

## Mental Health First Aid:

# WJCS holds training on how to help

By JULIE SCHNEYER

One in five adolescents has a diagnosable mental illness, according to Westchester Jewish Community Services.

This weekend and next, WJCS will offer assistance to help combat those illnesses, with a nationally recognized eight-hour, evidence-based training course on how to help youth experiencing a mental health crisis. The program is offered in collaboration with JCC on the Hudson and UJA Federation of New York.

The training course takes place over two Sundays, April 10 and 17, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the JCC on the Hudson in Tarrytown.

"Mental Health First Aid" is listed in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's national registry of evidence-based programs and practices.

The course, said WJCS' director of public affairs Jan Fisher, aims to provide training to those who spend time with young people in schools, faith-based organizations, community groups, sports leagues, camps and recreation programs.

However, the course is open to the community at large, including adults as well as older adolescents. West-

chester Jewish Community Services encourages adolescents to register. Fisher said, "We want to give them the power to help and make a difference. An informed community helps one another."

Anyone under the age of 18 needs parental consent to register.

First introduced in the area two years ago in collaboration with County Executive Rob Astorino and the county's Department of Community Mental Health, the course continues to generate interest and will be offered at a series of diverse locations in the tri-state area over the next several months, including private practice medical offices, New York City's department of health and mental hygiene, a charter school in Queens and New York Presbyterian Hospital.

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— JAN FISHER,  
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC  
AFFAIRS, WJCS

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# WJCS course targets youth who suffer

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Fisher said the drive to offer this kind of training stems from the agency's hope to destigmatize mental health issues and "have a community of first aiders equipped to respond to a mental health crisis the same way as if a child was in a car accident."

Fisher said there are currently 18 instructors in Westchester County certified to teach the training course, which emphasizes early identification and intervention regarding mental health issues in children ages 12 to 18, including how to spot risk factors and warning signs.

Developing mental health problems covered include depression, anxiety problems, psychosis, substance use problems and eating disorders. The mental health crisis situations covered include suicidal thoughts and behaviors, nonsuicidal self-injury — sometimes called deliberate self-harm — panic attacks, traumatic events, severe effects of drug or alcohol use, severe psychotic states and aggressive behaviors.

"We're trying to teach a common language, and reduce stigma," Fisher said.

Teen issues, she said, are taken seriously and acknowledge situations specific to teens and the challenges posed to them.

The course also looks to dispel the

myth that mental health sufferers are perpetrators of violence, said Nancy Kennedy, WJCS' director of school-based programs in Yonkers Public Schools, and a licensed clinical social worker. "More often, sufferers are harmful to themselves, not to others," Kennedy said.

She was the first professional in the county to become certified as a youth mental health first aid instructor and took a 35-hour training class to achieve her own certification, sponsored by the National Council of Behavioral Health. The council is a Washington, D.C.-based not-for-profit that advocates for policies serving those affected by mental health issues and provides professional training. The council announced earlier this year a national campaign with a goal to train a million people as first aiders in the coming year.

Early identification and intervention, Kennedy said, is key. The course's five-step action plan, using the acronym ALGEE, teaches participants what to look for when helping a youth coping with a crisis:

First, assessment of the situation to determine the scale of the issue; next, participants are taught to listen non-judgmentally, then give reassurance and information, and ultimately to enlist appropriate professional help as well as encourage self-help and support.

Fisher told The Inquirer Community Services is passionate about helping youth with mental health issues. But she said, because of the stigma surrounding mental health issues, often problems that exist amongst sufferers go ignored.

This training course looks to change that.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and Community Services will offer the course again May 13, this time for legislators. Fisher said state, county, municipal, city, and school board officials are all welcome.

"Anyone from a local mayor to a New York State Assembly member or senator" is welcome, she said, as the service wants to involve public officials in the fight against mental illness.

Fisher said the organization will continue its training options for the public frequently throughout the year and said the course's interactive style has proven endearing to participants.

"There's very little lecture in the eight hours," she said.

Role-playing scenarios and group discussion are frequently incorporated into the session.

Other mental health first aid courses that are currently in development stages will target assistance to veterans, and young children.

To register for the course, visit [wjcs.com](http://wjcs.com).