



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Southwest Institute for Research on Women



Help & Hope for YOUTH COVID-19 Focus Group Results

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July 2020

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Suggested reference: Brinley, C. & Powell, C. (2020). *Help & Hope for YOUth: COVID-19 Focus Group Results*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona, Southwest Institute for Research on Women.



FOCUS GROUP OVERVIEW

Help and Hope for YOUth invited its Alliance members to participate in an online focus group on Zoom on the afternoon of April 20, 2020. With approximately 32 participants in attendance, there was a group of diverse professionals and community members that varied by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Participants also represented various professional and organizational affiliations, though a majority were associated with either education, a mental health organization, or a community-based agency. The goal of the focus group was to glean insights about the challenges, opportunities, and impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has created for youth, educators, administrators, and mental health and community providers. It also sought to better understand what type of supports and resources Help and Hope for YOUth (HH4Y) could provide to the community during this unique and challenging time. The focus group was facilitated by the HH4Y Evaluation Team led by Claudia Powell, M.Ed. and Corrie Brinley, MSW from the University of Arizona's SIROW, with the support of the HH4Y Program Director, Arcy Cornidez.

The focus group began with a warm greeting from Arcy Cornidez, as well as some general housekeeping items (i.e., how to mute yourself and ensure that others can see participants'

names). This was followed by a review of the focus group intentions and agenda by Claudia Powell. Participants were informed of the groups' confidentiality, participant rights, and data dissemination plans. Participants learned that the focus group would be organized into three groups that would each meet with an assigned facilitator in a separate breakout room to allow for more timely and productive discussion. Participants were asked to self-identify if they were either new to the HH4Y Alliance, a NAMI or Lovell staff member and/or a member of the HH4Y Steering Committee. Participants who identified with one or more of these 3 groups were assigned to Arcy Cornidez' breakout group. The remaining participants were divided randomly into two more groups—one that would be led by Claudia Powell and the other led by Corrie Brinley in separate Zoom breakout rooms. All three groups reviewed the same focus group questions with their respective facilitator in their separate breakout rooms for the course of an hour before returning to the main room as one large group. The focus group wrapped-up with a warm thanks and reminder of confidentiality and dissemination plans, as well as upcoming HH4Y opportunities.

Help & Hope for YOUth COVID-19 Focus Group Highlights

- COVID-19 has created serious and significant barriers for people in various realms (education, behavioral health, community-based agencies, etc.) to staying connected to their colleagues and students/clients.
- Challenges for youth include a lack of resources (computers, WI-FI access, child-care) for all students to stay connected to their schools and teachers.
- The lack of connection may increase mental health needs and decrease efficient and effective referrals, though some students are thriving without the pressure of attending school.
- There are not enough mental health services available for students who need them. Advocacy for increased and accessible service provision is necessary.
- There have been some promising outcomes using tele-health for behavioral health and there are hopes that this will remain a post-pandemic option for service delivery.
- HH4Y is a great resource for people to come together to learn what is happening with regard to mental health for youth across the county.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Current Challenges

How is the COVID-19 health crisis currently creating challenges in your work? [Probes: What has changed for you? What operations have changed?]

Education:

- Challenges staying connected to teachers, administrative, superintendent teams.
- Meetings stopped and created silo across departments.
- Hostility has been created because some people are allowed to work from home, while others are still required to work in schools.
- Tension is high and you can sense it in meetings.
- There have been some promising outcomes for tele-health and there are hopes that this will remain an ongoing option.
- Teachers are feeling very isolated because administrators aren't holding as many meetings as they were in the past.
- Rules have changed for grading, graduation, and expectations in such a short period of time—teachers feel overwhelmed.
- Initiatives have been put in place to help increase connectivity and inclusiveness
- Disconnection has been the biggest challenge
- Created unique opportunities to connect school based mental health professionals to students and each other.
- Wi-Fi access for students is challenging. A very large number of students do not have access to the necessary technology.
- Sunnyside schools have been sending out Wi-Fi enabled buses in the mornings to their district neighborhoods to help students gain access to their education and deliver food. Though, they're recognizing that the need is high than they anticipated and they'll likely need to increase these service hours to cover afternoons as well.
- Schools have also extended all their Wi-Fi distances on and near campus, so that kids can access connectivity and work near the school on their school work. Sometimes this involves something as little as downloading a pdf file.
- In Sierra Vista, school districts didn't give teachers the resources or training to feel prepared to ask questions about mental health. Teachers had to develop their own resources to share with the parents of students.
- Teachers have concerns that when broaching the subject of mental health with their students, that students cannot be forthcoming about their true mental health status because their parents are likely within earshot.
- Challenging running labs virtually.
- Native American reservations have been the toughest population to ensure have access to services.
- Native students at the University of Arizona are most challenged by the digital divide, as Wi-Fi doesn't exist on many on reservations. Connection has to happen through a satellite.
- It's also challenging to send mail on many reservations, as many do not utilize physical addresses and families cannot make it to the post office because of the stay at home order or because of physical distance from their home. Working to redirect funding to assist with these issues.



[Participant Question: *What are districts doing to identify students who may need tele-mental health services currently, but who didn't previously identify as needing it?*]

- Counselors, families, or superintendents reach out if they have students in need of services and are admitted to services as needed.
- The expectation is that teachers have “eyes” in google hangouts. They’re asked to pay attention to their student’s writing assignments and regularly ask their students how they’re feeling or if anything has changed for them. If the teacher isn’t sure how to respond they are asked to refer to the mental health professionals.

[Participant Question: *What are other resources that are challenging for youth to access? Do we know of any resources for laptops or tablets for youth who need them? Are schools lending them out?*]

- At some districts, all students K-3 can pick-up a laptop to borrow to do their work at home.
- At many districts this is also the case—access to laptops and devices aren’t the challenge, but rather connectivity at home.
- Cox Communications has rolled out a discount Wi-Fi program, but only if a family hasn’t had an outstanding bill with Cox.
- Arizona Commerce Authority has been collecting donations of hot spots and trying to distribute them to students, especially in rural areas.
- Donated wireless gift cards aren’t as useful to families because they run out so quickly. But Sunnyside has been trying to figure out how to best utilize gift cards effectively with families, if donors want to gift them.
- Sunnyside has also been asking for donations of old cell phones so that the district can support turning them into hot spots for families.

Community-based Organizations:

- Trying to pursue HH4Y fund raising goals has been challenging because attention is diverted to COVID-focused activities and other non-profits seeking funding.
- Challenging organizing meetings in the new Zoom format.
- Provided an opportunity to be a resource for families and youth around issues of mental health.
- Been able to increase resources available on the HH4Y website to support youth and families and garner new attention to the Alliance.

How is the COVID-19 health crisis affecting the people you serve/work with? [Probes: If you work directly with youth, how is it affecting them? If you work directly with youth, how has it altered your ability to provide service to them?]

- A lot of the youth have checked out! There’s a large number of students that are not participating in school that were before the start of the pandemic. Those are the students that likely need the most support, but are inaccessible.
- Youth are really struggling emotionally. So many youth accessed supports at school with friends, friends’ families, and mentors in the classroom, sports, or other extracurriculars.
- Some youth are thriving without the pressure of being in a school setting.



How do you anticipate covid-19 health crisis generally affecting youth in the community? [Probes: What important youth services are no longer available? Are you aware if youth experiencing mental health challenges can get support during this time?]

- People do not know what services are available and what services are on hold or have ended. The offerings are changing from day to day, but people aren't notified.
- There are still very long wait times for mental health intake appointments.
- Most youth use their peers for social and mental health support and many have lost this connection without in-person education. Not all youth have access to consistent Wi-Fi and aren't able to regularly connect with their peers on social media. These are the youth who are most vulnerable and isolated. No one can reach them.

Impact

What long term challenges do you anticipate as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis? [Probes: Are you aware of programs will be permanently lost? What services might be overwhelmed long term?]

- NAMI has been doing Ending the Silence via Zoom and experiencing some success, but the format makes the presentation a little challenging for presenters. However, they're hopeful that this will work during this time and that the program won't be lost.
- Other NAMI Affiliates are also trying and finding success utilizing other virtual formats, so those might be other options to try in the future to ensure longevity.
- Lack of availability to support the mental health needs of students was a challenge before this crisis. It seems likely that this will only be exacerbated by the need for additional counselors in schools to address the unknown mental health needs of returning students.
- More students will need outside resources because of the pandemic and services will still be insufficient.
- High student to counselor ratio.

How do you see this health crisis changing the landscape of your workplace?

- Administrators are rethinking how the beginning of school (start of the semester—first 3 or 4 days) will need to look to assess and address the mental health needs of returning students.
- Districts will need to front load mental health support for students as they anticipate that students will be feeling the effects of the pandemic for the next couple years to come.
- The image of mental health will be changed permanently because so many people will have experienced anxiety, isolation, and depression.
- There's a need for a new position emerging, a position that serves to connect mental health resources to schools lacking these resources.

What positive impacts could emerge from this health crisis? [Probes: What issues will be highlighted in the community? What new resources do you foresee emerging? How can HH4Y support these types of positive change?]

- A sensitivity to mental health could emerge and help people to see how important mental health issues are.
- Tele-health is a way to serve people in rural communities and with less access to services of all types, including mental health.
- More funding and legislation could emerge to support mental health work.



- There's an opportunity for the Education and Training Task Force to share learning tools for youth and families in the home via technology since there will likely be an increase in need and interest.
- Education and Training could focus on offering tools for both professional development and parental development through in-home learning tools like webinars or taped seminars that are accessible online. This could help with early recognition in the homes and help support the work of teachers in schools.
- Increased momentum of support in the community to serve youth with mental health needs.

Support

How should HH4Y focus their efforts during this challenging time? [Probes: What does the community need from HH4Y? What could HH4Y do to support you in your work during this time?]

- HH4Y needs to continue to offer sessions like this that allow us to learn about each other's needs, as well as the resources we can share.
- HH4Y should be acting as a broker of mental health services in the community to schools in need.
- Continue to share resources online that are current and useful to educators, students, and families.
- Focus on disseminating mental health education to students in the classroom, so that they can identify mental health challenges that will likely arise within themselves, a family member, a peer or a friend. This is critical.
- We don't know what we don't know—it's hard to anticipate the needs of families in the coming months, so making sure that resources stay available.
- Resources to programs for families who don't have access to mental health resources or counseling services, as schools can only do so much. We need other services for families to use/access.
- Offer this same set of focus group questions to the Youth Task Force to learn about youth specific challenges and generate ideas for ways youth can come together to address some of these issues.
- Offering youth a weekly teen town hall to talk about how they're being impacted by COVID-19.

Can you think of legislation should HH4Y be working towards to support the impact of this crisis?

- Legislation to ensure that schools are receiving adequate funding to support the mental health needs of their students—increased counselors and on-site family services.
- Legislation to reduce the student to counselor ratio in schools and across districts.
- Advocating for more behavioral health services. There are not enough services for students who need them.

What things is the HH4Y Alliance not doing that you'd like for us to do? [Probes: What could the HH4Y Alliance do better? What would make the Alliance stronger?]

- The Alliance should focus on more advocacy efforts. There are many youth who need resources and resources are insufficient and inaccessible.
- Funding to carry out the initiatives. The task forces are making very slow progress. No one has time to do the work.



What positive/supportive things is HH4Y already doing? [Probes: Are there ways that the HH4Y Alliance has benefited you? What are they? Are there ways you seen it benefit or affect others? What are they?]

- It's important to know that there are 3-parts to Ending the Silence that are available to the community through HH4Y. One for students to learn about mental illnesses. One for staff members, including teachers, counselors, whomever in the school to learn how to identify the early warning signs or speak to a student who they suspect or who shows these warning signs. And one that teaches parents and families to identify these signs at home and talk about these issues with their child.
- Text Talk Act—now has an online version or is working on one soon.
- The HH4Y website offers so many great resources, including COVID-19 specific resources and information specifically for school districts.
- HH4Y is a great resource for people to come together to learn what is happening with regard to mental health in schools across the county.
- The HH4Y Alliance meetings have been a good place to learn what is happening with regard to mental health in schools on the state level.

