Sweetser introduces ConnectME to Better Mental Health as a way to prepare community members to recognize and be responsive to emerging mental health needs of people of all ages. Made possible by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), it supports Sweetser’s Training Institute in providing Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Psychological First Aid (PFA) training to individuals who are in roles that respond to and manage traumatic events, including first responders and teachers. In addition to MHFA and PFA, it includes training on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) for those who work with youth. Through this work, Sweetser will also aim to eliminate the stigma associated with mental health through awareness, and build a centralized location for community resources.

MHFA and PFA will be provided for free within parts of Androscoggin, northern coastal Cumberland, Knox, Lincoln, Penobscot, Sagadahoc, Waldo and York Counties through collaborations with schools, college personnel, public safety personnel, parents, caregivers, public housing personnel, and Veterans and Military personnel. If your community group is interested in these free evidence-based trainings, contact training@sweetser.org for more information.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-informed modular approach to help children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of disaster and terrorism. Its practice also offers support in challenging times as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. PFA seeks to illuminate the impact of collective trauma, build resiliency and assist in self-care actions plans. It incorporates five evidenced-based principles (safety, calming, connectedness, self and community efficacy, and hope) along with eight core elements (engagement, safety, stabilization, information gathering, practical assistance, connection to social supports, information on coping, and linkages with collaborative services). PFA provides skills for:
- identifying and responding to individuals who have experienced trauma
- strategies for connecting individuals to resources
- skills for self-care.

The premise of PFA is based on the understanding that those impacted by trauma will experience a range of reactions and that those reactions will cause enough distress that initial support is critical to help prevent a more serious conditions. Developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD, PFA has been used by the American Red Cross, first responders and law enforcement to train staff on how to respond to collective trauma experiences. Although targeted for different populations, it offers a consistent approach to each population. PFA has been developed to address the cultural and developmental competencies of populations served by those trained in PFA such as school personnel, law enforcement/public safety staff, military & veterans. It utilizes a standardized field manual that outlines the training modules, core actions and self-care strategies to ensure fidelity to the training is maintained without modification.

Mental Health First Aid-USA is an internationally proven and effective program. Peer-reviewed studies published in Australia, where the program originated, show that individuals trained in MHFA:
- Grow their knowledge of signs, symptoms, and risk factors of mental illnesses and addictions.
- Identify multiple types of professional and self-help resources for individuals with a mental illness or addiction.
- Increase their confidence and skills likelihood to help an individual in distress.
- Increase skills in de-escalation to be used with individuals who are in a mental health crisis
- Show increased mental wellness themselves.
Studies also show that the program reduces the social distance created by negative attitudes and perceptions of individuals with mental illnesses. The target population for MHFA is the public, especially those individuals who may come into contact with persons experiencing mental health distress. MHFA offers a number of different courses designed for adult learners that have been developed to meet the needs of different populations:

- MHFA-Adults
- MHFA-Adults with a focus on Veterans
- MHFA-Adults with a focus on Higher Education students
- MHFA-Adults with a focus on Fire/EMS
- MHFA-Adults with a focus on Public Safety
- MHFA-Youth for Adults working with Youth*

*For schools, the grant will pay for substitute teachers so that teachers can attend.

Although targeted for different populations, MHFA offers a consistent approach in each module. All Mental Health First Aid modules are based on the algorithm, ALGEE, an action tool that can be applied to assist someone with a developing mental health issue or in a mental health crisis. The five components of ALGEE are:

1. Assess for risk of suicide or harm
2. Listen non-judgmentally
3. Give reassurance and information
4. Encourage appropriate professional help
5. Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Attendees apply ALGEE while role playing scenarios that are based on real life experiences. By the end of each workshop participants are well equipped to respond to a mental health situation in their work, schools, and community and make appropriate linkages to community-based resources and mental health agencies.

ACES: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES): The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study is a research study conducted by Kaiser Permanente, a health maintenance organization, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Participants were recruited to the study between 1995 and 1997 and have been in long-term follow up for health outcomes. The study has demonstrated an association of adverse childhood experiences with health and social problems as an adult. The dialogue in this training will not only address the results of this study but how we can prevent some of these stressors in our communities.

The sessions for all of the training types are generally offered virtually but under some conditions may be in-person. Sessions can be divided into 2 parts delivered on 2 different days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Training Session length</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MHFA-Adult</td>
<td><strong>Virtual:</strong> 2 hrs. self-guided, 5.5 hours instructor led (or divided into 2 2.75-hrs)  <strong>In-person:</strong> 8 hrs. (or divided into 2 4-hour parts or other arrangements)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MHFA-Youth</td>
<td><strong>Virtual:</strong> 2 hrs. self-guided, 4 hours instructor led (or divided into 2 2-hrs)  <strong>In-person:</strong> 6 hours (or divided into 2 3-hour parts or other arrangements)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFA</td>
<td><strong>Virtual:</strong> 6 hours (or divided into 2 3-hrs)  <strong>In-person:</strong> 6 hours (or divided into 2 3-hour parts or other arrangements)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACES</td>
<td><strong>Virtual:</strong> 1 to 4 hours  <strong>In-person:</strong> 1 to 4 hours</td>
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Upon completion of these sessions, consultation is available.

For more information on ConnectME to Better Mental Health, contact Sweetser’s Training Institute at training@sweetser.org.