

# Local health care coalition to offer mental health first aid course Aug. 1

By Kyle VonRuden

As mental health awareness grows, so does the gap between the demand for services and the supply of local providers, especially in rural communities.

To help close that gap, Black River Memorial Hospital (BRMH) will be hosting a free mental health first aid course in the Oak Conference Room on Thursday, Aug. 1, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The course—a collaboration between BRMH, the Krohn Clinic, the Greater Black River Area Safety Council and the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (WORH)—is designed to teach participants how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse disorders.

This is the first time such a course has been offered free of cost locally, said Michaela Bemis, occupational health and wellness coordinator at BRMH. Bemis and her supervisor Nicole Schweitzer, director of BRMH's Physical Medicine, Rehabilitation

and Occupational Health and Wellness departments, first heard about the concept last year at the annual conference of the National Association of Occupational Health Professionals (NAOHP) in Nashville, and with the support of WORH, they've been able to bring the idea back with them to Black River Falls.

"At the conference, they were talking about how some of the pressure of getting people help with mental health issues was often falling on employers," Bemis explained. "They have employees who are missing work, so often they're the first to notice when things aren't quite right. Sometimes in these situations, it's left to a human resources professional, a manager or a business owner to connect employees with the next steps."

The centerpiece of the course is an evidence-based five-step action plan community members of all stripes can implement to support individuals coping with mental health or sub-

stance abuse challenges. As with a traditional first aid/CPR course, the training is designed to be supplementary—non-medical professionals will learn how to identify the signs and symptoms of mental health problems and how to appropriately connect those in need to professional services.

By increasing understanding of mental health issues and treatments and reducing stigma, the course aims to leverage existing professional and personal networks in order to expand the community's ability to address these issues in the absence of sufficient mental health care providers.

"Mental health care in rural areas like Black River Falls is a huge need because we don't have enough providers or enough capacity to take on some of these patients," said Bemis. "So we wanted to provide something that might give more people in the area the knowledge to be able to see the signs and know what the first steps should be to connect them with the services

they need."

This relative lack of capacity is one of the main reasons Black River Falls was chosen as a test case for the program, said Kevin Jacobson, loan assistance program manager at WORH (a program within the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health). He also attended last year's NAOHP conference and, after digging into statewide data on mental health care providers, identified BRMH as an ideal site to hold an initial training.

"Jackson County has a low level of access to mental health providers, so we wanted to target a place where we thought this kind of program is needed," he said. "This might be something that we would offer other communities in the future, so I'm looking forward to seeing what it's all about before we make that commitment."

Jacobson said he'll be attending the course himself (his office is providing the funds so BRMH can offer it free of charge). If it's deemed effective, it could become an important tool in his office's efforts to help communities improve

their mental health care infrastructure—a need that, as he explained it, is especially acute in the state of Wisconsin.

"The federal government assesses states on provider-to-population ratios, and Wisconsin has one of the greatest needs for providers of any state," said Jacobson. "Almost 40 percent of the population lives in areas that do not have an adequate number of mental health care providers. It's estimated that to eliminate the shortage gap, Wisconsin would need almost 250 additional providers to ensure that everybody in the state has adequate access."

Pre-registration for the course is required, and those who complete it will earn a two-year certification in mental health first aid. Registration will be capped at 25 attendees.

"I think this course will be really beneficial for anyone: people who have a leadership role within an organization, are responsible for human resources, health professionals, for people who work with kids or are managing large groups," said Bemis. "A lot of times, you have employees who manage teams,

and they pick up on some of these signs, but they're just not sure what's going on. It could be any number of things, but if they're equipped with those first few steps and can help individuals seek treatment sooner rather than later, that's generally the best way to mitigate an issue that could turn into something much worse."

Those interested may contact Michaela Bemis at healthworks@brmh.net or at 715-284-3626 to register or to request further information. Lunch will be provided midway through the eight-hour course.

"There's going to be a lot of great information provided, and from what I've seen so far, they've organized the course in a way that's going to be simple yet effective in explaining those first steps," Bemis said. "I don't want people to think this course will be really in-depth or that they need to know anything about treating individuals who experience mental health challenges. It's just going to be really good information that will be impactful for any organization and any member of the community."

## A delicious start to summer



Contributed photo

Last week, Comstock Strawberries brought in a donation of two flats of berries to Pine View Care Center in Black River Falls. "We are so fortunate that they did this for us," said Pine View administrator Rebecca Rieber. "The residents will really enjoy them." Pictured (l-r) are Kevin Comstock, Bob Comstock, Rieber and dietician Katie Rearick.

## July 1 general school aids estimate released

Following a timeline required by state law, the Department of Public Instruction released an estimate last week of the general school aids each public school district will receive for the 2019-20 school year.

General school aid estimated to be received by area school districts is as follows: Alma Center-Humbird-Merrillan School District - \$4,080,396, an increase of 4.66 percent from last year; Black River Falls School District - \$10,796,380, an increase of 4.85 percent from last year;

Blair-Taylor School District - \$3,063,941, an increase of 4.59 percent from last year;

Melrose-Mindoro School District - \$5,719,014, an increase of 6.26 percent from last year.

General school aids are the largest form of state sup-

port for public schools in the state. Wisconsin statutes require the department to publish estimated aid amounts by July 1 each year. The estimate can help school personnel complete their annual budgets and project changes in property tax levies. Estimated amounts are subject to change because they are based on proposed, not final, state budget appropriations for 2019-21 as well as budgeted, not audited, school district data from the 2018-19 school year. On Oct. 15, the department will certify amounts for 2019-20 general school aids based on audited data and finalized state budget numbers.

Estimated general school aids for 2019-20 total \$4.74 billion for the state, representing an \$83.2 million (1.8 percent) increase over last year. Due to changes in the aid deduction from Milwaukee Public Schools for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the estimated increase in aid payments to districts is \$83.7 million.

Of the state's 421 school districts, 59 percent (248)

are estimated to receive more general aid in 2019-20, while 40 percent of districts (168) are estimated to receive less; five districts will have no change in the aid between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 fiscal years. A district's general aids can increase or decrease due to changes in any of the three local factors comprising Wisconsin's general equalization aid formula — property valuation, enrollment and shared costs — or from changes to the state appropriation.

District aid estimates can be found on the department's School Financial Services website, in the general aid section. Estimates are available as "Summary by Alphabet" and "Summary by Percent." The department's July 1 aid estimate does not include per pupil categorical aid, which will be based on student membership from the 2019-20, 2018-19 and 2017-18 school years (third Friday in September count). Per pupil aid will be paid in March 2020. Proposed budget language would set this aid at \$679 per pupil.

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