

# East Alton-Wood River Students Become First in County to be Certified in Teen Mental Health First Aid

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
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**EAST ALTON/WOOD RIVER** - On Friday, Dec. 15, 2023, 45 East Alton-Wood River (EAWR) High School students became the first high school students in Madison County to be certified as Teen Mental Health First Aiders.

The students underwent a six-week course to become certified through the Madison County Mental Health Board, the National Council for Mental Well-Being and the [Born This Way Foundation](#). Under the instruction of the school's guidance department, they talked about how to identify and support peers in crisis.

“The whole process began when there was a strategic plan created and conversations on how we can better support teen mental health,” explained Katie Venvertloh, EAWR

student/family interventionist. “And after some other discussions and research, we decided that the Teen Mental Health First Aid curriculum would be awesome to bring to East Alton-Wood River...It really opened up our guidance office and we had a lot of students come to our guidance office more.”

Venvertloh and Susan Caraway, the school psychologist, worked with two sophomore health classes over the past six weeks. Through roleplaying, presentations and discussions, they talked with students about handling mental health challenges, finding appropriate help, and helping a friend through specific crises like suicide, bullying and substance use.

Caraway and Venvertloh emphasized that students are not therapists and are not expected to diagnose or treat mental health issues. Instead, they have a five-step action plan to follow that encourages them to look for warning signs, ask a struggling peer how they are, listen, help them connect to a trusted adult, and continue their friendship.

By following this plan, the goal is for students to support each other and get the help they need from adults. The EAWR students are the first in Madison County to have this specific training through the National Council for Mental Well-Being’s Teen Mental Health First Aid program, but the Madison County Mental Health Board hopes to work with more schools to expand the program.

“It’s something that the Mental Health Board has been trying to promote,” said Deborah Humphrey, the Board’s executive director. “It’s an evidence-based practice. Our kids right now — the numbers are really high in terms of kids in crisis and suicide. Over 40% is the national average, and we’re actually a little bit higher than that in some of our school settings. So it’s really important that we implement programs and services that reach out to kids, and this is a perfect one because it’s teaching peers to help peers.”

The Board hopes to certify more students in the coming months, starting with the remainder of the EAWR sophomore class next semester. Humphrey, Michelle Brooks and Denise Bradley, all members of the Madison County Mental Health Board, noted that students who know what to look for can help adults identify kids who are in crisis.

“I think we’ll learn a lot from them,” Bradley added. “They’re on different platforms than I’m even familiar with. They have different language and acronyms that I have no idea . So I think that we’ll be able to learn a lot from them, too.”

Caraway said the program had already helped several students, as some of the sophomores were able to connect their friends to school resources following the steps

they were taught through the Teen Mental Health First Aid curriculum. The students were also given exit questions after every session, and this helped Caraway and Venvertloh identify students who might need help.

While the EAWR sophomores were the “guinea pigs,” Venvertloh joked, they were successfully certified on Friday as the first of many EAWR students to be Teen Mental Health First Aiders. Edwardsville Community Unit School District #7 is also interested in starting a Teen Mental Health First Aid program, and Venvertloh encourages any school districts who are interested in the program to reach out to her with questions. For more information, you can contact Venvertloh at 618-254-3151, ext. 2535 or [kvenvertloh@eawr.org](mailto:kvenvertloh@eawr.org).

“It is quite a process, but it’s definitely worth it,” Caraway added. “I’m hoping that you’ll see that we’ve got a lot of support now for our kids.”

If you need immediate help, contact 988 or other [local crisis resources](#).

