

Youth Mental Health Corps in Virginia



Leveraging AmeriCorps resources to address critical community needs, the Youth Mental Health Corps in Virginia will serve thousands of youth and young adults who are affected by mental health challenges while also building “service-to-career” pathways for Virginians to gain experience in the behavioral health field.

The Youth Mental Health Corps is a unified, multi-sector partnership designed to address the youth mental health crisis and the mental health workforce shortage in the United States.

In Virginia, the Corps will use a near-peer model to engage young adults in local AmeriCorps service opportunities to support youth. Corps members will complete certifications and credentials—such as Peer Recovery Specialist or Community Health Worker—to prepare them for careers in behavioral healthcare, creating expanded mental health services for youth.

Planning for Greater Impact

Serve Virginia, with the support of a planning grant from the Schultz Family Foundation and Pinterest, invites leaders, stakeholders, and community members to join the process of bringing this idea to reality. As planning begins for the Youth Mental Health Corps in Virginia, we invite partners to help us consider ways to:

- Design service opportunities that benefit youth and leverage existing resources
- Consider organizations to host AmeriCorps members for these service opportunities
- Build and expand on partnerships across state, regional, and local agencies and organizations to support AmeriCorps members serving youth
- Explore formalizing a school-based stackable credential for members to earn during their service
- Assess additional resources programs will need to support youth and members

Youth Mental Health in Virginia

Mental health risks and substance use disorder affect young Virginians at higher rates than elsewhere:

48th

Virginia ranks 48th out of 51 for youth mental health risk factors, indicating heightened mental health risks & lower accessibility of care than in other states.

Mental Health America

Between 2015–2021, negative mental health markers steadily increased among Virginia youth, accompanied by decreases in positive mental health levels:

 **38%** felt sad or hopeless for extended periods

 **1 in 5** seriously considered suicide

 **52%** strongly agree or agree that they feel good about themselves

*Virginia Department of Health,
2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey*

To learn more about ways to get involved in this initiative, please contact Serve Virginia Statewide Engagement Officer Analise Gammel at analise.gammel@dss.virginia.gov.

National Service Infrastructure for Youth Mental Health Corps in Virginia

As the state service commission, Serve Virginia convenes partners in the Governor's administration, state agencies, nonprofit networks, and other stakeholder groups to promote the role of national and community service to help meet critical community needs through strategies, like the Youth Mental Health Corps, that leverage state and federal resources for a maximized impact on the overall wellbeing of Virginians.

Currently, Serve Virginia supports over 295 AmeriCorps members that serve more than 11,000 youth and young adults in schools and through afterschool settings to promote academic achievement, support post-secondary success, and offer opportunities for social emotional learning. In addition, more than 30 AmeriCorps members currently provide resources and support to those impacted by substance use disorder and other chronic health challenges as peer recovery specialists and community health workers.



Mobilized by the current crisis in youth mental health, many leaders and stakeholders have mobilized to create solutions. In recognition of the rising mental and behavioral health needs, Governor Youngkin created the *Right Help, Right Now* plan in 2022 to reform the behavioral health system. The plan includes a youth mental health strategy, with proposed solutions such as expanding school-based mental health services for youth while and prioritizing investments to strengthen the behavioral health profession. In addition to the Right Help, Right Now plan, youth mental health is a priority area across the strategic plans of many state agencies, including VDSS, DBHDS, and VDOE, to name a few.

As an AmeriCorps program, the Youth Mental Health Corps in Virginia will engage new subgrantees and host sites for a minimum of **75 AmeriCorps members** who will:

- Receive **high-quality training** from a network of state and local organizations
- Learn through **hands-on experience** with youth and young adults ages 13-18
- Engage in a new **school-based stackable certification pathway**
- **Serve youth** in schools, out-of-school time programs, and community-based youth organizations in communities with limited access to mental health services

Serve Virginia will collaborate with stakeholders to identify primary organizations to extend the model in Virginia's communities, and establish service-to-career pathways to help strengthen the talent pipeline for behavioral health.

AmeriCorps members serving in the Youth Mental Health Corps will engage in professional development, including trainings like Youth Mental Health First Aid, as well as explore credentials and certifications related to their service. Members will enhance their current experience working with youth by participating in these trainings and will be prepared to translate their service after their term is over to continue to strengthen outcomes for Virginia's youth.

Youth Mental Health Corps member benefits will include living stipends, education scholarships, and networking with other AmeriCorps members serving youth through existing AmeriCorps State programs. Other supports for members will be identified in the planning process.

