

Strengthening Youth Mental Health – 2023 NGA Winter Meeting

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NGA Chair New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy opened the first plenary session of the 2023 NGA Winter Meeting with an overview of his **2022-2023 Chair's Initiative: Strengthening Youth Mental Health**. In response to rising rates of mental health distress among young people, Governor Murphy first introduced his NGA Chair's Initiative in July. Through the Strengthening Youth Mental Health initiative, Governors from across the nation are collaborating to develop bipartisan, state solutions. Part of this work has included conducting roundtable discussions to focus on the four pillars of the Chair's Initiative. In January, Governor Murphy was joined by Colorado Governor Jared Polis to lead **the second of four roundtable discussions** focused on the Chair's Initiative. A previous roundtable **was hosted in Utah** by NGA Vice Chair Utah Governor Spencer Cox.



After opening remarks from Governor Murphy and Governor Cox, Governor Murphy started the plenary session noting, "As leaders, one of the most important and sacred responsibilities is protecting the health and well-being of our kids, and for far too long, mental health and well-being of our young people has been overlooked, and the consequences are impossible to miss. From small towns to big cities, America's youth mental health crisis is playing out in homes, schools, hospitals and beyond."



During the meeting, the panelists discussed the close link between youth mental health and maternal and infant health. Maternal and infant health has been a significant area of focus in New Jersey throughout the Murphy Administration, and while Governor Murphy's Chair's Initiative has been working to elevate and expand the national conversation around youth mental health, First Lady Tammy Murphy has been **leading a parallel initiative** focused on improving maternal and infant health.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy spoke at the event during a conversation moderated by Dr. Alfiee Breland-Noble, Founder, The AAKOMA Project; Dr. Richard Besser, CEO, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Reina Chiang, a college student and founder of the nonprofit, "u matter apparel," and First Lady Murphy also served as panelists.



The Surgeon General shared that he felt “honored to be here a time where youth mental health is center of our focus, and that’s thanks to Governor Murphy and our First Lady of New Jersey who have really put this on the map as the key issue that it is,” and noted that “the good news is that we are making progress. There’s a lot more work to do, but I have never in the nearly 30 years that I’ve spent in public health seen the kind of alignments and momentum around addressing mental health concerns that we have right now.”

First Lady Tammy Murphy shared, “To give you the picture, you should know, if you don’t already, that the United States is 55th in the world for maternal mortality rates, and once you understand that and you dig a little bit below the surface, you’ll find that the inequities are vast.”

Dr. Richard Besser also detailed some of the concerning maternal and infant health statistics while echoing the Surgeon General’s sense of hope, noting when “you look around the country, and you see all kinds of things that are taking place that are having an impact” to address maternal and infant health challenges.

Governor Murphy shared that Dr. Bessler called him when his Chair’s Initiative launched to say “you better have lived experience represented in all of your panels and discussions.” Governor Murphy has included examples of lived experience in each convening held for his Chair’s Initiative, including the plenary session held during the Winter Meeting where Reina Chiang shared her lived experience with the panel, emphasizing “we need to listen to the youth voices and perspectives when making policies because you really hear the patient’s view of what is going to be productive treatment for them and what’s going to be the most helpful treatment for them.”

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer thanked Governor and Mrs. Murphy for championing what she sees as two of the most important issues facing the country, and she noted how her budget proposal is prioritizing the issues. Governor Whitmer encouraged other Governors to introduce budgets that prioritize the issues, and she shared that she looks forward to hosting the third roundtable that will be held in April as part of Governor Murphy’s Chair’s Initiative.

Hawai’i Governor Josh Green, M.D. shared some of his firsthand insights learned through his many years serving as a physician and expressed concerns about historic low reimbursement levels for behavioral health care.

Montana Governor Greg Gianforte shared details about work underway in Montana to increase investments in behavioral health care as well as efforts to bring back community-based mental health care. The Governor also talked about work he previously led in Congress to enable 9-8-8 has the three-digit number Americans can use to reach to Suicide and Crisis Hotline.

Maryland Governor Wes Moore also spoke about state funding for mental health progress in addition to sharing details about work taking place in Maryland to have an Adverse Childhood Experiences database to have “a better understanding of where all of children are and what they’re dealing with.” In concluding the discussion, moderator Dr. Breland-Noble stressed the importance of “talking to people with lived experience” and “broadening our lens about who we identify as an expert” to ensure Governors and other leaders have a better understanding of the needs of the Americans they serve so they can help implement policies that will better address the issues Governor Murphy is amplifying through his Chair’s Initiative.

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