



Wednesday, December 4, 2024

#### Summary of Conversation Topics

- Updates
  - Cambridge Youth Council
  - Youth Wellness Working Group
- Youth Wellness and Prevention Panel and Discussion: An opportunity to learn from those who work directly with children, youth, and teens
  - Mental health challenges young people are experiencing
  - Strategies that are working and not working
  - Recommendations

**Chair:** ~~Mayor Simmons~~

**Co-Chair** Sumbul Siddiqui

**Members:** ~~Tina Ali~~, Eva Asraf, ~~Jasper Adiletta~~, Johanny Castillo, Christine Elow, Lida Griffins, ~~Michelle Godfrey~~, Tabithlee Howard, ~~Caroline Hunter~~, ~~Mike Johnston~~, Michelle Lower, Jasper Mallon, Maria McCauley, Larisa Mendez-Penate, ~~Dave Murphy~~, Matt Nelson, ~~Geeta Pradhan~~, Bridget Rodriguez, Ellen Semonoff, Liz Stapleton, Tagesech Wabeto, Johanny Castillo Ayesha Wilson, ~~Derrick Neal~~

**Executive Director:** Nancy Tauber

**Notetaker/Find It Manager:** Andrew Liedtka

**CYC Coordinator:** Izzy Schpeiser

**CYC Members:** Rehaan Anjaria, Urbana Barua, Abel Asefaw

**Guests:** Connor Epsteinkraus, Sarah Lincoln, Melina O'Grady, Nadia Davila, Jack O'Hearn, Joyce Majewski, Yoyo Yau, Marsé Romero, Precious Gomez, Mary Kowalczyk, Nikoi Coley, Christine Del Vecchio, Anais Ramos

#### 5:30 Welcome and Introductions

- Family Policy Council Business
  - Approval of October 24, 2024 Minutes
    - PASSES: Unanimously
- Public Comment
  - N/A

- Announcements
  - The Family Policy Council is the Advisory Council for The Center for Families, the Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Grantee.

## Updates

- Cambridge Youth Council
  - Trip to National League of Cities Conference in Tampa Florida (November 11-14)
  - CYC won \$2,000 for their video submission to the NLC100 Youth Challenge
  - [TikTok Video](#)
  - Art Installation Subcommittee
    - Sent a proposal to CRLS asking them permission to create a mural for the high school. The theme is Community.
  - Events Subcommittee
    - Hosting their first event Game Night) at the library on December 13th 3-5 p.m.
    - Met with Tina and Rachel from CEOC to talk about how CYC can be involved in CEOC's 60th anniversary event on May 3, 2025.
- Youth Wellness Working Group
  - First meeting is December 12th

## Panel

- Facilitator: Melina O'Grady,
- Panelists: Nadia Davila, Marsé Romero, Anias Ramos, Jack O'Hearn (Bios below)

## Discussion

### Panel (bios below)

- Facilitator: Melina O'Grady,
- Panelists: Nadia Davila, Marsé Romero, Anias Ramos, Jack O'Hearn (Bios below))

## Introduction

- We are seeing both crises and beautiful things happening for the young people we work with.
- Every young person is different and has their own unique way of approaching problems and the daily obstacles in life, and that can make it difficult to support them.
- Youth long for connection, want to know they aren't alone.
- Young people are at an inflection point, self-conscious about who they are and how they feel about themselves, issues of handling mental health when it's visible to others, compared to when it is more subtle or hidden.

## What protective factors/assets do they have in their lives?

- The assets and barriers go hand in hand.

- Young people have more language and courage to talk about mental health and wellbeing.
- Many can advocate for themselves
- Relationships are so important
  - Friendship is everything (then family)
- Adults who genuinely care is a huge protective factor
- Cultural factors and family traditions
  - Example - A teen new to the country having a hard time making friends. I thought it was because of language barriers, but that was not the case. In their home country kids don't have cell phones, and it was easier to make friends because the environment was much more social. Here it is harder because of the barrier cell phones create.
  - Example - Haitian teens talk about their experiences they have with family (holidays, food, etc.) and share it. Bond with kids from similar cultures
- Social Media
  - Social media has pros and cons - They get connected, get helpful resources that can help them protect themselves with information.
- Afterschool is a different environment than school.
  - Able to establish relationships with adults. Youth workers gain a level of trust by encouraging them to show up as their authentic selves.
  - Students don't feel as comfortable talking to teachers.
  - We have become a second family. We have young people who have left home and they are with us from 2-9pm. We provide a safe space and hot meal.
  - Teens come back and visit because of the relationships we have built.
  - Inclusive spaces where you can be yourself and explore your identities.
  - Middle School Specific
    - They still have elementary school-age tendencies, still want open affection and love from adults whenever possible.

## Challenges

- Supporting young people who have a diagnosis or experiencing a crisis. These are delicate situations and can be every day, every moment, and can be tender when someone is on the verge of a crisis
- There is no easy fix, to provide the support youth need, it takes intentionality, time and attention, day after day.
- Society and social media suggest "fixes" with simple strategies or products, when the reality is much more nuanced and personal.

- Feeling the weight of internalized failure (especially when it comes to school), which can turn into a mental health crisis.
- Family pressure (grades, college, etc.)
- Social media
- Our healthcare system
  - Distrust
  - Waitlists
  - Finding a counselor they connect with
  - Co-pays
  - Stigma
  - Negative experiences in the system can chip away at your spirit and make it even harder to reach out for help in the future
- Staff need help supporting young people
  - Teens have been abused physically and mentally and more. Young person can be triggered by a sound, a voice, could be anything, we are always learning what might be a trigger. Then we have to address it at the moment. Requires tremendous awareness and alertness from staff.
  - It can be triggering for staff to hear the stories of youth.
  - Teens say I have **you**, I don't need therapy. But I am not a therapist. What do I do when they have suicide ideation. I do the best I can. We do the best we can.
- We don't have formal connections or agreements with school, IEPs, and family so we mostly get information directly from young people.
- We share a lot of the same young people in Cambridge - There are times we have tried to help in a team effort approach, but it is hard to do it on a consistent basis.
- Getting around "the wall" that can come up when you try to talk to youth directly about mental health.
- There is only so much we can do which is heartbreaking.

### **What works/Advice**

- Staff mindset
  - Recognize that most/much of youth work is centered around mental health, it's not an add-on but a central theme within the work.
  - Those who work with young people should give themselves grace.
  - Acceptance is important. Acceptance without judgment and the urge to fix.
  - Need to recognize and celebrate progress
- Connection and Relationships
  - Getting to know the teens we work with will help us know how to support them.

- One on one, organic conversations are easier to have and easier to get young people to open up. When it's more formal or asked directly or in front of a group, youth tend to hold back and don't want to talk as much.
- Praising all the positives, even if it is small
- Sharing our stories
  - It helps when I share some of my own experiences with young people. I can model similar struggles and how I've addressed them.
- Therapist on staff to help us support the young people.
  - The Community Arts Center has a therapist on staff. Teens would often rather talk to me than the therapist, so I get support from the therapists so I can support the young person.
- One size does not fit all
  - Try lots of different approaches rather than thinking there is one right approach for everyone.
  - Provide young people with many strategies since different things work for different people at different times.
  - I don't use mental health and therapy words. Many young people are tired of talking about "Mental health."
    - Mirror the language of the youth you are working with (i.e., if they refer to their "mental health" don't be afraid to use that term)
  - Offering up new experiences to show different aspects of life
  - Having an outlet for students to get out extra energy and get grounded
  - Yoga and meditation are just a couple of examples.
  - Pay attention to youth already getting help, high functioning, and high achievers. Don't assume they don't need help or support. They also experience high anxiety and stress.
  - Moses Youth Center focuses on Community Healing
    - Create space for joy, love, and consistency.
    - Finding joy in resilience.
    - We provide hot meals and sit with teens and talk.
    - Introduce them to fun and play
    - Treat them like kids.
    - Gratitude journals, music, snacks.
    - Celebrating.
- Evaluation
  - The Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program collects relationship data.
  - Find out what is working and not working directly from young people.
- Create safe spaces for young people to be their full selves and explore their identity.

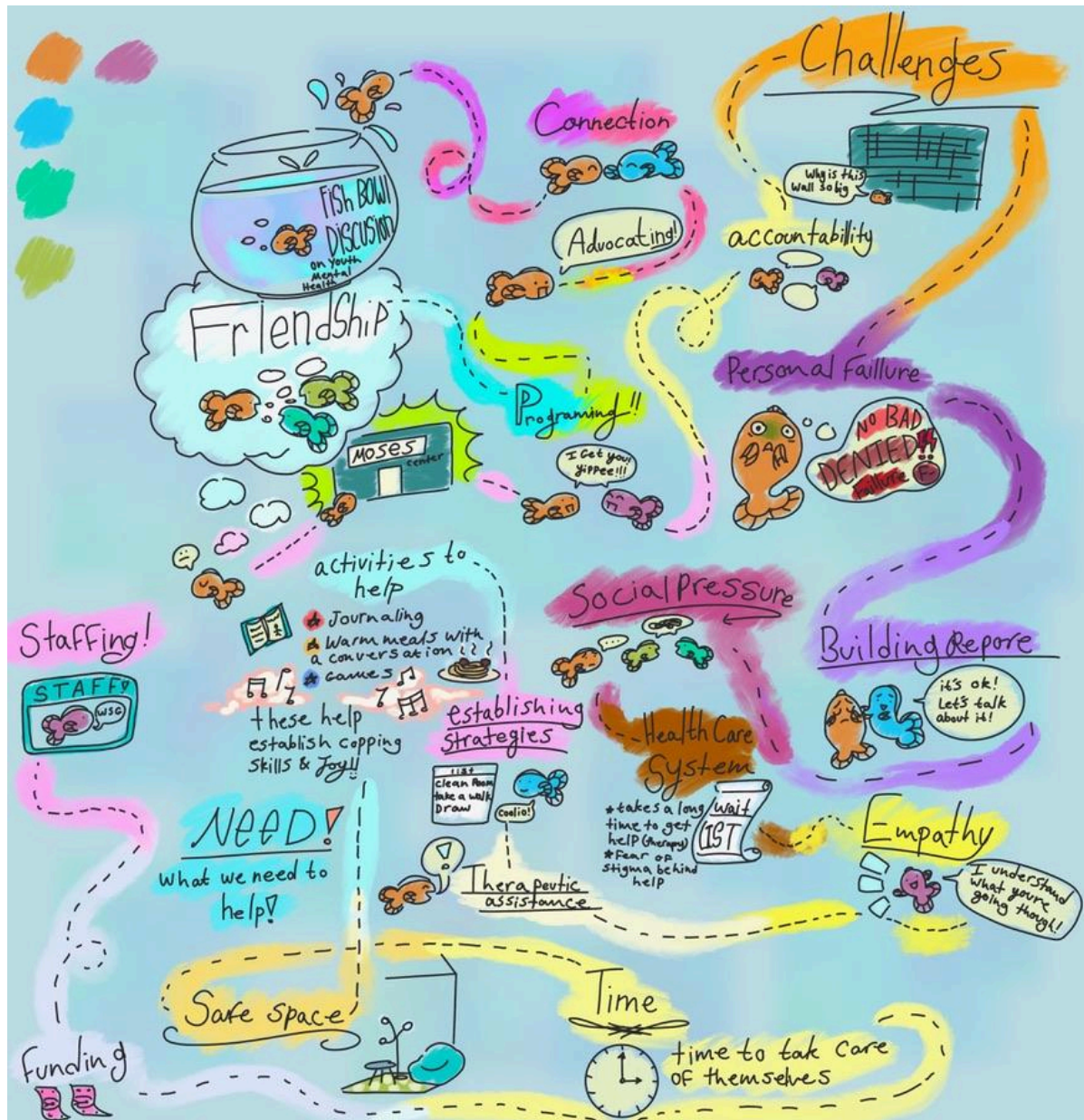
- Safety is important.
- Hold young people accountable and build mutual respect.
- Clear Expectations and clear redirections
- It can be challenging. Where is the balance?
- Moses Youth Center uses restorative justice practices and gives youth a second chance when they make a mistake. We hold them accountable to themselves, to us and to each other. They might not want it at first, but they know it's important, and being held accountable builds trust.
- Systems
  - Say no to some things in order to not replicate the system even though society or other structures in someone's life are telling them that's what they should do.
  - We need to rebuild the system and have to do the things we want to see rather than feeling stuck in our circumstance (modeling our values).

## Suggestions

- Professional Development
  - Empathy training for each other, teens, families, etc.
  - Deescalating and empathy
  - Social emotional learning
    - How to implement SEL curriculum
  - Restorative Justice
  - Trauma informed practices.
  - Consult with Moses Youth Center about their training.
  - Leadership
- How to help teens self-regulate and meet their own needs. How can we create ways to collaborate outside of traditional spaces for one-off things to happen since many teens don't have the time to do something on a regular basis.
- Space
  - Programs need designated spaces for young people to go when they're having a crisis, space is a key component.
  - Also safe "free spaces" for youth to come and go
- Social Workers
  - Programs need social workers on staff
- Collaborating with other people who serve the same youth from other organizations is effective. We need to create a system to make it happen.
- Clearer pathways between school and OST
  - information sharing
  - More shared language and shared conversations

- Discretionary funds to help teens pay for things they need when in a crisis or just a tough situation
- Entrepreneurial industry opportunities and training
  - Young people have so many gifts and they are already on their journey and their passions and talents aren't always being nurtured with their futures in mind. They need more pathways for them to pursue these things.

**Drawing summarizing the conversation by Preceous Gomez (Junior at Prospect Hill Academy/Community Arts Center)**



**Bios:**

**Nadia Davila** is the Youth Services Coordinator for the Office of DHSP Workforce Development, which includes coordinating the RAY Network (bringing together those that work with teens in Cambridge), coordinating the Next Up Program (a career exploration and internship program for 18-24 year olds), providing teens with job search help, and being a part of the management team for the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program. Nadia was born and raised in Cambridge, going to Cambridge public schools and participating in Cambridge programming throughout her upbringing. She aims to build a world of liberation, joy, and humanity.

**Melina O'Grady** is a veteran educator with over two decades of experience in the youth-serving community in Cambridge and beyond. She is currently a trainer with Walker Solutions, focusing on youth and adult mental health and wellbeing in schools and other community institutions. Walker Solutions is a training arm of Walker Cares, a statewide youth mental and behavioral health provider and network. Melina has deep roots in Cambridge, from her time at the Community Art Center and the Agenda for Children to the STEAM Initiative and Cambridge Community Television. Melina's core vision is to generate creative collaborations around community thriving and wellbeing.

**Jack O'Hearn** is a multi-disciplinary artist and Teen Program Manager at The Community Art Center. He has spent the past four years working directly with Cambridge youth in CAC's Teen Public Art Program. This program teaches youth life skills while working as a team to transform their community through public art installations such as murals. O'Hearn has spent nearly two decades as a professional artist, with experience in public art, grants management, and education. Throughout his time at CAC, he has facilitated over a dozen youth-led public art installations throughout Cambridge.

**Anais Ramos:** is a proud Cambridge resident with deep ties to the community. A graduate of Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS) and a former teen participant at the Youth Center she now leads, Anais brings a unique perspective as the Teen Program Director for Moses Youth Center part of Cambridge Youth Programs. With over seven years of experience in youth development, she has spearheaded many initiatives, including the impactful Blooming into Womanhood initiative, which empowers teens through leadership, personal growth, and community engagement.

Ms. Ramos has consistently enhanced youth engagement by fostering inclusivity and cultivating a strong sense of community. She excels in building strategic partnerships, coordinating innovative and developing innovative, youth-focused programs that inspire and empower the next generation. Her dedication to impactful community work has earned recognition from Mayor Wu of Boston and the Riverside Community Center, highlighting her significant contributions to youth empowerment and community development.

**Marsé Romero** serves as the Middle School Program Director for East End House, a nonprofit organization dedicated to community enrichment and youth development. With over 15 years of experience in youth work, Marsé never originally intended for this field to be her career path after higher education. However, her career took an unexpected yet fulfilling turn. In 2020, after receiving her master's degree in music, she shifted her focus from performing on stage to empowering youth. While her primary focus is now on youth development, Marsé still makes time to perform and remains deeply committed to supporting the arts in all aspects of her work. She is passionate about fostering positive, inclusive, and safe environments that support her students' growth. Currently, Marsé is working to establish a High School Program that aligns with the organization's mission to promote well-being, academic success, and a seamless transition from childhood to adulthood.

**Adjourn 7:18**