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AHS expands program that aims to prevent self-harm

Community Helpers Program to begin training individuals in Calgary

CALGARY — An Alberta Health Services (AHS) program designed to help communities prevent self-harm and suicide among youth and young adults is expanding to three new communities, including Calgary.

Driven by research that indicates when individuals need support for mental health issues they will often turn to a friend or family member for help, the Community Helpers Program trains a community's 'natural helpers' to spot the signs of mental distress and gives them the tools to provide support and guidance to individuals in crisis.

These natural helpers include teachers, coaches or trusted and respected students within their schools, and are identified by surveying members of the community.

The Community Helpers Program has trained about 3,400 community helpers from across the province since the initiative launched in 2010. Now, with new partnerships in Calgary, Red Deer and Cochrane, the program is in 13 communities and expects to have 6,500 community helpers providing support and guidance to Albertans within two years.

"Just as Albertans are trained to perform CPR in the event they come across someone in cardiac distress, our program is training Albertans to support people in emotional distress and to point them toward appropriate resources in their community," says Dr. Laura Calhoun, AHS Provincial Medical Director for Addiction and Mental Health.

"This program is building community competency in the area of mental wellness. Many people want to help those in distress but maybe don't know what to do or what to say. Our training shows people how they can help."

AHS and local community agencies conduct the surveys of individuals to identify 'natural helpers,' who are then provided an opportunity to take free, two-day workshop training to learn more about the signs of mental distress and what supports to use. The workshop includes information on many mental health and wellness topics, such as suicide prevention, substance use and misuse, depression, stress management, and healthy relationships.

Participants also learn about dealing with crisis situations and effective communication, and are introduced to mental health resources within their community.

"In addition to offering our Mental Health Education program to schools, we are thrilled to be able to provide this additional program to our students, to create more supports for those who may be struggling or just need someone to talk to," says Laureen MacNeil, Executive Director of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Calgary Region.



The program is also available in Edmonton, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Banff, Jasper, Lac La Biche, Grande Prairie, Slave Lake, Fort McMurray and High Level.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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