



May 2022

#NationalAdolescentHealthMonth

#HealthyYouthNAHM

Voices from the Field

Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System Foundation

Connect Spartanburg is a 36-partner collaborative aimed at reducing the rate of teen pregnancy and promoting the overall health and well-being of adolescents in Spartanburg County, South Carolina. Connect leverages federal grant funding to provide evidence-based strategies to support organizations – including schools, healthcare entities, and non-profit entities – that serve young people.

Connect supports 186 facilitators serving six thousand preteens and teens annually through training, technical assistance and evaluation support and convenes the community for systems thinking to ensure federal dollars result in institutionalized change within systems.

Essential to the success of the Connect collaborative are its Community Advisory Board (CAB) and its robust teen ambassador program. With involvement and input from both adolescents and key community partners, Connect has established a track record of listening to young people, engaging them in meaningful opportunities to support their peers, and responding to their needs with effective systems-thinking strategies.

Data collected through a 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey led to a greater understanding of mental health challenges faced by teenagers. A year later, as COVID-19 led to school closings and social isolation, Connect began hearing from former ambassadors who stressed the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and the well-being of their younger family members, friends, and acquaintances.

Connect was ready to act. The collaborative has taken a lead role in addressing teen mental health needs through their Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Committee, made up of representatives in the mental health field, responding to the unprecedented realities of the pandemic as well as to wider, ongoing challenges faced by young people. Among the highlights:

- In 2020, when the federal grant was being written, CAB identified mental health support in school as a primary area for exploration in systems thinking. We understand from the Youth Behavior Risk Survey that disparities in mental health and lower levels of school connectedness directly correlate with higher level sexual risk taking; because of this improving the schools' systems to support behavioral and mental health became a priority. Connect supports the school districts multi-tiered systems of support for behavioral health in three areas: 1) ensuring students in need of support received social emotional curriculum, wellbeing curriculum, Teen Outreach Program and Aban Aya; 2) providing safe spaces for marginalized teens through training for educators; and 3) technical assistance on discipline policies to ensure unbiased policies and procedures to ensure marginalized populations are not disproportionately removed from school.

This story was written by Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System Foundation.

HHS Office of Population Affairs

Web: opa.hhs.gov | Email: opa@hhs.gov

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- The Connect website is a hub for local and national information to support adolescents in need. In the past two years we have worked closely with mental health partners to update information and craft a message that destigmatizes seeking help. We hear from community partners and from teenagers that the website has been a vital resource during the pandemic. One former teen ambassador, now a student at a local university, said this: "I had a friend who told me he was depressed, and I immediately looked up resources on the website. I was able to help my friend, and that felt good."

2022 ADOLESCENT HEALTH CONFERENCE TEENS  PARENTS/PADRES PARTNERS CONTACT



- Connect has funded and directed two video productions – one aimed at a [teen audience](#) and the other at [parents and adults](#) who support young people – that highlight the importance of mental health and provide information on resources in the community. These videos are based on perspectives from local teenagers and have been shared widely on social media. These videos were the backbone of a mental health social media toolkit to share youth voices and promote engagement. Goals were to destigmatize seeking care, giving young people specific guidance on how to seek help locally, and informing adults about challenges youth face when it comes to dealing with mental health issues.
- In 2021, Connect provided support in the renovation of space to serve adolescent behavioral health patients in the main emergency room of the Spartanburg Regional Healthcare Center based on an unprecedented increase in adolescent patients. Connect worked with area mental health facilities on ensuring a safe space and clear, consistent messaging from crisis to placement. Funding also came from Spartanburg Regional Foundation, which has been home to the Connect initiative since 2020. This renovation is a crucial step in the treatment of youth facing a mental health crisis. Previously, these patients were placed alongside adults in the ER's behavioral health unit.

Mental health is, of course, an essential aspect of overall well-being. And as research, including data from the YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey) makes clear, it is also linked to Connect's goal of teen pregnancy prevention.

We are proud of these and other efforts to bring systemic, strategic focus to the mental health needs of young people, and we are grateful for the many partners—including teenagers themselves—who have propelled this work forward.

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