United Way Key Strategy: Promoting Mental Health

THE WHY

Mental health is one of the hardest areas of community need to address, and it is of utmost urgency at this moment in time. It’s no secret that the pandemic has created more worry, anxiety and stress for people, and services are hard to access. The stigma of mental illness, navigating confusing and complex systems like private insurance and Medicare (or a combination of both), waiting lists for appointments, and lacking the means, transportation and time to seek services are all compounding to create the perfect storm for people trying to access mental health services.

Pandemic-related hardships and language barriers also exacerbate access for certain populations in our community.

In addition, our region’s shortage of mental health care providers is creating strain on the existing systems that do provide critical, front-line care to our community members.

THE DATA

* 1 in 5 adults has a depressive disorder, according to [UVM Medical Center's 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment](https://d2ubrtwy6ww54e.cloudfront.net/www.uvmhealth.org/assets/2022-06/uvmmc-chna-june-2022-report.pdf?VersionId=rZZ94mxrOa8hsGrHdmlXBs5Uz3ZscRJy).
* [Suicide is the 8th leading cause of death in Vermont](https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR_Injury_Suicide_Databrief_2021.pdf)—touching every socioeconomic status, race, identity and community.
* Pandemic isolation and lifestyle changes have caused a drastic uptick in youth mental health concerns. Primary care pediatricians in Vermont are reporting a waitlist of patients, with [75-80% of cases being mental health related](https://npr-brightspot.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/sites/vpr/files/202103/mental_health_impacts_on_vermont_children_and_youth_final.pdf).
* 40.8% of Vermonters ages 12–17 who have depression did not receive any care in the previous year, [according to data compiled by NAMI Vermont in 2021](https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/StateFactSheets/VermontStateFactSheet.pdf).
* Older Vermonters continue to face increased isolation made worse by the pandemic.

WHAT WE’RE DOING

**Community Funding**

United Way of Northwest Vermont is making strategic community investments that cover a range of services and programs, from prevention of mental illness to crisis response and helping people access appropriate and timely treatment. Community funding grants support programs that connect our community’s youth to adult role models and mentors to enhance their feelings of belonging and wellbeing. They also support crisis hotlines, like Howard Center’s First Call, that operate 24/7 to help children, youth and families get what they need to be safe at their most vulnerable moments. They also help multicultural families through programs like Connecting Cultures that provide support, case management and counseling to families with sensitivity to their language and cultural needs.

**\*2022 Funded Partners:**

* Howard Center
* Northwestern Counseling & Support Services
* Spectrum Youth and Family Services
* Connecting Cultures at Vermont Psychological Services

\*Partners listed above provide direct mental health care and services, but many other United Way funded partners address important mental health needs. For example, Age Well's Meals on Wheels program not only provides nutritious meals, but also offers a human connection which addresses the social isolation many older Vermonters experience. And mentoring programs such as Franklin County Caring Communities' Watershed Mentoring program provide struggling youth with a connection with a caring adult.

**Mental Health Initiative**

United Way of Northwest Vermont recognizes that mental health is an extremely high priority and that funding existing community-based programs is simply not enough.

In early 2022, United Way embarked on a three-year process to formally convene a network of regional partners doing mental health work in order to improve Vermonters’ timely access to appropriate mental health services and focusing on three initial priorities:

* addressing Vermont’s critical labor shortage of mental health providers;
* strengthening and aligning resources for suicide prevention;
* and, responding to the rise in youth mental health needs.

Three volunteer-led Action Teams will facilitate activity, redirect or combine existing resources, identify gaps in the system, and allocate sub-grants to partners to carry out essential action items from the network. This initiative leverages state and federal dollars which, combined with the power of our network of generous donors, helps power up our community’s resources to make greater and faster progress to promote our community’s mental health.