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Capitol Ideas: The Council on State Governments

Mental Health—The Final Frontier in First Aid

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One in four adults will suffer from a mental health illness in any given year, according to the National Council for Community Behavioral Health Care.

"You're more likely to see someone having a panic attack than you are to see someone having a heart attack," Linda Rosenberg, executive director of the council, said in an interview with *Governing*, "Yet, most people don't know how to react to the former."

Those realities are behind the idea of mental health first aid, a close cousin to Red Cross first aid and CPR training. Mental health first aid is a nationally recognized eight-hour training course where people learn how to help someone developing a mental illness or in a crisis. CSG will host a webinar, "Mental Health First Aid," at 1 p.m. EST Tuesday, March 11. Rebecca Farley and Bryon Gibb from the National Council for Community Behavioral Health Care will explain the program and how states can benefit.

The training is geared toward first responders and members of the public, as well as teachers and others likely to come into contact with youth and others in crisis. Just as CPR classes teach how to assess a crisis and respond, mental health first aid teaches a five-step action plan to assess risk, give information and encourage appropriate professional help.

The idea for mental health first aid was developed in Australia in 2001. The program has been thoroughly researched and is now recognized as an evidence-based practice and program by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

President Obama's plan, "Now Is The Time," released just one month after the December 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting in Connecticut, called for mental health first aid training for teachers as part of a new initiative called Project AWARE—Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education. The omnibus budget bill, passed in January by Congress and funding the remainder of the 2014 fiscal year, contains $15 million for mental health first aid. The president also included funding for the plan in his 2015 fiscal year federal budget proposal.

But before the the mental health first aid model and training curriculum gained national attention, it was being adopted by some states and localities.

According to the National Council for Community Behavioral Health Care, more than 50,000 people have been trained in 47 states and the District of Columbia. Statewide programs in Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Maryland and Missouri require some public employers to undergo the training as part of their jobs. In Rhode Island, police officers take mental health first aid. Library employees in Austin, Texas, also are offered the training.

In July 2013, the Illinois legislature adopted **House Bill 1538** establishing the Illinois mental health first aid training program. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Esther Golar, said she would like to see mental health first aid training become standard for first responders.

"The bill can also be a model for training schools and educators," she said. "We need to address the high suicide rates in some schools. Teachers may learn to recognize signs they didn't see before."

While the Illinois bill did not contain funding, Golar said, "as we go forward, we are looking to see what agencies may have funding to allocate for the training."

She said the training could end up saving money. "Our prisons are filled with persons who are mentally ill. Some have not committed any crime. Others have committed crimes to be safe off the streets.

"This training brings awareness not just to agencies but to lay people too. In neighborhoods when someone may be acting peculiar, instead of ignoring them, neighbors will respond to them," Golar said.

Rosenberg hopes that mental health first aid will become as commonplace as CPR and will help to erase the perpetuating stigma of mental illness. "Mental health is the last illness that people talk about in whispers," she said.