

IDAHO, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

The Youth Behavioral Health Crisis in the Gem State



Idaho has a youth behavioral health crisis, and data suggests that the crisis in the Gem State is more severe than the rest of the country.

The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health is in Idaho for Idaho. Two of our core values are listening and understanding. What we hear from our partners – elected officials, community members, school administrators, educators, healthcare providers and parents – is how daunting the behavioral health crisis is in their community.

“Idaho is in the same crisis that is going on nationally, but at higher rates,” said Dr. Megan Smith, Director of Communities for Youth, an organization that works with schools and communities to promote mental health wellness. “Every survey that we’ve done in Idaho, the results have been over the national average.”

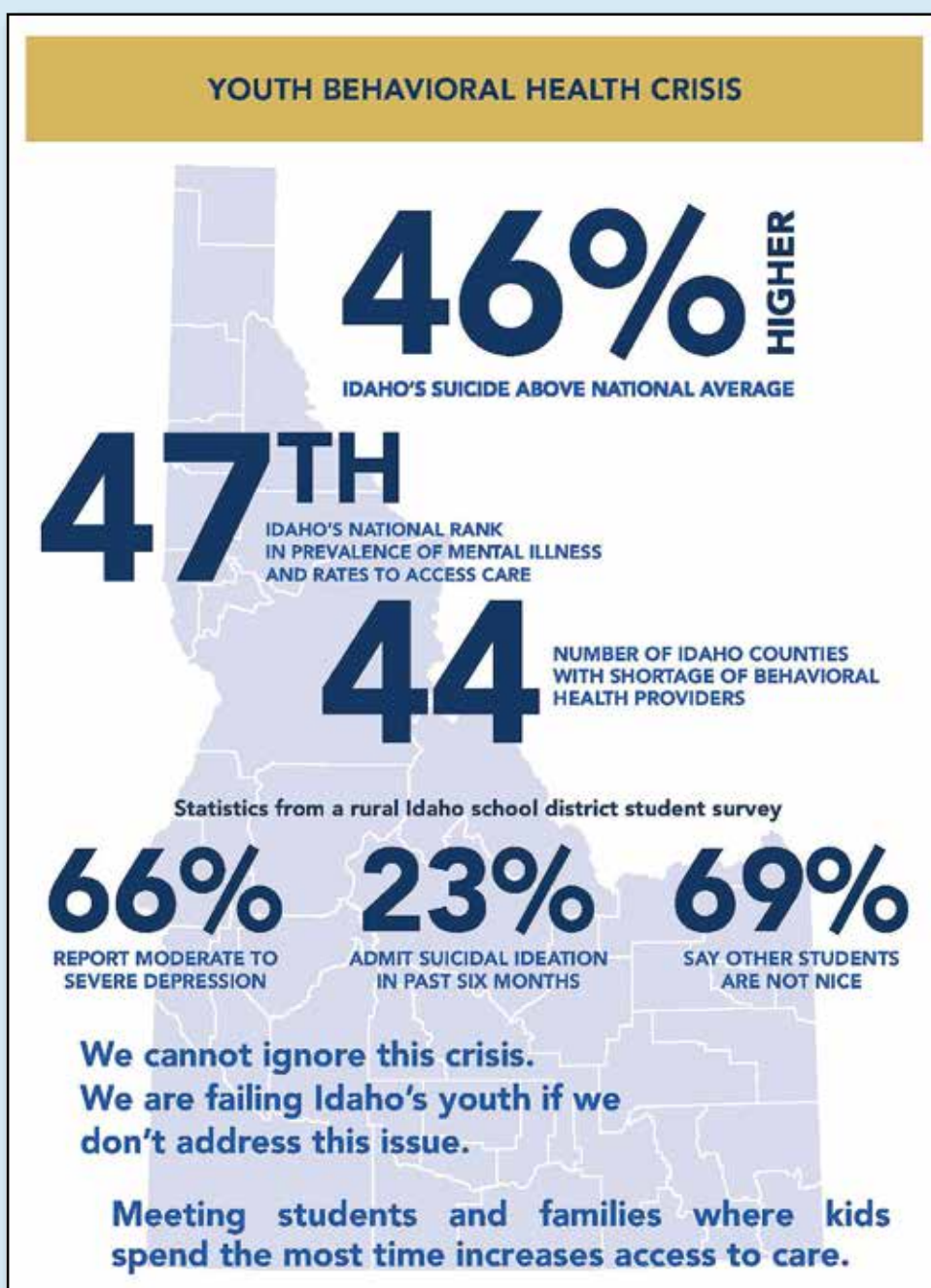
Dr. Smith, who also is an adolescent health specialist and associate professor at Boise State University, has been working with school districts across the state. Her findings show that 31 to 60 percent of students in these districts are moderate to severely depressed, well above the national average of about 25 percent. Based on Idaho surveys, youth depression is rooted primarily in two areas – high stress levels and social isolation, meaning that youth are suffering from emotional loneliness because they don’t have deep connections with others. Youth may experience sadness and hopelessness as a result.

High stress and social isolation are also leading to suicidal ideation in Idaho’s youth. Idaho’s suicide rate is 46% higher than the national average. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 52.5% of Idaho youth (ages 12-17) who have depression did not receive any care for their conditions within the past year. That statistic isn’t surprising, considering all 44 Idaho counties have a shortage of behavioral health providers. This shortage is exacerbated in rural counties and communities.

These numbers, along with conversations and meetings with educators around the state, have caught the attention of Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield. She released a statement to Idaho Ed News in late April after a presentation at the State Board of

Education meeting in Moscow that focused on behavioral health at the collegiate level.

“It’s been clear for some time that the state of our young people’s mental health is an emerging issue and one that is affecting education in Idaho,” Critchfield said in a statement. “I’m pleased that we are continuing to have this discussion across the K-20 system and looking forward to the partnership with higher education.”



Critchfield has formed a workgroup exploring the mental health crisis in the state, reinforcing how much of a crisis we face as a state.

THE SCHOOL BOARD'S ROLE

We know Idaho has a youth behavioral health crisis. The key questions are what should be done and who is responsible for addressing the crisis?

"It's everybody's job in the community, particularly the adults' job," Dr. Smith said. "As adults, we want our young people to thrive and that's clear in Idaho when we talk to people with all sorts of perspectives and opinions. They want young people to live healthy and successful lives."

It is going to take all of us, working together, to combat this crisis – school boards, students, parents, and the community. There are no better organizations than local school boards to connect the community to the school to take on the challenge.

Schools are a key stakeholder in the behavioral health crisis because students spend more time at school than anywhere else besides their homes. Schools teach more than reading, writing and arithmetic; they help educate young people how to be good citizens, get along with others, and more.

"School board members have a role in this because they can help guide how schools and communities come together," Smith said. "School board members represent the community around a school, and it's in those communities where we can change those risk and protective factors, so all kids have less likelihood of suffering from negative mental health outcomes."

UNDERSTANDING IS IMPORTANT

Smith's organization, Communities for Youth, helps school districts understand what is happening about youth behavioral health by collecting data in a variety of ways, including surveys and focus groups with students, parents, and the community. This helps the district understand what is happening locally among their students.



Unlike federal statistics, which can take up to two years to be aggregated and shared, data that is collected locally is shared with the community within a few weeks. This helps the community understand what is happening with student mental health needs right now.

“When we get data from the national level, people will say that’s not my kid,” Dr. Smith said. “When we talk about this is 40 percent of your community, this could be 600 kids in your community who are experiencing moderate to severe depression. Whether or not it’s your kid, your child interacts with those kids on a daily basis.”

The findings help the district and community formulate a plan to address the behavioral health crisis. “The specific thing we can do is put our attention on it together and build a shared understanding and a shared approach,” she said.

WHAT WE’RE DOING

The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health is Idaho’s largest statewide health foundation. We are in Idaho, for Idaho and youth behavioral health is a topic we will not ignore. We are actively working with schools and education leaders to provide funding to address youth behavioral health. We believe in a comprehensive approach that focuses on prevention and intervention. Here is a snapshot of the work we have done and are doing.

We launched Healthy Minds Partnership in 2016, this program helps schools offer onsite behavioral health services. We have helped more than 30 schools and districts launch the partnership, and many of those districts expanded the service to other schools because of the program’s effectiveness. Some schools that had integrated the program have lost their behavioral health providers, leaving students who need counseling services with no place to get the help they need.

The lack of behavioral health providers in Idaho has prevented Healthy Minds Partnership from expanding, particularly in rural areas. This shortage is one reason the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health offers scholarship programs at several Idaho colleges and universities to address Idaho’s healthcare worker shortage.

Since there are not enough behavioral health providers, we are supporting districts and schools to integrate comprehensive, evidence-based behavioral health programs that promote student and staff well-being. This upstream approach focused on prevention and connection, should reduce the number of students who could have a behavioral health crisis, become depressed, or even suicidal.

We also collaborate to bring in expert behavioral health speakers and presenters for education conferences and conventions that are attended by Idaho educators and administrations to help them find solutions to this behavioral health crisis.

We cannot ignore this crisis, and we’re failing Idaho’s youth if we don’t address this issue. Learn more about our work at www.bcidahofoundation.org.



IN IDAHO, FOR IDAHO.