

State of California

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMISSION

MHSSA Collaboration Teleconference Meeting Summary
March 6, 2024

MHSOAC
1812 9th Street
Sacramento, CA 95811

Staff Presenting:

Riann Kopchak, Chief, Community Engagement and Grants
Cheryl Ward, Health Program Specialist
Michele Nottingham, Health Program Specialist
Lester Robancho, Health Program Specialist

Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began with a video featuring Ventura County's Peer-to-Peer mental wellness support in its schools, demonstrating how Mental Health Student Services Act (MHSSA) grant dollars are moving programs forward. Ventura County will present this program later in today's meeting.

Cheryl Ward, Health Program Specialist, called the MHSSA Collaboration teleconference meeting of the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC or Commission) to order at approximately 1:00 p.m. and welcomed everyone to the 13th quarterly meeting. She reminded everyone of the goals of these meetings and stated the focus of today's meeting is peer-to-peer mental wellness support in schools.

Announcements and Updates

1. MHSSA TA Technical Coaching Teams

Ms. Ward stated the awardees have been chosen for the technical assistance coaching teams (TCTs): Placer County Office of Education (COE) for Program Implementation, Tehama Department of Education (DOE) for Data Collection, and Imperial COE for both Partnership Development and Sustainability. Staff is in the process of finalizing the scope of work for each of these contracts. This is a two-tiered process, as a Statewide Coordinator will be included to work with the TCTs to build a strategy for statewide MHSSA technical assistance.

Ms. Ward thanked respondents to the January survey for candidate suggestions. The TCTs and the Commission will consider this input when sending out the Request for Qualifications (RFQ). The TCTs are expected to be in place before the Statewide Coordinator is selected.

Ms. Ward asked Mr. Robancho to post the link to the Grantee Contact List on the MHSSA website in the Chat Section.

2. MHSSA Funding Request for Applications (RFA)

Ms. Ward stated the latest round of MHSSA funding was approved by the Commission at the February 22nd Commission Meeting. It will be a total of \$25 million dollars in four MHSSA grant funding areas:

- \$5 million (10 grants for \$500,000) to provide support and services to foster, juvenile justice involved, marginalized, or vulnerable youth.
- \$8 million (10 grants for \$800,000) to support a learning cohort of MHSSA grant partners to develop a plan to implement equitable and universal mental health screening in schools.
- \$9 million (20 grants for \$450,000) to support continuous quality improvement and long-term sustainability of school-county partnerships funded by MHSSA.
- \$3 million (10 grants for \$300,000) to support other priorities as defined by applicants to address unique needs of their partnership that do not fit the other categories.

Ms. Ward stated the Commission meeting packet included the RFA target release date of March 2024. The RFA will include submission deadline information within its timeline. A preview of what the RFA may include can be found within the Commission meeting packet for the February 22nd Commission meeting on the website.

Ms. Ward asked Mr. Robancho to post the relevant links in the Chat Section.

Discussion

JoNell Wallace, School-Based Mental Health and Wellness Coordinator, Tehama County, asked if counties can apply for more than one of the four areas.

Riann Kopchak, Chief, Community Engagement and Grants, stated the RFQ is still in the process of being completed; it is anticipated that counties will be able to apply for more than one area. Details for how that will be laid out in the process are forthcoming.

Peer-to-Peer Mental Wellness Support in Schools

Ms. Kopchak stated the focus of this meeting is peer-to-peer mental wellness support in schools. This focus is important among students. She reviewed the feedback on peer support programs, which included the following:

- Empower youth to provide mental health support
- Reduce isolation
- Increase self-help skills and empower other youth
- Youth involved in peer support programs and leadership roles can help create systems of services that better meet young people's needs in the ways that matter to them

- Helps mitigate the provider shortage
- Can offer a workforce development pipeline for youth

Ms. Kopchak stated the three presenters represent three different perspectives: an MHSSA grantee to explain how they have set up their program, a peer fellow with lived experience, and a subject matter expert with extensive knowledge on setting up these programs and providing resources for success.

1. Ventura County MHSSA Peer-to-Peer Program

Ms. Ward introduced the representatives from Ventura County and asked them to give their presentations.

Suzanne Weist, M.Ed., PPS Coordinator, Ventura COE, provided an overview, with a slide presentation, of the introduction, goals, and services of the county's 11 Mental Health Wellness Centers. She stated an Access and Awareness Survey was sent out to all students for the past three years. The number one reason why students access the Wellness Centers is because it is a safe space for them on campus. She shared statistics of the program gathered from Wellness Center data. She noted that the highest population of students who visited the Wellness Centers were 9th grade students, the majority of whom came from middle school Wellness Centers.

Ms. Weist continued her slide presentation and reviewed the role and application and training process of the wellness peers. She stated one of the county's Wellness Centers reorganized the peer structure to include a president, vice president, secretary, and cabinet to support peers in taking ownership of their role on campus. Summer and winter trainings focus on mental health, access, providing resources, emotion management, cultural awareness, team building, and creativity around mental health activities and include a survey. Approximately 115 students attend these trainings.

Montserrat "Monse" Sanchez, Ventura County Wellness Peer, The Nest Wellness Center, Oxnard High School in Oxnard; Dan Mendoza, Ventura County Wellness Peer, The Wave Wellness Center, Pacific High School in Ventura; and Kaitlin Lizaso, Ventura County Wellness Peer, The Cove Wellness Center, Pacifica High School in Oxnard, shared their experiences as wellness peers. They described their processes of becoming wellness peers and provided feedback to the following questions:

Why did you want to be a wellness peer?

To help someone, especially someone who is feeling hurt, and being the person they can rely on.

To join their friends who were helping people and participating in activities.

To be part of a comfortable, safe community.

To be the reason someone smiles.

To be a part of and bring people into that community. It is nice seeing everyone smile.

Liked the content presented during fieldtrips to the VCOE, which were part of the mental wellness pathway.

What are some of the most important things you have learned as a wellness peer?

To better handle my emotions. To allow myself to have bad days.

To overcome cultural mental health stigma both for myself and my friends.

The safe talk. Although I was in the mental wellness pathway and I practiced meditation, it helped me be more comfortable with talking to other people with any issues or hard times they may be having.

To be inclusive, accepting of everyone, and making everyone feel welcome regardless of what they look like or what their background is.

To be compassionate and vulnerable. Sharing your story can save someone's life - they can relate to it and feel less alone. One small act of kindness can take someone a long way and maybe save their life.

How do you know the Wellness Center is successful?

Seeing students attend the offered peer-led workshops.

Seeing students come in and out of the Wellness Center means that it is convenient and accessible to students.

Seeing students show interest and share that they liked certain activities or ask when a certain speaker will be invited to present or when a certain subject will be discussed.

Seeing students frequent the Wellness Center for workshops or to enjoy the safe space to do homework or relax and de-stress.

Seeing students come into the Wellness Center eager to talk with staff and others, knowing that they have a safe place where they can come.

Hearing students tell others that they are attending activities, how engaging the activities are, how much fun they have, and how much they learn about engaging and being more talkative and social.

Having a safe and welcoming space for students is important.

How do you think being a wellness peer will help you in the future?

It will improve my communication skills and being able to help people.

It will improve my public speaking and leadership skills since peers lead the workshops attended by students.

It will help me lead by example, be a role model, and be able to make connections with friends and others through the Wellness Center.

I want to work in elementary education. Being a wellness peer gives me insight on how to make activities around certain topics, especially mental health, and normalize it. It will help me to teach that mental health is important from a young age, that there is no stigma around it, and I can use the skills from being a wellness peer and share resources in education and with family and friends.

It will help me be more socially aware and notice signs that may not be obvious.

It will help me in any future environment.

I want to be a counselor. Being a wellness peer has a lot of engagement with people and having a connection and making people feel heard and understood.

It will help with engaging and communication skills.

Discussion

In response to Ms. Ward's question, the students agreed that their experience of being a wellness peer makes it more likely for them to consider the mental health profession as a future career path.

Christina Lombard, Santa Barbara BWELL, asked how wellness peers get support when they are supporting others. Students responded that wellness peers share with each other and the counselors, help each other, and use the tools available in the Wellness Centers.

Christina Lombard stated Santa Barbara County put on its first peer-run summit two weekends ago with a partner agency and youth advisory board. Today's meeting provided ideas on how to expand youth presentations and activities in the future.

Ms. Ward read a comment in the Chat Section from Chris Ridge, who expressed appreciation for the Wellness Peer presenters' leadership.

2. Youth Peer Connections

Michele Nottingham, Health Program Specialist, introduced the next speaker and asked her to give her presentation.

Alishia Dauterive, Behavioral Health Consultant, UC Davis Lived Experience Integration Team, and former Sally Zinman Mental Health Peer Fellow, spoke on the importance of youth peer connection in strengthening self-esteem. She stated it is important to recognize that community and togetherness is not new. Many places in the world have been practicing this for as long as they can remember. Cultures in the United States, especially Indigenous communities, practice this as an ancient way of being. This should be recognized when looking at the importance of youth having a space where they can be around people who look like them and talk like them and people who they learn to trust emotionally and who trust them emotionally.

Ms. Dauterive stated community and togetherness teach individuals to trust their emotions and builds an appreciation of self and others, which is important for the development of self-esteem. That connection strengthens identity and a willingness to honor all feelings, so individuals do not grow up fearing their feelings, negativity, and themselves. Having the opportunity to share woes, ask for suggestions, find resources, and engage in a space with peers – to fully be themselves without the pressure of someone else's fear about what others experience – reminds people that they are worthy and deserve compassion from others and from themselves.

Ms. Dauterive stated self-care is pushed so hard that it starts to be confused with self-compassion. The idea of believing in self, reaching for the stars, confidence, thinking

positively, and manifesting seems like a simple concept, but none of it is that simple. This is a new age. The world follows a cycle of advancement and discovery but every day it is different. What it means to have self-esteem – and how to cultivate environments to promote that, whether talking about peer support or not – will also have to be different. New perspectives and new ways of understanding must develop.

Ms. Dauterive stated a community of peers teaches how to explore feelings in the way that leaves individuals vulnerable but, in that vulnerability, they learn to trust, love, and hope. These are things that help individuals navigate the world, the world's problems, and the world's beauty. Mental health and wellness are not separate from what is going on in the world. To promote community-based understanding, youth peer support, and peer support in general, the idea that mental health happens in a vacuum must be dismantled.

Ms. Dauterive stated youth supporting each other means they have the opportunity to become themselves in whatever way is comfortable for them. Any program or group or individual who supports that must allow that development. The heaviness of the struggling world means that youth need the opportunity to be around individuals who can relate to uncomfortable and even extreme fears, angers, and sadness and who have knowledge of resources that are tailored to them. No clinic can address what is going on in the world, but the closeness and strength of community can provide a space for souls to be safe and held and honored regardless of their age. Youth are the next leaders. It is important to cultivate and provide spaces for youth to discover their truth and their feelings with each other. Ultimately, that is what peer support is about.

3. Peer-to-Peer Support in Schools

Ms. Ward introduced the next speaker and asked her to give her presentation.

Amy Blackshaw, Behavioral Health Project Director, California School-Based Health Alliance (CSHA), discussed the benefits of peer-to-peer support in schools. She provided an overview, with a slide presentation, of health care in schools, peer-to-peer mental health supports, programs and models, principles of effective peer-to-peer programs, and elements of a peer program to build on the power of peer-to-peer support to enhance student well-being.

Ms. Blackshaw stated there currently is a critical need for more mental health supports in schools. Peer-to-peer support increases equity and diversity on campus and benefits both the peer mentor and the peer mentee. Effective peer-to-peer models are based on prevention, peer education, and non-clinical support. She stated the need for youth input and involvement in program design and implementation, clinical support for high intensity peer-to-peer programs, and strong partnerships and buy-in from school administration and staff. She announced that the CSHA's 2024 California School Health Conference will take place on April 29-30 at the Santa Clara Convention Center. The theme is Building Transformational School Health for California's Future.

Q & A for All Presenters

Ms. Kopchak read a question from the Chat Section asking if peers receive an incentive for participating and if it is an allowable cost.

Ms. Kopchak stated the new RFA will provide an avenue for that.

Ms. Weist stated Ventura County gave the option for school districts to hire peers. Some districts tried hiring peers but determined that a better option is to give students credit for being a wellness peer.

Ms. Blackshaw stated she has seen it both ways. Many schools provide academic credit or community service hours and others provide a stipend, although not all districts agree. It is easier as an after-school program rather than something embedded in the school day.

Ms. Weist stated Ventura County's wellness peers do sessions at its Youth Mental Health Conference. The conference is open to all students throughout the county. She stated Ventura County's wellness peers would be interested in presenting at other conferences statewide.

Zoom Poll regarding Youth Peer-to-Peer Mental Wellness Supports

Ms. Ward stated the intent to conduct a poll for the MHSSA grantees attending this meeting. The purpose of the poll is to learn more about peer-to-peer mental health and wellness support programs across the state and support any needs for technical assistance for grantees. She stated this information is for planning purposes only and will not be reported out or included in the meeting follow-up materials.

Mr. Robancho explained how the poll will be conducted.

Meeting participants participated in the Zoom poll.

WestED Update and Introduction of Youth Advisory Group

Ms. Ward introduced the MHSSA evaluation team from WestEd and asked them to give their presentation.

Natalie Romer, Ph.D., Project Director, WestEd, provided an overview, with a slide presentation, of the evaluation plan update. She stated WestEd is currently in Phase 1, evaluation planning, which includes the Theory of Change and Logic Model, research questions, and community engagement.

Arturo Chavez, Program Associate, WestEd, continued the slide presentation, and discussed the purpose, goals, diverse make-up, and meeting structure of the newly-formed Youth Advisory Group (YAG). He noted that the YAG includes youth from seven California counties.

Adjourn

Ms. Ward stated the next meeting will take place on June 5, 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 3:00 p.m.