

Rebuilding Support: Coaching California's School-Based Mental Health System to Wellness



For many families, navigating mental health challenges and traumatic experiences can feel overwhelming. Having a strong support system can be the key to finding a path forward. Jacque Thomas, a single mother of three in Tehama County, knows this firsthand. Her journey—from a child who relied on community resources to a [Certified Wellness Coach \(CWC\)](#) helping young people today—is a testament to the power of support, resilience, and giving back.

Growing up, Jacque watched her mother lean on a strong network of community support, including school resources, church programs, counselors, and mental health services. She started therapy at the young age of four and continued relying on the guidance of teachers and school staff throughout her childhood. Those experiences shaped her understanding of how crucial it is to have access to mental health and social support services—especially during difficult times.

“I had such a great experience being able to lean into my school’s support systems—I really needed it to help build my resilience,” Jacque says. “Without seeing my mom access resources and those protective factors, I wouldn’t have been able to bounce back after each of my trials and tribulations.”

–Jacque Thomas, Certified Wellness Coach (CWC)

But as Jacque became a mom herself, she noticed something troubling: the support systems she had depended on were disappearing. Programs in schools were being cut, resources were harder to access, and fewer people were available to help students struggling with mental health challenges, family instability, and trauma.

This shift meant that young people today don’t have the same level of built-in support that she had as a child. Despite online connections, young people often experience a lack of strong, in-person relationships; and more than 60% of youth who needed mental health care did not receive it. Without access to mentors, therapists, and school-based resources, many young people are left navigating their struggles alone.

Closing the Gap: Certified Wellness Coaches in Action

One approach to closing gaps in mental health resources is [California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative \(CYBHI\)](#), a statewide initiative focused on transforming care for young people and their families. As part of this initiative, a new profession called a Certified Wellness Coach (CWC) is being codified. CWCs like Jacque provide important behavioral health services—such as wellness education, coping skills development, sensory-based interventions, crisis referrals, and more—under the supervision of qualified professionals.



Jacque Thomas, Certified Wellness Coach (CWC)

The role offers opportunities for those with an associate or bachelor's degree from diverse backgrounds to formally enter the behavioral health workforce upon completing field experience and getting certified. After earning her bachelor's degree in psychology, Jacque joined Northern California Child Development, Inc., working with families in Tehama County's Head Start Program. From there, she became a CWC, a role she believes is critical for those passionate about community-based mental health support.

"I say just do it. Applying for the certification was probably the easiest thing I've ever done," she says. "It's so simple, it's free, and it's a valuable tool if you're passionate about this work. I want to be the reason people change, and I want to be the reason they do better."

"The relationships I get to build with students are incredibly meaningful," Jacque says. "I love being able to work one-on-one with them, helping them develop coping strategies that will serve them long after they leave school."

-Jacque Thomas, Certified Wellness Coach (CWC)

This work is supported and led by the Superintendent of Tehama County Department of Education (TCDE), Rich DuVarney. With the support of TCDE's Superintendent, the CWC initiative was able to pilot and promote the certification process and integration of this position into schools.

For Jacque, being a wellness coach is more than just a job: it's a deeply personal mission. The program has given her the opportunity to directly support students, build trust, and equip young people with essential life skills—all while working alongside licensed professionals to strengthen the broader system of care in her community.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM JACQUE ABOUT WHAT CWC SUPPORT WOULD HAVE MEANT TO HER AS A YOUNG SINGLE MOTHER OF TWINS STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET

Reflecting on her own experiences as a young parent, Jacque recognizes just how critical these services are—especially for families who, like hers, struggled to find support when they needed it most.

“I would’ve given anything for my daughters to have had that [support],” she says.

Expanding Access: How CWCs Strengthen Youth Mental Health Support

By stepping into the role of a CWC, Jacque is also extending the reach of other team members supporting students.



*Jebediah Hall, LMFT
Licensed Clinical Supervisor*

“So many of our students have needs, but with limited clinical staff, we had to prioritize those in crisis,”

-Jebediah Hall, LMFT Licensed Clinical Supervisor

Jebediah Hall, the LMFT Licensed Clinical Supervisor for the CWC program in Tehama County, has already seen how CWCs are improving student outcomes, both by providing direct support to students and families and by relieving pressure on licensed professionals so they can focus on high-need cases.

According to the American School Counselor Association, the average student-to-counselor ratio in California during the 2022–2023 school year was 464 to 1—nearly double the recommended 250 to 1 ratio. With so few counselors available, many students never get the help they need.

“Now, with Certified Wellness Coaches in place, we’re able to support more students, and I’ve seen noticeable improvements in symptoms and behaviors for those working with both a wellness coach and a clinician. I don’t think we would see that level of progress if we didn’t have these combined services on board.”



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM LICENSED CLINICAL SUPERVISOR FOR THE TEHAMA COUNTY CWC PROGRAM JEBEDIAH HALL ABOUT THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS FOR THOSE SEEKING CAREERS IN MENTAL HEALTH

Investing in the Future: Strengthening Youth Mental Health Support

California's youth mental health system has long struggled to keep up with demand, leaving many students without the services they need to thrive emotionally and academically. While the CWC program, a flagship component of the CYBHI, aims to augment support, it is one part of a larger effort to reimagine behavioral health care for children and youth across the state.

Another strategy benefitting the students that Jacque and Jebediah serve is [Safe Spaces](#), a free, online trauma-informed training designed for anyone working with young people. This training helps adults recognize and respond to signs of trauma and stress in children, equipping them with culturally responsive, healing-centered approaches to support student well-being. Educators, early care providers, and others in Tehama County schools are taking the course and redesigning their approach to students based on Safe Spaces.

Recognizing the need for safe, student-centered spaces in schools, the Tehama County Office of Education is creating Calming Corners—designated areas where students can decompress, regulate their emotions, and develop coping skills before returning to learning.

"In some instances, it's more than a corner—it's a room. A safe room with sensory objects and other tools that help students de-escalate big emotions," explains Kevin Gallagher, principal at Evergreen Elementary School.



"Whether a student is anxious about an exam or upset about a situation with a friend, this space allows them to process what's going on so they can return to class. And with CWCs and mental health counselors available for additional support, our staff—who have been trained through Safe Spaces—are also prepared to approach student behavior through a trauma-informed lens. It all comes together."

-Jebediah Hall, LMFT Licensed Clinical Supervisor

"The flexibility of the Safe Spaces training honors the fact that anyone who regularly interacts with youth has the opportunity to build relationships and reshape critical interactions with students who may be overwhelmed or struggling," says Heidi Mendenhall, Executive Director of First 5 Tehama, who is supporting Head Start providers taking the course.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM JEBEDIAH ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF HAVING CWCS IN SCHOOLS

For Savannah, a parent at Evergreen Elementary School, the support her daughter has received through CWC has been a game changer. After years of navigating challenges related to her daughter's ADHD, Savannah says working with Jacque was a turning point. "I was so proud. It was a lot of relief because you don't ever want to see your kid struggle," she says. "Being able to see her do well and think, 'Wow, we can really do this'—that's when I knew we were in a good spot." She also praises the program for helping young children build emotional awareness early on: "Being able to not be afraid of their emotions at a young age is a big deal. It opens up such a big door for them later on."



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR SAVANNAH'S WORDS FOR PARENTS WHO MIGHT HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET CWC SUPPORT FOR THEIR CHILD

As California works to transform youth mental health care, efforts like CWCs and Safe Spaces Training are part of a long-term strategy to improve the well-being of students and communities. In Tehama County, school districts are taking critical steps toward sustaining these investments by engaging with the [CYBHI Fee Schedule program](#), a first-in-the-nation approach for eligible health insurance plans to reimburse schools and school-linked community organizations for providing certain behavioral health services.

"One program or initiative is not going to fix everything," says Mendenhall. "But by listening to youth, families, and the professionals in schools and communities, we are identifying gaps and addressing them with strategic investments—whether through proven solutions or out-of-the-box approaches."

– Heidi Mendenhall, Executive Director of First 5 Tehama

For Jacque, the importance of this work goes beyond immediate support. She sees her role not just as helping students navigate challenges today, but as giving them the tools to thrive for years to come. By providing young people and their families with coping skills, resources, and a sense of self-worth, she hopes to foster a culture where seeking help is seen as a strength, not a stigma.

While she celebrates the small victories—seeing a student gain confidence, develop emotional resilience, or feel less alone—she also understands that true impact takes time. "I've had to learn to be okay with just being the seed for change," she reflects. "Maybe one day, a student will look back and say, 'There was that one lady.'"

And for Jacque, that's enough—because change doesn't happen overnight, but it starts with someone willing to plant the seed.