

Organizational Background

Did you know the YMCA is largest childcare provider in San Diego County? Founded in 1928, the YMCA of San Diego County (YMCA) is dedicated to nurturing a healthy spirit, mind, and body so all can thrive while honoring our faith-based heritage. Our mission is brought to life through our focus on Youth Development, Healthy Living, and Social Responsibility, and our social services branch, Community Support Services, embraces these values through programs and services focused on myriad social issues including mental and behavioral health. Our YMCA has 14 recreational branches, 3 overnight camps, dozens of day camps supporting children and youth across 22 locations, with almost 5,000 employees and 2,000 volunteers who bring our mission to life every day. Each year, we serve more than 400,000 San Diegans, including nearly 100,000 children and youth.

Need

We are currently facing unprecedented challenges in the mental health of America's youth stemming from the recent pandemic and exacerbated by systemic barriers and inequities. Increases in demand for pediatric inpatient mental health services are an exceptionally concerning indicator, with children's hospitals reporting a 42% increase in cases of self-injury and suicide in 2021 when compared to 2019. This startling increase prompted the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, to issue an Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health in December of 2021, in which he called for an "all-of-society" response to the mental health challenges young people are facing. An additional advisory was issued in May of 2023 warning of an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" and noting that time spent in person with friends for those ages 15-24 has decreased nearly 70% over the last twenty years. Both advisories call for a societal shift in how to address these longstanding challenges by reconsidering opportunities to strengthen the resilience of young people in culturally responsive ways while supporting their families and communities.

While our nation's mental health crisis is often discussed in the context of clinical mental health services, there is increasing agreement that simply expanding access to traditional clinical mental health services will not meet the full needs of the moment. A growing evidence-base argues that community members can be effective at providing mental health support through experiences that strengthen young people's sense of identity, belief in the future, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. **Significant shifts are possible when we recognize that mental health and healing is the domain of us all.**

Vision

The YMCA believes this moment calls upon us to radically reimagine how our youth are engaged in their environment. What if every place a young person engages (i.e., school, swim, soccer, afterschool programs) was geared to build their protective factors? Our work is informed by research-based evidence that demonstrates young people who have more protective factors and resiliency have greater positive adjustment and development in the face of adversity and are less likely to require high acuity mental health care. Unlike prevention programs that focus solely on risk behaviors, **Positive Youth Development (PYD) engages young people through methods that promote resilience and improve mental wellness and social-emotional skills.**

We believe that scaling PYD at YMCA branches and across YMCA's programs, such as after school programs, day camps, sports, and childcare, will shift the paradigm for how we define youth well-being. PYD activities, created with a purposeful and measurable approach, will demonstrate changes in the mental health and social-emotional well-being of youth we serve. Our preventative mental health approach alleviates demand for a highly trained clinical workforce by **democratizing basic therapeutic knowledge and skill** to a larger set of community-based peers and staff. This approach ensures multiple entry points to a coordinated delivery system and provides the appropriate level of care across the spectrum of need. As a result, YMCA's PYD approach ensures **healthy equity** through a multilayered, community-forward approach to mental health care that beings with those serving youth *in* community.

In addition to this approach within community, we also understand the need for more relevant and responsive mental health treatment options for children, youth, and families throughout San Diego County. The YMCA is expanding options for high quality treatment throughout our continuum of care and in collaboration with providers across the region. We're part of the Strategic Behavioral Health Initiative (SBHI) Steering Committee whose goal is to create a comprehensive, multi-layered approach for the region that includes several partners: County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services, Rady Children's Hospital, American Academy of Pediatrics California Chapter, San Diego Center for Children, and is funded by the Conrad Prebys Foundation, Price Philanthropies, and Alliance Healthcare Foundation.

Current PYD Work

Each year we serve approximately 400,000 community members, including nearly 100,000 children and youth, , with many living in systemically under-resourced areas with limited access to mental health care. Programs such as sports, out-of-school programs, and camp deeply impact children's positive development and social-emotional learning, which has been demonstrated to translate into effective coping mechanisms later in life. With Annie E. Casey Foundation funding, the YMCA is implementing a pilot PYD model across five of our branches and developing a PYD toolkit that will be made available nationally to other youth-serving organizations.. With the ultimate goal of measuring expected social-emotional gains among youth, the pilot is **training staff to embed six core PYD practices into their youth-serving work** while measuring both staff fidelity to the model and youth experiences of staff. Maintaining fidelity to a PYD approach, ensuring its practical applicability in the field, and measuring both process and impact is requiring a full transformation of our service delivery approach. The pilot will culminate in an "uptake" roadmap/toolkit for other youth-serving organizations seeking to incorporate PYD practices into their services.

As we move forward, we will continue to scale best practices based on our internal evaluation with the goal of ensuring all staff and volunteers are trained and supported in the PYD approach to support the children we serve. To date, we have trained over 200 staff who have invested almost 800 learning hours while serving over 3,500 children across our five pilot sites.

Experience

As a committed community mental and behavioral healthcare provider for more than 50 years, the YMCA is in a unique and significant position to both prevent *and* treat mental health conditions among children and youth. YMCA's clinicians first witnessed the benefits of

incorporating PYD into their trauma-informed care practices while providing strengths-based, compassionate services in our intensive residential, outpatient, caregiver psychoeducation, and school-based counseling programs. In 2015, the YMCA successfully developed and scaled the CAAVE (Compassion, Awareness, Acceptance, Validation, Empowerment) evidence-informed service delivery model to effect protective factors change with hard-to-reach populations. CAAVE service delivery helps those who regularly interact with children and youth identify the actions necessary to reduce stress among participants through modifying their own behaviors toward co-regulation. We have trained over 1,000 providers in CAAVE both locally and nationally, including personnel from myriad child welfare and youth homelessness agencies.

The YMCA is guided by our core principles rooted in a culture of innovation and belief in the healing power of relationally responsive service provision. We will continue to foster inclusive, cross-sector, action-oriented dialogue to define the strategy needed to reimagine and integrate youth mental health prevention-oriented systems. This requires us to work differently and in ways that may seem challenging and unfamiliar. **When all YMCA child- and youth-serving staff are willing and able to take on this challenge, lasting transformative change is possible in the health and well-being of children and families.**

Request

We respectfully request a grant of \$25,000 with a goal of \$50,000, which would be used to increase staffing on the PYD Transformation team to scale PYD to more locations throughout San Diego County. This will allow us to have a more immediate impact on the mental health crisis among not only the children and youth we serve, but also through sharing our findings and partnering with a wider network of community-based providers and child-serving organizations. With this investment, we can reach at least 50 additional staff members who serve approximately 100 additional children over the next year. Our overarching goal is to reach all team members who work with children in order to impact the nearly 100,000 children served across the YMCA each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a brief proposal outlining our PYD work. If you would like any additional information on this project, I can be reached at (760) 419-4083 or by email at kesquivel@ymcasd.org. We appreciate this opportunity and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Krysta Esquivel
Vice President of Social Services
YMCA Youth & Family Services