

Building the Future of Mental Health, One Student at a Time

April 6, 2026



Youth Mental Health Academy project completed in cohort 1.

By Riley Casentini, The Social Changery

Produced for the California Health & Human Services Agency

With the stress of picking a career, the daily workload of school, and navigating changing family dynamics, being a teen is tough. Still, when everything feels overwhelming, asking for support and knowing where to turn can be its own challenge.

“High school is such a challenging time. You’re going through puberty, you’re dealing with peer pressure, you’re dealing with social anxieties, you’re still trying to find yourself,” says Camara Christian, now a first-year student with junior standing at California State University, Fullerton.

At Camara’s high school, students faced a lot of pressure to excel academically, but speaking about mental health was still a taboo subject. Camara wanted to change that, “I think we just have to create a space

where people are ready to come out of their shells, are ready to explore mental health, talk about it, and feel comfortable enough to open up.”

After receiving support from her school’s wellness center, she began to advocate for mental health awareness to break down stigma and help more youth get connected to support. Then, an opportunity arose: the director of Camara’s wellness center suggested she could deepen her efforts by applying for the Youth Mental Health Academy. The Youth Mental Health Academy (YMHA) is a 14-month community-based program for students in California that provides hands-on learning in mental health science, practice, and communications. YMHA is a part of the broader Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), a \$4+ billion investment in youth mental health programming designed to transform mental health supports and services.

For Camara, YMHA was “life-changing.” “I didn’t know that I had a passion for mental health, like, I knew that it was there, but I was so on the fence about it. I think with YMHA, it brought the sun out for me and really put me on the path where I wanted to go.”



Camara Christian, member of Youth Mental Health Academy cohort 2.

YMHA youth attend classes about different mental health careers, research and create a capstone project on a mental health topic, and participate in an internship in a mental health position. The model of this academy offers numerous benefits to both the youth participating and the broader youth mental health ecosystem. Youth who participate can gain a deep understanding and real-life experience in topics that interest them, supporting them in choosing a career path and providing them with a competitive edge in the job market. In a larger sense, YMHA helps to break down the stigma of mental health challenges and build a stronger, more representative mental health workforce.

Habiba Alnahhal, a freshman at UC Berkeley and a YMHA participant, explains that finding this program, she was “over the moon.” Through her participation in YMHA, she was able to explore her interest areas before selecting a major and begin research projects that she continues in college. “This program, I think, was the sole indicator to what I wanted to pursue, and it’s actually brought me a lot into research. I’ve been connected to a lot of people,” she explains.



Habiba Alnahhal, member of Youth Mental Health Academy cohort 1.

For her internship, Habiba supported the development of two mental health digital services with the Next-Generation Digital Therapeutics team at the Child Mind Institute. “Working with the leading team of the Child Mind Institute was made so accessible to me, and I know if I wasn’t a part of [YMHA], it would have been extremely difficult to gain an internship like that.” After completing YMHA, Habiba was offered a paid internship with the Child Mind Institute and continues her work while studying psychology at UC Berkeley.

Although Camara had long cared about mental health, it was her experience in YMHA that clarified her path. She shares, “I was so intrigued by the information that I had learned, and I had realized that sociology was something that I was actually deeply interested in and passionate about. And so now I’m actually on the pre-law track to become a mental health attorney.” A mental health attorney, in her own words, is “someone who advocates for individuals, groups, programs, and funding for mental health resources.”

Though their careers in mental health are still ahead of them, Habiba and Camara are two of more than 2,500 students making strides as advocates

and changemakers through YMHA. “I was able to go back to my high school and actually become a peer mental health specialist, and, you know, even talk through it with my peers and about the things that they were going through, and taking back the information that I got and pouring it back into my community, so I was able to see, of course, it helped me through that journey, but then also help others as well,” says Camara.

Camara was able to see her impact as an advocate in real time during the opportunities she had through YMHA: “I sat on a panel for UCLA and spoke about my experiences, truly going outside of my comfort zone because I didn’t grow up in a household that discussed mental health. For me to sit there and express myself to the world things that I’ve experienced and gone through was definitely life changing.” She continues, “Others would come up to me after and say how inspired they were by my story, and, you know, tell me all these positive things and how it even influences them and impacts them, and it honestly just made me realize how important it is to even talk about mental health challenges.”

While training the next generation of advocates and behavioral health professionals is one way that YMHA helps to normalize discussions of mental health, the program structure also allows members to learn about mental health directly from individuals with lived experience. That exposure matters. A 2020 study published by the Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development found that exposure to providers with lived experience can favorably improve stigmatized views about psychiatry, or of patients or colleagues affected by psychopathology, and has the potential to enhance medical students’ mental health and their health-seeking behaviors ([Martin et al., 2020](#)). For Habiba, that inclusion is key: “We’re used to seeing people with mental disorders and mental illnesses as people that are incapable, that can’t live normal day-to-day lives, and can’t be parents or can’t have jobs,” but the individuals she learned from in YMHA are “proving the stereotype and stigma wrong.” Through this model, YMHA challenges stigma not through theory alone, but through real stories that redefine what living with mental illness can look like.

In addition to breaking down stigma, YMHA is helping to improve the mental health ecosystem by increasing representation from many of California's distinct communities within the workforce. For example, the 2024 cohort of the YMHA included 23% LGBTQI+ youth, 32% Asian youth, 36% Latino youth, and 8% Black youth.

Currently, 86% of psychologists in the U.S. are white, which is significantly less diverse than the U.S. population as a whole, which is 62% white (Lin et al., 2018). YMHA's recruitment and selection process serves to create a more representative mental health workforce by recruiting youth with a broad range of backgrounds, ethnicities, and experiences. Habiba explains that this was a motivating factor for her to join YMHA: "Culturally, there's not a lot of representation across different cultures. I'm Middle Eastern, and I'm not seeing a lot of representation for people who are struggling with mental illnesses and disorders, and I'm not seeing a lot of people stand up and talk about it in comparison to other cultures and other identities. So, I think that's something that's missing, and that's also something that's made me particularly motivated to join the mental health workforce just to provide more representation."

YMHA does more than prepare students for careers; it equips young people with the language, confidence, professional exposure, and lived understanding to create change in the mental health ecosystem in real time. "They're preparing us to go into the world and ... talk about mental health and step into our careers in sociology and continue on that legacy of breaking down stigma," says Camara. For youth who are considering a career in mental health, Camara has a simple message: "Dive right in. You're going to learn so much, and you're going to grow as well, and you're going to become the best version of yourself"

As participants like Camara and Habiba continue their careers in the field, CYBHI's investment in the YMHA program continues to grow, building momentum as young people shape the future of behavioral health.



The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) is a flagship component of Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health and historic investment by the State of California to expand access and behavioral health support for children, youth, and families.