



CARES

Creating Actionable & Real Solutions

AN INITIATIVE OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

A COMMUNITY THAT CARES FOR YOUNG ADULTS

A Youth-Centered Mental Health & Well-Being Policy Agenda for Atlanta



**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy agenda is a product of a collaboration between young adults who have experienced foster care and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). CARES Ambassadors in Atlanta worked together with CSSP staff to co-develop policy recommendations that would break down barriers and set all young people up to thrive. The following CSSP staff helped to co-develop the agenda: Shadi Houshyar, Esi Hutchful, Megan Martin, and Alexandra Citrin. The authors are grateful to Judy Fitzgerald, Melissa Haberlen DeWolf, and Polly McKinney, Voices for Georgia's Children for providing thoughtful feedback on this agenda. They are also grateful to their colleague Liz Squibb for her input and suggestions and thank Jessica Pika for the design and layout of this agenda.

This local policy agenda builds on an earlier collaboration between CARES Ambassadors and CSSP, [A Policy Agenda for a Nation that CARES for Young Adults](#). The national policy agenda seeks to advance policy that supports young people in their families and communities, calling for fulfilling jobs that pay a living wage, have predictable hours, and provide workplace protections; housing that is safe, healthy, and stable; health care that is affordable and affirming, and includes supports for managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health needs; and for those who are parenting, affordable and responsive child care.

ABOUT CARES

CARES, Creating Actionable and Real Solutions, aims to drastically change the systemic challenges that youth—specifically older or "transition-age" youth of color—who are or have been involved with the foster care system experience. We believe that, working in tandem with the young people most impacted by the foster care system, we can develop intentional, authentic, and anti-racist policy strategies that dismantle racist systems and begin to develop the policies, community resources, and infrastructure that truly support youth in achieving their goals.

ABOUT CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children, youth, and families thrive. We translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, and support strong and inclusive communities. We advocate with and for all children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. Learn more at www.CSSP.org.



MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

A MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING GUARANTEE

Our mental health is deeply connected to every element of our lives. When young people are able to access mental health services and supports that are responsive and affirming and that promote health and healing, they gain a positive sense of identity, efficacy, and well-being, build resilience, and thrive. Young people who have the mental health supports they need are able to succeed in school, at work, and throughout life.

Yet all too often, young people struggle with their mental health and are unable to find the resources they need. They experience many barriers to well-being, including out-of-pocket costs for certain therapies or treatments, waitlists, and disruptions in care. In Georgia, access to mental health services and supports has been a long-standing challenge. The state is ranked 48th in the nation for access to mental health care and nearly all of Georgia's counties face a shortage of mental health professionals.^{1,2} In 2020, 45 percent of Georgia's children and youth ages 3-17 had difficulty accessing or could not access mental health services.³ Young people in the state describe barriers including a shortage of quality and appropriate providers, inadequate insurance coverage, and high costs.⁴

In our conversations with CARES Ambassadors in Atlanta, they consistently voiced their desire for a better landscape of mental health supports that promote their well-being and ability to pursue the goals they set for themselves. They called for universal access to care so they can easily connect with providers without jumping through hoops, making tradeoffs, or worrying about cost and what is or isn't covered by their insurance. They described wanting the choices they make to be respected, access to a range of services they identify as helpful, and to hold the system accountable for responding to their needs.

One Ambassador described wanting support from providers who would allow her to *"open up and fully express myself without feeling judged."* Another shared that he wanted *"to have a provider who understands me and is not a robot."* Most of all, Ambassadors demand care that is high-quality, holistic, culturally-responsive, and affirming of their identities and experiences, particularly as Black and brown youth who have experienced foster care. As one Ambassador explained, young people who experience foster care *"deserve quality support... why would it be any other way? Quality mental health propels you forward. When you grow up in foster care, you feel like you are set apart and don't have the supports your peers have. Mental health supports help you gain the tools you need as an adult."* The following policy agenda reflects CARES Ambassadors' vision for how young people should experience mental health services and supports in Atlanta, as well as their priorities for how to achieve this vision.

A VISION FOR MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING IN ATLANTA

Young people should have access to high quality, accessible, affordable, and affirming mental health services and supports that meet their needs.

POLICY PRIORITIES

01 ENSURE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND SERVICES, IRRESPECTIVE OF COVERAGE.

In Atlanta, CARES Ambassadors talked about how challenging it is to find providers who are trained to provide a range of supports for young people. In order to ensure that young people can access high-quality providers and supports, we need to:

- **Guarantee that cost is never a barrier to care by creating a comprehensive health insurance program**—which integrates mental and behavioral health into the model of care—available to all young people and entirely free. Young people should not have to pay out-of-pocket for treatment and should not have to make tradeoffs like foregoing therapy in order to make rent or afford groceries.
- **Ensure young people have choices when seeking mental health care by removing barriers that limit the pool of available providers.** Taking down these barriers includes eliminating administrative burdens for providers, like excessive paperwork and onerous requirements for joining health insurance networks or obtaining approvals from insurers as part of necessary care, ensuring providers are reimbursed for integrated care, and incentivizing more providers to accept Medicaid coverage (e.g., raising Medicaid reimbursement rates to attract providers to Managed Care Networks).
- **Focus on improving quality of care by including robust quality measures of mental health services in Care Management contracts** in order to improve case management, care coordination, communication, and practices, ensuring that children and youth are receiving necessary treatment, and monitoring Medicaid Care Management Organizations (CMO) prior authorizations (i.e., a type of cost-saving measure insurance companies use to guard access to services) to ensure they are not limiting access to mental health services.
- **Ensure choice and continuity of care for young people who have been in foster care** by allowing them to choose their own provider, and when they leave foster care, to continue to see their provider of choice with whom they have built trust, through age 26.

“MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS HELP YOU GAIN THE TOOLS YOU NEED AS AN ADULT.”

— ATLANTA CARES AMBASSADOR

02 ENSURE ACCESS TO NAVIGATORS WHO CAN SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN IN FOSTER CARE AS THEY NAVIGATE THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM.

Young people often report finding it hard to navigate the mental health system. In response, CARES Ambassadors call for navigators who are available to provide guidance to young people aging out of foster care as they traverse the mental health system. These navigators can support the autonomy of young people accessing help for the first time, navigating complex needs, disruptions or changes in care or providers, or transitioning between different levels of mental health care. Navigators should be:

- **Knowledgeable about the mental health system, services, and supports that young people interact with and help them connect to resources.** Navigators should be prepared to provide support to young people and help to ensure that they can access needed resources and supports and guide them in applying for and receiving services.
- **Connected with a young person before they age out of foster care and available to support them as they establish a solid foundation for the future.** CARES Ambassadors emphasized the need to ensure that a young person is connected to a navigator before they age out of the foster care system. In this way, a navigator can ensure that there is a plan in place to support a young person and their mental health needs before and once they age out of foster care and help ensure a smooth transition to adulthood.
- **Include peers who have expertise and experience navigating the mental health system and can deploy their own experiences to help other young people.** Trained peers who come from the communities they serve and have experience navigating the system they work in can help young people do the same. Peers can provide mental health support, reduce isolation, increase self-help skills, and help young people engage in treatment and decisions that impact their lives. Peer support can be especially helpful, as it has been shown to improve mental health outcomes, including depression and substance use, and facilitate positive feelings of empowerment and hope.

03 ENSURE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS OF COLOR, IN PARTICULAR, BLACK MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS.

The demographics of the mental health workforce do not reflect those of the communities they serve. Nationally, only 22 percent of social workers, 11 percent of professional counselors, 7 percent of marriage and family counselors, 4 percent of psychologists, and 2 percent of psychiatrists are Black.⁵ This lack of diversity contributes to lower quality care for people of color, particularly Black people.

In Atlanta, CARES Ambassadors shared that it is hard to find a mental health provider of color. They want counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other providers who look like them, share their racial, ethnic, or language background, offer culturally-responsive care, and are trained to understand their experiences. In order to increase the availability of mental health providers of color, we need policies that:

- **Create career pathways for providers of color** by increasing incentives like scholarships and loan forgiveness.
- **Provide equitable compensation for a diverse mental health workforce** that includes community health workers, peer counselors, recovery coaches, certified peer specialists, certified addiction counselors, and community care workers.
- **Create readily accessible resources that help young people identify and connect with providers of color.** CARES Ambassadors shared that they often struggle to identify providers of color and that it would be helpful to have readily available resources that help young people find providers of color.

04 ENSURE ACCESS TO A RANGE OF SUPPORTS INCLUDING THOSE THAT ARE FOCUSED ON PROMOTING WELLNESS AND HEALING.

Mental health services are often focused on treating acute symptoms and stabilizing crises, are over reliant on diagnoses and medication, and are mostly offered in clinical settings. We need investments in approaches that promote health and well-being at any time and not just when there is an acute need or crisis. In addition to services provided in a clinical setting, young people need access to services provided in non-clinical settings including clubhouses, mobile and home-based care, and in-community services like library-based social workers.

In Atlanta, CARES Ambassadors described the need for supports like mindfulness, guided imagery, yoga, traditional healers, support group meetings, movement techniques, and resources that help young people make connections to their communities and cultural practices. These mental health services should be:

- **Available without conditions** like the need for a diagnosis or limitations on the number of visits.
- **Covered by insurance** without requiring a full evidence base behind them.
- **Responsive to the needs of populations** including young men and fathers and young people who identify as LGBTQIA+.

- **Paired with training for mental health providers** to ensure that they are prepared to deploy a range of supports for young people.
- **Reflective of the variety of different therapies** and approaches that young people need.

05 HOLD THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE FOR RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FOSTER CARE.

In talking about mental health with CARES Ambassadors in Atlanta, accountability comes up often. They describe wanting to hold the system accountable for responding to their needs, ensuring they can access the services and supports they need and high-quality providers, and doing so in a timely way.

Young people in foster care experience a number of barriers in accessing responsive and affirming mental health services and support and these challenges persist as they age out the foster care system. For young people in Georgia, these barriers include lack of access to providers, long wait lists for accessing services, a narrow definition for “medical necessity,” and inadequate information-sharing between Georgia Families 360° (Georgia’s managed care program for children and young people in foster care, children and youth receiving adoption assistance, and select youth involved in the juvenile justice system), agencies, and providers.⁶ We need a mental health system that is accountable to young people, and can begin by:

- **Putting in place accountability mechanisms**, such as performance metrics for providers, health systems, and insurers to ensure they are responsive to the needs of young people.
- **Creating opportunities to involve youth in identifying relevant accountability** metrics, and in data analysis, monitoring, and evaluation, to gather information that can help improve programs and services so that they are youth-centered and reflect the perspectives, needs, and priorities of young people.
- **Providing transparency and access to medical records** by keeping them up to date, with accurate diagnoses and treatment information, and ensuring that young people have access to all of their health information, can request corrections or updates to their records, and that these records are readily available to young people once they age out of foster care.

CITATIONS

¹ Access to Care Data 2022 | Mental Health America (mhanational.org)

² Gringlas, S., WABE (March 24, 2022). Georgia doesn't have enough mental health providers, but the need is only growing. Available at: <https://www.wabe.org/georgia-doesnt-have-enough-mental-health-providers-but-the-need-is-only-growing/>

³ Voices for Georgia's Children (January 2022). Georgia's Crisis in Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health. Available at: <https://georgiavoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Crisis-in-Child-and-Adolescent-Behavioral-Health.pdf>

⁴ Newton, B., Kelley, L., & Haberlen DeWolf, M. (2022). Youth Behavioral Health in Georgia Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions of Need, Services, and System of Care Obtained Through Youth and Caregiver Focus Groups. <https://georgiavoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FocusGroupsReport-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ The Association of Black Psychologists, Inc. (2022). The Black Mental Health Workforce Survey Report. The First Multidisciplinary and Multigenerational Report on the Black Mental Health Workforce. Available at: <https://abpsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Black-Mental-Health-Workforce-Survey-Final.pdf>

⁶ See communication from Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Human Services to the State Medicaid Agency regarding barriers here: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23577647-broceletter202208>