

Support Youth Resilience April 28, 2020

Youth are particularly vulnerable to the added stresses of the pandemic. Before COVID-19, 1 in 3 high school students felt chronically sad and hopeless. Almost 1 in 5 had seriously considered suicide in the past year. Sheltering at home may not be safe for youth, particularly those youth such as LGBTQ youth and foster youth who are at greater risk for parental rejection and abuse. At-risk youth are less likely to check-in with their teachers and participate in virtual learning, and more likely to experience increased stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 crisis.

Youth are Best at Defining Needed Supports

At the request of youth advocates, the Commission in 2018 launched the Youth Innovation Project and established a Youth Innovation Project Planning Committee, comprised of 14 youth from 12 counties. The Committee is organizing youth-led community engagements and developing concepts for youth-centered county innovation projects to increase preventative mental health services in schools and in the new “virtual space.”

The Commission has also funded innovation projects, such as Santa Clara’s allcove project to facilitate transition-age youth (TAY) engagement with the community mental health system. The youth-led allcove project provides holistic services including onsite mental health and substance abuse counseling, physical health care services, and linkages to education, housing, and employment, as well as intensive treatment options.

Youth-led is key to youth served. Throughout all of these activities, youth have made it clear they want services and supports that are strength-based, peer-led, and wellness-oriented. The COVID-19 crisis is requiring ingenuity and the rapid deployment of new strategies consistent with those principles.

Stigma is a primary barrier to youth seeking mental health services or helping a friend in crisis and in turn youth play an important role in reducing stigma among their peers through outreach and engagement, education and support.

Youth-led Innovations Provide a Foundation for Swift Action

The emerging “best practices” for serving youth are undermined by physical distancing rules. Safe places, at school and in the community, are particularly important for youth, but have been suspended by physical distancing orders. Youth are spending more time on social apps, which can enhance social connection, but may also be determinantal to their mental health.

Youth leadership continues to be essential to effectively connect to those in need. Youth leadership has been effective in countering stigma and establishing the safe zones that allow other youth to open up, share their stories, and get connected to services. NAMI Campus High School clubs and Cal-HOSA chapters have supported youth leadership and mental health advocacy within schools and communities and are needed more than ever as schools make the transition to virtual means of connection.

Youth are also playing a role in designing and leading mental health service delivery. Youth leaders have stepped up to educate their peers about mental health and shape school-community mental health programs. Psypher, a youth-led organization, held a 14-day online workshop series called Wellness in Place to bring youth together to discuss difference aspects of wellness during COVID-19. Connecting youth to youth-initiated and directed programming can strengthen resilience and mitigate mental health crises now and in the future.

Take Action Now

The abrupt shift to remote learning, the emotional consequences of social distancing and the shuttering of safe places are expected to have profound impact on the emotional wellbeing of youth. Fortunately, the momentum and learnings of recent years provide clear direction to policymakers.

Recommendation: Strengthen emerging efforts to increase the youth voice in responding to mental health needs of youth and young adults.

- > The State should support and expand local youth wellness councils that provide leadership and oversight for school mental health planning and policy, and focus support on high-risk communities where risks have likely increased during the pandemic.
- > The State should support a network of youth-designed web and app-based and tele-mental health resources and ensure that all youth can access those supports. Programs would include virtual drop-in centers, online wellness communities and other resources that include outreach to diverse communities and that are culturally, linguistically and LGBTQ appropriate.

Disrupt the Emerging Mental Health Crisis

COVID-19 is impacting the mental health of millions of Californians. Physical distancing may be reducing the spread of disease, but the strategy also weakens the links between Californians and supportive services. The State can disrupt this emerging mental health crisis now by increasing funding and fortifying critical public mental health infrastructure. This brief supplements the Commission's April 28, 2020 letter to the Governor and Legislature.