

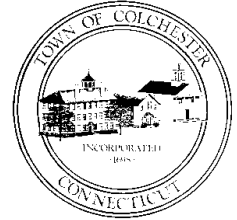


## Colchester Youth & Social Services

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# Memo

To: Board of Selectmen and ARPA Committee Members

From: Valerie Geato, Y&SS Director

Date: February 22, 2022

Re: ARPA

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As a community, if we are serious about mitigating the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic we will heed the recent [Advisory issued by the US Surgeon General](#) titled, *Protecting Youth Mental Health* - a national health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Advisory offers recommendations for supporting the mental health of children, adolescents, and young adults and includes essential recommendations for the institutions that surround young people and shape their day-to-day lives—schools, community organizations, health care systems, technology companies, government, and others.

To combat the negative impacts of Covid-19 on children's mental health, the Surgeon General recommends several different strategies, many of which can be done through Youth & Social Services and our partner agencies. Supporting the mental health of children and youth will require a whole-of-society effort to address longstanding challenges, strengthen the resilience of young people, support their families and communities, and mitigate the pandemic's mental health impacts. The strategies are as follows:

- Communities should implement evidence-based programs that promote healthy development, support children, youth, and their families, and increase their resilience. Examples include youth enrichment programs (e.g., mentoring, after-school programs), skill-based parenting and family relationship approaches.
- Support the mental health of children and youth in educational, community, and childcare settings. This includes creating positive, safe, and affirming environments, expanding programming that promotes healthy development (such as social and emotional learning), and providing a continuum of supports to meet the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of children and youth.
- Recognize that mental health conditions are real, common, and treatable, and people experiencing mental health challenges deserve support, compassion, and care, not stigma and shame. Mental health is no less important than physical health and that must be reflected in our how we communicate about and prioritize mental health.

- Empower youth and their families to recognize, manage, and learn from difficult emotions. For youth, this includes building strong relationships with peers and supportive adults, practicing techniques to manage emotions, taking care of body and mind, being attentive to use of social media and technology, and seeking help when needed.
- Ensure that every child has access to high-quality, affordable, and culturally competent mental health care tailored to children’s developmental stages and health needs. It’s particularly important to intervene early, so that emerging symptoms don’t turn into crises.
- Address the economic and social barriers that contribute to poor mental health for young people, families, and caregivers. Priorities should include reducing child poverty and ensuring access to quality childcare, early childhood services, and education; healthy food; affordable health care; stable housing; and safe neighborhoods.
- Increase timely data collection and research to identify and respond to youth mental health needs more rapidly. Governments and other stakeholders should engage directly with young people to understand trends and design effective solutions.

Youth & Social Services, with our community partners in C-3 and Colchester Recreation, already provide positive youth development opportunities and family programs that address some these areas of concern. We can lead the charge on this community call-to-action, but we need appropriate resources to do so. We currently provide our programs in a building that has been largely neglected for decades and does not meet the needs of our youth or families. To better support and engage young people in programs and services we need a safe, healthy, and inviting building to hold space for our kids at a time when they need connection and caring adults more than ever.

We’ve done the best we can with the resources we have to make the Youth Center more appealing, the fact of the matter is – it’s in awful shape. There are mushrooms growing inside from on-going water damage. The smell of mold and mildew hit you in the face upon entering. All the paint and decorating in the world can’t cover up the structural deterioration that has occurred since we moved in back in the early 90’s. The soffit on the front is completely rotten and falling off the building, the roof needed to be replaced ages ago, there is no insulation, it’s built on a dirt floor, and the windows don’t open. It is hard to have good feelings about the place. Being in the youth center doesn’t evoke feelings of calm and content. Funding a Youth Center project will allow us to design a space for young people with intention and purpose. A Youth Center that is safe and sound with good air quality and modern aesthetics shows our young people that they are valued, and their health and well-being are important.

A building designed to meet the needs of our youth and families (rather than trying to figure out how to make inadequate space work) is exactly what we need to provide dedicated space to offer programs and services to our youth and families. We can create a space that can be utilized by the Collaborative for Colchester’s Children (C-3) for children under 5 and their parents, as well as adequate space to provide parent education and support groups. Additionally, the Recreation Department can offer programs in the evening or even possibly as an indoor option for summer camp.

It would be most beneficial for anyone who has a role in determining how the ARPA funds are spent to take a few minutes and read the Surgeon General's Advisory. The following excerpt from the Advisory summarizes the current state of adolescence quite well.

*The challenges today's generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate and the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating. Recent national surveys of young people have shown alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges— in 2019, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from 2009. We know that mental health is shaped by many factors, from our genes and brain chemistry to our relationships with family and friends, neighborhood conditions, and larger social forces and policies. We also know that, too often, young people are bombarded with messages through the media and popular culture that erode their sense of self-worth, telling them they are not good looking enough, popular enough, smart enough, or rich enough. That comes as progress on legitimate, and distressing, issues like climate change, income inequality, racial injustice, the opioid epidemic, and gun violence feels too slow. And while technology platforms have improved our lives in important ways, increasing our ability to build new communities, deliver resources, and access information, we know that, for many people, they can also have adverse effects. When not deployed responsibly and safely, these tools can pit us against each other, reinforce negative behaviors like bullying and exclusion, and undermine the safe and supportive environments young people need and deserve.*

*During the pandemic, children, adolescents, and young adults have faced unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed their world, including how they attend school, interact with friends, and receive health care. They missed first days of school, months or even years of in-person schooling, graduation ceremonies, sports competitions, playdates, and time with relatives. They and their family may have lost access to mental health care, social services, income, food, or housing. They may have had COVID-19 themselves, suffered from long COVID symptoms, or lost a loved one to the disease. Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, have increased.*

Here in Connecticut, doctors are seeing the trends, too. "The high rates of depression, one in four youth now experiencing symptoms of depression, one in five youth experiencing symptoms of anxiety, and perhaps most notably, as the advisory indicated, which we're seeing here in Connecticut, is the number of kids ending up in the emergency room due to suicide attempts," said Dr. Melissa Santos with Connecticut Children's Medical Center.

In addition to a new Youth Center, we are also requesting funds to provide free mental health counseling for youth. Parents reach out weekly looking for supportive services for their kids and we don't have many resources to offer. Covid has taken a toll on our youth and our service providers, and the demand outweighs the supply. Most of the providers who we generally refer to in our area are full, and there are very few therapists who are accepting new clients. Depending on what insurance you have, there may be no appointments available. Waitlists for many are 2- 4 months out.

Regarding Covid-19 and Youth Mental Health, Murthy wrote in the report, “It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place.” The ARPA funds provide a very rare opportunity to invest in our community in the areas that have been so profoundly impacted by Covid. I hope we can all get behind supporting our young people in the out-of-school time by providing this much needed support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Valerie Geato". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Valerie" and "Geato" being capitalized and prominent.

Valerie Geato

*Director*