



HEALTHY TEEN MINDS PROJECT REPORT 2024

PRESENTED BY THE NORTHEAST WISCONSIN
MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

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Forward

It's remarkable to reflect on this journey, spanning eight years of sustained effort to make a difference, as a coalition, on youth mental health. My first activity as the newly hired executive director of the Northeast Wisconsin Mental Health Connection (aka The Connection) was to apply for the grant that led to our Healthy Teen Minds project. I'd never seen a funding model quite like this. It was innovative, experimental, aspirational and had all the ingredients to create the opportunity for real, systemic change.

It would prove to be transformational for our youth, schools, community, region/state, coalition, staff, and much to my surprise, me. We could not have known, at the time, all the ways our community would benefit from this experience.

Healthy Teen Minds, an initiative of The Connection, has been an extraordinary opportunity to work to improve the mental health of teens in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties. The Connection was one of 10 community coalitions selected throughout Wisconsin for this new, innovative grant project — called the "Advancing Behavioral Health Initiative," through the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment (AHW) at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

We were given eight years of sustained funding, along with education, resources and the support of a learning community, to tackle systemic mental health challenges in our communities, and collectively, in Wisconsin. Individually, each community coalition developed population-level strategies to 'move the needle' on community mental health. Collectively, we learned from one another, shared our successes, problem-solved barriers and challenges, leaned on one another through the pandemic, and supported each others' work.

The ripple effect of this project and our relationship with the AHW Endowment created ecosystem changes to our coalition and community that go far beyond our project strategies and are leaving an indelible mark on our work moving forward. This project transformed how we both do our work and measure its impact.



Beth Clay
Executive Director
N.E.W. Mental Health Connection



It would prove to be transformational for our youth, schools, community, region/state, coalition, staff, and much to my surprise, me. We could not have known, at the time, all the ways our community would benefit from this experience.



Forward (continued)

These changes encompass our adoption of the Collective Impact model to structure our work, a commitment to data-informed decision-making, using Results-Based Accountability as a measurement tool for complex social change, and the utilization of the Conditions of Systems Change model to guide our systemic efforts (see next page). Our connections with like-minded colleagues statewide have enriched our collaborative efforts and priorities. Embracing Sources of Strength, a key strategy of this project, moved us and our community to best-practice, strength-based messaging, away from the traditional 'sad, shock and trauma' of community prevention work.

We cannot talk about the impact of Healthy Teen Minds without acknowledging the passionate leadership of our Project Coordinator, Wendy Harris. She has lived and breathed Sources of Strength for our community, exemplified the spirit of collective action and embodied hope, help and connection over eight years of dedicated effort. We would not be celebrating these wins without Wendy's deep commitment to this work.

For me, personally, I am profoundly moved by the chance to see real change happen in our community. Collective Impact works. Tackling mental health together, collectively and collaboratively, is the RIGHT way to do this. What a humbling and deeply satisfying experience of which to be a part.

Though the Healthy Teen Minds project has sunsetted, it is the hope of The Connection that this report will serve not just as a project summary, but also as a celebration of this effort and its impact, and an impetus and resource for the community's continued and collective work to improve the mental health of children, teens and adults in the Fox Valley region.

Beth Clay
Executive Director
NEW Mental Health Connection



HOW WE MAKE CHANGE

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Collaborating to advance work that no single agency can do alone. The five conditions that create a foundation for successful collaborative work are:

- Common Agenda
- Shared Measurement
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- Continuous Communication
- Backbone Organization

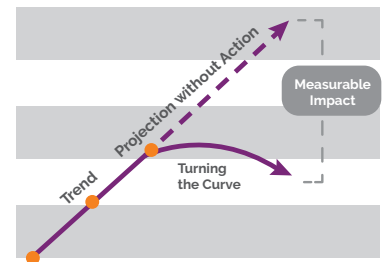
HOW WE MEASURE IMPACT

RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

A model where mental wellness serves as the “north star” of our work, from which a variety of collaborative strategies are required to “turn the curve.”

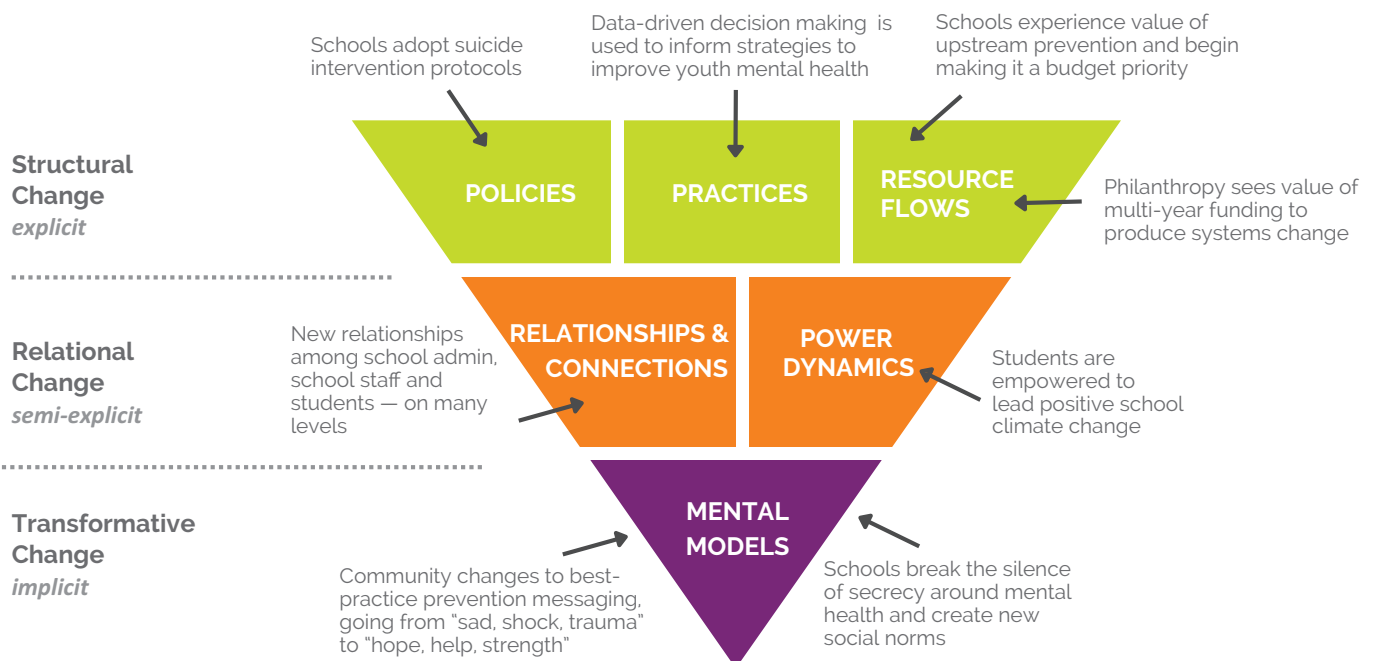
Three categories of performance-level measurements guide how we measure our outcomes:

- **How much did we do?**
Number of people served or activities offered
- **How well did we do it?**
Training, support, customer satisfaction
- **Is anyone better off?**
Improved skills, attitude, behavior, etc.



Six Conditions of Systems Change

Shifts in system conditions are more likely to be sustained when working at three different levels of change: structural change, relational change and transformative change. Below are examples of changes that occurred throughout the work of this project.



How was this project funded?



In 2015, The Northeast Wisconsin Mental Health Connection received an eight-year, \$1.2 million grant from the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin (AHW) Endowment at the Medical College of Wisconsin to improve behavioral health in our community. The Connection was one of 10 Wisconsin community coalitions selected to participate in AHW's new initiative, called the Advancing Behavioral Health Initiative (ABHI).

Fueled by the power of communities to build the networks, systems, and structures best suited to address the health challenges their residents face, ABHI set a new standard for large-scale mental and behavioral health improvement. This strategic, coalition-centered approach combined significant funding with the resources, time, and support communities needed to develop and implement customized action plans reflective of their unique circumstances, and to evaluate both the impact and sustainability of their programs.

AHW's Advancing Behavioral Health Initiative provided the 10 community partners across Wisconsin the luxury of time — 8 years — to form coalitions, identify priorities, build sustainable programs, and measure their effectiveness — all with the support of a robust, AHW-funded team of Medical College of Wisconsin academic partners and a leading national expert on large-scale community-driven change.

GRANT RECEIVED

In 2015, The Connection received an eight-year, \$1.2 million grant from the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin (AHW) Endowment at the Medical College of Wisconsin to improve behavioral health in our community.

“

At a time when alarm bells are ringing across the country about the youth mental health crisis, Healthy Teen Minds has offered an innovative response that works. They are an exemplar of what collective impact can be when the right leaders pull together a network that fosters both belonging and accountability for results. I look forward to continuing to watch, learn from, and share their example.”



Paul Schmitz
CEO, Leading Inside
Out & Senior Advisor,
The Collective Impact Forum

To learn more about the research and coalition-developed strategies generated by this innovative \$20 million investment in 10 community partners who spent eight years studying, shaping, and creating community-driven, sustainable solutions to addressing mental and behavioral health concerns in Wisconsin, visit the Behavioral Health Strategy Guide at <http://www.mcw.edu/strategy-guide>.

The Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment (AHW) is a statewide health philanthropy established by the Medical College of Wisconsin to steward a generous financial gift from Blue Cross & Blue Shield United of Wisconsin. Since 2004, AHW has invested more than \$336 million in 600 health research, workforce development, and community health initiatives statewide. Learn more at www.ahwendowment.org.



“

The Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment is proud of the work and progress Healthy Teen Minds has made to improve mental health and to eliminate the stigma surrounding it within its community.”

— Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH
AHW Director

Executive Summary



By Wendy Harris, Healthy Teen Minds Project Coordinator



Wendy Harris



Healthy Teen Minds, an initiative of The Connection, was an eight-year project to improve the mental health of youth in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties.

Healthy Teen Minds, an initiative of The Connection, was an eight-year project to improve the mental health of youth in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties. Our project set an ambitious goal to reduce the rates of depression and suicide-related behaviors among youth, ages 12-18, by implementing population-level strategies focused on upstream prevention, interventions for struggling teens, and improving access to care.

This project, which ran from 2016 - 2024, was informed by alarming youth mental health data and community concern over the growing youth mental health crisis. Fast forward eight years and the Healthy Teen Minds team is proud to have developed two successful strategies that are being sustained in the community. They include a region-wide implementation of **Sources of Strength**, an evidence-based suicide prevention and wellness program for teens, at area middle and

high schools. The second key strategy was the development and launch of **MyConnectionNEW.org**, a mental health service navigation website designed to make it easier for people to access local providers, services and supports.

Did these strategies make a positive impact? The answer is a resounding “yes.” Did the strategies “move the needle” on teen depression and suicide-related behaviors? That answer is more nuanced, but there is good news to report in the latest local Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data, which provide a window into the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our local youth. YRBS data was used to both inform the development of strategies for this project and measure change.

Suicide-related behaviors are trending downward in the region, with a slightly smaller percentage of high school students in the tri-county region

seriously considering suicide; making a plan for suicide; and attempting suicide, according to 2021 YRBS data. The opposite is true for both the state and nation, where these numbers have continued to rise. (To see the graphs that illustrate these changes, jump ahead to page 21.)

Meanwhile, the rate of self-reported depression among tri-county high school students grew slightly to 27 percent post-pandemic, a smaller percentage compared to both the state and national averages.

This gives us hope that our collective efforts, as a community, to prevent youth from going into crisis in the first place are working. We remain cautiously optimistic as we await the release of the 2023 YRBS data to confirm whether these trends continue.

Of course, we could not have anticipated the global pandemic that exacerbated mental health risk factors and eroded protective factors for not just youth, but the entire population. The pandemic reinforced the lessons we were learning throughout this project, with great urgency: That social isolation is dangerous for our mental health. And what our youth need more than ever is to feel socially connected, supported within their schools, and have trusted adults they can turn to in times of stress. Having a trusted adult — one of the key tenets of Sources of Strength — reduces suicide risk in teens. Our local YRBS data show, however, that we still have work to do in this area.

The pages ahead serve as a summary of our strategies, including how they were implemented; their impact; and sustainability plans for the future. Eight years went by fast, and in the scheme of population-level change, it can feel like a small blip. But our community is gaining momentum to turn the tide on our youth mental health crisis.

Our Sources of Strength strategy was, by far and away, our biggest undertaking of this project. Twenty-two middle and high schools joined us on the journey to implement the program. Our message to those schools is: Stay the course, because Sources of Strength works and it has the power to transform school culture so ALL students can feel connected and supported. As for other schools that are ready to join this “wellness movement,” there is good news to celebrate.

We are thrilled to report that the Cooperative Educational Service Agency 6 (CESA 6), based in Oshkosh, has not only taken over the Sources of Strength strategy, but as of March 2024, has received \$400,000 in state funding to support the expansion of Sources in Northeastern Wisconsin and throughout the state.



Sources has given some of our students who normally would not connect with an organization or other students an avenue to do that. It creates building-wide opportunities to connect all students to a common goal.”

**— Stephanie Bartels, Science Teacher,
Adult Advisor &
Sources of Strength Trainer,
Chilton High School**

Strategy: Sources of Strength

At its core, Sources of Strength is a wellness model. Our goal is to not just keep people alive, but to help people live healthy lives and thrive. It's the idea that 'a rising tide lifts all boats.' Sources works to foster and support healthy individuals and healthy communities, which can have broad downstream preventative impacts in many areas of life."



— Excerpt from the Sources of Strength Trainers Manual

STRATEGY AT A GLANCE

What is Sources of Strength? Sources of Strength (aka Sources) is a best practice youth mental health promotion and suicide prevention program designed to harness the power of peer social networks to create healthy norms and culture within school communities and beyond. The mission of Sources of Strength is to prevent adverse outcomes by increasing wellbeing, help-seeking, resiliency, healthy coping, and belonging. Sources moves beyond a singular focus on risk factors by utilizing an upstream approach for youth suicide prevention. This upstream model strengthens multiple sources of support, or protective factors, for young people so that when times get hard, they have strengths to rely on.

What did we do? Our project implemented Sources at 19 high schools and 3 middle schools

in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties between 2017-2024. This project offered schools a high quality, evidence-based prevention program for suicide, violence, bullying and substance abuse by training, supporting and empowering student peer leaders and caring adults to impact their school and local communities through the power of connection, hope, help and strength. The project also built community capacity to sustain the program in these schools long-term, spread the program to additional schools, and changed local

school culture to improve youth mental health.



Kaukauna High School students and staff brainstorm campaign ideas during their fall 2021 Sources of Strength peer leader training.

How did we do it? We invested in the training and certification of three local trainers who trained and supported each school through three consecutive years of trainings for staff and students. The Connection cost-shared with schools, making the program more affordable for school districts to adopt. We engaged school leadership in the adoption of the program; offered support for program implementation and program evaluation; and supported adult advisors through a learning community. To ensure long-term sustainability, the project certified additional local trainers, including local school staff and Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) employees, while building capacity for the spread of Sources of Strength throughout Northeast Wisconsin and even statewide.

How did we measure impact? Over the seven years of implementation, including during and in the wake of the pandemic, our intended impact was to decrease youth depression; decrease youth suicide-related behaviors; increase youth identification of trusted adults within their schools; and increase youth sense of belonging at school. We measured impact using county-level data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey; qualitative data; and fidelity markers established by the Sources of Strength program.

How will the strategy be sustained? CESA 6 took over the local implementation of Sources of Strength in 2023 and is expanding the program in Northeastern Wisconsin and beyond. Our project provided funding support for three CESA 6 employees to become Sources trainers. CESA 6 is also contracting with our project's two Sources trainers, allowing it to meet growing demands for trainings. Meanwhile, a dozen staff from schools engaged in this project achieved

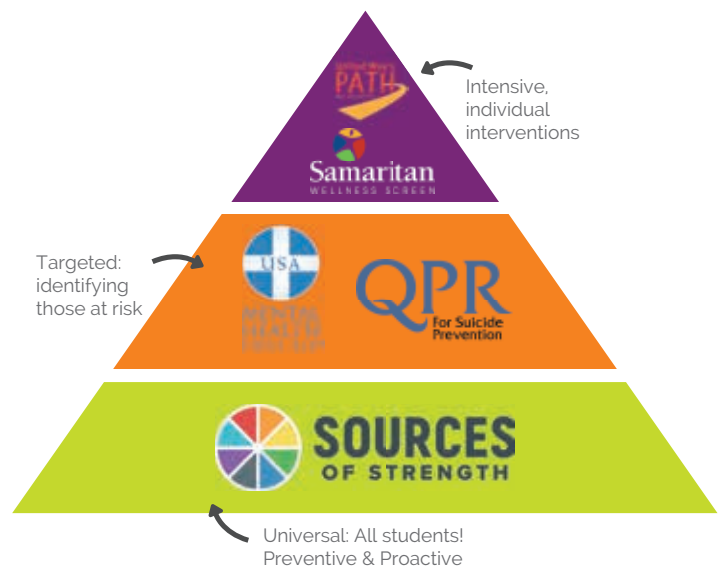
Carter King, a 2020 graduate of Appleton North High School and former peer leader, shared his strengths on a campaign poster that was displayed at the school.



Sources training certification, and are equipped to sustain Sources in their respective school districts for the long term.

STRATEGY BACKGROUND

In 2016, the Healthy Teen Minds initiative of The Connection made the strategic decision to implement Sources of Strength, an upstream suicide prevention and comprehensive wellness program for youth. The project team discovered



SOURCES OF STRENGTH

Sources in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMSHA's) National Registry of Evidence-Based Practices. While vetting the program, our team learned that Hortonville High School, in Outagamie County, had implemented Sources, and was reporting a positive impact.

At the time, the landscape of youth mental health was concerning, with data on youth depression, anxiety and suicide-related behaviors moving in the wrong direction, and several community partners were also working to address this crisis. Samaritan, the Menasha-based outpatient mental health and AODA clinic, was expanding its Wellness Screen program, which offers mental health screening and referrals for students at schools. United Way Fox Cities was investing in its Providing Access to Healing (PATH) Program, offering newly-designed school-based mental healthcare for students. The community was also offering and expanding its gatekeeper trainings, including Youth Mental Health First Aid and Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), equipping more adults with the tools to support youth in crisis in our community.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Public Instruction, in 2016, released a new guide, The Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework, offering a road map for schools to plan and implement comprehensive school mental health systems. Many of our local school districts were just getting started in creating their plans to address school-based mental health, while others were continuing to develop and implement more comprehensive plans. Schools were seeking thought leadership from experts and financial support in order to follow this new road map towards improved youth mental health.

As the Healthy Teen Minds project team mapped existing efforts, it became clear the region could benefit from a universal, upstream mental health promotion/suicide-prevention strategy. Much of the existing youth mental health "prevention" work taking place in our community was actually intervention work. Sources offered a new and universal approach for our community to truly be preventive and to build up protective factors in teens to ultimately prevent the onset of mental health crises in the first place. This upstream approach complemented existing efforts and offered our community an evidence-based, preventive and proactive strategy that had the best chance of moving the needle for our kids.

THE SOURCES OF STRENGTH MODEL

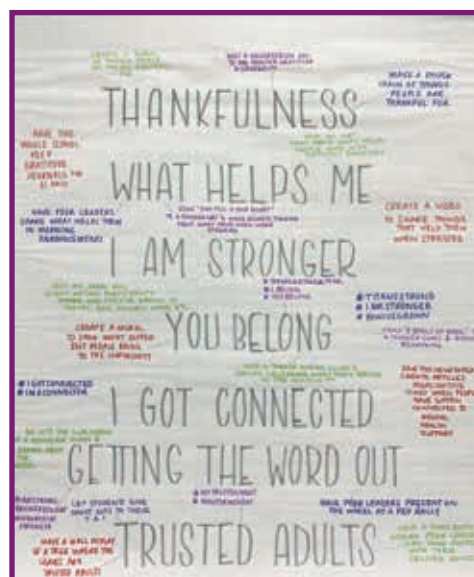
Sources focuses on building and promoting protective factors in teens and school communities to enhance mental health and overall wellbeing.



The program empowers teams of student peer leaders mentored by adult advisors to positively influence peer social norms and culture.

The program is rooted in eight “strengths” — factors protective against suicide risk, including: family support, positive friends, mentors, healthy activities, generosity, spirituality, physical health, and mental health. Peer leaders are trained in the model and are encouraged to individually assess and develop strengths in their life; serve as agents of positive change in their schools; and connectors to help.

The peer leader teams, with the support of adult advisors, meet regularly at their school to plan and spread interactive messaging campaigns based on “hope, help, and strength.” The cumulative effect of the messaging campaigns, and the social contagion of peer leaders sharing and modeling personal strengths and ties to trusted adults, creates improvements in:



- Help-seeking behavior
- Youth-adult connectedness
- Trust toward adults
- Healthy coping skills
- Individual resilience; and
- School environment, where ALL students feel welcome, included and connected

Sources of Strength has been listed on the SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices since 2011. Also, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention featured Sources in its 2017 publication “Preventing Suicide: A Technical Package of Policy, Programs, and Practices.”



HOW ARE SCHOOLS TRAINED IN SOURCES OF STRENGTH?

The Sources of Strength model consists of recruiting and training a diverse group of adult advisors and peer leaders who then practice, build and share a community of strength.

The training model is broken into two foundational trainings. First, adult advisors are trained at the beginning of the school year, typically. This three- to four-hour training covers the history, philosophy and model of Sources of Strength, along with the logistics of leading a peer leader team. Schools were encouraged to invite all staff to the adult advisor training in their first year of implementation, to create a strong foundation and buy-in for the program.

Following the adult advisor training, staff and administrators decide who will lead the program. Schools were advised to have at least two lead



Appleton North High School students and staff enjoy a game during their first peer leader training in fall 2017.



Appleton North High School staff participate in adult advisor training in fall 2017.

adult advisors who self-identify (and are not "voluntold") to champion the program, mentor students and provide logistical support for meeting and campaign planning. Schools were also encouraged to offer a stipend to their lead adult advisors, in the same way they pay coaches of sports teams and advisors of school clubs.

Meanwhile, a diverse group of students are nominated and invited to be peer leaders. Peer leader teams should reflect the student body in terms of grade level, socioeconomic experience, racial and ethnic identity, gender and sexuality, religious affiliations, etc.

Also, peer leader teams need to be socially diverse, composed of students from every social group (or clique), including students from marginalized groups (and even outliers — those without a social group).

The peer leaders then attend a four- to six-hour training with adult advisors. The training is designed to be fun, interactive and build a sense of community while elevating youth stories of strength and hope.



Students from **J.R. Gerritts Middle School** in Kimberly work on a strengths poster during their peer leader training in fall 2021.

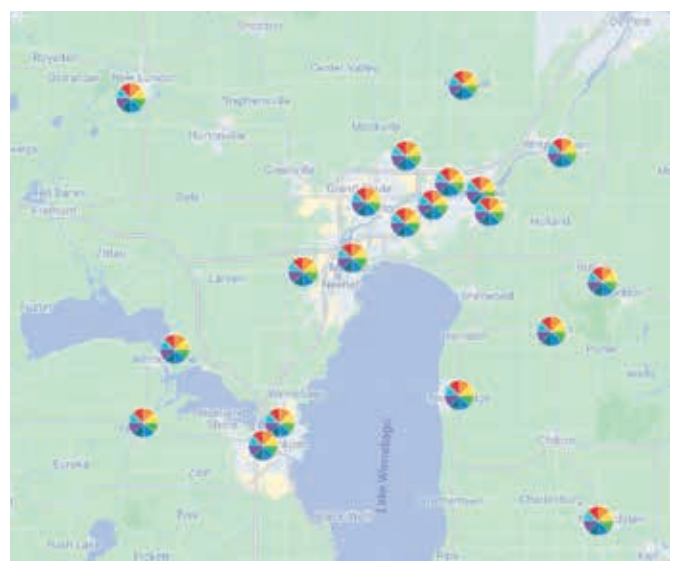
Following training, the peer leader teams are expected to meet once or twice a month throughout the school year to develop interactive messaging campaigns with guidance and support

from the adult advisors. The National Sources of Strength organization offers a variety of resources to support schools, including a website filled with campaign and meeting templates.

IMPLEMENTATION: 22 Tri-County Schools Adopt Sources of Strength

Between 2017 and 2023, a total of 22 public middle and high schools in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties implemented Sources of Strength as part of the Healthy Teen Minds initiative. Each school agreed to three years of annual Sources trainings, to be part of a learning community, and participate in evaluation activities.

Sources of Strength is evidence-based for high schools, but is commonly implemented in middle schools as well. This project gave priority to implementing Sources at area high schools, but did add three middle schools in the second cohort as part of a middle school pilot project.



Sources of Strength spread to 22 middle and high schools throughout Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties.

SOURCES OF STRENGTH SCHOOLS				
Cohort 1: Joined 2017/18	Cohort 2: Joined 2018/19	Cohort 3: Joined 2019/20	Cohort 4: Joined 2020/21	Cohort 5: Joined 2021/22
Appleton East HS	J.R. Gerritts MS	Chilton HS	Omro HS	Brillion HS
Appleton North HS	River View MS	Freedom HS		Kaukauna HS
Appleton West HS	Little Chute MS	Hilbert HS		Stockbridge HS
Neenah HS	Little Chute HS	New Holstein HS		Menasha HS
Oshkosh North HS	New London HS	Winneconne HS		
Oshkosh West HS	Wrightstown HS			

The project invested in training and certifying three regional trainers to support schools during the implementation years. In year one, the project team hired Carlyn Andrew, then Senior Director of Counseling and training at the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Fox Valley, as its first trainer and invested in Carlyn's training certification. Mandi Dornfeld, an experienced youth trainer with the University of Wisconsin Extension - Madison, was recruited

and hired as a second trainer in year two. Wendy Harris, the Healthy Teen Minds project coordinator, achieved her training certification in year three, and served as a backup trainer to meet growing demand for trainings.

Having regional trainers was more affordable than using trainers from the national Sources of Strength training team, based in Denver, CO.

Using local trainers also allowed known community leaders in the youth space to build relationships with schools and create continuity from year to year. The project split the training fees with schools, using financial support from the AHW grant. Schools were offered three years of annual trainings and support for \$3,875, representing a nearly 75 percent discount from the program's actual \$15,000 cost, (\$5,000 per year of trainings. Training costs have since increased.



Mandi Dornfeld (left) and Carlyn Andrew (in pink boa) pose with other Sources of Strength trainers at a national training in 2018.

SUSTAINABILITY PLAN: CESA 6 and School-Based Trainers Ensure Sources Keeps Going

The plan to sustain Sources of Strength in the region was two fold: 1) Empower school districts to sustain their own Sources programs by investing in, and certifying, school-based trainers; and 2) Identify an educational organization willing to adopt the Sources implementation project, and support certification of local trainers within that organization.



Empowering our youth to use their voices and working cooperatively to build a community of strength has its roots in ordinary conversations that focus on connection and belonging. Sources of Strength helps set the stage to elevate our everyday conversations to ones centered on hope, help, and strength. This work has the power to transform our communities."

— Rebecca McMorrow,
Sources of Strength Trainer & SEL Coach,
CESA 6

In 2022, The Connection and CESA 6 shared the exciting news that the CESA 6 Social Emotional Learning Center would take over the Sources implementation project. In March 2024, CESA 6 received \$400,000 in funding from the state Department of Health Services to support and expand Sources throughout Wisconsin.

Becky McMorrow, a CESA 6 social-emotional learning coach, was certified as the agency's first Sources trainer in 2023, with support from the Healthy Teen Minds project. Becky attended the Appleton T4T in 2021 and co-trained with Mandi and Carlyn to achieve her certification. Project funding also supported two additional CESA 6 staff to attend a T4T to become provisional trainers.

Meanwhile, a dozen staff from the project's Sources schools who attended the T4T completed their certification requirements in 2023 and can now lead Sources trainings in their own school districts.

As a final sustainability effort, the Healthy Teens Minds initiative, in partnership with CESA 6, is sponsoring a "booster" T4T in Appleton in summer of 2024, allowing local and school-based trainers to be re-certified for three additional years. Mandi and Carlyn, who both plan to attend, will remain trainers in the region, contracted by CESA 6. Becky, meanwhile, is working toward advanced certification, which will allow her to co-train and certify additional trainers for CESA 6.



We couldn't have asked for a more perfect community partner to take over this work. While we were building up our Sources strategy, the CESA 6 SEL team was building its comprehensive school mental health model to support schools. This is the perfect marriage of two complementary projects."

— Wendy Harris, Project Coordinator
Healthy Teen Minds

Congratulations to the 12 school-based trainers who achieved their Sources of Strength training certification:

- Mike Altekruise, Neenah Joint School District
- Stephanie Bartels, Chilton High School
- Shelby Brey, Oshkosh West High School
- Kendilyn Brockman, Brillion High School
- Lisa Gretz, Little Chute High School
- Rhonda Holmes, Brillion High School
- Michelle Huettl, Oshkosh West High School
- Brittany Mayer, Chilton High School
- Olivia Schad, New Holstein School District
- Tracy Schmidt, Little Chute Middle School
- Casey Suttner, New Holstein School District
- Sarah Zygarlicke, River View Middle School, Kaukauna



EVALUATION & IMPACT of Sources of Strength

Moving the Needle: YRBS Data Show Progress Being Made

The goal of the region-wide implementation of Sources of Strength was to turn the curve on the region's youth mental health crisis, and help reverse a decade-long trend of ever increasing rates of depression and suicide-related behaviors among local teens.

At the outset of this project in 2016, data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) across Calumet, Outagamie, and Winnebago Counties indicated that 26 percent of teens reported feeling "sad or hopeless," a proxy for teen depression. Meanwhile, 17 percent of local teens had seriously considered suicide and 9 percent had attempted suicide, rates higher than both the state and national averages at the time.

These data points served as key indicators for this project, the "needles" that we sought to move. Eight years later, there is good news to report — that this project, and our community's collective efforts to improve youth mental health, have made a measurable impact.

2021 YRBS data showed that:

- The rate of self-reported depression among tri-county high school students grew slightly to 27 percent post-pandemic, a smaller percentage compared to both the state and national averages. Wisconsin, as a whole, saw a 5 percentage point increase to 34 percent of high school students reporting feeling "sad and hopeless." For the nation, the number rose to 42 percent.

- Local teens reporting significant problems with anxiety dropped to 45 percent (from 47 percent), while the Wisconsin rate increased to 52 percent (from 49 percent). (National data is not available for teen anxiety.)
- Between 2016 and 2021, the percentage of local teens:
 - who seriously considered suicide dropped to 14 percent (from 17 percent);
 - who made a suicide plan dropped to 10 percent (from 13);
 - who attempted suicide dropped to 6 percent (from 9 percent.)

While these data trends are encouraging, and suggest that fewer teens are reaching the point of crisis in the first place, there is still much work to be done to continue to build protective factors in our youth, particularly for marginalized teens.

In 2021, more than half of tri-county LGBTQ+ teens (55 percent) reported feeling "sad and hopeless,"

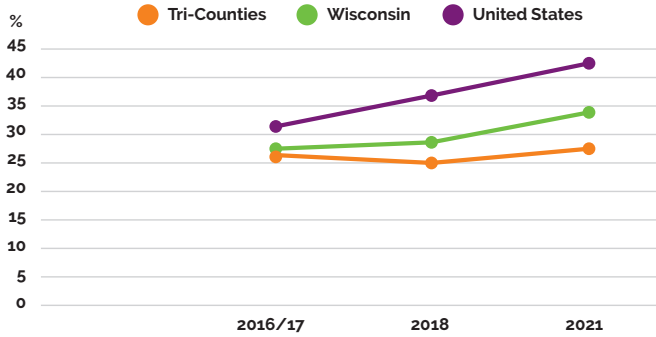
WHAT IS THE YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY? (YRBS)

Administered every two years, The Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey is conducted as part of a national effort by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to monitor health-risk behaviors of the nation's high school students, including topics related to mental health, substance use, sexual behavior, safety, social supports; social media use; nutrition and physical health.

YRBS

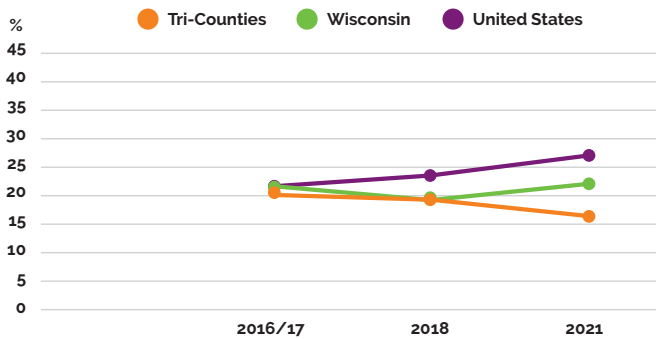
Depression

(so sad and hopeless that stopped usual activities, in past 12 months)



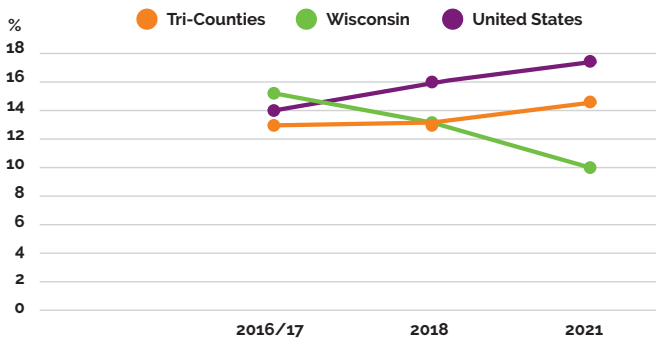
Seriously Considered Suicide

(in past 12 months)



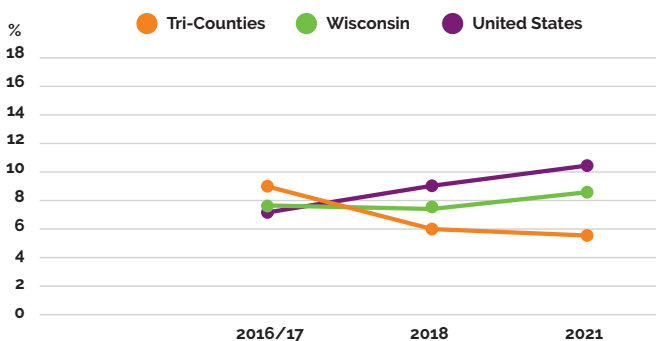
Made a Suicide Plan

(in past 12 months)



Attempted Suicide

(in past 12 months)



a rate more than two times higher than their heterosexual peers (21 percent). A third of LGBTQ+ students (33 percent) reported they seriously considered suicide — three times higher than their peers; and 13 percent had attempted suicide, twice the rate compared to all students.

Meanwhile, students of color, students receiving special education services, and students facing food insecurity all reported experiencing greater mental health challenges while having fewer supports. Also, females experience higher rates of anxiety, depression and suicide-related behaviors compared to males.

For protective factors, 83 percent of all tri-county students in 2021 reported having at least one supportive adult besides parents, and 70 percent reported that they had at least one teacher or adult at school to talk to. Both numbers represented a slight dip from 2018 data. The number of high school students reporting that they felt like they "belong at school," dropped four percentage points to 63 percent.

We can't know what these trend lines would have looked like had we not experienced the pandemic in the middle of implementation. The pandemic and subsequent school shutdown, and resulting social isolation, could be contributing factors to the decreased sense of belonging at school and ties to trusted adults. Sources is designed to move these data points in the other direction.

Source: Historical community YRBS data and 2021 YRBS data provided by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

PROJECT REACH

Over the course of this project, the training team trained 1,520 school staff members and 3,566 peer leaders across the 22 schools between 2017 and 2023.

During the first year of implementation, a total of 240 school staff from the project's first cohort of six high schools attended adult advisor training, followed by 340 students who attended the day-long peer leader training at their respective schools. Each year, the numbers grew as additional schools joined the project. By year five, 22 schools were engaged when the three regional Sources trainers trained a total of 442 school staff and 884 peer leaders.

Postpandemic, several schools from the early cohorts sought additional annual trainings, beyond the three-year commitment, to keep momentum going and ensure that additional staff and students, including incoming freshman, were able to experience the training. Other school districts, like Wrightstown Menasha and New London, contracted with the national Sources of Strength training team to train their middle schools (because our project had maxed out its training capacity). The Stockbridge School District even invested in the Sources of Strength elementary model, which includes a classroom curriculum. This growing commitment to Sources was evidence that schools valued the program and were willing to continue to invest in it.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS AND STAFF TRAINED

	2017/18 Year 1	2018/19 Year 2	2019/20 Year 3	2020/21 Year 4	2021/22 Year 5	2022/23 Year 6	2023/24 Year 7 <small>CESA 6 takes over project</small>
# Schools Trained	6	12	17	2	22	20	20 <small>(including 8 new schools)</small>
# Adult Advisors Trained	240	238	305	91	442	204	120
# Peer Leaders Trained	340	595	835	71	884	841	513

Potential number of students exposed to Sources of Strength messaging, per year, at implementing schools, based on total enrollment

2017/18 Year 1	2018/19 Year 2	2019/20 Year 3	2020/21* Year 4	2021/22 Year 5	2022/23 Year 6
9,171	13,046	14,876	15,072	17,725	17,555
6 schools	12 schools	17 schools	18 schools	22 schools	22 schools

*Due to COVID and the subsequent shutdown of schools, many schools were limited in their ability to carry out campaigns.

IMPLEMENTING TO FIDELITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Because Sources of Strength is an evidence-based program, it includes a list of fidelity measures for schools. Throughout the project, our project team engaged with schools to support them toward implementing the program to fidelity by:

- Providing annual adult advisor and peer leader trainings to school staff and a diverse group of students that were identified to reach all social groups within the school community;
- Hosting learning community meetings for adult advisors, two to three times per year, to coach schools, help problem-solve implementation challenges and share best practices;
- Offering monthly support meetings during the COVID shutdown to support adult advisors in continuing to capitalize on the program, even as youth were not attending school in-person, and
- Supporting schools in documenting messaging campaigns annually, which allowed trainers to offer better informed coaching on reaching fidelity with those campaigns.

As adult advisor/peer leader teams progressed through the years with their Sources programs, they became more adept at creating impactful campaigns that moved beyond passive messaging to engaging campaigns that involved participation by the entire school population.

Successful and effective prevention messaging is targeted; it is positive, it builds awareness of the strengths, and it invites everyone to engage, interact and apply the strengths to their own lives.



It has been incredible to work with our team of peer leaders and adult advisors to spread the message that we are a Sources of Strength school and that everyone can benefit from engaging with the strengths around the wheel. The peer leaders are always so enthusiastic, and I love hearing their creative ideas and seeing them come to life."

— Shelby Brey, English Teacher,
Adult Advisor & Sources of Strength Trainer,
Oshkosh West High School

LESSONS LEARNED: A Qualitative Review by Adult Advisors

As with any large scale implementation, there have been successes, challenges and lessons learned. Some of the challenges have included:

- Staff turnover resulting in the loss of key adult advisors;
- School staff and/or administrators' attitudes about mental health and commitment to the program;
- Busy school schedules that make it difficult to find times for peer leaders to meet and plan;

- Finding and training the right advisors who are committed and have the appropriate skill sets and passion for the program;
- Insufficient resources allocated to school staff to fulfill their duties as adult advisors (i.e. dedicated planning time, stipends, money for supplies)

Despite these challenges, and in the wake of COVID, the engaged schools, overall, have shown commitment to the program and are reporting positive changes in school culture.

As part of this strategy's evaluation process, The Healthy Teen Minds project team convened a series of focus groups in 2022 of lead adult advisors — school staff — who offered feedback on their Sources of Strength implementation efforts.

A summary of key themes from those interviews follows.

Whole school buy-in helps ensure success

Adult advisors indicated that successful implementation relies on buy-in at all levels, especially from school leadership and administration. As one advisor explained,



Trainer **Mandi Dornfeld** leads a "rock, paper, scissors" tournament at the Wrightstown High School peer leader training in fall 2019. Games and making time for fun are an integral part of the Sources of Strength model.

"I will say that you have to have the principals involved," and another added, "If your principal's not part of it, not aware of it, not supporting it, I can't even imagine that it could run for very long."

Providing training and information to all members of the school, including for example, custodial staff, can better spread the lessons of Sources throughout the school, making it more likely to result in culture change:

"I do think it helped...to train the whole staff. And any new staff members that come in, we still add them to our group...I think that's important just so there's that baseline of understanding."

This "whole school" approach requires organized and frequent communication. Advisors emphasized that Sources competes with many other priorities for both teachers and students, which became especially pronounced during the height of COVID.

Stipends, financial support needed to maintain program

Advisors said that stipends for adult advisors greatly improves engagement from teachers and other implementers. Advisors discussed the need for financial support of the program, similar to other student clubs, and many used fundraisers to support implementation. The Connection's support both in paying for the program itself, and the in-kind support provided through supplemental training was highly appreciated: "If they weren't around, we would have had to find other braided funding and grants."

The value of diversity

Ensuring diversity of peer leaders was important to adult advisors, who intentionally sought participation from all groups in the school, not just those students who are already engaged in school or extracurriculars.

Being creative, thoughtful, and welcoming helped ensure that diversity: "Finding the right avenue to bring them in a positive light to say, hey, it doesn't matter what's been going on. You have strengths, and you have a following, and you have a voice, and you have people who listen, and so we need you."

Advisors conducted specific outreach to popular teachers and coaches, alternative education and special education teachers, shop teachers, lunch monitors, crossing guards, and other school community members. As one advisor explained, "Sources needs to be cool at the schools. And if it's not cool, then it doesn't take hold or it doesn't stick. And that has to do with the right adults being involved, the right kids being involved."

Some schools benefited from teachers with experience with middle schools, allowing them to identify potential peer leaders who are new high school. One advisor explained that some of the peer leaders at her school indicated, "This is the first time somebody's invited me and nominated me to be a part of something."

Successful implementation meant that adult advisors needed to be highly involved with peer leader groups to identify influential leaders, encourage participation from more introverted students, and ensure some students don't get "lost in the shuffle and their voices aren't heard."



The peer leader team at **New London High School** invited all students to decorate ornaments that were hung throughout the school. The decorations represented positive friendships (gingerbread people), mentors (holiday lights), healthy activities (snowflakes), and gratitude (presents). If students decorated an ornament, they were able to "punch" the giant snowman and win a prize.



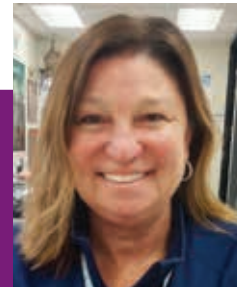
Successful campaigns

Implementation of Sources relies on peer leader teams leading interactive campaigns and awareness building, which advisors greatly valued. Advisors suggested that schools getting started in Sources can use any of the templated campaigns offered by national Sources of Strength. While students are encouraged to design original campaigns that reflect their school culture, starting off with a pre-packaged campaign is an initial "easy win."

Other suggestions included tying Sources campaigns to existing events, such as dances, fundraisers, holiday events, and spirit week activities. Advisors emphasized that small campaigns can also have a big impact. Regardless of size, the key component to

successful campaigns was having fun, and advisors suggested a degree of flexibility around ambiguity regarding the specific parameters of Sources:

"We had an obstacle course that we did...and it was just a lot of fun for the students that participated. Again, I don't know if they're like, 'Oh, this is healthy activities through Sources of Strength.' And that's the other thing, the people that are involved — the Sources of Strength students — that's what keeps them coming back is the fun."



Two of my favorite campaigns have been generosity day, where we created things for several organizations and delivered them. All students volunteered their time to make this happen. And secondly, Wellness Day. We had over 35 vendors show up from Fox Cities to support our students and share resources."

— Lisa Gretz, School Counselor,
Adult Advisor & Sources of
Strength Trainer,
Little Chute School District

Dave Pynenberg (middle), former principal of **Appleton North High School**, poses with student peer leaders in 2021.





The **Oshkosh West High School** peer leader team ran a gratitude campaign in fall 2022. Peer leaders interviewed students and staff about what they were thankful for in a series of video messages. Students were also invited to write something they were thankful for on a turkey "feather," which became part of a large mural.

Need and Excitement

Initiation of Sources in schools was, for the most part, greeted with enthusiasm. Advisors indicated the need for mental health support for students: "There was just a lot of excitement, acknowledgement that this is needed — I almost think a lot of relief that there was something to do that people felt like 'This feels like a solution to a problem that we have.'"

Advisors acknowledged several factors that may limit uptake and sustainability of Sources. Buy-in was not universal, with some staff expressing resistance, perhaps due to stigma, burnout, unsatisfying experience with previous programming or training, skepticism of Sources, and time constraints.

In 2020 especially, students and school staff were greatly challenged by the pandemic and Sources implementation lost momentum. Even outside of the dramatic effect of the pandemic on schools, excitement naturally "waxed and waned,"

with some expectation of decreased impact or motivation over time. Advisors also suggested that schools not become discouraged by attrition of peer leaders, and that it was a natural part of the process often leading to a core group of individuals that are dedicated and committed to the program.



SOURCES OF STRENGTH



Culture Change

Advisors indicated that Sources provided a "shared language" to discuss issues of mental health and gave teachers and staff more skills to rely upon when a student expressed difficulties.

One advisor explained that having the Sources Wheel of Strengths up in their office created a "conversation piece" to spark reflection on an individual's own resources. "One of the things that we never did before, at least I never did before Sources, was deal with a lot of students who were in my office — whether it's behavioral things, whether it's things that they're just going through socially, emotionally and so forth...So, we've had a lot of success in using it that way, even students that are feeling suicidal."



The biggest impact observed by advisors was a change in the culture of the schools.

"I think the language has changed. I think people are talking about it," said another advisor. "Our school counselors — they all have the posters up, talk about Source of Strength as part of when they're talking to the kids. And I think that's helped."

However, they also indicated that culture change requires consistency of the holistic approach:

"It has to be integrated in all aspects...we talk about using our strengths in order to get through difficult times and just making it just part of the everyday conversation ongoing."

SOURCES OF STRENGTH SPREADS ACROSS WISCONSIN

Just as Sources of Strength creates a contagion effect among school populations, the program also became “contagious” throughout Wisconsin. ThedaCare, one of our project partners, used our business and training model to duplicate our implementation project in their service area, which includes six adjacent counties to the north and west of our project footprint. This “sister” project, launched in 2018, has implemented Sources at 15 high schools in that region.

Additionally, our team was invited to share our Sources implementation story in 2019 with a school-based mental health project in Southwest Wisconsin. Katrina Johnson, who has been leading that project, attended our “Train the Trainer” event in August 2021, and is now a certified trainer. That project, called “Connect Strength,” has since implemented Sources across 15 school districts

in Southwest Wisconsin and has hosted its own Sources trainings. Also, numerous other schools throughout Wisconsin have independently implemented Sources.

In 2019, the state took note of this peer-led wellness movement and authorized a state statute directing the state Department of Public Instruction to establish a competitive grant program to support peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in high schools. Since then, schools have been able to apply and receive up to \$1,000 annually to support their programs. In January 2024, the state went further and announced a grant funding opportunity, offering up to \$400,000 spanning four years, to an educational agency to support schools in implementing Sources across the state. CESA 6 applied for and received the grant award and is poised to hit the ground running with its infrastructure, experience, and team of certified Sources trainers.



Trainer **Carlyn Andrew**, left, leads Kaukauna High School students and staff in a game of “dance master” during their fall 2021 peer leader training. A favorite game among students, dance master involves secretly picking a participant to lead the group in dance moves, while a volunteer must then figure out who the leader is.

SUMMARY

The Advancing Behavioral Health Initiative (ABHI), which both funded and supported this project, gave our community an amazing gift: the opportunity to scale-up an upstream, evidence-based suicide prevention program for youth and spread it across the entire region. This represented a new and needed approach for our community to make an impact on our youth mental health



Sources has helped our students become aware of their own strengths and empowered them to use those strengths. We have turned our focus from reactive to proactive in the sense that our students are not only building up the tools they need to succeed but using them as well. SOS represents what we should all focus on."

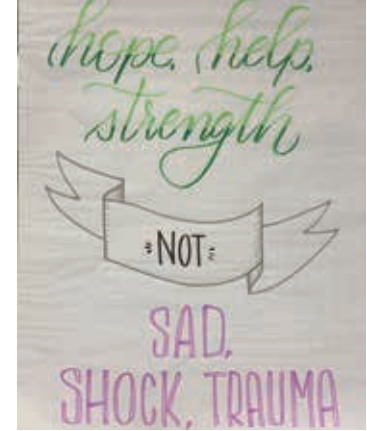
— Tracy Schmidt, School Counselor,
Adult Advisor & Sources of
Strength Trainer,
Little Chute School District

crisis. To use a Sources analogy, our community had been doing a good job building watchtowers and training lifeguards to catch youth from heading over the waterfall. By implementing Sources, we have moved upstream, built a fence, and are teaching youth how to swim so they can get out of the river before the water gets rough.

Sources has taught our community valuable lessons about best-practice prevention work involving youth: that to make positive culture change we must empower youth to lead the way. And, that the "sad, shock, and trauma" messaging of traditional prevention work does not work, and at its worst, can cause harm. Rather, shifting to messaging centered on "hope, help and strength," is the best course for creating positive social norms (which are contagious), inspiring hope, and reminding us to ask for help when we need it.

It is our greatest hope that schools will continue to invest in and support their Sources of Strength teams, and that annual peer leader trainings become as much a tradition as homecoming. That students, who don't fit in traditional student leadership roles or on sports teams, find their place on peer leader teams, where their voices are heard and their unique talents can be tapped.

School programs can come and go. When a program loses its luster, or there are challenges, it can be tempting to abandon it and try something new. Again, we ask schools to stay the course and continue to innovate, improve and course-correct when needed. Because Sources works. It can save lives. And it can help all students live healthy lives and thrive.



A Closer Look: Sources of Strength **Stories**

For Carlyn Andrew, Mandi Dornfeld and Wendy Harris, becoming Sources of Strength trainers was life enriching — both professionally and personally.

BECOMING SOURCES OF STRENGTH TRAINERS: A Transformative Experience



Carlyn Andrew

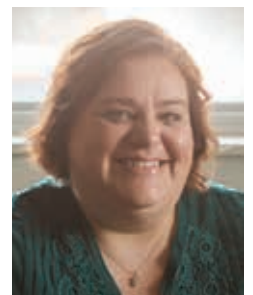
"Nothing helped me realize — as strongly as Sources of Strength — the limitless potential we all have to positively influence those around us," said Carlyn Andrew, who holds a master's degree in Clinical Mental Health and School Counseling.

Carlyn joined the Healthy Teen Minds initiative in 2017, with the support of her employer — the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Fox Valley, and committed to becoming a certified Sources of Strength trainer. At the time, Carlyn served as senior director of counseling and training at Boys & Girls Clubs.

"We all can be an agent of change in how we live and how we do life when we acknowledge and honor the hard, turn to strength, connect playfully, and share stories of hope, help-seeking, and strength," added Carlyn, now the Chief Culture Officer at the youth-serving organization.

"Sources of Strength creates such a sense of community and an immense sense of hopefulness."

As the project expanded in year two, the Healthy Teen Minds team recruited Mandi Dornfeld, another experienced community trainer with a deep commitment to youth mental health. Mandi joined the project with support from University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension, where she served as a human development and relationships educator. She is now an area director.



Mandi Dornfeld

"I am deeply and profoundly changed by this work," said Mandi, who became a certified Sources of Strength trainer in 2018. "The marriage of deep research, thoughtful instructional design and a whole lot of fun created a magic that I never knew was possible."

A CLOSER LOOK: STORIES

Between them, Carlyn and Mandi conducted more than 150 Sources trainings between 2017 and 2023, reaching more than 2,000 middle and high school students in the tri-counties.

"Sources of Strength provided a shared language and voice to the students," added Mandi, who has a master's degree in educational leadership and is also a Professional Certified Coach. "The model is a genuinely youth-led effort that creates opportunities for authentic belonging and the amplification of the most important voice in youth mental health — their own."



Wendy Harris

Wendy Harris, who managed the region-wide implementation of Sources, became a certified trainer in 2019, to help meet the growing demand for trainings.

"Doing this work was transformative — personally and professionally," said Wendy. "Learning how to become more resilient — and normalizing asking for help when we are struggling — isn't just for young people. It's for all of us. Sources gave us — our schools and our

community as a whole — an expanded vision, and model, for doing upstream prevention work."

"Intervention work is necessary and important but it's simply not enough," added Carlyn. "Sources of Strength has created conversations and opportunities for entire systems and communities to shift efforts upstream to prevent more young people from getting to the point of crisis in the first place by elevating examples and practices that bolster protective factors and build strength and resiliency."

Mandi said she hopes Sources' lasting impact will also be on adults, in addition to youth.

"My deepest hope is that through the relationships and partnerships, we have challenged the adults in our community to listen more than talk and to believe our young peoples' wisdom," she said. "They know how to lead us into health and resilience and we should continue to follow them. We have a call to action within this model of being a safe, trusted, competent adults for our young people."

Though the Healthy Teen Minds project has ended, Mandi and Carlyn are continuing as Sources trainers in the community, contracted by CESA 6.



A Closer Look: **Wrightstown** High School



My former district administrator told me recently that she felt starting Sources of Strength was one of the best programs we've started in our school district. We agree! We love the emphasis that Sources of Strength puts on creating student-led campaigns. When the students are passionate about what we are doing, it not only helps them, our high school students and staff, but extends to our community as well."



Lisa VanDyke,
Physical Education Teacher,
Adult Advisor,
Wrightstown High School

Wrightstown High School peer leaders (from left) Coby Green, Sabrine Narvasa and Stella Lusk, pose in front of the mural their Sources of Strength team designed for the school's commons area.



During the 2023-24 school year, I was able to host a donation drive, with proceeds going to our local homeless shelter, and man, when I say that it was life changing, it truly was. The overwhelming feeling I had after setting up all of those donations and to then see even more flood in that night during the game was truly mind blowing...Being a peer leader has taught me the importance of giving back and continually spreading our message of hope, health, and resilience."

— Morgan Hussin,
Peer Leader & Senior,
Wrightstown High School

A Closer Look: Neenah High School

Neenah High School was among the first six high schools to adopt Sources of Strength in 2017 as part of the Healthy Teen Minds initiative. At the time, school leaders were taking steps to be more proactive in their approach to student mental health.




The district had launched a series of new initiatives, including mental health screenings, raising awareness to combat stigma, investing in school-based mental health providers and training staff in Youth Mental Health First Aid. Then came the opportunity to adopt Sources of Strength.

"Sources of Strength came at a time when we needed to not only educate our students, staff, and families, but we needed to change the culture," said Mike Altekruise, Ph.D., Mental Health Coordinator for the Neenah Joint School District.

In the fall of 2017, roughly 100 students were nominated and invited to attend the Sources of Strength peer leader training, alongside more than a dozen staff who stepped up to be adult advisors. Since then, Sources trainings have become an annual event, where staff and students come together to train, play, regroup, brainstorm and build momentum for the year ahead. Over the years, Mike has seen peer leadership ownership grow and new school traditions take hold.

"(Peer leaders) took the lead to develop messages for all of our freshman students around the Sources of Strength wheel," said Mike, who became a certified school-based Sources trainer in 2022. "They run the Winterfest Dance and Winterfest Week every year to spread messages about Sources of Strength and to make money for the many campaigns they run."

NEENAH HIGH SCHOOL YRBS DATA TRENDS

	2015	2018	2019	2021	2023	Trend
Sad & Hopeless	28%	29%	28%	30%	25%	
Seriously Considering Suicide	20%	17%	18%	15%	11%	
Made a Suicide Plan	16%	11%	13%	10%	8%	
Attempted Suicide	14%	5%	7%	6%	4%	

Source: YRBS data provided by Neenah Joint School District



Neenah High School peer leaders and adult advisors pose for a group photo following their fall 2018 Sources of Strength training.

The peer leaders also started a group of high school peer mentors who present to fourth and fifth graders about mental health. They named their group "Mental Health Awareness and Perception", or M.A.P. The M.A.P. presentations reach nearly 1,000 elementary students and "bring awareness about the need to talk to trusted adults and to develop your resilience at a younger age," Mike added.

Neenah High School has seen a marked decrease in suicide-related behaviors among students, according to their YRBS data, an encouraging trend that their efforts are having an impact.

"Our YRBS data on suicidality has improved over the time we have implemented Sources of Strength," Mike said. "Sources of Strength has been integral to our efforts to build a positive culture at our school, reduce mental health stigma, and help students reach out to trusted adults in and out of school. We have used Sources in conjunction with mental health screenings and our mental health presentations that include Sources of Strength as part of the discussion around building resilience."



Sources of Strength has been integral to our efforts to build a positive culture at our school, reduce mental health stigma, and help students reach out to trusted adults in and out of school. We have used Sources in conjunction with mental health screenings and our mental health presentations that include Sources of Strength as part of the discussion around building resilience."

— Mike Altekruise, PhD,
Mental Health Coordinator,
Neenah Joint School District

A Closer Look: **Omro** High School



Omro High School students work on a mural in spring 2024, where trusted adults who “lift up” students are named on paper balloons. “Everyone has a trusted adult here, even if they don’t realize it,” said Brady Kiesow, 16, (right). Brady, a sophomore, has been a peer leader since his freshman year.

Since implementing Sources of Strength in 2021, Omro High School’s culture has changed for the better, according to science teacher Crystal Ransom.

“It’s been transformative,” said Crystal, one of five lead adult advisors who has been championing Sources at the school. “It has brought a lot more awareness of mental health issues and we have reduced the taboo... we have frank discussions about depression and what it’s like to struggle with stress.”

A key message that students have taken to heart is that it’s ok to ask for help and that there are trusted adults at school they can talk to. Research suggests that having a trusted adult can reduce the risk of suicide attempts by as much as 40 percent.

“We want students to know that everyone in our building is there



Crystal Ransom,
Science Teacher,
Adult Advisor,
Omro High School

because they care about (students), said Crystal. "We have more students reaching out to trusted adults. I even had a student email me, saying 'you're my trusted adult, may I come see you over lunch?' And I was like yes, yes, yes."

Peer leaders, meanwhile, have grown more comfortable learning to be connectors to help and finding creative ways to ensure fellow classmates feel like they belong, Crystal added. The peer leader team now hosts an annual freshman orientation, where they play games with the newcomers and offer a Q&A led by upperclassmen.

"Sometimes you have to go outside of your comfort zone to help others feel comfortable and create a safe space for everyone," said Hadley Lampe, 17, who is a junior. "Sources of Strength has also helped me become more comfortable with myself, by helping others."

Hadley said she was thrilled when she found out she had been nominated to be a peer leader at the start of the school year.

"When I found out I was nominated to be part of it, I was like 'awesome,'" she said. "I thought it was really cool."

Key to Omro High School's implementation success has been support from administrators and dedicated time during the school day to meet with peer leaders, Crystal said. The peer leader team of about 60 students meets twice a month as a large group, while smaller groups will meet between those meetings, as needed, to work on campaigns.

The adult advisor team also has dedicated time to meet once a month for two hours and even hosts mini professional development sessions for all staff meetings.

"We've given teachers (language) on what to say when students are in crisis," Crystal said. "Sometimes a student will come to you and tell you something and you don't know how to react. The teachers are on the front lines, so we want them to be able listen, validate, be empathetic and connect them to resources."



Hadley Lampe, a junior at **Omro High School**, points to a photo collage of her trusted adult. As part of a trusted adult campaign, students identified trusted adults and invited them to put up photos from when they were in high school.



Billboards, like this one that was displayed near downtown Appleton, were used in 2017 to promote MyConnectionNEW.org.

Strategy:

MyConnectionNEW.org

A Mental Health Resource Navigation Website

The Connection is dedicated to ensuring the community's access to this incredible resource into the future. The cost of the website and planned quality improvements are covered through December 2026. Efforts to elevate this strategy to the state level are being pursued.

STRATEGY AT A GLANCE

What is MyConnectionNEW.org?

MyConnectionNEW.org is a user-friendly website for both the public and professionals to:

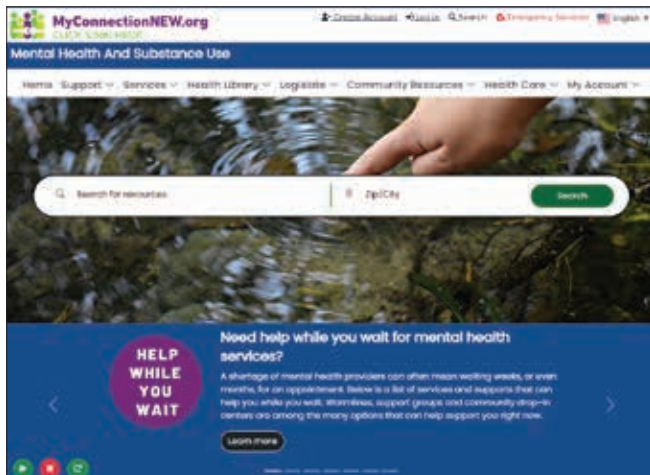
- Search for, navigate and connect to local mental health and substance use services and supports, from counseling to psychiatry;
- Find anonymous online mental health screening tools;
- Access a mental health library filled with educational articles, cutting-edge research and explanations of treatment and recovery options; and
- Connect directly to warm— and hotlines, text, chat options and crisis services of all kinds.

What did we do?

The Connection contracted and collaborated with Trilogly Integrated Resources to design, launch (in 2017) and continuously improve a local "Network of Care" website. Trilogly is a California-based Internet company focused on building health and human resource navigation websites that increase community capacity for finding their way through complex care systems, like mental health. This solution of a 'one-stop' website for finding care was affordable, practical, user-friendly and Trilogly was eager to support us in implementing this solution for our community.

How did we do it?

To build our site, we first sought the partnership and guidance of Connection member agencies, other community navigators (discharge nurses, home visitors and law enforcement, for example), the general public, and United Way 2-1-1. Site development was also informed by focus groups that included parents of youth and adults with mental health challenges, adults who've struggled to find care in a timely fashion, older adults who struggle to use technology in this



MyConnectionNEW.org home page.



I had the honor of developing the MyConnectionNEW.org website with the coalition team in 2017. The launch event was scheduled to

begin at 7:30 on a May morning. I said to Beth Clay, "Wow, that is really early — are you sure the community will show up for that?" I will never forget opening the door to the large meeting room and seeing it crammed, front-to-back, side-to-side, with eager providers, wide awake and ready to launch our website. I was so impressed by everyone I met that day, I tried to talk my husband into moving to Appleton!

By then, I had worked for 16 years with large and small communities in about 30 states across the country to develop hundreds of behavioral-health websites. Your community is truly unique. Your ability to find creative solutions and your willingness to collaborate across boundaries make you an absolute standout, and I'm talking nationwide. Since then, you have continued to innovate and create custom content to meet the changing needs of your residents. Your "Strong Minds for Men" section is one excellent example, and we're currently developing your latest one-of-a-kind section titled "Support Others, Support Yourself." I'm honored and grateful for the continuing opportunity to work with your coalition."



Kathy Sterbenc
Vice President
Trilogly/Network of Care

way, and special populations including veterans and refugees. Support for this strategy included start-up funds from the Basic Needs Giving Partnership of the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley region and funding support from AHW throughout the eight-year Advancing Behavioral Health Initiative (ABHI).

How did we measure impact?

Site analytics were used to measure usage and growth. Site traffic has grown consistently since the website was launched to an average of more than 250 visits per day with an average engagement time of more than six minutes per visitor. Meanwhile, the MindWise mental health screeners, which are embedded in the site, received an average of 2,000 visits per month. During the pandemic and in its wake (2020-22), the site experienced a nearly ten-fold surge in usage of the screeners.

How will the strategy be sustained?

The Connection is dedicated to ensuring the community's access to this incredible resource into the future. The cost of the website and planned quality improvements are covered through December 2026. Efforts to elevate this strategy to the state level are being pursued.

STRATEGY BACKGROUND

What is MyConnectionNEW.org?

This strategy grew out of The Connection's "No Wrong Door" impact area, and reflected the community's philosophy and desire to improve access to care and treatment in the Fox Valley.

The impetus behind this strategy was the reality that the mental health system of care is difficult

to navigate, which can delay access to care or even discourage it. Too many lose hope before they ever make it to services and care.

There are typically long wait times for appointments to see mental health professionals; limited insurance coverage for various services; complex referral processes; and internet searches that can lead to frustration.

According to the 2016 Community Needs Assessment conducted by The Connection, 72 percent of respondents found it "difficult or very difficult" to access mental health services. This strategy sought to impact the issue by making it easier to navigate existing resources, even if it would still take time for the community to grow its workforce to meet the true increased need.

To that end, in 2016, The Connection contracted with Trilogy to develop an easy-to-use website



The Connection created a one-stop web resource to quickly and easily connect the community to mental health treatment options, crisis information, and screening!

When a family is in crisis, extra time is a luxury they don't have. Thank you for addressing the real needs of people."

— Kristen Bergstrom
Community Member



featuring searchable listings of local mental health/wellness and substance use providers and resources in the tri-county region. Trilogy was chosen for its expertise and experience, having developed its Network of Care sites across the United States, with various sized implementations across counties, states and complex systems of care. At the time, our project was one of only a few that focused on mental and behavioral health as its central service line.

During the development phase, our local United Way 2-1-1 (a free and confidential service that connects individuals in need with local community resources and social services), joined us in developing the database of mental health service providers that would ultimately be used by our local 2-1-1 operators, who act as resource navigators. We conducted research to pull in provider organizations that were not already in the 2-1-1 database and found nearly 100 additional providers to include.

While this strategy was developed as part of the Healthy Teen Minds initiative, with the goal of improving access to services and supports for teens, MyConnectionNEW.org has served as a larger strategy for the entire tri-county population. The Connection continues to develop the site, meeting emerging needs (like post-pandemic languishing and long waitlists) and continuous improvement remain the priority. We continue to respond to community calls for new ways of interacting with the state, quality improvements, upgrades and specific marketing efforts have



Posters, like this one, were among the many marketing materials developed and distributed throughout the Fox Valley to promote MyConnectionNEW.org over the years.

broadened and new content is constantly being developed to ensure this resource meets real, local needs.

EVOLUTION OF MyConnectionNEW.org

MyConnectionNEW.org was publicly launched on May 11, 2017, as part of our community's annual May Mental Health Awareness Month events. Kathy Sterbenc, Vice President of Trilogy, attended the kick-off event, held in Appleton, and gave a virtual tour of the site and its many features.

At the time, the service directory included more than 250 local services and supports in its backend database, which could be viewed by category,

popular topic, program/agency, keyword or location.

The site also featured:

- “Need Help Now” resources, allowing users to connect immediately to crisis lines, hot lines, and warm lines for immediate assistance;
- A variety of anonymous mental health screening tools to help determine the need for professional help (that screen for everything from eating disorders to depression; gambling addiction to risk for alcohol misuse);
- A robust library of valuable mental health/substance use information (including more than 30,000 articles, fact sheets, interactive tools, symptom checkers and reports), providing valuable and credible mental health/substance use information that is accessible and digestible by the general public;
- Quick links to insurance companies to assess individual coverage while searching available services;
- Legislative links to track state and federal bills affecting mental health and suicide prevention and reach lawmakers connected to those bills;
- Links to provide feedback on the site, add and update listings in the service directory; and;
- One click to transform the site into more than 21 languages (with the Spanish and Hmong sites reviewed by local community members).

Over the last eight years, The Connection has led various marketing and outreach efforts to continuously grow community awareness and engagement with the website; continually update the resource directory; and add new content and resources.



In May 2022, The Connection ran a month-long social media campaign highlighting local mental health programs and services to promote MyConnectionNEW.org

A variety of marketing materials were developed and distributed to schools, businesses, social service organizations, bars and coffee shops, municipalities, etc. and were also shared at health fairs and community meetings. Materials included wallet cards, refrigerator magnets, drink coasters, flyers, posters, and table tents, for example.

The project team also leveraged social media to promote the website, particularly during May Mental Health Awareness Month and Mental Illness Awareness Week in October. The site was also promoted through e-news, member meetings and the media, as well as more than 80 community presentations. Graphics and links promoting the website are now featured on many member agency and school websites, increasing the visibility, awareness and branding of the site, and drawing an ever-increasing audience to the resource.

In 2019, MyConnectionNEW.org expanded to Brown County, when Connections For Mental Wellness in Green Bay, another of the 10 ABHI-funded sites, adopted Trilogy as one of its strategies. The service directory was expanded to include providers in Brown County and, by 2023, had grown to nearly 600 listings in the four-county area. The two coalitions joined forces on marketing materials and campaigns, and site usage continued to grow.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT & EXPANSION

Over the years of implementation, The Connection continually updated local listings; added new listings; and expanded and grew content to respond to community needs and drive new users to the website. Efforts included the following:

During the pandemic, Network of Care launched a COVID-19 Resource Center, which was embedded in MyConnectionNEW.org, and provided up-to-date COVID-19 information, resources for self care and a growing list of telehealth services during the lockdown.

A section on Disaster Mental Health was added within the library, to assist our community with resources for responding to large-scale impacts of local, state and national events and collective experiences.

In 2021, The Connection's other AHW funded initiative, Project Zero, leveraged the website as part of its "Strong Minds 4 Men" public health campaign. The campaign, which targets middle-aged men (who have a higher risk for suicide), features a dedicated webpage on the site with curated mental

health resources for men, including self-care tools; helpful articles, podcasts and videos from a male perspective; and a link to the mental health screeners with added information about breaking the stigma about asking for help.

In 2022, as a result of the rising suicide rate in the wake of the pandemic, Network of Care added to the homepage a "Suicide Prevention and Support" module with resources to support the needs of those at risk.

In 2023, a local listing of grief resources was compiled and posted on the homepage for quick access. This addition was in response to public demand for easier navigation of grief support

Local listings in the database are annually updated and service providers are able to edit, add or delete information from their record.

Other site improvements for users include updated device responsive design for smart technology;



a redesigned, user-responsive homepage; Google search optimization, and a simplified search box for more accurate results.

In 2024, a "Help While You Wait" page was added to the site, featuring local services and supports that community members can access while they are on waitlists for professional mental health services.



The Fox River Mall provided in-kind support by donating the use of a kiosk in 2023, which was used to promote MyConnectionNEW.org and the online mental health screeners.

Throughout this project, The Connection's experience of developing MyConnectionNEW.org served as a resource for the other ABHI coalitions. Two of them, Improving Children's Mental Health - Racine County, and the Southwestern Wisconsin Behavioral Health Partnership, contracted with Trilogy to develop their own Network of Care mental health navigation websites.

Since then, the four coalitions that all adopted this strategy have been working, with the support of their Medical College of Wisconsin academic partner team, to advocate for a statewide implementation strategy. Having a state landing page that then split off by county or region would better serve our community in need of care, which we know to regularly cross county lines and areas

of the state for hard to find mental health services.

What's Next?

We look forward to continuing the quality improvement work of MyConnectionNEW.org to continue to meet the needs and requests of our community. Plans for further improvements include:

- A decision tree for "What mental health/substance use services do I need right now?"
- A glossary of mental health providing professionals to address challenges with understanding the differences among psychiatrists, counselors, psychologists, neuropsychologists, peer specialists, recovery coaches, etc.
- Dedicated landing pages, similar to Strong Minds 4 Men, that addressing the specific mental health and suicide prevention needs of the Black, Hmong, Hispanic, Native American, LGBTQ+ and other disparity populations, with culturally-specific education, service/provider directory, support options, toolkits and crisis contacts.

EVALUATION & IMPACT

Since its launch in mid-2017, site traffic to MyConnectionNEW.org has experienced steady growth and has received more than a half-million visits. In 2018, the site received 55,000 visits with an average of 150 visits per day. In 2023, those numbers had grown to more than 93,000 visits and an average of 263 visits per day.

Additionally, we have seen exponential growth in the numbers of page views (more than 1 million since 2017); time of engagement per visit (from 2 minutes in 2017 to 6:16 in 2024); unique views of



Strong Minds 4 Men landing page (as one of our top 3 visited pages), and visits to the crisis Need Help Now resource page (which is consistently in the top 5 visited pages each year). Our newest resource, the While You Wait page, has received more than 14,300 clicks in the first three months on the site (January – March 2024). The usage analytics of the site speak for themselves: the community is actively seeking, and more importantly finding, the help they need.

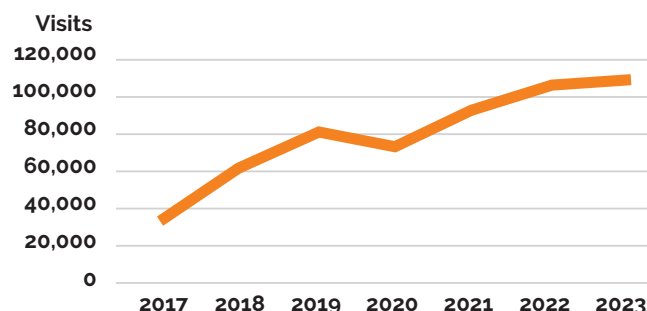
Having access to free, anonymous, online screening was a priority when creating MyConnectionNEW.org. Because 1 in 5 youth and adults in the U.S. will experience a behavioral health disorder in their lifetime, knowing when to seek care is critical to community wellbeing. With appropriate support and clinical care, individuals with mental health and substance use issues are able to manage symptoms and lead full and productive lives.

However, everyone experiences behavioral health disorders differently, so it's important to learn more about some of these common disorders to help identify signs and symptoms, and then seek proper care. The power of screening is that it can move a person from experiencing symptoms to recognizing a need for professional help.

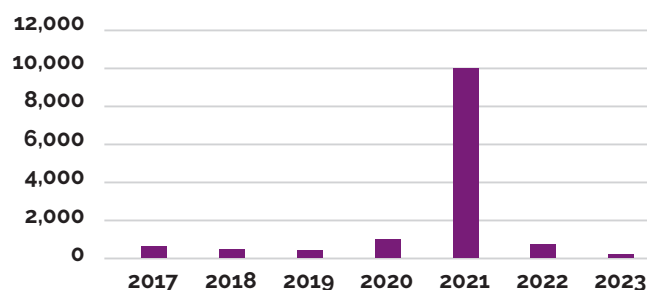
Visits to the MindWise mental health screener, which is featured on the homepage, saw a steady usage over the years, with a very sharp surge during the pandemic. The number of community members taking the free, anonymous mental health screenings during that time doubled in 2020 to 1,065 screenings, and then spiked to more than 10,000 screenings in 2021.

As the pandemic has lingered on, there was also

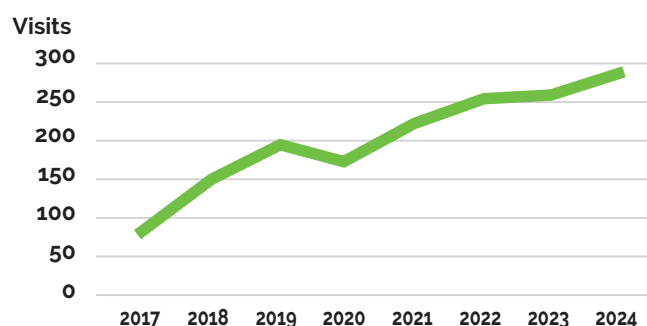
Total Visits By Year



Total Screenings



Average Visits Per Day



an interesting trend in which screeners were taken and by whom. For example, the screeners most often selected by men were the alcohol misuse assessment and the wide-range screener. Meanwhile, women most often took the PTSD and anxiety screeners.

Additional screening tools have been added over time including: a screener for parents to assess their teen's mental health; a wellbeing screener to assess wellness; a first-episode psychosis screener; and a screening for gambling addiction. This menu of screeners continues to show its value in ensuring there is a safe, accessible, anonymous space for exploring whether help is needed in addressing mental ill-health and stress.

SUMMARY

This website has been effectively and impactfully fulfilling the needs of our community for the past eight years in navigating the complex

mental health system of care. The Connection is committed to it being available as long as it continues to be our best strategy for the general public and our local community of navigators. We continue to advocate for Network of Care to become a statewide strategy, as this makes the most fiscal and resource sense, but we're also committed to the quality of our local service directory, of which we intend to keep local control, in partnership with our 2-1-1. The cost of the website and planned quality improvements are covered through December 2026. The Connection continues to seek funding opportunities to ensure its longer-term sustainability as an access-to-care strategy.

**WE ALL FACE
CHALLENGES IN LIFE
THAT MAY IMPACT OUR**
mental health.

OUR COMMUNITY IS HERE TO HELP...

MyConnectionNEW.org
CLICK. LINK. HELP.

Serving Brown, Outagamie, Calumet & Winnebago Counties



Acknowledgments

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THANK YOU



PRESENTED BY THE NORTHEAST WISCONSIN MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

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