

BUILDING A CARING COMMUNITY

Mental health is not always an easy or comfortable topic to confront. So Kathleen Fuchs, director of counseling services at Lawrence, was delighted to see more than 120 educators, nonprofit staff, and clinicians — representing 13 local school districts and 24 youth-serving organizations — gather alongside Lawrence staff and faculty for a day-long training session with nationally-recognized psychiatrist Dr. David Mays on how to recognize and reach out to young people at risk for suicide.

“We have clearly tapped into a deep concern in the broader community,” Fuchs said. “There is a shared commitment to address this issue through effective prevention.” Fuchs spends a lot of time talking about suicide prevention these days. Along with a team of staff and faculty colleagues, she is implementing a three-year grant awarded to LU by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The grant provides resources for lowering suicide risk and enhancing protective factors among Lawrence students through training and education for staff, faculty, and students, as well as greater collaboration across campus and with community mental health partners.

“The bottom line is to do everything possible to make sure that students who need help, get help,” says Fuchs. And although the SAMHSA grant focuses on college students, our community knows all too well that the need is just as great among adolescents. The J. J. Keller Foundation, known for its commitment to mental health issues, challenged Lawrence to ‘think big’ about engaging a broad community audience and provided a grant to help extend evidence-based training and education opportunities to local youth-serving organizations.

Fuchs has not been shy about thinking big. She hopes the next series of outreach events will ultimately benefit tens of thousands of people through *gatekeeper training*, which empowers ordinary individuals to recognize early warning signs of someone in distress, open a supportive conversation that persuades the person to accept help, and connect them to mental health services. The approach gets a thumbs-up from Karen Aspenson, executive director of the Fox Valley chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. “This sort of gatekeeper training, especially at the high school level, is very valuable and is a best practice,” Aspenson said.

J. J. Keller Foundation funds will enable more than 55 people from area schools and youth-serving nonprofits to become qualified gatekeeper *instructors* who can then train teachers, coaches, staff, even student leaders to be gatekeepers. Fuchs hopes that more than a thousand new gatekeepers could be trained over the next two years. “We couldn’t be more pleased with the work Lawrence is doing to engage the community in this important discussion,” said Mary Harp-Jirschele, executive director of the foundation. “They are making a concerted effort to reach out to nonprofits that can benefit from this training, and we are simply the conduit to making that happen. In the end, this outreach will benefit us all.”