



Building a Culture of Support: Designing and Implementing a Peer Support Program in a Multidisciplinary Graduate School Setting

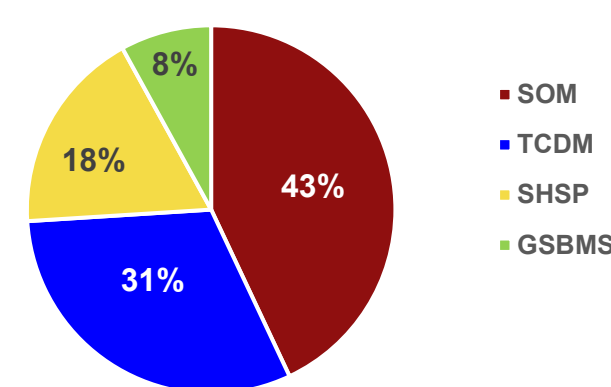
Amy Stern, LCSW-R, Robin Saide, LCSW-R, Paula Wasserman, LMSW, Kathryn Spanknebel, MD, FACS, MAMSE

BACKGROUND

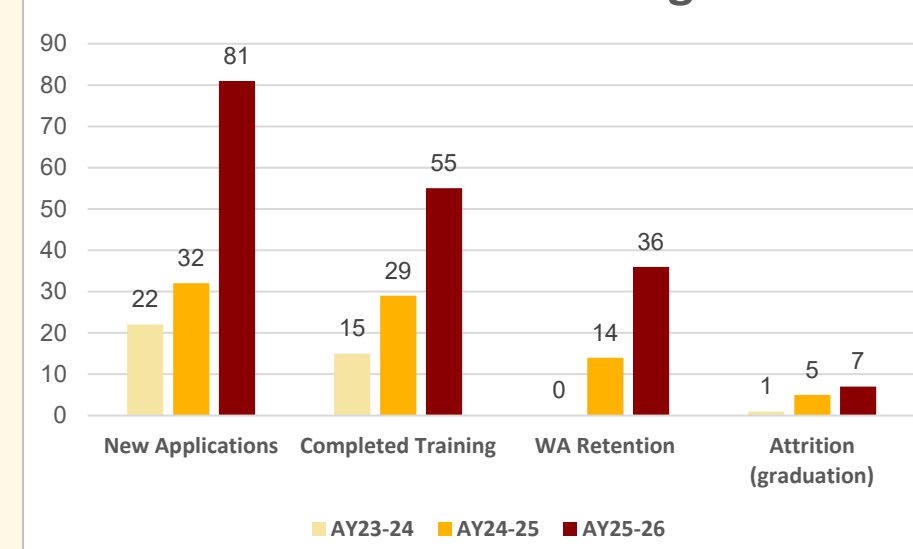
- The Office of Student Mental Health and Wellness (OSMHW) at New York Medical College (NYMC), part of the Touro University System, offers psychological counseling and wellness programs to graduate health care students: The School of Medicine (SOM), The School of Health and Science and Practice (SHSP) The Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBMS), and The Touro College of Dental Medicine (TCDM).
- Student surveys from academic year (AY) 2021-2022 revealed gaps in awareness regarding campus mental health services and a lack of clarity on how to access them.
- OSMHW aimed to proactively educate the NYMC community about mental health (MH) support available & connect students to services.
- Culture, race and ethnicity impacts student engagement with accessing MH services.¹ OSMHW aimed to decrease stigma around connecting with mental health providers and normalize help-seeking.
- Interventions were explored on how to best increase the breadth and reach of OSMHW.
- Peer support is increasingly used in medical and dental school programs.² Studies show that young people turn to each other when experiencing distress.^{3,4} Consultation with staff at institutions with peer programs offered insight on best practices, strengths and challenges.
- In Fall 2023, OSMHW launched the **Wellness Ambassador (WA)** Program.

PROGRAM INTEREST & GROWTH

Average Campus Population AY2023 - AY2026 (N=2052)



Student Interest in Being a WA



New applicant to WA program:

"During my past two years at NYMC, I've come to appreciate the wide variety of resources and support that the OSMHW provides. As a wellness ambassador, I hope to encourage my peers...to engage with OSMHW in a way works for them (through programming, lectures, or therapy)."

Program	AY 23-24	AY24-25	AY25-26
SOM	11	31	66
TCDM	0	5	17
GSBMS	1	4	2
SHSP	3	5	6
Total	15	45	91

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES & DESIGN

OBJECTIVE 1: Improve Awareness of OSMHW Services

- Student volunteers (WAs) are trained on all OSMHW services.
- WAs disseminate thoughtfully developed, well-designed communication/outreach to student body.
- Promotion of WA program and increased number of events with WA support results in elevating visibility.

OBJECTIVE 2: Enhance Program Alignment

- OSMHW ↔ WAs ↔ Students – programming is iterative.
- Monthly reports to OSMHW sharing input about program-specific and campus-wide needs. Spontaneous input always welcome.
- Quick implementation of suggested programming once unmet needs are named; feedback invited post-event/program.

OBJECTIVE 3: Proactive/Active Engagement

- WAs trained in effective communication, de-escalation techniques & identification of warning signs that require connection with OSMHW. Low threshold for referral.
- Monthly emails from WAs to OSMHW leadership starting AY 2025-2026 reporting number of encounters and types of issues being raised, and WA learning needed. Supervision provided.

OBJECTIVE 4: Shift Campus Culture

- Reduce stigma in help-seeking.
- Provide opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Create opportunities for all campus engagement around mental health and wellness.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Program Participation

- Recruitment → Applications → Application Review → Acceptance Offer

Expectation

- Attend 3 mandatory training sessions.
- Participate/Support ≥2 events during AY.
- Respond to OSMHW communications.
- Complete anonymous survey about trainings.

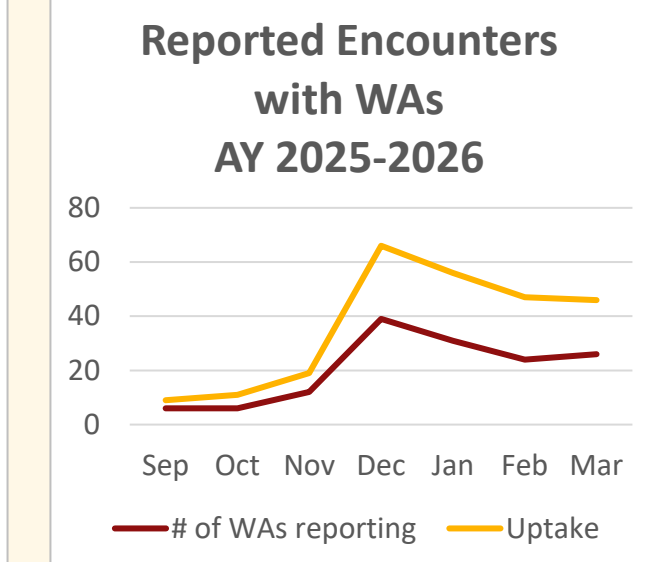
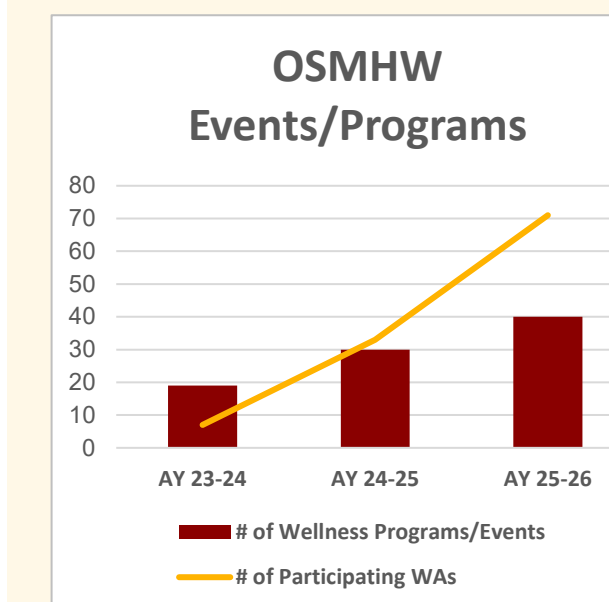
Engage in Ongoing Support

- Contact OSMHW to debrief about situations.
- OSMHW's monthly outreach gathers feedback on how to support WAs in their roles.

Opportunities

- Enhance emotional self-regulation skill set.
- Take initiative in event development and execution, and advocate for mental health integration by connecting OSMHW with broader campus programming.
- Research projects.

EVALUATION



Programming Implemented Due to WA input:

- Community Building: *The Power of Partnership* for dental clinics.
- Rooted in Wellness project.
- Recognizing and Responding to Behavioral Emergencies workshop.
- Zumba (offered weekly).
- OSMHW participation in student-led Gold Humanism Society's "Reflection Rounds."

Successes

The WA program:

- Demonstrated a high retention rate once trained.
- Supported an increased number of events/programs on campus, elevating the presence of OSMHW among students.
- Extended the reach of the office through trained students who are able to respond to and refer their peers in need.
- Enhanced alignment of content of workshops, presentations and wellbeing opportunities with students' interests.

Challenges

- Influx of interested applicants/rapid growth of program required greater financial and staff resources.
- Monthly response rate for quantitative measurement of WA uptake was less robust than expected.
 - By March 2026, > 50% of WAs responded to monthly communications.
 - WAs who responded reported meeting with approximately 1-2 students/month to provide support & information about accessing OSMHW.

FUTURE STEPS

- To address rapid growth – Fall 2026 will incorporate:
 - Additional core OSMHW staff into the training and oversight of new and existing WAs. This will include revising training program.
 - Create tool to monitor quality of care.
- Incentivize response to communications & greater engagement with office - May 2026 started highlighting outstanding WA contributions through awards & public recognition.

REFERENCES

- Lipson, S.K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M. & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the National Healthy Minds Study, 2013-2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138-147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038>
- Abrams, M.P., Salzman, J., Espina Rey, A., & Daly, K. (2022). Impact of Providing Peer Support on Medical Students' Empathy, Self-Efficacy, and Mental Health Stigma. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(9), 5135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19095135>
- Dooley, B., and Fitzgerald, A. (2012) My world survey. National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland
- Eisenberg, D., Justin, H., & Lipson, S.K. (n.d.). (rep.). The Health Minds Study Fall 2021 Winter/Spring Data Report.