



2025 KANE county YOUTH VOICES Forum on Mental Health



Lifting Youth Voices and Perspectives on Mental Health

2025 Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health Report

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Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health Report Purpose and Objectives

Purpose

The Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health provides a platform for open dialogue and engagement between youth, educators, and mental health professionals. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, the forum amplifies the voices of young people, allowing them to share their lived experiences, insights, and suggestions for enhancing mental health services in schools and communities. This aligns with our overarching mission to create a more responsive and empathetic approach to youth mental health care, ensuring that every young person feels heard, understood, and supported.

Objectives

1. Amplifying Youth Voices

Empowerment and Engagement: Promote an environment where youth feel empowered to share their experiences, opinions, and ideas about mental health. Encourage active participation from students across Kane County, providing them with the opportunity to express their thoughts on the support they receive and the challenges they face.

Recognition of Youth Expertise: Acknowledge the unique perspectives of young people as vital contributors to the dialogue on mental health. Recognize their insights as critical to shaping effective mental health policies and practices.

2. Facilitating Open Conversations

Addressing Stigma: Create a safe space for discussing mental health stigma, particularly within the Latino community, as identified during the forum. Highlight

the importance of breaking down barriers and fostering open conversations around mental health to reduce stigma and promote understanding.

Exploring the Impact of COVID-19-: Examine the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health, focusing on the challenges of returning to in-person schooling and the social, emotional, and academic impacts experienced by students.

3. Promoting Holistic Support Systems

Accessibility and Inclusivity: Identify key areas where schools and communities can enhance accessibility to mental health resources, especially for marginalized groups such as LGBTQIA+ students, students with disabilities, and those facing socio-economic challenges. Advocate for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and gender-affirming mental health services.

Community Collaboration: Strengthen the partnership between schools, families, and mental health organizations to create a cohesive support system for students. Encourage collaboration to ensure a comprehensive approach to mental health care that extends beyond the school environment.

4. Building Connections and Resilience

Fostering Genuine Connections: Emphasize the importance of building authentic connections among peers, educators, and mental health professionals. Promote initiatives that encourage positive relationships and emotional vulnerability, helping students feel validated, supported, and seen.

Encouraging Resilience: Equip students with the tools and knowledge necessary to develop resilience and coping strategies. Support efforts to empower young people to navigate mental health challenges and become advocates for their well-being.

5. Developing Actionable Outcomes

Identifying Needs and Priorities: Gather insights and feedback from students to identify Kane County's most pressing mental health needs. Use these findings to inform actionable steps and initiatives to address these challenges effectively.

Creating a Roadmap for Change: Develop a strategic plan outlining the key priorities and actions needed to improve youth mental health services. Engage stakeholders, including students, educators, public health professionals, parents/caregivers, and community leaders, in the implementation of these initiatives.

About the 2025 Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health Report

The Kane County Health Department (KCHD) and Regional Office of Education (ROE), as part of the Kane County System of Care (KCSOC), hosted the 6th Annual Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health on February 7, 2025. Elgin Community College hosted the event and brought together students and staff from 10 high schools across Kane County, along with professionals in public health and education, to discuss the state of youth mental health in schools and explore intentional improvements through collaboration. The event began with a panel discussion facilitated by Josh Axelsen from the Kane County Regional Office of Education. Panel members included Kim Peterson from the Kane County Health Department, Jeff Aranowski from the ROE, and two student representatives from Dundee Crown High School.

Following the panel, students gathered in small groups to courageously discuss questions created based on their experiences seeking mental health support and services in their schools and communities.

The students represented the following area high schools:

- Bartlett High School
- Blackhawk Academy
- Compass Academy
- Dundee Crown High School
- Elgin High School
- Geneva High School
- Larkin High School
- South Elgin High School
- Streamwood High School
- West Aurora High School

Prior to the Youth Voices Forum, the student facilitators received training rooted in community healing practices led by Dr. Piper Stratton from Dundee Crown High School. During this training, they collaborated on the development of topics and questions that would guide the discussions they would lead at the Forum. Students asked their peers questions, including:

- “How do students currently perceive the level of support for mental health issues in schools?”
- “What was the most difficult thing about seeking help?”
- “What was most helpful about the services you received?”

To conclude the day’s event, speaker Brandon McCall led an inspirational conversation with the students. Brandon McCall experienced a life-changing event in middle school when his older brother made a decision that ended up taking the life of another during a street fight. This life-altering choice changed the life of not only his brother’s life, but also the life of McCall himself.

Importance of Lifting Youth Voices

Youth are the owners and experts of their own experiences, and they bring unique strengths and valuable insights that must be uplifted within organizations and institutions. Incorporating youth voices at all levels is essential in holistically addressing child and adolescent needs during this youth mental health crisis. Through recognizing and elevating youth and student voices in meaningful and authentic ways, we foster a profound sense of connection and respect, empowering them to actively shape their own lives and make positive impacts on their communities.¹ Intentionally integrating youth opinions not only increases program effectiveness and attendance but also promotes the development of problem-solving skills and a deeper understanding of systemic issues. When young people feel heard, they are more engaged and supported, further developing connections to their schools and communities.

Key Needs in Kane County Identified by Youth at the 2025 Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health

1. **Discrimination and Its Impact on Immigrant Mental Health:** Discrimination against immigrants, communities of color, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ youth is on the rise, fueled by harmful rhetoric and exclusionary policies. Young people are experiencing bullying, fear, and isolation—leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma. The emotional toll is deep and lasting, with some cases ending in tragedy

¹ Alliance for Education Solutions. n.d. "Why is youth voice important?" AES Impact. Accessed June 5, 2024. <https://aesimpact.org/why-is-youth-voice-important/>.

2. **Cyberbullying and Social Media Risks:** Cyberbullying has become widespread, leaving students vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior.
3. **Educator and Professional Bias:** Students from diverse backgrounds reported experiencing biased treatment, impacting their motivation, self-esteem, and academic success.
4. **Routine, Structure, and Physical Movement for Stability:** Consistent routines and physical activity improve emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and support healthy habits.
5. **Emotional Recognition for Healthy Development:** Teaching adolescents to identify and manage their emotions is essential for mental well-being.

Challenges and Issues Identified

Theme 1: Discrimination and Its Impact on Mental Health

The news is hard to escape these days. With a new president taking office, it seems as though we have a new executive order every minute. With smartphones at our fingertips, news and social media are available 24/7, making harmful and discriminatory content far too accessible to young minds. Since 2016, discrimination against marginalized communities has been increasing sharply. Bias, hate crimes, and exclusionary rhetoric have all risen, affecting not just immigrants, but communities of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others.¹ Across many sectors, harmful policies continue to emerge, leaving families uncertain, isolated, and vulnerable. When families face systemic discrimination and instability, children suffer. Research shows that youth exposed to discrimination experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, aggression, and social isolation. Young people witnessing or directly facing bias—whether through policies, school environments, or public rhetoric—may develop long-term emotional and psychological struggles.²

Emboldened by the current political and social climate, students across the country have reported experiencing bullying based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or family background. At a recent Youth Voices Forum, students shared frequent encounters with slurs, exclusion, and threats in their schools — remarks like "go back to your country," "you don't belong here," or accusations of "stealing opportunities" meant for others. This kind of discriminatory language can have devastating consequences. Recently, an 11-year-old girl, Jocelynn Carranza from Texas, tragically took her own life after enduring relentless bullying tied to her family background and identity. Jocelynn's story highlights the deep fear, isolation, and trauma that discrimination can cause in young people. Her experience mirrors the daily reality faced by millions of children and families navigating bias and systemic injustice.

When families are separated, children often suffer serious emotional and psychological effects. Youth who become separated from their parents due to deportation experience depression, nightmares, eating problems, and school failures.² Many also reported feeling withdrawn, fearful, and anxious.² Youth who lose parents to deportation may experience depression, nightmares, eating problems, and academic struggles.² Many also report feelings of withdrawal, fear, and anxiety.² Because of these challenges, mental health professionals are encouraged to become familiar with the unique experiences of both citizen and noncitizen children who are left behind following parental deportation.

When families are destabilized by discriminatory systems and practices, the psychological impact on youth is profound. Young people separated from their communities — whether through incarceration, deportation, or systemic barriers — often experience depression, nightmares, eating disturbances, and school struggles. Many report feeling withdrawn, fearful, and anxious. Mental health professionals are encouraged to understand the distinct

experiences of youth living in environments shaped by discrimination, in order to provide trauma-informed and culturally responsive support.²

Theme 2: Cyberbullying, Social Media and Mental Health

The debate over social media's impact on mental health remains ongoing, with studies showing mixed results. Cyberbullying can be defined as sending harassing messages through text, or the internet and posting disparaging comments on a social networking site, posting humiliating pictures, or threatening/intimidating someone electronically³.

That said, social media presents very real dangers. At the 2025 Youth Voices Forum, cyberbullying emerged as a recurring concern. Many students expressed fears of embarrassment and being videotaped without consent. Some reported the existence of social media pages dedicated to spreading rumors and humiliating their peers. These pages are often hosted on platforms like Google Docs or Instagram, where anonymous posts make it difficult to identify the individuals behind them. Even when the perpetrator's identity is known, students often stay silent out of fear of retaliation. Students recounted stories of other students falling asleep in class or doing something embarrassing and finding it on an anonymous school Instagram the next day. This cyberbullying has become commonplace, even expected by students.

² Morey, B. N. (2018). Mechanisms by Which Anti-Immigrant Stigma Exacerbates Racial/Ethnic Health Disparities. *American Journal of Public Health, 108*(4), 460–463. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2017.304266>

³ Nixon, C. (2014). Current perspectives: The impact of cyberbullying on adolescent health. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics, 5*(5), 143–158. <https://doi.org/10.2147/ahmt.s36456>

Cyberbullying can be considered dangerous because of its wide reach, potentially unlimited audience, increased exposure, lack of supervision, and sense of permanence.⁵ It is also believed that cyberbullying can be more harmful than traditional bullying, potentially because cyberbullying can be completely anonymous.⁵ Consequently, youth who are cyberbullied are likely to show symptoms of depression, anxiety, social isolation, and suicidal behavior.⁵ Meanwhile, those who engage in cyberbullying are at greater risk of aggression, substance use, and delinquent behaviors.⁵ In addition to emotional distress, youth who are cyberbullied often report fewer friendships, weaker school connections, and greater peer-related struggles.⁵ Most alarming of all is the heightened risk of suicide—targets are twice as likely to attempt it.

What can be done to combat cyberbullying?

For Individuals Experiencing Cyberbullying

- **Don't engage:** Avoid responding to bullies, as it may escalate the situation.
- **Document everything:** Take screenshots and save messages as evidence.
- **Block and report:** Use platform settings to block and report the bully.
- **Tell someone:** Talk to a trusted friend, family member, teacher, or counselor.
- **Strengthen privacy settings:** Limit who can contact or interact with you online.

For Parents & Guardians

- **Educate about online safety:** Teach children how to handle online interactions.
- **Monitor online activity:** Without invading privacy, stay aware of online behavior.
- **Encourage open communication:** Let kids know they can come to you for help.
- **Report incidents:** Notify schools and platforms if the bullying is severe.

For Schools & Communities

- **Implement anti-bullying policies:** Enforce rules that address cyberbullying.
- **Provide digital literacy education:** Teach responsible online behavior.
- **Create support groups:** Offer resources for students dealing with cyberbullying.
- **Work with social media platforms:** Advocate for better reporting tools.

For Lawmakers & Platforms

- **Strengthen regulations:** Enforce stricter laws against online harassment.

- **Improve reporting systems:** Make it easier for users to report bullying.
- **Hold offenders accountable:** Implement consequences for repeat offenders.

Theme 3: Addressing Educator and Professional Bias

Another theme that emerged at this year's Youth Voices Forum was the topic of teacher bias. One student expressed frustration that administrators imposed what they believed to be culturally appropriate for the entire school, often overlooking the diverse backgrounds of students. Other students mentioned feeling singled out more than their white peers. Students also emphasized the need for teachers to recognize that not all students share the same upbringing and to be more considerate of those differences. As one student bluntly stated, "There should be a rule that teachers can't have biases." Many educators and professionals may be unaware of their own biases. Even so, one study conducted by the University of Maryland found that children as young as 8 can detect teacher bias related to race, ethnicity, or gender.⁴ This same study found that when faced with unequal treatment from teachers students may develop negative self-perceptions, experience anxiety, withdraw socially, and lose motivation to attend school.⁶ Given the significant diversity in Kane County schools — where 2020 data shows approximately 55% of students were Hispanic/Latino, 6% were Black, and about 25% were White — addressing bias is crucial.⁵

The first step educators can take is engaging in self-reflection to develop awareness of their own biases. There are several tools available to help identify and understand these biases.

⁴ "That's Not Fair!": UMD-Led Study Finds Kids Notice Teacher Bias | UMD College of Education. (2024, July 15). Umd.edu. https://education.umd.edu/news/07-15-24-%E2%80%98s-not-fair%E2%80%99-umd-led-study-finds-kids-notice-teacher-bias?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵ Equity & Diversity / Demographics and Home Languages. (n.d.). Wwww.u-46.org. <https://www.u-46.org/Page/17372>

To further address biases:

1. Self-Reflection and Awareness

- Encourage teachers to examine their own biases through self-assessment tools.
- Promote open discussions about implicit bias in professional development sessions.

2. Culturally Responsive Training

- Implement diversity and inclusion training to help teachers recognize and challenge biases.
- Provide real-world scenarios and case studies to help teachers practice equitable decision-making.

3. Equitable Classroom Practices

- Use diverse teaching materials that reflect different cultures and backgrounds.
- Ensure discipline policies are applied fairly to all students.
- Use anonymous grading, when possible, to reduce bias in assessments.

4. Building Relationships

- Encourage teachers to get to know students' backgrounds and experiences.
- Foster an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel valued.

Theme 4: Routine, Structure, and Physical Movement

The state of the next generation of adults' minds, behaviors, decisions, and actions are being molded in their homes, classrooms, communities, and place in society. In adolescence, pivotal transformations in both brain development and emotional regulation are happening simultaneously. Educational reform plays a vital role in ensuring a positive

and safe environment that supports adolescent mental health through life's everchanging challenges. Establishing a consistent routine with physical movement contributes to emotional regulation by reducing anxiety and depression and strengthening resilience.

According to the World Health Organization, 50% of mental health disorders start by the age of 14, the age most adolescents begin high school.⁶ Mental health disorders hinder adolescents from reaching their full potential during one of the most transformative years of their lives. Ideally, a routine should become established in early childhood, this creates familiar patterns that are surrounded with the practice of healthy habits. Realistically, however, not all adolescents benefited from a structured routine starting in early childhood, when brain development is most active. Factors that could have limited the parent when their adolescent was a younger child are socioeconomic status, parental involvement, parenting knowledge, practices, etc. Routine and structure offer a sense of stability and security. When an individual is structuring their routine, they must slowly incorporate changes day by day. Forming a routine or structure may take a long time. The amount of changes added or removed is dependent on each person. A study examined how long it would take adults to form a healthy habit, it took approximately 66 days before habits became automatic for participants.⁷ Seeing as it takes adults 66 days to structure a routine with healthy habits, it is imperative for parents, school staff, and healthcare providers to show adolescents grace. Adolescents themselves must be mindful of the importance of consistent routines instead of focusing on a mistake, accident, and/or oversight. It is recommended to start with one change and then gradually add changes because adding too many at once will likely be difficult to sustain and may result in

⁶ Poli, P. F., Correll, C. U., Arango, C., Berk, M., Patel, V., & Ioannidis, J. P. A. (2021). Preventive psychiatry: A blueprint for improving the mental health of young people. *World Psychiatry*, 20(2), 200–221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20869>

⁷ Arlinghaus, K. R., & Johnston, C. A. (2018). The Importance of Creating Habits and Routine. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 13(2), 142–144. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6378489/>

behavior relapse. Successfully following a consistent routine builds a sense of accomplishment, boosts self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect of an individual. A greater sense of stability helps adolescents manage their emotions more effectively. Reduction of the likelihood of stress-induced disorders allows for the practice of healthy habits such as; eating healthy meals, sleeping eight or more hours a night, keeping up with hygiene, utilizing healthy coping mechanisms, and adding physical activity to the day. Allocating specific time for healthy habits and practices highlights one universal dilemma in the life of adolescents. The common phrase “there are not enough hours in the day” is used repeatedly to justify why things are not getting done or not getting done well. Juggling school work, social relationships, extracurriculars, part-time jobs, and home life as an adolescent can be exhausting enough, but more emphasis should be placed on the importance of sleep. Structure allows for improved sleeping patterns essential for mental health and well-being. Without adequate sleep, adolescents may be prone to irritability, mood swings, and a decreased ability to focus. The importance of routine and structure in early childhood and adolescence is imperative to mental health and well-being.

The role of physical movement in mental health is crucial for young children and adolescents’ emotional and cognitive development. The brain is one of the most vital organs in the human body, making the importance of physical and mental health the highest priority on an individual, national, and global scale. In addition to improving cardiovascular, muscular, bone, cognitive, and brain health, increased physical activity can help prevent and reduce anxiety and depression. During exercise, the brain releases neurotransmitters that enhance mood and feelings of happiness after stimulating the production of endorphins and serotonin. In comparison, behaviors such as low levels of physical activity, sleep disturbances, adverse dietary patterns, and tobacco smoking are associated with an increased risk of psychotic, bipolar, and depressive/anxiety disorders that disproportionately affect adolescents.⁸ Additionally, physical movement releases tension and reduces stress, by actively working through emotional regulation figuratively and literally. Physical movement as a healthy coping mechanism can improve mental health, and also cultivate opportunities to make social connections by building

relationships and emotional support. Physical movement fosters a sense of belonging, which helps alleviate feelings of isolation and reduces the risk of developing mental health disorders. Hormonal changes are outside of individual control and are yet another challenge of adolescence. Hormones increase at puberty, alerting the body and brain that physical and chemical changes are about to affect mood and heighten emotional responses. The brain stops growing during adolescence, but it is not fully developed for most people until their mid to late 20s. Before maturing the prefrontal cortex is responsible for decision-making, reasoning, personality expression, maintaining social appropriateness, and other complex cognitive behaviors. It is necessary for healthy habits, practices, and behaviors to be taught, implemented, and modeled for adolescents to not only exercise their autonomy but to exercise their brain to instill longevity of physical movement incorporation for the rest of their life. Physical movement can serve as a coping mechanism that is healthy for an adolescent's mental health as it teaches adolescents about perseverance, resilience, and teamwork. Physical movement also involves problem-solving, time management, and positive affirmation skills. Adolescents involved in sports train and strengthen their physical attributes to be equipped with the necessary skills to improve their performance. The same goes for invisible skills that are practiced when an adolescent has to accept defeat individually or as a team by reacting appropriately and respectfully. Without realizing it, the adolescent is learning crucial coping strategies in handling challenges or personal setbacks by aligning all the components that go into being physically active.

Integration of routine, structure, and physical movement are fundamental elements for mental health. Adolescents know there are a plethora of parts that are out of their control in their lives, one part they can control and regularly be part of is prioritizing their mental health by synergizing routine and physical movement to translate to other parts of their lives. A long-balanced life is the ultimate goal, but to achieve that goal there are many necessary steps. Balance is paramount to prevent adolescents from becoming overwhelmed by any single aspect of life. Establishing a structured routine makes a predictable day, which alleviates stress, reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, and

improves cognitive function. Incorporating physical activity into a routine can enhance both physical and mental well-being. For parents, caregivers, and educators, encouraging routine and movement can be a powerful tool in creating a positive and safe environment that supports adolescents' overall well-being.

Theme 5: Recognizing Emotions

The importance of adolescents being able to identify their own emotions directly affects how they process and react to those emotions. Adolescents undergo intense emotional and psychological changes, making it crucial for them to identify their emotions to better understand and regulate their feelings for healthy emotional development.

The ability to self-regulate is an important factor in adolescent learning, cognitive, and social functioning. They will be best set up for success when their basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfactory.⁸ Self-regulation is not self-control because self-regulation allows individuals to form goals, standards, and values to determine if the individual can respond with emotional intelligence to adversity. Adolescents are intersectional and multidimensional individuals who benefit from proactive guidance. Parents, caregivers, and educators play a vital role by modeling the behaviors they wish to see in them. When adolescents are able to identify and label their emotions, they may process and respond to situations more quickly and effectively. Gaining self-awareness will better equip adolescents to manage feelings that are surfacing. By learning to identify their emotions, adolescents may realize they need to take a break, step

⁸ Opdenakker, M.-C. (2022). Developments in early adolescents' self-regulation: The importance of teachers' supportive vs. undermining behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1021904>

away from the situations, ask for help, or use coping tools to relax. If adolescents start learning how to identify their emotions, they can use this awareness to build emotional intelligence, which is crucial for navigating social and emotional challenges throughout life. Without the ability to recognize their emotions, processing them can become overpowering, confusing, and surprising. The lack of emotional awareness can lead to poor decision-making, risk-taking, or unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance use, self-harm, emotional eating/not eating, social isolation, and more. If adolescents are unable to recognize and identify their emotions, they become frustrated and could resort to aggression or avoidance and/or struggle to seek the right support. Adolescents with poor self-regulation skills may have problems handling frustration, stress, and may lack self-esteem and self-confidence. Over time, this can result in poor health and life conditions, affecting both short- and long-term outcomes. Research has shown that structured learning in the classroom, combined with teacher involvement and student autonomy, is most impactful for adolescents' development of self-regulation due to their internalization process.¹⁰

Knowing how to identify and process emotions allows adolescents to understand how their feelings influence their goals and future. Since the prefrontal cortex is still developing during adolescence it is critical for adolescents to fully comprehend that their emotional reactions and behaviors can have serious consequences if not properly managed. Emotional regulation and emotional development are dependent on context and the adolescent's capacity to be self-aware. Recognizing the importance of strong communication skills, identifying mental health needs, and being attuned to warning signs will create a path for adolescents to begin identifying their emotions and responding to them in healthy ways.

Strategies for Improvement and Growth

Community collaboration and investment in comprehensive and culturally competent services are at the heart of striving to improve mental health systems and outcomes for youth and their families. By developing partnerships between established support networks, we can further increase the effectiveness and overall reach of interventions. These holistic efforts ensure that services and supports are accessible, informed, and aligned with the needs of the diverse community we serve. Below are recommendations for those with significant roles in the lives of youth that aim to nourish an effective mental health framework that will better support their mental well-being.

School Staff and Leadership

- Lift youth voices by incorporating community-building practices in classrooms and throughout schools
- Invest in school mental health staff to increase access to social workers and school-based services
- Create Student Advisory Committees that are active stakeholders in relevant school issues
- Utilize restorative justice practices or alternative disciplines that encourage community building, restoration, and empowerment
- Create safe and supportive environments in schools that promote connectedness and emotional safety
- Place value in social-emotional learning and development, acquiring coping and reflective skills, positive examples of conflict resolution, and ensuring equity for all students and staff
- Involve parents and caregivers in the school community and encourage language access
- Continue to educate staff on mental health challenges, LGBTQIA+ awareness, cultural competency, and the impacts of trauma

- Prioritize staff wellness and staff mental health supports

Parents and Caregivers

- Practice self-care and compassion through reflection on own mental health, identity, and trauma history
- Seek support from other adults and professionals when needed
- Lean into curiosity about your child's feelings and interests
- Develop empathetic listening skills
- Allow your children to feel and express distressing emotions without trying to fix them
- Read books about subjects that may be difficult to discuss: grief, sexuality and gender expression, body and safety, disability and difference, generational trauma, substance abuse
- Educate yourself about common mental health challenges from accurate sources
- Develop healthy social media habits to share with your children
- Involve yourself in supportive communities

Students

- Focus on strengthening your own healthy habits to enhance developmental growth- sleep at least 8 hours every night, eat breakfast, upkeep personal hygiene, add physical activity to your day, limit social media, keep a journal, etc.
- Create a supportive environment with your peers to foster connection and compassion, allowing students to recognize when they are struggling with their mental health before it escalates into a crisis
- Limit the influence social media has on self-esteem, self-worth, and self-care to take your power back

- Acknowledge that your effort is enough, even when consistency is a struggle, as you work to build resilience
- Recognize when its time to talk to a friend, teacher, coach, or trusted adult when the pressures of school, sports, work, and home life become overwhelming
- Increase informal meetings with your school social workers to create space for de-stressing, managing anxiety, or seeking support when feeling troubled. This can help reinforce the importance of having easy access to mental health resources in a safe soothing environment
- Advocate for additional funding by fostering a sense of community and organizing fundraisers between students and social workers to boost morale and trust
- Eliminate stigma by educating yourself on mental health, identifying triggers and trauma, practicing healthy coping mechanisms, and utilizing mindfulness tools, starting with peer-to-peer conversations

Conclusion

Addressing the mental health needs of youth requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the complex challenges they face. By actively confronting anti-immigrant stigma, reducing cyberbullying, promoting inclusive education, and encouraging healthy routines and physical activity, we can empower youth to build resilience. Equipping young people with the skills to recognize and manage their emotions is equally essential, fostering stronger mental well-being. Supporting adolescent mental health requires a multi-pronged approach that combines awareness, education, and intentional intervention. By addressing these issues through collaboration, empathy, and targeted resources, communities can create safer, healthier environments where all youth have the opportunity to thrive

About the Kane County System of Care

The Kane County System of Care (KCSOC) was formed and is sustained by a 7-year grant from the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation to strengthen the existing local care system for child and adolescent mental health. Also known as the Children's Mental Health Grant, its initiatives are driven by the collaboration of Kane County Health Department Staff, community organizations and institutions, and parent leaders who are all deeply committed to improving mental health outcomes for youth and their families in our community. The grant promotes the principles of the Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP), advocating for child-centered, family-focused, community-based, and culturally competent multilevel systems.

The Kane County System of Care Initiatives Include:

- **Parent Council** - Lifting parent voices with education, outreach, and advocacy
- **Parent Cafe Support Network** - Peer support through sharing, leadership, and connection
- **Implementation Team** - Coordinating partner agencies for action
- **Flex Funds** - Financial support as unique as the communities we serve
- **Youth Voices Forum** - Amplifying youth voices to improve program quality

Acknowledgments

We at the Kane County System of Care are exceptionally grateful for the school mental health staff, school and community leaders, and remarkable students who have dedicated their time and effort to helping organize the annual 2025 Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health. Their commitment to supporting community mental health and lifting youth voices has continued to encourage and inspire our efforts at the Kane County Health Department.

A heartfelt, grateful acknowledgment to Josh Axelson, Amber Evans, Keri Glenn, and Alejandra Moreno at the Kane County Regional Office of Education for their leadership and efforts in bringing the 2025 Youth Voices Forums to fruition. Your dedication is invaluable.

Every year, the students' willingness to be honest and open regarding challenging and painful mental health experiences embodies schools' and communities' need to listen. The stories shared maintain the importance of continuing to create safe, supportive, and inclusive spaces for all.

Report Authors

Maria Leon, MPH, Bilingual (Spanish), Program Manager for the Kane County System of Care, Kane County Health Department

Maria brings several years of community outreach and family engagement experience in the Elgin, IL area. As the new program manager for the Children's Mental Health Initiatives, her focus has been fortifying initiatives surrounding parent engagement, the mental health training series for professionals, process improvement, and supporting Kane County's Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS). Maria's background is in public health and health promotion and has a special interest in health equity and community collaboration.

Jennifer Lozada, Community Health Initiatives Coordinator, Kane County Health Department

Jennifer is a new addition to the Children's Mental Health Program. She previously worked for the Kane County State's Attorney's Office with the Child Advocacy Center as a Case Manager/ Court Advocate in 2022 after graduating from University of Illinois at Chicago. Her previous employer was a non-profit mental health agency, but was stationed at the Glendale Heights Police Department as a Case Manager. Her main focus is the importance of increasing diversity, cultural competence, mental health awareness, and advocacy for the most vulnerable communities with trauma-informed care, incentives, services, and resources.

Appendix 1: Agenda

2025 KANE COUNTY YOUTH VOICES FORUM ON MENTAL HEALTH AGENDA

Event date: 2/7/2025

Start time: 9:00 am

End time: 1:30 pm

Location: Elgin Community College, Building E

Student group details: Provided name tags will have designated groups on them. Following the panel, please find your designated group's location. Groups will be sorted by animal.

| TIME | EVENT | LOCATION |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 9:00 am - 9:10 am | Arrival and Check-In | Building E lobby |
| 9:10 am - 9:40 am | Welcome from KCHD & ROE introducing mental health panel | Siegle auditorium E125 |
| 9:40 am - 9:50 am | Break | |
| 9:50 am - 11:15 am | Break out discussion groups | Designated group location |
| 11:30 am - 12:30 pm | Speaker - Brandon McCall | Siegle auditorium E125 |
| 12:45 pm - 1:15 pm | Lunch | Dining room E121 |
| 1:15 pm - 1:30 pm | Closing & Goodbye from KCHD & ROE | Dining room E121 to buses |



Appendix 2: About the Speaker

Brandon McCall

Brandon McCall is a motivational speaker and youth football coach with a passion for helping teens discover their voice. Raised in deep poverty in the inner city, he experienced firsthand the challenges that many underserved youth face. In a community where conflict, theft, and dishonesty were part of daily life, Brandon struggled to find the courage to stand up for what was right—even for himself. When his brother got involved in a street fight that tragically ended in someone losing their life, Brandon was forced to face a harsh reality—his brother would spend much of his life in prison, and Brandon would have to navigate life without him. That moment became a turning point. Determined to change his path, Brandon began seeking out positive influences, building connections with teachers, counselors, and supportive peers who helped guide him forward. Today, Brandon channels his passion into mentoring young people, giving his all at football practice and beyond. Since 2022, he has proudly served as TEEN TRUTH’s leading motivational speaker, inspiring students across the country with his powerful story and message

More information about the keynote speaker and his movement can be found here:

<https://teentruth.net/brandonmccall/>

Appendix 3: Resources

IRIS

The Kane County Integrated Referral & Intake System (IRIS) is a free web-based communication tool featuring over 190 Kane County area organizations that provide a variety of free or low-cost services. IRIS is a tool providers and schools can use to make referrals on behalf of their clients and students to meet their unique needs. For example, a school social worker can refer a student for a mental health assessment and outpatient counseling, link their family with resources for food or utility/rental assistance, and link the student's parent with an organization that provides parenting education. Consent from a parent or adult is required to make referrals through IRIS. IRIS is HIPPA compliant and offers a collaborative platform to strengthen community partnerships amongst schools and providers to help children, youth, and families thrive in Kane County.



Contact one of our IRIS System and Data Managers for more information:

Kim Peterson
Director for Community Health
peteronkim@kanecountyil.gov

Lorena Nunez
Early Childhood Programs Manager
nunezlorena@kanecountyil.gov

Michele Meyer
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Cindy Rodriguez
Family Engagement Specialist
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Maria Leon
Program Manager for the Children's Mental
Health Grant
leonmaria@kanecountyil.gov

Additional Resources

[Kane County Health Department Behavioral Health Training Series](#)

[Mental Health of Children and Parents - A Strong Connection](#)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness - How to Help a Friend](#)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness - Hispanic/Latinx Identity](#)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness - What You Need to Know About Youth Suicide](#)

[Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools - An Action Guide for School and District Leaders](#)

[Mental Health Effects of Restrictive Immigration Policies](#)

[The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review](#)

[Understanding Teacher Bias](#)

Appendix 4: Kane County Mental Health Resource Guide



Kane County Mental Health Resource Guide

Did you know?

Mental health support can be affordable. There are numerous mental health resources in our county that accept Medicaid or have sliding fee scales!



| Organization | Insurance & Services | Contact Information |
|---|--|---|
| Ascension Adolescent Behavioral Health | <p>Ages served: 12-17 (18 if still in high school)</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid and most major plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary care provider (PCP) referred outpatient group-based therapies for adolescents with recreational, family, and individual therapies mixed into treatment PCP referred psychiatry services available Translation services available | <p>77 N. Airlite Elgin, IL 60123 healthcare.ascension.org</p> |
| Association for Individual Development | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicaid Managed Care, self-pay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outpatient individual, group, and family therapy Psychiatric services, residential services, and consultations for schools and other agencies Victim services and grief support Services available in English and Spanish | <p>309 New Indian Trail Ct. Aurora, IL 60506 (630) 966-4000 www.aidcares.org</p> |
| East Aurora Counseling | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, most major plans, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onsite, offsite and in-home individual, group, couples and family counseling services Diagnostic screenings, evaluations, case-management and assessments with transferable reports LGBTQIA+ inclusive and gender-affirming mental healthcare through <i>Rainbow Wing</i> Services available in English, Spanish, and German | <p>2755 Church Rd. Aurora, IL 60502 (630) 486-3800 www.eastauroracounseling.com</p> |
| Ecker Center for Behavioral Health | <p>Ages served: Children (4+), adolescents, and adults</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicaid Managed Care, Medicare, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counseling, case management services, and residential treatment Mental Health Juvenile Justice program and support groups Psychiatric and nursing services | <p>1845 Grandstand Pl. Elgin, IL 60123 (847) 695-0484 www.eckercenter.org</p> |
| Family Counseling Service | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicaid Managed Care, Medicare, Private Insurances, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counseling and case management Psychiatric and psychological testing services Services available in English and Spanish | <p>70 S River St. Aurora, IL 60506 (630) 844-2662 aurorafcs.org</p> |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Family Guidance Centers | <p>Ages served: Adults (18+)</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid and self-pay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health counseling • Psychiatry services • Substance use treatment and co-occurring substance use & mental health treatment | <p>751 Aurora Ave. Aurora, IL 60505 (630) 801-0017 www.fgcinc.org</p> | | |
| Family Service Association of Greater Elgin | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, and adults</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicaid Managed Care, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual & family therapy, case management, mental health assessment, pre-hospital screening, and crisis intervention • Psychiatric services • Mental Health Juvenile Justice, Family Linkage, and Family Support Service programs • Services available in English and Spanish | <p>1140 N McLean Blvd. Ste 1 Elgin, IL 60123 (847) 695-3680 fsaelgin.org</p> | | |
| Focus Group Wellness Partners | <p>Ages served: Children (6+), adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, most major plans, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual therapy, group therapy, case management, family counseling, and play therapy • Parent coaching and anger management classes • Services available in English and Spanish | <p>27475 Ferry Rd. Warrenville, IL 60555 (312) 837-0099 www.focusgroupwellnesspartners.org</p> | | |
| Fox Valley Hands of Hope | <p>Ages served: Children (6+), adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief support provided through counseling, peer support, or group programs • Individual and family services available • No cost • Services available in English and Spanish | <p>200 Whitfield Dr. Geneva, Illinois 60134 (630) 232-2233 www.fvvh.net</p> | | |
| Greater Family Health | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicare, most major plans, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual, family, and group counseling • Psychiatry services & substance use disorder treatments • Services available regardless of immigration status • LGBTQIA+ inclusive • Translation services available | <p>373 Summit St. Ste 100 Elgin, IL 60120 (844) 599-3700 greaterfamilyhealth.org</p> | | |
| Tricity Family Services | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicare, most major plans, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual, couples, and family counseling • Psychiatric services and urgent assessments • Emotional Wellness Program workshops and support groups | <p>1120 Randall Ct. Geneva, Illinois 60134 (630) 232-1070 www.tricityfamilyservices.org</p> | | |
| VNA Healthcare | <p>Ages served: Children, adolescents, adults, and seniors</p> <p>Insurance: Medicaid, Medicare, sliding fee scale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual mental health and behavioral health counseling • Psychiatry services • Translation services available | <p>620 Wing St. Elgin, IL 60123</p> | <p>400 N. Highland Ave. Aurora, IL 60506</p> | <p>801 Villa St. Elgin, IL 60123</p> <p>(630) 892-4355 www.vnahealth.com</p> |

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