and a mental health desert here in Southwest Florida,” Shawn Felton, interim dean of FGCU’s Marieb College of Health & Human Services, told the News-Press. “You look around Southwest Florida — the vast need is there.”

The professional development component is “so important a part of who we are as mental health counselors,” Bartley said. Advocacy has been an important area of emphasis in her teaching, she said, with her students having become accustomed to giving media interviews, “They’re our tomorrow,” she said. “They will be blazing the trail in the community.”

Bartley added that the university’s doctorate program would be accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). FGCU already has CACREP-accredited counseling degree programs.

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**CDC examines MH impact on public health workers amid COVID**

While increases in mental health conditions have been documented among the general population and health care workers since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent of mental health conditions among public health workers during this period is uncertain, according to the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

The CDC report, “Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidal Ideation Among State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Public Health Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, March–April 2021,” was released early online June 25 and again on July 2.

Public health workers might be at similar risk for negative mental health consequences because of the prolonged demand for responding to the pandemic and for implementing an unprecedented vaccination campaign. A 2014 survey estimated that there were nearly 250,000 state and local public health workers in the United States, according to the CDC.

**Method**

To evaluate mental health conditions among these workers, a non-probability-based online survey was conducted during March 29–April 16, 2021, to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation among public health workers in state, tribal, local and territorial public health departments.

**Results**

Among 26,174 respondents, 53% reported symptoms of at least one mental health condition in the preceding two weeks, including depression (32.0%), anxiety (30.3%), PTSD (36.8%) or suicidal ideation (8.4%).

The highest prevalence of symptoms of a mental health condition was among respondents under 29 and transgender or nonbinary persons (i.e., those who identified as neither male nor female) of all ages.

Public health workers who were unable to take time off from work when they needed were nearly twice as likely to report symptoms of an adverse mental health condition as were those who could take time off.

Among those not able to take time off from work (8,586), the most common reasons were concern about falling behind on work (64.4%), no work coverage (60.6%) and feeling guilty (59.0%); 18.2% reported that their employer did not allow time off from work. Needing mental health counseling/services in the last four weeks but not receiving these services was reported by nearly one in five (19.6%) respondents. Employee assistance programs were available to nearly two-thirds (66.1%) of respondents but were accessed by only 11.7% of those respondents; 27.3% of all respondents did not know whether their employer offered an employee assistance program.

Symptoms of PTSD disproportionately affected public health workers who experienced work-related traumatic stressors (e.g., felt inadequately compensated or felt unappreciated at work), particularly those factors that affect workers’ personal lives (e.g., felt disconnect ed from family and friends because of workload). Traumatic and stressful work experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic might have played a role in elevating the risk for experiencing symptoms of PTSD among public health workers.

**Strategies needed**

The CDC report found that even where available, employee assistance programs were not commonly accessed. Several strategies could reduce adverse mental health symptoms among public health workers during public health emergencies. For example, expanding staffing size (e.g., recruiting surge personnel to backfill positions) and implementing flexible schedules might reduce the need for long work hours; encouraging workers to take regular breaks and time off could help avoid overwork and reduce the risk for adverse mental health outcomes. In addition, implementing, evaluating and promoting use of employee assistance programs could improve employee resiliency and coping.

Addressing work practices that contribute to stress and trauma is critical to managing workers’ adverse mental health status during emergency responses. Furthermore, strengthening work systems to encourage behavior changes that promote mental health, such as building awareness

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of symptoms of mental health conditions and developing sustainable coping strategies, might improve mental health conditions, particularly for public health workers who are at increased risk, including those who are younger or transgender or nonbinary persons.

In addition, employee assistance programs could be evaluated and adjusted to be more accessible and acceptable to workers and focus more on building workplace cultures that promote wellness and destigmatize requests for mental health assistance, the CDC report indicated. •

STATE NEWS

Sweeping redesign of Wyoming’s MH services policy underway

Wyoming is redesigning how it provides behavioral health services, and while most of the details are still to be determined, it seems clear fewer people will qualify for state-funded treatment. The upshot, however, according to advocates, is that by focusing scarce resources on those who need help the most, the state can prevent expensive and painful cycles of institutionalization and family breakups, the Wyoming Tribune Eagle reported July 5. House Bill 38 — Community behavioral health-priority populations, passed during the 2021 legislative session, requires the Wyoming Department of Health to reconsider the state-funded mental health and substance abuse system. Wyoming pays for many mental health and substance abuse services provided through a network of community behavioral health centers. In recent years, the state put about $44 million annually into such programs, but demand for services consistently outstripped funding and supply. Then budgeters reduced mental health funding by $7.5 million annually — roughly 17%. That reduction was put in place July 1, the first day of the fiscal year. House Bill 38, the result of a years-long effort, was an attempt to get the most impact out of that oversubscribed investment. One of the mechanisms to that end involves establishing priority treatment groups. A report is due to the Joint Labor, Health and Social Services Committee Sept. 1.

Oklahoma schools to receive grants to boost MH staff, resources

Norman Public Schools will get a boost to its district counseling and mental health resources with several hundred thousand dollars in grant funding from Oklahoma, education leaders announced last week and The Norman Transcript reported July 5. The Oklahoma State Department of Education is awarding over $35 million — sourced from federal relief dollars — to fund counseling and mental health grants for 181 school districts in the state. The grant fund, called the Oklahoma School Counselor Corps, is intended to be used to hire “school counselors and school-based mental health professionals” to “meet the needs of children in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic,” according to a Department of Education news release. The grant is expected to fund 50% of the salary and benefit costs for the new staff for three years, or through the 2023–24 school year. In grant applications, districts could list their direct needs for counselors, school-based mental health professionals, social workers and recreational therapists. Norman Public Schools will receive $384,000 from the grant. “These grants can bring transformational change to schools, some of which have not had a single school counselor,” State Superintendent of Public Instruction Joy Hofmeister said in a statement.

In case you haven’t heard...

In the face of everyday offenses and mistreatments, people can achieve a greater sense of psychological and physiological well-being by offering forgiveness rather than taking revenge against the offender, according to research published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. The research found that people experienced less self-harm, a greater sense of belonging to their community and a stronger sense of their own humanity when they forgave the person who had wronged them, a news release from the American Psychological Association stated. The findings are based on four studies in which the researchers asked participants to rate their feelings of humanity following an offense. The studies revealed that victims who recalled forgiving, imagined forgiving or forgave their offender reported feeling more human compared with how they felt before having forgiven and with the people who took revenge.

Coming up...

The National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery announced its 35th annual Alternatives Conference to be held virtually and continuing on July 15 and July 17. For more information, visit https://www.alternatives-conference.org.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is holding its virtual NAMICon 2021, “Bringing People Together for Mental Health: The Time is Now,” July 27–28. Visit https://www.nami.org/Get-Involved/Attend-the-NAMI-National-Convention for more information.

The American Psychological Association is holding its 2021 virtual convention Aug. 12–14. For more information, visit https://convention.apa.org.

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