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ENGAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE ARKANSAS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Mental Health in Arkansas



Exploring issues from the Community Foundation's
Aspire Arkansas report.



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Mental Health Matters: Resources and Solutions for Arkansas

In our fast-paced and ever-changing world, the topic of mental health continues to grow in the public discourse, and for good reason. Mental health impacts every facet of our lives, from productivity and creativity to relationships and resilience.

Mental health services are often limited, particularly in rural Arkansas. Challenges like longer wait times, limited access to specialized care, and a general lack of mental health awareness abound. Stigma and isolation exacerbate these issues, making it harder for individuals to seek help.

Nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in advancing mental health improvements for Arkansas communities, especially in areas where resources are limited. It is a tall order. With your help, here are several ways nonprofits can lead the way:

- Increase awareness and education for communities to help reduce stigma and recognize early signs of mental health problems
- Provide direct services such as therapy, crisis interventions, support groups and peer counseling

- Advocate for policy change to improve access and insurance coverage
- Collaborate with organizations such as schools and healthcare providers to create a more comprehensive support network
- Offer training and resources for educators, healthcare providers, and first responders to recognize and respond to mental health issues
- Support research and innovation to help bring new solutions to communities

Fostering environments and initiatives that support mental well-being requires intention. This publication highlights nonprofits and donors that are leading by example.

Thank you for your dedication to building stronger communities and for being part of the discourse on this important topic. Together, we can build a healthier, more productive, and more compassionate Arkansas.

Sincerely,

Heather Larkin



Excellence. Accountability. Impact.™



On the cover: Staff with Immerse Arkansas work with clients to develop long-term mental health tools for youth to carry them into adulthood.



UNDER PRESSURE: Parents and Students Showing Worsening Mental Health Trends Nationwide

On August 24, 2024, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an Advisory on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents, highlighting the urgent need to better support parents, caregivers, and families to help our communities thrive.



- 33% of parents report high levels of stress in the past month compared to 20% of other adults
- Additionally, 48% of parents reported that most days their stress is completely overwhelming
- Nearly 70% of parents say parenting is now more difficult than it was 20 years ago, with children's use of technology and social media as the top two cited reasons

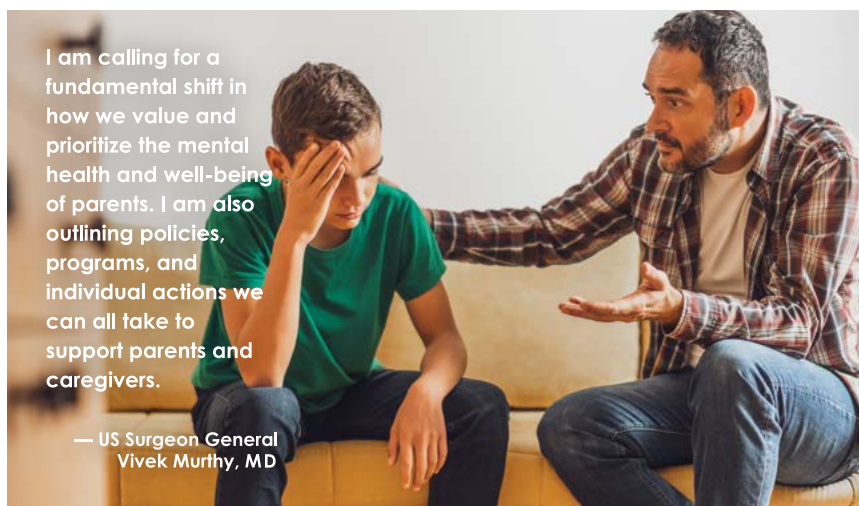
The stressors vary: financial strain and economic instability, time demands, concerns over children's health and safety, parental isolation and loneliness, difficulty managing technology and social media and cultural pressures.

When parents are stressed, their children feel it. Data shows the impact on high school youth. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- 40% of high schoolers experienced persistent feeling of sadness or hopelessness (up from 30% in 2013)
- 20% of high schoolers seriously considered attempting suicide (up from 17% in 2013)
- 1 in 5 youths, (ages 13-18) either currently or at some points have experienced debilitating mental illness.



Read the U.S. Surgeon General's full Advisory here:



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Transforming Foster Care Youth from Crisis to Healing

By providing accessible, supportive, and impactful programs and services, Immerse Arkansas helps young people who typically have a difficult time accessing mental health resources overcome the challenges they face as they transition into adulthood.

Eric Gilmore is the executive director of Immerse Arkansas. During Mental Health Awareness Month in May, he shared with Arkansas Community Foundation staff and donors the mission of Immerse Arkansas and its unique approach to addressing the mental health needs of young people in foster care.

“Our big goal is to create an expansive pathway to healing that would be available to every Arkansas youth in crisis,” said Gilmore. “And specifically, we zoom in on a critical decade, ages 14-24, in the lives of youth who’ve suffered trauma and have more mental health needs.”

Understanding the profound impact of trauma on young people’s identities, relationships, and resilience, Immerse Arkansas strives to provide holistic support that is deeply rooted in building unconditional relationships, providing tools and resources to meet their needs and instilling a vision for each youth’s restored future.

Gilmore added, “Mental health services need to be readily available to these youth, along with a clear understanding of how to access these services. After that, we have to support them in getting on a path to address and manage mental healthcare longer term.

“One of the most pivotal programs we offer is a youth center that provides assistance to young people in crisis situations,” he said. “We also run a transitional living program that fosters a sense of independence and helps individuals develop essential life skills.”

Immerse Arkansas recently opened a new shelter dedicated specifically to young adults called The Station. The 15-bed shelter will give each person his/her own unit with a bedroom and bathroom so the residents have their own space to start the healing process.



Gilmore also looks to expand the group's impact by establishing Arkansas' first statewide network dedicated to serving youth in crisis in the 14 to 24 age range. By extending its reach beyond Little Rock, Immerse Arkansas aims to provide essential support to young people and families across the state, recognizing the unique needs and challenges faced by those in rural areas.

"Our pursuit for healing is driven by our hope to change lives," Gilmore said. By advocating for mental health strategies that are relationship-first, trauma-informed, and focused on promoting a restored future, Gilmore believes they can revolutionize mental health support for vulnerable youth in Arkansas. This will transform their experiences and challenges into opportunities for healing and success.



Our pursuit for healing is driven by our hope to change lives.

— Eric Gilmore



Immerse Arkansas provides resources, life skills training and counseling among other programs for underestimated youth.

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Dr. Jason Williams, Senior Vice President, Chief Mental & Behavioral Health Officer, Arkansas Children's

Our Kids Need Our Help

How are you doing today? This is a question that we ask in our casual conversations but do not always answer with the truth. If you ask our kids today how they are doing, you might not like the answer. Our youth today are struggling in ways we have not seen in a generation. Suicide rates are up, more kids report feeling depressed or anxious every day, and thoughts of self-harm are commonplace. Furthermore, the influence of social media exacerbates these struggles.

As a society, we have not addressed the mental health needs of our youth. We know that our mental well-being is critical to the overall health of our children and their families. It truly impacts every aspect of our lives including how we feel about ourselves; how we cope with stress or trauma; how we build meaningful relationships; and how we feel a sense of belonging in our community. Mental health encompasses our emotional, psychological, and social aspects of who we are, and it is an essential component of overall positive health. Because we continue to treat mental health as a separate construct from overall physical health, we see increased stigma and negative perceptions of those who seek services to address their mental health concerns.

To address this crisis, we must start to think more holistically about health. We need to move away from thinking about a culture of trying to close the division between mind and body, instead we should be focusing on healthcare and community programs that have an emphasis on the whole person and on the communities where kids and families live.

At Arkansas Children's, we have taken the step of integrating mental health professionals into our primary care, specialty care and in many of our medical inpatient programs. By having mental health professionals as part of the "physical" health environment, we can provide a more holistic care model and are able to address both physical and emotional health in the same visit or clinic.

Additionally, to ensure that families have the needed resources to help raise healthy children, we have added community health workers to the team. These community health workers have a deep understanding of the community where families live and as a result are responsible for connecting families to resources for their unmet needs. This is a particularly crucial step, but it will not fully address all the needs that exist in our youth today.

Now is the time to think about how we view integration. Integration does not have to be unique to a hospital system nor does it need to solely focus on healthcare.



We all need to feel supported and connected to the community around us. Along with the Natural Wonders Partnership Council, we have started a series of community listening sessions across the state. We must create a space for communities to share their perspective and to help us understand their needs. One thing is clear from those conversations, we need to think more creatively about how we provide support to address the mental health crisis.

What if we start to think about the integration of physical and mental health at a community level? Think about how powerful it would be if we created teams of community members and professionals who could work collaboratively, in the very communities they live and serve, to offer comprehensive care along with needed community support to address the overall wellbeing of the children and their families!

Additionally, we must get creative about alternative places where these supports are accessible. We need to be connecting and working closely with schools, the faith-based community, boys and girls clubs, social clubs, and any other community organizations who are willing to be at the table. By integrating services into the community, we start to break down the stigma of mental health and, with time, increase the overall wellness of the child, as well as the entire community.

We must not only invest in programs that have solid evidence, but also new ways of promoting this type of integrated approach to health. We can do this by partnering with like-minded organizations and investing in innovative ideas, technologies, and care models. And, most importantly, amplify the voices of youth and families in our communities. At Arkansas Children's, we are committed to championing children by making them better today and healthier tomorrow. Will you join us?



References:

Benjamin F. Miller, PsyD, Emma C. Gilchrist, MPH, Kaile M. Ross, MA, Shale L. Wong, MD, MSPH, Larry A. Green, MD. *Creating a Culture of Whole Health: Recommendations for Integrating Behavioral Health and Primary Care*. February 2016.

Protecting Youth Mental Health. The Surgeon General Advisory, 2021

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Empowering Transformation: The Holistic Approach to Healthcare at Our House



In a world where homelessness and extreme poverty cast long shadows over countless lives, organizations like Arkansas' Our House stand out as beacons of hope, striving to create lasting, positive change for those in need.

Executive Director Ben Goodwin paints a vivid picture of their ambitious vision — one where individuals can leave behind the specter of instability and focus on goals, hopes, and dreams for themselves and their children.

“We want them to be able to put homelessness and instability in their rear-view mirror, and then keep their eyes on the prize,” said Goodwin.

His insights shed light on the multifaceted nature of homelessness, revealing that it is not just about lacking a physical shelter, but also encompasses the absence of a job, transportation, childcare, and more. This holistic understanding serves as the foundation for Our House's approach, where every aspect of a person's well-being is carefully considered and nurtured.

“You need a lot to get out of homelessness, to go from that place of great instability, to a greater place of stability,” said Goodwin. “And to get there, you've got to have so much confidence, resilience, determination, coping skills, relationship skills, and self-awareness. And that is a tremendous accomplishment that exceeds what probably most of us will ever achieve in our lives.”

Goodwin explains that at the core of Our House's mission lies a deep commitment to serving the community — from providing shelter for 80 to 90 residents each



night to offering programs that cater to every member of the family.

The focus on children is particularly poignant, with early childhood education initiatives and a robust children's program that engages with 300 young people daily. By investing in the youngest members of society, Our House is doing its part to ensure that the cycle of poverty is disrupted at its roots.

Recognizing the profound impact of mental well-being on one's journey out of homelessness, Our House's dedication extends beyond physical needs and includes a comprehensive mental health program that empowers individuals with the resilience, determination, and coping skills needed to navigate life's challenges.

"We want to be the partner to people who are going through a hard journey, achieving great things, that are going

to help themselves and their families, and turbocharge that with our mental health services," he said.

In a world where barriers to healthcare can be insurmountable, Our House stands out for its "low to no barrier" approach, ensuring that residents receive the support they need without unnecessary obstacles.

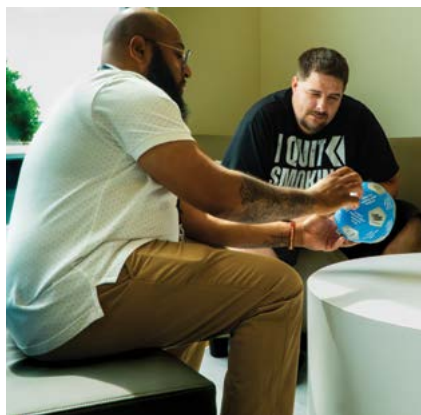
Through strategic partnerships with healthcare providers and organizations, Our House has created a seamless network of care that meets people where they are and guides them towards a path of transformation and empowerment.

"The journey towards a brighter future is not without its challenges. But it's our belief in the transformative power of our approach that drives us forward, propels us to find innovative solutions and cultivates a community of support around our mission."



We want them to be able to put homelessness and instability in their rear-view mirror, and then keep their eyes on the prize.

— Ben Goodwin



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A Legacy of Advocacy

Mary McLeod was a tireless advocate for children in Arkansas. In recognition of her lifelong dedication to youth and mental health, a \$50,000 endowment was established in April 1978 in Mary's memory donated by former Governor Winthrop Rockefeller's estate. The fund was named the Mary McLeod Memorial Fund for Youth Home. Youth Home is a residential treatment center in central Arkansas serving youth struggling with mental illness.

When you examine the financial return of that initial \$50,000 investment, you can see the lasting power and impact of an endowment with Arkansas Community Foundation. And how a financial legacy can live beyond a donor's lifetime.

Thanks to careful financial management, the principal amount has nearly *doubled* to more than \$92,000. Since the endowment started, Youth Home, Inc. has received **more than \$210,000 in grants**, and every year, more will be issued to provide essential support for the organization's programs, ensuring that this gift will continue to support Youth Home's important work for generations to come.

While much has changed since the endowment's creation, the need for legacy gifts like this has not. For those who take a long-term approach to philanthropy, an endowment offers stability and longevity — indefinitely. Endowments are permanently invested with only a portion of the fund used annually for grantmaking. The remaining funds are reinvested for the future, so long after you're gone, it will continue to support the causes you care about.

As Arkansas faces a growing adolescent mental health crisis, Youth Home's efforts to support teens and families across the state are more crucial than ever. "We are proud to continue honoring Mrs. McLeod's passion and memory in the work we do every day," said Larry Betz, chief operations officer at Youth Home, Inc.

McLeod's passion for supporting mental health in Arkansas lives on, forever, because of the power of an expertly managed endowment, the commitment of the Foundation to honor her legacy and the passionate work of Youth Home to serve children in our state.



Courtesy: Winthrop Rockefeller Collection/UALR Archives & Special Collections



NEW WEBSITE

Building Stronger Communities Through DATA

Arkansas Community Foundation is working to build the communities where our kids will want to raise their kids by thoughtful, data-driven grantmaking.

One thing we have learned over the years is that better information leads to better problem solving. The Community Foundation has launched a new edition of *Aspire Arkansas*, a powerful online county-by-county report about the quality of life in our state. We consider this resource to be one of the most important tools we can provide to Arkansans.


This interactive site measures where Arkansas stands today, reveals insights about how to make grants more impactful — and offers a compass for our future.

Learn where your time and resources can make the biggest impact. With secondary aggregated data from state and federal sources, *Aspire Arkansas* helps us know what issues our communities are facing, and understand where our state ranks nationally in six categories.

Impactful philanthropy starts with a strong foundation. With a variety of indicators to address mental health issues like youth poverty levels, homelessness, overdose rates, ALICE families (Asset-Limited, Income Constrained, Employed), food insecurity and other issues impacting Arkansans, *Aspire Arkansas* can help you find your foundation for **impactful grantmaking**.



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