



A future social worker, YMHC member Myah Wiersema is gaining hands-on experience while making a difference in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

📍 CHERRY HEALTH, GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Building a Stronger Behavioral Health Workforce Through the Youth Mental Health Corps

Across the United States, youth mental health challenges are reaching critical levels. In 2023, 40% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year.ⁱ Despite an increasing demand for mental health services, the behavioral health workforce is significantly understaffed nationally, with more than one third of the U.S. population living in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area and even greater projected shortages by 2037.ⁱⁱ While the national landscape illuminates widespread challenges, each state addresses its own unique hurdles and triumphs in supporting youth mental health.

Michigan's youth are facing a significant mental health crisis. In 2022–23, 17% of Michigan children ages 3 to 17 were diagnosed with anxiety or depression, up from 13% in 2020–21.ⁱⁱⁱ This rise translates to approximately 68,000 more children struggling with mental health challenges compared to previous years. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated youth mental health challenges, increasing isolation, anxiety, and depression among students. In Michigan, suicide is now tied with unintentional injury as the leading cause of death for children ages 10 to 14, underscoring the urgent need for effective interventions.^{iv} Moreover, more than 4.2 million residents live in areas lacking sufficient mental health professionals, highlighting a gap in the availability of essential services.^v

There is a clear connection between mental health and academic performance, school climate, and community well-being. Students struggling with mental health challenges are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, disengagement from learning, and difficulty forming supportive peer relationships—factors that increase the likelihood that they will drop out of school.^{vi}

Social media is another growing mental health concern because usage among young people is nearly universal: In 2024, almost half of young people ages 13 to 17 report being online “almost constantly,” with 95% using at least one social media site.^{vii} The widespread use of social media has sparked national conversations around the potential benefits and harms of social media use among young people and prompted the U.S. Surgeon General to release an advisory in 2023 to call attention to the issue.^{viii}

Addressing this crisis requires innovative solutions that not only provide immediate support to affected youth in Michigan but also build sustainable pathways to bolster

✦ About the Youth Mental Health Corps

The YMHC is a multisector partnership designed to address the youth mental health crisis and the mental health workforce shortage in the United States. The initiative connects youth between 13 and 24 years of age with vital mental health resources while offering young adults (ages 18–24) opportunities to gain exposure to and practical experience in behavioral health careers. To do this, the YMHC recruits and trains young adults (referred to as YMHC members) to work as mental health navigators within schools and community organizations. YMHC members gain on-the-job work experience, receive a stipend, earn industry-recognized certifications, and complete a postsecondary credential at no cost to members, equipping them for careers in behavioral health and strengthening the future workforce in this critical field.

The initiative was developed by the Schultz Family Foundation and Pinterest in partnership with AmeriCorps. The YMHC deployed its first cohort of 306 members in September 2024 to serve schools and communities in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas. Seven additional states are preparing to launch their own YMHC programs in fall 2025, and another seven states are developing plans to launch in fall 2026, supported by planning grants. In total, 18 states are now actively partnering in this growing national effort to address mental health through service.

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— DIRECTOR OF AMERICORPS AND ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

the behavioral health workforce. In response to this pressing issue, the state partnered with the Youth Mental Health Corps (YMHC) to build Michigan’s YMHC—a statewide effort to recruit, train, and support the next generation of mental health professionals while addressing the urgent needs of students and families.^{ix}

Michigan’s YMHC members serve in schools and community organizations across the state, connecting behavioral health supports and building a future-ready workforce from the ground up. This dual approach helps mitigate the current mental health and workforce crises, ensuring the long-term well-being of Michigan’s youth population.

This brief explores the 1st year of operations for Michigan’s YMHC, focusing on Cherry Health, one of five service organizations in Michigan taking part in the YMHC.

Pathways Into the Behavioral Health Field

When Michigan’s YMHC launched in fall 2024, the program introduced a school-/community-based organization stackable certification pathway to expand its workforce development impact. In collaboration with Wayne State University (WSU), the pathway incorporated five youth mental health certifications developed by the WSU Community Health Worker Academy to augment participating AmeriCorps partner programs’ existing member training. This innovative pathway equips members serving in schools and community organizations with evidence-based practices to support youth as a peer or near-peer mental health navigator.

Year 1 YMHC partners included Cherry Health, City Year Detroit, the Detroit AmeriCorps Success Program, the Detroit AmeriCorps Urban Safety Program, and the Michigan State University 4-H Health Corps. Beginning in fall 2025, YMHC members will also have the opportunity to earn a Community Health Worker (CHW) state certification—an industry-recognized credential in Michigan—and gain valuable, real-world experience in the field.

Once approved by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan’s YMHC service hours will count toward the CHW certification—offering a clear entry point

How the YMHC Model Works in Michigan

Michigan’s YMHC is a statewide initiative designed to strengthen the behavioral health workforce by engaging young adults in hands-on service experiences that support mental health and well-being in local communities. The program recruits individuals 18 to 24 years old who are committed to careers in behavioral health, including those currently enrolled in undergraduate or associate degree programs related to the field. In its 1st year, Michigan’s YMHC enrolled 50 members.

The YMHC members engage in a range of activities, including

- ♦ delivering health education and outreach;
- ♦ helping youth and families navigate local resources;
- ♦ conducting basic assessments and referring concerns to licensed providers;
- ♦ educating students and school staff on healthy social media use, digital safety and well-being, and online safety; and
- ♦ promoting healthy behaviors and addressing social determinants of health.

into the behavioral health workforce. Upon certification, CHWs in Michigan are eligible for Medicaid reimbursement, expanding access to care for underresourced communities and strengthening the state’s supply line of qualified health professionals.

Cherry Health and the YMHC: Integrated Healthcare and In-Service Training

As a key partner in Michigan’s YMHC, Cherry Health helps advance the program’s dual mission: to expand access to behavioral health support for young people and to grow the supply line of qualified professionals entering the field. Cherry Health is Michigan’s largest and most trusted Federally Qualified Health Center. It operates a network of 14 health centers that serve as one-stop shops for patients seeking comprehensive, quality healthcare—including medical, dental, behavioral

Michigan children ages 3 to 17 diagnosed with anxiety or depression increased

2022–23

17%

2020–21

13%

68,000

more children are struggling with mental health challenges compared to previous years.

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—MYAH WIERSEMA, YMHC MEMBER



YMHC member Myah Wiersema on the steps of Cherry Health

health, vision, and pharmacy services. With more than 35 years of experience delivering care to underserved communities, Cherry Health is deeply embedded in neighborhoods where barriers often limit access to care.

Cherry Health provides integrated, team-based services that not only meet urgent health needs but also fill critical care gaps often left unaddressed in siloed systems. As an integrated healthcare clinic, Cherry Health also has unique insight into the behavioral health workforce shortages in the state—seeing firsthand the vital importance of training and preparing more learners for careers in healthcare. To help address this need, Cherry Health partnered with Michigan’s YMHC to bring in YMHC members who could support patients while gaining hands-on experience. The members serve as a bridge between youth and formal clinical services, expanding Cherry Health’s capacity to offer timely, relationship-centered support while also contributing to the long-term supply line of behavioral health professionals. One Clinical Manager commented,

“this pilot year really helped us figure out how a youth mental health navigator fits into our workflow. ... It’s a flexible care coordination and access point—we wanted someone who could help youth and families navigate the tangled world of behavioral health, especially when clinical staff are stretched thin.”

Cherry Health offers a powerful platform for workforce development—training the next generation of healthcare professionals in real-world, community-based settings. By hosting YMHC members so they can gain work experience, Cherry Health is serving the healthcare needs of Michigan communities while also preparing the next generation of behavioral health professionals.

YMHC Members: “Bridging the Gap” While Gaining Real-World Experience

The impact of near-peer service in a clinical setting cannot be overestimated. The director of AmeriCorps and Academic Programs explained how useful it is to have the 18–24-year-old YMHC members as the connection points with middle and high school age patients:

“Sometimes a white coat isn’t the most comfortable person to open up to. Our Youth Mental Health Corps members are more relatable—they get it on a different level. They make the clinic feel more welcoming and help young patients feel seen.”

Often, this approach of bringing young adults in to support younger patients has an additional benefit: catalyzing community members to serve their neighborhoods through the YMHC experience. That is the case with Myah Wiersema, a YMHC member serving at a Cherry Health clinic in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For Myah, who grew up in Western Michigan near Grand Rapids, the opportunity to serve her community was one she always hoped for but was never sure would come to fruition. After working as a substitute teacher in Grand Rapids Public Schools, Myah discovered a passion for working with youth, ultimately inspiring her to pursue a bachelor’s degree in social work. Eager to complement her studies with hands-on experience, Myah sought out an internship that would immerse her in the behavioral health field—leading her to Cherry Health and the YMHC. Now Myah serves 3 days a week at Cherry Health, addressing the mental health and wellness needs of the Grand Rapids community while gaining crucial work experience to guide and enrich her career path.



YMHC member Myah Wiersema brings compassion and curiosity to her service, helping patients feel seen, heard, and supported.

♦ A FEW THINGS MYAH MAY DO IN HER DAY:

- Review the day's caseload
- Meet with her supervisor to align on daily goals
- Assist with intake forms
- Meet one-on-one with patients for informal check-ins
- Shadow a licensed clinical social worker or participate in a care coordination meeting
- Log case notes

Training and Certifications Set Up Pathways to Employment

Through the YMHC, Myah received training in motivational interviewing, suicide risk screening, and Youth Mental Health First Aid. She also earned a Community Health Worker certificate through Cherry Health AmeriCorps. Myah recently completed her bachelor's degree in social work from Grand Valley State University while serving as a youth mental health navigator with Michigan's YMHC, helping her gain real-world experience and stackable credentials that make her a strong candidate for roles in schools and healthcare settings. She also has continued access to professional development coursework through the WSU Community Health Worker Academy education catalog for 6 months after her service term with the YMHC so that she can extend her learning and readiness for the workforce.

YMHC members like Myah gain wraparound skills and supports that create strong pathways into employment. Myah shared, "I was offered two new positions over the summer—one at a therapy clinic and another at a daycare. Now I just have to decide what pot I'm going to throw my coins into."

Day-to-Day Responsibilities: Gaining Work Experience and Building Professional Networks

Beyond enabling her to earn certifications, Myah's day-to-day responsibilities provide rich exposure to integrated healthcare environments. She participates in interdisciplinary team "huddles," shadows doctors and therapists, and builds relationships with professionals across the healthcare system. These experiences not only prepare her for a career in behavioral health but also expand her professional network and deepen her understanding of whole-person care.

In her role, Myah also helps connect children and families to community-based resources, addressing immediate needs like food, clothing, and transportation while facilitating referrals to therapy and counseling. As a near peer, she helps young patients feel welcomed and comfortable in clinical settings—offering a relatable presence that builds trust.

Myah is an integral part of the Cherry Health team. When she's onsite, she serves as a flexible and responsive support person for the behavioral health team.

Myah reflected: "I'm on call all day. If a behavioral health need pops up—like when a child comes in for an appointment—they'll call me into the room. I can offer a listening ear and help bridge the gap between families and the often-tangled world of behavioral health referrals, autism evaluations, and ADHD screenings."

In her own words, Myah sees herself as "a bit of a care coordinator." She plays a vital role in reengaging existing patients who have missed appointments by working to identify and reduce barriers to care. "I try to see if there are any challenges they're facing—transportation, communication, anything—and help address those so we can improve their continuity of care."

Beyond her day-to-day responsibilities, Myah has built deep and meaningful relationships with her colleagues. "My supervisor wrote my character reference for graduate school, and I'll be starting my master's program in the fall. I feel like I've met people here who I would invite to my wedding."

Myah's experience at Cherry Health has not only advanced her professional journey but also grounded her in a community of mentors and peers who are invested in her growth.

Witnessing Social Media's Impact on Young People Firsthand

In her role at Cherry Health, Myah's average patient load varies on any given day depending on who comes into the clinic and what their needs are. She interacts with children, family members, and caregivers. One of the most pervasive challenges she sees is the emotional toll that excessive screen time can take on young people, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. While in her role, she has become a strong advocate for rebuilding students' social-emotional skills away from screens and devices one face-to-face interaction at a time.

"Post-pandemic, we're seeing a lot of lags in social-emotional development," she explained, noting that students today are "spending more time on their tablets and their phones than ever before, which is really impacting their self-esteem." From her perspective, emotional growth is being stunted as students struggle to disconnect from technology and engage in real-world relationships.

Drawing from her experience at Cherry Health, Myah described how children often become "super dysregulated when their iPad or their computer [is] removed from the situation," likening it to "an addiction of sorts." To counter this, she developed creative lesson plans aimed at building emotional literacy and helping students stay present. "School is not just academics—it's also, how do I interact with people? How do I collaborate? How do I voice when I feel upset?"

For Myah, helping kids navigate this terrain also means engaging parents and caregivers. "I know when you have kids and they're screaming and crying ... it's really easy to put them in front of that tablet," said Myah, acknowledging the challenges of modern-day parenting. But she also urges families to promote alternative coping strategies that nurture imagination, connection, and emotional regulation. "Drawing, being outside in nature—these are the positive experiences that are going to create healthier outcomes anyway over the smartphone."

Myah's work highlights the critical role that YMHC members can play in supporting students' emotional well-being and helping schools respond to the growing impact of digital life on youth development. As efforts to promote healthy social media use and digital safety expand, members like Myah are already laying the groundwork to build trust with students, promote positive behaviors, and create space for conversations that strengthen emotional skills both online and offline.

Through the YMHC, Myah is not only building her career but also helping address the demand for youth behavioral health support in Michigan.

Early Signs of Impact

While comprehensive statewide data are still being collected, early results suggest that Michigan's YMHC is already making a measurable difference—especially at community-centered health sites like Cherry Health. Myah's contributions offer a window into the program's potential. Myah is 1 of nearly 50 YMHC members serving across Michigan in the 2024–25 program year, and her story reflects the powerful ripple effect this model can have when scaled statewide.

From September 2024 to April 2025, Myah made a measurable impact as a YMHC member at Cherry Health:

- ✦ She conducted *281 follow-up connections*, helping ensure continuity of care for young patients and reinforcing support between visits.
- ✦ She facilitated *21 warm handoffs*, personally connecting youth and families to needed services and building trust in the referral process.
- ✦ She made *21 internal referrals* within Cherry Health, including referrals for services such as dental care, expanding access to whole-person support.
- ✦ She provided *2 community-based resource referrals*, demonstrating her role in linking families to external supports beyond the clinic walls.

These numbers underscore the power of integrated care and proactive engagement. Myah did not just help individuals navigate a complex healthcare system—she actively closed service gaps, built trusting relationships, and modeled what it looks like for a community member to become part of the solution. Now consider these contributions in the context of nearly 50 YMHC members currently serving across Michigan. While each member's impact may look different based on their placement and role, together they are building stronger connections between youth and behavioral health services—laying the groundwork for a more responsive, community-based system of care.

Looking Ahead

The Michigan YMHC is still in its early stages, but sites like Cherry Health show its promise. The model not only addresses immediate gaps in care but also seeds a stronger, more representative behavioral health workforce for the future.

Endnotes

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