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## Referral Pathways Protocol for Mental Health Supports



*Please note: This referral pathways protocol was developed [in part] under grant number CFDA 93.243 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.*

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# Referral Pathways Protocol for Mental Health Supports

In September 2015, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Now is the Time Technical Assistance Center (NITT-TA) released a comprehensive *School Mental Health Referral Pathways (SMHRP) Toolkit*. The entire 130-page document is available at the following webpage:

<http://files.ctctcdn.com/bde05f96001/84fa3636-08af-43fc-aeaf-a016f2aa68a6.pdf>.

Project AWARE Ohio compiled the following seven-step protocol for interested stakeholders who want to establish a mental health referral pathway within their local communities. This protocol was developed by condensing information from the *SMHRP Toolkit* into an easy-to-use seven-step checklist. This protocol is intended to provide a general overview of the steps to consider in establishing a referral pathway for behavioral and mental health issues. This protocol should be considered a basic introductory overview that condenses the information provided in the *SMHRP Toolkit* into simple steps for practitioners that are easy to understand, rather than a complete guide for establishing a mental health referral pathway. Please refer to the original *SMHRP Toolkit* for a thorough discussion of the practices recommended by SAMSHA and NITT-TA when establishing a mental health referral pathway.

## What is a mental health referral pathway?

A mental health referral pathway is a series of actions or steps to take after identifying a student with a potential mental health issue. Having a referral pathway system in place is important because this type of system can:

- Help school staff know what to do when they identify a student in need;
- Help coordinate supports within schools and between schools and outside organizations; and
- Improve student well-being by helping students get supports at early signs of need.

## What are the foundations of an effective mental health referral pathway?

Mental health referral pathways are as unique as the schools and communities where they operate, and to create an effective pathway, schools must consider the specific needs and resources of their school and community. Although the specifics may vary, foundations of effective mental health referral pathways include:

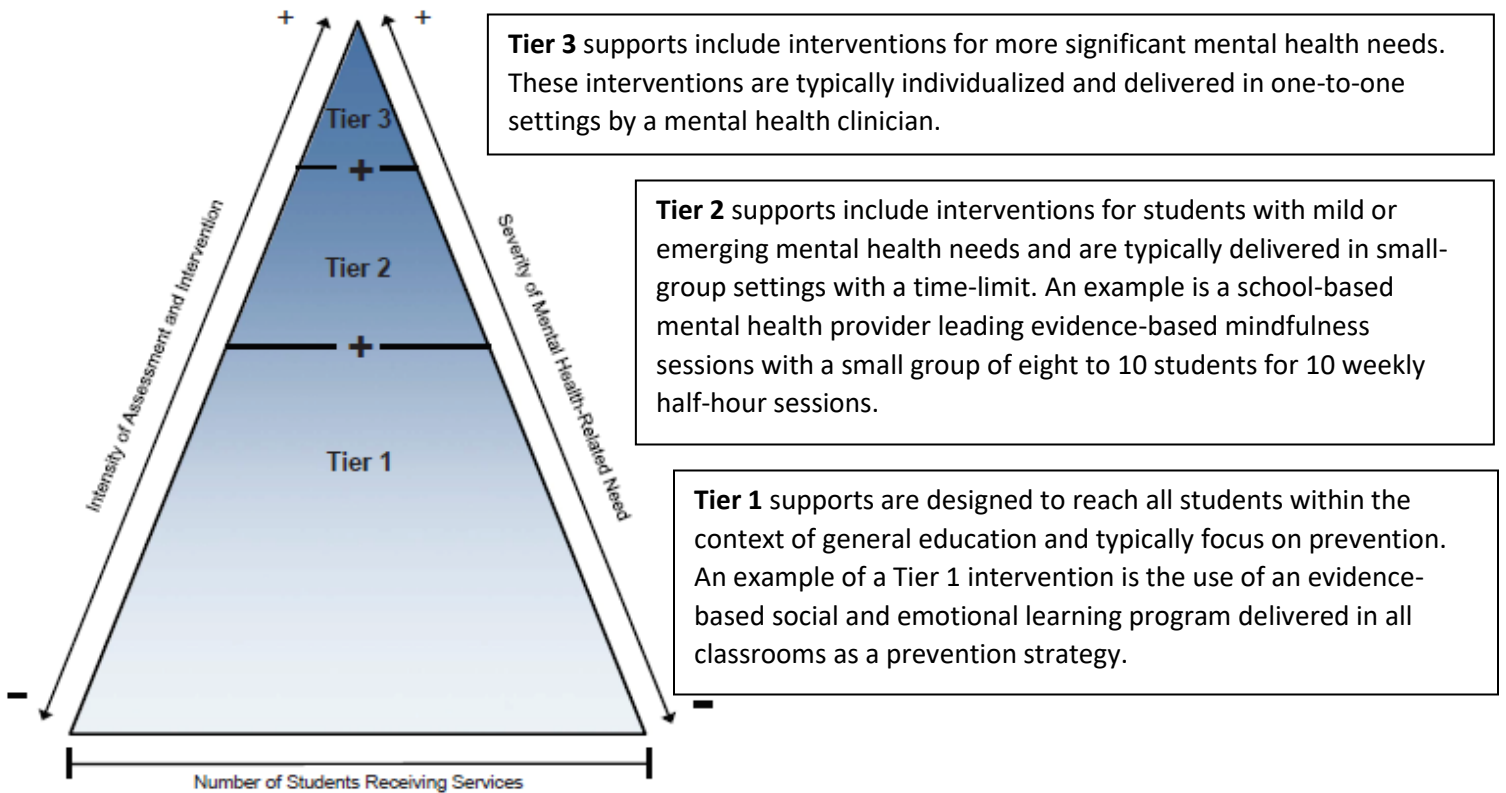
- Identification of partners within and outside of the school, including clear definition of partners' roles and responsibilities;
- Procedures for managing referrals;
- Procedures for sharing information across partners;
- Monitoring effectiveness of evidence-based interventions provided to students in need;
- Collaborative decision-making that prioritizes the student and his or her family.

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## MTSS and mental health referral pathways

Mental health referral pathways often are used within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. MTSS is a framework for providing students with a continuum of supports. This system divides supports into three tiers, often illustrated with a pyramid such as the one below:



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The following key steps are important to consider when establishing a mental health referral pathway within your local community:

1. Establish a problem-solving team for referrals (aligns with Stage 1 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
2. Determine a procedure for managing referral flow (aligns with Stage 2 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
3. Develop a system for the team to gather student background information (aligns with Stage 2 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
4. Establish a secure student record management system (aligns with Stage 2 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
5. Map available resources and interventions (aligns with Stage 3 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
6. Create decision rules to determine appropriate interventions based on this information (aligns with Stage 4 of *SMHRP Toolkit*);
7. Develop a system to monitor and evaluate intervention effectiveness (aligns with Stage 4).

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## 1) Establish a problem-solving team.

### (Aligns with Stage 1 of SMHRP Toolkit)

- Assess existing campus teams (e.g., school climate teams, wellness teams, grade-level teams, crisis intervention teams, PBIS teams, IEP teams) and determine if an existing team can manage referrals or if a new team needs to be established.
- Identify team members. Teams should include support from physical health, general education, law enforcement, community organizations and mental/behavioral health personnel. Families also should be involved in the referral process.
- Articulate the team purpose and identify roles and responsibilities of each team member.
- Establish a routine, including meeting at regular intervals for a set time, following an agenda.
- Regularly assess team structure and functioning.

## 2) Determine a procedure for managing referral flow.

### (Aligns with Stage 2 of SMHRP Toolkit)

- Adopt a referral form or forms (sample referral forms can be found on pages 31-35 of the *SMHRP Toolkit*).
- Consider how referrals can be accessed and submitted (e.g., submitted to the school social worker, counselor).
- Determine who from the problem-solving team will review referral forms.
- Identify contacts for community agencies. If referrals are needed for community agencies, who are the main points of contact?
- Communicate procedures with school staff, parents, students, etc.

## 3) Develop a system for the team to gather information.

### (Aligns with Stage 2 of SMHRP Toolkit)

#### Plan to:

- Collect background information about the student.
- Consider using universal screening measures to identify and measure student need (find examples of measures on page 85 of the *SMHRP Toolkit* or Project AWARE Ohio's Mental Health, Social-Emotional, and Behavioral Screening and Evaluation Compendium: <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learning-Environments/PBIS-Resources/Project-AWARE-Ohio/Project-AWARE-Ohio-Statewide-Resources/Compendium-Version-2.pdf.aspx>).
- Conduct observations.
- Interview parents, teachers and other school adults.

## 4) Establish a secure student record management system.

### (Aligns with Stage 2 of SMHRP Toolkit)

- Determine a secure location or electronic system for storing records.
- Determine levels of permission to access files.

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- Ensure access to records for appropriate team members.

## **5) Map available resources and interventions.**

### **(Aligns with Stage 3 of SMHRP Toolkit)**

- Identify resources available within the school (e.g., after-school clubs as Tier 1 supports, group counseling as a Tier 2 support and individual mental health services as Tier 3 supports).
- Determine whether existing school-based interventions are of sufficient breadth and quality to serve student needs (e.g., research-based interventions and numerous, diverse Tier 2 and Tier 3 services are available).
- Identify community resources and request information to build a resource database.
- Within the database, create a list of resources and interventions categorized within the tiered support framework.
- Begin building partnerships with new community partners, define roles and responsibilities, establish a process for information sharing and plan for transitions between levels of care.
- Consider how the team will facilitate issues related to access to community-based resources and partnerships (e.g., barriers).

## **6) Create decision rules to determine appropriate interventions based on this information.**

### **(Aligns with Stage 4 of SMHRP Toolkit)**

- Determine guidelines to decide when a student needs a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention.
- Determine guidelines for deciding if an intervention is complete or is not working and should be discontinued.
  - Does the problem-solving team collect positive outcome data (e.g., improved attendance, improved grades, fewer office referrals)?

## **7) Develop a system to monitor and evaluate intervention effectiveness.**

### **(Aligns with Stage 4 of SMHRP Toolkit)**

- Develop a system to monitor whether the intervention is happening (documentation to track number and duration of sessions).
- Develop an outcome goal for each student based on the need description.
- Create a process for selecting a progress-monitoring method and schedule for each outcome goal (e.g., analyzing data at weeks five and 10 for a 15-week intervention plan).
- Determine a process for requesting information from community partners.
- Determine a process for obtaining feedback from the student and his/her family.
- Consider adopting a software system to electronically track intervention process and outcome data.
- Develop a plan for sharing intervention effectiveness information with appropriate stakeholders (e.g., family members, school staff that interact with the student being referred).
- If needed, have a plan to identify potential improvements to the intervention plan, revisit the intervention plan or refer the student to an outside service agency better able to support the problem.

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## Additional Resources

Information about Project AWARE Ohio:

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learning-Environments/PBIS-Resources/Project-AWARE-Ohio>

Project AWARE Ohio statewide resources (Ohio Department of Education):

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learning-Environments/PBIS-Resources/Project-AWARE-Ohio/Project-AWARE-Ohio-Statewide-Resources>

Project AWARE Ohio statewide resources (Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs and the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success):

<http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/>  
<http://continuum.oberlinkconsulting.com/>  
<http://poe.oberlinkconsulting.com/>

Project AWARE Ohio school-wide universal screening and evaluation tools:

- Mental Health, Social-Emotional, and Behavioral Screening and Evaluation Compendium:  
<http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/compendiums/Compendium-Version-2.pdf>
- School-Wide Universal Screening for Behavioral and Mental Health Issues: Implementation Guidance: <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learning-Environments/PBIS-Resources/Project-AWARE-Ohio/Project-AWARE-Ohio-Statewide-Resources/Screening-Guidance-Document-Final.pdf.aspx>
- Webinar on School-Wide Universal Screening for Behavioral and Mental Health Issues: Implementation Guidance:  
[http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/compendiums/School-Wide\\_Universal\\_Screening\\_Webinar.mp4](http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/compendiums/School-Wide_Universal_Screening_Webinar.mp4)

Information about the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs:

<http://miamioh.edu/cas/academics/centers/csbmhp/index.html>

Information about the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success:

<http://miamioh.edu/cas/academics/centers/csbmhp/network/index.html>

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