ARTS ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH

Eugene S. Farley, Jr. Health Policy Center
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Cleo PARKER ROBINSON DANCE

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Creative Healing: How the Arts Support Youth Mental Health

De'Janae' Guillory-Williams, MPH; Emma Gilchrist, MPH; Shale L. Wong, MD, MSPH



Youth mental health in Colorado is at a critical juncture, marked by both encouraging progress and persistent challenges. In 2024, the state recorded its lowest youth suicide rate since 2007, 5.85 deaths per 100,000 youth ages 10-18 years, down from a peak of 12.91 in 2020.[1] This decline is credited to initiatives led by the Office of Suicide Prevention and programs like I Matter Colorado and Colorado LIFTS.[1]

Despite these gains, disparities and systemic gaps remain. Geographic, economic, and racial disparities continue to limit timely and effective support. Rural areas face provider shortages, and low-income families often encounter barriers to mental health care access. While free therapy programs exist, awareness and utilization vary. To address these disparities, the Behavioral Health Administration launched the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Implementation Plan in 2024, aiming to expand Medicaid coverage, increase culturally responsive services, and invest in community-based care.[2]

Arts Impact on Youth Mental Health

Creative expression through the arts, whether visual, musical, theatrical, or literary, continues to emerge as a powerful and accessible tool for supporting youth mental health. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that arts-based interventions can improve emotional regulation, reduce anxiety and depression, and foster resilience among adolescents.

A 2024 global review published in BMC Medicine highlights the arts as a scalable, cost-effective strategy for addressing youth mental health challenges. The report emphasizes that engagement in arts and cultural practices promotes self-expression, community connection, and cultural identity — protective factors against mental distress, especially among marginalized youth.[3] Arts-based programs have also been shown to increase emotional and cognitive arousal, improve sleep quality, and activate neural pathways associated with stress resilience.[3]

A 2023 study by the Adobe Foundation and the National Alliance on Mental Illness revealed that 63% of youth engaging in creative activities reported increased confidence, 61% experienced reduced stress or anxiety, and 57% noted improved overall mental well-being.[4] These benefits were especially pronounced among marginalized groups.[4] These findings reinforce the need to elevate the arts as a core component of youth mental health strategies — positioning creative expression not as a luxury, but as a vital, evidence-based tool for prevention, healing, and empowerment.

Policy Implications

Collectively, these findings highlight the urgent need to embed arts-based approaches into youth mental health policy and programming. Beyond their therapeutic value, the arts provide culturally responsive and trauma-informed pathways for healing — especially for youth who face barriers to accessing traditional mental health services. To make these benefits more widely accessible, we must foster multi-sector collaboration and invest in arts-led initiatives that prioritize underserved communities. Expanding access to creative programming can empower youth with tools for self-expression, resilience, and connection. An example of such a program, and the transformative impact it can have, is featured on the back of this document.

1. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Youth suicide rate in Colorado drops to lowest level since 2007, CDPHE committed to ensuring trend continues. Published August 25, 2025. Accessed September 4, 2025. https://cdphe.colorado.gov/press-release/youth-suicide-rate-in-colorado-drops-to-lowest-level-since-2007-cdphe-committed-to
2. Colorado Behavioral Health Administration. *Children and Youth Behavioral Health Implementation Plan*. Report. Published August 18, 2023. Accessed September 4, 2025. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XFwa56Lruzh0Gvb4OZGkULBgM7YZ4y2k/view
3. Golden TL, Ordway RW, Magsamen S, Mohanty A, Chen Y, Ng TWC. Supporting youth mental health with arts-based strategies: a global perspective. *BMC Med*. 2024;22(1):7. doi:10.1186/s12916-023-03226-6
4. National Alliance on Mental Illness. New research from Adobe Foundation and NAMI shows powerful benefits of creative activities on mental health, especially for young people, LGBTQ+ community. Published June 20, 2023. Accessed September 4, 2025. https://www.nami.org/press-releases/new-research-from-adobe-foundation-and-nami-shows-powerful-benefits-of-creative-activities-on-mental-health-especially-for-young-people-lgbtq-community/

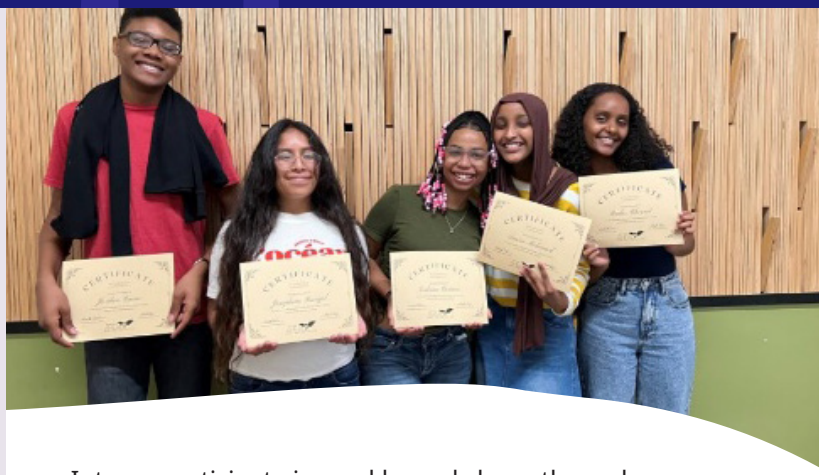
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Mental Health is Wealth Internship Program



Program Overview

Launched in 2023, Mental Health is Wealth (MHiW) is a summer arts-integrated internship program designed to empower high school students to understand, manage, and advocate for mental health while gaining paid work experience. Developed through the Arts Alliance for Health, the program blends evidence-based mental health education with artistic expression, creating a unique and transformative experience for youth. Through this program, students not only gain valuable workplace skills but also learn to express themselves, support one another, and become champions for mental health in their communities.

Youth benefits:

- Learn how to manage and advocate for self and other's mental health and wellbeing
- Gain professional workplace experience
- Practice artistic expression and experience the positive impact of arts on mental health and wellbeing
- Build relationships with peers and adult mentors

Employer benefits:

- Learn about and engage in trauma-informed supervisory roles and inclusive workplace environments
- Boost productivity with additional support for tasks and projects
- Serve as a mentor and nurture curious youth in career and post-high school educational options
- Commit to investing in the future workforce and community

Interns participate in weekly workshops through a five-module curriculum adapted from validated mental health curricula for adolescents led by clinical psychologists and community artists, together. The modules introduce foundational concepts in mental health and emotional wellbeing, and are paired with skill-building through creative practices such as dance, storytelling, and visual arts. In addition to the workshops, each intern is matched with an organization aligned with their professional interests to complete 90+ hours of professional workplace experience. Placements range from health policy and research to the arts and community service.

Over three summers, MHiW has grown 3-fold, offering interns a safe, supportive space to explore and develop emotional resilience, self efficacy, and community advocacy. The program is designed to benefit both youth and employers by fostering mental wellness, leadership, and professional development in real-world settings.

Contact us:
FarleyHealthPolicyCenter@cuanschutz.edu
Derrick@cleoparkerdance.org

"I liked the tai chi, creating music, collages, and talking to new people. Tai chi was hard at first but then became relaxing and I could feel my body becoming less tense and my mind clearing up as I was doing it."

– Summer 2025 Intern