

# There aren't enough mental health professionals despite a tsunami of need. Here's what S.F. is doing about it

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Isolation, loss and fear have haunted many young people during the pandemic as mental health shot to the forefront of youth issues.

While many young people have long struggled under the weight of poverty, loss, violence and other traumas, the pandemic's harm is so pervasive that Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory this month citing the "urgent need" to address the country's mental health crisis among youth.

Exacerbating the problem is a lack of diversity in the profession as well as stigma and a lack of access to services in communities of color.

In San Francisco, top mental health experts, physicians and academics at UCSF are working to change that. Starting in the fall, a group of high school and college students in San Francisco paired up with top experts and academics in mental and behavioral health at the teaching hospital for a nine-month, paid and potentially life-changing internship.

The pilot program, called Change SF, is a partnership between UCSF and the city to expose young people from a wide range of backgrounds to careers in psychiatry, social work, substance abuse treatment, trauma recovery and other disciplines.

The goal, officials said, is to connect mentors and mental health professionals with a diverse group of young adults in San Francisco, ages 13 to 24, many of whom have historically lacked access to those careers.

It's the kind of opportunity too often available only to those with the means and connections to gain access, said UCSF psychiatry and behavioral science Professor Marina Tolou-Shams.

“Let’s face it: Opportunity is all about privilege. It perpetuates privilege,” she said. “We want to make this world accessible.”

The country needs a pipeline of young people heading into the field to address these long-term challenges, Tolou-Shams said.

For Suky Lu, a 20-year-old student at City College, the internship was like having a door opened to the world of mental health, where she culturally and personally had little exposure.

“I’m most looking forward to having experience working in this field,” said Lu, who plans to major in psychology after transferring to a four-year university in the fall. “I don’t have a good picture of what it would be like.”

When she was growing up in an Asian household, mental health was not part of family conversations, she said.

“It’s seen as a taboo topic and often brushed aside,” she said. “I started to learn more about it going into college and how important mental health is.”

Mental health can be a taboo subject in many communities and cultures, Tolou-Shams said, and the field needs young voices like Lu’s, to not only learn about it, but to also be an advocate in their families and social circles.

The internship “empowers young people to get at the table,” she said. “It starts with a conversation with a young person who is totally committed and passionate about this in their community and wants to make a difference in the world and in an area that holds so much stigma.”

The pilot program includes six young people, with the expectation it will grow in coming years to include more participants and expand to other institutions, officials said.

It’s aligned with the city’s Opportunities for All initiative, which typically places 3,000 young people in internships and jobs over the summer.

For the most part, the internship will be remote given the pandemic.

Change SF seeks to provide a basic background in psychology and behavioral science, as well as a mentor to work with each student and offer opportunities to participate in research or other activities. The interns will also work on ways to provide education on mental health within their communities, said Nicole Elmore, youth activist with the Human Rights Commission, who is coordinating the internship program.

“They know firsthand how youth are struggling, how communities of color are struggling with (mental health) resources,” she said. “The younger generation is more open to talk about what’s happening and more open to solutions.”

Dylan Marchiel, 16, is the youngest of the interns in the pilot year. She’s interested in mental health and the medical field in general as well as the legal profession, particularly as all of that relates to incarceration, noting a family member was locked up during the pandemic.

“I’m really hoping to raise awareness about all of the issues, the myths and misinformation about mental health,” she said. “I think now specifically is a time when we need resources like this and there are a lot of people that don’t have access to those resources.”

Dylan, who attends Urban High School, emphasized she is “super excited” about the opportunity to have something so important and prestigious on her resume and college applications, perhaps giving her future opportunities she never thought she’d have.

That’s the point, Tolou-Shams said. These young people, many first-generation college students and from low-income families, will have on their resume that they were mentored by someone at UCSF, which this year will include the office of the psychiatry department chair.

“Just that exposure can make a huge difference in your trajectory and your decisions,” she said. “We want to make this world accessible.”