

The Youth Mental Health Crisis: A Half-day Convening Focused on How Philanthropy Can Make All the Difference

Post-Convening Report – December 2024

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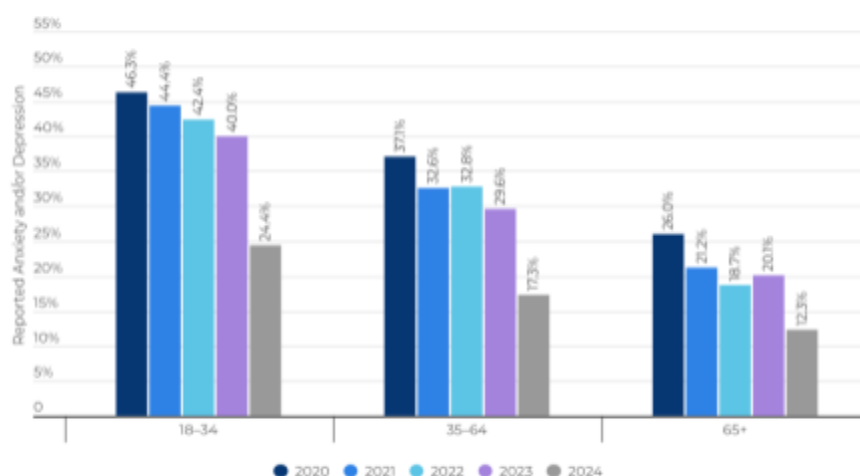
Overview

In October 2024, [Philanthropy New York](#)'s Youth and Education Funders Working Group, convened over one hundred funders interested in learning more about the youth mental health crisis for a half-day convening focused on how philanthropy can make a difference in the youth mental health crisis. A recording of the convening in its entirety can be accessed [here](#).

The convening provided an in-depth exploration of several aspects of the youth mental health ecosystem, fostering connections and shared understanding among philanthropic leaders who have long invested in youth mental health, and others who are newer to the topic. Together, funders explored how philanthropy can play a pivotal role in supporting the well-being of young people in New York City by fostering a thriving, interconnected youth mental health ecosystem.

The mental well-being of our youth is a critical indicator of their overall health and future success. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges, leading to a growing mental health crisis among young people. Recent data reveals the alarming reality that over 2.7 million American youth are grappling with severe major depression. According to the NY Health Foundation, 1 in 5 New Yorkers experience poor mental health, 1 in 4 young adults (ages 18-35) report anxiety and/or depression, 25% of Hispanic New Yorkers report poor mental health, and food-insufficient New Yorkers report anxiety twice as often as others.

Annual Anxiety and/or Depression Rates by Age, New York State, May 2020–July 2024



While timely intervention and clinical care are crucial, many young people face significant barriers to accessing these services due to cost, waitlists, or other obstacles. Nonprofits across New York City are rising to the challenge, developing innovative approaches to address the growing mental health needs of youth. However, the ecosystem of providers, educators, healthcare systems, government agencies, and funders is complex and often fragmented.

This conference was initiated by members of the Youth and Education Funders working group who have been increasingly compelled that mental health is so closely connected with their foundations' missions and priorities that addressing this crisis began to feel like a moral and strategic imperative.

One of these funders is Laurel Dumont, Senior Director of Grantmaking for the [Solon E. Summerfield Foundation](#) and Co-Chair of Philanthropy New York's Youth & Education Funders Working Group. She opened the convening by welcoming the many funders who gathered for the event in both the main conference space and the overflow room and briefly summarized how the Summerfield Foundation found itself entering into the youth mental health space. She explained that, in support of the board's decision to triple its grantmaking during COVID, staff conducted some field research and a listening tour of grantees *about the biggest challenges facing young people on their college and career journeys*, all of which kept pointing towards the need for more mental health services for youth. Specifically, they pointed to:

- Access in places where young people already feel comfortable
- Proximate providers with cultural competence
- Healing-centered and trauma-informed approaches
- Support from peers, "near-peers" and/or trusted individuals.

While there are trusted and high quality providers in the city, systemic challenges contributing to those organizations' inability to meet all of and keep up with demand, including:

- Service gaps (not enough quality providers, long waitlists)
- Access issues (insurance, referral, mechanism, location)
- Wellness gaps (staff/leaders of youth-serving orgs need wellness too)
- Pipeline issues (market/system failure, career ladder, low wages).

The convening aimed to create space and provide content for funders, coming together from youth and education, workforce, health/mental health contexts, to discuss and understand:

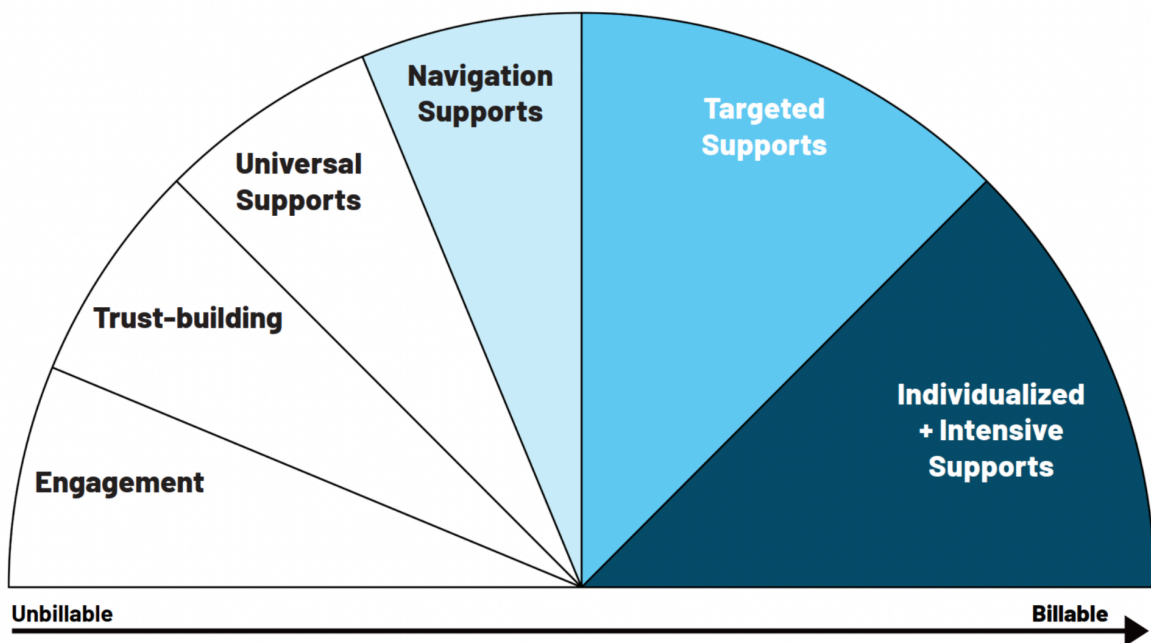
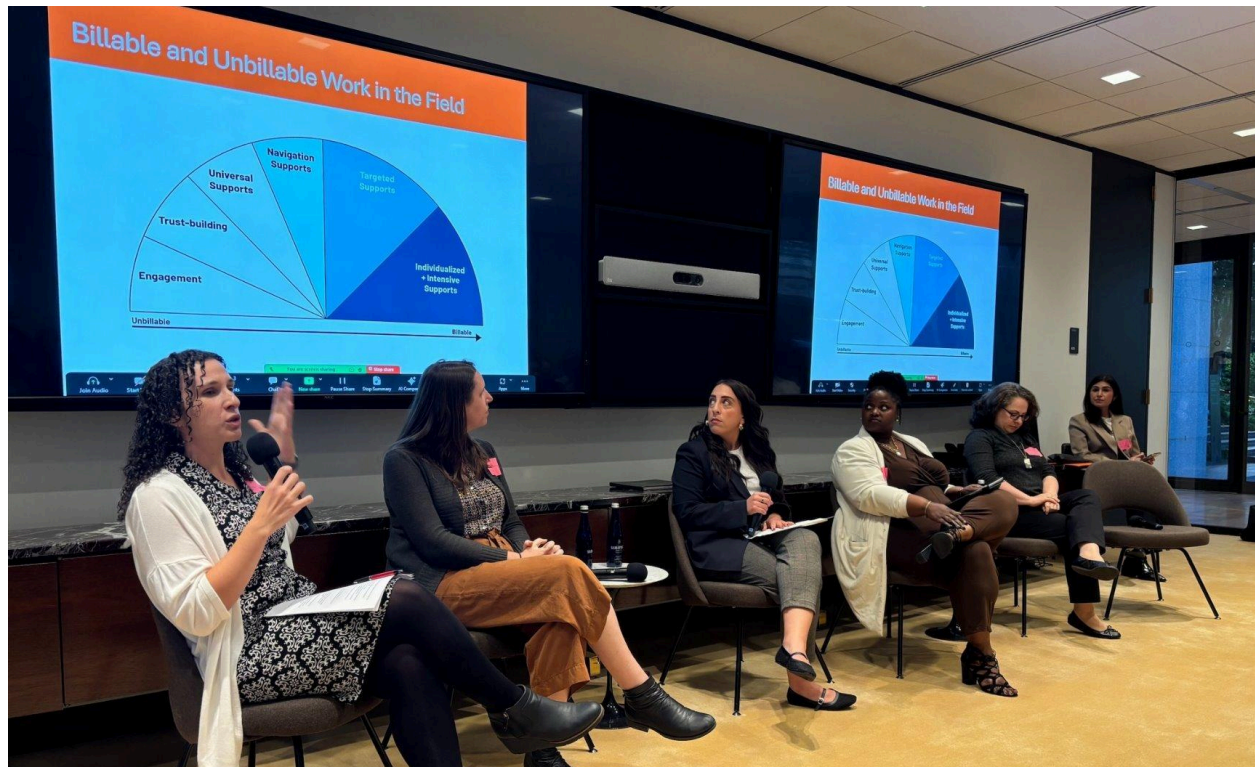
- What are the gaps, challenges, and opportunities nonprofit service providers face in providing, sustaining, and resourcing youth mental health services?
- What are career pathways in mental health, and how can we build more pipelines and on-ramps for people at all career stages?
- How can funders be better allies in supporting positive mental health outcomes for youth in a way that centers youth voice?
- Where can philanthropy make a difference in a large and complex system of private insurance and public funding?

Itai Dinour (Executive Director, [Carmel Hill Fund](#)) thanked Philanthropy New York for making space for youth mental health at the forefront of recent conversations in the health arena as well as in education and youth development, noting that this is the kind of attention and energy that is needed to support young people in the ways that they deserve. He shared about his foundation's "learning-by-doing" approach to developing a grantmaking strategy around youth and adolescent mental health, in community with the people doing the work, with young people themselves and with peer funders. In that spirit, the Fund joined a co-funding partnership with the Summerfield Foundation and Gray Foundation that directed \$5M to eight high-quality organizations that are providing direct services to young people at low or no cost so that they can expand their clinical capacity and reduce waitlists citywide by the hundreds.

Before Itai introduced the first panel, representing several of the eight organizations funded by this funding partnership, Itai invited others in the room to join Carmel Hill Fund on its learning journey, as it continues to learn from partners in the field and seeks to understand both where philanthropic dollars can support services directly, as well as "how philanthropy might help nudge policymakers to do more on their end so that we are not reliant on philanthropy to hire social workers and psychologists and psychiatrists which we know is not going to scale and is not going to be as sustainable."

Panel 1: The Practitioner Perspective on Funding and Delivery Challenges in Youth Mental Health Services

The first panel, "*The Practitioner Perspective on Funding and Delivery Challenges in Youth Mental Health Services*," was moderated by Jen Curry (Founder and CEO, [Change Impact](#)) and was comprised of panelists Asha Alexander (Assistant Director of Counseling & Case Management, [Hetrick-Martin Institute](#)), Barbara DiGangi (Director of Community Wellness Initiatives, [University Settlement](#)), Phoebe Richman, Director of Mental Health Services, [The Door – A Center of Alternatives](#)), and Marina Stoleran (Clinical Director, [The Fostering Connection](#)).



This graphic depicts the broad range of youth mental health services, including universal programming that deepens youth engagement and prosocial relationships. This work is often unbillable to traditional mental health funding streams.

In this panel, participants heard directly from mental health clinicians and clinical supervisors who gave an overview of the kinds of mental health services they offer in a variety of nonprofit

contexts, how these services are typically funded, and where private philanthropic dollars make a difference. They also shared firsthand experiences of the barriers and gaps they encounter in providing, funding, and sustaining mental health care for young people.

One of the primary challenges touched on was lack of support and understanding of how critical non-billable services are. The panelists each discussed the importance of building trust with youth. Many of the youth they serve are profoundly traumatized and have extreme distrust of mental health services and clinical care. By first providing a safe space, being visible and integrated into where youth and their families are, and investing the time in developing relationships, organizations can more effectively deliver critical mental health care that is considered billable.

Additionally, DiGangi pointed out that “access doesn’t always mean accessibility... you can have a service but does the provider look like me? Do they speak the language I speak? Are they approachable?” For many youth, speaking with a practitioner who looks like them, speaks their language, and understands their culture can make all the difference in building trust. One way to address this need as well as build the pipeline of clinicians is to hire from within the organization and within the community served.

To fill these gaps, the panelists called upon funders to focus on supporting non-billable services and supports, such as intake and clinical care for undocumented youth, making sure care is accessible, investing in shared policy/advocacy work, and building the pipeline of clinicians. Offering non-billable services or connection points hyperlocally can also promote wellness at the community level and prevent the need for clinical support. Additionally, there is a need for more peer learning collaboratives and help with easing the burden on front line practitioners who bear the brunt of this work every day.

PHIL Talk: Systemic Barriers to the Mental Health Workforce Crisis

Next, in a TED-style philanthropy talk, Hugh Hogan (Mental Health Workforce Crisis Group) presented on “Systemic Barriers to the Mental Health Workforce Crisis.”



This educational presentation explained some of the high level policy issues impacting youth mental healthcare at the federal, state and local level, and identified some efforts aimed at addressing them. It also outlined the web of contributing factors to today's mental health workforce crisis, including flaws in contracting, policy, education and training, movement advocacy, and financing, as well as poor working conditions and political cultural economy.

Hogan closed by echoing the first panel in urging funders to support advocacy and organizing as well as cultural competence training. He also pointed to a need for more funding to research this workforce crisis to better understand shortages and gaps.

Community MH Workforce Crisis — Contributing Factors



Panel 2: Building the Future Workforce – Pathways and Potential in Youth Mental Health Careers

The second panel, “Building the Future Workforce – Pathways and Potential in Youth Mental Health Careers,” included Curtis Dann-Messier (Interim Dean for Workforce Development, Guttman Community College), Wendy Wong (Director of the Healthcare Training Program, Project Renewal), Sophia James (FutureReadyNYC Director of Education and Human & Social Services Pathways, NYC Public Schools), Kelsey Louie (Chief Executive Officer, The Door & Broome Street Academy), Sophie Pauze (Senior Director for Strategy & Impact, NYC Health + Hospitals Office of Behavioral Health), and was moderated by Laurel Dumont (Senior Director, Grantmaking, the Solon E. Summerfield Foundation).



This panel on career pathways in youth mental health delved into the gaps, barriers, and inequities in the workforce and highlighted promising initiatives to create a pipeline of providers at various levels. Panelists explained that vacancies in social work, psychiatric nursing, and other clinical roles throughout the nonprofit and public mental healthcare ecosystem are resulting in long wait lists for people in need of care and placing undue stress and burdens on the providers who work in understaffed environments.

They explained that one contributing factor is a lack of clear pathways into and up mental health career ladders; how each of their program innovations is addressing this issue from different angles, within high schools, nonprofit providers, community college and public hospitals; and providing in-roads and opportunities for advancement for people who share background and/or lived experience with the young people seeking care from currently understaffed providers. “In 13 characters, I can share the entire nursing career ladder: CNA to LPN to RN to BSN to NP.

While it is not easy to advance along this career pathway it is clear, and motivated individuals know exactly what is needed for advancement. A clear and concise education and career pathway does not exist across the mental health workforce and middle-skill jobs are practically non-existent,” explained Dann-Messier.

Starting at the top of ladder with two employer-developed models, NYC Health + Hospitals (NYC H+H) presented its newly launched Behavioral Health Nursing Career Ladder, which enables entry level hospital employees to attend nursing school at no cost with additional supports, including admissions and career counseling, preparing them to move into much-needed roles in psychiatric nursing, and The Door announced a new, on-site program to make acquiring a Master of Social Work degree more accessible, less time consuming, and less cost-prohibitive for current staff interested in moving into clinical roles.

Guttman Community College identified a “missing rung” on the behavioral health career ladder between entry level and managerial roles, which leads to recruitment and retention challenges. Their solution is an “upskilling” program for workers to improve their standing and increase their income. Project Renewal is building the pipeline through its mental health workforce development program, which includes job placement services, case management, and job readiness and training to prepare people for entry level roles within NYC H+H’s psychiatric services. FutureReadyNYC aims to intervene early by providing high school students interested in social work and human service careers (grades 9-12) with career connected instruction, early college credits and professional credentials, career readiness and advising, and financial literacy.

Funding is needed for more of these innovative programs. Louie remarked: “For many of us, we feel that private philanthropy is nice to have, but it’s actually lifesaving... I have a mnemonic: Life RAFT. Flexible funding allows us to be Responsive to community needs the way public dollars don’t, Adaptable to think about ‘what are the emerging needs of our communities?’, allows for Flexibility and the innovation that follows, and creates a Thought partnership between community-based organizations and philanthropy.”

Other panelists touched on the gaps in public funding. While public funding often requires proof points, private dollars can help test solutions. Additionally, the panelists urged private philanthropists to consider supporting current frontline workers, training educators, funding recruitment campaigns, and thinking longer term about careers and sustainability, rather than just getting people into jobs.

Panel 3: Amplifying Youth Voices – Race, Mental Health, and Philanthropy’s Role
Finally, Desiree “Des” Armas (Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project), Jimmie Cassamajor (Youth Speak Out – Elevating Youth Development), and Siara Chowdhury (Youth Ask Youth Census – Intergenerational Change Initiative) discussed “Amplifying Youth Voices – Race, Mental Health, and Philanthropy’s Role.” As youth themselves, the panelists shared their experiences shaping innovative mental health support approaches and discussed how funders can better support positive mental health outcomes for youth in their communities by incorporating young people’s wisdom into philanthropic decision-making.



The Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project is an intergenerational partnership aiming “to support young people as they define, collect, and make meaning of data about their wellbeing”. Armas highlighted the partnership’s qualitative arts-based research design, grounded in the principles of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Regarding youth-led research, Armas remarked, “I may not have multiple degrees, but I think my experience IS expertise, and I think that’s something that needs to be not just talked about but invested in and funded because there are a lot of groups of young people that can do this and are doing this. They just need that recognition and money.”

The Intergenerational Change Initiative also incorporates YPAR through their annual Youth Ask Youth (YAY) census. Through this survey, 50% of NYC youth reported that they have felt stressed, anxious, nervous, or tired in the last 3 months. The data from the YAY is used to push for policy change via the NYC Youth Agenda Coalition. The Mental Health subcommittee has made recommendations related to developing Joy Centers around NYC as well as high quality, culturally sustaining mental health supports in schools and in the community.

Cassamajor presented recommendations from youth to funders that came out of Speaking Out’s national conversations on youth mental health. These included:

- Listen to the needs of grantees and when possible, engage the community in grantmaking processes.

- Develop new measures of success. Promote measures of ongoing learning rather than just success or goal attainment.
- Educate donors and board members about DEI and racial equity.
- Understand that one-size does not fit-all and that we need to customize our approaches based on the needs of individual grantees and communities.
- Do the work, listen, learn, engage, validate, and ask questions. Don't get comfortable in your assumptions.
- Realize that no one owns the problem. It is going to take all of us working in concert to solve these issues. And we must work with the government, politicians, and funders.

All three youth leaders emphasized the importance of youth-led solutions and involving young people in identifying problems and shaping the actions needed to solve them. Additionally, they encouraged funders to address structural barriers to wellbeing, invest in culturally grounded supports, and grow mental health support in schools.

Key Takeaways

Hearing the perspectives of practitioners, nonprofits, subject matter experts, funders, and youth leaders provided a setting for learning and ideation around opportunities for outsized impact.

With many different solutions to be explored and potential opportunities for outsized impact discussed, the overall takeaway for funders is that there are many ways funders can contribute to improving mental health access and outcomes for youth today. Because youth mental health intersects with so many different issue areas, and funders from across those spaces see the need and are interested in finding a way to direct funding to this issue, maybe for the first time, we have a unique opportunity to generate more resources to support this work at a services, workforce, organizational or systems level.

Big or small, grants of flexible (and multi-year) funding can enable nonprofits to:

- Serve youth without insurance, excluded from Medicaid or other government funds.
- Manage engagement and trust building, intake, referral, case management, and other non-clinical staff time.
- Provide therapeutic services not covered by insurance such as art therapy or groups.
- Conduct evaluation and/or continuous improvement efforts.
- Innovate, experiment, try new things in terms of staffing models, delivery of services, training and credentialing.
- Build out physical spaces and organizational infrastructure to be able to bill insurance and become eligible for other larger public funding sources.
- Pursue systems change through advocacy and policy work, in cross-organizational coalition and cross-sector partnerships.

We closed with a quote from Vivek Murthy, then Surgeon General of the United States: “If we seize this moment, step up for our children and their families in their moment of need, and lead with inclusion, kindness, and respect, we can lay the foundation for a healthier, more resilient, and more fulfilled nation.”

Thanks to all who attended and contributed to making this convening come alive by making connections, sharing information and ideas pertaining to the youth mental health crisis in NYC, and identifying potential solutions for greater impact.

We are also excited to announce that Philanthropy New York's Youth and Education Funders Working Group and Health Working Group are planning a follow-up convening on September 9th 2025. Please register [here](#) and watch this page for additional details!