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How can Stamford help slow a growing mental health crisis? 20 local organizations hope to find a way.

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STAMFORD — In late 2021, after Caroline Simmons was elected the city’s mayor, she held a series of advisory group meetings including one that touched on youth mental health.

“The question was raised, ‘What can we do?’” said Vin Tufo, a leader of the Vita Health & Wellness Partnership and CEO of Charter Oak Communities, the city’s public housing authority.

The discussion that followed ultimately led to the creation of a new group, the Youth Mental Health Alliance, a collaboration and partnership between more than 20 organizations in the city including the mayor’s office, the school district and police department.

At a meeting of the group last week, member Lorraine Olson, the chair of Stamford’s Health Commission, said the group can have a major impact — if.

“If we can do all the work that we say we’re doing, and all of these ideas are put to fruition, Stamford will be front and center on the map in the state and everyone will look to us for ideas and look to us to conquer the mental health crisis we have right now,” she said.

The overarching goal of the group is to tackle mental health issues among youth through a community approach, its organizers said, with the hope that issues can be identified and treated sooner as opposed to when students are in crisis.

The group has already started raising money, and has set a budget goal of \$1.7 million for the next three years.

“The particular challenge of addressing Stamford’s youth mental health crisis is that, while standard efforts are largely focused on providing clinical care in reaction to an identified need, a significant part of the care ecosystem — parents, caregivers, families, peers and community organizations — is left underutilized,” the executive summary reads.

Experts agree the COVID-19 pandemic brought on a national youth mental health crisis, with a huge spike in young people seeking mental health clinical support.

Staff at the health care provider Family Centers, which runs centers at Stamford's two biggest high schools — Stamford High and Westhill — have reported an increase in anxiety and depression since the onset of the coronavirus.

“We've seen our numbers and requests for mental health services explode over past two years,” said Bill Brucker, chief advancement officer for the health care provider, who said the organization has a waiting list of patients seeking mental health services for the first time in the 16 years he's been with Family Centers.

“I kinda see this as kind of the beginning stage of really formulating a community-wide response to the mental health crisis,” Brucker said of the Alliance.

The beginning of this school year in Stamford, when students returned to full-time in-person learning, also saw an increase in violent behavior, data show. At the city's two biggest high schools, fights between students [led to 20 or so arrests](#).

At Rippowam and Cloonan, multiple students [were suspended for participation in a video “battle”](#) that included images of students using their hands to imitate the firing of a gun directed at a camera. Later in the school year, a student at Cloonan [was badly injured when he was allegedly attacked](#) by five other students, all of whom were arrested.

Tufo said the alliance hopes to tackle mental health issues before they turn into a crisis.

“It's really getting everybody under the tent,” Tufo said, describing the alliance's strategy. “And I mean everybody.”

The collaborative includes Building One Community, Stamford Hospital, Community Health Centers, Domus Kids and Family Centers, as well as other clinical providers and churches.

While it is still in its early stages, the alliance has already begun to offer services including mental health first aid training and suicide gatekeeper training to groups; the idea, its creators said, is to educate people on recognizing warning signs in young people.

So far, discussions among group members have focused on a big-picture view of the crisis, as well as initial ways to address it: training and public service campaigns, along with expanded mental health screenings and training those who work directly with students and at-risk families to identify and respond to signs of mental health issues. That could mean expanding care and clinical services in Stamford schools and school-based health centers.

Health care provider Community Health Center offers behavioral health support to elementary schools in Stamford, specifically at Roxbury, Northeast, Springdale, Stark and Hart. A behavioral health clinician is stationed at each. The organization also has a presence inside J.M. Wright Technical School in Stamford.

Family Centers also has a hub at Rippowam Middle School and Dolan Middle School. Another center exists at Cloonan.

The organization provides social workers to certain schools: AITE, Stillmeadow Elementary School and Turn of River Middle School.

“Mental health problems have often been associated with stigma or seen as “someone else’s concern,”” the executive summary of the alliance reads. “The YMHA campaign will work to reframe that thinking and spur a community-based understanding and response to this urgent public health issue.”

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