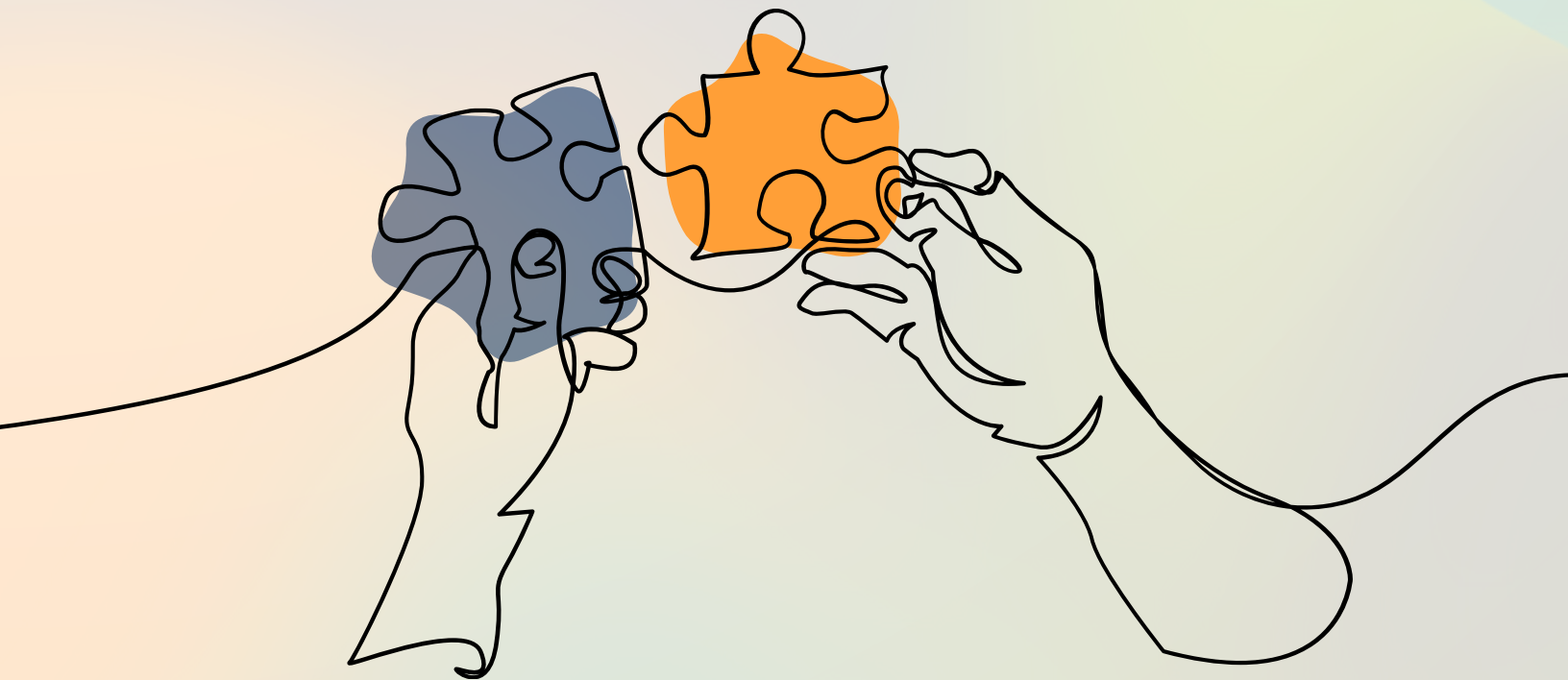


How to Go From Data to Action: Spotlight on Youth Mental Health Advocacy

The State of Mental Health in America report



TURN
AWARENESS »
INTO ACTION

MHIA
Mental Health America

Acknowledgments

Mental Health America (MHA) was founded in 1909 and is the leading national nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being, and illness prevention. Our work is informed, designed, and led by the lived experience of those most affected. Operating nationally and in communities across the country, Mental Health America advocates for closing the mental health equity gap, while increasing nationwide awareness and understanding through public education, direct services, tools, and research, making MHA a national standard bearer in public mental health advocacy and community-based solutions.

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Table of contents

04

Introduction and overview

05

Translating numbers into compelling narratives for change

08

Identifying who influences mental health in your community

16

Creating your personal advocacy plan

18

Youth advocacy case studies

27

Appendix: Template letter to policymakers, local officials, or agencies

You've seen the rankings. You know where your state stands.

NOW WHAT?

The data in the State of Mental Health in America report are meant to spark action, but numbers alone don't create change. That work happens when people use the data to push for better policies, stronger systems, and more responsive communities.

Young people are already stepping into that role. **They bring unique strengths to mental health advocacy that seasoned policymakers often lack, including insight into what it is like to be a young person today.** Youth carry lived experience of mental health in schools and communities. They hold credibility with their peers, speaking their language and understanding struggles adults often miss. And they bring fresh perspectives that challenge assumptions others have accepted as unchangeable.

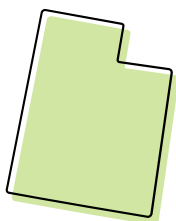
Mental Health America's Young Leaders Council (YLC) believes data without action is just numbers on a page and that young people must be part of creating solutions.

The YLC is a cohort of 10 young advocates, ages 18–25, from across the United States. They are transforming mental health systems through youth-led initiatives, policy reform, and community organizing.

In this Spotlight on Youth Mental Health Advocacy, the YLC bridges the gap between research and real change with guidance on how youth advocates and adult allies can:

- **Translate numbers into compelling narratives** to influence the public and decision-makers.
- **Identify who has decision-making power** with examples of how young people are already influencing change in education, government, and communities.
- **Create a plan** to turn state data into real change.
- **Leverage lessons from YLC members** to shape and inspire advocacy and transformation, personally and professionally.

Translating numbers into compelling narratives for change



Utah ranked **50th out of 51** in the 2025 State of Mental Health in America report

7.6%

of adults reported experiencing **serious thoughts of suicide.**

~ONE THIRD

of adults **experienced a mental illness** in the past year.

What the data says:

The state has an alarmingly high prevalence of mental health challenges, with almost 30 percent of adults reporting any mental illness, as well as the highest rate of severe suicidal ideation among adults (7.6%) in the country.

What this means for real people:

While these numbers alone are startling, advocates can help further communicate the stakes by framing the data not just around comparisons to other states but by emphasizing the real human stakes that need urgent action in a state where nearly a third of adults are facing mental health struggles and so many are at high risk for suicide.

What leaders can do about it:

Utah should increase investment in peer support specialist services to expand access to mental health support and community connectedness.

Translating numbers into compelling narratives for change



ranked **18th place** for substance use disorder (SUD) prevalence and **51st** for SUD treatment access

Prevalence of SUD among adults

17.9% → **18%**
California National

Among all states, California ranked

LAST PLACE

for prevalence of adults with SUD
who did not receive treatment

What the data says:

In California, 17.9% of people had a substance use disorder (SUD), which aligns with the national average of 18%; However, the state ranked last place for adults with SUD who did not receive treatment.

What this means for real people:

When you consider the size of California's population, the percentage of individuals living with a substance use disorder represents over **5.38 million people – roughly the population of New Zealand**– with the vast majority (4.85 million people) currently left to go without needed support.



What leaders can do about it:

California should invest in more young adult-driven substance use prevention and outreach programs to provide youth with substance use challenges the tools and resources they need to transition to adulthood with the needed support for long-term well-being.

To create a data-driven narrative for your advocacy, you should:



Get a big picture.

Every metric contributes to the larger story. It isn't necessary to find the most "alarming" statistics or to rank the lowest on a specific measure or ranking. All data, even in a state with higher rankings, can contribute to effective advocacy.

Interrogate the state's response.

The State of Mental Health in America report consists of two key parts: the ranking of states based on the problem, and their effectiveness in addressing it. The goal isn't just to point out what isn't working, but to influence decision-makers to act on what would make a difference. Find examples of what is already working or should be tried in your state.

Focus on the human impact.

Don't just look at how your state ranks — communicate what that ranking means for real people. Like the Utah and California examples, look beyond a single ranking to understand the broader context of the data to shape your communications.

(Optional) Make it personal.

Personal stories are often the most powerful tool in advocacy. They elevate the narrative, give the data human depth, and remind decision-makers that these issues are more than statistics — they're lived realities. You can learn more about how to share your story from YLC members [here](#).

Identifying who influences mental health in your community

The rise of youth mental health advocacy is bolstered by organizations and institutions that use their power to create change and improve youth wellbeing. Key sectors include education, government, and community organizations. Although not limited to these examples, these serve as entry points for youth to begin their advocacy.

Young advocates often believe that meaningful impact can only be made at the federal level. In doing so, they may unintentionally overlook some critical power holders closest to home. Your school board meets next Tuesday. Your county commissioners are up for re-election. Your state legislature is debating next year's mental health budget right now.

They need to hear from you, and knowing who they are is the first step to making change.

In this section, you'll find:

- **Descriptions** of key decision-makers who influence mental health policy
- **Real-world examples** of these powerholders in action
- **Action steps** for connecting with and influencing them as a young advocate

These are categorized across three critical areas:

- **Education:** School boards, youth advisory councils, college administration
- **Government:** City councils, health departments, state legislature
- **Community:** Nonprofits, coalitions, and grassroots organizations

Education

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
School boards	School boards are run by locally elected officials, and decide on student services, policies, and budgets.	<p>South Carolina: Following budget cuts, the jobs of 10 school mental health counselors were at risk until the <u>Rock Hill School Board voted to save them.</u></p> <p>In the past year, the counselors served thousands of students, completed hundreds of crisis interventions, and referred 40 students for emergency care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look up your district's school board website. • Attend an open board meeting (most allow public comment). • Identify which members are up for election and learn about their positions. • Reach out to a board member to share your perspective on student mental health.
Youth advisory positions	Students serving in youth advisory positions are appointed or elected to advise school boards or district leaders. Youth in these positions are generally encouraged to share the current concerns and needs of their peers.	<p>Georgia: The Atlanta Public Schools Student Advisory Council provides the district with student input on current and future mental health resources offered in schools. The Student Advisory Council played a role in a district partnership that now provides no-cost mental telehealth services to students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your district website for student board member or advisory council openings. • Ask a teacher, counselor, or administrator how students are selected. • Apply to join – or, if none exist, advocate for creating youth representation in your district. • If the position is already filled, reach out to the student who holds it to discuss your specific concerns.

Education *(continued)*

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
College/university administration	<p>Colleges and universities often support mental health access and offer platforms for student advocacy.</p> <p>Though it varies by campus, some key offices often support student mental health:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Health Center • Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) • Student Success or Retention Teams • Disability Services Office • Dean of Students <p>Additionally, student government often manages funding and sets student priorities, serving as a direct channel to administrators</p>	<p>Texas: <u>The University of Texas System implemented a mandatory mental health training</u> across all its universities.</p> <p>This initiative was originally pitched by the former student government president and vice president. They first approached UT's associate vice president for health and well-being, and the idea eventually reached faculty across the system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search your university website for offices supporting mental health and disability services. • Ask how students can provide feedback or join advisory committees. • Contact your student government representative to raise a concern or propose an initiative. • If allowed, attend a student government meeting or start a resolution/petition to spark action.
Parent-teacher associations (PTAs)	<p>Parent-teacher associations are parent-led groups that fundraise, support student wellbeing, and elevate youth concerns to school boards and state legislatures. They sometimes work in coalition with education unions and advocacy groups.</p> <p>PTAs also often sponsor wellness programs and activities that impact mental health.</p>	<p>Connecticut: <u>Parents and teachers successfully filed a complaint</u> with the state against the Killingly Board of Education. The board had refused a plan to implement a school mental health clinic at no cost to the district.</p> <p>Following a state investigation and community outcry, the board was compelled to implement full-time mental health services for students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask if your local PTA allows student representatives. • Offer to present at a meeting on mental health. • Partner to co-sponsor an event or awareness campaign.

Education *(continued)*

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
State education departments	State education departments are state-level agencies that oversee school standards, curriculum, funding, and statewide student support services.	Delaware: <u>The Delaware Department of Education developed Project THRIVE</u> to provide free, trauma-informed mental health services to students in the state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit your state Department of Education website. • Look for youth councils, advisory groups, or mental health initiatives. • Contact the student wellness or school climate division. • Advocate for mental health policies through public comment or advisory applications.

Government

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
City council	<p>City councils are local government bodies that make decisions about laws, budgets, and city services.</p> <p>They are made up of elected officials who represent different areas.</p>	<p>Washington: <u>The Seattle City Council voted to allocate \$12.5 million</u> towards student mental health programs. Students from the Seattle Students Union attended city council meetings and campaigned for this funding after the 2022 Ingraham High School shooting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit your city's official website. • Look up council meeting schedules (often open to the public). • Contact your councilmember about youth mental health needs. • Ask if your city has a youth council or commission and how to apply. • Volunteer with city programs and mental health initiatives.
State/local health departments	<p>Health departments are local government agencies responsible for protecting and promoting public health. They manage services like vaccinations, disease prevention, health education, and emergency preparedness.</p> <p>There are also behavioral health departments that specifically design and fund mental health initiatives, including crisis response.</p>	<p>Ohio: The Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services expanded its <u>Mobile Response and Stabilization Services (MRSS)</u> to support youth in crisis.</p> <p>OhioMHAS provides certification standards and technical support for MRSS providers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search your county health department website for behavioral health programs. • Find out who oversees youth or school-based mental health. • Reach out to ask how young people can participate in planning or advisory groups. • Share concerns about crisis response or service gaps.

Government *(continued)*

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
State legislature	<p>State legislatures are made up of elected officials who create laws for the entire state. They set funding priorities, pass education and health laws, and oversee statewide mental health policy.</p> <p>Many states offer youth councils or youth advisory boards connected to the legislature, giving young people a chance to learn about lawmaking and share their ideas.</p>	<p>Washington: Washington State Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) successfully conceived, wrote, lobbied, and passed HB1373. This bill requires school districts to list mental health resources for students on all school websites.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look up your state legislature website for committees on health or education. • Contact your state representative or senator about mental health priorities. • Check if your state has a youth council and apply to join. • Submit testimony (written or spoken) during legislative hearings.
Governor's & mayor's offices	<p>The offices of the mayor and governor are the executive branches of city and state government.</p> <p>Both offices often have youth advisory councils or programs that allow young people to share their ideas and influence decision-making.</p> <p>Additionally, sometimes the spouses of governors or mayors take on causes like youth mental health, education, or child wellbeing.</p>	<p>Arizona: Students serving on the Arizona Governor's Youth Commission Mental Health Workgroup created the Yellow Ribbon Toolkit for high school students interested in starting a mental health club.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your city or state website for youth councils under the mayor or governor. • Look for First Lady/First Gentleman initiatives related to health or youth. • Write or email your mayor/governor directly to share your perspective on youth mental health. • Request a meeting with staff in the Office of Youth Engagement, Community Affairs, or Health Policy.

Community

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
Local/news media	Local newspapers, radio stations, community blogs, and youth media organizations shape public opinion and can pressure decision-makers to act on mental health issues.	Michigan: High school student Harmonie Stewart <u>published an op-ed</u> in the Detroit Free Press, making the case for excused absences for mental health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for journalists who write about education, health, or youth issues at your local newspaper or radio station. • Follow relevant reporters on social media, and engage with their work. • Pitch a specific story idea if you have data or a personal angle that makes it newsworthy. • Write op-eds or letters to the editor about youth mental health in your community.
Community-based organizations	<p>Many community-based organizations provide direct mental health services, advocate for policy changes, and have established relationships with decision-makers and funding sources.</p> <p>These include both local grassroots organizations and local chapters of national networks.</p>	<p>Delaware: <u>Sean's House</u> is a community space for young people to connect with one another and support their mental health.</p> <p>Their Peer24 Training Program trains individuals to provide peer support at Sean's House or Sean's Rooms throughout the state.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find your local chapter/affiliate from these national networks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Mental Health America ◦ National Alliance of Mental Illnesses ◦ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention • Search for community mental health centers, youth-serving nonprofits, and other organizations that serve youth who need mental health support. • Attend community coalition meetings, volunteer for organizations, or fundraise on their behalf. • Some organizations may also offer training and mentorship programs to help build your skills.

Community (continued)

Power holder	Description	Example	Action steps
Sports/athletics	<p>Athletic departments and coaches shape the values and culture of youth sports.</p> <p>They influence how athletes talk about mental health, what resources they access, and whether seeking help is encouraged.</p>	<p>Maryland: Marcus Alston founded <u>Alston for Athletes</u> based on his experiences as a student athlete living with mental health challenges.</p> <p><u>He helped introduce and pass a bill</u> in the Maryland legislature requiring mental health training for athletic coaches at public schools and universities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your school or league if they offer mental health training for athletes or coaches. • Propose a “mental health day” or awareness week in your athletic program. • Start a peer support group or mentoring network for student-athletes. • Share resources, statistics, and stories about the mental health in sports with your coach or athletic director.
Arts	<p>Arts programs and cultural institutions have the power to elevate youth voices, especially around mental health.</p> <p>They can provide platforms for expression, healing, and public engagement to shift community understanding.</p>	<p>New Hampshire: Kaisar Perry <u>founded Playing for Change in 2021</u>. The completely student-run theater initiative transforms youth-submitted mental health plays into full productions.</p> <p>They have raised thousands of dollars in donations for the New Hampshire Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask local museums, libraries, or theaters to feature mental health-focused works. • Submit your story to youth-centered film festivals, zines, or exhibits. • Start or join an art collective focused on emotional expression and advocacy.

Creating your personal advocacy plan

STEP 1

Research what is already happening in your community

Start by building a solid foundation of knowledge about your community's mental health landscape. Continue learning about the policies and resources available in your community, using a variety of sources and cross-checking their accuracy. Explore your local health department's website or contact them directly to learn about current mental health programs, task forces, or public listening sessions.

In today's age of AI and diverse media platforms, it's essential to seek multiple perspectives and fact-check information to ensure it's correct.



STEP 2

Explore the problems you care most about

Identify areas in need of action. Look at available public health data — including your state's State of Mental Health in America report rankings — to pinpoint a specific gap or issue in your community, then use that evidence as the foundation for your advocacy.

STEP 3

Find who has the decision-making power

Mental health is a complex topic with overlaps in all areas of our lives. As noted in the description of different stakeholders, it is essential to identify the people who can actually do something about the problems you'd identified.



STEP 4

Offer solutions based on examples or your perspective

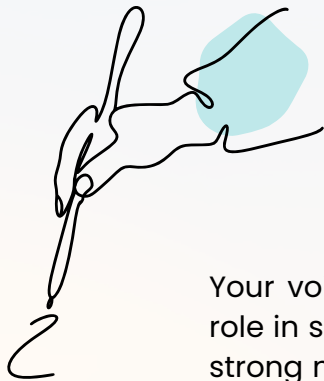
Don't just identify what's wrong; come prepared with potential solutions or examples of what's working in similar communities. You can find potential solutions from your own research and may advocate to expand something that already exists or adapt solutions to the needs of your community.

Creating your personal advocacy plan

STEP 5

Build support with allies

Advocating for mental health isn't something you need to tackle alone. Connect with nonprofits and community-based organizations that share your goals. Collaborating with organizations that already have structure and resources can amplify your efforts. Partner with advocacy groups and participate in coalitions to access valuable resources and opportunities to influence policy change. Some coalitions may also offer training and mentorship programs to help build your skills and participate in targeted advocacy opportunities.



STEP 6

Learn to leverage storytelling, including your own

Your voice, expressed through both words and actions, plays a powerful role in shaping policies in your community. This is exactly where building a strong narrative becomes an essential part of driving advocacy efforts. It's crucial to engage by contacting and building relationships with policymakers, sharing your personal stories and experiences, and using your platform both online and in person.



STEP 7

Take action and keep taking action

Whether through writing letters and emails, posting on social media, or participating in public hearings, town halls, and community meetings, your active involvement can create a meaningful impact. Don't underestimate the power of a message — email, call, or attend meetings to share your concerns, ask questions, or propose ideas. Your voice does matter.

Youth advocacy case studies: How the YLC members got started

Elisabeth Chai

Deb Coffy

Max Delgado

Margaret Garcia

Travis Haughton

Asia Horne

Cadon Sagendorf

Oleksandr Sharlai

Elisabeth Chai's journey: From marginalization to mobilization

Location: New York, NY

Focus area: Health equity and education

The entry point:

My advocacy began at home, in efforts to support friends and family while managing my own mental health struggles. Through my personal experience, I uncovered widespread gaps in access to mental health resources, health literacy, and cultural congruency in mental health care. I recognized a need for community-centred change, and began volunteering with a chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, where I supported the translation of scientific research and development of culturally responsive crisis care programs.



MY ADVICE:

For youth interested in starting their advocacy journey, I recommend getting in touch with local and/or community-based organizations. These groups often provide spaces to connect with other advocates, as well as opportunities in mentorship and leadership development. Take the time to learn from clinicians, researchers, other experts of their fields – and most importantly – people with lived experience, who often go unrepresented in discussions around policies that will directly impact their lives.

The impact:

I currently lead an initiative, *Kintsugi*, which has connected over 25,000 New Yorkers to free harm reduction supplies, resources, and education. I regularly provide training in Mental Health First Aid and naloxone administration, as well as psychoeducation and crisis intervention for first responders. I also serve on several advisory boards, working to advance youth mental health in areas ranging from mental health parity to K-12 health curricula. My work has earned recognition by organisations including Mental Health America, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the American Psychiatric Association, and the New York State Office of Mental Health.

Deb Coffy's journey: From cultural and religious stigma to organizing

Location: Orlando, FL

Focus area: Mental health advocacy for black LGBTQ+ folks, peer support, and reproductive justice

The entry point:

My advocacy started at a very young age, when I would talk about social justice with my family, and I eventually got involved through volunteering and nonprofit work. My mom worked at a domestic violence shelter in Western Pennsylvania, where she provided support to survivors of domestic violence. I noticed the gaps that existed, and being a child of Christian Haitian immigrants, I saw the stigma surrounding mental health challenges among Black people across the diaspora. When I entered college, I majored in clinical psychology and political science and researched whether Christianity impacts the decision-making of Black LGBTQ+ women in seeking mental health services. I became a group facilitator for Peer Support Space for the Black LGBTQ+ Group and a recovery support specialist intern under Aspire Health Partners. After I graduated, I worked as a research assistant for a study focusing on suicidality for women who love women under the College of Medicine at the University of Central Florida.



MY ADVICE:

If you're looking to get involved as a youth, I say look everywhere and don't be afraid to speak out. Starting locally is your best bet to learn more about your community and what funding does and does not exist. From there, you can expand your reach to your state, region, country, and eventually globally. Don't be afraid to lean into your lived experiences. Everyone has a story. Your story can impact those you serve with and those you advocate for. Learn the facts, check your sources, and know this is a marathon, not a sprint. There may be different crossroads and policy challenges depending on where you live or want to live, but if there is something that doesn't exist, that may be a chance for you to create it or to work with your peers to create something that will be amazing for your community. Regardless of the challenges along the way, know that you will never be alone, and there are so many organizations, such as Mental Health America, that support youth advocates.

The impact:

I am a certified recovery peer support specialist in Florida and a respite peer supporter at Eva's Casita, the first peer respite in Central Florida. I am on different advisory boards locally and nationally, focusing on mental health wellness and access to services such as Black Girls Smile, Mental Health America, the Dove Youth Board for the Dove Self-Esteem Project, the National Black Women's Justice Institute's Justice for Youth Survivors Initiative, and the National Domestic Violence Hotline's Love is Respect program, which focuses on supporting healthy relationships for youth between the ages of 13 and 26. I have earned recognition for this work through the Dively-Dupuis Scholarship, Dorothy Ruggles Walker Scholarship, and Legacy Award. Currently, I am in the early stages of co-creating a docuseries focusing on third spaces for the Black Sapphic and Black trans men community in the United States. I am also a Call to Kindness fellow under Riley's Way Foundation, where I will be co-creating an event focusing on the Black LGBTQ+ community in Central Florida. I am a freelance writer who focuses on the importance of community work, advocacy, and economic justice, and a memory worker fellow for the Autistic Voices Oral History Project. My focus is to always amplify those with intersecting identities, to speak up on the gaps that exist in our system, and to provide solutions through research, advocacy, and organizing.

Max Delgado's journey: From personal struggle to community organizing

Location: Rogers, AR

Focus area: Youth empowerment through community leadership



The entry point:

Going into high school, I was an incredibly insecure and fearful kid. Especially going into a cutthroat environment that became a social warzone once you entered. I felt lost, with nowhere to express myself, finding myself crumbling under the pressures I placed upon myself to fit in. I had ideas and beliefs on how I wanted to change the school, but lacked the confidence to take action. So I started asking questions, exploring opportunities, and making connections. I met two teachers at my high school who shared my goal of creating an environment that made everyone feel accepted and heard. Through their help and guidance, I founded Friends of Rogers, a student organization in Northwest Arkansas schools focused on supporting student mental health. I also found myself by breaking down the barriers that were holding me back from being the person I knew I was.

The impact:

Through my work with Friends of Rogers, I've created an organization with 500+ members across two high schools in Rogers, Arkansas. I have also organized community events with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Arkansas Chapter with a focus on young students. I have advocated for real change that affects millions at the Arkansas State Capitol, and won the STARR Coalitions Stop the Stigma Champion award. I have also spoken on panels related to rural youth mental health. Most importantly, I have inspired and empowered the students around me in Arkansas to do the same.

Margaret Garcia's journey: From isolation to exploration

Location: Merced, CA

Focus area: Latino youth mental health research and advocacy

The entry point:

When surrounded by miles of farmland in the Central Valley of California, youth have fewer opportunities to engage in policy work compared with more populous cities such as Los Angeles. However, I found solace in the fact that I can work from home and still be actively engaged in mental health advocacy. My entry point was being accepted to a remote fellowship opportunity with Poder Latinx Poderosas. This fellowship is dedicated to advancing Latina civic engagement. Here, I gained valuable experience that helped mold me into an advocate for the Latino population and pushed me to explore additional remote advocacy opportunities. As a result, I began working with Mental Health America, Active Minds, Stanford University, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the University of California Los Angeles, and more.



MY ADVICE:

My call to action for other youth who want to be involved in advocacy – but may not have many local opportunities to do so – is to be active and open to opportunities that mental health organizations offer remotely, and apply to remote advisory boards! I connected with youth mental health advocates on LinkedIn, kept track of the opportunities they had, and applied when the application opening came around! LinkedIn is your best friend when it comes to seeking remote opportunities, as many have an application window of only a week or two and are only available in small circles. Because of this super short time period, you need to connect with these opportunities quickly so you can get first dibs!

The impact:

Through my first entry point with Poder Latinx Poderosas, I have been able to: lobby for youth mental health funding, write advocacy guides, provide consulting on youth-driven reports, conduct health equity research, meet with legislators to lobby for research funding, and speak at panels and conferences!

Travis Houghton's journey: From silence to speaking out through film

Location: Atlanta, GA

Focus area: Pairing creativity with advocacy

The entry point:

Growing up, I stayed quiet about my mental health struggles. This all changed my senior year of high school when I had the opportunity to write and direct my own One Act stage play. In my play, I finally expressed how I felt mentally, physically, and emotionally about bullying and suicide. The live audience reactions and the feedback after the show showed me that I needed to keep using my voice to tell my stories. That exact moment inspired me to start my own production company, A Travis Production, to focus on mental health through the arts, particularly in film and television.

I then went on to major in Film, TV, and Video Production with a minor in Screenwriting at Webster University. Though I didn't have a formal mental health background, I dedicated myself to learning. Through my research, I discovered Mental Health America and applied to serve on their Young Leaders Council.



MY ADVICE:

Begin with the story you feel most comfortable telling. Share it in any format you can, whether that's on stage, on screen, or online, because no one can tell your story like you can. Also, don't be afraid to reach out to people in your network and organizations like Mental Health America that can help you get started in pairing your creativity with advocacy.

The impact:

Now, as a member of Mental Health America's Youth Leadership Council, I use my voice even more to advocate for more mental health counselors in schools, anti-bullying initiatives, and lowering suicide rates. I started a podcast titled "It's All In Your Head," that dives into real-life experiences, personal stories, and expert insights to help listeners navigate mental health challenges. I also work professionally on movies and TV shows such as: Swarm, Reasonable Doubt, The Piano Lesson, Scream 7, and more. I plan to continue to use my creative work and mental health advocacy efforts to show how storytelling can break stigma, inspire change, and save lives.

Asia Horne's journey: From a volunteer to a career

Location: Washington, DC

Focus area: Physical and mental health equity for adolescents, peer support, education, sports development

The entry point:

Since middle school, I knew I wanted to work in mental health. Back then, I thought the only options were to become a researcher or clinician, and clinical work felt right for me. I mapped out a 12-year journey toward a PhD, ready to take each step in order. In college, getting relevant experience was key to my plan. But as a student-athlete, my soccer schedule made it tough to find opportunities that fit early morning practices and away games. Then I found Grassroots Health, whose mission is to teach middle schoolers in DC about mental, sexual, and nutritional health through an interactive, sports-based model. This opportunity aligned perfectly with my interests and schedule. They specifically wanted student-athletes and made sure to train us to guide youth through 10 weeks of health topics – mental, sexual, and nutritional. I was all in. But when I started, I was shy and unsure. I told myself, this is part of the plan, you have to lean into the newness. What I didn't expect was how much I'd grow alongside the organization. Over the years, I've gone from volunteer to part-time staff to my current role as Senior Program Coordinator, watching our mission take root in schools across DC.



MY ADVICE:

Think beyond the box. This field doesn't thrive on linear thinking. It thrives on people who create, experiment, and take chances on themselves, even when the outcome isn't certain. The best things I've seen often start as small, hesitant ideas. Believe in yourself, get others to rally behind you, and watch those ideas blossom.

The impact:

In 15 years, Grassroots Health has run 665 school programs, reached 12,462 students, and engaged 2,288 student-athletes like me. My work here has reshaped my career vision, which is still rooted in mental health and backed by a master's degree, but now focused on the power of clinical community health. I've learned the path isn't always linear. Change doesn't just happen in big moments. It's often built in the small choices we make every day. Grassroots Health hasn't just been a stop on my career map; it's where my love for mental health, my belief in prevention, and my hope for the next generation meet. Every day, I get to do work that matters, and I wake up eager to see where this journey will take me next.

Cadon Sagendorf's journey: From the child welfare system to policy change

Location: Salt Lake City, UT

Focus area: Mental health and policy change within the child welfare system

The entry point:

My advocacy journey began when I exited the foster care system. I quickly recognized the significant barriers former foster youth face when trying to advocate for systemic change, both in their own cases and in the broader child welfare landscape. I also saw how critical it is for young people with lived experience to have a seat at the table and play an active role in shaping policies that directly impact them. I began by joining my state's Youth Advisory Council, where I eventually served as president. In this role, I led and contributed to a range of initiatives aimed at strengthening protections and resources for youth in foster care. These efforts included amending the Foster Care Bill of Rights to incorporate a Siblings Bill of Rights, advocating for increased clothing stipends, and pushing for greater oversight and accountability in congregate care programs. Before I knew it, a seed was planted. I began to realize that my voice carried weight, not just in rooms filled with professionals, but in rooms filled with young people who had stories like mine. When I spoke my truth, others listened. And when others spoke, I listened too. That's where the healing began – the lived experience and the connection.



MY ADVICE:

Never convince yourself that discomfort is where you belong. Just because something is familiar doesn't mean it's right for you. Settling into the uncomfortable can quietly drain your confidence and limit your growth. Instead, open yourself up to opportunities you never imagined, because often, the things you think you can't do are the very things that will change your life.

And remember, there is power in the pause. Stepping back isn't giving up, it's giving yourself space to breathe, reflect, and realign. Sometimes the most important progress happens in the stillness. Let rest be part of your journey, not a detour from it.

The impact:

I am now a student at the University of Utah studying psychology with aspirations of becoming a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, and opening up my own practice working with youth and young adults. I have continued to contribute to advocacy efforts that supported the passage of Utah State Bill S.B. 297 Congregate Care Amendments, and the Federal Act Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act H.R. 2955. In addition to those advocacy efforts, I serve on various boards and committees, collaborating with leaders to identify and implement strategies for strengthening the child welfare system. Throughout my advocacy journey, I have had the opportunity to speak at briefings with members of the United States Congress on Capitol Hill, members of the executive branch of the White House, and have received an award for my service from the governor of Utah. But most importantly, I have had the privilege of advocating for youth in the child welfare system, working to improve not only their quality of life but to rehumanize it.

Oleksandr Sharlai's journey: From self-stigma to science-backed advocacy

Location: San Diego, CA

Focus area: Research-driven advocacy

The entry point:

My advocacy began as a personal mission to better understand myself and my own mental health struggles. As a researcher at heart, I launched an independent study on social media's impact on mental health perceptions. That experience not only deepened my interest in science but also showed me how research could be used as a tool for advocacy. As a newly arrived refugee with English as my second language, I had no roadmap for where to start. I leaned on my curiosity, spoke with professors at my college, and joined the speech and debate team — a decision that eventually led me to represent students at the California State Capitol. What began as local advocacy for issues I cared about grew into opportunities to influence policymakers directly.



MY ADVICE:

If you're in college, don't underestimate the power of networking on your campus. Faculty members are often more than willing to help you turn ideas into action — all you have to do is ask. And remember, you don't need to be in a Capitol building to make change. Some of the most meaningful advocacy starts locally, right where you are.

The impact:

I have combined research, advocacy, and leadership to drive change in both academic and policy settings. I was honored to be named a finalist for the Mary Louther Mental Health Changemaker Scholarship. In the lab, I contributed to alcohol use disorder research, reinforcing its recognition as a psychiatric condition requiring medical care. On campus, I launched Cortibye, an initiative designed to address academic stress and promote student mental health. At the state level, I represented community college students at the California State Capitol, meeting with legislators to advocate for educational reforms that support non-traditional and underserved students. Across every project — from neuroscience research to student-led initiatives — my focus remains the same: to ensure that anyone who has ever felt self-stigma, as I once did, knows that science is on their side, their voice matters, and their story holds the power to create change.

Appendix: Template letter to policymakers, local officials, or agencies

Use this template as your starting point for reaching out to local decision-makers, but make it your own. Add your personal story, include relevant data from your state's rankings, and make specific requests based on your community's needs.

Remember: Policymakers receive plenty of form letters, so authentic details and local context will make your message stand out!

Dear **[Title + Last Name]**,

(e.g., Senator Gomez, Mayor Lee, Commissioner Patel)

My name is **[Your Name]**, and I am a **[student /young person/advocate/community member]** from **[Your City/County/State]**. I'm writing to you because I recently read the 2025 State of Mental Health in America report from Mental Health America, and I found some of the findings about **[Your State]** notable.

According to the report, **[Insert your state ranking or key finding – e.g., "our state ranks 43rd in overall youth mental health" or "rates of youth depression and unmet mental health needs are increasing here"]**.

As someone who **[brief personal connection – e.g., "has struggled to access support myself" or "cares deeply about youth mental health in my community"]**, I'm concerned that we are not doing enough to meet the growing mental health needs of young people.

I'm reaching out to ask: **What are you doing to address this crisis?**

How are we making sure that every young person in our state can access the support and care they deserve? I'd love to hear more about how your office is responding to these challenges.

Thank you for your time, your service, and your commitment to our community. I look forward to seeing your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,
[Your Full Name]
[Your City, State]
[Optional: Your Contact Info]