers today are called upon to do much more than just teach their area of expertise, whether its math or English, art or football. Teachers often play a critical role in the lives of children beyond the classroom. They can be an outlet, a source of support and help when kids really need it. This is especially true for children and adolescents experiencing mental health challenges.

But in order for teachers, coaches and administrators to be effective, they need the skills that Youth Mental Health First Aid offers. Yes, even teachers need to be taught.

Youth Mental Health First Aid offers tools and resources specifically designed for adults who work with young people. In the training, we teach adults how to handle difficult situations, how to be more aware of changes and other signs of mental health issues. We talk about language – both what to listen for and what language to use. And we give them the skills they need to know how to ask the right questions.

Too many of our young people are taking their own lives. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 24. It can be scary for an adult who suspects a child is thinking of hurting themselves. Where do you start the conversation? Youth Mental Health First Aid gives adults the language to use, the questions to ask and, most importantly, the confidence to ask them. These conversations can literally save lives.

As adults, we sometimes forget how hard it was being an adolescent. When we see a kid who is just miserable at school, we might think they choose to be that way – or that it's just part of adolescence. But in fact, they might be in a mental health crisis, one they certainly did not choose and do not want.

When a teacher says “how can I be helpful,” that is a powerful question. It conveys a recognition of pain or distress, and a level of sympathy rather than judgment. There is no stigma. It is an opening, a lifeline to that kid. It is a way of saying I know you need help and I want to help you get it. It doesn't mean that teacher can fix whatever is wrong. But it means that the teacher will help connect the child with the care they need.

That is what Youth Mental Health First Aid can do – help students get connected to an intervention. The sooner adults can see the signs and symptoms of a mental health issue, the sooner the intervention can happen, the better the outcome.

It is important that kids have adults in their world who can handle a conversation that might be tough or scary. Thanks to the SAMSA Project Aware grant program, school systems in [20 states](#), including Iowa, received critical funding to increase awareness of mental health issues among school-age youth, to train school personnel to detect and respond to mental health issues and then to connect children, youth, and families with the appropriate services. I am so grateful to have received the Youth Mental Health First Aid training as part of the Project Aware grant and I believe that every school system in the nation should have the ability to offer the training to their personnel. I believe Youth Mental Health First Aid saves lives and makes our communities stronger, and I am honored to be a part of this important program. Thank you.