Investing in Teen Mental Health

To build on investments in safer communities and support youth in Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Health Funders Collaborative recommends creating a Community-Based Teen Mental Health Grant Program. This grant program would fund community-based organizations' (CBOs) teen mental health prevention and early intervention (EI) services, which currently fall outside of existing funding streams.

Teen Mental Health Needs in Pennsylvania

Teen mental health is a growing concern amid a backdrop of societal pressures, academic stress, and the challenges of adolescence. According to recent studies, the prevalence of mental health issues among teenagers in the United States is significant with depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts increasing. These trends have also been observed in Pennsylvania. The 2023 Pennsylvania Youth Survey indicates that 37% of 6th to 12th graders in the Commonwealth felt sad or depressed most days in the past 12 months, and 16% seriously considered suicide. The reported cases of suicidal ideation and self-harm among teenagers underscore the urgency of addressing mental health issues in this demographic. At a time when teenagers are in dire need of connection and care, 28% indicate that they have no one to talk to when sad, lonely, or worried.

Bolstering prevention and EI is paramount as Pennsylvania also faces a shortage of mental health professionals. Pennsylvania's workforce shortage in mental health professionals is projected to be among the worst in the nation by 2026, and 53 of the 67 Pennsylvania counties are either entirely or partially in mental health professional shortage areas. This shortage calls for not only innovative approaches to attracting and retaining mental health professionals, but new strategies to expand the workforce into communities to allow more timely and early interventions in the places where teens present with mental health needs.

Rationale and Structure for a Grant Program

PHFC is recommending a grant program as the policy lever for these services since CBOs' teen mental health prevention and EI services fall outside of existing funding streams, including existing grant programs, reimbursement for traditional mental health treatment services, behavioral health reinvestment funds, value-based payments and community mental health services block grants. To complement existing investments, the grant program could be administered by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). The proposed grant program also falls within PCCD's mission since exposure to adverse childhood experiences and violence increases youth's risk of experiencing behavioral health disorders.

PHFC recommends structuring the grant program as a three-year investment to fund:

a) **grants to non-profit CBOs' for implementation and provision of teen mental health prevention and EI services (see Table 1), and**
b) **a statewide Teen Mental Health CBO Collaborative to provide technical assistance (TA) and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for the CBOs.**

Table 1: Teen Mental Health Prevention and Early Intervention (EI) Services

Health Education, Promotion, and Skills Development Through mental health awareness education, life skills training, and service learning, teens increase resilience and wellbeing by learning coping skills, stress management, problem solving, healthy relationships education, and self-care planning. Programs include evidence-based social emotional learning curriculum and help teens develop a sense of self and belonging through education around emotion management, problem solving, conflict resolution, goal setting, adolescent health and wellness, service-learning, and coaching support.
Peer Support and Teen Leadership Through teen leadership committees and peer engagement, CBOs engage teen leaders to design programs, share prevention messages, and offer mentoring support to other teens. Teen leaders help their peers to develop coping strategies, avoid risk-taking behaviors, and seek counseling and additional mental health supports when needed.
Mentoring and Career Pathways Development Teens are connected to trusted relationships with caring adults through mentorship, career coaching, and specialty programs. CBOs offer science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) education, internship programs, and career pathways development. STEAM education is also connected to health (e.g., a performance arts program includes education about communicating positive mental health messages).
Early Intervention Services In addition to evidence based social emotional learning, CBOs provide safe spaces for developing skills for stress management, meditation, self-care planning, and meditation. They also offer trauma informed programs and services, art therapy, restorative practices, grief and loss support, and mediation.
Brief Intervention, Counseling, and Drop-in Services CBOs offer brief intervention and support for teens needing help navigating transitions, relationships, academic pressures, and early signs and symptoms of mental health needs. Many also provide on-site individual, group, and family therapy to teens accessible through drop-in services or in the spaces where they attend other teen programs. CBOs help to reduce the stigma around accessing mental health services by offering these services in communities.
Triage and Referral CBOs that have referral relationships with health systems provide multiple entrance points to the system of care through community-based assessment and referrals, post-intervention supports, and peer support. CBOs can also help coordinate follow-up with healthcare services, promote family ang teen engagement in care, and connect to crisis services when necessary.
Care Management CBOs connect teens and families to resources that address social determinants of health like food banks, housing, rent and utility assistance, and medical assistance. They also collaborate with primary care and behavioral health systems, schools, and juvenile justice to assist with health system navigation and engagement.
Violence Prevention and Response CBOs offer a safe place for youth, structured activities that build resilience, and access to caring adults critical to preventing violence and trauma and responding to community needs as they arise. CBOs do this through screening for ACEs, training in trauma-informed care and other needs that youth may present with, mental health first aid training, mandated reporting, child abuse prevention best practices, and through prevention programming, community engagement, and education.