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May 10, 2022

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Mental Health America of Wisconsin again raises alarm of public mental health crisis.

Milwaukee, WI - One year ago, Mental Health America of Wisconsin and the Milwaukee Coalition for Children's Mental Health declared a Public Health emergency for children's mental health. We stated:

The COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in social isolation, economic downturn, and job loss, and a national reckoning with systemic racism has created a perfect storm impacting Milwaukee residents' long-term mental wellbeing. When combined with existing racial and socioeconomic disparities in mental health and child developmental outcomes in Milwaukee, we predict that we are facing a sustained, multi-faceted public mental health crisis to which we need to respond quickly, decisively, and collaboratively.

Now, two years into the pandemic, these concerns have been borne out. Milwaukee, like much of our nation, is reeling from the confluence of these events. We are seeing sharp increases in children's Emergency Room visits for mental health crises and huge disparities in mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. Gun violence has become the number one cause of death for children and young adults from age one to 24. We anticipate that we will not fully understand the breadth of this crisis for years.

Let us be clear: our children were struggling before the pandemic. Measures of depression, anxiety, and self-harm had been on the rise for more than a decade. Social and environmental factors, such as community violence and lead poisoning, were having devastating impacts well before 2020. The structural violence of systemic racism drives this reality. The pandemic has worsened these trends, impacting those with no previous history of mental health disorders and magnifying the already significant disparities. Children and youth of color, low socioeconomic status, those who identify as LGBTQ+, and those with preexisting mental health disorders are at far greater risk for poor outcomes.

Children’s mental health is dependent on the mental health and well-being of those around them, including parents and caregivers, educators, siblings, and peers. The environments in which they live and learn, including how challenging behaviors are addressed, also influence their mental health. We cannot choose to prioritize children’s mental health without addressing the mental health of adults and the conditions in which we live. We prioritize Children’s mental health as an upstream intervention in our community’s future wellness and emotional resilience.

Thus, in alignment with our community partners and national recommendations, we are again calling on our leaders, providers, and policymakers to support the following:

- 1. Prioritize increasing access to mental health services for children and the adults in their lives.** Expand school-based mental health programs to all children, increase funding and support for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, support Black and minority-led social service organizations, and providers of nontraditional mental health interventions to expand their reach, and support programs that increase the number of clinicians of color to meet the need for culturally responsive mental health services.
- 2. Utilize a Public Health approach to address our current needs and prevent a second pandemic.** Develop a broad, culturally resonant messaging campaign to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and normalize mental health struggles, and make universal mental health screening and surveillance available for children of all ages and identities as well as their parents/caregivers.
- 3. Create a coordinated network of funders, initiative leaders, researchers, and evaluators to better coordinate an equitable response to this crisis.** Bring together the many people involved in addressing systemic mental health issues to improve coordination, leverage assets, and influence policy through a shared commitment to improve the mental health of Milwaukee’s children, their families and service providers.

Milwaukee, we needn’t start from scratch. The pandemic has emphasized the importance of mental health as an integral part of overall health, opening avenues to address stigma and normalize seeking support. Our community has continued to come together throughout the pandemic to support each other and our most vulnerable. Within our city and surrounding communities is a wealth of resources and an unprecedented philanthropic, institutional, and community interest in addressing this issue.

The time is now. Only together can we address this public health crisis. In honor of Children’s Mental Health Awareness Week and Mental Health Awareness Month, we call on each of you to use your voice, your passion, and your influence to advance these recommendations. **Contact Martina Gollin-Graves, President and CEO , Mental Health America of WI, 414-336-7963**

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About Mental Health America of WI

Mental Health America of WI is an affiliate of the nation’s leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to helping all Americans achieve wellness by living mentally healthier lives. Our work is driven by our commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all, early identification, and intervention for those at risk, integrated care, and treatment for those who need it—with recovery as the goal.