

Optum[®] Idaho Mental Health First Aid Training



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The power of training transforms a community and creates a shelter

Winters are cold and icy here in Lewiston, a town tucked up in the state's northwest corner. When its only warming center for homeless people shut down last spring, people worried. And as winter approached, their worry grew. "What would happen to the people sleeping outside?" recalls Tammy Lish-Watson, executive director of First Step 4 Life Recovery Community Center in Lewiston.

To many, the prospect of opening a new, 24/7 warming shelter was daunting — but not to Ms. Lish-Watson, who operates the recovery center with a can-do spirit and a resourcefulness honed by eight years of service in the military. Ms. Lish-Watson's recovery center also had an understanding of the homeless community; it treated a number of homeless individuals struggling with substance abuse disorders and other mental health issues.

Ms. Lish-Watson also had another advantage — a corps of newly trained volunteers. Over the spring 2019, she had completed an intensive training sponsored by Optum that taught her how to train others on how to identify and help people with a substance use disorder or behavioral health issue. By November, Ms. Lish-Watson had trained more than a score of dedicated volunteers.

"It seemed logical to me that, with this training, we could make it happen," she said. And they did.



As part of its commitment to improving behavioral health care in Idaho, Optum is helping spread training throughout the state about how to help people experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge.

Mental Health First Aid

At the heart of this effort is training provided by Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), an international nonprofit organization ([mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org)). Similar to CPR courses, MHFA instruction enables ordinary individuals to respond to real-life, mental health situations in their community.

Last year, Optum sponsored 28 individuals, including Ms. Lish-Watson, to participate in MHFA's three-day "train the trainer" course, offered in Boise.

For Ms. Lish-Watson, the course was an eye-opener. Though she had taught special education for seven years, teaching other adults how to teach required some new skills. Learning how to politely limit conversations in the information-packed sessions was one of them. "Everyone has a story to share," she says. It also helped her fill in the gaps, almost inevitable in training volunteers. "You can tell them all you want to tell them, but you always miss something. This helps you complete the picture."

Once trained, Ms. Lish-Watson and her peers instructed people in their area, reaching such key responders as sheriffs, corrections employees, nursing students and recovery center staff. Optum also underwrote the cost of this instruction.

In these sessions, participants learned how to identify signs of depression, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, trauma, psychosis and substance use disorders. They also absorbed how to assess someone's risk for suicide or self-harm.

And they role-played the essential skill of listening without judgment. "It's something you have to practice. Listening but without giving advice," says Ms. Lish-Watson. Also essential was teaching them how to give reassurance and to encourage people to seek help from themselves and from appropriate professionals. Explains Ms. Lish-Watson: "It's not our job to do the work for them. Our job is to notice and get support for them. We can't wave a magic wand."

Thanks to Optum, 515 people were trained over the past year, creating a ripple effect across the state. One of the wave's most tangible results has been the new warming center.

Opening a new warming center

In late November, 2019, Ms. Lish-Watson and 26 volunteers offered to keep part of their facility open 24/7 as a warming center during winter for homeless individuals. The community readily accepted their offer. A survey, taken on a freezing January night the previous winter, had found 121 people experiencing homelessness in the region. "Our 24-hour warming center would be the only game in town," she recalls.

Though the previous shelter had been open from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. and only on the coldest days, the new facility would be open around the clock. That way, homeless clients could access the recovery center's other services, including recovery coaches, peer support, resume-writing help, creating a budget, information on food banks, addiction support groups and housing. This more holistic approach would help address the root causes of homelessness, Ms. Lish-Watson explains.

Referred by police and others in or working with the homeless community, homeless individuals began to arrive at the center. During the day, center staff welcomed the guests. Overnight, an employee provided on-site supervision from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.

From 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. and on weekends during the day, a crew of volunteers pitched in. With their training, Ms. Lish-Watson was confident that they could handle almost anything that came their way.



The Mental Health First Aid action plan

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm.
- Listen nonjudgmentally.
- Give reassurance and information.
- Encourage appropriate professional help.
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Much of the time, the volunteers engaged with clients, offering meals and playing board games. At 9 p.m. every night, the volunteers would help their clients stow their belongings in a tote and set up their mats, bed rolls, pillows and blankets on the center's floor.

Throughout their shifts, the volunteers talked, getting to know their homeless guests. "They were able to work with a person — to meet them where they were at," says Ms. Lish-Watson. "They were able to find out what the homeless person's perception of a good life was. Case in point: "Not everyone wants to be off the street. They may want a better sleeping bag," she says.

The volunteers

Many of Ms. Lish-Watson's 26 volunteers share a unique bond with their homeless clients; they, too, had once been homeless. And some had been helped by First Step 4 Life — like Summer Gibson.

Now, 42, Summer Gibson, has been sober for two years after nearly three decades of addiction to methamphetamine. During much of her struggle, she survived on the streets of Lewiston and Spokane, often forced to forge "friendships of convenience" to stay warm.

An arrest on a drug charge stopped the spiral, pushing her to seek treatment. It helped her find First Step 4 Life. There, staff provided support for her substance use and mental health issues, helping her navigate the many steps to recovery: secure housing, food stamps and health care. "First Step showed me how to get back on my feet," she says.

When the chance arose to enroll in Ms. Lish-Watson's Mental Health First Aid course, Ms. Gibson seized it. Already helping out at the recovery center, she saw it as a way to improve upon her volunteer abilities.

"I want to help others come from where I was at," she says. "I want to help others know there is a better way."

Ms. Gibson loved the class.

Learning how to recognize the difference between someone struggling with a mental health disorder or an addiction problem provided new insights.

"I'm able to recognize and understand when others are having a mental health episode," Ms. Gibson says. "I'm able to understand the differences and levels of it. I know how to keep the calm and not interact and make it worse."

The role playing proved crucial. In one classroom scenario, Ms. Gibson was asked to show how she would calm a distraught individual. Instinctively, she placed her hands on the shoulders of the person playing the person in distress. "That is typically how I would have tried to calm someone." The role-playing actor cried out in alarm, startling Ms. Gibson. But she understood the point: even well-intentioned, common physical gestures may seem threatening to someone in distress. "That is the last thing that you want to do. The lesson has stuck to this day," she says.

Like other volunteers, Ms. Gibson draws upon her own life experiences in her work with homeless clients. "I remember myself being that individual," she says. She is not afraid to share her past with them. "People are more apt to listen when they realize you had been through the same," she says.



Ms. Lish-Watson trained 71 volunteers, with more than a third helping at the warming center.



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Ms. Gibson is careful not to tell them what to do. “The power of suggestion is a big thing. You can’t tell them what to do. But you can suggest ‘This is what I do.’”

She also sees the result of listening judgment free. “You are not there to critique them. You’re there to hear unconditionally. It takes that one person to really listen to show that someone does care.”

Though Ms. Gibson had been homeless, she was shocked at who arrived for help. “I didn’t realize how many people were homeless and didn’t have any place to go.” The clients also shattered even her perception of who might be homeless. “People would come in and all their belongings are in their vehicles. You couldn’t tell by walking by them. It brought the realization that you didn’t have to look like you don’t have a home.”

Community support

To Ms. Lish-Watson’s surprise and delight, the community stepped up substantially to support the new warming center. The Twin Counties United Way awarded emergency funding of \$11,176. Local residents chipped in about \$15,000 in donations, with one generous citizen contributing \$2,000. On every Tuesday, a local church delivered tacos. On the remaining days, other places of worship whipped up meals. Clearwater Paper Mill, which has a mill in Lewiston, gave an unlimited supply of paper towels, toilet paper and other related goods.

Results

Recently, Ms. Lish-Watson ticked off the warming center’s winter results. Overall, it sheltered 77 people. As hoped for, many took advantage of the on-site services — peer support, recovery coaching, housing placement, resume building and financial literacy.

Ultimately, 23 individuals found housing. And 22 secured jobs at gas stations, fast food restaurants and other area businesses. Case workers also helped clients access their benefits. Three clients completed inpatient treatment for substance use disorders. Two veterans received benefits from the Veterans Administration, with one receiving backpay owed from 1996 to the present.

As for Ms. Gibson, she also transitioned from center volunteer to center employee — along with two of her peers. “I have never felt better in my life,” she says.

Plans for a new, year-round facility for the homeless

Ms. Lish-Watson is now in the process of applying for a block grant to expand the warming center to a year-round facility at a larger site. Once again, the community has rallied, writing multiple letters in support of the application, she says.

“I am overwhelmed,” she says, reflecting on the community’s embrace of the warming center.

To Ms. Lish-Watson, the center is reframing the collective perspective on its clients. “It really helps the community to see that homelessness is not who this person is; it is just a situation or a symptom of a diagnosis.”



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Training is now a click away

Mental Health First Aid classes now offered virtually

Responding to the pandemic, training for Mental Health First Aid participants has now gone online. Optum recently sponsored a virtual “train the trainer” course for 16 people to learn how to teach others to identify and help youth in distress.

“I was really happy about it,” says Sheila Murdock, a clinical nursing instructor at the College of Eastern Idaho and Brigham Young University-Idaho, who just completed the three-day course provided by the nonprofit Mental Health First Aid (mentalhealthfirstaid.org).

Teaching Mental Health First Aid virtually, she says, “actually opens up the population that we can train.”

The need for such training is critical in Idaho, says Mrs. Murdock, who also chairs the executive board of Community Suicide Prevention, a nonprofit agency in eastern Idaho (communitysuicidepreventionid.org/about-us). In 2018, state records show that 87 adolescents and young adults took their own lives.¹ An annual federal survey also shows a grim upward trajectory of high school students, seriously considering suicide: from 14.2% in 2009 to 21.6% in 2019.²

Also underwritten by Optum, the virtual course that Mrs. Murdock and other trainers will offer teaches people how to identify youth with a substance use disorder or such common mental illness as anxiety, depression, eating disorders or ADHD.

It teaches them how to reach out to a youth in distress. Some tips from Mrs. Murdock: To avoid putting youth on the defensive, be more low-key than you would with an adult. And, be persistent.

The course consists of a two-hour, self-paced session of videos and related content, followed by a four-hour, online class conducted by an instructor like Mrs. Murdock on the Zoom platform. Paying attention is key. Students are asked to keep their video camera on throughout the course to maintain visible contact with their instructors. The virtual format fosters engagement, says Mrs. Murdock. In a conventional face-to-face class, the same three people always raise their hands, she says. In a virtual setting, instructors can call — randomly — on every student at least once, she says, noting, “In a way, that’s where virtual has an advantage. You are getting everyone to participate!”

Potential course takers range from parents to school staff to anyone who works with children and youth. In the next few months, the virtual trainers will announce their own online courses on social media serving their communities. Mrs. Murdock is planning to post information about her course on her organization’s Facebook page. Optum also will post info on its page. Follow Optum Idaho on Facebook [@optumidaho](https://www.facebook.com/optumidaho) and on Instagram at [OptumIdaho](https://www.instagram.com/optumidaho) for updates on the courses in the state.

“The more people that we can get trained, the more lives that we are going to save,” says Mrs. Murdock.



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