

Stamford Advocate
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Opinion: Stamford Youth Mental Health Alliance a resource for children and families
By Jody Bishop-Pullan

With summer drawing to an end and a new school year beginning, it seems like the perfect time to talk about youth mental health and our collective role in supporting our young people.

It's important to recognize that the start of the school year can be challenging for students of all ages. Managing new routines and schoolwork, and reconnecting with and making new friends, can be challenging for kids and teens. It's especially critical at the beginning of the school year that we take extra care to support them in this transition. We can remind kids and teenagers that it's OK not always to be OK — and we can model how to overcome emotional difficulties by promoting self-care through empathy and encouragement. As a mother and grandmother, I know first-hand how important it is for kids to know they have trusted adults looking out for them. If you are unsure where to start, you can consider looking at the resources and training the Stamford Youth Mental Health Alliance (SYMHA) offers.

As Stamford's Director of Health & Human Services, I am proud to co-chair the SYMHA, a city-wide network of 35-plus organizations working together to improve access to mental health care and support for children and adolescents. Our collective effort aims to build a heightened awareness around the importance of youth mental wellness, ensuring care is accessible and inclusive, and facilitating a comprehensive system of intervention and support for families across our community.

The SYMHA includes nearly every agency in Stamford that provides clinical and therapeutic services to our children. The goal is to work together to improve the delivery of prevention services, early intervention, and treatment of behavioral health challenges. Additionally, parent groups and information sessions have helped identify key issues facing our young people. Mental Health First Aid and suicide prevention trainings are provided to empower adults to start these conversations about mental health and substance use issues. Our resource guide, available in multiple languages, outlines the mental health services available in the community.

This collaborative effort is a *community-level* response to a complex *community-level* need. While standard responses focus on providing individualized clinical care for an identified need, oftentimes the child's support system — parents, caregivers, families, peers, and community organizations — is left underutilized. We're working to engage children in places where they are raised and nurtured, as well as where they live, play, and participate in the community. We know our community can have a potentially unlimited role in supporting mental wellness. This strengths-based approach is a hallmark of the SYMHA.

Our slogan, "Don't carry it alone, We've got you," reflects our collective support. We are all part of that "we." Take this as your call to action! By applying our efforts collaboratively, Stamford can make a significant leap forward in its attitudes and efforts to help our children and adolescents remain healthy and thrive.

If you care about Stamford, we know you care about our kids and their mental well-being. I believe we can strengthen our community by ensuring that Stamford's children and their parents know that youth mental health is a priority for us all.

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