



Area Health Education Centers

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January 29, 2013

Improving access to mental health services is an important part of a multipronged approach to reduce the number of gun violence deaths experience by communities across the nation.

As a resident of Newtown and the executive director of Northwestern CT Area Health Education Center (AHEC), which serves Newtown, I feel a strong sense of urgency to find solutions.

Northwestern AHEC's mission is to enhance access to quality health care, particularly primary and preventive care, by improving the supply and distribution of health care professionals through community/academic educational partnerships.

Northwestern AHEC is advocating for the implementation of the Mental Health First Aid Program (MHFA). MHFA is an evidence-based training program administered by the National Council on Community and Behavior Health Care. MHFA trains citizens to identify mental health problems in people, connect them with care, and safely deescalate crisis situations if needed. MHFA provides an ideal forum to engage communities in discussing the signs and symptoms of mental illness, the prevalence of mental health disorders, the effectiveness of treatment, how to engage people in services. MHFA training gives people basic skills to know what to do when they encounter family, friends, acquaintances or others who are struggling with mental illness.

Today, less than half of children and adults living with diagnosable mental health disorders receive the treatment they need. While the vast majority of Americans with a mental illness are not violent, several recent mass shootings have highlighted how some cases of mental illness can develop into crisis situations if individuals do not receive proper treatment. Research shows that the sooner people get help for mental health disorders the more likely they are to have positive outcomes.

NWAHEC is part of the CT AHEC Network with four AHEC centers in Connecticut and a program office at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. NWAHEC is also part of the National AHEC Organization with over 200 AHEC centers across the nation. AHEC's infrastructure should be leveraged to roll out MHFA training, and other important initiatives focused on improving mental health care, across Connecticut and across the nation.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patricia Harrity".

Patricia Harrity, MS
Executive Director

