

IT'S TIME FOR ADULTS TO LISTEN: YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



In July 2023, First Focus on Children held a [webinar](#) entitled, ***It's Time for Adults to Listen: A Youth-Centered, Policy-Focused Discussion on the Nation's Youth Mental Health***. This was a unique opportunity to hear from five dynamic youth advocates who are stepping up to effectively raise important policy issues and solutions with local, state, and federal lawmakers for themselves and their peers. As Senator Tim Kaine (VA) said in his opening remarks, “[Youth] advocacy has the power to help others experiencing mental health challenges and to change the direction of our country for the better.”

Key Principles

Panelists underscored **three key principles** that are integral to effective policymaking, and which cut across all the policy recommendations from the webinar:

» **Young people want and need to be involved in the issues and policies that affect them.**

Children and youth, starting at the youngest ages, must know that they are valued. We must ensure that youth have a seat at the table by continually embedding them in meaningful ways in policymaking to share their lived experience.

» **Stigma exists at generational and cultural levels.** While young people are having conversations about and leading efforts on their mental health, stigma regarding mental health can prevent adults, providers, and policy makers from listening to and meeting the needs of youth. Labeling and stigmatizing are destructive to young people. We must look for ways to reduce stigma through more discussions in schools, families, and communities, and by adequately funding services to support these efforts.

» **Prevention is key.** Efforts to provide social and emotional support to children and teens will help them cope with challenging circumstances and be more resilient. Additionally, any support that can be offered to parents and caregivers will benefit children and teens.

Policy Recommendations

While work has begun to address youth mental health issues, much more still needs to be done. Below are some of the policy recommendations raised by our panelists and moderator that First Focus on Children endorses:

» Provide funding for mental health coordinators in all schools to oversee student care coordination and ensure help is received.

» Integrate existing youth-led peer crisis intervention programs into the 988 Suicide and Crisis

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Lifeline to build a national sub-line staffed by teens, for teens.

» Integrate peer-to-peer support programs into middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities to connect more youth to help amidst national mental health workforce shortages.

» Require mental health checkups in schools as standard care.

» Expand the pediatric behavioral health workforce with the intention to recruit and train providers (professional and paraprofessional) from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

» Improve the cultural competency of behavioral health providers so that all youth—including those with unique needs—feel heard and understood and receive the appropriate care.

» Increase the number of pediatric behavioral health providers who can provide therapies for youth with higher levels of trauma, including those in foster care, and increase Medicaid access to providers who have this expertise. Ensure that families are included in the care plans of youth facing mental health issues.

» Require insurance coverage of at least three mental health visits per year under ACA marketplace plans and private employer-sponsored plans (which includes youth under 26 still on their parents' plans).

» Enforce the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) which was passed by Congress and signed into law in 2008. The goal is to treat mental health conditions and substance use disorders as equivalent to other health conditions in insurance plans.

» In the spirit of the MHPAEA, make patient co-pays for behavioral health visits the same as for physical health visits.

» Ensure there are regular and consistent mental health screenings at annual pediatrician appointments that are covered by insurance and result in referrals to mental health providers when needed.

Additional Resources

[Why those most impacted by the youth mental health crisis might be the answer to solving it](#)

[Did you know? The state of mental health for our children and youth](#)

[The need to incorporate children, youth, and adolescents into state 988 systems](#)

[Watch: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline – One Size Does Not Fit All](#)