

From Surviving to Thriving: Reimagining Youth Mental Wellness in L.A.











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# 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum

We are proud to welcome you to the first Crossroads Conference since 2019 – a long-awaited return after a time of tremendous change. Historically, this event has served as a space to foster cross-sector dialogue, align around shared goals, and develop policies that support Los Angeles' most vulnerable populations. That mission remains more important than ever. When the City's YouthSource Center System was repurposed two years ago, one need rose clearly above the rest: mental health.

While we couldn't have predicted how urgent this issue would become, we now recognize mental health as a cornerstone of youth development. This year's Crossroads Conference centers on Youth Wellness, with a particular focus on mental health. The event is two-pronged in its approach – providing youth with access to wellness resources, while also offering vital professional development for our dedicated YouthSource Center staff who work tirelessly to support them.

Together, we hope to spark meaningful conversations, build stronger systems of care, and walk away better equipped to support the young people of our city.

Welcome back, and thank you for being part of this journey.

Sincerely,



**David Crippens** 

Youth Council Chair
City of Los Angeles Workforce
Development Board



# **Mission Statement**

The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum aimed to advance youth wellness by fostering equitable, community-driven policy solutions that center mental health as a cornerstone of development for marginalized youth in Los Angeles. Through cross-sector collaboration, shared learning, and direct engagement with young people, the forum seeks to reimagine systems of care that move youth from surviving to thriving.

# 1. Promote Mental Wellness Equity

Identify and elevate actionable strategies to improve access to mental health support for opportunity youth, with an emphasis on culturally responsive and trauma-informed care.

# 2. Empower Youth Voice and Leadership

Create platforms for youth to lead, share lived experiences, and shape the policies and practices that affect their futures.

# 3. Strengthen Professional Capacity

Provide training and development opportunities for YouthSource Center staff, and allied professionals in mental health first aid, wellness practices, and inclusive service delivery.

# 4. Advance Policy and Systems Change

Develop and disseminate policy recommendations that drive economic mobility, reduce disparities, and support holistic youth development.

## 5. Foster Collaboration and Shared Learning

Facilitate meaningful dialogue and relationship-building among youth, practitioners, and policy influencers to align efforts and resources across sectors.





# A Comprehensive Review of the Crossroads Youth Policy Forum

"Supporting alternative care networks through new Medicaid-reimbursable career pathways"

The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum served as a critical space for intergenerational dialogue, policy innovation, and community-led action aimed at redefining youth mental health and wellness. With a central theme of healing-centered support, this full-day event brought together experts, policy influencers, youth leaders, and advocates to address the mental health crisis among young people, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key accomplishments of the forum include advancing system-level solutions, empowering youth voices, and building actionable strategies for equity-rooted mental wellness.

## 1. Reframing Youth Mental Health Through Healing-Centered Approaches

The opening keynote by Alex Briscoe, a renowned health and human services expert, set the tone for a bold reimagination of youth mental wellness. Briscoe emphasized the need to move away from deficit- and diagnosis-centered models, instead promoting community-rooted, peer-based wellness systems. The keynote outlined the disproportionate burden of mental health issues on low-income youth—81% of whom are children of color and introduced policy opportunities to make public health systems more responsive and inclusive.

# Briscoe outlined five essential Medicaid strategies that the forum recognized as central to system transformation:

Removing diagnosis requirements for services;

Reimagining the mental health workforce to include peer specialists, community health workers, doulas, and wellness coaches;

Supporting alternative care networks through new Medicaid-reimbursable career pathways;

Centering racial equity and cultural competence in care delivery;

Leveraging Medi-Cal, which already serves 50% of California's youth, to fund and support non-traditional providers and organizations.

By grounding the mental health conversation in healing justice, equity, and cultural responsiveness, the keynote effectively challenged attendees to view young people as not

## 2. Elevating Lived Experience Through the Expert Panel

The expert panel, titled "From Surviving to Thriving: Reimagining Youth Mental Wellness in L.A.", featured professionals and youth advocates who explored how systemic disruptions—exacerbated by the pandemic—have fueled an unprecedented youth mental health crisis. Moderated by Dr. Kristen Williams, the session emphasized the damaging effects of social isolation, loss of routine, and trauma.

Panelist Dr. Caleb Stephens addressed the need for relational healing and community-based support, calling for deeper connections between young people and trusted adults. Mariyah Williams, representing the Teen Source Youth Advisory Board, shed light on the toxic impact of social media, bullying, and rising racial tensions. Her remarks highlighted how many teens lack interpersonal communication skills, not from disinterest but from a lack of learned experience.

The Los Angeles Department of Mental Health's Mary Barraza shared existing support structures, such as the LACDMH's "No Wrong Door" policy, access lines, crisis stabilization teams, and culturally competent services offered in 13 languages. These systems, she emphasized, are evolving to include youth input, extended service hours, and focus groups to design services "with, not for" youth.

# Highlights from the panel included:

The need for continuity and long-term community investment;

Identity-affirming care that combats transphobia, racism, and gaslighting;

Youth-led initiatives and peer mentorship as frontline mental health interventions, that include pay and livable wages.





# 3. Empowering Youth Leadership and Voice

A central accomplishment of the forum was the Youth Poster Session, where student leaders presented original research and lived experiences. Each student presented the following;

**Nysha Prasad** presented on the intersection of adolescence and mental health, focusing on the neurobiological changes during this critical developmental period and the role of early intervention in promoting youth well-being.

- Explained how early stress affects adolescent brain development, highlighting the importance of early intervention.
- Addressed the mental health challenges posed by academic pressure and social media.
- Proposed HALOs (Healing, Awareness, Learning, Outreach) —safe, non-intimidating environments for teens to prevent risky behaviors.

Mariyah Williams explored the post-pandemic decline in youth mental health, emphasizing how systemic inequities, especially for Black and Latino youth, are exacerbated by social media and parental stress.

- Used mixed methods to highlight the mental health crisis facing youth, particularly post-pandemic.
- Connected systemic issues, such as inequitable resources and parental stress, to youth mental health outcomes.
- Advocated for social justice reform and equity in social media recommendations to support better youth mental wellness.

**Caleel Smith** called for a shift in how society views mental health, asserting it should be treated as a right, not a privilege. He emphasized the need for better teacher training and supportive environments for students struggling with mental health challenges.

- Argued that mental health care should be a basic right accessible to all students.
- Criticized current school responses to mental health needs, advocating for less punitive and more supportive approaches.
- Stressed the importance of communication-based de-escalation by adults and police in youth crises.

**Genis Wooten** focused on ADHD and the challenges youth face in educational settings. He advocated for better support and understanding of neurodivergent students to improve their school experience.

- · Discussed the unique challenges of students living with ADHD in school settings.
- Emphasized the need for better recognition and accommodations for ADHD students.
- Advocated for a more inclusive and supportive approach to neurodivergence in education.

**Sophie Williams** shared her personal experience navigating ADHD and anxiety within the school system, advocating for improved teacher training, better confidentiality for accommodations, and accessible mental health support for all students.

- Shared her experience of being outed by teachers when requesting accommodations for ADHD.
- Advocated for more teacher training on ADHD, anxiety, and fostering open communication with students.
- Highlighted the importance of on-campus counseling (Counseling Partners of Los Angeles) to support students' mental health needs.

Their proposals underscored a significant shift: from youth being seen as passive recipients of care to being knowledge producers, policy contributors, and community leaders.



# **Action-Oriented Workshops and Capacity Building**

The forum's afternoon workshops were instrumental in providing practical tools for youth and professionals alike:

# What If Stress Isn't the Problem? How Emotional Intelligence Turns Daily Pressure into Personal Power

In this transformative session by Alphonso Paz of Vibix Learning, participants learned how to reframe their relationship with stress through the lens of emotional intelligence (EQ). Rather than viewing stress as an obstacle, attendees discovered how to harness their emotional responses to turn pressure into power, using simple yet powerful tools to pause, reset, and thrive even in challenging situations.

- The power of venting: Participants engaged in a reflective venting exercise, realizing how expressing emotions can lighten mental loads and prevent emotional baggage from building up.
- Brain science at work: We explored how changing your environment can calm the brain's stress response, while intentional pauses strengthen emotional regulation, helping us make better decisions under pressure.
- Building lasting emotional resilience: Participants left with a deeper understanding
  of how daily, small acts of emotional awareness and regulation can rewire the brain,
  building long-term emotional resilience that enhances both personal and professional
  lives.

#### **Youth Wellness & Inclusion**

In this empowering workshop led by Ariel Bustamante from the LGBT Center, participants delved into the critical need for mental wellness practices that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and centered on the identities of youth, particularly those from marginalized communities.

- With a focus on LGBTQ+ youth, youth of color, and those experiencing systemic challenges, this workshop empowered participants to rethink care models that often fail to meet the needs of these populations.
- Breaking down barriers: The workshop illuminated how institutional biases, discrimination, and a lack of cultural responsiveness often prevent LGBTQ+ and minority youth from accessing the care they need. Participants gained insight into the real-world struggles faced by youth in foster care, juvenile justice systems, and homelessness.
- Affirming inclusive care: Emphasizing an intersectional approach, the session called for service providers to understand the unique mental health needs of these youth and take action to create spaces that affirm their identities and experiences.
- Empowering youth through inclusion: The workshop introduced the Positive Youth
  Development paradigm, urging a shift from traditional models of youth services to
  approaches that empower young people as co-creators of their wellness journeys,
  ensuring that care is not just provided to them, but shaped by their voices and lived
  experiences.

#### Mental Health First Aid for Professionals and Youth

This session by Gladys Postadjian, LCSW and Jacaira Linder, LCSW of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, trained professionals to identify signs of mental health distress in youth and understand the role of "gatekeepers" in connecting Transitional Age Youth (TAY) to timely support and services.

- Gatekeeper model: Introduced the role of clinicians as gatekeepers—first responders who screen and guide TAY and their support networks toward appropriate services.
- Emergency support for TAY: Highlighted Enhanced Emergency Shelters (EESP), a 60day crisis intervention program offering short-term treatment and housing for youth ages 18-25.
- TAY Drop-In Centers: Shared details about accessible, youth-centered resources that
  offer mental health support, basic needs, and care navigation in non-clinical settings.

#### Breaking the Silence: Education, Awareness, and Prevention of CSEC

In this awakening session, Tyi'Shauwn Watkins of Lutheran Social Services California, raised awareness about the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth (CSEC), emphasizing the importance of education, policy reform, and trauma-informed community engagement to protect vulnerable young people.

- Policy and prevention: Reviewed critical legislative efforts such as SB 1322 and AB 1227, which support exploited youth and shift legal responses from punishment to protection.
- Protective factors: Introduced a framework for prevention rooted in parental resilience, community support, and children's emotional competence.
- Community engagement: Emphasized the power of local partnerships and early education to break cycles of exploitation and create safe, informed environments for youth.

These sessions equipped attendees with the frameworks and tools to continue the work beyond the forum—building momentum for long-term change.





# **Conclusion: A Blueprint for Youth-Centered Change**

The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum not only facilitated meaningful dialogue—it also mobilized concrete actions to transform how youth wellness is approached in Los Angeles and beyond. By centering wellness over pathology, listening over prescribing, and healing over punishment, the forum laid a new foundation for mental health equity.

New understanding of policy levers, especially around Medicaid reform.

Tools for emotional intelligence, trauma-informed care, and inclusive service delivery.

Commitment to youth co-leadership, with youth voices integrated into service design.

Momentum for addressing parental support, systemic reform, and community accountability.

As David Crippens emphasized in the opening remarks: in these stormy times, "someone loves you, even if you don't love yourself." The forum embodied this message—offering not just hope, but tangible strategies to help our youth navigate, survive, and ultimately thrive.



# Key Findings and Themes of the Crossroads Youth Policy Forum

The Crossroads Youth Policy Forum convened youth, practitioners, and policy influencers to explore how systems can better support youth mental health and economic mobility. As young people face challenges like housing instability, racism, and under-resourced care, the forum offered actionable solutions rooted in equity, healing, and community.

The key findings and themes that emerged captures the most impactful insights from the forum—from Medicaid reforms and peer-led support models to culturally responsive training and youth-driven innovation. Across all sessions, participants shared a clear commitment: transform care by centering youth voices, embedding equity, and building cross-sector systems that heal and empower.

# 1. Access to Policy Recommendations That Enhance Youth Mental Health Support and Economic Mobility

#### **Key Findings:**

- Healing-centered systems: Alex Briscoe emphasized Medicaid reforms enabling peer specialists, wellness coaches, and non-diagnosis-based services.
- Economic mobility as care: Emphasis on job pipelines, paid internships, housing stipends, and family-inclusive policies.
- Wraparound models: Youth-serving professionals increasingly understand the connection between mental health and long-term economic stability.

#### Themes:

- Policy is practical: Participants plan to integrate new resources into programming.
- System navigation: Professionals gained confidence in navigating Medicaid, Medi-Cal, TAY, and CSEC supports.
- Youth-informed reforms: Youth input shaped calls for embedded, community-rooted care.



# 2. Training on Mental Health First Aid and Culturally Responsive Care

#### **Key Findings:**

- Lived experience = expertise: Sessions emphasized peer-informed, trauma-aware practices.
- Holistic training: Addressed suicide risk, emotional intelligence, and identity-affirming care.
- Internal shifts: Professionals reflected on the importance of self-care and empathy as foundations for service.

#### Themes:

- Cultural humility: Professionals committed to building culturally responsive, inclusive care systems.
- Non-clinical approaches: Mental health support must extend beyond traditional models to reflect diverse youth realities.
- Trust-centered training: Awareness is the first step toward culturally competent, equity-rooted practice.

# 3. Networking Opportunities with Youth Leaders, Practitioners, and Policy Influencers

## **Key Findings:**

- Intergenerational collaboration: Student poster sessions and panels fostered co-learning and shared advocacy.
- Relationship-building: Strong intent to maintain and grow professional networks post-conference.
- Youth-led innovation: Attendees highlighted practical ideas shared by youth, such as therapy spaces, social media reforms, and community care hubs.

#### Themes:

- Youth as equals: Networking uplifted youth as co-creators, not passive participants.
- Sustained ecosystems: Participants plan to replicate successful models and continue cross-sector partnerships.
- Mentorship & solidarity: Relationships built during the forum transcend traditional networking—fueling shared purpose.

# 4. Insights on How Policies Impact Marginalized Youth

#### **Key Findings:**

Systemic inequities spotlighted: Racial bias, immigration status, poverty, and digital harms are key stressors for youth well-being.

Legislative awareness: SB 1322 and AB 1227 tied policy to protections for exploited and marginalized youth.

Equity-centered practice: Professionals committed to creative, inclusive programming and policy advocacy.

#### Themes:

Policy is personal: Access, language, and trust are all shaped by policy decisions.

Lived realities matter: Intersectional policy design is essential—especially for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, and low-income youth.

Community-based care: Healing happens in schools, families, and neighborhoods, not just clinics.

# **Overall Impact**

- 1. Policy and Practice Are Aligning: Professionals are applying new policy knowledge to real-world support strategies.
- 2. Healing-Centered Design Is Taking Root: Culturally grounded, trauma-informed care is shifting how services are designed and delivered.
- 3. Youth Are Leading—and Being Heard: Youth participation moved from symbolic to strategic, shaping policy and program design.
- Sustained Collaboration Is the Goal: Cross-sector ecosystems of care are emerging as a lasting strategy for impact.
- 5. Equity Is Non-Negotiable: The forum reinforced that true transformation requires centering marginalized youth in every aspect of policy and care.

# Conclusion: A Paradigm Shift in Youth Support

The Crossroads Youth Policy Forum did more than educate—it mobilized. Through collaborative spaces, culturally rooted training, and youth-centered policy dialogue, the forum catalyzed a transformational shift in how youth-serving professionals approach equity, healing, and systemic change. Participants left not only more informed—but ready to act.

# Strategic Recommendations for the Evolution of the Crossroads Youth Policy Forum

#### Introduction

The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum aided in catalyzing discussions in Los Angeles' approach to youth mental wellness. By centering youth leadership and cross-sector collaboration, the forum laid the groundwork for systemic change rooted in healing, equity, and cultural responsiveness.

This roadmap provides detailed explanations for each midterm (1–3 years) and longterm (2–5 years) recommendation, including data-driven rationale and survey feedback from participants, to ensure the Forum's legacy becomes an enduring force for transformation.

#### Midterm Recommendations (1-3 Years)

#### 1. Launch a Centralized Digital Engagement Platform

Many participants reported gaps in knowing where to go for help or how to stay involved post-event. A digital hub can close this loop, offering access, visibility, and continuous engagement for youth, families, and providers.

Crossroads Digital Hub: This online platform, such as a Linktree, or Instagram, should feature:

- First-person stories from youth, including blogs and short videos
- Toolkits for organizing, self-care, and advocacy
- Wellness event calendars, registration tools, and reminders
- Interactive spaces for reflection, storytelling, and feedback collection
- Links to community services and policy updates



#### 2. Create Year-Round Professional Learning and Peer Support

Service providers need consistent training and supportive peer networks to effectively deliver trauma-informed, culturally grounded care. Forum attendees emphasized the need to "get away from standardization" and "really listen to youth." There was also strong support for professionals to prioritize self-care to reduce burnout and improve service delivery.

- Crossroads Learning Collaborative: This initiative will host quarterly trainings for service providers and mentors, with content co-developed and co-facilitated by youth leaders. These sessions will provide culturally responsive strategies, mental health first aid, and opportunities for cross-site peer learning.
- Certification Pathways: In response to feedback about the need for professional standards grounded in inclusion, offering certification programs with partners, during the Crossroads event, will validate and elevate healing-centered practices, creating career incentives for trauma-informed work.
- Community of Practice: These monthly, regional gatherings of YouthSource Center staff and peer mentors will serve as supportive spaces for dialogue, problem-solving, and strategy sharing. The goal is to foster a consistent, values-aligned community that centers wellness and equity.

# 3. Translate Forum Insights into Policy Action

Participants strongly advocated for more accessible mental health care, expanded Medicaid coverage, and economic supports for families. Over 70% of survey respondents indicated support for reforms to Medicaid, and many called out the need for parental mental health care and financial relief as crucial supports for youth. Equipping youth and professionals to become their own advocates, legislatively, ensures continuity with policy recommendations.

- Policy Brief Series: A series of concise, data-informed briefs will summarize key forum
  insights and propose actionable policy recommendations. These will be distributed to
  local and state legislators, agency leaders, and advocacy partners.
- Legislative Alignment: Future forums and advocacy pushes will be timed with legislative sessions to ensure that proposals are timely, relevant, and strategically positioned for adoption.
- Policy Fellowship Program: Designed for both youth and allied professionals, this
  fellowship should aim to train participants in policy analysis, storytelling, and lobbying.
  Fellows will participate in legislative hearings, provide testimony, and help shape bills
  that reflect forum recommendations.

## 4. Deepen Cross-Sector Collaboration

Youth wellness is multifaceted and requires integrated support across systems. Attendees underscored the value of wraparound services, especially for families navigating housing instability, school transitions, and justice involvement. Many emphasized the importance of "integrating mental health into schools" and ensuring "aftercare and follow-up."

- Crossroads Coalition for Youth Wellness: This coalition will function similarly to a working group but will prioritize inclusivity and lived experience. Unlike many professional alliances that operate in silos, this coalition will intentionally create space for youth and practitioners to shape agendas, lead initiatives and outcomes for future forums. It will disrupt exclusivity norms by building rapport, honoring diverse perspectives, and practicing mutual accountability.
- Sector-Specific Roundtables: Quarterly roundtables will convene representatives from key sectors—such as public education, juvenile justice, behavioral health, and housing—to identify overlap, clarify roles, and build coordination. These sessions will be action-oriented and informed by data.
- Shared Equity Metrics: These metrics will be developed in partnership with coalition members and based on forum input. Indicators will track access, engagement, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, gender, and other demographic information. Metrics will be public-facing to ensure transparency.

# Long-Term Recommendations (2-5 Years)

# 5. Create Sustainable Career Pathways for Youth and Non-Traditional Providers

Many participants expressed a desire for youth to "choose who supports them" and to be "supported by people like them." Youth with lived experience, along with community-based care providers, bring credibility, cultural understanding, and trustworthiness that institutional systems often lack.

- Medicaid Waivers & Peer Provider Funding: This helps support professionals in advocating for waivers and legislative changes that allow Medicaid to reimburse services provided by trained peers—expanding access to non-clinical, healing-centered care
- Workforce Partnerships: Working with workforce development boards and community colleges, Crossroads will create paid internships, stipends, and training pipelines that lead to meaningful employment in community mental health settings.
- Youth Mental Health Career Ladder: A comprehensive guide outlining clear, supported
  pathways into youth mental health careers—from peer mentor roles to leadership positions—will be distributed through schools, community orgs, and career fairs.

# 6. Institutionalize Longitudinal Impact Evaluation

More than 60% of survey respondents highlighted a need for continuity and follow-up. Community members want to see real change—and they want to know what's working. Transparent, youth-informed evaluation helps track progress and recalibrate when needed.

- Mixed-Method Evaluation: Crossroads will adopt a combination of surveys, interviews, and focus groups to assess how policies and programs affect youth well-being. Quantitative measures (e.g., school attendance, service access) will be paired with qualitative stories to provide a full picture of impact.
- Participatory Research: Youth will serve as co-researchers, helping design studies, analyze results, and present findings. This approach empowers youth to define success and hold institutions accountable.
- Shared Equity Metrics: These metrics will be developed in partnership with coalition members and based on forum input. Indicators will track access, engagement, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, gender, and other demographic information. Metrics will be public-facing to ensure transparency.



# CONCLUSION: FROM MOMENT TO MOVEMENT

The Crossroads Youth Policy Forum laid the foundation for something much larger than a one-day convening. With these thorough and inclusive recommendations—grounded in youth voice, data, and shared community values—Los Angeles can build a sustainable, youth-led ecosystem for mental health and wellness. This is not just a strategic plan; it is a blueprint for equity, healing, and transformation from the inside out.



# ReTHINK It's Collaboration in the 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum

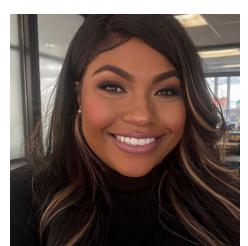
The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum was a powerful testament to what is possible when youth voice, public systems, and grassroots vision align. ReTHINK It was honored to serve as a lead planning partner alongside the City of Los Angeles, the Economic & Workforce Development Department (EWDD), the Workforce Development Board (WDB), and the YouthSource System, as well as a diverse network of community-based organizations and youth leaders.

ReTHINK It's mission is to dismantle systems of oppression by centering healing, wellness, and justice for marginalized youth. As a youth-powered, Black-led nonprofit grounded in lived experience, our work focuses on transforming how schools, systems, and communities support young people—particularly those most impacted by incarceration, trauma, and structural inequality. The Crossroads Youth Policy Forum embodied this mission by creating a platform where youth did not just participate, but led, facilitated, testified, and shaped the future of wellness policy in Los Angeles.

Throughout the planning process, ReTHINK It collaborated closely with EWDD and Youth-Source Center, and partnering organizations representatives to ensure the forum was not just logistically sound, but deeply values-aligned—healing-centered, culturally responsive, and action-oriented. Together, we hosted monthly planning meetings, facilitated youth listening sessions, coordinated over 25 speakers and presenters, and designed an agenda that integrated policy, testimony, and mental health training. The Workforce Development Board's involvement was essential in anchoring conversations around economic mobility and career access—a theme that intersects directly with ReTHINK It's vision for youth empowerment.

We are profoundly grateful for the opportunity to work with these partners in co-creating a forum that not only elevated youth wellness but also laid the foundation for sustained systems change. The relationships built during this process are not transactional—they are transformational. The 2025 Crossroads Youth Policy Forum was a beginning, not a conclusion, and we are excited to continue this work in deep partnership with the City of Los Angeles and the many organizations committed to rethinking what's possible for our youth.

Sincerely,



**Dr. Richelle Brooks** 

ReTHINK It Founder and Director





From Surviving to Thriving: Reimagining Youth Mental Wellness in L.A.







