

## Advisory Commission on Youth Message on the Mental State of our Youth



On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, we provided our annual report for 2019. Our report was completed before COVID-19 came to Loudoun County. We also provided commentary in a short letter on how COVID-19 has affected our youth. We felt it was necessary to continue to report on our work because of the serious concerns to our younger population.

Back in April, we reported “I miss my friends,” was perhaps the most common outcry of our youth population. We also discussed a growing trend at the time of “I’m so bored.” That has now alarmingly become **“I feel like I’m in a black hole and I have no way out.”**

We have quickly pulled information together from the libraries, the schools, practicing child psychologists, foundations, juvenile justice, the Sheriff’s office, and of course our youth population. Please take moment to review what we have observed, our recommendations, and emerging solutions that are starting to take place.

Sincerely,

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We spoke with a Loudoun County mental health professional who has over 50 patients as young as 7 through their late teens. We had an opportunity to speak with her on her observations over the past 9 months. She is part of a larger practice with 5 offices and over 50 clinicians. They are one of the few practices in the area that still takes insurance for mental health issues. After an initial dip in March, they now receive over 75 calls / day and they are all full, including 2 more nurses that were hired in the spring, turning away as many as 750 calls / quarter. This is a significant increase in 2020.

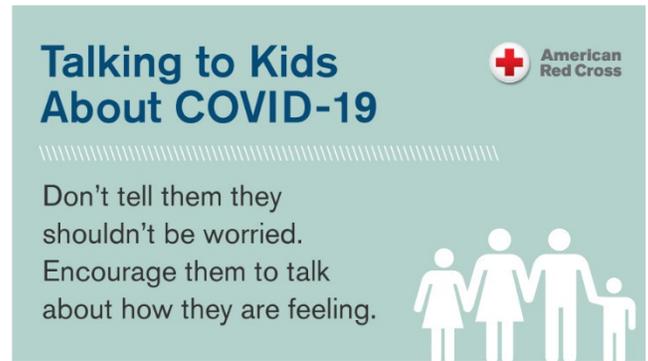
Alarming, she is seeing mental health issues emerge earlier than expected. She has pre-teen patients with signs of schizophrenia and 7-8 year olds with major phobic reactions. Eating disorders are up, more so in teenage girls being used as a means of something they can control in a perceived out of control environment. She has seen increases in depression, anxiety, self-harm, and even homicidal thoughts. Some students can't operate in the virtual learning environment. It could be a special needs issue but also some A/B students in the classroom are now finding themselves failing, then tuning out. These same observations were echoed from other members of the commission with their interaction among Loudoun youth.

Her suggestions on why this is happening is two-fold. She sees the immense pressure that parents and the kids themselves put on "success" where this is defined only as academic excellence without regard to anything else such as social skills, executive function, communication, or their own mental health. She stated our county is much worse than the nation in this regard. In addition to the pressure, Loudoun youth find themselves in an invalidating environment where they are told "this is their easy time in their life" or other reactions from adults that do not allow them to express their feelings. Our youth are smart. They see what is happening in the world, the nastiness and conflict, the devastation from the pandemic. It is causing them to retreat to "why try?" or "this isn't a world I want to live in."

While it is often easy to dismiss the accounts of a single individual, it was alarming to ACOY to hear similar stories among others who also interact with groups of young teens. Inability to adapt to the online learning environment was common. Reports of depression were on the rise in youth clubs now online and other groups both inside and outside of school. The most vulnerable age group are the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders but the majority age range is 7<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup>. Underrepresented groups including minorities, economically disadvantaged, and the LGBTQ community may be significantly affected as well.

From the American Psychological Association "Stress in America 2020" published in a report from October 2020 using survey data by the Harris Pool in August 2020 of several thousand people, we compiled a few highlights below pertaining to our youth population:

- **Gen Z adults** (18-23yr olds) reported the highest stress level during the month of August of all older age groups surveyed. Their main sources of stress reported are:
  - the rise in suicide rates and
  - widespread sexual harassment and assault reports in the news.
- Nearly 8 in 10 Gen Z adults said the future of our nation is a significant source of stress in their life.



- **Gen Z teens** (13-17yr olds) are struggling with the uncertainty of their own futures
  - 50% say the pandemic has severely disrupted their plans for the future
  - 51% say the pandemic makes planning for their future feel impossible
- The majority of Gen Z teens who are in school (81%) report they have been negatively impacted due to school closures as a result of the pandemic.
  - 52% report less motivation to do homework,
  - 49% report less involvement in sports, clubs or other extracurriculars
  - 47% feeling they didn't learn as much as in previous years
  - 45% having a hard time concentrating on schoolwork
- 2 in 5 Gen Z teens say the level of stress in their life has increased over the past year

It is important to note that the above data reported is from a nationwide survey. However, as we mentioned earlier, Loudoun County youth are not faring as well compared to national averages. Furthermore, the survey data represents feelings in August, before the modified school year began, that is now likely worse. Even in our conversations with our Loudoun County mental health professional, she noticed significant increases in anxiety and stress just between our two meetings less than a month apart.

We talked about what help exists today for youth and received a sobering "not much" reply. There is nothing for them in school, no one they can talk to and the online environment does not lend itself well for teachers to see any warning signs. Outside of class, there are limited options in Loudoun. Your choices mainly come down to weekly therapy (if available) or hospitalization and not much in between. Ideally, our youth have the support and help before they become patients. There are a few crisis hot lines and there is some active work being done by the Ryan Bartel Foundation and others. However, one of the chief complaints is that those in need do not know what is available. Even in our own commission, it was difficult to ascertain what services are available and how to utilize them. We know we missed many as we continue to try to inventory.

We moved our focus to what can be done about this. We discussed at length the continued ACOY mantra of safe space access to become "**safe space, reimagined.**" What does a safe space mean and what can we do in the physical distancing environment? Our youth, now more than ever, need a place they can share their complex trauma with a caring adult or even a mature older peer or they are forced to internalize. We talked about small age-based support groups, the crisis intervention team, and the Youth Mental Health First Aid program to get more youth involved to be able to help. We also talked about Youth After School program options and other organized activities. At our most recent meeting, the Youth Advisory Council talked about their initiative of "Talk About it Tuesdays," bringing youth together in small groups virtually to talk. The Libraries are implementing an activity-based program for youth. ACOY is also trying to facilitate ways to put small groups together.

What can the Board of Supervisors and School Board do to help in this crisis? Perhaps the most important thing to do and is also free, is to include us when you are looking to help our youth. We understand there was a recent request from the School Board to take a pulse of the student body and the Research Department administered a survey. We certainly could have helped but even our own representative from LCPS on ACOY was unaware of the survey. We can't help you if you don't reach out. Further, our understanding from the survey is that the only real change being made is to switch student's schedules from A, A, B, B to alternating A and B days. That decision was met with some skepticism by our Commission. The student body has adapted to the initial A, A, B, B, schedule. Change midstream is just more disruption in their already overturned lives. It is also a band-aid on a gaping wound where **students mainly complained about increased workload**, difficulty with the online learning environment, **general feeling that their voice is not heard**, the inadequacy of the schoology platform, few options for mental health wellness, and very limited one on one interaction, if any.

At a minimum, it is important that we get the word out that ACOY is here to help you. Loudoun youth's wellbeing is all we do. Furthermore, we need to make these programs known to those who might need them. Too often do we hear "I had no idea that was available," either from students or parents. Finally, for those feeling the pressure and the stress, it is important to reach out to our youth and let them be heard instead of invalidating their feelings on the situation. We should be thanking them for the sacrifices they are making for the greater good by being in isolation to protect the most vulnerable of the population. We need to bring the school counselors to the forefront and made available to the students whenever they need to talk, creating more safe spaces. We need to provide educational, work, training and employment opportunities specifically targeted at supporting this generation of young adults. They need to see a possible path forward for themselves.