



**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA**  
*Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services*  
*Promoting Recovery, Resilience & Self Determination*

**Jill Bowen, Ph.D.**  
Commissioner

**Tierra M. Pritchett, Ed.D. CHC**  
Deputy Commissioner

**H. Jean Wright II, Psy.D.**  
Deputy Commissioner

**Policy and Practice Brief: Mental Health First Aid<sup>1</sup>**

What is Mental Health First Aid?

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a public education program designed to teach members of the public how to identify and support individuals experiencing a mental health crisis.<sup>1,2</sup> It was first developed in Australia to combat the rising rates of mental illness, constituting 7.4% of the total disease burden internationally.<sup>1</sup> With an estimated 11% to 62.1% of individuals with mental illness receiving treatment,<sup>1</sup> MHFA was established to increase the provision of treatment across this population. The driving concept behind MHFA is to provide immediate aid to someone experiencing a mental health- or substance abuse-related issue or crisis until professional treatment is available and received, or until the crisis has abated,<sup>3</sup> much like traditional first aid. MHFA is offered [internationally](#), with over 67,000 instructors across 29 countries spanning Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Globally, over 6,000,000 people have been trained to be Mental Health First Aiders!

Several versions of MHFA training are available, including Adults Supporting Adults, Adults Supporting Young People, Teen Peer-to-Peer Support, and additional adaptations tailored to specific populations (e.g., seniors or individuals from rural communities). In the United States, in-person or hybrid trainings are available, with the in-person training led by an instructor lasting 7.5 hours, and the hybrid training including both a two-hour online course and a five-hour instructor-led training.<sup>4</sup> Trainings under both methods cover:

- common signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use disorders,<sup>3,4</sup>
- how to interact with an individual in crisis,<sup>3,4</sup>
- how to connect an individual with help,<sup>3,4</sup> and
- background information on trauma, substance use, and self-care.<sup>3,4</sup>

Completion of MHFA training aims to address common mental health symptoms, teach participants strategies for recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health or

---

<sup>1</sup> By Avery Chard and Tierney Huppert, Forensic Associates at the Behavioral Health and Justice Division. Supervised by Jaymes Fairfax-Columbo and Adam Stout of the DBHIDS Policy Unit.

substance use issues to provide support, and reduce stigma. Additionally, MFHA training also offers self-help strategies for staying healthy.<sup>4</sup>

### Is Mental Health First Aid Evidence-Based?

Yes! Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) has been supported by decades of research indicating its effectiveness in improving the public's ability to support individuals experiencing a mental health or substance abuse issue. Research indicates MFHA:

- improves recognition of and empathy towards individuals with mental disorders,<sup>3,6,7</sup> as well as reduces stigmatizing attitudes in participants,<sup>5</sup>
- improves retention in treatment programs,<sup>4</sup> as individuals are more likely to seek professional help when it is suggested by someone in their social network,<sup>3</sup>
- increases participants' confidence in their ability to be more effective when interacting with individuals struggling with mental health issues,<sup>4,5,7</sup>
- increases the amount of help offered to individuals with mental illness,<sup>3,5</sup>
- increases participant agreement with health professionals on identifying effective interventions,<sup>3,5,6</sup> and
- improves the mental health of the participants themselves.<sup>3,5</sup>

### Does Philadelphia offer Mental Health First Aid training?

Yes! Philadelphia was one of the first metropolitan areas in the United States to implement MHFA on a large scale. The Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services began the initial rollout of MHFA in 2012. Since 2012, over 43,000 Philadelphians have been trained to be mental health first aiders!

Currently, DBHIDS offers Philadelphians the opportunity to get trained in MHFA at no cost via [Healthy Minds Philly](#). Individuals can be certified to practice MHFA with adults, older adults, and veterans. Additionally, individuals can be certified to provide MHFA in public safety contexts and in higher education settings.<sup>8</sup> Courses are provided virtually and consist of some self-paced pre-work and a 5.5-hour, instructor-led class. Private trainings can also be requested for groups of 15 or more.

### Additional Reading

- Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services
  - <https://dbhids.org/our-approach/engaging-community/healthy-minds-philly/>
- Healthy Minds Philly

- <https://healthymindsphilly.org/mhfa/>
- United States Mental Health First Aid
  - <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/>
- Mental Health First Aid for Adults
  - [https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22.06.17\\_Adult-MHFA-Flier.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22.06.17_Adult-MHFA-Flier.pdf)
- Mental Health First Aid for Youth
  - [https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22.06.17\\_Youth-MHFA-Flier.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22.06.17_Youth-MHFA-Flier.pdf)
- Mental Health First Aid International
  - <https://mhfainternational.org/>
- Philly MHFA in the News!
  - <https://whyy.org/articles/philly-charter-school-trains-teachers-staff-in-youth-mental-health-first-aid/>
  - <https://www.audacy.com/kywnewsradio/news/local/city-promotes-mental-health-first-aid-courses>
  - <https://owlsports.com/news/2023/8/2/general-temple-athletics-staff-completes-mental-health-first-aid-training-program>
  - <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/philadelphia-to-begin-offering-mental-health-first-aid-training/>

## References

1. Hadlaczky, G., Hökby, S., Mkrtchian, A, Carli, V., & Wasserman, D. (2014). Mental Health First Aid is an effective public health intervention for improving knowledge, attitudes, and behavior: A meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 26(4), 467-475. DOI: 10.3109/09540261.2014.924910
2. "Mental Health First Aid". Healthy Minds Philly, City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services. <https://healthymindsphilly.org/mhfa/>
3. Kitchener, B.A. & Jorm, A.F. (2008). Mental Health First Aid: An International Programme for Early Intervention. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 2(1), 55-61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-7893.2007.00056.x>
4. "Mental Health First Aid for Adults." Mental Health First Aid from National Council for Mental Wellbeing. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/adults/>
5. Kitchener, B.A. & Jorm, A.F. (2004). Mental health first aid training in a workplace setting: A randomized controlled trial. *BMC Psychiatry*, 4(23), 1-8. doi:10.1186/1471-244X-4-23
6. Jorm, A.F., Kitchener, B.A., O'Kearney, R., & Dear, K.B.G. (2004). Mental health first aid training of the public in a rural area: a cluster randomized trial. *BMC Psychiatry*, 4(33), 1-9. doi:10.1186/1471-244X-4-33
7. Jorm, A.F., Kitchener, B.A., & Mugford, S.K. (2005). Experiences in applying skills learned in a Mental Health First Aid training course: a qualitative study of participants' stories. *BMC Psychiatry*, 9(5). doi: 10.1186/1471-244X-5-43
8. "Healthy Minds Philly." City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services. <https://dbhids.org/our-approach/engaging-community/healthy-minds-philly/>