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SC Afterschool Alliance and SC Department of Mental Health announce innovative partnership to expand youth access to mental health care across South Carolina

COLUMBIA, S.C. (Dec. 5, 2023) - The South Carolina Afterschool Alliance (SCAA) and the South Carolina Department of Mental Health (SCDMH) are partnering on a new, innovative effort to improve access to mental health care for South Carolina youth by tapping into the statewide network of afterschool programs.

The partners will work together on three targeted strategies: training afterschool providers in the Youth Mental Health First Aid program, building a youth network of peer wellness coaches, and adding a staff clinician to the SCDMH who would work specifically to support the afterschool network sites.

Beginning in the spring of 2024, all afterschool program professionals who are part of the SCAA network will be offered training in the Youth Mental Health First Aid program, which will teach afterschool staff how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges among children and adolescents ages 12-18.

The partnership between SCAA and SCDMH also aims to enhance the mental health workforce serving children by creating a youth network of peer wellness coaches in schools and afterschool programs. By fostering support systems among students, SCAA and SCDMH hope to reduce the stigma surrounding needing and receiving help for mental health disorders.

The partnership will be supported by a \$225,000 grant awarded to SCAA by the Mott Foundation for implementation over three years.

Rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders are on the rise among children in the state and nationwide. Twelve percent of children in South Carolina reported experiencing depression or anxiety in 2020, a 55 percent increase from 2016, according to the 2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book. South Carolina is one of six states that saw an increase of more than 50 percent in children's anxiety or depression.

Expanding support systems in environments where young people already spend time – such as school or afterschool programs – is a proven method to connect them to mental health care treatment they might not otherwise be able to access.

“Afterschool programs not only enhance academic recovery, we know they can also serve as critical support systems and open more pathways to mental health treatment for our youth,” said Zeldia Waymer, President and CEO of SCAA. “We are so grateful for the Mott Foundation’s support to be able to enter this unique partnership with SCDMH to expand access to mental health care for children through afterschool.”

“SCDMH is proud to be part of this new collaboration,” said SCDMH Acting State Director Robert Bank, MD. “It will support our goals of reaching South Carolina children in need as soon as possible and providing appropriate services. Early intervention will give youth and their families additional tools to successfully reach their goals.”

About the South Carolina Afterschool Alliance

South Carolina Afterschool Alliance (SCAA) is a partnership among state government agencies, municipal leaders, foundations, higher education, business leaders, the arts community, local school districts, after school program providers and other critical stakeholders joining together to form a supportive statewide network for after-school and summer learning programs. SCAA works with its partners to raise awareness, increase sustainability, and promote the importance of quality afterschool programs. For additional information please visit <http://scafterschool.com/>.

About SCDMH

The SCDMH's mission is to support the recovery of people with mental illnesses. The Department provides clinical services to approximately 100,000 patients each year, about 30,000 of whom are children. As South Carolina's public mental health system, SCDMH provides outpatient mental health care through a network of 16 community mental health centers and associated clinics serving all 46 counties and inpatient psychiatric treatment in three state hospitals.

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