

Strides Made in Mental Health Awareness Among California Youth

SACRAMENTO, Calif. June X, 2015 — A friend reaching out to Courtney Loi during high school gave her the strength to find help for her depression. Today, the University of California, San Diego student could inspire thousands of other young people to step into that same role through her short animated film, “From Me, to You.”

“It’s my story. It’s about my suicide attempt in high school,” Loi said. “I really wanted to dig deep and let it all out so that people feel like, ‘OK, I don’t have to hold it all in, I don’t have to hold everything in.’”

Loi was among the winners of California’s statewide Directing Change student film contest and program, recently announced at its third annual awards ceremony in Sacramento. Her story encapsulates the emerging success of the state’s mental health movement, known as Each Mind Matters, funded by the California Mental Health Services Authority, or CalMHSA. Directing Change is one of 25 CalMHSA programs to prevent suicide and reduce stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health.

Directing Change films feature individuals who have the power to stand up for themselves and their friends. They also show that those dealing with a mental illness are not defined by it and are not alone. The award-winning Directing Change films can be downloaded at www.directingchange.org.

Confronting stigma matters when it comes to young people. About one in five teens experience a mental health challenge in a given year. Yet, due to stigma, many wait an average of six to eight years from onset of symptoms before they seek help. But there are signs that more Californians of all ages are becoming aware of stigma and, by overcoming it, how they can be more accepting and supportive of people experiencing mental health challenges.

According to a statewide survey conducted for CalMHSA by the RAND Corporation, nearly 1.5 million more Californians — a 5 percent increase year-over-year — are willing to socialize with, live next door to or work with people who have mental health challenges. The RAND findings provided evidence that Californians are becoming more accepting and supportive of those with mental health challenges. This links back to multiple initiatives led by CalMHSA that encourage people to take action, speak up and reach out to help when they see someone struggling.



As part of the focus on student mental health, Directing Change represents CalMHSAs outreach to adolescents and young adults in California, whose efforts to find help often start with peers rather than adults.

“Activities like Directing Change are truly transformational,” said Dr. Wayne Clark, executive director of CalMHSAs. “By engaging young people in talking to each other, we not only educate the current generation, we take a long-term step toward changing societys attitudes and making today’s generation of young people the first that doesnt fear coming forward for help.”

Another statewide CalMHSAs program reaches out to younger students aged 9 through 13 — Walk in Our Shoes. Through online outreach and a series of school performances, Walk in Our Shoes reaches students to dispel myths about mental health while educating children about mental wellness. The program relies on storytelling, and recent surveys reflect positive trends with students retaining knowledge of the program’s message months after school presentations. The website itself — www.walkinourshoes.org — has attracted nearly 100,000 visits since its launch a year and a half ago.



“Programs such as Walk in Our Shoes are great examples of how CalMHSAs is achieving long sought after breakthroughs in reaching young people, both those experiencing mental health challenges and their peers who can effect positive differences by understanding their role in reducing stigma,” said El Monte City School District Superintendent Dr. Maribel Garcia.

Walk in Our Shoes’ statewide tour during the last two school years brought professionally acted plays to nearly 140 schools throughout California. The plays taught students about mental health stigma, how it hurts people with mental health challenges and how everyone wins by eliminating stigma surrounding mental health.

“Students, especially students living in poverty, suffer many stressors and traumas that go unnoticed and untreated and affects their mental health. Students may face abuse, neglect, divorce, and other stressors that negatively impact their growth and development,” said Board of Education Clerk Adam

Carranza with the Mountain View Elementary School District. "It is important that schools address the stigma around mental health to help students and their families receive the care they need and live healthy lives."

With funds generated by Proposition 63, which imposed a special state tax on people with incomes over \$1 million, the efforts supported by CalMHSA are intended to reduce stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness, prevent suicides, and improve the mental health of students in K-12 schools and colleges across the state. For more information about Each Mind Matters, visit www.eachmindmatters.org.

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