

Governor Phil Murphy

# ICYMI: Murphy Administration Unveils New, First-in-the-Nation Statewide Student Mental Wellness Support Infrastructure Proposal

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**TRENTON** – In response to the sharp increase in rates of depression, anxiety, and stress facing New Jersey's teens and young adults, Governor Phil Murphy and members of his administration announced today a new infrastructure for student and family support, the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) network, operated by the Department of Children and Families.

"Building on our existing efforts to address the mental health needs of New Jersey's students has never been more important, as countless young people throughout the state – and the nation – face mental health challenges that have been exacerbated by the turbulence of the past few years," said **Governor Murphy**. "Implementing this new mental health support model will allow us to reach more students and offer the evidence-based resources and services they need. My Administration will continue to prioritize the well-being of New Jersey's youth as we seek to support their mental health."

"New Jersey, like the rest of the nation, is still reeling from the trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and emotional and behavioral challenges that may have been there before have been exacerbated dramatically," said **NJ DCF Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer**. "According to a recent CDC report, nearly one in four young adults in the United States has been treated for mental health issues during the pandemic, and the US Surgeon General issued a report indicating more than 1 in 3 students reported feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness. Depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts are all on the rise. We are at a crisis point, and we need new tools and new strategies that reflect this new reality – that's what the NJ4S proposal delivers."

The NJ4S network will provide statewide coverage through regionally based hubs that will offer proven prevention strategies used to support every student in the state and their families. Each hub will integrate its programming with existing state and local services, to improve coordination and reduce duplication of effort. Hubs will offer a tiered menu of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that can be deployed in high-need districts. The NJ4S network will provide universal supports to all NJ students, and more intensive supports to students in schools with higher needs. NJ4S was informed by input from students, parents, school leaders, and providers of the state's existing School Based Youth Services programs.

Universal resources and targeted support through the hubs will focus on promoting positive mental health; teaching and strengthening social, emotional and behavioral skills; and supporting a positive school climate and staff wellbeing. Additionally, the hubs will consider the needs of the entire family in the context of serving individual students, and serve as connectors to engage existing supports through the Children's System of Care and other state and local resources to maximize the youth mental health system's efficacy and avoid duplication of services.

Each service hub will be staffed by a hub director, support staff, prevention specialists, and mental health counselors who can be mobilized to support the needs of schools, as well as deliver services and support at other areas within the community, including libraries, community centers, faith-based organizations, social service agencies, and even residential homes. Communities with the greatest need for services and support would be able to receive greater intensity of services from their regional hub

"Our system and our understanding of youth mental health has evolved, particularly since COVID," said **NJ DCF First Deputy Commissioner Katherine Stoehr**. "The new NJ4S approach builds beyond what we've been doing for students historically, leveraging research into what works in prevention for this population to create a comprehensive and coordinated prevention effort across the state, while ensuring adaptability and local voice in guiding the programming."

Each hub will be administered and implemented by a social services agency, selected through a competitive RFP process. Agencies that currently provide School-Based Youth Services would be eligible to apply to operate a hub, individually or as collaborative teams. Additionally, each hub will be guided by an Advisory Council, comprised of community and civic leaders, parent and youth representatives, school leaders and others, to ensure that the hub meets the unique needs of the community without replicating existing supports within the community.

The NJ4S Network is envisioned to be funded through a mix of state and federal dollars, strategically leveraging existing state investments and resources as well as federal funding opportunities to advance a statewide approach to student mental health and wellness that creates a sustainable and cost-effective model for New Jersey.

The FY2023 Budget includes \$6.5 million in American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds to maximize federal funding opportunities and to build a state-level data infrastructure network to ensure the services are continuing to meet student needs. In addition, Governor Murphy will be dedicating \$8.5 million more in ARP funds to support the robust startup of hubs with the necessary staff and programming from the start.

"Over the last 20 years – but in particular in the last few years – New Jersey and its federal partners have expanded and evolved the mental health and wellbeing infrastructure, and we envision NJ4S sitting in complement to that infrastructure," said **NJ DCF Assistant Commissioner for Family and Community Partnerships Sanford Starr**. "We want to mobilize existing resources and funding streams, and take advantage of federal funding opportunities, to develop this model into a cost-efficient, service-oriented benefit to students and their families throughout New Jersey."

The re-engineering of New Jersey's School Based Youth Services is just one way that New Jersey is stepping up to address the youth mental health crisis happening in the state and around the country. Since 2020, New Jersey has increased its investment in the Children's System of Care – the system serving children and youth below the age of 21 with significant mental or behavioral health challenges, as well as those with intellectual and developmental disabilities – by more than \$100 million.

New Jersey has also entered into a partnership with the local chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to establish the NJ Pediatric Psychiatric Collaborative to support pediatricians in connecting families to behavioral health supports. And NJ DCF has participated in inter-agency and cross-sector partnerships around mental health issues, including working with the Department of Education on the DREAMS program to advance trauma-informed, healing-centered training in schools, and the Garrett Lee Smith suicide prevention training in partnership with the Department of Health.

The NJ4S network is expected to launch in the 2023-2024 academic year. DCF will work with existing providers to determine the supports necessary throughout and beyond the transition to ensure students continue to be supported. Coinciding with today's announcement of the program, NJ DCF has issued a white paper to solicit public feedback to this new proposal. The white paper can be accessed here ([http://governor/news/news/562022/docs/20221003a/20221003a\\_NJ4S.pdf](http://governor/news/news/562022/docs/20221003a/20221003a_NJ4S.pdf)), and feedback can be submitted to [NJ4SFeedback@dcf.nj.gov](mailto:NJ4SFeedback@dcf.nj.gov) (<mailto:NJ4SFeedback@dcf.nj.gov>) by October 14, 2022.

## Governor Phil Murphy

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