

STRENGTHENING AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Addressing Behavioral Health Concerns in Older Adults

The Center for Aging and Disability Education and Research (CADER) at Boston University School of Social Work, with support from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, developed a program incorporating behavioral health into an Age Friendly initiative in New Bedford, MA.

BACKGROUND

- It is estimated that up to one in five older adults in the United States experience mental health challenges.
- In Massachusetts, 31 percent of older adults report a history of depression, and in some communities, the rate is closer to 50 percent (Mass Healthy Aging Data Report, 2018).
- Barriers that impede effective recognition and intervention of mental health concerns include stigma, lack of knowledge about behavioral health, and lack of a trained workforce.
- The Age Friendly movement can be an effective vehicle for addressing these barriers to emotional well-being.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In collaboration with the city of New Bedford's Age Friendly initiative, CADER developed and implemented a three-tier program addressing the barriers of stigma, lack of behavioral health knowledge, and insufficient workforce training in behavioral health and aging.

TIER 1

Anti-Stigma Campaign

The anti-stigma campaign included a program slogan and logo as well as media pieces (e.g., handouts, articles, and flyers) that provided both information on topics related to mental health and contact information for local resources. The materials were disseminated through local partners, the Council of Aging's newsletters, and at community hotspots. Several pieces were translated into Spanish and Portuguese.

TIER 2

Increased Knowledge

The more that older adults know about behavioral health issues, the more likely they are to seek help. In order to increase knowledge and decrease stigma, four workshops were facilitated with groups of older adults across New Bedford. Topics included:

- Behavioral Health Issues and Local Resources
- Suicide Prevention Among Older Adults
- Mental Wellness
- Substance Use Among Older Adults

TIER 3

Workforce Training

Learners from diverse settings across New Bedford, including senior centers, elder service organizations, housing authorities, mental health centers, medical health centers, and faith-based organizations completed CADER's 19-hour online certificate in Behavioral Health in Aging. Courses in the certificate included Mental Health and Aging, Suicide Prevention Among Older Adults, Mental Wellness and Resilience Among Older Immigrants and Refugees, Substance Use Among Older Adults, and Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias.

RESULTS

TIER 1: Anti-Stigma Campaign

10,000 media pieces were distributed, reaching an estimated 500 people in New Bedford. Two clinicians from Boston University also appeared in an interview that aired on New Bedford's public access channel.

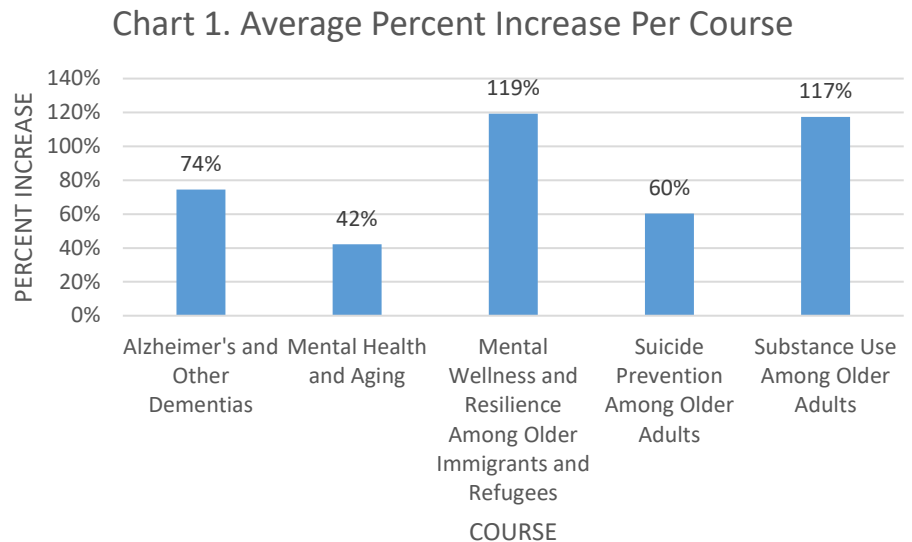


TIER 2: Increased Knowledge

Nearly 40 older adults attended the four workshops. These programs were well-received with comments such as "Very informed about mental illness. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Talk to someone. Get help" and "Open talk about depression with other people."

TIER 3: Workforce Training

A total of 35 participants completed at least one course in the certificate program, and 30 completed the entire training. Participants submitted pre- and post-course self-assessments of their knowledge and skill levels related to course content. See Chart 1 for the average percent increase from pre to post per course.



Course Evaluation

90%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the training will help them to **describe the best ways of communicating with people who have dementia.**

91%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the training improved their ability to **identify key risk factors associated with suicide among older adults.**

94%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the training enhanced their ability to **identify stressors and barriers faced by immigrants and refugees.**

94%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the training enhanced their ability to **outline the roles that workers can play in promoting recovery.**

91%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the training expanded their ability to **identify resources and services available for treating mental health conditions in older adults and their families.**

Learner Feedback

"I took this course to gain knowledge for my job as a sanitarian/Housing inspector. I run into many different situations during my inspections, and I was hoping to learn how to better assess a how to handle some of the problems these inspections reveal. I have learned, thru this course that some of the housing problems I encounter, may have underlying issues, such as mental illness (Hoarding)." **Mental Health and Aging Issues Course**

"The content will be very useful in my career. The videos provide such an impact which i will not soon forget. The video about music therapy was amazing. I really enjoyed this course. It provided a great refresher on the disease and really showed the significance of person centered care. I would love to see more long term care facilities in this area like the one in the video. I worked in long term care for over twenty years and we tried to incorporate person centered care but had a very long way to go." **Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias Course**

"LOVED this course. I think the case examples presented were wonderful and thought provoking. By far the best class I have taken in a long time." **Suicide Prevention Among Older Adults**

SUMMARY

Despite high prevalence rates among older adults, behavioral health issues are not often addressed in Age Friendly initiatives. Community-wide capacity building efforts create opportunities to recognize community strengths and direct local resources toward behavioral health issues – with the ultimate goal of meeting the needs of the older adult population. Our findings show that a three-tiered approach to incorporating mental health and wellness into Age Friendly initiatives is a successful model that could be replicated in other communities.