

**By Sheree Thaxton Vodicka**

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, so I am sharing a bit of data and then news about a couple of proposals in the works to help NC youth and teens. But first, the bad news.

According to the Unified School Behavioral Health Action Plan released by the NC Department of Health and Human Services in March 2023, North Carolina's youth are facing an urgent mental health crisis. I know you all are seeing it nearly every day in youth programming.

In 2021, nearly 1 in 5 adolescents considered attempting suicide, and 1 in 10 attempted suicide. NC Child and the NC Institute of Medicine's 2023 Health Report Card gave NC an "F" due to the startling increase in rates of teen suicide deaths (67 suicide deaths in 2020) and a 49% increase in depression and anxiety diagnoses in 2020. Data from the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey found that 35% of middle school students and 43% of high school students report feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row and stopped doing some usual activities.

Sadly, help is not on the way. According to the 2023 Child Health Report Card, roughly half of youth with mental health needs do not receive the necessary care, and NC is among the bottom 10 states for youth mental health due to inadequate access to care and lack of insurance coverage for mental health.

The Y has a fabulous opportunity to be part of the solution. While the Child Health Report calls on schools to do the work needed to be done, we know that our YMCAs are poised to play a major role. We know our Ys help kids and youth develop the type of close, trusting relationships that enhance their emotional well-being. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "While SEL [social-emotional learning] and mental health are not the same...SEL cultivates important 'protective factors' to buffer against mental health risks. In this way, SEL is an indispensable part of student mental health and wellness, helping to improve attitudes about self and others while decreasing emotional distress and risky behaviors. SEL should be implemented as part of a system of mental wellness supports and resources that include promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment."

During this legislative session, the Alliance is asking our lawmakers to fund \$3.75 million in appropriations so YMCAs can build upon our work in character development/social emotional learning. If approved, the Alliance will offer grants to YMCAs to hire and train staff and expand program and membership offerings to youth and teens. The good news is we are hearing a positive response to our request. Additionally, the Alliance staff team just submitted a grant application to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for a

training grant to train 1,300 of our youth development staff in Youth Mental Health First Aid.

As always, the Y is there to meet community needs and it's no different when it comes to mental health. I'm optimistic that we will be able to serve this need more fully with these government funds should they be approved. Stay tuned!