



# Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western MA

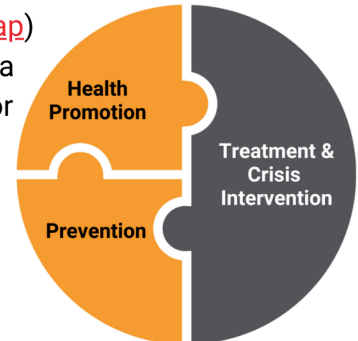
## We must work together to support youth mental health

In 2018, MA convened a Special Commission, led by Former State Representative Jim Cantwell and staffer Benjamin Thomas, that created the “Promote Prevent” Plan focused on programs, systems changes, and practices to prevent behavioral health disorders, including mental, emotional, and addictive disorders ([promoteprevent.com](https://promoteprevent.com)). We knew back then that youth mental health was a priority health need and that a comprehensive approach of prevention, promotion, and treatment/crisis infrastructure was necessary. Then COVID-19 undermined the mental well-being of almost everyone. The systems of behavioral health care, already found to be insufficient in the 2019 Coalition of Western MA Hospitals/Insurer (“the Coalition”) Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA), could not handle the increased demands. Across the Coalition’s five-county service area, youth surveys from 2021, as well as the statewide COVID-19 Community Impact Survey from 2020, show that the pandemic has worsened the mental health of many adolescents and teenagers, who experienced growing anxiety, sadness, and depression. For example, in 2021 more than four in 10 Springfield eighth graders reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in a row that it disrupted their usual activities. Inequities among some youth populations were already well documented in prior CHNAs. These were brought to the fore during the pandemic, especially for girls, youth with a disability, LGBTQIA+ youth, rural youth, young adults 18-24, and in some communities Black and Latino/a/e youth. An overview of youth mental health can be found in this [recent report](https://qrco.de/WM-YMH): <https://qrco.de/WM-YMH>.

Factors affecting youth mental health and access to care include individual and systemic racism; stigma among parents and youth; provider shortages; and lack of cohesive and culturally competent mental health services. These multifaceted factors call for a complex solution, that considers not just treatment and crisis intervention, but also prevention and health promotion.

## Efforts are in place to support treatment infrastructure

In 2022, the MA Behavioral Health Roadmap (<https://qrco.de/MAroadmap>) was launched and is now showing early signs of promise. Anecdotal data in our region shows youth boarding at ERs has decreased, youth visits for mental health to ERs have decreased, and community-based behavioral health assessments have increased. The MA Roadmap focused specifically on treatment infrastructure that will increase community supports as well as mitigate some of the workforce needs. This is just one important piece of the puzzle.



## Promotion and prevention are critical

The Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western MA aims to honor and marry the 2018 “Promote Prevent” plan with the treatment and crisis infrastructure as a comprehensive approach that is so desperately needed. The road aims to reduce crisis situations in the first place and complement the ongoing work in the treatment sector by identifying policies, resources, and best practice strategies to fortify protective factors for use by parents and caregivers, school personnel, community organizations, and youth themselves.

## Building a Roadmap for Prevention and Promotion

Over the past year, PHIWM amplified feedback from youth and worked with an expert Advisory Board on an iterative process to synthesize the findings, prioritize areas of focus, and create recommendations. This process included:

- Review of the literature, evidence, and other existing Roadmaps
- Interviews and a focus group with over 30 people who were regional behavioral health providers, service providers, social workers, school committee members, school nurses, physicians, experts in social-emotional learning, providers working with youth of color, as well as representatives from statewide organizations relevant to promotion and prevention of youth mental health
- Vetting findings with youth and Springfield-based and regional mental health and prevention coalitions

Their insights and expertise have been and will continue to be invaluable in crafting a roadmap that is inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the diverse needs within our community. Our Western MA roadmap will continue to be an iterative process while we set up programming and policies to support youth and families over many years to come.

Based on this process, the roadmap focuses on:



The Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western MA calls forth opportunities to lean into regional assets, augment areas where there is promising momentum, advocate for resources and policies for regional equity, and create collective action in Western MA to innovate community-clinical linkages.

**Learn  
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<https://qrco.de/wmroadmap>



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