



A FORCE FOR YOUTH & FAMILIES

- A child** acting out in preschool.
- A teenager** in trouble with the law.
- A family** reeling from a mental health crisis.

These are just a few of the North Carolinians aided by the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships at UNCG.

For more than a quarter of a century, the center, known as CYFCP, has addressed pressing social concerns among families, children, and young adults across all 100 counties in North Carolina through wide-ranging programs. Today, the center continues to expand, with funding skyrocketing to \$6.8 million annually and a robust staff – currently 30 people – closely collaborating with the community.

“What all the programs in the center share is the translation of research to practice for the greater good and authentic partnerships with the community,” says Dr. Terri Shelton, UNCG’s vice chancellor for research & engagement and a prior director of the CYFCP.

Community engagement isn’t just a catchphrase for the center: working in tandem with the community is their North Star.

“Partnerships with the community are at the heart of what we do, and I would say a lot of evolution for us has been, ‘Where’s the community’s need?’” says Dr. Christine Murray, the most recent director of the CYFCP.

The center fosters its two-way relationship with the community in multiple ways, from participating in outreach events to inviting people who have experience with a project’s focal condition or life event to serve as experts on its teams.

“A real foundational piece of the work at the center is including youth and families with lived experience – or you could say living experience because they may still be living through it,” Shelton says. “It changes everything when you’re in partnership this way.”

These community members provide integral perspectives on conditions a family may face and crucial points in youth development.



More than 100 kids a year receive support from Bringing Out the Best collaborations between teachers (like Jyo Ramesh, top right, at KinderNest Preschool) and specialists (like Amanda Flynt, bottom left).



The center’s support to address behavioral challenges doesn’t stop at kindergarten. For example, the NC High Fidelity Wraparound Training Program assists families when youth experience mental health or behavioral challenges. The program trains teams across the state, including family and youth support partners from the community, to help guide and empower youth along their journey.

| Funder NC Department of Health and Human Services
| Impact 18 teams in 74 counties, with plans to grow

In The Early Years

For the past 20 years, Bringing Out the Best has lived up to its name by helping Guilford County residents under 5 years old overcome behavioral, social, and emotional challenges.

“These children are our future,” says program director Janet Howard. “If we don’t help them at this critical time, they’re not going to get where they need to be.”

The long-standing program, funded by the Guilford County Partnership for Children, adopts an immersive and evidence-based approach, working with the child, teacher, and parents within the child’s preschool or childcare setting for approximately six visits.

Helping approximately 100 children a year, the program has a year-round waitlist with caregivers eagerly waiting for their child’s name to be next in line to work with one of Bringing Out the Best’s dedicated specialists – trained professionals whom Howard describes as superheroes.

“It takes a really special person to work in this field and have the passion and drive to do this work – it flows out of people like lava,” Howard says. “Other teachers and parents feel it, and we make more connections.”

A specialist’s first school visit is all about observation. They watch the child interact with their teacher. If they notice a disconnect, they suggest approaches to foster trust, such as taking a few minutes to read a book together at the start of the day.

The specialist tracks when the child engages in the behavior leading to the referral, including context. Was the child feeling left out before their aggressive outburst? Did the teacher notice and support the child when she pulled away in the corner?

“They might be throwing things because they’re angry, but they don’t know how to express it. We work to try and help them understand their emotions, regulate their emotions, and put some words to it,” Howard says.

Strategies include helping the child turn inward by finding a quiet spot, such as a comfy corner, where they can calm down. They may also create a story where the protagonist is struggling with a similar situation, so that the child can brainstorm alternative behaviors.

Howard says one strength of the program is that this skill development happens in real time. “There’s a lot of modeling that goes on for the child and walking them back through the situation.”

The child is not the only focus. Bringing Out the Best invests in coaching teachers and parents on best practices for responding to difficult behavior and supporting more positive alternatives. Howard says coaching one teacher can benefit future students who enter that classroom.

“A teacher I worked with years ago recently said to me, ‘Everything you’ve ever brought to the classroom, it’s still here. I use everything you taught me.’”

Especially in the aftermath of COVID shutdowns, as many struggle to reacclimate to school environments, Howard says the program can provide guidance and positivity to teachers, parents, and children.

“We see progress frequently, almost at every visit,” says Howard. “If we can be the safe place for that kid and they just want to sit in our lap and that’s all we accomplished that day, that’s okay. That’s progress.”

IN THE AFTERMATH OF A *crisis*

After a crisis occurs – whether a high schooler’s violent outburst or a middle schooler’s attempt to self-harm – families are left to pick up the pieces, often unsure where to begin.

That’s where the NC Enhanced Mobile Crisis Unit comes in. Their team of clinicians and community members with lived experience, known as family support partners, work closely with North Carolina families in the aftermath of a crisis involving a young person. “We have four weeks to walk alongside the family,” explains program manager Gayle Rose.

“We’re available by phone. We can answer questions and really focus on, ‘What does the family want? What are they going to set as their goals?’”

The unit, which launched in July 2023 in Buncombe, Henderson, Davidson, Cabarrus, Wayne, and Wilson counties, has already reached 60 families in their first four months of operation. Also known as the Mobile Outreach, Response, Engagement and Stabilization Pilot, the program is funded by the NC DHHS Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services.

The crisis unit receives information about families in need through the counties’ Mobile Crisis Management system. Families may also be referred from other entities like emergency departments, school administrators, and local social service agencies working with youth.

Once the unit receives information for a young person who meets criteria between the ages of three and 21, they quickly assemble a team and contact the family. “When a family is in crisis, they jump from one thing to another, and they’re just putting out fires,” Rose says. “They rarely have anybody sit with them and say, ‘Let’s take a step back and really look at how we can prevent the fires.’”

The crisis team brings empathy and expertise to their conversations with families and aligns their support with family goals, whether it’s providing a referral for treatment, bridging a conversation with school administrators, or sharing evidence-based parenting skills.

They also play to families’ strengths. Rose says that the family support partner often excels at this element, as the team works to make clients’ desired next steps a reality. “They’re listening and really picking up on what a family brings to the table. What are their strengths? What natural supports can they lean on?” For example, a teenager struggling with depression who loves to sing is encouraged to enroll in choir to connect to a community.

While the unit is just getting started, the impact has been powerful. For example, Rose says, multiple families avoided involuntary commitment of a child by the courts while in the program.

In addition to working to expand coverage to additional counties across the state, the team is also active in spreading the word in the community.

“Most people do not know there is immediate crisis help available for people experiencing a mental or behavioral health challenge,” she says. “Part of the pilot is a community outreach component to educate the public and to create community champions to help families connect with these services.”



60 families reached in the first 4 months. Here, staff members Gayle Rose, Shannon Barr, and Naglaa Rashwan – and family – take part in Shae’s Chase 5K, to support Guilford mental health services and spread word about the program.



Community support partners are effective, but finding them isn’t always easy. The center’s NC Voices Amplified program helps recruit new family partners and youth peer support providers. It also helps train them and the agencies employing them.

| Funder NC DHHS Division of Child and Family Well-Being
| Impact 334 partners trained in 2 years



INSIDE the juvenile justice system

In 2022 alone, about 15,000 young people were entangled with the North Carolina juvenile justice system. CYFCP program manager Dannette McCain says the majority of these young people have experienced trauma and related behavioral and emotional challenges.

But people often only see the young person’s crime – a theft or violent outburst, for example – and not the struggles lurking underneath.

The NC Juvenile Justice Behavioral Health Partnerships, or JJBH, helps these youth and their families gain access to behavioral health treatment they require for recovery, with the hope of halting further interactions with the justice system.

“We’re looking at a young person from a holistic perspective and not just looking at them and evaluating or assessing them as the thing that happened, but also, ‘what are some of the things going on with you and your family that may have led to this moment?’” says McCain.

The center supports 21 JJBH teams across the state, providing training, technical assistance, and guidance to ensure these youth can move through the continuum of mental health care.

Center assistance comes in many forms, depending on the needs of the young person. For example, a local team may find that a teenager hasn’t attended counseling to address their recent diagnosis. CYFCP experts troubleshoot to uncover the root problem: perhaps the family does not have transportation or leave time.

“It can be very easy to say that a family just didn’t show up or want to participate, but if we drill down a bit more, are the processes in place to really help them navigate and move through the system?” McCain asks. “If some of these doors are trapped, how do we identify them?”

CYFCP also serves as a bridge between local teams and state leadership to streamline policies and processes. They ensure local JJBH teams are kept abreast of shifts in policies and up-to-date approaches,

including providing tools to ensure teams are using culturally appropriate methods.

McCain says their teams adopt a strength-based mindset. “We start with: what are the strengths of the young person, their family, and their community, and how do we build upon those things?”

They also prioritize pro-social and community-based activities. For example, if a middle schooler loves to be active, their team may find and suggest a community basketball league where she can build healthy bonds.

“What I love about the work is that we’re centering the conversation on the youth and the families and what they need and having the system be led by them, and we’re culturally responsive,” McCain says. “We’re not just doing a one-size-fits-all approach to juvenile justice and behavioral health.”



21 JJBH teams across the state receive support from program manager Dannette McCain (center) and program specialists Carla Carpenter (left) and Danielle Dancy.

VOICES, SEEN

A rain-streaked windshield and a street sign don't normally warrant more than a passing glance.

But four high school students found deeper meaning in them as perfect visuals to express their feelings about mental health. With help from doctoral student Stacy Huff and the NC Healthy Transitions pilot program, they found a creative approach to depict their experiences when it comes to anxiety, self-esteem, hope, and security.

The students in Buncombe County, North Carolina, first saw their photovoice exhibit unveiled to the public on September 14, in the lobby of Asheville's new County Health and Human Services building.

The exhibit is comprised of photos participants took while going about their lives. Metal plaques next to each photo share quotes from the students, connecting the images to aspects of their mental well-being.

The photo of the windshield in the rain represents a drive to school, and on a deeper level, the stress and repetitiveness of school days.

A black-and-white photo of a crocheted bouquet, with one flower appearing brighter than the others, represents focusing on the outcome. "It represents how this participant tries to focus on a bright spot as a motivation to get through challenges," Huff says.

Suicide is one of the top five leading causes of death for people ages 10 to 65 in the state. As awareness grows about mental health, Huff, who is getting her doctorate in educational research methodology, wants to help get resources into the hands of young people.

It was important for Huff to not only put young people at the center

of her research, but to give them a voice in the process. "As much as you might presume to know what they're going to say or what they want, you really don't," she says.

It's one reason she uses photovoice, a research method that employs photography to break down and explore social issues.

"It's community-based action research," she says. "It involves participants in the data collection, and it gives results back to the community as a traveling exhibit."

The idea was attractive to her mentor Dr. Tiffany Tovey who connected her with the NC Healthy Transitions Program, for which Tovey is an external evaluator. "Pictures tell deep stories and encourage people to reflect on their own experiences," she says.

"Stacy's photovoice project falls right in line with our program's valuing of youth voice and choice, of reflecting actual experiences of youth," says project director Willow Burgess-Johnson.

Tovey granted Huff's request to lead the project. "I have an enormous amount of gratitude," Huff says. "She let me take charge but was always my safety net."

Huff adds that her work reflects the UNCG School of Education's emphasis on cultural responsiveness. "To be culturally responsive, you need to give back as well as take. You're not just taking data. You're also giving back to that same community."

To develop the exhibit, participants took photos with some guidance from a professional photographer, presented them to the group, and

explained their meaning.

One photo of a community watch sign came as a surprise to Huff until she heard a student's explanation. "It filled them with anxiety. It prompted them to wonder why they needed to have a neighborhood watch. Did somebody get hurt? Would it be safe for them to play outside?"

"That's something that a lot of us take for granted."

September's unveiling was the first of many stops for the display, which traveled across western North Carolina and was seen by community decision makers, including healthcare providers and government officials.

"We want to share a sense of the broader community," says Huff. "What are they seeing in their lives that's helping, or not helping, or making it worse?"

Huff also presented her work at the American Evaluation Association's October conference to help her peers adopt and apply the process.

"To see something that was just an idea now out in the world is just phenomenal," she says.

Tovey says, "It was so fulfilling to see the photovoice exhibit during opening night. It's getting such an important topic in the public eye, for folks to reflect on and hopefully take action for."



The Youth Mental Health Photovoice exhibit was first unveiled at the new County Health and Human Services building in Asheville.

MAKING THE NEEDLE MOVE

Across CYFCP's diverse programs, Murray says she has been struck by the interconnectedness of social concerns in North Carolina.

"One of the things I've seen in the center is everything is so related – whether we're talking about early childhood, mental health, family relationships, substance abuse, juvenile justice, or violence prevention," Murray (bottom, left) says. "It doesn't matter what the entry point is into the social challenges. It's all connected."

At the end of her tenure with the center, Murray effervesced about her colleagues and the dedication of CYFCP's staff. "The people in our center are some of the greatest people in North Carolina working in behavioral health systems in innovative ways," she says.

Shelton (bottom, right) says Murray's work over the past four years has helped the center evolve in closer connection with the community, and she's excited to see how the incoming director builds upon this momentum.

The impact doesn't stop with the programs, she adds. "By working in concert with policymakers, we can help ensure that insights gleaned from CYFCP's programs inform and guide statewide policies and programs."

In this way, the CYFCP is reaching beyond academia – both into the community and policy spheres – to address problems and enact changes that help nurture North Carolina families.

Shelton describes her own eight years as the CYFCP director as a dream job that has been a highlight of her career. "I went home feeling like I made the needle move. Sometimes it was a teeny-weeny bit, but sometimes it was big," she says.

"What a joy, what a blessing, and the people I've met along the way and what I've learned – every day was a continuing education."



by Rachel Damiani, with "Voices, Seen" story inset by Janet Imrick
learn more at cyfcp.uncg.edu