These community members provide integral perspectives on conditions a family may face and crucial points in youth development. People who have experience with a project's focal condition or life event to serve as experts on its teams.

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.

"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, to help guide and empower youth along...'", 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. 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 the core of its work continuing to serve children and young adults across all 100 counties in North Carolina through wide-ranging programs. Today, the center continues to expand, with the core of its work continuing to serve children and young adults across all 100 counties in North Carolina through wide-ranging programs.
The crisis unit receives information about families in need through the county's 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 zeroes in 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.

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 young person 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 lacks 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 none of these doors are open, how do we help 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.

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 pre-social and community-based activities. For example, if a middle schooler loves to be active, their team may find and support a community basketball league where they 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.”

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**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.

“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.”

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**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.**

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

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**21 JJBH teams across the state receive support from program manager Dannette McCain (center) and program specialists Carla Carpenter (left) and Danielle Dancy.**
It was important for Huff to not only put young people at the center but also help get resources into the hands of young people. 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, the United Neighborhoods Community Researcher, wanted to give back as well as take. You’re not just taking data. You’re also giving back to that same community.”

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.”

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

“Stacy’s photovoice project falls right in line with our program’s emphasis on youth voice and choice, of reflecting actual experiences of youth,” says project director Willow Burgess-Johnson. “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.”

Huff added 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.”

One of the things I’ve seen in the center is everything is so interconnected — 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 discussed 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.

“One of the things I’ve seen in the center is everything is so interconnected — violence prevention,” Murray (bottom, left) says. “It doesn’t matter what the entry point is into the social challenges. It’s all connected.”

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“Making the Needle Move”

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