



NORTHWEST MICHIGAN
**Behavioral
Health
Initiative**



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**'Through Our Eyes'
Photovoice Project showcases teen views on youth mental health**

When youth from 10 regional counties talk about the stigma of mental health, they use words like “messy,” “alone,” “unworthy,” and “discrimination.” Their inspiring insights are shared in “Through Our Eyes: A Photovoice Project on the Stigma Around Youth Mental Health & Wellness,” a project premiered in April during the Celebration and Action Summit hosted by the Northwest Michigan Community Health Innovation Region (CHIR).

The summit and the photovoice project are part of a Behavioral Health Initiative launched in June 2021 by the CHIR in response to a spiraling behavioral health crisis in the region. The group’s youth task force used photovoice to share their perspectives and experiences related to mental health, the stigma surrounding it, and recommended actions to address these issues.

A creative tool and research method, photovoice uses photography to capture an individual’s perspective and to tell their story. It is used to encourage positive change within communities and to educate decision-makers. In this use, students were given three framing questions to help launch their creative process:

1. What does the stigma around youth mental health look like? What is the impact of this stigma on youth?
2. What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health? What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?
3. What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?

Each student submitted one photo per framing question.

“As submissions were coming in, it was surprising to see the diversity among the students’ depictions of mental health, stigma, and perspectives on how student mental health could be better supported,” said Amy Horstman, community health coordinator at the Health Department of Northwest Michigan and Northwest Michigan CHIR staff. “It was exciting to see their photos and hear from their perspective what could be done moving forward to support student mental health. This was something students truly cared about, and you could see the passion, drive, and excitement for the project with each submission.”

A youth driven and youth led initiative – the students reviewed their peers’ photovoice submissions and selected the photos and stories to share with over 150 cross-sector partners during the summit. The youth define the stigma and recommend actions that can be taken within schools and communities to improve their wellbeing.

Summit attendees called [the outcome](#), “inspiring,” “eye-opening,” “thought-provoking,” and “courageous” while virtually applauding students for their dedication, openness, and professionalism throughout their project and presentation.

“The Photovoice project with the kids was simply amazing, and I am so glad to have seen their work and heard their perspectives,” one summit participant said.

Taking next steps

The Northwest Michigan CHIR includes the 10-county region of Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, and Wexford counties. Each CHIR region utilizes action teams, comprised of cross-sector leaders and staff, to achieve goals related to access to care, and well-being and resiliency.

Of the 12 action teams formed in the CHIR region, one team’s focus was to reduce stigma towards youth mental illness. This action team, informally called the youth task force, was led by five young adults and two adult advisors, Hannah Rodriguez (Manistee County Community Foundation) and Mishelle Shooks (Charlevoix County Community Foundation).

The task force is now using the photovoice project and the wise words of youth to promote change. Student recommendations to reduce the stigma include providing youth with education on mental health to change attitudes and behaviors, encouraging more face-to-face and less social media interactions, scheduling group conversations to promote openness and access to mental health assistance, supporting sports and other activities that alleviate stress, and more.

“We can ensure our communities are a safe space by encouraging empathy and support of others; and most of all, respect for each person,” said one youth participant in her photovoice submission.

“What can we learn from our kids about the stigma around youth mental health? How can we help our kids feel less alone?” asked Ty Schmidt, founder of Good Works Lab, a Traverse City-based team tasked with solving complex community problems. “It starts with listening to our kids. It’s time.”

To view the slides of student photos and stories click [here](#).

If you would like to display the physical photovoice exhibit in your community or organization, or learn more about this project and the Behavioral Health Initiative's Youth Task Force, please contact behavioralhealth@northernmichiganchir.org.

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