

29 January, 2026

TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Kristin J. Chandler

RE: Mental Health Advocacy Day

I am here to talk about Youth Mental Health First Aid. This is a national program that is a free one day training. It is offered statewide by mental health clinicians who are trained in the curriculum.

As a former high school girls basketball coach – I coached the junior varsity team at Randolph Union High School for 6 years – and as a mental health educator – I think it's time to require this course for all high school coaches, as a start. As a coach, I was required to take CPR/AED training, concussion protocol training, and implicit bias training, in addition to fundamentals of coaching. The CPR training must be renewed every two years. None of this training touches on the mental health needs of youth.

In my experience, many students turn to sports as an outlet, sometimes even an escape from their families and their social struggles. A coach is often a well-respected adult for a high school youth, someone to look up to, to confide in, to turn to in difficult times. I found that much of basketball coaching had nothing to do with the fundamentals and strategies of the sport. My teams would talk about things that were bothering them, their home life, their attempts to fit in, food insecurity, their relationship issues, and at times I found I was ill-equipped to offer help. Then I participated in a day long course of Youth Mental Health First Aid.

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. YMHFA is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, substance use, disorders in which psychosis may occur, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an 8-hour public education program which introduces participants to the unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems in youth or adults, builds understanding of the importance of early intervention, and teaches individuals how to help when a person is in crisis or experiencing a mental health

challenge. MHFA uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to assess a mental health crisis; select interventions and provide initial help; and connect young people to professional, peer, social, and self-help care.

Vermont Care Partners/Vermont Care Network has been implementing MHFA since 2014, has trained close to **12,000** Mental Health First Aiders in Vermont and currently has three MHFA grants – one is through SAMHSA enabling trainings for adult, youth, and teen, one is through the Vermont Department of Mental Health that focuses on three school districts, and one is through the Vermont Department of Health focusing on four specific counties. Through one grant, this past year, nearly **1200** MH First Aiders were trained, **2318** youth/adults were supported by MH First Aiders and **1476** were encouraged to seek professional help.

This training is easy to access. VCP does a lot of training with schools and trainings can be requested (as long as the funds last) through a form on their website: <https://vermontcarepartners.org/events/>