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New program breaks down barriers to how people respond to mental illness

(Edmonton, Alberta) – While people often know a lot about physical illness, most people have little knowledge about mental illness. This lack of understanding promotes fear and stigma – and keeps people from providing help. Today at Edmonton City Hall the Alberta Mental Health Board (AMHB) launched *Mental Health First Aid Canada*, a first-time, groundbreaking program designed to change the way people respond to mental illness.

Based on the concept of medical first aid, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is the help provided to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis is resolved.

“This program is unique in that it gives *anyone* the tools to help and support friends, colleagues, family members and others around them who may be developing mental health disorders or in a crisis. As with medical first aid, you don’t have to be a trained health professional to offer initial help,” says Ray Block, AMHB President and CEO. “It’s an early intervention process where we can all make a difference.”

The AMHB is in the process of training instructors to spread the program throughout Alberta and Canada. The program is open to anyone interested in learning about mental health – members of the general public, families affected by mental illnesses, teachers, health service providers, and emergency workers, frontline workers who deal with the public, volunteers, human resource professionals, employers and community groups.

“Because one in three Canadians will develop a mental health problem at some point in their life, it’s important that people learn about mental health and have the confidence to help someone who is experiencing mental health problems,” says Iris Evans, Minister of Health and Wellness. “By creating awareness and generating understanding about mental health, we can positively influence the mental health of Albertans.”

MHFA was developed and introduced by Professor Anthony Jorm and Betty Kitchener from the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University in 2001. Since 2005 the program has been sponsored by the ORYGEN Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. Since then, the MHFA Training and Research Program has been developed, evaluated and disseminated nationally and internationally. Both Australia and Scotland have made MHFA part of its national mental health strategy. The MHFA course has been thoroughly evaluated in Australia using randomized controlled trials and a qualitative study. It was found to be effective at improving participants’ knowledge of mental disorders, reducing stigma, and increasing the amount of help provided to others.

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This event kicks-off Mental Illness Awareness Week, October 1-7, 2006. With the theme, “We can all make a difference,” a number of programs and events take place throughout the week to teach Albertans about the most common mental disorders: what they are, how to recognize their signs and symptoms, and how to get help.

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