POWER:
ELEVATING YOUTH VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT IN TAY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Submitted JUNE 2019
by No Stigma No Barriers, a TAY Mental Health Project to
The Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission
ABOUT NO STIGMA NO BARRIERS

In 2016, California Youth Connection (CYC) was awarded a three-year contract with the California Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) to facilitate the engagement of transition age youth (TAY) stakeholders with California’s mental health systems. Bringing decades of experience facilitating youth-led outreach, training, organizing, and advocacy as well as in-depth understanding of the state’s child serving systems, CYC gathered young people from around the state to guide a program that would elevate youth voice as one strategy to improve and transform systems. CYC launched the youth-led project in the fall of 2016 with the goal of reducing stigma around mental health and improving services for transition age youth in California. The youth board chose to name the project “No Stigma No Barriers” (NSNB) to emphasize their commitment to eliminating stigma around mental health and breaking down barriers—both internal and external—to wellness.

“Mental health programs should be unapologetically original. They shouldn’t be one-type-of-healing fits all, but programs and healing methods should be tailored to the individual.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

✅ SUCCESS FACTOR

The young people of No Stigma No Barriers consider being visible, unashamed, and unafraid one of the vital roles of an active mental health advocate.
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Dear Community,

For over 30 years, California Youth Connection has facilitated the direct engagement of current and former foster youth with our state’s administration and legislature. Motivated by their personal experience of foster care and other systems, CYC members ages 14 to 24 unite in a community of mutual empowerment, healing, and connectedness, and together they mobilize to elevate the voice and experience of children and youth who have experienced foster care, help shape policy and practice, and increasingly, to seek a fundamental transformation of California’s child serving systems. For 30 years CYC has worked to make sure that youth have a seat at the table, and now we’re working to make sure that they are setting the agenda.

For the past three years, we’ve been proud to partner with the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) to leverage our expertise to engage a broader range of young people—those who self-identify as stakeholders in the functioning of California’s public mental health systems—and to facilitate their visibility, voice, and impact in California’s constellation of state and local mental health systems. Everything we do at CYC is youth-directed, so the first thing we did was put together a youth board. They named our effort No Stigma No Barriers and have decided and guided every outreach, training, and advocacy activity we’ve undertaken over the past three years. The project exists to elevate their voices and perspective, and they are quoted extensively throughout this report.

At CYC we’re constantly looking for ways to articulate not only what “authentic youth engagement and youth organizing” means but what it requires. Lately we’ve been relying on the familiar “tip of the iceberg” idea. Here we mean that when a very impressive young person—who by virtue of the organization they represent has experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect, homelessness, or justice system involvement—speaks before the legislature or on a conference panel, for example, what might not be apparent is the journey it took for that young person to arrive at that moment, speaking their truth, shaping the world. Those hearing this young person holding their own in a room where nearly everyone else has a background of relative privilege may not see the years of experience and many hours of staff time and community/peer support that it takes to support them in understanding their context, developing their position, crafting their message, finding their voice, and building their confidence.

This is the third of three State of the Community Reports that CYC has crafted under our current contract with MHSOAC. In it, we offer first and foremost the voices and reflections of the young people who have led the No Stigma No Barriers project. We also consolidate takeaways, lessons learned, and recommendations arising over the three years of the project, and our young leaders’ assessment of the current state of youth voice in California’s mental health systems. Our hope is that our community will first and foremost recognize and respond to the voices of the young leaders of the project, and that our work will inspire our community to continue to work towards putting youth voice at the center—of analysis, of planning, and of oversight.

CYC and NSNB youth often say “nothing about us without us.” In the past, this has been appropriately considered a corrective. But we genuinely believe that including young people—from the start, in everything—makes systems better. And we hope that our work and this report will provide you with information to contribute to your work engaging and organizing youth.

In community,

Haydée Cuza
Executive Director
California Youth Connection
YEAR THREE NSNB BOARD ROSTER

Kimberly Coronel • San Bernardino

Smitha Gundavajhala • San Jose

Shantell Marche House • Alameda

Kevon Demaria Lee • San Bernardino

Dana LeSueur • San Bernardino

Michelle Amber Mathews-Williams • Modesto

Lauren Ashley Ann Mendez • Modesto

Cecelia Najera • Modesto

Sean Noonan • San Bernardino

Ricardo Ortega Martinez • Los Angeles

Malaysia Zhané Parris • San Bernardino

Shauntice Penn • Riverside

Jerry Salazar • Los Angeles

Year Three NSNB Board Members are between the ages of 19 and 28.

“Some of the people providing mental health services come from a different generation, and what was going on in their generation when they were this age is different from what’s going on for our generation. So they should respect the perspectives of young advocates and understand that we know how to support our generation and the mental health issues happening for youth in our time.”

—RICARDO ORTEGA MARTINEZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
Since 2016, CYC has operated the No Stigma No Barriers TAY-led mental health project under contract with California’s Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC). From the outset, young people ages 16 to 28 with personal and professional experience with California’s mental health systems have comprised the board guiding the project, with young people joining the project every year. One thing has been clear from the start: the youth guiding the project know what they need and what they are not getting—and they have plenty of ideas about how California’s mental health system can better support them and their 5,500,000 transition age youth peers. Any mental health support or service for TAY should, then, be infused with guidance from TAY themselves, and ideally should include paid peer supports.

“TAY should be viewed as a unique culture, therefore having a unique set of needs. Systems of care and their providers must tailor approaches and services in ways that support young people’s needs and their development as they transition into adulthood. This can only be done by respecting and fostering young people’s culture, goals, and hopes for the future.”

—NATHAN WOOLBRIGHT, FOUNDING MEMBER, NSNB BOARD

“I don’t think my advocacy turns off. I’m not only an advocate when I’m with No Stigma No Barriers or when I’m at USC. I’m an advocate when I’m walking within the community; it surrounds the things I do. It’s not just a quality I turn on. It’s within my actions, it’s my motivation.”

—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

In the years between adolescence and early adulthood—ages 16 to 25 or so—young people experience significant neurological, emotional, and social development. Also during these years, they cross into adulthood and are presented with the challenge of becoming “independent”—for many of them, at a much younger age than they would choose. Many also experience the onset of serious mental illness in this period of intense development and pressure to manage on their own. According to the National Institute of Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five teens and young adults live with a mental health condition, with half developing the condition by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24. Yet, in California today, only about 5% of children and youth receive mental health services.

Over all three years, the young people guiding No Stigma No Barriers and the young people they have met in their work have resoundingly affirmed the importance of providing supports beyond a medical, illness-based model. What young people need are asset-based approaches, peer-led programs, and support for paths to mental wellness that lie outside the traditional model.

This is the third and final NSNB annual report on the state of the community of transition age youth with mental health needs in California and the TAY leaders, providers, and systems engaged in serving them. As with the previous reports, the voices and work of the young people leading the project are at the center of this report. The report also shares the project’s findings on best practices for supporting youth advocates: what organizations need to know to engage, support, and sustain young people leading advocacy projects.

The young people guiding No Stigma No Barriers have drawn upon their own experiences and information gathered through the NSNB activities to develop materials aimed at ensuring that California’s local and statewide systems provide access to high quality, responsive supports and services to improve mental health outcomes for transition age youth (TAY) and their families.

Every year, No Stigma No Barriers has engaged in increasingly robust local and statewide:

- Outreach, Engagement, and Communication
- Training and Education
- Advocacy

In its third year, NSNB has planned and hosted mental health outreach, training, and advocacy activities in 17 California counties. Reflecting the project’s increasing connections around the state, representatives of the NSNB youth board have been invited to attend and participate in dozens of forums, conferences, and other speaking engagements with both TAY and adult audiences.

As in past years, the Year Three NSNB board devoted time in the beginning of their tenure together to building community among themselves. While the board members all bring different life experiences to the group, all experiences are viewed as valid and of equal importance to the group’s identity. Utilizing effective communications activities, the group learned to work through tensions arising from different experiences and identities, which drew them closer together and helped them deliver cohesive, impactful trainings and other activities. NSNB committed to intentionally creating space for members to “talk things out” as opposed to putting things in a “parking lot” to address later. This intentional space became part of in-person as well as virtual meetings of the board, resulting in a deep well of trust among the members—essential to their comfort when creating and leading the NSNB activities.

✅ SUCCESS FACTOR

A youth-branded, youth-led effort, with the benefit of program infrastructure provided through MHSOAC, gives legitimacy, creates a platform, and spurs momentum.

✅ SUCCESS FACTOR

Creating space to talk things through builds trust and a sense of community.
### TRAINING & EDUCATION

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### OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

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STIGMA SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH

Based on their own experience, their conversations with other young people, and research, the NSNB youth board developed a grid describing stigma surrounding mental health and showing its root causes and effects:

**WHAT IS STIGMA?**
- Stereotypes
- Negative labels
- People with mental health challenges seen as “less than” others

**ROOT CAUSES**
- Lack of education and awareness about mental health
- Pre-judgement
- Prejudice
- Underrepresentation and misrepresentation in media
- Racism
- Generational differences
- Oppression
- Religion

**EFFECTS**
- Fear
- Bullying
- Hopelessness
- Less is expected of you
- Denial of personal mental health needs/supports
- Fewer resources
- Discrimination
- Criminalization
- Over- and under-medication
- Denial of access to services, often as a result of power dynamics arising from stigma

Negative comments youth hear about mental health:
- “It’s all in your head.”
- “Just get over it.”
- Being involved in the Mental Health system means you’re:
  - “Weak”
  - “Less than”
  - “Living off the system”
  - “Abnormal”
  - “Incapable of making own decisions”
OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION

“The mental health system’s purpose should be to help those who need the help, and to do it in a quick way so things don’t become worse. It should be about giving appropriate services to individuals, and analyzing what works best. The system should find ways to inform transition age youth about what is available in case they need mental health support. A lot of youth I’ve talked with know they need help but they don’t know where to go for help. So the system needs to do more outreach.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

NSNB hosts outreach and engagement events around the state. Each event builds upon the last, as the youth board members listen to their peers and allies, adding new insights to their presentations. Highlights from the past year include:

WELLNESS MIXER

Leading up to the group’s presentation to the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (see the Advocacy section below for more on that presentation), NSNB partnered with the Eureka City School District to host a Wellness Mixer. Youth were invited from the Humboldt County Transition-Age Youth Collaboration (HCTAYC) and CYC’s Humboldt Chapter along with others in the community. The event was a fun, informal, and conversational setting about wellness and how to intentionally practice wellness. The conversation provided a great grounding for the presentation to the Board of Supervisors the following day.

☑️ SUCCESS FACTOR

Tapping into young people’s creativity breaks down stigma.
DANCING AWAY MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

NSNB partnered with Psypher LA to host a powerful workshop teaching mental health awareness and stigma eradication through dance. The workshop tapped into the dynamic rhythm of dance to raise awareness about the connection between art and wellness. The workshop also elicited healing conversations about the importance of identity and how it can shape mental health and wellness.

NSNB RECOMMENDATIONS

Ways Everyone Can Work Towards Ending Stigma Surrounding Mental Health and Wellness, and Build Community Acceptance and Awareness

1. Employ mental health staff who represent the people being served (i.e. language, culture, gender, age, etc.)

2. Normalize mental health by having transparent and vulnerable conversations about our own experiences with others.

3. Embrace, train, and pay Peer Supports.

4. Create more safe, confidential spaces specifically for transition aged youth.

5. Ask and listen to young people. They are experts about their experiences and have an idea of what they need.

6. Provide space for transition aged youth to express themselves creatively.

7. Teach mental health and wellness from a young age—like any other life skill.

8. Educate yourself so you can educate others.
ONLINE RESOURCES
NSNB maintains a dynamic website at www.nostigmanobarriers.org, which serves as the hub for the project’s outreach, engagement, and communication activities. The site provides:

• Resources for youth in need of mental health support
• Connections for TAY and their allies to get involved with NSNB
• Quotes and stories from TAY advocates

Further disseminating key information about TAY mental health and wellness, the project maintains an active presence on Facebook. NSNB’s online resources and social media messaging are key to eliminating stigma and breaking down barriers as they are widely available anytime, anywhere.

Check out the NSNB website for youth-led mental health resources!
NSNB PROMOTES WELLNESS AND PUTS STIGMA ON BLAST

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS MONTH

CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE.

AUDRE LORDE

UCSF-School of Nursing Presents...2019 Black Maternal Health Week

What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.

— Jane Goodall
NO STIGMA NO BARRIERS • YEAR THREE STATE OF THE COMMUNITY REPORT
TRAINING AND EDUCATION

NSNB’s youth-designed and delivered workshops, trainings, presentations, materials, and curricula for TAY and adults who work with them are presented in the five regions of the state: The Superior Region, Bay Area, Central Region, Southern Region, and Los Angeles. Training materials are adapted for accessibility across cultural norms; intersectionality of mental health needs and services with race, class, gender, and sexuality; and the structural and cultural differences between child and adult service systems. NSNB collaborates with stakeholder and advocacy groups focused on unserved and underserved populations to ensure the trainings are accessible to the broadest possible range of TAY.

Youth board members participated in a curriculum development training in September, and developed curricula that they then led in trainings conducted with a range of organizations around the state, presenting to youth, educators, mental health professionals, and other providers. A few of these trainings are highlighted below:

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACT TRAINING

At the California Mental Health Advocates for Children and Youth (CMHACY) conference, NSNB presented on the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), passed as Proposition 63 by California voters in 2004. Through a tax on the state’s very high earners, the MHSA created a fund to enhance existing mental health programs and address gaps in services. Overseen by MHSOAC, MHSA funds provide for a range of direct services to individuals with significant mental health needs and specifically to transition age youth. Among the intended outcomes of the MHSA, it is intended to make services easier to access and more effective; eliminate stigma; reduce institutional care; and tailor services to local communities.

After presenting their training on the elements of the MHSA at the CMHACY conference, NSNB collected feedback from participants on how implementation is faring in their counties. The participants, including several youth consumers, were eager to share their perspectives, and offered observations about the challenge of conducting outreach that doesn’t replicate stigmatizing structures, the relative success of different attempts to integrate mental health services into school settings, and the need for a workforce that is diverse across several axes—diverse in background, race and ethnicity, training and modality, age and experience. Given that the attendees were drawn from all corners of the state, they also stressed the importance of allowing for service models that can be implemented in areas with fewer professional resources.
ART IT OUT

At the Napa Valley Student Wellness Conference—a gathering of mental health professionals, administrators, educators, community partners, and school law enforcement—NSNB presented an engaging, interactive workshop entitled “Art It Out” to End Stigma Around Mental Health. Designed for those who work with TAY, the workshop aimed to inspire and equip them to be effective allies to the TAY with whom they work. Together with participants, the NSNB presenters identified ways to reach, engage, and empower youth. The group highlighted the importance of art and creative expression as a form of communication and an advocacy tool for TAY in their mental health journey, and discussed ways that these tools encourage movement towards ending stigma around mental health and wellness.

Creative Expression Breaks Down Stigma

Stigma around mental health remains a significant barrier preventing TAY from receiving the services they are entitled to. How can we end the stigma around mental health in the TAY community? One way is to empower TAY to express their mental health needs and experiences through artistic expression in whatever form they choose: poetry, painting, drawing, writing, music, rapping, dancing, etc. In sharing and receiving creative expression, TAY break down stigma around mental health by experiencing universal commonalities and individual identities.
TRAININGS FOR TAY

NSNB delivered a training to the young people assembled for CYC’s Statewide Membership Council meeting. The youth, who represented 27 California counties, received in depth training on the structure, financing, and administration of California’s mental health systems, the Mental Health Services Act and role of MHSOAC, the relationship between those systems and the child welfare systems, and the landscape of youth-led and other advocacy organizations. Together, the NSNB trainers and their peers defined ‘wellness’ and discussed ways that the system can support TAY mental health and wellness.

Asking the question “What do you need for mental health and wellness?” the group created a word cloud with “stability” at its heart.

TRAINING FOR YOUNGER YOUTH IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY

NSNB led a training for The Youth Opportunity Center (YOC) in Riverside. This training was unique because the youth in the workshop were ages 9 to 13, younger than the other young people NSNB has presented to. The presenters covered basics such as the concept of mental health: “What does mental health mean?” They also discussed common experiences such as having trouble sleeping, and the ways those experiences might indicate anxiety. The young people who participated in the training were eager to share their experiences and receive support for ways to feel their best.
ADVOCACY

“Young advocates need support from people in power so we can get our voices through. To have an effective mental health process for youth, youth voices need to be involved in that process. Every TAY is not going to have a title attached to them, so we need people in power to not brush us off but to have open ears and open minds. Young advocates need support from the organizations they’re involved with before addressing people in power. Mental health is a touchy subject, the youth need support in case they receive backlash. We’re trying to push society forward and society will push back.”

—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

PRESENTATION TO HUMBOLDT COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

NSNB presented to the Humboldt Board of Supervisors on the importance of developmentally appropriate mental health services for transition age youth. They shared the fact sheet NSNB prepared, which noted that Humboldt County has the highest rate of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in the state, with 30.8% having experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences, compared to 16.7% of Californians broadly. The fact sheet also highlights disproportionality in foster care in Humboldt County, with 7% of residents identifying as Native American yet 39% of children and youth in foster care identify as Native American. A quote from a 17-year-old from the Yurok Tribe emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant services:

“It is important to have culturally relevant services because we don’t always have culturally relevant homes. So we could lose our culture. And that hurts.”

—MEMBER OF THE YUROK TRIBE, AGE 17

Supervisors thanked the presenters, with one expressing his appreciation for their sharing the fact that development is still occurring for transition age youth. In public comment, Calla Peltier-Olson, Youth Organizer with the Humboldt County Transition-Age Youth Collaboration (HCTAYC), commended California Youth Connection’s leadership across the state through the No Stigma No Barriers project. Peltier-Olson described the long partnership between CYC and HCTAYC to ensure that the voice of foster youth is uplifted, particularly noting the partners’ work to address through legislation the issue of overmedication of foster youth in California.
PRESENTATIONS TO THE FRESNO COUNTY AND YOLO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

NSNB presented to the Yolo County Board of Supervisors and the Fresno County Board of Supervisors on the four pillars of stability:

- A Place to Call Home
- Health and Wellness
- Relationships and Lifelong Connections
- Education and Extracurricular Activities

“Fresno Board of Supervisors was very supportive and welcoming and appreciative. It seemed like if we didn’t share this information, no one else would. They seemed really glad to have us there.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

They shared CYC’s #FosterStability campaign with the boards (see more about the campaign later in this report), and emphasized the point that a lack of stability in any area of life makes it hard to focus on being mentally well.

If there’s a school change or a placement change, it’s really hard to focus on our mental state but once we know we’re safe and we’re not moving, we then begin to heal and can focus on how to heal our emotional state and focus on our emotions and figure out healthy coping skills.

So my ask for you all is: When working with young people, think of how we’re engaging them in a strength-based way, think about the terms we’re using around mental health so it’s not stigmatizing. We want young people to reach out for services and feel ok about reaching out for services, and sometimes it’s the language we use that might deter them from reaching out.

As we support our youth we’re supporting ourselves and our future. We’re focusing on turning the system into a place for fostering growth instead of another traumatic experience.

—EXCERPTS FROM THE NSNB PRESENTATION TO THE YOLO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
MONTEREY COUNTY AND LA COUNTY ADVOCACY

“Monterey County shared with us work they’re doing with foster youth: When youth go into foster care they get an initial analysis to see where they’re at with their mental wellbeing, and to see how much trauma they’ve gone through and how many ACEs they’ve experienced. This seemed like a great way to really help youth.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

NSNB’s advocacy events in Monterey County and LA County differed from the project’s advocacy elsewhere because the mental health system in these counties is not overseen by the Board of Supervisors. In LA the NSNB Board met with the Children’s Deputy and in Monterey County, they met with the Monterey Mental Health Bureau—these individuals are directly responsible for ensuring the quality of mental health services being delivered in their counties. Participating NSNB board members found these conversations in smaller venues—talking around a table rather than standing at a microphone before supervisors on a dais—both engaging and impactful.

“Thank you so much. This is important work, and it’s being done by the right people.”

—DON SAYLOR, YOLO COUNTY SUPERVISOR

PRESENTATION TO THE RIVERSIDE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

NSNB also presented to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, breaking down the numbers of TAY mental health needs and access.

“I attended the Riverside Board of Supervisors meeting in February. That was my first time at a supervisors’ meeting so it was really eye opening for me. It was a great platform to share what we wanted to say, and to hear what other community members shared with the board, too. How I opened it up really set the tone. It’s not just what I say but the way I carry myself and my visual presentation. I bring this unconventionally mature and professional image. My hair has been blue for the past year so visually I get some puzzlement at first, and then once I speak, they hear what I’m saying from a new perspective. The board members gave us high kudos and compliments afterward. I love that we were able to actually share directly with them, and hear their responses.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
AN NSNB BOARD MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE

SPARKING CHANGE

No Stigma No Barriers is dedicated to bridging the gap between TAY Mental Health prevalence and accessibility to resources. As a board member of NSNB I have been able to attend many conferences and trainings dedicated to eliminating the stigma and barriers around mental health as well as policy hearings in which our TAY youth voice was heard regarding the need for mental health resources within communities. Over the past three years, NSNB has provided opportunities for young people whose voices may have been silenced by the expectations and stigmas of society, providing a platform through which to initiate change.

NSNB allows TAY to be in a place of empowerment and voice our opinions, which is how we spark change in the way society views youth as well as the way it views mental disorders. One of the messages we have been sharing with policymakers, educators, health care providers, and others is: Seeking professional help for a mental health disorder can become an intimidating experience as negative behaviors and attitudes are often projected towards individuals who suffer from a mental illness. To support TAY Mental Health in their communities, counties need to hold their government officials and professional health care providers accountable for their treatments and behaviors towards individuals with mental health concerns. As adults are the models for children, they must address their own stigmas in order to decrease cultural stigmas. In school settings, when children and adolescents seek professional help, they are sometimes labeled by their peers as “crazy” or “weak.” Providing a central place on campus for accessible mental health supports, and implementing mental health education in the school system can normalize mental health, and create a safer and more open culture.

Outside of NSNB I attend USC as an MSW candidate. Through this career I am able to connect families in the community to local resources while also advocating for resources not currently present within the community. Utilizing the skillset obtained at USC I have been able to effectively address mental health concerns within the community of educators with the help of NSNB, which has created a safe place for individuals to feel vulnerable and empowered regarding their mental health concerns.

—DANA LESUEUR,
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK–USC,
NSNB BOARD MEMBER
"I think the mental health system still needs change, and I think the system is trying to change. However, there are still some old school ways of dealing with mental health issues, such as the thinking that medication is the solution and that's it. Instead we need to try to fix the issue before we give medication."

—RICARDO ORTEGA MARTINEZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

As the quotes from young people in these pages reveal, California’s mental health system is making strides to increase TAY voice and involvement in the system and the services it provides. As the quotes also show, more work is needed to transform the system to one in which all young people with mental health needs feel heard, know where to access services, and receive support that helps them truly thrive.

"Often when a youth needs help, it’s not the youth speaking about their needs but the parent or guardian speaking for them, and if they aren’t in tune with the youth then their needs aren’t going to be met. A child should be able to express their needs about mental health without getting a backlash or without being guided in the wrong direction because someone else has spoken for them."

—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
“Mental health is just as important as everything else. If you’re not in the proper mental health state it affects everything else. Young people need support around housing and employment because you can’t really focus on your mental health if you’re worried about your housing and employment stability.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“The mental health system should be providing not only resources but actual profound opportunities and hands-on, real world experiences different from the norm.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“In my experience I’ve been received pretty well in my role at NSNB. When I’m standing right in front of the Board of Supervisors it’s kind of hard for them not to listen. I use a lot of my communication skills because if I can’t communicate what’s going on then my point isn’t going to be received. CYC has really helped me build my communication skills.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“NSNB allows us to be our open selves. Part of what life is about is learning and then processing what you’ve learned so you can teach others. I see the NSNB tools being utilized beyond the workshops and presentations. I see other youth starting their own projects after seeing youth doing this work.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
PART THREE: NO STIGMA NO BARRIERS’ ADVOCACY AND IMPACTS

At the start of each year of the project, CYC has convened the NSNB youth board for a multi-day retreat that supports the board in developing a group identity, building their knowledge of state and local mental health systems, learning essential group process and collaboration skills, and beginning to map out their priorities, goals, and vision.

During their Year Three retreat, the youth board developed an initial list of advocacy topics to pursue during the coming year. They adopted the primary frames of targeting root causes of stigma and barriers to mental health access, and identified the following factors:

- Lack of education about mental health
- Underrepresentation and misrepresentation in media
- Racism, prejudice, and oppression
- Cultural and generational differences in conceptualization of mental health
- Lack of education around mental health (self, community, family, institutional/systemic)
- Misinformation about services

For each of these topics, the board further researched existing models and approaches, and focused on possible audiences that would address some of these “root causes” proactively, including law enforcement, college campus staff, and religious leaders.

“NSNB has really brought mental health awareness forward. When we went to the Fresno BOS, the supervisors acknowledged that it’s important to be aware of what young people need in their mental wellness. And it’s an “out of sight, out of mind” thing—if no one’s talking about it, no one’s doing anything about it.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“I think of myself as an advocate all the time. It never turns off. I’ve always felt like a warrior for my people. Even when you think no one’s watching, someone is. I’ve always felt like the voice for those who can’t speak. There are times to reflect and pause, and self-care is every day but I always feel like an advocate. No matter what you think of yourself, there’s power within all of us that we have to access and project.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
“CYC taught me what advocating is and the proper time to advocate. When I first started CYC five years ago, I didn’t even know what ‘advocacy’ meant. As I became active and got involved in committees, I learned that it means to stand up for something you believe in that needs to change for the better. There’s always a good time and a place for advocacy. You’re not going to go through the grocery store yelling things but you’ve got to be logical and go to the right people. I’m not going to talk to my teacher about changing laws affecting the foster care system because they can’t do anything about it but I’m going to talk with my Assemblymembers.”

—KATRINA QUIROZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

DIRECT ADVOCACY

SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

The board has advocated around the state—both in person as well as online—for mental health support in schools to reach all youth who need it, without replicating or perpetuating stigma.

NSNB presented to several groups of educators in the past year, focusing on effective outreach and engagement of youth. Among their messages to these audiences, the youth board emphasized:

• Understand that TAY are mobile.
• Listen actively when engaging with TAY.
• Include TAY in school advisory boards to create shared vision and accountability.
• Be transparent about your process.
• Personalize the intake process so TAY feel cared about and safe to be vulnerable about their mental health needs.

Everywhere NSNB has presented, the reception has been overwhelmingly positive, with educators and others who work with TAY thanking the presenters for sharing their expert perspectives on what youth need in order to thrive.
COLLABORATIVE ADVOCACY

MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS FOR IMMIGRANTS

In addition to engaging in direct advocacy around TAY mental health needs, NSNB is responsive to requests for collaboration on advocacy work that aligns with the priorities set by the board. This year, NSNB joined the Behavioral Health Equity Collaborative to engage in advocacy around one of the project's Year Three advocacy priorities: mental health equity for immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, a topic that greatly affects the hundreds of thousands of undocumented TAY in California. The mission of the Behavioral Health Equity Collaborative, comprised of local and state advocates, is to pursue greater investments into appropriate and quality mental health services for communities of color and other historically underserved communities. As a member of the Collaborative, NSNB conducted advocacy around the issue of immigrants’ access to mental health services—especially critical in the current political climate of bigotry as stigma around immigration intersects with stigma around mental health.

NSNB contributed to the development of the policy platform and advocacy efforts developed by the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN), the lead Collaborative member that researched barriers affecting immigrant communities’ access to mental health around the state.

After reviewing CPEHN’s findings, the Collaborative developed a set of recommendations for policymakers, advocates, and county behavioral health departments, and disseminated them widely.

STATE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The state should expand access to full-scope Medi-Cal and its mental health benefits for low-income undocumented adults.

2. The state should review existing population and service assessment tools, such as the cultural competency plans, to determine the extent to which they may or may not meet the needs of undocumented immigrants.

3. To communicate the right of county behavioral health departments to serve the undocumented population with realignment and MHSA funds, the state should take additional administrative and legislative action to specify the right of county behavioral health departments to serve all residents in California, regardless of immigration status.

4. The state should provide greater direction on the metrics county behavioral health departments can safely use to evaluate mental health disparities among all immigrant communities, including undocumented immigrants.

5. The state should issue and monitor additional directives regarding safe space policies to county mental health facilities and private non-profit mental health organizations.

6. The state should leverage or expand existing statewide workgroups aimed at addressing barriers to care coordination, including a specific evaluation of the mental health and care coordination needs of undocumented immigrants.

7. The state should provide legal support for county behavioral health departments to safely discuss and evaluate mental health outreach strategies to immigrants, including undocumented immigrants.

8. The state should expand eligibility for county mental health care among undocumented immigrants, beyond criteria for serious mental illness, to include risk assessments based upon other social determinants of health: exposure to trauma, housing insecurity, food insecurity, exposure to violence, and lack of access to health coverage.
#FOSTERSTABILITY CAMPAIGN

In another example of NSNB’s collaborative advocacy, the project fully supports CYC’s #FosterStability campaign, an overarching frame that upholds relationship stability as CYC’s capital value and seeks to secure commitments from planning bodies and decision makers to adopt stability as a primary goal as well as criteria for evaluating proposed policy changes impacting young people in foster care.

Through #FosterStability, CYC’s young people seek to shift the expectations of foster care policymakers, administrators, and stakeholders regarding the responsibilities of the system—from “settling for safety and supervision” to ensuring that stability, a loving home and caring adults, education opportunities, and health and wellness are at the center of every young person’s experience in foster care. CYC members see stability across all domains of healthy development as an essential responsibility of a system that has presumed to remove children from their families. This means stability in where they live, and who they turn to; how they learn, and how their needs are met.

#FosterStability seeks to create a youth-centered process for stability in all aspects of the lives of youth in foster care:

- Stability in education and extracurricular activities
- Stability in relationships and lifelong connections
- Stability in a place to call “home”
- Stability in health and wellness

Essential to TAY mental health and wellness, stability is the foundation of CYC’s vision for a system that honors and nourishes the mind, body, and soul of every child and youth impacted by California’s foster care system.
“If your voice is not being heard it’s going to make you want to quit or it’s going to make you push harder to be heard. So that’s going to light the fire. The reason I’m involved in mental health and want to start my own nonprofit is because I felt like I wasn’t heard growing up, and I finally put my foot down. That feeling of not being heard made me want to have a voice, my own voice.”
—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

Over the past three years, NSNB has demonstrated that transition age youth know best what they and their peers need in order to thrive. The young people who led NSNB in successive years gained professional skills and experience—and importantly, received stipends for their work—while working to break down stigma around mental health and improve services and supports for young people.

While developing skills in curriculum development and facilitation, strategic sharing, advocacy, and policy knowledge, the young people who have led NSNB created and refined a culture of youth-led mental health advocacy, which includes their commitment to:

- **Represent** the NSNB culture of inclusiveness and shared leadership
- **Self-identify** as someone with lived mental health experiences
- **Demonstrate** interest in advocacy work and improving policies and practices within the mental health system, especially for TAY
- **Desire** to learn more about different aspects of mental health advocacy
- **Participate** in conversations and decision making
- **Engage** in shared learning opportunities with other NSNB board members
- **Volunteer** for tasks and project work on a regular basis
- **Resolve** issues/conflicts that arise

“My supervisor Joy has been so supportive. She allows my thoughts and ideas to not only be heard but implemented when considering how we want to deliver our message. This is really how creative advocacy programs should work; allowing your members to be authentic and innovative.”
—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“A lot of people are very encouraged when they see how much effort we at NSNB have put into our work in the mental health field.”
—RICARDO ORTEGA MARTINEZ, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
Over the three years of the project, CYC has invested in building the capacity of the NSNB board. While CYC has drawn on its 30 years of youth organizing experience in shaping the project, it can’t be overstated how necessary it is to invest resources in maintaining youth engagement and supporting well-being. Facilitating a youth-led organization requires persistence, patience, adaptability, and structure. Members of the NSNB youth board live in different regions of the state, have lived experience with the mental health system, and have a range of commitments, including education and employment. CYC recognizes the necessity of not only diligently planning and executing logistics, but building program elements that ground, reassure, and build confidence.

“Being involved with the community, I’ve seen people of older generations possess a bias about the opinion of younger individuals. When I’m trying to convey what I’ve heard from other young people regarding their mental health needs, I feel like I’m not taken seriously—I’m seen as ‘just a young person talking,’ but no; I’m a young person telling you what the community needs. I feel like I’m only taken seriously when I put a title to my name—when I say I’m with No Stigma No Barriers or I attend USC—and then it’s like, ‘Ok, let me listen to you.’ They actually want to engage in conversation with me, but it shouldn’t be like that. Their ears should be open any time a young person speaks. We shouldn’t have to attach any labels to be taken seriously.”

—DANA LESUEUR, NSNB BOARD MEMBER

“I believe that people appreciate originality and authenticity, and I love that I’m able to bring that to the field with my uniqueness. I’ve done this kind of work all my life. It’s really cool to see that people are being receptive to things that are not the norm. I believe people appreciate the fact that I come with a unique perspective to help people think in new ways—kind of shake up the paradigm. I believe I’ve been very well received in my role at NSNB, and I’m very grateful for that.”

—MALAYSIA PARRIS, NSNB BOARD MEMBER
**PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES**

**What key factors enable and empower youth leadership and advocacy?**

“Meeting youth where they’re at. A quiet teen who is great at art may do her advocacy that way. So we need to allow youth to own their own talents and skills, and not be so forceful about what and how we expect them to contribute.”

“Convenience. Young people have a lot going on. They’re managing family life, academic life, jobs, relationships, and more. We need to make it convenient for them to participate in initiatives where we need their point of view and expertise.”

“Actively listen to youth while being open minded. Validate their input and opinions. When possible honor their suggestions and ideas by implementing or discussing further. Accommodate the meeting times to fit their schedule—most youth have a difficult time making early meetings due to school or work. Meetings in the afternoon tend to be more successful.”

**How do systems make themselves truly welcoming and responsive to youth advocates?**

“Provide multiple channels for TAY to provide feedback. Be sure to report back any change that they helped initiate. Give public credit (with permission) when TAY-initiated ideas come to fruition.”

“By accommodating meeting times to reflect youths’ schedules, and utilizing language that is understandable to youth—minimize acronyms. Be patient and explain and clarify contents for youth. Provide incentives (food, gift cards, outings).”
WHAT
Trainings, presentations, public testimony by youth

HOW
Legislative accomplishments, cultural changes

EXTERNAL RESULTS
Recommendations, inspiration, recognition

INTERNAL RESULTS
Professional skills, confidence, connections, hope

WHO
Impressive, confident, skilled, visible, impactful, inspiring young people at the center of decision-making

COMMUNITY
Over 30 years of interconnections: Former members become volunteers, board members, staff, partners in the work.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Through hours of training, coaching, mentoring, and practice, youth build stellar professional skills.

LONGEVITY
Relationships are developed with local and statewide policymakers and community partners.

BELOW THE SURFACE ARE POWERFUL LAYERS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT.
CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, CYC has been proud to partner with the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission to bring authentic youth engagement and youth voice to the tables and forums where mental health policy decisions are made.

Throughout this report are observations and recommendations from young people themselves not only about how systems can be made more responsive to youth voice and advocacy, but also about everything it takes to support authentic youth engagement. In our 30 years, CYC has been proud to be at the forefront of a movement to recognize the legitimacy and necessity of having young people participate directly in making the decisions that directly impact their lives. In that time, California’s state and county agencies have made numerous commitments to including young people, and CYC is proud to help young people seize the opportunity to be seen and heard.

As we make clear throughout this report and in our previous reports, “Transformation” and “Impact,” a primary message from CYC to the field is that it is absolutely necessary to adequately resource youth engagement. This means devoting the attention, time, and money it takes to empower young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence it takes for them to walk into a room filled with powerful adults and speak their truth—and advocate for what they believe in. Asking for feedback is great, but how many of us, when we were 16 ourselves, could have given meaningful feedback on, say, how Medi-Cal and MHSA-funded services should interact?

CYC believes that the answer is that any of us could have IF we’d been taught and coached; encouraged to define, explore, and research the issues; given the opportunity to co-learn, and discuss, and deliberate with our peers; and supported in practicing, trying, learning, and trying again. These are the very elements of CYC’s program and organizational structure. And we believe that they are all absolutely necessary to fulfilling the promise of youth participation in policymaking. As the “tip of the iceberg” graphic in this report illustrates, every time you walk into a room and a young person blows you away with their knowledge, wisdom, poise, and eloquence, you may not be aware of the many hours and months and dedicated people that helped make that possible.

Each year, MHSOAC devotes millions of dollars to stakeholder contracts that fund the intensive work it takes to facilitate the authentic engagement of individuals with lived experience of California’s mental health systems. This is absolutely the kind of commitment that is necessary to honor and respect the need and the willingness of the community to participate in governance. CYC applauds this commitment and has been honored to have the opportunity to create No Stigma No Barriers as a means for young people to stand in their power, show leadership to their peers and to the field, and help shape the systems that directly impact their lives.

As we look to the future, we’re committed to continuing to put youth voice at the very center of planning and policymaking. And our young people have a vision of their own: “For 30 years, we’ve worked to make sure youth have a seat at the table. Now we’re making sure that they’re setting the agenda.”