

# It's Time to Stop Failing Our Young People and Start Empowering Them

**Chuck Ingoglia**

When I read the articles that appear in this issue of *JBHS&R*, I was both inspired with hope and stung by sadness. There is a thread that runs through the content that reminds us that too many young people are in need of our help. And it is the responsibility of all of us to respond.

We have failed our youth in too many ways. It's time to put our money—and our energy—where our mouths are.

As neighbors, parents, and teachers, we want to help teens around us who may be struggling in silence. We want to hold their hand, listen to their concerns, and show them the resources that are available. Unfortunately, it's not that easy.

If we truly believe that young people are our most valuable resource, we must also trust them to direct their own fate, aided by our steadying hand. At the National Council, we are investing both our money and our energy in programs that will empower young people. We are partners in these endeavors, and our role is as much to listen as to act.

Research shows that most teenagers will turn to their friends and peers for support before they turn to an adult.<sup>1-3</sup> We cannot wait for teens to come to us for help. We need to give them the tools they need to support each other. We need to help them learn about their own mental health and motivate them to participate in treatment.

teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) responds to these critical needs. It is a program that empowers teens to speak up, take action, and get help when it's needed most from a trusted adult. tMHFA teaches high school students about common mental health challenges and what they can do to support their own mental health and help their friends who are struggling.

With the support of Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation, the program was launched in eight high schools across the country. Adult instructors and students alike have told us that tMHFA is a game-changer. Our firm belief in empowering youth was rewarded, and tMHFA will expand to 35 additional high schools around the country this fall. We anticipate being able to offer this training nationwide in September of 2020.

If all our teens are at risk—and we know they are—underserved youth is in even greater peril. Less-advantaged groups, including youth navigating their gender identity and sexual orientation, communities of color, and those with immigrant and refugee backgrounds, are having a harder time sorting through difficult emotions that result from compounding stress or trauma. Suicide attempts

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Address correspondence to Chuck Ingoglia, National Council for Behavioral Health, 1400 K Street NW Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Email: [nealc@thenationalcouncil.org](mailto:nealc@thenationalcouncil.org)

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are four times more likely among LGBTQ youth, and deaths by suicide are roughly two times higher for black children ages 5–12, compared with their white peers.<sup>4, 5</sup>

We need solutions and the National Council is working to change this equation. In January of 2019, we created a youth-driven leadership program, CONNECTED, to help the next generation of leaders thrive at home, at school, and in their communities. The 2-year program kicked off at NatCon19 in Nashville, TN, USA, by bringing together five youth-serving organizations (pilot sites) and 20 youth participants.

What makes CONNECTED a rich and diverse learning collaborative is the leading role of the network of 20 young influencers, ages 16–24, who are passionate about bringing youth voices into local community plans and projects, and five youth consultants who mentor them and guide the implementation of these efforts.

Not only are the youth advocates demonstrating their commitment to elevating the voices of youth nationwide, they have important stories to tell—stories of challenges and successes, of unmet needs and unsung heroes, of hope and recovery from their unique experiences—navigating the foster care system, building a youth group, living with a mental health challenge, and stepping up to lead in their school or community.

I ask you to think about the disturbing statistics surrounding our youth’s mental health as you read this issue of *JBHS&R* and to consider the solutions before us. In these pages, we are reminded of the special challenges that are unique to children whose parents served in the military (Wooten, Brittingham, Sumi, et al.) and of the pervasiveness of substance use in our high schools and the detrimental effects for all students (Sharp, Young and Moore).<sup>6, 7</sup> We also examine the therapies that may prove most valuable to our youth and the increasing use of emergency departments as ad hoc first responders for pediatric mental health issues. (Rosychuk, Newton, Hu).<sup>8, 9</sup>

All young people deserve to grow into healthy, resilient adults. It’s time for us to step up and do our part to empower them.

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