

OVERVIEW: What's Up? Wellness Checkups screens students for suicide-risk/mental health challenges, assists families in accessing treatment/resources, and provides prevention groups in county high schools.

CHALLENGE: After a series of suicides among teen and young adults from 2010-2013, the awareness of the need for early suicide prevention became acute in Nevada County. At that time, there was no universal mental health screening program for youth. Programs existed to serve high school students identified as high risk, but no comprehensive program to identify those suffering with significant mental health symptoms going unnoticed. The challenge then became to identify and implement a mental health screening program at public high schools within a rural community. The culture of Nevada County, with a history of resistance to "outside intervention," would provide program challenges due to pervasive mental health stigma and lack of initial buy-in - school administrations and staff, families, and even students themselves at times questioning universal mental health services in a public school setting. Challenges would also include the rural community's lack of access to mental health services due to transportation and financial barriers.

SOLUTION: The program was conceived out of a community brainstorm aimed at identifying an effective suicide-prevention program for Nevada County's youth. The Suicide Prevention Task Force comprised of school administration, county staff, laypersons, and other non-profits collaboratively chose Columbia TeenScreen as the evidence-based screening program the community needed. What's Up Wellness Checkups (WUWC) then adapted the TeenScreen model to the unique concerns of a screening program in a rural community. WUWC began its work of normalizing mental health checkups in Nevada County's high schools by promoting the destigmatizing perspective that mental health screenings are like any other checkup, a standard part of maintaining one's overall health. Media efforts, parent & student outreach, as well as consistent collaboration with school officials proved effective - by the third year of its inception, WUWC's parent consent forms were included in 9th grade enrollment packets in the county's two public high school districts. This inclusion increased the program's exposure to the community and numbers of participating students. With this increasing universality in screenings, it then became clear that there was a significant gap in resources for students. Although treatment for higher risk students was accessible in the schools, the program was uncovering students with mild-to-moderate anxiety or depression, as well as families who struggled with barriers to accessing treatment outside of school. In response, WUWC began providing in-school prevention groups aimed at promoting healthy coping skills/stress reduction techniques. WUWC currently provides Mindfulness Skills, Boys, and Expressive Arts groups in three area high schools, and offers groups in response to school needs. For example, a Mindfulness Skills for Loss group was recently offered in one school in response to sudden student deaths.

ORIGINALITY: This screening tool is unique to Nevada and Marin Counties in California. WUWC in Nevada County is distinct from Marin in that screenings and case management services are county funded, making the program accessible to schools and parents at no cost as opposed to private-pay. WUWC's in-school prevention groups also distinguish WUWC, in that they are an easily-accessible and no cost referral source for students provided on campus during the school day. WUWC has distinctly responded to the statistic that 10th graders have been found to have the highest suicide completion rate among youth, providing screenings to incoming 9th grade students offered through

their school's enrollment. Also every student screened, regardless of mental health impairment, receives an individualized psychoeducational meeting that encourages/identifies coping skills, support systems, as well as promotes their peer-to-peer outreach. This unique approach adds to the destigmatization of teen mental health needs. And finally, for those students screened and identified as needing treatment, case management services are offered to families in both English and Spanish - WUWC serves traditionally under-served Spanish-speaking families in Nevada County. Referrals to treatment providers, psychoeducation, resource information re: health insurance, housing, clothing, food, dental care, and parenting support is provided by Promotoras and Translators as needed.

COST EFFECTIVENESS: WUWC's suicide prevention and early interventions target youth struggling with significant mental health symptoms. These preventative outreach efforts keep youth out of juvenile hall, hospitals, and other intensive mental health services. The program also reduces costs to schools due to in-school behavioral problems related to mental health issues.

RESULTS: Since 2013, WUWC has provided mental health screenings to 1413 youth in Nevada County. 480 of those youth have been found to have clinically significant symptoms and 330 of those youth and their families have received WUWC's case management services. WUWC has provided a total of 19 targeted prevention groups that have served 143 students since 2014. Students participating in WUWC have stated that they were asked "a lot of important questions" and that "more kids should take this." Another student stated that "it is a good interview because talking about the way you are feeling can help in understanding not only yourself but your effect on people." WUWC group participants have stated that the groups gave them "the feeling of not feeling so alone" and that their group participation "helps me get through the day." A parent having received WUWC services for their teen daughter says, "thanks to your intervention she's alive and receiving support," and "the program has helped our family to be more open to talk about mental health issues." High School District Administrator Trisha Dellis related, "What's Up Wellness Checkups supported our school district in normalizing and integrating mental health screenings into the high school setting. They provide an invaluable resource for catching students who may not be identified as 'obviously' struggling. The program offers a key piece to improving overall student health, mental health stigma reduction and school success."

CONTACT:

Shellee A. Sepko, MA, LMFT Program Director

530-268-5854 shelleeann1@gmail.com

What's Up? Wellness Checkups, Po Box 431, Nevada City, CA 95959

www.whatsupwellness.com