



# Youth Mental Health Stabilization Report

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UW-MADISON UCA POLICY INTERN



DANE COUNTY  
BOARD of  
**SUPERVISORS**

# Overview



## Background

- Review Dane County youth mental health
- Outline project scope
- Identify gaps in policy



## Case Studies

- One-Stop-Shops
- Sources of Strength and Safe Communities
- BadgerSPILL



## Recommendations

- Outline potential initiatives
- Discuss plans for implementation



## Conclusion

- Open for questions



# Acknowledgements

- **Lisa MacKinnon**, Manager of Policy, Outreach & Communications
- **Sarahi Garcia**, Policy Analyst
- **Michelle Ritt**, Dane County Board Supervisor (Dist.18)
- **Heidi Stringer**, DCDHS Youth Connect Program Supervisor
- **Amy Gangl**, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Dept. of Poli. Science



# Methodology



## Step 1

Coordinate with project leaders

Review data on mental health in Dane County

Identify gaps in policy



## Step 2

Holistic review of academic literature

Analysis of evidence-based strategies



## Step 3

Meetings with community members and staff

Research case studies

Draft recommendations



# Scope

- This project and report aim to:
- Detail Dane County's diverse network of programs for youth mental health support
- Identify any gaps in Dane County's current programs
- Highlight relevant models and initiatives that could be used in DC
- Recommend realistic, cost-effective, and time-sensitive policy



# Background: Youth Mental Health in Dane County

Among youth in Dane County,

- 5.8% report being diagnosed with an eating disorder
- 16.8% report being diagnosed with depression
- 24.6% report being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder

**58%** of high schoolers said they feel lonely often or always.

- **18.6%** have considered the idea of suicide
- **14.9%** of Wisconsin students made a step toward suicide
- **8.7% reported attempting suicide**

*These numbers reflect a growing mental health crisis among local youth.*



# Dane County's Current Mental Health Initiatives

- Dane County has many high-quality programs and initiatives focused on mental health, behavioral health, and youth outreach
- Budgets over **\$63.5 Million** for mental health out of a nearly \$1bn budget
  - Main initiatives are Youth Connect, Building Bridges, and the BHRC
- Clear commitment to mental health despite a tight budget
- Still not enough to foster consistent improvement



# Gaps in Dane County

## Gaps identified

- Limited information and youth outreach
- Limited accessibility
- Generally not preferred by youth

## What Dane County does well

- Many available resources
- Quality of programs



# Policy Intersectionality

The implementation of new policy will have disproportionate impacts on residents within Dane County. For example, people who are:

- **Low-Income**
- **Female**
- **LGBTQIA+**
- **BIPOC**
- **Unhoused**
- **Immigrants**

**Are at much  
higher risk of...**

- **Depression**
- **Suicide**
- **Self-harm**
- **Anxiety**
- **Undiagnosed needs**
- **Lack of care**



# AI and Mental Health



Downward trend in youth mental health with AI & the Pandemic



AI is the **most easily accessible** resource for struggling children



Up to **12%** use AI for mental health support (Robb, Mann, 2025).



AI mental health support is not optimal for youth mental health.



# Case Studies



# The Ideal: “One-Stop Shops”

- What is a “one-stop shop”?
  - **No questions asked**, 24/7 support across the county
  - Grace periods for insurance, paperwork, and finances
- Why is it a policy ideal?
- **Expensive**, long implementation periods, and existing locations
- Anesis Foundational Therapy, Behavioral Health Resource Center, Milwaukee MH Clinic



# Case Study #1: Safe Communities & Sources of Strength

## WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO:

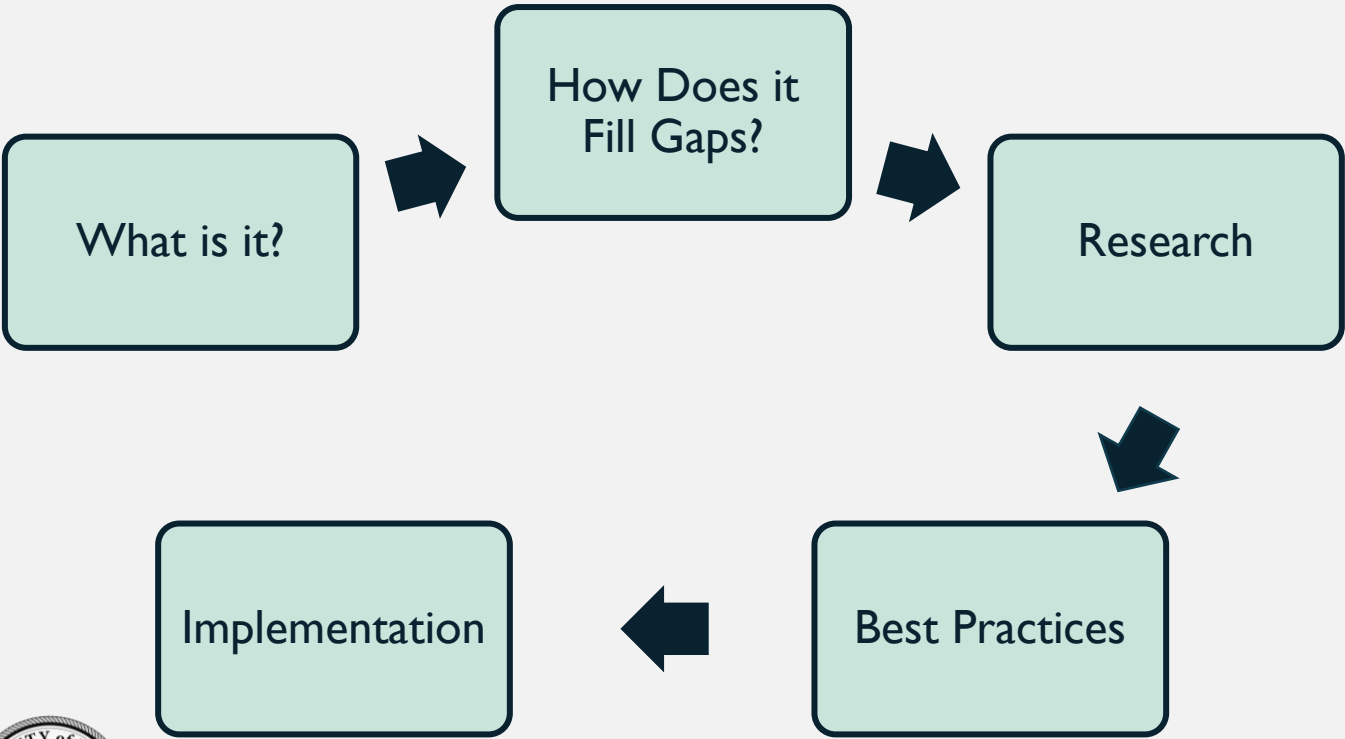
- Harm reduction, suicide prevention
- Peer networks to create safe conversations
- Go into schools with advisors
- Targeted support through trained peer mentors
- “Supportive moments of change”

## CHALLENGES

- Lack of staffing/funding
- Costs of staffing
- Not as present in Dane County compared to greater Wisconsin
- **Challenges signal opportunity for Dane County**



# Recommendation 1: Youth Peer Support Worker Program



# Case Study #2: Badger SPILL

## WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO:

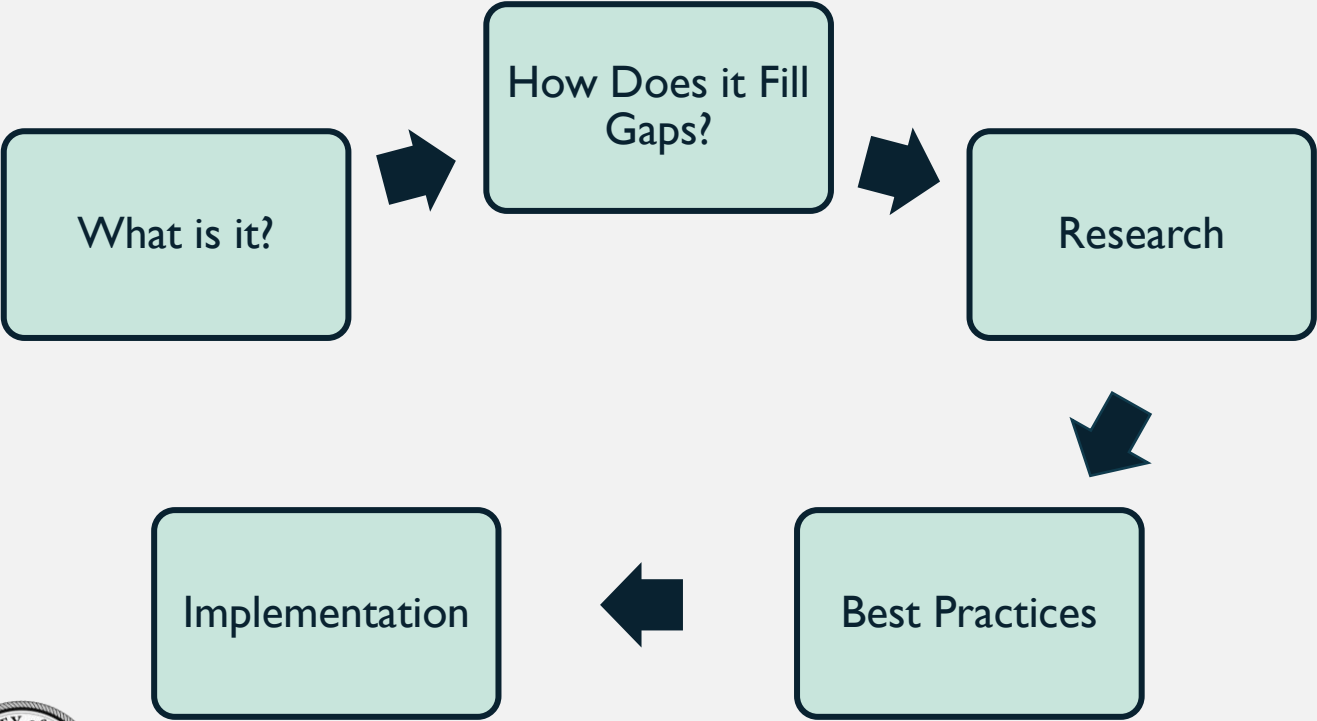
- UW-made, student government program
- Students sign up to respond to 5-10 emails a semester
- Emails are anonymous student letters asking for advice or support
- Leverages the internet, cost-effective

## CHALLENGES

- Limited to UW student body
- Students are adults, better able to respond
- Not many students aware of it
- **Signals opportunity for Dane County**



# Recommendation 2: School-Based Mental Health Forum



# Dual Implementation

*These two recommendations work best if implemented in tandem.*

## RECOMMENDATION 1

- Trained youth would become responders on the chat board.
- Trained youth could receive further training to respond digitally to even younger kids in elementary and middle schools.
- Whoever trains youth would also ideally be the chat board moderator.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

- Youth responders would be credited for volunteer hours for responding to students.
- The chat board could be used to facilitate check-ins between the trainer and trainee for guidance.



# Key Considerations

## Students outside of the school system

- Existing community spaces
- The internet

## Staffing concerns

- Split the difference
- Teacher-sponsored support
- Part-time/district-wide assistance



# Conclusion

- **Supporting youth mental health is challenging!**
  - It takes teamwork, effort, time, and money.
- Regardless, it must be addressed
  - Show our youth how to have **healthy conversations** and **support their classmates**.
  - Allow youth a space to speak **anonymously, honestly, and openly**.
- Continue to advocate for these recommendations and keep youth mental health a **priority** going forward.



# Questions?

