

June 9, 2020

## **Youth-led Mental Health Proposal for CARES Relief Act Funding**

Dear Mayor Steinberg and Members of the City Council,

We propose that the City Council allocate \$1,000,000 in CARES Relief Act funds to support a youth-led mental health strategy as a core part of its COVID-19 response.

As you know, one of the most negative impacts of the pandemic has been on youth mental health. According to a citiesRISE survey in late March and early April, 277 Sacramento area youth reported that COVID-19 has resulted in high levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness. This sample represents a larger issue. Early in the shutdown, two youth committed suicide in North Sacramento/Natomas. As the pandemic continues, and young people struggle with isolation, we are greatly concerned that the mental health of our young people will worsen as anxieties and stress continue to build, and we will lose more youth to despair, addiction, and suicide. We cannot continue to let this happen.

Research shows that young people, particularly youth of color and marginalized youth, are most likely to be receptive to mental health supports from a peer or young adult who shares their cultural background and lived experience. For example, a LGBT youth is more receptive to seeking help from a LGBT young adult. Black youth are more receptive to black young adults. The citiesRISE survey noted 63% of youth respondents said the person they would turn to first for help is a peer. Less than 25% said they would turn to a counselor. These findings also surfaced in recent local youth listening sessions convened by IQ Squad and Youth Forward.

For these reasons, a peer-to-peer mental health effort in place at the beginning of the school year would have a significant, positive impact on our youth. This effort will serve the entire City with the placement of trained peer mentors in every Council district with initial focus on high school and community college students. To ensure district-specific needs are met, Councilmember and/or Council staff would be invited to engage in the planning process to develop this effort for his/her local district. We will also seek input and leadership throughout this process from young people themselves.

To implement, we envision 10 program sites, hosted at 9 high schools (one per council district) plus Sacramento City College. We propose this effort start at the following schools and their surrounding neighborhoods:

- Inderkum High School (District 1)
- Grant High School (District 2)
- Natomas High School (District 3)

- CK McClatchy High School (District 4)
- Sacramento High School (District 5)
- Hiram Johnson High School (District 6)
- Valley High School (District 7)
- Luther Burbank High School (District 8)
- American Legion High School/Capital City School (Citywide)

This list may change given the perspective of the City Councilmember. We believe the City would need to invest \$1,000,000 to support this effort over the next school year.

We propose the following program elements:

- A *lead site facilitator* working one day a week at each school site and supporting 10-15 high school or college mental health peer mentors per site. We recommend that the facilitator be based at a non-profit partner who already works with the school site.
- These paid *mental health peer mentors* (between 100-150 youth) will be trained in at least 20 hours of mental health and wellbeing education, culturally-based wellness practices, how to talk to peers about mental health and wellbeing, the impact of racism and poverty on mental wellbeing, and how to identify when and where to refer a mentee if needed. The curriculum, once piloted this summer, can be made available to all 10 sites under this proposal.
- These 150 mental health peer mentors will do education to help reduce stigma about mental health, provide tips to mentees on how to be mentally well, when to seek help from an adult or mental health organization and where mental health resources are in the community. They should be able to reach up to 1,500 mentees and will be paid interns for 10 hours per mentor per week.

In addition, the peer mentors will be asked to work as a team and engage their mentees at their school sites to do a service project that might include using social media to promote mental wellbeing, advocating to county mental health policy makers about more youth-friendly services, hosting a mental health resource fair, holding yoga classes or art/music programs at lunch and/or after school, online programs, or any other project that improves mental health and wellbeing in their communities. Schools will be approached to provide extra credits or community service credits to the students who participate in the service projects.

Each site will determine if the peer mentor will be of the same age/grade (peer-to-peer) or near peer (high school students supporting middle and elementary school students) and how the effort will complement existing efforts on the school campus. Furthermore, the

college level program will have college students doing near peer mentoring and education with either high school, middle or elementary age students.

Regarding the allocation of funding, we suggest a competitive RFP process. In this process, the City or an intermediary would requests proposals from each CBO outlining the proposed school site, program elements, and budget. The program is to be targeted to the most at risk students in the lowest income communities. The program is intended to primarily serve youth of color, foster youth, and LGBTQ youth who are at greater risk for depression, suicide and trauma.

Fortunately, there are existing models in Sacramento and around the country that can serve as the basis for the development of this program. In addition to the surveys conducted, a group of educators, mental health providers and youth development organizations have been working together for several months to explore how to launch peer-to-peer programs and to develop apprenticeship programs for youth in this field.

In addition to serving youth mental health, this project will create jobs for youth and young adults who come from the communities hardest hit by job loss and who are experiencing housing risk and food insecurity. This project represents a direct investment in the economic well being of Sacramento families. The project combines youth jobs, youth leadership training and mental health promotion in one dynamic effort.

We believe the City can play a leadership role in launching a long-term youth-led mental health effort to benefit our most vulnerable communities. If you have any questions or feedback on this proposal, please do not hesitate to contact Jim Keddy at [jim@youth-forward.org](mailto:jim@youth-forward.org).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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