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PATERNSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS DISTRICT MAKING STRIDES IN BUILDING ITS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CAPACITY

Hundreds of district staff trained in mental health first aid

PATERNSON – Paterson Public Schools officials today announced the progress that has been made in building the district’s capacity to address the social and emotional needs of its students by providing Mental Health First Aid training to hundreds of staff members. Mental Health First Aid USA provides a skills-based training course that teaches participants about mental health and substance-use issues, according to its website.

“Developing our ability to attend to our students’ social and emotional wellbeing is a goal that has been identified in the new five-year strategic plan, but our efforts to train our staff have been underway for a year,” said Superintendent of Schools Eileen F. Shafer. “We hope to be able to provide cohesive support in our district community and establish viable resources for anyone who is in need of help.”

The district’s Department of Special Education, under the direction of Chief Special Education Officer Cheryl D. Coy, identified Mental Health First Aid training as an effective resource to help Paterson Public Schools stakeholders recognize that mental illness and addictions are real, these illnesses can be treated, and that people can recover from them.

During the 2018-2019 school year, 325 district staff members participated in eight-hour training sessions on Mental Health First Aid for youth. In August, 300 staff members participated in an eight-hour training session on Mental Health First Aid for adults. Stakeholders included teachers, administrators, parents and recent graduates of the district.

The training covered different types of mental illnesses and addictions, and provided instruction on assessing the risk of suicide or harm, listening without judgement, giving reassurance and resources to support, and encouraging self-help and other support strategies.

“The point of the training is not to have staff replace mental health professionals or medical attention that may be needed,” said Coy, “but rather to enable district staff to better identify potential crises that may occur and to know the correct actions to take in response.”

On behalf of the district, Mental Health First Aid USA is currently training a diverse group of staff members who will be certified to in mental health first aid for youth. These staff members will be responsible for raising mental health awareness in the district community, as well as reducing the negative stigma that can surround mental illness, and promote an understanding of how to help
someone in a mental health crisis. The training will be available to all district personnel starting in October.

Earlier this month, Coy and Teacher Intervention and Referral Specialist Gail Nolton attended Hill Day 2019 in Washington, D.C. It is the largest behavioral health advocacy event in the nation, given by the National Council for Behavioral Mental Health. The district’s motivation to participate was to expand networking opportunities with mental health organizations, and to support the extension of federal funding for certified community behavioral health clinics and the expansion of programs throughout the State of New Jersey.

As a result of the multifaceted trainings and networking efforts, the district will also develop a mental health curriculum for all students in the Paterson Public Schools.

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