



YMHC member Jonah McCauley builds trust with his students through daily one-on-one interactions.

📍 CLOQUET PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CLOQUET, MINNESOTA

Students at the Center: Catalyzing Change Through Local Community Action

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.

In Minnesota, youth mental health is a pervasive and escalating challenge across the state. Data from the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey reveals that 29% of students reported long-term mental health problems, a significant increase from 23% in 2019 and 18% in 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ

This crisis is also reflected in a 2023 statewide survey of over 2,400 school leaders in Minnesota: Almost all (94%) principals agreed or somewhat agreed that student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at their schools.^{iv} Leaders selected mental health challenges as the “single greatest challenge” they currently face, citing student trauma and social media as potential root causes for students’ mental health challenges.

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.^v

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 reported being online “almost constantly,” with 95% using at least one social media site.^{vi} The widespread use of social media has sparked

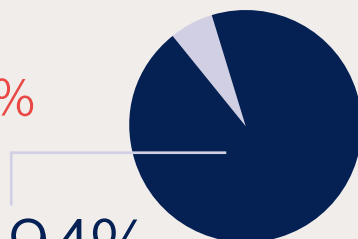
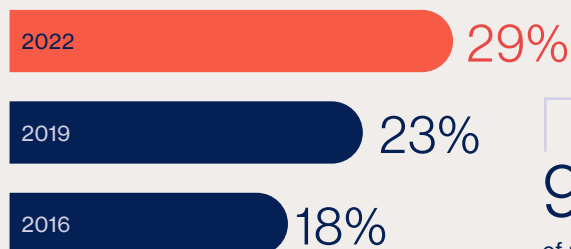
✦ About the Youth Mental Health Corps

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 aims to connect youth between 13 and 24 years of age with vital mental health resources while offering young adults (ages 18–24) opportunities to gain practical experience in behavioral health careers. By recruiting and training YMHC members to work as mental health navigators within schools and community organizations, the initiative provides mental health supports to young people while building the behavioral health workforce of the future. Corps members gain on-the-job work experience, receive a stipend, and earn a postsecondary credential at no cost to advance members’ careers in behavioral health.

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.

Learn more at YouthMentalHealthCorps.org.

Minnesota students reporting long-term mental health problems have increased year over year



of principles agreed that student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at their schools

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.^{vii}

In Cloquet, the YMHC did not arrive as a solution imposed from outside. It has been a relationship-based extension of what the community was already trying to do: meet young people where they are and walk alongside them as they grow.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Care Can Impact Students' Education

Despite these alarming statistics, many young people face barriers to accessing necessary mental health care, including a shortage of mental health professionals. These barriers are exacerbated across rural communities. In rural schools across Minnesota, the ratio of students to a guidance counselor or psychologist is 400:1.^{viii} The U.S. rural average ratio is 310:1. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, 80% of the state's counties are designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas, with rural regions facing the greatest staffing gaps.^{ix} Even when services are technically available, lack of transportation, broadband, and provider diversity can make access nearly impossible. The term "provider diversity" refers to having mental health professionals who reflect the cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of the communities they serve—an essential factor in building trust and delivering effective, culturally responsive care.

These persistent access barriers do not just affect mental health; they also have ripple effects throughout students' educational journeys, limiting their ability to thrive in school and beyond. The connection between mental health and academic outcomes is both well documented and deeply felt by educators across Minnesota. When students struggle with anxiety, depression, or emotional dysregulation, their ability to concentrate, attend school regularly, complete assignments, and form healthy relationships with peers and teachers is significantly compromised. In effect, untreated mental health challenges create invisible barriers to learning that even the best instruction cannot overcome alone. Without targeted, school-embedded supports that address students' emotional well-being, gains in academic performance will remain out of reach for too many.

Connecting Students to Vital Resources Through the Youth Mental Health Corps

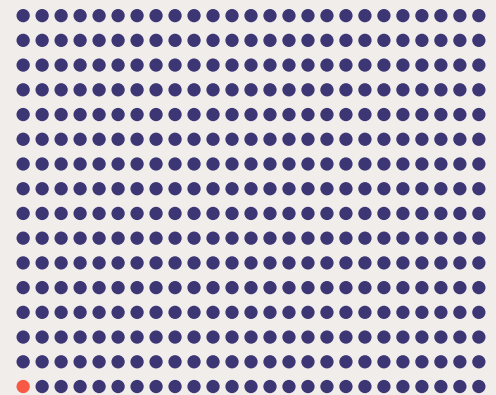
Addressing this pressing issue requires innovative and collaborative solutions that not only provide immediate support to affected youth but also build sustainable pathways to bolster the mental health workforce. The Youth Mental Health Corps (YMHC), launched in Minnesota as part of a national initiative, is working to connect middle and high school students with vital mental health resources while offering young adults opportunities to gain practical experience in behavioral health careers.^x

Since its launch in September 2024, the YMHC has trained and deployed 55 members across Minnesota communities to provide support to thousands of Minnesota youth. Minnesota leverages existing partnerships with two AmeriCorps programs, Recovery Corps and Promise Fellows, the latter run by the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, which also oversees the Minnesota Youth Council to empower members to provide mental

health navigation in schools, community organizations, recovery community organizations, and collegiate recovery programs. The YMHC's work has impacted a range of Minnesota communities, including rural areas such as Cloquet, where YMHC member Jonah McCauley serves his community while earning work experience and building his career.

Integrating the YMHC into Minnesota's educational and community settings can help catalyze action at the local level to create a robust support system that addresses the immediate mental health needs of youth and cultivates a new generation of mental health professionals. This dual approach is essential for mitigating the current crisis and ensuring the long-term well-being of Minnesota's young population.

In Minnesota, student voices are integral to shaping state educational policy. The Minnesota Youth Council (MYC), established by state statute in 2013, embodies this commitment to youth engagement. Comprising



400:1

the ratio of students to a guidance counselor or psychologist in rural schools across Minnesota



80%

of Minnesota's counties are designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas

36 middle and high school students from across the state, the MYC serves as an official legislative committee that provides advice and recommendations to both the Minnesota Legislature and the governor on issues affecting youth.^{xi}

MYC members select bills for consideration, propose youth legislation, and offer advisory opinions on pending legislation. Their involvement ensures that policies are informed by the perspectives and experiences of young people. For instance, the MYC has advocated for increased mental health resources in schools, recognizing wellness as a cornerstone of student engagement and academic success.^{xii} The MYC is supported by the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, a statewide organization dedicated to youth leadership, educational success, and systems change.

Through the MYC, Minnesota has prioritized student-centered design in state education policy, positioning young people as cocreators of the systems that shape their learning and well-being. This model values students not only as recipients of services but also as agents of change capable of influencing statewide priorities, including wellness and engagement.

The YMHC Reflects Minnesota's Student-Centered Approach

The work of the YMHC (also supported by the Minnesota Alliance With Youth) reflects these same values, carried out at the local level by corps members who are embedded in schools and youth-serving organizations. The members not only deliver services to students but also build relationships, listen deeply, and elevate the voices of the students they support. In doing so, they cocreate a service experience that matches the needs of their communities while also ensuring their experience is grounded in their interests, passions, and vocational curiosities.

This student-centered approach—both in creating policy and in addressing the youth mental health crisis—reflects the state's values around fostering youth agency and empowering young people to take action and improve their own communities and state. By aligning its YMHC program with the state's student-centered values, Minnesota is implementing the program in a localized and tailored way to best serve its youth people.

Meeting Rural Mental Health Care Needs Through Relationship-Driven Service

For communities across rural Minnesota, access to behavioral health care remains an ongoing challenge. With fewer providers, limited public transportation, and heightened stigma around mental health, students in rural areas often face barriers that are both structural and cultural. Recognizing these barriers, Cloquet Public Schools partnered with the YMHC—not simply to add another program but to bring in a dedicated, compassionate presence who could build bridges between students, communities, and the support systems they need. In small, rural towns like



YMHC member Jonah McCauley shares a light moment with student—building trust through everyday connection.

◆ An Example of How the YMHC Model Works in Minnesota: Minnesota Alliance With Youth

The Minnesota Alliance With Youth program is one of two AmeriCorps programs participating in the YMHC in Minnesota, with 55 members placed at 45 host sites across the state. Minnesota Alliance With Youth oversees two core youth-centered initiatives:

- ◆ stewarding the MYC to provide the state's youth with a voice in state policymaking
- ◆ coordinating three AmeriCorps programs in Minnesota, including the YMHC

Through its partnership with the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, the YMHC offers young adults (ages 18–24) in Minnesota the opportunity to gain work experience providing behavioral support and navigation services to students at local middle and high schools. These navigation services involve helping students connect with school-based and community mental health resources; supporting them in overcoming barriers such as transportation or family challenges; and guiding them through referrals to counseling, academic supports, or basic needs assistance.

Beginning in fall 2025, members can also enroll in a newly created Mental and Behavioral Health Worker Certificate program at a local community college. This certificate program will enhance members' qualifications for entry-level roles in the field, such as a behavioral health navigator or community health worker—ensuring that their service is beneficial not just to the local community and young people but also to the YMHC members' career goals and the state's broader workforce needs.

In addition to the onsite work experience, members receive ongoing training and support on Youth Mental Health First Aid, mandated reporting, motivational interviewing, and career development training. Fellows also participate in a national YMHC training cohort. Each YMHC member is supported by the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, which offers assistance throughout their YMHC service term.

In its inaugural year in Minnesota, over 55 YMHC members have been deployed across the state through the Minnesota Alliance With Youth; another 10 YMHC members serve with the state's Recovery Corps.

Cloquet, located 20 miles south of the southwestern tip of Lake Superior and with a population of approximately 12,500, the presence of YMHC members like Jonah McCauley is especially powerful.

Through consistent check-ins, one-on-one conversations, and school-based programming, Jonah and other YMHC members in Minnesota create space for students to articulate their needs, which can include help with navigating anxiety, accessing basic necessities, or simply feeling seen. These insights into student needs are not only used to improve individual support but are also shared with school staff and community partners to inform broader interventions. In this way, the YMHC operates as an extension of Minnesota's student-centered ethos—turning policy into practice and values into action.

As one leader reflected, YMHC members are trained “to be listeners” who focus on “forming authentic relationships with young people so that young people can trust them.”

A “Listen-First” Approach That Emphasizes Flexibility and Adaptability

The role of being a trusted ear for students resonates deeply with Jonah. With humility, empathy, and a quiet confidence, Jonah works across multiple school sites to connect with middle and high school students as a near peer. His approach is simple but profound: Listen first. That listening—paired with his genuine love of math and knack for finding shared interests—opens doors to deeper conversations and lasting trust.

Jonah's impact ripples across classrooms and hallways. Whether supporting a student struggling with social anxiety, offering a safe space during lunch hour, facilitating restorative circles, or helping someone make sense of algebra during a tough day, his presence is felt in both quiet gestures and meaningful breakthroughs. Students respond in kind—seeking him out; confiding in him; and seeing him as a model of calm, grounded support.

The experience is just as powerful for Jonah. As he helps students find stability and voice, Jonah reports feeling his own sense of purpose deepening. Teachers and staff note how his contributions reshape the

“I wish I had a million Jonahs. I wish the world had a million Jonahs—we would be in a much better place.”

—CLOQUET PUBLIC SCHOOLS EDUCATOR

climate of care within each site. One educator put it simply: “I wish I had a million Jonahs. I wish the world had a million Jonahs—we would be in a much better place.”

In rural districts such as Cloquet, YMHC members like Jonah are intentionally deployed across multiple schools—a flexible design that helps fill persistent mental health support gaps. Jonah works across five different sites, including a middle school, a high school, an alternative school, the local library, and a restorative justice program. While the majority of his hours are spent at the middle school, he also rotates through the other sites based on student needs, often traveling between

locations during the school day and into the evening. At least once a week, he hosts programming at the library, and his presence at other sites—such as the alternative school or restorative justice program—varies depending on caseload and demand. This mobility enables Jonah to connect with a broad spectrum of students and tailor his support to meet the evolving needs of each setting.

In Cloquet, the YMHC did not arrive as a solution imposed from outside. It has been a relationship-based extension of what the community was already trying to do: meet young people where they are and walk alongside them as they grow.

Finding a Voice—and a Vocation

For Jonah, joining the YMHC was not just an opportunity to give back to his own community—it became a turning point in his own life. Like many YMHC members, Jonah came into the role with a strong desire to support young people but was initially uncertain about his career path. Through 3 years of service in AmeriCorps, including 1 year in the YMHC, that uncertainty transformed into clarity and confidence as he discovered his passion for math education and youth development. Through his daily work as a near-peer mental health navigator—tutoring students, participating in restorative circles, and providing a listening ear—Jonah developed a deepened sense of purpose.

Jonah explains, “I think the biggest part is that [students] just need somebody to be there that they can sort of talk at for a while ... most students don't really have that many adults who they know will listen to them about their problems.”

Jonah credits the program's training, including Youth Mental Health First Aid and Adverse Childhood Experiences education, for reframing how he understands student behavior and trauma. He notes that the training helped him shift from asking “Why is that student acting out like that?” to “What happened to that student that makes them now act like this?”

Jonah finds fulfillment not only in helping students manage academic challenges, such as breaking down overwhelming workloads or improving math skills, but also in supporting their mental health by being a consistent, trusted adult presence. Reflecting on his impact, he shared, “One [parent] actually told me that after working with her daughter for a little bit, that she went from getting an F in math class to consistently getting A's.”

This experience shaped Jonah's professional goals, leading him to pursue a teaching credential in high school math at Bemidji State University: “Before I started my first term as an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, I wasn't at all sure what I wanted to do. ... And now I'm certain I'm going to be a high school math teacher and that's what I want to do.”

For Jonah, serving in the YMHC has been more than just a service opportunity—it has been a journey of personal growth, career exploration, and community impact. In Cloquet, a small rural community with limited access to behavioral health services, programs like the YMHC are helping build a local supply line of passionate young professionals eager to contribute to education and mental health care. Jonah's experience has solidified his decision to pursue teaching, and after completing his credential, he hopes to return and work in the very

school district where he has already built meaningful relationships with students and staff. Through the YMHC, he's found both his professional direction and a strong network of support to guide him forward.

Early Signs of Impact

While formal evaluation data gathering is still underway, early indicators from Cloquet suggest the YMHC is beginning to make a difference.

Jonah, the inaugural YMHC member in this region, has provided both structured and informal support to a broad cross-section of students across five sites.

Over the course of the school year, Jonah has spent more than 620 hours providing one-on-one and small group support, helping students navigate academic challenges, manage stress, prepare for life after school, and build social-emotional skills. In total, he has worked formally with over 24 students and engaged informally with many more throughout both the school day and school year, oftentimes meeting weekly.

Just as importantly, Jonah has helped students and families access critical mental health supports. He has facilitated warm handoffs and referrals to school counselors, county social workers, and local resources, helping students access services such as mental health screenings, food assistance, and tutoring. He has also maintained a regular schedule of follow-up connections, tracking progress and ensuring students felt supported every step of the way.

These early signs of impact highlight not only the value of having a consistent, caring near-peer mental health navigator in the building but also the power of student-centered navigation to remove barriers to well-being and academic success.

Looking Ahead

Although the YMHC is still in its early stages in Minnesota, schools in rural communities like Cloquet are already seeing promising signs of progress. Teachers and administrators report that students working with YMHC members are showing improved attendance, greater academic engagement, and fewer behavioral disruptions. These early outcomes suggest that even a single consistent and supportive near-peer navigator presence can have a meaningful impact on a young person's school experience.

The promise of the program extends beyond students. Starting next year, YMHC members in Minnesota will be enrolled in a Mental and Behavioral Health Worker Certificate program at a local community college. Designed to strengthen YMHC members' professional pathways, the certificate prepares young adults for entry-level roles such as behavioral health navigators and community health workers. In this way, the model serves a dual purpose—meeting the immediate needs of students while building a stronger, more diverse behavioral health workforce for the future.

In a district where staff already wear many hats, the addition of a dedicated, student-centered YMHC member has brought welcome relief. The YMHC model is confirming what educators in Cloquet have always known: When students feel seen, heard, and supported, they begin to show up—not just in body but also with confidence, purpose, and a readiness to learn.

Endnotes

- i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). *Data and statistics on children's mental health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>
- ii Health Resources and Services Administration. (2024). *State of the behavioral health workforce, 2024*. National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/state-of-the-behavioral-health-workforce-report-2024.pdf>
- iii Minnesota Department of Education. (n.d.). *Minnesota Student Survey tables 2013–2022*. <https://public.education.mn.gov/MDEAnalytics/DataTopic.jsp?TOPICID=11>
- iv Kemper, S., Pekel, K., Evenson, A., Seabrook, R., Fynewever, N., & Zhao, Q. (2024). *Report of findings from the second biennial Minnesota principals survey*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. <https://carei.umn.edu/sites/carei/files/2024-04/April-2024-MnPS-2023-main-report.pdf>
- v Monzonis-Carda, I., Rodriguez-Ayllon, M., Adelantado-Renau, M., & Moliner-Urdiales, D. (2024). Bidirectional longitudinal associations of mental health with academic performance in adolescents: DADOS study. *Pediatric Research*, 95(6), 1617–1624.
- vi Faverio, M., & Sidoti, O. (2024). *Teens, social media and technology 2024*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/>
- vii U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sq-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>
- viii Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. National Rural Education Association. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381177248_Why_Rural_Matters_2023_Centering_Equity_and_Opportunity_A_Discussion_with_the_Research_Team
- ix Minnesota Department of Health. (2024). *Rural health care in Minnesota: Data highlights*. <https://www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/ruralhealth/docs/summaries/rhcmn.pdf>
- x Youth Mental Health Corps. (n.d.). *Minnesota Youth Mental Health Corps*. <https://www.youthmentalhealthcorps.org/state/minnesota-youth-mental-health-corps>
- xi Office of the Revisor of Statutes. (2013). *Minnesota Youth Council Committee* (Minn. Stat. § 124D.957). <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.957>
- xii Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor. (2020). *MN Youth Council Committee Annual Report 94th Legislature 2020*. <https://www.leg.mn.gov/docs/2020/mandated/200759.pdf>