

# Addressing Mental Well-Being through Afterschool Programs



Vermont youth are suffering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, feeling disconnected from classmates, adults, and their communities. Now, afterschool programs in Vermont stand ready to give young people the support they need to re-engage, recharge, and rebound from the pandemic.

## The Problem

Vermont's youth are experiencing an urgent mental health crisis. An [October 2020 survey of Vermont youth](#) found:

**MORE THAN**  
**45%** of high schoolers say that COVID-19 has worsened their mental health.

**AROUND**  
**50%** of eleventh and twelfth graders say they are lonelier and more anxious due to COVID-19.

**NEARLY**  
**40%** of youth report that in the past month they sometimes or often felt difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them.

I've noticed a lot of my peers have gotten more anxious and have all fallen into deeper holes because we don't know how to socialize anymore.

— **GABRIELLA OLSEN**, Rutland High School junior, shared in the [Town Hall with Senator Sanders on February 16, 2022](#)

## The Solution

**Afterschool programs are well positioned to help address the mental health crisis.** The U.S. Surgeon General and the U.S. Department of Education have recognized the power of afterschool in the COVID-19 recovery. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's recent ["Supporting Child and Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs" report](#) calls for programming that supports social-emotional health. It also notes that "school environments are busy and complex, and environmental challenges may inhibit the delivery of evidence-based supports." And the [2021 Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health](#) encourages community-based

organizations to "implement evidence-based programs that promote healthy development, support children, youth, and their families, and increase their resilience." It calls out afterschool as an example of this type of youth enrichment program.

Many afterschool and summer programs in Vermont recognized the need to help address youth's mental health in summer 2021 and responded accordingly, showing that while the mental health crisis is daunting, it is not insurmountable.

## Program Spotlight: Camp Agape, Plymouth

Offered free-of-charge, Camp Agape serves youth who have a parent or caregiver involved in the Vermont correctional system. Therefore, having resources to address stress and grief is particularly important, giving campers the opportunity to have fun while receiving extra support from caring adults. Made possible with the Summer Matters for All grant, Camp Agape worked with a licensed mental health counselor to provide support around social-emotional learning skills, trauma, and crisis intervention. They hired additional staff and trained them in youth mental health first aid to enhance emotional and behavioral support for campers.



**We must respond with coordinated urgent action, across all afterschool programs, implementing an all-hands-on-deck approach.** Afterschool can provide Vermont youth with a solid base of healthy, supportive programming that promotes their mental health and well-being. The afterschool field has a history of doing so, and with intentionality, we can help address the current mental health crisis.

## Why It Will Work

Currently, **afterschool programs:**

- Serve both as a fundamental setting in which healthy development and learning take place, as well as an intervention through which social and emotional skills and competencies are fostered.
- Integrate strategies that are well-known to promote good mental health and well-being: healthy eating, exercise, time outdoors and in nature, caring adults, close peer groups, mindfulness, and opportunities for exploration.
- Have autonomy and flexibility, giving staff the ability to design programming that meets youth where they are.

Beyond the programs themselves, **the afterschool field at large** operates at the nexus of families, communities, and schools. Vermont has spent decades building a web that has essentially become Vermont's family-supportive infrastructure across county lines that already reaches 20,000 Vermont youth. Through Vermont's [universal afterschool and summer model](#), soon, we'll have an even broader reach statewide.

## Afterschool programs provide developmental supports:



**Caring and supportive mentors**



**Safe spaces where students build confidence and feel a sense of belonging**



**Opportunities to work collaboratively, problem solve, and think critically**

## In turn, these supports help kids:



**Gain self-control and confidence**



**Improve work habits and grades**



**Develop strong social skills**



**Improve school day attendance and behavior**



**Build healthy relationships with their peers and adults**



**Reduce risky behaviors, such as tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol use**

**We have the bones of a strong platform. Our infrastructure is sound. Now, we can build on it to intentionally address mental well-being.**



## How We'll Do It

This is an opportunity for Vermont to address our youth's mental well-being by leveraging our collective experience with cross-agency collaboration.

The proposed grant program will expand the capacity of Vermont's afterschool programs to support youth mental health, providing resources for programs to collaborate with schools, mental health agencies, and pediatricians. All youth will be able to thrive because our approach will value them and center their individual needs.

Benefits include:



Building on in-school counseling and interventions, while giving families additional flexibility to access these supports for their children and youth.



Directly connecting mental health practitioners with staff, children, youth, and families.



Reaching a broad sector of children, youth, and families with tiered levels of supports.



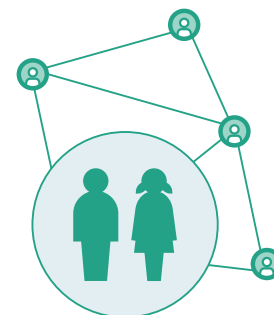
Counteracting the stigma of seeking and receiving mental health support.



Allowing afterschool programs to engage experts to provide one-on-one and small group support groups and resilience sessions. These would be offered to youth who would benefit from addressing specific needs such as suicide prevention, social isolation, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use.



Providing additional in-depth and focused staff training around mental health and well-being.



By addressing mental well-being through afterschool, together — and with — Vermont youth, we can move forward from a challenging two years and forge a bright future.