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YouthAction Community Leadership Course Teen Mental Health in NYC

Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City. CCC is a seventy-three year old independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training program, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on teen mental health. Students surveyed approximately 100 youth to get their opinions and also visited programs and agencies that provide mental health services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

YCLC participants believe that these recommendations, created by teens, are essential to the public conversation about adolescent mental health, because ultimately it will be these students and their fellow teens who will be the beneficiaries.

Findings and Recommendations

Thrive NYC

New York City's commitment to spend \$850 million over the next four years on various mental health initiatives is encouraging. Plans to reduce stigma, increase access to services, and raise awareness about the warning signs of mental health problems are all important in the effort to adequately meet the needs of New Yorkers. Of Thrive's allotted \$850 million over 4 years, \$30 million per year will be spent on school mental health. These funds will be used to hire 100 school mental health consultants and expand services in certain schools.

NYC Well

We surveyed NYC teens about the mental health services available to them in their schools and communities. Of the 95 youth surveyed by the YCLC class, almost half (46%) were unaware of whether there are mental health services available to them in their communities. Of the respondents who attend NYC public schools, more than half (52%) were unaware of whether there are mental health services available to them in their schools.

- We **support** the creation of the NYC Well hotline, a phone number that anyone can call or text if they are in need of a mental health intervention.
- We **support** the promotion of NYC Well throughout the city's public spaces, and **recommend** that the city continue to advertise this service in all communities.
- We **recommend** that NYC Well be promoted in schools and on social media in order to ensure that teens and parents are aware of the hotline.

School-Based Mental Health Services

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness of NYC, 1 in 5 youth in the United States lives with a mental health condition, and at least half of these youth go without the care they need. They also note that 50% of all mental illness starts by age 14 and 75% starts by age 24. New York City's Office of School Health reports that almost half of children who receive services for a serious mental health issue receive them through the school system. The Office of School Health's position is that offering services in schools, during the school day, improves access to needed treatment.



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Currently, out of 1,700 schools, only 255 have school-based mental health clinics, and an additional 235 have at least one mental health professional on site. Funds from Thrive NYC will place additional mental health services in schools with the city's highest student suspension rate.

- We **recommend** that Thrive funding dedicated to school mental health services be increased so that all NYC middle and high schools may benefit from onsite mental health services, not just the most high-need schools.
- We **recommend** that Thrive funding for school mental health services be extended beyond four years.

Mental Health Education and Training

Throughout the course of our research, many service providers and advocates called for better education and training on mental health for both students and teachers within the public school system so that issues can be recognized early and handled properly. As part of Thrive NYC, mental health training for school staff will be offered on identifying early signs of distress, offering assistance, and suicide prevention. Additionally, New York State recently passed a bill that requires mental health education in all schools, though the mandate is unfunded and requires school districts to create their own curricula.

- We **support** the trainings being offered to NYC school staff through Thrive NYC and **recommend** that all teachers be required to participate.
- We **recommend**, in addition to the trainings already offered, that teachers be trained on classroom strategies to respond to youth with mental health issues, who may require non-traditional approaches to teaching and discipline.
- We **support** the state mandate for mental health education in New York schools. We **recommend** that New York City fund the development of a high quality, evidence-based curriculum and provide oversight and support to ensure it is implemented in all public schools.

Youth Voice

"I found through the YCLC that teen mental health is much more complex than some may perceive, and these issues require a multi-layer approach to treatment." -Beatrice Donovan, grade 10, Bard High School Early College

"Mental health is an essential aspect of teen well-being and ought to be treated as such by the education system." - Grace Foley, grade 11, the Spence School

"Through the YCLC program, I have learned that mental health services for teens are not only fundamental for growth but quite inaccessible. We should aim to make mental health services available to everyone." -anonymous

"When I found out that half of kids who get mental health services get them from school, I thought right away, 'We need more money for school-based mental health!'" -Merry Parasol, grade 10, Brooklyn Friends School

"I found that there are so many organizations all over the city focused on teen mental health, which was very encouraging." -anonymous

"Untreated mental health issues can flood the minds of youth with negativity. Therefore, our government should fund programs that plant positive seeds and cultivate healthy minds." -Tammy Yonatanova, grade 12, Forest Hills High School

"I learned that mental health issues for teens are much more pervasive than I once thought. In order to ensure that everyone can succeed and be happy, we must first ensure that everyone has the emotional capacity to do so." -Alexander Miller, grade 11, the Trinity School