

Strengthening Age Friendly Communities by Addressing Behavioral Health

Concerns among Older Adults

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Study Aims

The Center for Aging and Disability Education and Research (CADER) at Boston University in collaboration with the Age-Friendly New Bedford Coalition created an outreach and educational campaign focused on reducing the stigma of mental illness and increasing awareness of the effects of social isolation in the community. We provided training to key stakeholders, including aging service providers, clergy, first responders, and resident coordinators focusing on the need to effectively identify and respond to older adults with mental health and substance use concerns, increase resilience, and further the prevention of suicide

Background & Significance

- Across the US, one in four older adults have behavioral health concerns, such as social isolation, depression, substance use, and dementia.
- Communities are working to become more age-friendly by improving the quality of life of all residents, especially older adults.
- Stigma and the inability to identify mental health problems are two of the most prevalent reasons for not seeking help for mental health issues (Conner, K. O., et al 2010; Hanisch, 2016).

Methods

We used a three-tiered approach by targeting:

Tier 1 – Community Member:

- Created a media campaign with a logo and slogan, *LIVABLE COMMUNITIES FOSTER HEALTHY MINDS & BODIES*
- Created 10 articles/media pieces around aging and emotional well-being

Anti-stigma media campaign, measured by:

- Number of articles, newsletters, flyers distributed
- Tracking of locations and areas targeted
- Number of subscribers, listeners for media outlets

Tier 2 – Older Adults:

Created a series of workshops for older adults on the following:

- Behavioral health issues and local resources
- Suicide Prevention
- Mental Wellness
- Substance Use

Workshops for older adults, measured through:

- Number of older adults attending workshops
- Changes in scores from pre to post training using the Depression Stigma Scale (DSS)

Tier 3 - Providers:

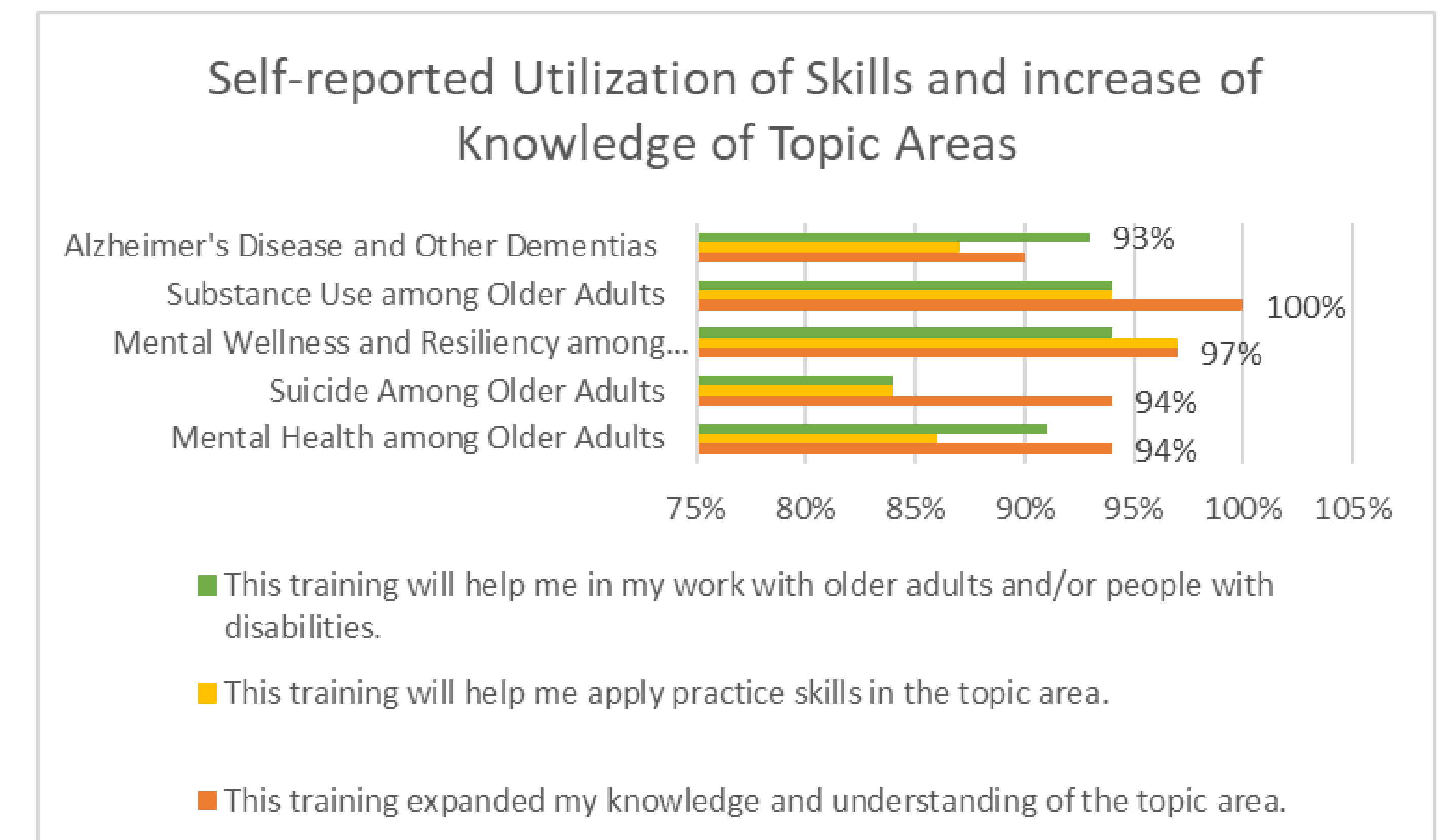
- Brought together a diverse group of community providers to promote mental well-being for older adults in New Bedford, MA
- Delivered training to local gatekeepers using BU CADER's online certificate in *Behavioral Health in Aging* & two in-person sessions

Training was evaluated through:

- Pre-post competency evaluation to determine change scores
- Course evaluations post-training

Results

- Our anti-stigma, educational materials reached over 10,000 New Bedford adults through the "Senior Scope" newsletter and other distribution channels. Our workshop on improving mental wellness and an informational interview around issues of mental health reached over 500 viewers through local television programming.
- Almost 40 older adults attended workshops on mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention. Using the Depression Stigma Scale, we measured perceived stigma among 37 older adults pre and post workshop participation. We found significant changes in 4 of 9 scale items measuring how older adults perceive depression after participation in the workshop ($p < .05$), particularly in the areas around how older adults perceive people with mental health concerns as dangerous and a greater understanding that depression is a real medical illness to be given equal consideration as other illnesses.
- Thirty-one providers, including first responders, housing staff and clergy completed BU CADER's five course 19 hour online *Behavioral Health in Aging* certificate and two in person sessions lead by New Bedford COA.
- Pre-post competency score changes were statistically significant across all courses; the percent of change ranged from 18%-308% ($p < .05$).



Learner Quotes

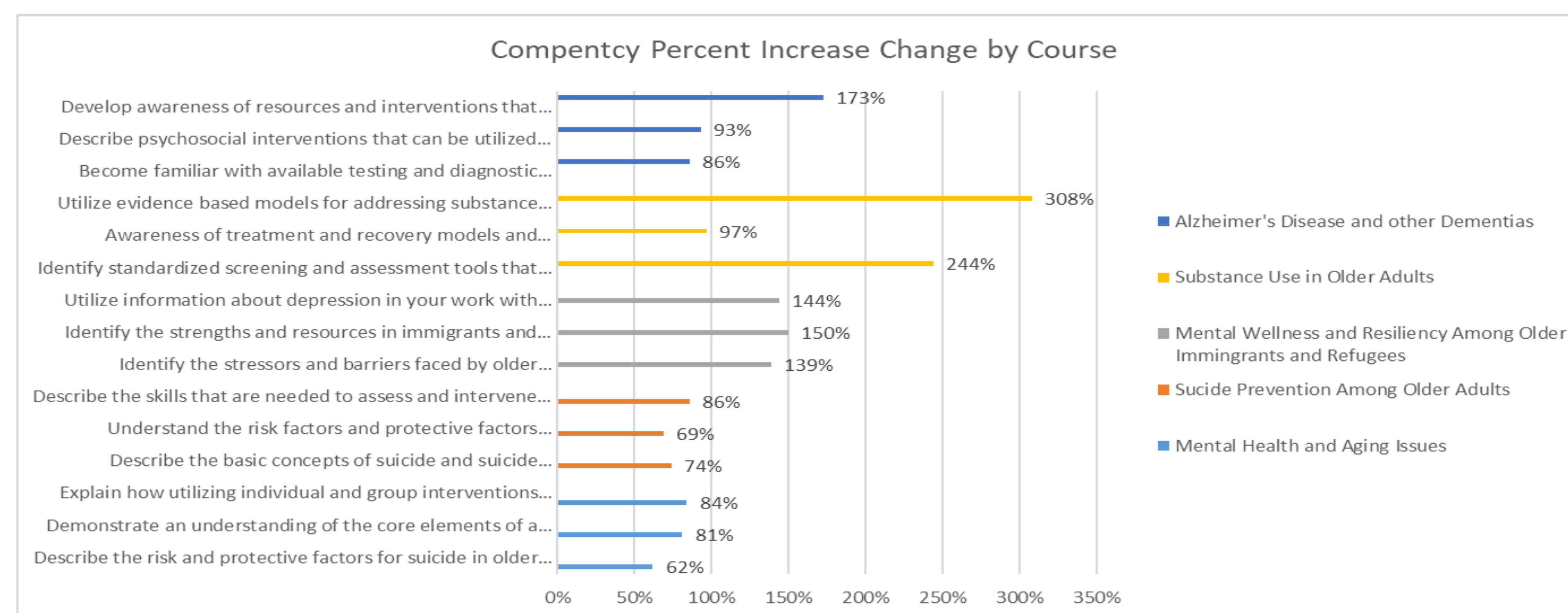
- *I took this course to gain knowledge for my job as a sanitarian/Housing inspector. I run into many different situations during my inspections, and I was hoping to learn how to better assess a how to handle some of the problems these inspections reveal. I have learned, through this course that some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

Mental Health and Aging Issues among Older Adults

- *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**
- *Great information will be able to use in my clinical area.* **Substance Use among Older Adults**
- *I thought that the amount of information provided in this section was tremendous. Lots to think about with refugees and immigrants.* **Mental Wellness and Resiliency among Older Immigrants and Refugees**

Study Implications and Next Steps

- In order for older adults to be fully engaged in community life, behavioral health concerns need to be addressed with a focus on social isolation, depression, and substance use.
- Many Age Friendly efforts don't address these issues even though significant numbers of older adults are impacted. Without a community-wide capacity building effort, behavioral health issues among older adults often fade into the background.
- Our findings show that a 3-tiered approach to incorporating mental health and wellness into Age Friendly initiatives is a successful model that could be replicated across the country.
- Based on knowledge gained, we will continue to work together with Age Friendly communities to identify sustainable community-based initiatives to address the emotional well-being and decrease isolation of older adults.



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