
NEWS RELEASE

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**ASTORINO LAUNCHES “YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID”
Program is part of “Safer Communities” response to tragedy in Newtown, Conn.
Westchester is the first in New York to offer this training on a countywide basis**



County Executive Rob Astorino (right) pictured with Alan Trager, CEO of Westchester Jewish Community Services as they launch a new partnership with Safer Communities initiative.

County Executive Robert P. Astorino, along with the Department of Community Mental Health and Westchester Jewish Community Services, launched “Youth Mental Health First Aid,” a new Safer Communities initiative, today at the Westchester County Center.

“Youth Mental Health First Aid trains adults on how to detect warning signs that our kids could be at risk,” said County Executive Robert P. Astorino. “If you see cuts or bruises, you don’t have to be a doctor to know what to do. The same cannot be said for mental illnesses. This program helps teach parents, teachers,

coaches, clergy – just ordinary people – what to be on the lookout for when it comes to mental illness and our kids.”

Astorino’s “Safer Communities” initiative has been a comprehensive response to the school shootings in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. Few issues are more difficult and require more sensitivity and understanding than when mental illness afflicts our children. The statistics are staggering. Approximately 20 percent of kids ages 13 to 18 either currently or at some point during their lives have had a seriously debilitating mental illness.

The dilemma for adults is that we don’t want to miss warning signs and at the same time we don’t want to jump to wrong conclusions that could stigmatize youngsters. Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to help on both fronts: teach adults how to recognize warning signs and then equally important equip them to come up with the right response.

Youth Mental Health First Aid is a nationally recognized program that teaches participants to provide “first aid” to youth, ages 12 to 18, for a range of mental health challenges. The training will be available to adults throughout the county thanks to a partnership between Westchester Jewish Community Services and the Department of Community Mental Health. It is aimed at those who spend time with young people in schools, faith-based organizations, community groups, sports leagues, camps and recreation programs.

“We’re very excited to roll this out in Westchester,” said Alan Trager, CEO of Westchester Jewish Community Services, the agency that will provide the training. “This will empower people to identify and approach youth who may be struggling and to link them to the professional help or other supports they need before issues escalate.”

At the presentation, the training was described and demonstrated. An adult, who graduated from the program, as well as a young person, who directly benefited from the program, shared their experiences. Program trainers also gave a brief demonstration of how the two-day, four-hour training sessions will be conducted. A booklet that highlights the approach of the Youth Mental Health First Aid program, in addition to statistics and useful resources, was distributed to attendees. To access the booklet online, visit <http://bit.ly/1fAeKi2>.

The training aims to give adults the necessary tools to help a youth experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis wherever they may be – at home, school or in the community. Interested organizations or individuals can sign up for the eight-hour training course that will teach participants to provide “first aid” to children and teenagers for mental health challenges including depression, suicidal thoughts, self-injury, panic attacks, substance abuse, reaction to trauma, aggressive behavior and acute psychosis.

Participants will learn a five-step method to respond to young people facing a mental health challenge:

1. Assess the risks of suicide or self-harm, and take these seriously
2. Listen empathetically and without judgment

3. Provide reassurance and information about options and resources
4. Enlist professional help
5. Encourage the young person to seek support from family, friends and others

The Westchester Department of Community Mental Health in partnership with Westchester Jewish Community Services will host the first training on May 13 and 16 from 9 a.m.-1p.m. It will be open to up to 30 participants and free of charge. For information on more training sessions in Westchester County please contact the Department of Community Mental Health at (914) 995-5225.

Progress to date:

In February 2013, Astorino launched “Safer Communities” in response to the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Conn., in December 2012. Astorino challenged the county’s departments of Public Safety, Health and Community Mental Health to develop a multi-pronged response to the threat of violence. The result was “Safer Communities”, a collaborative effort involving community leaders and county officials. The initiative has focused on ways that county and local governments, school districts and nonprofits can collaborate to offer practical and cost-effective programs to prevent violence.

To date, the “Safer Communities” has included:

- The School Safety Symposium held on February 20, 2013, at SUNY Purchase, where New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton served as the keynote speaker. More than 350 teachers, school superintendents, police brass, firefighters and other first responders participated.
- The county’s departments of Community Mental Health and Health and New York Medical College brought together community leaders from the family courts, non-profit groups, mental health agencies, faith-based communities, educators and government for an April 9, 2013, forum at the Westchester County Center that presented a public health approach to community violence prevention.
- The Department of Community Mental Health arranged on May 29, 2013, for 300 mental health professionals to view and discuss *Path to Violence*, a film about a powerfully effective Secret Service program — the Safe School Initiative — that’s helped schools detect problem behavior in advance and thwarted acts of violence.
- School districts in Somers and North Salem asked Westchester County to help them create dedicated school resource officer posts. On August 12, 2013, Astorino proposed legislation to provide school resource officers from the county’s Department of Public Safety to the Somers and North Salem school districts. By September, those police professionals were on the job, making a difference in both school districts.
- The County Executive, County Youth Bureau, Department of Community Mental Health, Yonkers and Mount Vernon school districts and Student Advocacy kicked off *Attendance Matters*, a campaign to keep kids in school on Sept. 9, 2013.
- The Safer Communities Blueprint, a framework for the ongoing initiative and resource guide, was presented on Oct. 21, 2013, at the Department of Community Mental Health Fall Forum, a gathering of more than 100 mental health professionals, service providers, clergy, educators and public safety

professionals. Also on hand were members of the Action Network, a volunteer group that helps chart the future of the Safer Communities initiative.

- The Department of Community Mental Health in partnership with the Westchester Putnam Suicide Prevention Coalition sponsored six SafeTalk training programs in 2013. More than 300 community providers and advocates were trained to promote suicide awareness and prevention. Forty-five service providers will participate in a two-day Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training on March 26 and 27 at the Westchester County Center.

Photo 2: *County Executive Rob Astorino addresses crowd of 300 participants to bring “Youth Mental Health First Aid” program to Westchester, which makes the county the first in New York State to offer this training on a countywide basis.*

Photo 3 (left to right): *Ron Belmont, Mayor of Harrison; Alan Trager, CEO of Westchester Jewish Community Services; County Executive Robert P. Astorino; and County Legislator Michael Smith.*

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