



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Department of Education

April 28, 2017

TO: Division Superintendents

FROM: Steven R. Staples, Superintendent of Public Instruction

SUBJECT: Youth Mental Health First Aid Courses – Trainers Available

A student's mental wellness is important to overall health and academic performance. This memo is to inform you of a professional development opportunity that can be provided to school personnel, after-school providers, and community partners at no cost.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness as many as one in five adolescents' ages 13 to 18 has a mental health disorder. So in a classroom of 25 students, five of them may be struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression, or substance abuse. "Whether treated or not, the children do go to school. The problems they face can tie into major problems found in schools: chronic absence, low achievement, disruptive behavior and dropping out" ([Anderson and Cardoza, 2016](#)). Experts agree that schools could play a role in identifying students and assisting them in getting the help they may need.

In 2014, the Virginia Department of Education's Office of Student Services received a five-year "Project AWARE" grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Project AWARE is a part of Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS). The VTSS is a data-driven decision making framework for establishing the academic, behavioral and social-emotional supports needed for a school to be an effective learning environment for all students. Project AWARE supports the training of over 850 educators and community members each year in Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA), an eight hour training program that teaches participants to recognize and respond to signs of mental health issues and crises in adolescents.

Consider bringing a free Project AWARE sponsored YMHFA course to your school or community as a professional development opportunity this spring or summer. Empower the whole school community and their partner organizations (e.g., PTA, after-school programs, law enforcement agencies, and faith organizations) to have a more seamless mental health safety net. Contact Jennifer Smith-Slabaugh, YMHFA Coordinator, at jjsmith@vcu.edu or (804) 828-2599. Also, please consider raising awareness of the importance of children's mental health on Thursday, May 4, National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day.

Please refer to the following online resources and tools to learn more about YMHFA in Virginia schools and the National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day resources and activities:

https://vtss-ric.org/Initiatives_-_YMHFA_-_about.html

<http://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/Children-MH-Facts-NAMI.pdf> (PDF)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-disorder-among-children.shtml>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/children/awareness-day-resources>

Additional information and questions regarding YMHFA may be directed to Vivian Stith-Williams, School Social Work Specialist by email at Vivian.Stith-Williams@doe.virginia.gov, (804) 225-4543, or Jennifer Smith-Slabaugh, YMHFA Coordinator at the Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports - Research and

Implementation Center at Virginia Commonwealth University, (804) 828-2599, jjsmith@vcu.edu.

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