



## “Reach Out Seattle” – A Youth Mental Health Initiative

### Background:

Mental health is a critical aspect of our overall health that impacts how we communicate with others, how we handle stress, and how we learn and make decisions. Recent studies have shown that rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues are on the rise among adolescents and young adults.

Prior to COVID-19, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [data](#) found 1 in 5 children had a mental health disorder. Contributing factors include the growing use of social media, academic pressures, and stressors like racial inequality, gun violence, socioeconomic pressures, and the impacts of climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with school closures and social isolation, added to the challenges that youth faced and heavily affected those that were already vulnerable: youth of color, youth with disabilities, LGBTQ+ youth, and others from marginalized backgrounds. Not only has the pandemic had an enormous negative impact on youth mental health, but it has also created additional barriers to access for treatment. The CDC estimates that only 20% of youth with mental or behavioral health challenges receive care from a mental health care provider.

At the end of 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a [public health advisory](#) on youth mental health, emphasizing that everyone – family members, caregivers, and trusted adults who interact daily with young people to the institutions like schools, community organizations, and government entities that surround them – has a role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth.

**Mental health conditions are real and treatable, and young people experiencing psychological distress deserve support and care from parents, caregivers, and other adults.** To address this crisis and ensure a healthy future for Seattle’s youth, it is imperative that that all sectors and stakeholders across our city come together to prioritize prevention, early identification, and intervention and increase access to mental health resources.

### Vision:

The vision for the **Reach Out Seattle** initiative is to create a unified response for addressing the crisis in youth mental and behavioral health by involving 12 community sectors and stakeholders from across the city, including:

- Youth
- Parents
- Businesses
- Media
- Schools and school-based health services
- Youth and family serving organizations, including those focused on youth who are homeless or unstably housed.
- First Responders/Designated Crisis Responders/Unified Care Team
- Religious organizations



- Civic/volunteer organizations, including those serving immigrant communities.
- Healthcare providers
- State/Local/Tribal governments
- Other organizations involved with youth and mental health care

This vision is meant to center diverse voices of our city, with special emphasis on low resourced communities and communities that experience the highest burden of health inequity. The initiative will also elevate youth voices, those most closely connected to the mental health challenges their peers face, to make resources responsive to their needs.

By focusing on our youth (prenatal to 24 years old), this initiative seeks to disrupt the progression to adult disease and create a healthier future for our youth and entire community. Evidence shows that effective upstream prevention and early intervention can prevent severe mental illness, decrease the need for intensive inpatient hospitalizations, and ultimately reduce the risk of relapse of related mental health conditions in adulthood.

### Model:

**Reach Out Seattle** will promote youth mental health and overall wellness through community-wide learning programs that will focus on **prevention and early identification** as well as **non-clinical intervention strategies** so that parents, caregivers, supportive adults, and others in community are better equipped to recognize the signs of youth psychological distress and have the tools and training needed to support them.

This model is inspired by the Seattle Fire Department's successful [Medic One and Two efforts](#), which trained firefighters to perform basic pre-hospital care and trained citizens and non-medical professionals to be first responders in administering CPR. The core principles of these programs involves developing a community-wide learning program and coordination across key sectors, standardizing intervention approaches, and building infrastructure for providing access to services.

This model will have a tiered response across the sectors identified above, informing the city's residents on how to appropriately respond when youth are experiencing distress. The material will focus on both prevention and intervention by orienting the community to the scope of the current crisis and educating broadly on how to promote wellness. Trainings will include a focus on how to identify a youth displaying signs of mental or behavioral health challenges, when and how to intervene, as well as how to coordinate access to available resources.

With limited availability of psychological services and providers, **prevention and early identification** will be a key component of this model and will ultimately decrease the need for high intensity inpatient hospitalizations.

The prevention component will target the core building blocks of youth mental health:

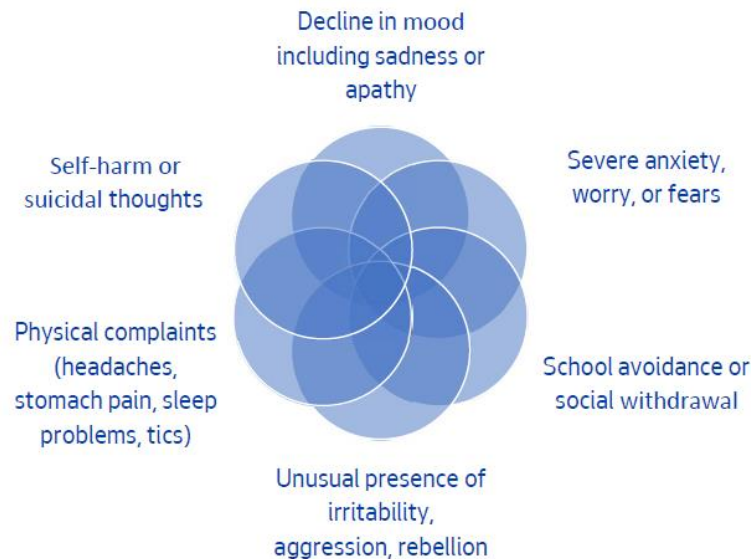
- Getting adequate sleep
- Access to affordable, healthy foods and a regular eating schedule
- Daily exercise with equitable access to sports, play, and other recreation
- Exposure to nature in parks, streetscapes, and urban forests
- A sense of belonging, through success and engagement in schools along with stable, welcoming, cross-generational networks and neighborhoods.



- Careful use of, and a watchful approach to, social media and other evolving technologies.
- Space and structure for deeper supportive, nurturing, and culturally congruent relationships to flourish.

Early identification of mental and behavioral health concerns will help refer youth to the services needed.

## Identifying Mental/Behavioral Health Concerns in Youth



The **intervention component** will involve offering training to parents, caregivers, other trusted adults and community leaders in psychological first aid, an [evidence-based method](#) to provide immediate support to individuals who are experiencing acute stress, trauma, or crisis. Psychological first aid is effective in reducing initial distress as well as fostering adaptive coping responses in the short and long term, promoting healthy coping, and building overall resilience.

Intervention training for families, friends, and bystanders will focus on applying 5 principles of psychological first aid:

- **Safety:** Ensure both physical and emotional safety through practical steps.
- **Calm and Comfort:** Foster an environment that eases distress and promotes hope and healing.
- **Connectedness:** Encourage access to the support system to enhance resiliency.
- **Self-efficacy/Empowerment:** Promote self-empowerment by finding culturally appropriate ways to meet needs and cope.
- **Hope:** Instill the belief that the current situation is temporary and will get better.

These interventions will be evidence informed, scalable, culturally tailored, and designed to address racial inequities with sensitivity to the City's history and diversity. An accessible list of available mental health resources in the City will also be provided if clinical interventions are needed to coordinate access to the appropriate services.



# City of Seattle

Mayor Bruce Harrell

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## Next steps:

The first phase will be initiating a multimedia public education campaign by developing youth-informed Public Service Announcements to disseminate to schools and other youth relevant sectors in the city. The campaigns, which will also be available on social media, will aim to increase overall awareness in the community and help de-stigmatize conversations around mental health among youth and adults.

The second phase will be developing a training curriculum with the help of subject matter experts that is comprehensive, culturally responsive, multi-disciplinary, and trauma informed. Led by the Civilian-Assisted Response and Engagement (CARE) Department, we will gather subject matter experts and community stakeholders to assist with the development of this training. The training will incorporate youth perspectives on their needs, identification and prevention techniques provided by mental and behavioral health specialists, education about Psychological First Aid (PFA), and alignment with current resources. The long-term goal is for each sector to have training material integrated into their core services.