

Alachua County Mental Health First Aid Training Initiative

- The MHFA Initiative was a three-year effort to fully train County employees in an internationally recognized, evidence-based training curriculum, which is designed to provide practical tools to help identify mental health issues and respond appropriately.
- The MHFA curriculum was devised by clinicians who sought to help lay people identify and respond to those with mental health issues or showing initial signs of a mental health crisis. Its delivery across the world is carried out by the National Council for Behavioral Health (NCBH), one of the country's largest nonprofit organizations focused on behavioral health issues. The total number of individuals trained in MHFA worldwide is now over 2 million individuals.
- This Initiative was begun in January, 2016 and proceeded in three phases. The first focused on training all County employees serving under the BoCC. 96% of all County staff was trained in MHFA. After this phase was concluded in March 2017, the BoCC sought next to expand the program's reach to the staff of the Constitutional and Judicial Officers. Additional organizations such as the Property Appraisers' Office, Tax Collectors, and Supervisor of Elections among them. Finally a third phase leveraged MHFA training staff of County municipalities, the Library District and multiple charitable agencies receiving County funds through either the CAPP or CHOICES programs.
- A total of 2,126 staff employed across all agencies were trained in MHFA between 2016 and 2019. Training was provided face-to-face with a certified instructor, using interactive groups for delivery.
- Under a separate program with similar goals, during the same period in addition the City of Gainesville ensured that its staff of more than 1,100 received MHFA training.
- We have no knowledge of any county in the nation other than Alachua which has embarked on a journey of similar scope and depth with the mission of expanding its staff's awareness of public mental health needs.
- Partnerships with local behavioral health providers were essential to the success of the County's campaign. Staff at Meridian Behavioral Healthcare and Partnership for Strong Families provided the training faculty –each of whom is certified by the NCBH through a rigorous program - to deliver the training. Court Services staff also contributed by providing trainers. Over 110 separate full-day training sessions were offered during the Initiative.

- The Department of Court Services was tasked by the BoCC to manage this Initiative. This responsibility was granted in recognition of the Department's prior experience in helping MHFA training be expanded to criminal justice agencies under a grant from DCF. Court Services staff recruited participants for training across over 30 separate organizations, scheduled all trainers, identified venues for training, and managed statistics to assure completeness and accuracy.
- This Initiative was designated in 2016 as a County priority by the BoCC. From day one, ensuring MHFA training was provided to the maximum number of employees had the full support of the County Manager's Office, which provided valuable leadership and guidance along the way.
- The use of new, innovative approaches to expanding awareness of mental health issues and needs suffered by citizens are more warranted than ever. Florida is now ranked 43rd among all the States for providing access to mental health. According to WellFlorida Council data, in 2019 only 22% of adults and 6% of children in the County were reported to be in need of mental health treatment but did not receive it.
- MHFA training was targeted to those employees who are on the front lines of service to the community, and charged with responding to the public's needs. In recognition of the increased public health challenges our communities now face, the value of MHFA is increasingly apparent. Through this effort, Alachua County as a whole is better equipped to respond to the challenges which present in our own communities.
- The MHFA Training Initiative is but one element of a significantly broader and creative array of services in our County to respond to mental health issues, including in the behavioral health and criminal justice systems. A strong commitment to behavioral health has long been a hallmark for the County.
- The NACo Achievement Award for this program provides the County with the opportunity to serve as a model for the thousands of other counties in the country that may be searching for innovative strategies to respond to their own citizens' mental health needs. We look forward to assisting other jurisdictions, by sharing our own work, methods and accomplishments.