



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mars Hill hosts county's first-ever Crisis Intervention Team training for law enforcement, first responders

Training helps participants respond to people in a mental health or addiction crisis

August 7, 2017 – In a first for Madison County, a total of 19 area law enforcement officers, first responders and community partners are now better equipped to respond to people experiencing behavioral health issues following a 40-hour training at Mars Hill University.

The county hosted its inaugural Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training, which focuses on interacting with individuals with mental illness, a substance use problem or a developmental disability, from July 24-28. Training graduates were: Denise Griffin, Marla Reese, Michael Cash and James Cooke of Mars Hill University Safety and Security Services; Jeffrey Tweed with the Madison County Sheriff's Office; Jake Morrow with the Madison County Department of Juvenile Justice; Austin Wilson, Nina King, Michael Robinson, Kevin McKinney, Josh Robinson, Rhonda McMahan and Jonathan Casteel with the Yancey County Sheriff's Office; Melissa Lowman and Briana Van Dyke from Mitchell County EMS; Jonathan Godfrey and David Blankenship from the Riceville Volunteer Fire Department; and Zack Manley from Buncombe County EMS.

Graduate Kevin West, director of safety and security for Mars Hill University, served as the law enforcement co-facilitator.

The training was provided at no cost by Vaya Health, a public managed healthcare organization serving western North Carolina. Mars Hill University served as the sponsoring local agency in partnership with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Madison County attorney Jenna Blackwell.

"We are excited to have offered the first CIT training in Madison County with support from Vaya Health," West said. "From my previous career as a police officer and supervisor, I know how important communication and de-escalation skills can be to law enforcement when interacting with individuals experiencing a crisis. We intend to continue the partnership with our local law enforcement agencies to continue to offer this dynamic, interactive training on the campus of Mars Hill University."

Training topics included behavioral health disorders, veterans' issues, trauma, suicide prevention and skills to de-escalate potentially dangerous situations. Graduates also participated in a "hearing voices" exercise that simulates what someone with auditory hallucinations may experience, as well as role-playing activities and local agency site visits.

“CIT provides participants with information and resources they can use to divert individuals with mental health needs or substance use problems from jail and connect them with treatment providers, when appropriate,” said Vaya Health’s Melissa Ledbetter, who coordinated the training. “We’re excited to have hosted our first class in Madison County and are grateful for the strong support of our partnering agencies.”

Vaya Health has trained more than 1,000 western North Carolina officers, first responders and community partners in CIT. The training helps participants better communicate with people with issues related to mental illness, alcohol or drug use or developmental disabilities and can increase both citizen and officer safety, help people get treatment and reduce arrests.

Between 25 and 40 percent of Americans with mental illness will pass through the criminal justice system at some point, according to NAMI. The first CIT program – a collaborative effort among law enforcement, advocates and mental health communities – was established in 1988 in Memphis, Tenn.

About Vaya Health

Vaya Health manages public funds for mental health, substance use disorder and intellectual or developmental disability services in 23 North Carolina counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey. Access to services and crisis help are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-849-6127. Learn more at www.vayahealth.com.

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