



Addressing the Adolescent Mental Health Emergency

Part 2: Building Community Partnerships

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Today, youth of color and/or LGBTQ+ youth face an increasingly complex array of risk factors that can compound to inhibit healthy development and resiliency. No single social program can address such challenges—this requires a multifaceted response. Indeed, a collaborative approach can also help to identify and address mental health issues earlier, preventing further deterioration and trauma that may result from involvement with clinical or punitive systems.

Why Community Partnerships are Important

To fully address the diverse mental health needs of youth, community-based youth-serving organizations must work in partnership with other actors in the community. According to Upswing grant recipients, partnerships fill gaps in reach and knowledge, improving access to, and effectiveness of, whole-person care. No one entity can meet the holistic mental health and related needs of youth. A cross functional, community-wide approach is needed.

However, developing strong and lasting partnerships requires time and resources that are often scarce. Funding partners often overlook the importance and resource needs of relationship-building amongst partners while expecting positive outcomes of such partnerships. Vulnerability is required to build the trust between unfamiliar, dissimilar, or even competitive partners. Yet, the benefits to mental well-being for youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth, and the community at-large, are of exponentially valuable return. Below we highlight key recommendations and challenges to building meaningful community partnerships.

Recommendations

For Funders

Fund capacity within organizations to drive partnerships and community collaboration. Don't expect existing staff who perform direct service to fulfill this function.

What we're hearing:

“Our leadership team is doing so much doing, there's just not enough time to go out and network with funders and partners.”

“It took five years to establish a memorandum of understanding with a local school district.”

“We maintain close staff relationships with local housing programs so we can refer youth into those that we know are LGBTQ-competent. We have provided training on culturally competent care and how to support LGBTQ+ youth, but shelters and transitional living programs don't pay well so frontline workers have high turnover. As a result, we continually have to establish new relationships with their staffs to ensure LGBTQ-competence.”

Be mindful of the strain of funder requirements on organizations. Streamline requirements by aligning them with other funders or reducing them outright.

What we're hearing:

“We so appreciate the rising tide in philanthropic funders to provide resources other than funds to grantees. That said, we are now responsible for attending many virtual gatherings hosted by multiple funders and this is becoming an increasing strain on staff time. If there's a way to share resources and build networks between organizations that does not require significantly more meetings, that would be preferable.”

For Policymakers and Funders

Support the development of culturally responsive partnerships within state institutions like public schools.

What we're hearing:

“Some school districts have social workers contracted through the district/county. All schools need them but not all have them—some districts have ‘student services specialists’ doing social work...we offer referrals to vetted professionals who are culturally competent.”

"Funding for LGBTQ+ equity and inclusivity training for public school counselors is not supported by schools outside of our district. Politically speaking, we are still battling legislation that is anti-LGBTQ+ in our state, which led us to develop and disseminate these trainings on a broader scale. While we haven't faced any push-back from school administration, we are really sensitive about that...When we provide training, we work to make them accessible for counselors who choose to participate (offered off-site/virtually, outside of school/work hours) and we pay stipends for counselors to participate. So far we've trained just under 200 counselors across the state."

Support partnerships to fill an array of needs from direct support to youth to organizational needs of the community-based organizations supporting them.

What we're hearing:

"We provide behavioral services, but we understand that you can't feel good and get better if you are hungry or have unstable housing. So, through a grant, we have licensed social workers (LSWs) who collaborate with other organizations...[to] refer youth, connect them with resources for these other wrap-around services like shelters, soup kitchens, etc. and we can walk them to the building near us to get it."

Be mindful that differences in infrastructure, processes, and schedules among partners limit opportunities for collaboration. Support creative approaches to address them.

What we're hearing:

"[The] school schedule is really restricted and that can make programming and partnership a little difficult."

"We currently have 130 kids on the waitlist to receive services (doubled from pre-pandemic). One barrier is the ability to find and reserve space on-site [at the school]. Scheduling a private room to meet with youth has limited our capacity to see more youth...It's tough to partner with outside agencies. Everyone has the same goal to serve kids but we all have to make sure we're following our own policies and procedures."



Spotlight Example:

SaintA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee received \$2 million in federal SAMHSA funding to place SaintA therapists in eight Boys & Girls Club sites to provide trauma-informed services to 2,700+ youth. The Medical College of Wisconsin will collect data on these youth and perform rigorous research and analyses of youth mental health needs and effective community interventions. In this way, a mental health non-profit, a youth development organization, and a mental health research institution are working together to make exponential impact.

For Community-Based Organizations

Leverage partnerships to increase your organizational impact—and convey the time needed to develop them—in your grant proposals and conversations with funders.

What we're hearing:

"As an emerging, Black-led non-profit with initially no money to get started with, it was important for us to partner with a well-established NGO who could guide us and expand our network."

"Pairing [our organization's] experience with group learning programs and peer support with [another organization's] expertise and background in serving youth holistically has built a partnership rooted in a deep level of trust and respect. Whatever comes our way, we feel confident that we navigate it together."

Be open to ways to monetize or underwrite valuable training for external partners without losing sight of organizational focus.

What we're hearing:

"We're looking to package our way of supporting girls' emotional and mental health expertise into a curriculum/professional development course and use that to train others and as a revenue stream. In this way, we can increase awareness around what the girls are asking for and provide support to other professionals working with girls."

"We are being sought out as a subject expert more and more and we're really the only game in town. So, we receive frequent requests from larger organizations, from law enforcement folks, from parents and more with these training needs and a desire to understand transgender and gender nonconforming youth."

