



Addressing the Adolescent Mental Health Emergency

Part 1: Funding Community-Based Programs

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Thoughts from Upswing Advisor, Ken Zimmerman

Philanthropy has a critical role to play in addressing the crisis among youth, particularly youth of color and who are LGBTQ+. The issue is straightforward: what in this time of ongoing crisis do these youth, and the youth-serving organizations focused on them, need?

What emerges clearly is how what is needed involves many of the most important tools philanthropy has to offer: connecting movements such as racial equity and mental health, advancing innovation by supporting novel approaches created by and for LGBTQ+ teens and adolescent mental health communities of color, and furthering the leadership of those most impacted by current policy and practice.

Through the report that follows, The Upswing Fund offers valuable insights into some of the most pressing funding and organizational challenges faced by their grant recipient partners. These insights inform how philanthropy can advance meaningful change. They are well worth reading.

Why Community-Based Programs are Important

Through conversations with our grant recipients, we've learned that adolescents of color and LGBTQ+ youth feel more comfortable frequenting community-based organizations rather than clinics, where they are less likely to seek out specialized care due to barriers such as stigma, lack of insurance, and insufficient knowledge of how to navigate complex health systems. As such, it's critical to understand that supporting community-based organizations allows for more nuanced, place-based, and holistic approaches to care.

Yet funding for these important programs is limited, as the vast majority of state and federal funding flows to larger institutions. In a survey of Upswing grant recipients, 82% reported that fundraising and grants management was their organization's primary need. This lack of funding and resulting lack of access disproportionately impacts people of color, who are less likely to be insured.⁵

Recommendations

For Funders

Provide flexible, multi-year funding for general operations. Restricted funding—including public, private, and insurance sources—is a shared challenge across the non-profit sector. It requires organizations to stitch together resources from multiple sources in order to provide holistic, culturally responsive programming. This limits the ability of community-based organizations to direct funding to where they know it is needed most and will have the greatest impact in supporting adolescent mental health.

What we're hearing:

"To have funding that is aware of the need for intersectional solutions to intersectional problems is a gift."

"In the world of behavioral health service provision, much of our funding is based on fee-for-service contracts. This creates a challenge for community-rooted organizations like us to build the administrative capacity needed to take our work to scale. In New Mexico, our behavioral health safety net was dismantled in 2013 and there has been no serious investment in rebuilding the long-term sustainability of organizations that are currently doing the work. We are working to build awareness of the organizational challenges that exist and the long-term vision required to build sustainable solutions."

"Particularly on the government side, the funding is really siloed and restricted in its use... Government funding is usually based on old data and is not reflective of today's needs. Even on the private foundation side, they can be really programmatically focused and only contributing to specific projects and activities."

Prioritize funding for non-clinical wrap-around services to help reach and serve diverse youth.

Care coordination, for example, isn't reimbursable, forcing non-profits to seek out funding elsewhere.

What we're hearing:

"There's this expectation that if a young person has access to a therapist, they can work through their trauma, so [funders] will pay for a staff therapist. But, sometimes if they're hungry, they can't talk about their friend that got shot. It's about understanding that nothing is a silo. Their primary needs have to be met before we can scratch the surface of systemic, generational trauma."

"It takes more than just the face-to-face substance use or mental health treatment session to help someone through recovery. They need food, they need stable housing, they need new clothes. They need enjoyable life experiences that can uplift them and show them that there is more in their life that they can have beyond their substance use and mental health disorder."

"The challenge when [potential donors] aren't specific funders for adolescent mental health and care is helping them understand how everything is connected. Our housing, our community programs, and belonging—all of those things that are typical for adolescent development are integrated with mental health. So, it can be a challenge to make sure we can tell our story and integrate those approaches in a way that reaches them. For our homeless and home security programs, we don't go for federal HUD dollars because of all these barriers. We want our programs to be low barrier and to reach as many people as possible. We do not accept funds or apply to funding opportunities that we believe will limit that for us."

Avoid the bias towards innovation on its own—there are many existing approaches that have solid results and fill key needs.

What we're hearing:

"Many potential funding partners want to be the main/exclusive funder for a new, novel idea to address mental health, but they also want it to be evidence-based... It worries me a little bit. The way that some organizations and funders have gone about it seems performative, something to just stick their name on. A new issue we have encountered consistently is evaluating the alignment and intentions of potential partners and donors. We're trying our best to stay on course for our cause and work with organizations that truly care and align with our work and values."

Be mindful of potential discrimination and bias, including microaggressions, in the funding process. Also, be aware of related challenges like access to funding networks, which can be a challenge for emerging organizations with diverse leaders.



What we're hearing:

"When I asked for feedback to understand why we didn't get certain funds and what we can do to improve, I was told, 'Well, you don't know how to code switch'... They seem to view our organization as unstable and maybe not a strategic investment, especially since I am a DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] recipient. They wonder if I will get deported and what will happen to our organization and community members. They view us as almost a risk, but it means they aren't taking steps to support vulnerable populations."

"In my role, one of the first challenges that I faced was walking into rooms to network and having people doubt that I was the person in charge. People who were sort of taken aback and unsure that I, as a Black woman, am the Executive Director. I've even had people ask me 'Oh, what was your experience for this role?' as though we were sharing resumes."

Make a targeted effort to support organizations that work to address inequities in the health care system. Prioritize funding to improve the mental health and well-being of communities who traditionally face higher barriers to care (e.g., youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, rural youth, low-income youth, etc.).

What we're hearing:

"Right now we only have about \$210/patient/year from the federal government to take care of all of their needs. One of our biggest issues is just calling attention to the fact that the Native population really needs dedicated funding and support for services."

"I love the fact that [The Upswing Fund] supported African Americans and LGBTQ+ youth. They are our main populations that we work with here and there is never funding specifically for African American populations here in Maryland."

"I really want funders to recognize the needs of LGBTQ+ youth, particularly trans and nonbinary youth, who are not being served. But sometimes, funders just don't think about them when designing their applications, their forms, or their requirements."

Simplify the application process and minimize reporting requirements to reduce administrative burden.

What we're hearing:

"Many of the leaders in this field have lived experiences with mental illness themselves. These life-long mental health struggles, say with anxiety or depression, can impact application processes when funding RFPs are too vague or very long. It can be very overwhelming completing those on top of doing everything else."

"With federal grants and some other funders' applications, they have all of these very specific requirements, and you almost have to prove that you know what you're doing. Those kinds of applications force us to box in our work trying to meet their criteria while also staying true to our mission and continuing to serve our youth."

"It is much harder for smaller, grassroots non-profits to get federal funding due to the application process and lack of 'big' numbers, but grassroots efforts are needed for inner-city and rural areas."

"One of our other funders was advising us to be prepared to apply for the funding that's going to come down from the [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021], but it takes a lot of time to prepare those applications and make that lift possible. Just trying to manage the grants that we already have feels like a full-time job for our staff already. So, it becomes, 'how do we address that need?'"

Form genuine relationships with grant recipients and make reporting and sharing needs and progress easy. One way to do this is to “solicit and act on feedback” and “simplify and streamline paperwork,” two of the six trust-based grantmaking practices. In our experience, in-depth conversations guided by an interest in partners’ work can offer a wealth of information in less than an hour and can serve in place of an extra reporting requirement.

What we're hearing:

"Of our funders, The Upswing Fund is the first to have a conversation with me like this—asking about our system-wide needs and organizational learnings."

"What you are doing for us now in asking us what we need and advocating for us—that really matters."

Consider what you can offer beyond grantmaking. Once you have a sense of what resources would be valuable to grant recipients, leverage your networks and network-building capacities to make introductions and facilitate peer learning. In our survey of grant recipients, 96% expressed that networking opportunities with other grant recipients, experts, and funders in the field would be meaningful.

What we're hearing:

"Additional support in capacity building for public speaking, communications and marketing work, etc. can be so impactful for supporting leaders in their organizations."



Endnotes

¹ Zimmerman, K. “[Mental Health Needs to Be a Top Priority for Philanthropy. Here’s Why.](#)” Inside Philanthropy (2020).

² World Health Organization, United for Global Mental Health, The World Federation for Mental Health. “[World Mental Health Day: An Opportunity to Kick-Start a Massive Scale-Up in Investment in Mental Health.](#)” (2020).

³ National Council for Mental Wellbeing. “[Unite for Behavioral Health.](#)” (2019).

⁴ Christidis P., Lin L., and Stamm K. “[An unmet need for mental health services.](#)” American Psychological Association (2018).

⁵ Altiraifi A. and Rapfogel N. “[Mental Health Care Was Severely Inequitable, Then Came the Coronavirus Crisis.](#)” Center for American Progress (2020).

⁶ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). “[NAMI Celebrate Wins for Mental Health in COVID Relief and FY2021 Federal Budget.](#)” (2020).

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. [Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs.](#) (2021).

