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Whitmer and Murphy: Youth mental health is a priority for our states

Gretchen Whitmer and Phil Murphy

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Coast to coast, America’s youth mental health crisis is playing out in homes, schools, and hospitals. Parents seeking treatment for struggling kids face long waitlists for an appointment — if there is even a pediatric therapist in their area. School counselors are swamped. Even emergency rooms are overwhelmed.

At every level, the system is strained by unprecedented rates of mental health distress among children. The CDC calls its data on youth depression and anxiety a “cry for help.” Most troubling of all, suicide is now the second leading cause of death for 10- to 24-year-olds.

As the governors of Michigan and New Jersey, connecting young people with the care and support they need is an urgent priority. Strengthening youth mental health is the focus of the National Governors Association (NGA) Chair’s Initiative — uniting governors from red and blue states alike in a nationwide push to increase awareness and support.

NGA is in Detroit this week to spotlight the issue with an event that will bring parents, educators, health care professionals and other experts to the table.

Every time we meet with students to talk about their mental health challenges, it’s eye-opening — and heartbreaking. We’ve heard from kids who feel isolated and bullied, who struggle with challenging family dynamics or don’t get support for being who they really are. And all this happens under the ever-present burden of a toxic social media environment and threats of gun violence.

Our states are among many that are taking action.

Over the last four years, Michigan has made record investments in schools. In addition to generational investment to build new libraries and labs, these bipartisan budgets funded

mental health and campus safety at record levels. So far, schools have hired 602 additional nurses, counselors, and social workers to care for our kids.

With bipartisan input, Michigan also launched the School Safety and Mental Health Commission. Made up of parents, teachers, mental health professionals, law enforcement officers and school-threat assessment experts, the commission will ensure the best use of strategies and resources to support kids' mental health and keep them safe — so that they can learn and thrive.

The MI Healthy Communities proposal would build on that progress. MI Healthy Communities is a \$1.4 billion plan to expand care for Michigan families. To help retain and recruit hundreds of mental health care professionals to Michigan, the plan would expand the Michigan State Loan Repayment Program (MSLRP) to focus on behavioral health providers. To give families more treatment options, MI Healthy Communities invests in community-based behavioral health and expands capacity at new and existing psychiatric facilities.

Michigan is also investing in mental health resources for law enforcement and first responders, who have worked so hard to see us through the pandemic and other challenges. The stress of this demanding work takes its toll on mental health, and these investments aim to support these men and women who do so much to support their communities.

As governors collaborate to find solutions, New Jersey's approach is another to study.

New Jersey's Children's System of Care consolidates the full spectrum of resources and supports under one umbrella — ensuring help is just one call or click away for youth up to age 21.

Through this central system, New Jersey residents anywhere in the state can access mental and behavioral health care services, Family Support Organizations, and even 24/7 mobile crisis response units — all at no cost to the family, regardless of their income or insurance status. This system is one piece of the broader spectrum of mental health and wellness supports provided by the state, including a first-in-the-nation statewide hub and spoke model to provide prevention, well-being, and mental health supports to youth in their schools and communities, and efforts to expand capacity to meet the mental health needs of college students through community partnership funding.

New Jersey is also focusing efforts to support the pipeline of behavioral health workers through a Behavioral Healthcare Provider Loan Redemption Program, providing up to \$150,000 in loan forgiveness for six years of service, with up to an additional \$30,000 in incentives for providers who work primarily with children and adolescents.

The bottom line for parents? Help is out there, and more is on the way. If you don't know where to begin, talk to your child's teacher or doctor, visit state government websites, or call or text 9-8-8 to reach the revamped National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which can connect you instantly with support.

Every single kid deserves to have their mental health supported. As governors, we're committed to ensuring that the young people in our states — and every state — can access the mental health support they need to thrive.

Gretchen Whitmer is governor of Michigan. Phil Murphy is governor of New Jersey and Chair of the National Governors Association.