

“NOW WHAT?” SUICIDE PREVENTION LISTENING SESSION REPORT

Youth-Led Insights for Collective Wellness and Change

20
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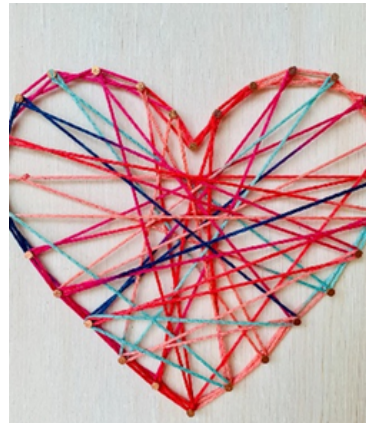


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Now what?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Youth-led Suicide Prevention Listening Session: **“Now What? Healing Through Creativity & Action”** was convened to address the alarming rise in youth suicide rates in Sacramento County, where suicide has become a leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 24. Envisioned by the Behavioral Health Youth Advisory Board (BHYAB) and facilitated by Stanford Sierra Youth & Families with support from Wind Youth Services and River Oak Center for Children, the session aimed to center youth voices in the urgent conversation around mental health and suicide prevention.

The session brought together 35 youth, ages 13 to 24, representing diverse backgrounds—including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ communities—with many having lived experience with mental health challenges, system involvement, or trauma. This diversity enriched the dialogue, highlighting both shared struggles and unique perspectives.

Youth shared powerful insights about the stigma surrounding mental health, the disconnect between service messaging and real access, and the lack of trusted, culturally responsive support. They also elevated the importance of peer connection, creativity, and safe spaces in promoting healing and hope.

Participants called for expanded peer-led programs, trauma-informed and inclusive care, greater access to school-based mental health resources, and meaningful adult partnership. Above all, they advocated for being seen not as passive recipients, but as co-creators of change.

This report highlights the session’s key themes, youth-driven solutions, and actionable recommendations for advancing suicide prevention through equity, empathy, and collaboration.

This session and report were made possible through funding from the Youth Suicide Prevention and Response Network (YSPRN), supported by the California Department of Public Health and Sacramento County Behavioral Health Services.



METHODOLOGY

The **Now What? Healing Through Creativity & Action Youth-Led Listening Session** was held on May 22, 2025, at Stanford Sierra Youth & Families (SSYAF), intentionally scheduled during Mental Health Awareness Month to elevate youth voice and drive system-level change.

Co-designed by SSYAF, the Behavioral Health Youth Advisory Board (BHYAB), Wind Youth Services, and River Oak Center for Children, the session was grounded in a trauma-informed, inclusive, and equity-focused framework that prioritized youth leadership and emotional safety.

Youth ages 13–24 with lived experience related to mental health, suicide, and/or system involvement were invited to participate through peer outreach, community partnerships, and digital promotion (social media & flyers). A total of 35 young people attended, representing a diverse cross-section of Sacramento’s youth, including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ participants.

The two-hour session blended creative expression with wellness-centered dialogue. Participants engaged in peer-led small group discussions, guided by reflective prompts, and explored hands-on art activities—such as personalizing canvas bags with affirmations, messages of encouragement, and symbols of resilience. Healing-centered and affirmation-themed swag items helped reinforce self-worth, while a photo booth and message wall provided a joyful space for self-expression and connection. Food and beverages were provided, contributing to a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere. Resources for crisis support and well-being were also provided, ensuring that participants had access to tools and contacts for continued care beyond the event.

To preserve confidentiality, no audio or video recording was used. Instead, staff took anonymous notes, and youth artwork and group reflections were documented to honor and amplify the voices shared.

Following the event, youth facilitators and partners debriefed to identify key themes, which are summarized in this report. Each participant received a \$25 gift card and wellness items in appreciation of their time and contributions. Insights gathered from the session will inform future youth-centered suicide prevention and mental health strategies across Sacramento County.

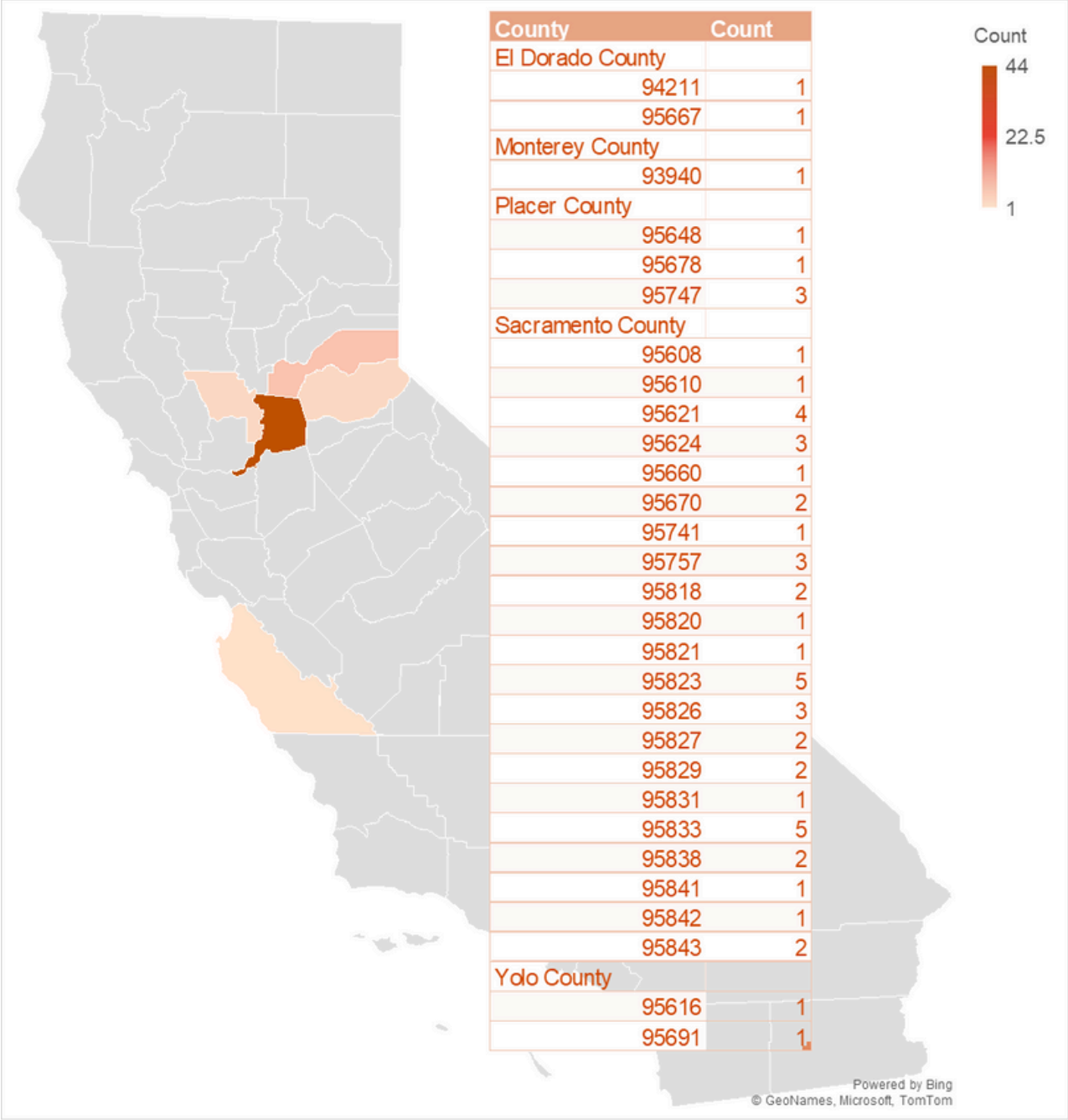
YOUTH PARTICIPATION DEMOGRAPHICS

This section summarizes demographic data collected during registration. The charts below illustrate the distribution of registrants by ZIP code, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. These data reflect the geographic diversity and cultural representation of youth who engaged with the session, offering valuable insight into the communities most impacted.

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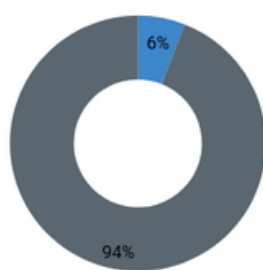
Youth Participants

Geographic Breakdown by County & Zip Code

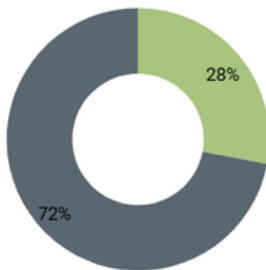


YOUTH PARTICIPATION DEMOGRAPHICS (CONT.)

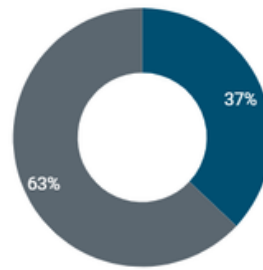
Breakdown by Race/Ethnicity



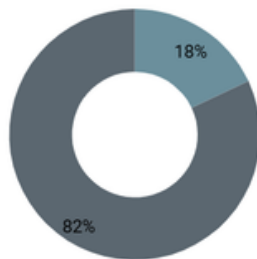
Indigenous (n=3)



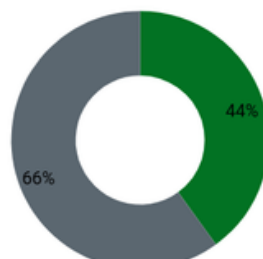
Asian/Pacific Islander (n=15)



Black/African American (n=20)



Hispanic/Latino (n=10)

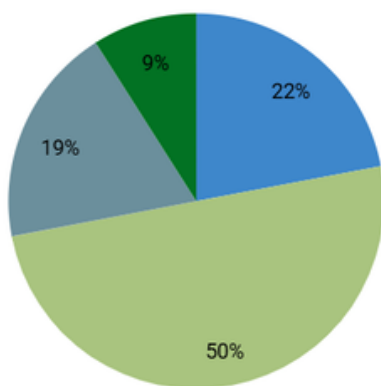


White (n=24)

*Percentages will not add up to 100% as this includes individuals who have identified as being more than one race/ethnicity

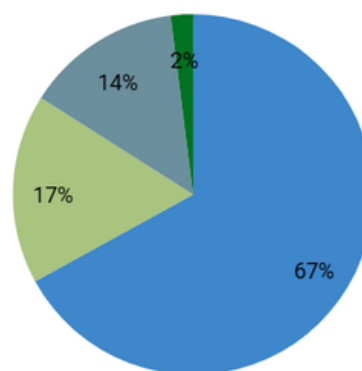
*22% (n=22) of individuals identified as More than 1 race
6% (n=3) declined to respond

Breakdown by Age



13-14 (n=12) 15-17 (n=27) 18-20 (n=10) 21+ (n=5)

Breakdown by Gender Identity



Cis Female (n=36) Cis Male (n=9) Genderqueer/Nonbinary (n=8) Transgender Male (n=1)

Participant Motivation

Youth participants were asked during registration why they chose to attend the “Now What?” listening session, revealing a wide range of motivations that highlight the importance of youth-centered mental health spaces. Many cited personal experiences with trauma, PTSD, or suicidal thoughts and saw the session as an opportunity for healing and self-expression. Others were drawn by a desire for connection and peer support, hoping to meet others their age and feel less alone. Some youth came to learn—about suicide prevention, supporting friends, or advocating for mental health in their communities—while others were motivated by a passion for advocacy and contributing their voice to systems change. Additionally, a number of participants were regular attendees of safe, supportive community programs like Stanford Sierra Youth & Families’ Resilient Youth Speak Out (RYSO) youth support group, emphasizing the role of trusted spaces in ongoing youth engagement. These motivations reinforce the session’s core principles of peer-driven healing, trauma-informed care, and youth empowerment.



BACKGROUND & EVENT OBJECTIVES

In response to the youth mental health crisis, the listening session was organized to bring together youth leaders, service providers, and mental health professionals to foster open dialogue, creative expression, and peer connection.

The session, themed “**Now What?**”, reflected youth grappling with trauma, loss, and a desire for action. Youth planners expressed a growing awareness among peers of suicide warning signs and a shared urgency to move beyond awareness toward healing and solutions.

Key objectives included:

- Centering youth voice in a trauma-informed space to discuss mental health and suicide.
- Using art and music to promote healing and reflection.
- Gathering insights to inform suicide prevention strategies and resource development.
- Building connection and resilience among youth through shared stories and support.

The event emphasized that youth are not just participants but co-creators of change, offering vital insight to shape future systems of care and community-based support. The following pages of this report highlight the event's core components, youth-driven themes, and key takeaways that can inform ongoing suicide prevention efforts.



ART THEMED ACTIVITIES

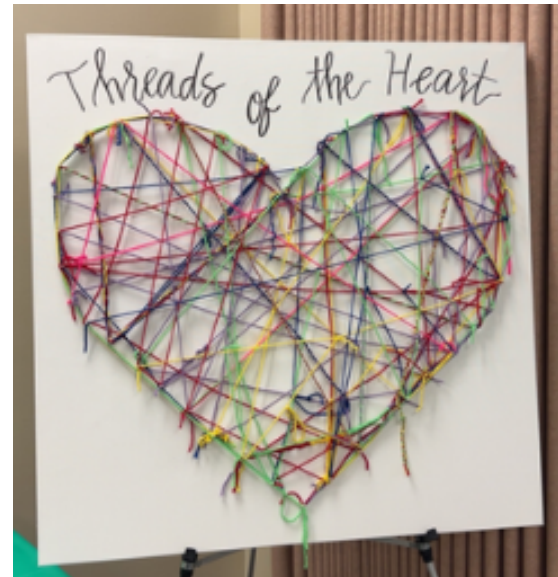
Threads of the Heart Activity

As part of the listening session, participants engaged in an interactive creative activity titled “Threads of the Heart.” This visual, hands-on experience invited youth to reflect on their personal and collective journeys with mental health and suicide through the symbolic use of color, string, and storytelling.

Using a heart-shaped pegboard and color-coded yarn, participants selected strands that represented their lived experiences — such as personal mental health struggles, loss, advocacy, or hope. One by one, they wove their threads across the board, creating a deeply layered, intersecting pattern that mirrored the complexity and connection of the stories in the room.

The resulting art piece served as a tangible representation of shared experiences, grief, resilience, and support — illustrating how individual stories are woven into a larger narrative of community and healing. Many youth expressed feeling grounded and moved by the process, with the finished heart symbolizing that no one carries these experiences alone.

This activity not only provided a moment of quiet reflection amidst an emotionally charged event, but also contributed to the larger goal of fostering connection and creativity in the face of difficult topics.





I'VE LOST SOMEONE TO SUICIDE

ART THEMED ACTIVITIES

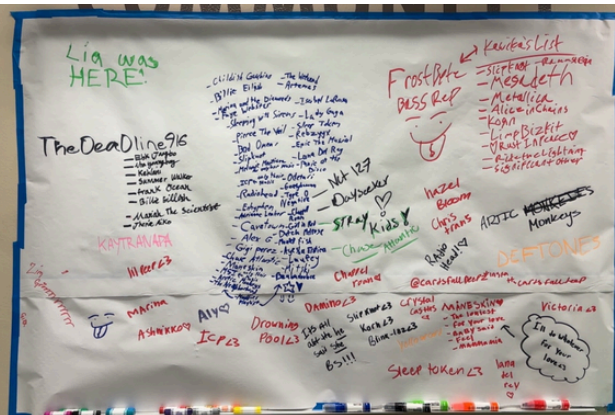
Creative Expression Activity: Affirmation Bag Decorating

As part of the listening session, participants were also invited to personalize canvas bags with affirmations, symbols of strength, or messages of love and encouragement—especially words they wished they had heard during difficult times. This hands-on activity offered a meaningful outlet for reflection and self-expression, while also serving as a quiet, low-pressure space to relax and connect with peers in a supportive environment.



Mural Activity

The “Collective Healing & Action” mural invited participants to explore how communities can heal together through creativity and expression. Youth were encouraged to respond to prompts using paint, words, doodles, or symbols, sharing messages of hope, resilience, and strength. While the original intent centered on collective healing, the mural organically evolved into a vibrant reflection of youth culture—featuring the names of favorite artists, meaningful song lyrics, and personal expressions of identity and emotion. The result was a colorful, collaborative tapestry that honored both individual voices and shared experiences.





PEER FACILITATED DISCUSSION

A core element of the listening session was small, peer-led groups co-facilitated by trained youth and adult allies using a trauma-informed, wellness-centered approach. This format fostered trust, safety, and inclusive dialogue.

Participants reflected on their lived experiences through the following guided discussion questions:

#	Guiding Questions
1.	What makes it hard to talk about mental health or suicide? What would make it easier?
2.	What has helped you—or a friend or family member—in the past?
3.	What supports have actually helped you—and what was missing when you needed help?
4.	What do you want adults and decision-makers to really hear from you?
5.	If youth could redesign mental health support, what would it look like?

The prompts invited youth to share personal experiences, identify barriers, and envision new models of support. To protect confidentiality, no recordings were made; staff took anonymous notes and gathered visual artifacts such as artwork and group reflections. Insights from these peer-led discussions informed key youth-driven recommendations for future suicide prevention efforts.

KEY THEMES & INSIGHTS

Youth consistently emphasized that being genuinely heard matters more than receiving clinical or prescriptive responses. Many described feeling dismissed or invalidated when their emotional struggles were met with judgment or superficial advice. Stigma—especially within families, schools, and adult systems—remains a major barrier to open dialogue. In contrast, creative expression (art, journaling, music), nature, and connection with trusted peers emerged as powerful tools for healing and self-regulation. Above all, youth want to be treated as whole people—respected, heard, and valued as equal partners in their mental health journeys.

“Treat me like a person rather than a subject”

“I like talking to my dog – she can’t talk back.”

“Channeling creativity into something I can build upon.”

Summary:

Youth seek empathetic, individualized, and creative approaches that affirm their lived experiences and humanity.



BARRIERS & GAPS IDENTIFIED

Participants named several systemic and interpersonal barriers to care. These included infrequent or impersonal therapy, dismissive providers, and a perceived disconnect between school-based support and actual follow-through. Stigma and lack of representation further complicate access for youth from immigrant and marginalized communities. Judgment from adults—especially when mental health is discussed—was a recurring theme, often leaving youth to cope in isolation.



“My therapist told me to get over it.”

“Only 1x a month, then therapist stopped it & said everything was good.”

“Mental health supports should be less robotic and more youth friendly!”

“No judgmental environment.”

Summary:

These gaps highlight a mismatch between youth needs and current mental health systems, underscoring the importance of authentic, sustained engagement.

YOUTH-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

Youth proposed bold and practical ideas to reshape mental health support. They called for mandatory yet flexible access to care through schools and community hubs, and suggested creating welcoming, low-pressure “chill zones” for decompression. Arts-based healing, peer-led initiatives, and curriculum-integrated mental health education were all named as ways to reduce stigma and promote early intervention. Most importantly, they called for seats at the table in designing and leading these efforts.

“Each school should have an LCSW.”

“Help – drawing to tell my blues/story.”

“Youth spaces that are free and open for distraction.”

“Have more advertisement and arts & crafts.”

Summary:

Youth envision inclusive, creative, and accessible mental health ecosystems—ones they help build and lead.





RECOMMENDATIONS

To truly meet youth where they are, systems must expand access to culturally responsive, empathetic mental health professionals in schools and communities. Youth emphasized the need for emotional safety, non-judgmental adults, and the normalization of mental health conversations in everyday life—at school, at home, and in the media. Holistic practices like journaling, mindfulness, and outdoor activities should be integrated as valid pathways to healing.

“Normalize mental health struggles.”

“It’s not an issue you can control but only assist and guide.”

“Include youth in conversations.”

“Have more youth-led events or have their voices being heard.”

Summary:

Actions should invest in youth-centered, healing-informed care that reflects the realities, values, and creativity of young people themselves.

EVALUATION



An electronic survey was distributed via Microsoft Teams Forms following the event to gather feedback from participating youth. While only a handful of responses were received, the feedback provided was overwhelmingly positive. Those who completed the survey rated the event as excellent or very good overall.

In addition to the formal survey, informal feedback was collected during and after the event. When asked directly, most youth expressed that they enjoyed the experience and would be interested in attending future events.

To gauge youth engagement and emotional impact, a live Mentimeter poll was used to check in with participants during the session. Notably, when asked whether they felt seen, youth rated the session a 10/10, highlighting the event's success in creating an inclusive and affirming environment.

What Worked: Event Highlights

"Being able to socialize and share"

"The open discussion on how younger people can redesign youth mental health services"

"Meeting new people"



CONCLUSION

The “Now What?” youth listening session demonstrated the power of centering young people in the conversation around mental health and suicide prevention. Through open dialogue, creative expression, and intentional peer connection, youth participants shared not only their challenges but also their visions for healing and systemic change.

Their voices made clear: youth are ready to lead. They bring lived experience, insight, and resilience that are critical to building more responsive, equitable, and compassionate systems of care. This session affirmed that when given the opportunity and support, youth will rise to the moment—not only to be heard, but to drive solutions.

As we move forward, the insights and energy from this session serve as a call to action. Investing in youth leadership, expanding trauma-informed practices, and sustaining youth-adult partnerships must remain central to our collective efforts in suicide prevention and mental health support. The work continues—and youth must remain at the heart of it.



 *Now What?* 
Healing Through Creativity & Action

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to each young person who showed up with courage, honesty, and hope. Your insights are the heart of this work and a powerful reminder of the strength and wisdom within our communities.

We also thank the trained peer facilitators and adult allies who held space with care, trust, and respect, allowing for honest dialogue and meaningful connection.

Appreciation goes to the leadership and staff who made the session possible—from art stations to coordination—ensuring the event was not only organized, but healing.

Finally, thank you to our partner organizations and funders who continue to invest in youth voice, mental health equity, and culturally rooted solutions. Your collaboration made this work possible.

Together, we are building spaces where young people are seen, heard, and supported.

Thank you!



WITH GRATITUDE: INDIVIDUAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BHYAB Board Members and Associate Members

Clara Armstrong
Cloud Peterson
Kiara Yates - Secretary
Stormee Burgan - Vice Chair
Radha Chauhan - Chair
Karisa Cinco
Natanya Kharat
Mayuri Kasturi

Stanford Sierra Youth & Families

Erin Hamilton
Ebony Chambers-McClinton
Beatriz Lodia
Hallie Symons
Laura Solorio
Gibrán Méndez
Jessica Kreb
Karla Zargoza
Kiara Hayden
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Abby Taylor
Milo Gomez
Maya Ellen Coleman
Triniti Semon
Victoria Warby-Garrison
Darius Battle
Jamie Lindsay
Julia Pearson
Terrell Thomas

River Oak Center for Children

Amy Fierro
Roland Udy
Latrice Cole
Betty Knight
Caitlyn Wardell
Rene Oliver
Alexandria Ybarra
Passionique Saunders
Shelby Greer

Wind Youth Services

Raine Winter
Lauren Anderson
Caree Carneiro

PRO Youth Services

Dexter Niskala
Sydney Saiya

Youth Empowerment Commission

Thomisha Wallace
Jennifer Serrano



*“Thank you for
showing up with
heart.”*