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Douglas ESD receives nearly \$7 million in federal funding to expand school-based mental health providers

Jan. 20, 2023 – U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley announced on Jan. 6 that four Oregon school districts will receive a combined School-Based Mental Health Grant Program funding of nearly \$20 million from the U.S. Department of Education to hire additional licensed mental health providers.

Douglas Education Service District is thrilled to be a recipient of \$2,236,382 for the fiscal year 2022. Federal grant funds for a total amount of \$6,808,215 will be awarded to Douglas ESD through the year 2025, which is 71.4 % of the total dollars that will be used in collaboration with other programs. This grant will play a critical role to expand mental health support throughout the thirteen component school districts in Douglas County.

“The increased services will positively impact our students, families, staff and community, providing immediate and long-term needs,” said Analicia Nicholson Douglas Education Service District superintendent.

The funds are intended to recruit, train and retain school-based mental health service providers, as well as increase the diversity and cultural/linguistic competency among providers.

Douglas County youth report experiencing behavioral health concerns such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicidal ideation at significantly higher rates than the State of Oregon’s average. For some populations such as BIPOC and LGBTQ+, youth who are unhoused and youth with disabilities, these concerns increase exponentially.

Approximately 13,000 students are enrolled in the 13 school districts that Douglas ESD serves. Currently, Douglas ESD employs 12 staff members in the behavioral health services department. This team is responsible for providing mental health support for nearly 50% of these students. Examples of recent services provided range from one-to-one interventions and skill building, group skills training, support during a school district-wide crisis or traumatic event and behavioral safety assessments and consultation. Additionally, mental health professionals, not employed by Douglas ESD, provide similar support to school districts who aren't contracted with the behavioral health services department.

“The expansion of the number of school-based mental health professionals will allow us to grow and create equitable pathways to behavioral health services for our youth. This effort to meet youth where

they are, in their schools, will not only be a proactive approach to breaking down barriers to accessing behavioral health care, our hope is it will also help alleviate some of the load on education staff who have been working diligently with youth to provide behavioral health support,” said Amy-Rose Wootton Douglas Education Service District behavioral health services director.

Increasing the number of staff dedicated to mental health supports will expand access to school-based behavioral health and supports. “We will also be able to continue building important relationships with students so they feel seen, heard and understood,” said Wootton.

The grant funds will expand Douglas ESD’s Grow Your Own Program to eliminate barriers for professionals interested in becoming trained or retrained as a school-based mental health provider. This innovative approach would integrate classroom learning with real-world experience by funding the graduate education through Bushnell University and simultaneous employment of a cohort of up to 15 clinical mental health counseling students to serve youth throughout the 13 school districts within the ESD service area. The goal of the educational training is to increase the number of available school-based mental health providers in our local region.

Bushnell University is a private university based in Eugene, Oregon. The School of Psychology and Counseling is led by Ryan Melton, Ph.D., LPC, ACS, the associate dean of the department. Additionally, Melton lives in Roseburg and understands the needs of Douglas County.

“As a resident of Douglas County and mental health provider, I understand the struggles our community faces in terms of meeting growing mental health challenges and not having enough professionals to serve the enormous need,” said Dr. Ryan Melton, associate dean of the School of Psychology at Bushnell University. “This is a major step in meeting this need by “growing our own professionals” which allows local residents to earn a master’s degree while living, studying and working in Douglas County. The School of Psychology and Counseling at Bushnell University is excited to partner with the Douglas ESD to increase representation of diverse, marginalized and underrepresented behavioral health counselors in this community.”

“Douglas ESD is grateful for the partnership with Bushnell University. Though we acknowledge this is a piece of the puzzle to meeting the needs of school-based youth, we look forward to continuing to partner with districts and community partners to find creative solutions to meet the needs of our youth,” said Wootton.

This Spring Douglas ESD and Bushnell University will begin the process of recruiting individuals to participate in this innovative program.

Three informational sessions will be planned across the county in the coming months where details about the program will be made available to interested applicants.

“We are grateful for this incredible opportunity to further develop our supports for youth,” said Nicholson.

Douglas Education Service District offers high-quality, equitable, cost-effective and locally responsive educational services to the regional community and 13 component public school districts. By prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion, Douglas ESD is building a stronger organization that is innovative and in service to the community. More than 300 full-time and part-time professionals provide vital services to advance student achievement for all children, birth to adulthood. Learn more at www.douglasesd.k12.or.us