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Mental Health First Aid Program Provides Important Training to Health Professional Students

The Missouri AHEC Scholars curriculum focuses on six core topics, one being “Behavioral Health Integration,” which reinforces the importance of integrating mental health in all aspects of a patient’s healthcare. Through the behavioral health core, scholars and other health professional students receive *Mental Health First Aid* training, which prepares them to assess, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.



Mental Health First Aid takes the fear and hesitation out of starting conversations about mental health and substance use problems by reducing stigma and creating person-centered action plans. Through these methods, students learn to safely and responsibly identify and address a potential mental illness or substance use disorder.

When healthcare providers are equipped with the tools they need to start a dialogue, more people can get the help they need. Stephanie Taylor, director of the West Central Missouri AHEC, notes the importance of offering this training to AHEC Scholars: “Regardless of their health professions discipline, be it primary care medicine, clinical psychology, nursing, or other allied health professions, students are really interested in mental health these days. This training not only helps students be better providers, but many find it useful in their personal lives, especially during the pandemic when more family members and friends are isolated and need help.”

A second training in *Youth Mental Health First Aid* will prepare students to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. Youth Mental Health First Aid is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people and can include parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, substance use, psychosis symptoms, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders.

MAHEC is a partnership of seven locally governed organizations and three university-based health professions education programs working statewide to increase the numbers of Missouri youth entering stable, high-paying jobs as healthcare professionals and the numbers of professionals caring for underserved populations.

The MAHEC partners include:

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