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Missouri AHEC Addresses Mental Health Needs Through Training and Workforce Development

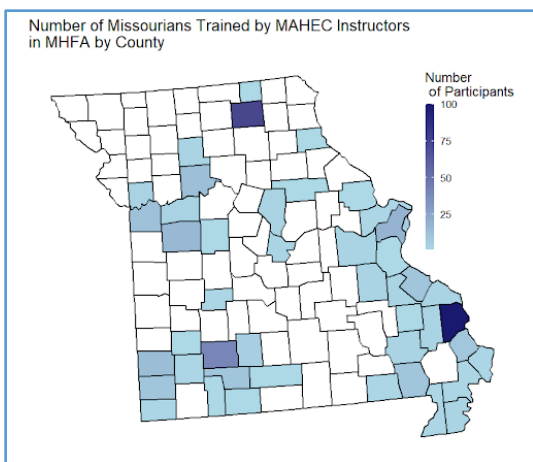
There has been a national increase in mental health concerns, both during and post-COVID, especially in rural areas where resources are lacking, and stigma is high. Therefore, the Missouri Area Health Education Centers (MAHEC) Network is partnering with A.T. Still University (ATSU) on a grant from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (MO DHSS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to address COVID-19 health disparities among populations at high-risk. The goals are to: 1) support the mental health needs of families in underserved communities; 2) improve health equity and promote health literacy within underserved populations throughout the Missouri Bootheel; and 3) increase leadership skills and capacity of Missouri’s public health workforce.

To support the mental health needs of families, an international, evidence-based program, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), was chosen to be implemented in Missouri communities. MHFA trains participants to recognize signs and symptoms of a mental health challenge and teaches the skills needed to refer persons to appropriate professional support. Matthew Burnett, an ATSU medical student fellow stated, “The training provides substance to support the campus’s effort to reduce mental health stigma within the healthcare setting. The rippling effect of this initiative will have a lasting impact on the mental health of ATSU, the healthcare field, and, most importantly, future patients.”

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:

- A.T. Still University Kirksville
- University of Missouri-Columbia
- Saint Louis University
- East Central Missouri ECMO AHEC – St. Louis
- Mid-Missouri AHEC – Rolla
- Northeast Missouri NEMO AHEC – Kirksville
- Northwest Missouri NWMO AHEC – St. Joseph
- Southeastern Missouri SEMO AHEC – Poplar Bluff
- Southwestern Missouri SWMO AHEC - Springfield
- West Central Missouri WCMO AHEC – Kansas City



There are three different versions of MHFA: adult, youth and teen. To date, 15 MAHEC staff members have been trained: 15 Adult MHFA instructors, 8 Youth MHFA instructors. Currently, the MAHEC team has provided MHFA training to over 240 Missourians, with an ultimate goal of reaching 1,000 in May 2023. One area of focus is the Missouri Bootheel, where a goal is to reach an additional 600 Missourians with MHFA of which currently, over 120 have been trained. Finally, two MAHEC staff members will be trained

in teen MHFA, to deliver the program to high schools.

Another way to address health equity and the mental health crisis is through workforce development. Through this grant, ATSU students have been engaged in numerous curricular and extracurricular events to promote good mental health hygiene including student success forums, a mental health seminar series and mental health standardized patient encounters. Additionally, one ATSU team submitted a Workforce Development Innovation Project aimed at piloting curricular innovations to boost medical student retention, academic success and wellbeing.

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