



2023 Healthcare Immersion Team

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Introduction: Children's mental health needs were steadily increasing prior to the pandemic, and have now been declared a national emergency by the U.S. Surgeon General. The pandemic created stressors that have measurably eroded the mental well-being of so many in Metro Richmond, and millions, particularly children, faced isolation, witnessed increasing incidents of domestic abuse, and lost loved ones. Today, Virginia ranks 48th in the nation for prevalence and access to care for youth. This statistic is alarming, but the team found that Metro Richmond is a resource-rich region for youth mental health services, and the project aims to unveil some of these resources to increase community awareness and promote seeking care.

Process: The healthcare immersion team embarked on a six-month research process to investigate healthcare issues in Metro Richmond and present findings. Following Tuckman's model, we progressed through the forming, storming, norming, and performing stages.

During our initial in-person meeting, we accomplished several key tasks to define roles and clarify the team's objectives. In the early stages, we faced the vastness of the healthcare topic, and to gain insight into the region's healthcare landscape, available resources, and needs, we conducted initial interviews and research. During this period, there was deliberation regarding the nature of the team deliverable, whether it would be a policy, design, or program. In the third and fourth months, we focused on gathering information and ideas by assigning members to conduct healthcare community contact interviews and perform research. To assist those with limited healthcare experience, the team developed a suggested list of questions for the interviews. Through the interviews and subsequent discussions, we identified ten healthcare issues of importance. To prioritize these issues, we created a poll for team members to rank their interests. As a result, children's mental health care emerged as the chosen focus.

Following the completion of the poll, we engaged in a discussion prompted by several team members sharing stories about their children's experiences with guns in school. As

a result, the team decided to refine the topic of children's mental health to focus specifically on what is being done to address this issue within the context of the gun-violence epidemic. At the March seminar day, we received round robin feedback from our fellow classmates, and after considering their suggestions, we decided to broaden our focus by moving away from the narrower perspective of the gun-violence epidemic. We revised the topic to address the accessibility and knowledge around children's mental health services in Metro Richmond.

Findings: During the pandemic, 37% of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health and 44% felt persistently sad or hopeless in the past year. The Virginia Youth Survey reports that this represents an alarming 7% increase from 2011-2019. To exacerbate the need for services caused by this increased prevalence, the pandemic also isolated many youth from caring teachers and trained school staff who often spot warning signs of abuse, neglect, and/or mental health challenges.

The devastating impact of the pandemic on youth mental health has made the need for services more urgent than ever. Unfortunately, according to Mental Health America, the Commonwealth ranks 48th in the nation for prevalence and access to care for youth, and Medicaid funding for children's mental health services has declined by \$100 million since the pandemic began despite an increase in children seeking services.

The team found that Richmond is rich in resources, but there is a clear gap in awareness of and access to these life-saving services.

We learned that among those whose insurance did not cover mental health services, 64% did not receive the care they need, and even among youth who do have private insurance that covers mental health, 35% do not receive care. For those who do receive care, the challenges of finding an available provider and getting an appointment can be daunting. Virginia currently ranks #9 in mental health workforce availability resulting in a lack of referrals for pediatric patients causing primary providers to deliver care without proper training. Nationally, more than 65% of pediatricians reported that they lacked mental health and behavioral knowledge and skills needed to help their patients.

Recommendations: When a doctor's appointment can't be secured because of insurance limitations, long waitlists, etc., there are still things that can be done to help the mental well-being of children in the Metro Richmond community.

Families and school communities play an important role in recognizing and supporting children's mental health needs, and family members who are aware of the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions may be better able to identify when a child needs help. Parents and other family members can help to advocate for their child to receive appropriate mental health care, whether that involves seeking out therapy, medication

management, or other resources. Family members can also play a supportive role in a child's mental health journey, by providing a safe and nurturing environment, offering emotional support, and helping to manage any practical barriers to accessing care (such as transportation or financial issues). They can also advocate for policy changes, and take a mental health first aid class.

In the end, children and families need to be at the center of decision making.

Sources: Allie Atkeson, Julie Bilodeau, Eva Colen, Emily Griffey, Denise Daly Conrad, Sheryl Garland, Ruth Loepp, Debbie Long, Debbie Oswald, Amy Popavich, Dianne Reynold-Cane, John Richardson-Lauve, Cheryl Roberts, Nikki Shaw, Chad Stewart, Albert Walker, Randy Wilson