



Empowering Perinatal Community Health Workers with Mental Health First Aid

The Importance of Maternal Mental Health

Maternal mental health is a crucial component to maintaining overall well-being during and after pregnancy. During this time, 1 in 5 women and nearly 3 in 5 women of color experience mental health conditions, such as postpartum depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders.¹ In New Jersey, mental health conditions are a leading cause of maternal deaths. Over 90% of these deaths are preventable.² For this reason, early recognition and treatment of mental health symptoms is imperative to prevent severe consequences for pregnant people and their infants.

Mental Health First Aid Education

To improve maternal mental health needs in New Jersey, the Quality Institute partnered with the Mental Health Association in New Jersey (MHANJ) to provide Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training to community health workers who support pregnant people before, during, and after childbirth – also known as perinatal community health workers. As close, trusted contacts, they have a unique opportunity to recognize signs of mental health distress early and guide clients to appropriate help.

MHFA is an evidence-based program that teaches adults how to identify the signs of a mental health or substance use challenge and how to assist someone experiencing symptoms. Research shows that the training program increases participants' knowledge of mental health conditions, mental health resources, and ability to intervene if an individual is experiencing distress. A key component of the training curriculum is the use of role-playing scenarios, whereby participants practice actions they would take to support someone experiencing mental health symptoms. To enhance perinatal community health workers' learning and skill development, the Quality Institute and MHANJ convened a workgroup of subject matter experts to develop and pilot 6 first-of-its-kind maternity-specific scenarios. The scenarios provide a brief storyline about someone experiencing early, worsening, and crisis warning signs of a mental health challenge during the prenatal and postpartum stage. Participants are asked to identify the mental health symptoms they observe and discuss the course of action they would take. The National Council of Mental Wellbeing, creators of MHFA, have approved these scenarios and will include them for use in MHFA nationally in September 2023.

Perinatal Mental Health First Aid Training Outcomes

The Quality Institute delivered four-day long training sessions, primarily in Essex, Union, and Morris County. To date, 90 perinatal community health workers have become certified in MHFA to provide mental health support to pregnant people.

¹ [Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance](#)

² [New Jersey Maternal Mortality Report](#)

Data collection through surveys and interviews highlight the value of perinatal mental health first aid trainings:

- 97% of participants reported an increased understanding of mental health and mental health stigma.
- 96% of participants reported an increased awareness of how to help or support someone experiencing mental health symptoms.
- 92% of participants reported an increased awareness of self-help or community resources to address mental health symptoms or challenges.
- 98% of participants felt the maternity-specific scenarios were relevant and increased their understanding of how to assist someone experiencing mental health symptoms.

Participants also shared direct feedback about their training experience, citing sentiments of empowerment, feeling more confident and prepared to help someone experiencing a mental health challenge, and feeling more informed about mental health issues. When surveyed 3 to 6 months after taking a training, participants reported that they continue to utilize the skills they learned and expressed how valuable the trainings have been to them and those they serve.

Given the growing and concerning evidence of the role that mental health plays in maternal morbidity and mortality, there is a critical need for anyone supporting pregnant individuals to be trained to some extent in mental health issues and to have an awareness of how to help their clients during or after their pregnancies³. Adding maternity-specific scenarios to the existing MHFA curriculum is an immediate way to provide mental health education to perinatal community health workers. The findings from our post-training surveys and interviews support the value of the trainings to perinatal community health workers in New Jersey.

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- Adelisa Perez-Hudgins, RN, New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute
- Armonie Pierre-Jacques, New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute
- Linda Sloane-Locke, CNM, LSW

To learn more about our Perinatal Mental Health First Aid initiative, please contact Adelisa Perez-Hudgins, at aperez@njhcqi.org.

³ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)