

Increasing Response Rates: Tips for Getting First Aiders and Instructors to Submit Referral Data

What is referral data? All Project AWARE grantees are required to evaluate the Youth Mental Health First Aid and Mental Health First Aid (Y/MHFA) trainings that are being offered across the country. As part of this evaluation, grantees must track referral data: the number of school-age youth who were referred by a First Aider or Instructor to a mental health-related service or support each quarter. “Referred” is defined very broadly as linking a school-age youth to any mental health or related service, resource, or support, and includes referrals to screening, assessment, consultation, review, or treatment.



What is this tip sheet all about? This tip sheet offers suggestions for encouraging First Aiders and Instructors to provide you with referral data when you request it. Unless you have a good understanding of how many referrals your Instructors and First Aiders are making, it will be hard to know if your Y/MHFA trainings are having their intended impact. It is not likely that you will be able to get 100% of your Instructors and First Aiders to respond to all of your requests for data for every year of your grant. However, you can increase your response rates—the number of First Aiders and Instructors that do send you data—by trying out some of the strategies included in this tip sheet, which other grantees have found to be helpful. The strategies include things that you can do during your trainings, and ideas for strengthening your data collection processes and communications with your First Aiders and Instructors.

Why should I care about increasing response rates? When you get a good response rate and have the majority of your First Aiders and Instructors sending you referral data upon request, you can use this data to improve the quality of your trainings. For example, if you find out that most of your First Aiders and Instructors are not making any referrals to youth, you can take steps to find out why this is the case and help them to feel better prepared to make referrals. If you find out that your Instructors and First Aiders are regularly making referrals to youth, you will know that your trainings are working as expected and you should keep doing what you are doing. Making quality improvements in your trainings will help you to better serve the youth in your communities!

Strategies for Trainings

- Some grantees have refined the language they use to describe referrals. Some have stopped calling them “referrals” if First Aiders have problems with the very broad definition of “referral” that is used by SAMHSA for Project AWARE. An alternative is to ask First Aiders to report on the extent to which they have used their First Aider training with a youth and made a recommendation to a youth in need.
- Have First Aiders sign a commitment form that explicitly states that they will provide you with referral data upon request.
- Take steps to ensure that Instructors understand the data submission expectations and can share these expectations with First Aiders. Consider creating materials for Instructors so that they can learn and share expectations and instill buy-in from First Aiders.
- Implement strategies to obtain buy-in from both Instructors (so that they can share and instill enthusiasm with First Aiders) and First Aiders. Buy-in is easier to obtain from First Aiders if they



understand why submission of data is so important (e.g., data could prompt further funding of the trainings, helps to establish whether training is working, lets us know if changes in the trainings need to be made).

- At the trainings, clearly set the expectation that First Aiders will have to submit their referral data to you upon request. Have Instructors reinforce the requirements multiple times during the trainings, especially at the end.
- Make sure that First Aiders know that you will be contacting them regularly with reminders and requests to submit data. Make sure that they know what to look for, when to expect your request, and how to recognize your call/text/email.
- Obtain contact information from First Aiders at trainings and ask what method they prefer to be contacted through (e.g., phone, email, snail mail, fax).
- Provide First Aiders with tools to help them keep track of referrals so that they can easily and accurately share these with you upon request (e.g., app for smartphones, business card-sized worksheets, hard-copy forms). Some grantees have reported increased response rates as they have increased the number of options for data submission (i.e., allowing data to be submitted online, over the phone, via fax, or snail mail), so it is important to know how your First Aiders like to be contacted, and what forms of communication they have access to.
- Let First Aiders know how long you think the request for data will take (e.g., only a few minutes of their time!).
- Consider including incentives to encourage First Aiders and Instructors to submit data to you regularly (e.g., enter them into quarterly drawings/raffles, provide gift certificates for local coffee shops/restaurants/grocery stores/gas stations/amazon.com, raffle off an ALGEE Koala Bear once a month, give prizes like Y/MHFA pens or mental health coping cards to those who reach a certain number of referrals). Make sure to tell First Aiders about these incentives during your trainings!

Data Collection Strategies and Communication Considerations

- Send out surveys/requests to submit data at regular intervals, and consider your timing. Some grantees have suggested that sending requests for data monthly is an optimal interval. More frequent requests for data can lead to “survey burnout/fatigue,” while quarterly requests for data may be too far apart, lessening the likelihood that First Aiders remember to keep track of their referrals. (Quarterly intervals would be the minimum, since all GPRA data needs to be entered into the TRAC system quarterly.)
- Consider sending out reminders (via email/phone) so that First Aiders remember to keep track of their referrals and any other relevant data. Reminders could let them know when and how to submit their data, or that another communication will be coming (on a specific date) that will request them to submit their data. (Reminders may also encourage them to use their newly learned skills to make referrals!)
- Consider setting up regular “newsletters” or other forms of communication in which you can offer something to the First Aiders that would be beneficial to them (so that they are less likely to just ignore or delete your email/text). Although this strategy has worked for some, one grantee noted that their response rates improved when they sent out simpler messages to request submission of referral numbers, rather than inundating the First Aiders with information. Try out different strategies to find out what works best for your First Aiders and Instructors!



- Within communications, let First Aiders know how much longer you will be requesting data from them (e.g., only two more quarters left!), so that they understand how long to keep tracking their referrals and know when the end is in sight.
- Within communications, thank them for their part in helping to achieve goals (e.g., reduce stigma, support youth, increase mental health awareness), so that they keep the bigger picture of why they are doing this in mind.
- Within communications, tell them when goals are being achieved (e.g., share high referral numbers to allow them to celebrate with you).
- If you are planning to use incentives to encourage Instructors and First Aiders to share their data, remind them about the incentives whenever you communicate with them.
- Make sure all communications are readable in whatever format you are sending them (e.g., preview what emails or texts look like in different web browsers or on different cell phones).
- Have a very simple and quick method for submitting data that everyone can easily use.
 - Consider local challenges (e.g., rural areas with sketchy cell phone service or coverage; First Aiders with low socioeconomic status may not have smartphones or easy access to computers or the internet).
 - Consider multiple data submission methods (e.g., an online survey that can be accessed via smartphone and internet in addition to a hard-copy template to keep track of surveys that can be faxed/mailed/phoned in).
- Provide clear and easy instructions for the requirements (what you expect of them and how they are supposed to submit data).
- Thank First Aiders in all communications! Let them know that you appreciate their submission!
- Let them know that their data has been received and is being used.
- Call to follow up if you have not received any data from them; ask if they've experienced challenges to do referrals and/or track and submit their data, and problem-solve ways to overcome the issues.
- Only ask for data that you will use (limit what you ask for).
- Consider the timing of when you send emails and texts (e.g., don't send emails on a Friday afternoon).
- Facilitate competitions for Instructors, LEAs, or organizations (e.g., who can get the highest percent of First Aiders to submit data).
- Provide business cards to First Aiders that can be used to share referral sources and options.



If you have any successful strategies that have worked with your Instructors and First Aiders that you would like to share, please contact the NITT-TA Center so that we can add your ideas to this tip sheet!

Need More Help?

For more information or for technical assistance, please contact the NITT-TA Center:



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