Friendship Benches in New York City!

A south-north knowledge and experience transfer

Realizing the heavy burden of mental illness, the NYC department of health and mental hygiene has been seeking evidence-based approaches to bridge the treatment gap supported by mayor Bill de Blasio and first lady Chirlane McGray.

As part of the Mental Health Road Map for all: ThriveNYC, Friendship Benches were introduced upon suggestion of Dr Mary Bassett, the NYC Commissioner of Health. Under Dr Gary Belkin, the Executive Deputy Commissioner, Division of Mental Hygiene, the Director of Networks and Coalitions Takeesha White has been leading the adoption of our Friendship Bench Zimbabwe program. Friendship Benches NYC emphasizes providing support and referrals through peer counselors. This task-shifting approach has been shown to be effective and acceptable for clients and counselors alike. The NYC peers receive a comprehensive training and are encouraged to use their lived experiences to build rapport with their clients and make an impact. The Friendship Benches NYC are targeting hard to reach populations within the communities. Peer counselors are reaching out at public events (mobile benches) or are found in close proximity to Health Action centers in boroughs like the Bronx or Harlem. Between July 2017 and January 2018, they have already engaged 11,268 New Yorkers and helped 2,135 individuals to talk about mental health and to find support from any of the wide range of agencies within NYC.

The Benches are made of strong plastic, are bright orange in colour and were designed to withstand any weather and use. For them to not be carried away, those benches that are more permanently placed in the community are filled with water.

New Yorkers are encouraged to start the conversation about mental health with many activities and initiatives such as the psychological first aid course for all interested citizens.

We presented our work in Zimbabwe at the Transforming the Work through task-shifting convening to counselors and researchers and were met with great interest and enthusiasm.

We are looking forward to continuing the exchange between the Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe and the NYC Friendship Benches team.
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Takeesha White, Dixon Chibanda, Ruth Verhey, Skip, Bethsanai and Sarai

NYC Friendship Benches peer supervisor Helen Skipper ‘Skip’ (above) and peer counselor Jennifer
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Left to right: Gary Belkin, Ruth Verhey, First Lady Chirlane McGray, Vikram Patel, Dixon Chibanda and Sidney Hankerson

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www.twitter.com/friendshipbench
www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/
41 Lanark Road, Kensington, Harare, Zimbabwe
hello@friendshipbenchzimbabwe.com

IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH
Friendship Bench - the community approach