

# The West Side Outreach Pilot Project

An expanding program teaches community leaders how to intervene and help those experiencing mental health or substance use challenges

By Amy Watson, PhD, and James Burns

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**M**ENTAL HEALTH and substance use disorders are common. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), national data show that approximately one in five adults in the United States live with a mental illness. Locally, data from the Chicago Department of Public Health’s 2016 Healthy Chicago 2.0 survey indicates that 5.4% of the adult population in the city reported experiencing serious psychological distress. The numbers are higher for non-Hispanic African Americans (7.2%) and those living at or below the federal poverty level (11%).

Unfortunately, due to stigma and lack of mental health literacy, many experiencing mental health challenges do not access effective mental health treatment until their distress reaches an acute crisis state. This challenge often makes police the first line of response to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. These situations sometimes go tragically wrong. According to *The Washington Post* in 2015, over 25% of approximately 1,000 officer-involved fatalities involved individuals with mental illnesses.

Such a tragedy occurred in the early morning hours of December 26, 2015. Quintonio LeGrier and his neighbor, Bettie Jones, were fatally shot on Chicago’s West Side by a Chicago Police officer. Nineteen-year-old LeGrier was in the midst of a mental health crisis. Jones was a bystander to this tragic event.

The deaths of LeGrier and Jones prompted leadership from the Kennedy Forum Illinois and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chicago to reach out to Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s office with recommendations to improve the city’s response to mental health crises. In response, the mayor’s office created the Mental Health Steering Committee with the goal to improve first responders’ ability to provide safe and effective crisis response across the city.

## Pilot Partnership Players

The Kennedy Forum Illinois, along with partners NAMI Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and others, initiated a pilot program to raise mental health awareness, lessen stigma, and improve access to behavioral health resources in communities most impacted by mental health and substance use challenges. The pilot – which became known as the West Side Outreach Pilot Project that focused on relationship building, collaboration and community education – led to measurable positive outcomes for communities in need.

The project focused on four communities on Chicago’s West Side: Austin, East & West Garfield Park, and North Lawndale. These communities were identified as areas with high rates of mental health and substance use challenges based on data from the Illinois Department of Public Health and Chicago’s Office of Emergency Management and Communications

## Target Communities and Training Content

Once the target communities were identified, the team engaged an advisory group of community leaders to inform key community partners of the goals of the project, challenges, target populations and planned outreach efforts, and to gather their feedback. With the help of elected officials, faith leaders, community-based organizations, school leaders, health providers, and other stakeholders, the advisory group set out to train at least 200 members of community-based organizations, 100 members of the faith community, and 100 staff of schools. These groups were targeted for two reasons: 1) their status as trusted messengers in the community; and 2) the presumed higher likelihood they would witness someone experiencing a mental health or substance use related challenge. Individuals in these groups are well-positioned to intervene and help a person seek the necessary mental health services.

The advisory group then identified the type of training to provide to the target population. The sessions included two-hour mental health awareness training and eight-hour mental health first aid training. All training sessions included a component on how to request a specially trained crisis intervention team (CIT) officer when dialing 911 for assistance with a mental health crisis. Training was provided by NAMI Chicago, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, Trilogy Behavioral Healthcare, Presence Health, Mt. Sinai–Under the Rainbow, and Laynie Foundation.

The training goals were to:

- Increase mental health literacy (knowledge of signs and symptoms of mental illness).
- Reduce stigmatizing attitudes/beliefs about mental illness.
- Increase requests for crisis intervention team trained officers in crisis situations.
- Increase referrals to professional mental health services.

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training began in January 2017 and concluded in December 2017. With the advisory committee's support, we blanketed the West Side with information advising community members how to register for free mental health training. By the time the pilot was finished, 583 community stakeholders participated in 34 training sessions across the West Side.

## Evaluation and Growth

An evaluation of the training was conducted by UIC's Jane Addams College of Social Work. The evaluation was designed to gauge the impact of each training session on stigma, knowledge of signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use, and awareness of how to request a CIT officer if needed. All training participants were invited to complete evaluation surveys immediately prior to and immediately following the training, and to complete online follow-up surveys three- and six-months after the training.

In June 2019, the UIC research team published the evaluation findings in *Social Work in Mental Health*. The article, "The West Side Community Outreach Pilot Project: A Mental Health Outreach Initiative in Urban Communities of Color," authored by Andrew Repp, Amy Watson, PhD, and Lorrie Rickman-Jones, PhD, from UIC, and the Kennedy Forum's James Burns, highlights the effectiveness of the training sessions in

significantly decreasing stigma associated with mental health and substance use and significantly increasing CIT knowledge. Further, recipients of mental health first aid training demonstrated significant increases in mental health knowledge, self-confidence, and decreased perception of difficulties in providing help to those experiencing mental health or substance use related challenges. Thus, not only was the project successful in reaching the targeted communities, exceeding the goal of training 400 community stakeholders, the evaluation results proved positive.

Through this successful initiative, the Kennedy Forum and project partners have continued to provide free mental health training sessions in Chicago communities, focusing on the South Side for most of 2018 & 2019. Since the project's inception, over 2,000 community stakeholders have participated in free training.

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*Amy C. Watson, PhD, is a professor at the Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. James Burns is program director for the Kennedy Forum.*