

The Youth Commission: Helping Center Youth Voices in Mental Health

A global pandemic spanning nearly two years has continue to have unprecedented impacts on the health and well-being of Los Angeles County (County) residents and communities. The combination of severe economic impacts, social isolation and educational disruptions have led to devastating outcomes for our most vulnerable residents. One of the communities most impacted by the pandemic has been young people; adolescents, teenagers, and young adults collectively. It is estimated by the Surgeon General that symptoms of depression and anxiety have doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety. When factoring in the complex needs and behavioral health conditions facing youth with chronic medical conditions, or those in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, mental health resources are even more crucial.

Disruptions to in-person learning caused by the emergence of COVID-19 variants have created significant barriers for youth who receive their mental health services through schools and related agencies. Non-traditional mental health supports like arts,

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music and animal therapies remain inaccessible for far too many of the County's young people. The Department of Mental Health (DMH) has continued to forge partnerships to address access and increasing these services, but more must be done. Additionally, young people face challenges navigating complex health systems, understanding their own mental and physical health conditions, and making sense of the growing telehealth infrastructure. To date, nearly half of youth experiencing mental health issues have reported not receiving any kind of treatment.

Public leaders across the country have raised awareness and issued calls to action: including the U.S. Surgeon General's report calling mental health among youth an "urgent public health crisis." Our state officials have also elevated the need for swift and effective mental health supports including State Superintendent Thurmond announcing plans to recruit 10,000 mental health clinicians to support students. The Board of Supervisors have taken several steps to proactively elevate and address the crisis impacting youth mental health—including plans to sustain mental health resources available for students across its 80 school districts and support those who are socially isolated. These combined efforts call for a robust, cross-functional approach by County departments and leadership to improve mental health outcomes for young people in our County.

A crucial step in achieving these outcomes must be engaging young people and those with lived experience and expertise, partnering with them in the efforts underway and centering their voices and recommendations in any solutions proposed. As the key recipients of these supports, young people provide an invaluable perspective on the efficacy of the various mental health supports the County

provides. Now more than ever, County agencies must continue to partner with youth and the communities they reside in reforming the mental health system, shaping policy, and increasing access to the mental health services offered by the County.

The Los Angeles County Youth Commission (Commission) was created by the Board of Supervisors to represent the voices and interests of systems-involved youth and works to elevate the issues most important to the over 2.2 million young people who reside in the County. The Commission provides recommendations to the Board and County agencies and creates platforms to integrate the ideas of individuals with lived experience and expertise in County policymaking. The Commission is uniquely positioned to give insight into how young people are faring during this pandemic and offer recommendations on how to address the various challenges currently facing them. Additionally, the Commission convenes youth leaders and community-based organizations from across the County to elevate important issues facing young people and discuss solutions.

For this reason, it is important that the County continue to build comprehensive, cross-departmental responses that are centered on the needs of young people. Addressing these needs requires collaboration from stakeholders in mental health, education, and public safety.

I THEREFORE MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Youth Commission in collaboration with the Department of Mental Health (DMH), other relevant Los Angeles County (County) agencies, community-based organizations, interested stakeholders, and community leaders, to help elevate and center youth perspectives and voices in mental health, do the following:

1. Convene a Mental Health panel discussion, led by youth and for youth, in order to develop a report back in 45-days that provides:
 - a. Youth perspectives, concerns, feedback, and recommendations pertaining to mental health services, and;
 - b. Support with outreach, materials, and engagement to youth and relevant stakeholders.

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