



**Support for [H.1979](#), *An Act Establishing a Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council***

**Oral testimony on 11/6/2023 to the  
Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use & Recovery**

Hello. My name is Andrea Freeman, and I'm with the Public Health Institute of Western Mass. We're a nonprofit based in Springfield. Thank you for this opportunity to share our recommendations.

Even before COVID19, the community health needs assessments we conducted in Western Mass identified *youth mental health* as a high priority. As you know, the problem has since intensified.

Four years ago, we began convening the Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition, a multi-sector partnership led by a group of youth called *Beat the Odds, Forget the Statistics*.

But we can't forget all the statistics.

In 2021, a little over 4 in 10 Springfield 8<sup>th</sup> graders reported that for two weeks or more at a time, they felt so sad or hopeless, that it disrupted their usual activities.<sup>1</sup> The rates were disproportionately higher for youth with disabilities, LGBTQI youth, youth of color, and girls.

Last week at the MA Health Policy Forum, my colleagues shared a [Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western MA](#). It builds on the state's Promote Prevent Special Commission, the Roadmap for Behavioral Health Reform, and the Mental Health ABC Act.

Crisis intervention and treatment are essential, but that's only one piece of the puzzle. In addition to strengthening community-clinical linkages, our recommendations focus on these four elements:

- De-stigmatizing mental health
- Emphasizing social connections
- Addressing social media
- Expanding social emotional learning, or SEL

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[https://www.publichealthwm.org/application/files/7616/9625/2715/Youth\\_Mental\\_Health\\_in\\_Western\\_Massachusetts\\_2023-09-22\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.publichealthwm.org/application/files/7616/9625/2715/Youth_Mental_Health_in_Western_Massachusetts_2023-09-22_compressed.pdf)



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While families, caregivers, and community organizations are key parts of a youth's life, *so too is their school*. Given the increased need for behavioral health services and the shortage of providers—especially in western Mass—schools are more important than ever. Schools need to have *comprehensive behavioral health systems* that utilize multi-tiered levels of support.

When we interviewed Western MA school staff who work on SEL we learned that most schools have adopted SEL curricula...but they are challenged to *implement* them. Granted, SEL is just one part of a school's behavioral health system, this lack of implementation spotlights a need for support. Given how much we ask of schoolteachers and staff, we really need to support them when we can. Rather than each school or district reinventing the wheel, we recommend that there be a representative group of experts to serve as a statewide coordinating council for implementing comprehensive behavioral health programs in schools.

*H.1979* will help school districts implement equitable, programs with the *multi-tiered support systems* that youth deserve.

Without clear statewide guidance from a coordinating council, it will be a guessing game of which youth will receive behavioral health supports and important life skills. And sadly, I think we all can predict which youth would miss out. So please, we ask you to advance H.1979.

Thank you for considering our request.

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