

Black Youth in Minnesota

The Reimagine Black Youth Mental Health (RBYMH) initiative is about improving the mental well-being of Black youth and families in Minnesota and expanding the approach to mental health. This three-year policy demonstration project is supported by an U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health grant.

GOALS

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) partnered with the **Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth** (BBAY) to establish a community and Black youth-led process with a shared set of goals:

Focus on Black Joy: Shift the narrative from deficit to well-being. This honors the diversity of the Black experience and celebrates Black identity and cultures.

Change the conditions that perpetuate harm: Change policies across community settings to address collective harms, instead of putting the burden solely on individuals. This highlights a health in all policies approach to mental health.

Strengthen the ecosystem: Create the environments for Black youth to thrive, increasing resources and connections for organizations, families, and communities.

Model community-driven change: Facilitate an authentic Black youth and community-led policy change process that models effective ways for Black youth to create change, building the capacity of individuals, families, and community.

THE APPROACH

- **Black centered:** Support the variety of experiences Black youth have, including opportunities for mental well-being.
- **Youth led:** Create a Black youth affinity space to define what mental health looks like and the crucial steps to claim positive racial identity and mental well-being.
- **Community driven:** Create Black leader affinity spaces to discuss shared experiences, define the issue, and prioritize solutions.
- **Local/state partnership:** Foster state and local partnerships to develop wider cross-system communication to advance and sustain narrative shifts and policy change.

BLACK CENTERED



Youth and community
engagement



Public and partner
communication



Leverage local and
state partnerships

Mental well-being and racial justice

Mental well-being requires a sense of purpose and self-determination. To truly experience mental well-being, Black youth need to feel and have the power to shape their world and change their lives and conditions for the better. For many, historical trauma is a reality that disrupts a sense of purpose and power and continues to be part of lived experience and reality.

Systemic racism and generational structural inequities (social, economic, political, and environmental) result in poor health outcomes. These inequities have a greater influence on health outcomes than individual choices or one's ability to access health care, and not all communities are impacted the same way. All people living in Minnesota benefit when health disparities are reduced and racial equity is advanced.

YOUTH VOICES ON POLICY

Individuals and communities have different perspectives on what it means to be well. Youth and community-led discussions throughout 2023, coordinated by the **Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth**, explored a wide range of critical elements for Black youth well-being. Topics included the nuances of the Black experience, the importance of establishing strong connections within the Black community, leveraging personal networks to drive positive change, the role of storytelling in relation to Black Joy, and others. Youth and community leaders chose the following areas to center deeper policy discussions:

- **Safety**
- **Family**
- **Identity**
- **School**
- **Social media**

YOUTH VOICES ON BLACK JOY

Black Joy is...

“Having choices”

“Being able to choose”

“Being seen and understood by people”

“Supporting others”

“Being a part of the team”

“Being free”

“Being comfortable”

“Black success”

MINNESOTA DATA

Black youth reported key mental well-being components in the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS).

47%

Sense of belonging: connection to structures and relationships that support sense of belonging.

52%

Personal growth: feeling like you have something to contribute, supports planning for a future.

38%

Empowerment: opportunities for autonomy and decision-making, feeling valued and appreciated.

28%

Positive identity: feeling good about yourself overall, understanding your role or purpose.

Building community capacity and state/local partnership

Advisory Council

This council is comprised of Black leaders from the county, cities, schools, higher education, and other key decisionmakers including parents and pastors. This group is the backbone of this initiative, driving decisions about the community process. The council is coordinated by the BBAY.

- Building community trust is essential, especially when discussing mental health.
- Affinity group supports trust building.

Black Youth Affinity Space

This is a space for and by Black youth to experience joy, build relationships, explore identity, and define mental well-being collectively. This space is coordinated by the BBAY.

- Youth need their own spaces to explore identity and well-being.
- Opportunities to experience well-being and joy is valuable as youth define what is critical for their mental health.

State Resource Team

This team involves leaders from across 10 state agencies. Partners share information, leverage additional resources, contacts, and research to support implementation, amplify effective policies and practices, and support sustainability. The team is coordinated by MDH.

- Intra-agency collaboration is growing and increased communication with local partners adds value for everyone.
- Collectively, Minnesota has numerous initiatives that contribute to Black youth mental health.

STATE AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIP PRACTICES

The leadership structure emphasizes shared power between state and local partners. State and local partners bring important and unique perspectives to the project, and must navigate different cultures and levels of trust. A few of the initiative practices to foster partnership include ensuring:

- Ongoing opportunities to build relationships within and across project structures.
- Time and space for local and state leaders at each table and events to represent their work.
- Local leaders and youth set the project pace, direction, and select policy priorities.
- Local leaders are included in state decision processes such as hiring and contracting.

While challenges persist, the expected added value of state and local partnership is the opportunity to amplify communications across systems, leverage a wider set of resources and support sustainability of effective policies and practice.

Building a foundation for future policy change: Successes and lessons learned

200+ Black youth

in Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park have been connected to this conversation about mental health and policies that shape their well-being.

10 state agencies

and statewide organizations are engaged to consider ways they can support Black youth mental health.

50 current initiatives

policies, or programs identified by the State Resource Team that relate to Black youth mental health.

30 community members

explored nature and the role of Black identity at the Black Joy Retreat.

16 kayaks

deployed during the Black Joy Retreat in the quest for joy.

58 tickets

to community events about Black mental health, roller skating, Black-centered iconic movies, and more to explore Black identity and build community connections.

Continuous engagement: An extended mobilizing phase that offers youth and families multiple opportunities to engage, build relationships, and explore this complex topic in a safe environment, is essential to get to the deep level of reflection needed.

Safety: Youth space focused a lot on building safety to have meaningful discussions about mental health. This critically informed a safe, engaging, and transformational youth summit.

Complexity: Mental health is a complex topic involving trauma, racial identity, history, and family history. Discussions must take place with care, patience, and humility.

Representation matters: There must be broad representation in participants and leadership from across the diaspora because the Black experience is diverse.

Mobilizing youth leadership: Active engagement of youth to inform and shape the community process is foundational.

Sharing power is a practice: Implementing power sharing in day-to-day operations can be challenging despite sharing this core value. It requires ongoing efforts to build trust, navigate relationships and decision making, outline roles and set boundaries between leadership bodies.

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Minnesota Department of Health | Child and Family Health Division | Maternal and Child Health Section
625 Robert Street N, St. Paul, MN 55164 | 651-201-3650 | health.mch@state.mn.us | www.health.mn.gov

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To obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-3650