

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID (MHFA)

In 2023, the ECOHE began facilitating Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training throughout Erie County. One of the ECOHE's main focuses is to address health disparities and service gaps among agencies within Erie County. Research shows that mental health distress is prevalent among racial and ethnic minority groups, residents of rural areas, and the LGBTQ+ community. Though the prevalence of mental health distress is high, there are not enough providers to meet the demand for mental health services, and many people are not prepared to assist someone who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge. MHFA teaches participants how to recognize signs of mental health or substance use challenges, how to offer and provide help, and how to guide a person toward appropriate care. This learning opportunity helps community members become better prepared to start conversations about mental health or



substance use by increasing understanding and providing an action plan. Adult MHFA classes (for adults interacting with other adults) began in February 2023. Youth MHFA classes (for adults interacting with youth ages 12-18) began in April 2023.

When it comes to mental health, many health disparities exist, and the prevalence of mental health distress is higher within the marginalized and minoritized communities named in the Health Equity Act of 2021, including racial and ethnic minority groups, sexual and gender minority groups, and residents of rural areas. By facilitating open and honest community discussions during MHFA trainings, the ECOHE is able to secure feedback from community members that aid in key functions of the Office, including analyzing disparities in health, health care, and availability/accessibility to health care services among disadvantaged and marginalized Erie County populations; understanding and connecting factors that contribute to health outcomes; and making recommendations for the improvement of health care delivery and access. MHFA trainings are also coordinated educational opportunities with the goal of supporting healthy lifestyles among disadvantaged and marginalized people, another key function of the ECOHE.

In 2023, the ECOHE certified over 700 Mental Health First Aiders in Erie County. MHFA training participants were demographically diverse in many ways, including age, educational background, gender, race, sexual orientation, and residential location within Erie County. 2023 MHFA participant demographic data is shown in the figures in the pages that follow. The diversity exhibited among

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MHFA participants emphasize the fact that the ECOHE has continued to prioritize the creation of safe spaces for all community members that are interested in participating. Each Mental Health First Aider received a copy of the MHFA manual and participant processing guide for the training they completed at no cost, as well as resource lists and other helpful information that can be shared with others.

Emerging themes in feedback from MHFA training participants include both appreciation of the opportunity to participate in this training as well as how useful the training is. Participants have emphasized that it is necessary for community members to learn how to support one another, noting that residents of Erie County have endured several recent events that have heightened stress, distress, and trauma and disproportionately impacted minority and marginalized communities, including the COVID-19 pandemic; the racially motivated mass shooting at Tops Supermarket on May 14, 2022; and the winter storms that struck at the end of 2022. Upon the completion of this course, participants have documented and voiced their commitment to offering aid to their co-workers, friends, neighbors, relatives, and more.

Staff members of both public-facing Erie County government offices and community-based organizations have expressed that the concepts of this course have helped them to be better prepared to assist community members who have experienced trauma or mental health distress, including those who engage in substance use. Vicarious trauma is prevalent among employees who work with trauma survivors, and MHFA participants in these kinds of roles have stated this training helps them to better support each other while they continue to meet the needs of their clients.

Next steps for the MHFA program include follow up with Mental Health First Aiders to determine whether they have been able to successfully apply MHFA knowledge and skills and to assess the effectiveness and usefulness of the training over time. The MHFA team also plans to explore barriers to participation that keep community members from signing up or from attending MHFA trainings, which may include SDOH factors, and to create a plan to mitigate these barriers.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID**

Email healthequity@erie.gov

Call (716) 858-2385

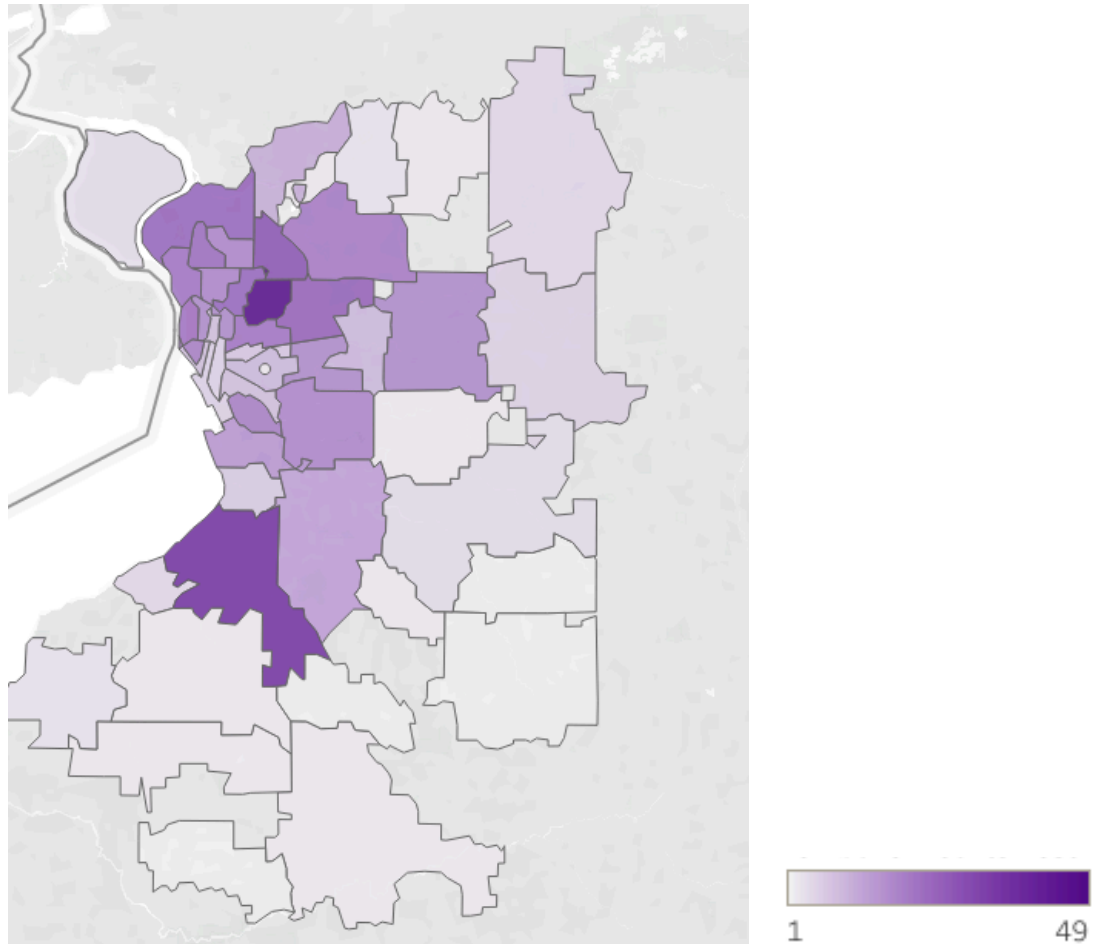
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The above map shows the ZIP codes of the people who attended the ECOHE’s Mental Health First Aid programs. The darker colors represent higher numbers of participants. ZIP code 14215 had the highest number of participants.



MHFA at Johnnie B. Wiley Pavilion



MHFA at the Frank E. Merriweather Jr. Library

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Mental Health First Aid Participants by Race

American Indian or Alaska Native	6
Asian	22
Black or African American	203
Middle Eastern or North African	4
More Than One Race	36
Other	5
Pacific Islander or Hawaii Native	2
White	389
Do Not Wish to Say	54

Mental Health First Aid Participants by Sex Assigned at Birth

Male	148
Female	537
Do Not Wish to Say	36

Mental Health First Aid Participants by Gender Identity

Man	139
Woman	523
Trans, Nonbinary, and Other Gender Identities	15
Do Not Wish to Say	44

Mental Health First Aid Participants by Age

