Youth Mental Health Corps

IMPACT REPORT 2025–26

Building Trust, Launching Futures


EXIT

LETTER

A Note from Our Founding Partners

From the beginning, we believed the Youth Mental Health Corps could do something extraordinary: help young people get the mental health support they need, strengthen the organizations serving them, and open doors to meaningful careers for a new generation of young adults.

During the 2025–26 program year, that vision has become a reality in communities across the country, fueled by innovative state leadership and a growing coalition of partners who share our belief in what's possible. We see it in the young person who finds someone they trust enough to ask for help, the school that can reach more students because a Corps member is there, and the young adult who discovers a passion and pathway to a career in behavioral health. These are the stories behind the Youth Mental Health Corps' growth, and they remind us why this work matters.

Ambition alone isn't enough. As the Youth Mental Health Corps has embarked on a remarkable journey of growth, we are equally committed to understanding the difference it is making, learning from what works, and using those insights to make the work stronger.

This report brings together findings from our second year of implementation. It highlights an external evaluation by WestEd on the Corps' impact across young people and host organizations, alongside a national career survey, conducted with the National Science & Service Collaborative at ServeMinnesota, tracking members' professional growth. The results are encouraging. Across 11 states, we are seeing promising evidence of impact for young people, host organizations, and Corps members. Just as importantly, we are learning how to build on that progress to deliver even greater impact as the Youth Mental Health Corps continues to expand.

> ***Our goal is not simply to reach more communities. It is to make a greater difference in every community we reach.***

Alise Marshall

Senior Director of Corporate Affairs and Social Impact, Pinterest

Marie Groark

Managing Director, Schultz Family Foundation

Young people need support. Too many aren't getting it.

Youth mental health needs are outpacing the capacity of schools, clinics, and communities to respond. Reaching young people earlier, through trusted relationships and accessible support, is increasingly important.

1

YOUNG PEOPLE

A youth mental health crisis

Many young people are struggling with their mental health, and too many go without the support they need.

3.8M

Adolescents experienced a major depressive episode in 2024 [1]

~40%

Of those adolescents received no mental health treatment [1]

Half

Of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 14 [2]

These figures describe adolescents nationally, not YMHC participants.

2

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

A workforce stretched too thin

Schools and community organizations don't have enough trained staff to reach every young person who needs help.

372:1

Students per school counselor nationally, well above the recommended 250:1 ratio [3]

48%

Of public schools say they can effectively provide mental health services to all students in need. More than half cite too few mental health staff. [4]

3

YOUNG ADULTS

A growing field that is hard to enter

Demand for behavioral health workers is growing fast, but young adults who want to join the field face a long path into it, with few clear entry points.

18%

Projected growth in jobs for mental health and substance use counselors from 2025 to 2035, compared with 3% for all jobs [5]

30%

Of incoming YMHC members knew how to get a job in the mental health field [6]

50,500

Projected openings each year, on average, for substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors nationwide, including openings to replace workers who leave the field [5]

Young people reaching young people

Many young people never get as far as asking for help. Nearly one in three with significant mental health struggles don't seek care, often because of worries about family, cost, or not knowing where to turn.[7]

The Youth Mental Health Corps is built on a simple idea grounded in emerging research: trained near-peers can help young people build trust, talk about mental health, and connect to resources. They fill a distinct role in the mental health continuum, complementing licensed professionals and extending nonclinical support into the places young people already spend their time.

HOW NEAR-PEER SUPPORT WORKS

Build Trust

Relatable connections

"I wasn't in school last year or the year before that because my anxiety and my mental health about school was just bad. If the teachers are too busy, he's there and we can talk to him and he'd help us. He's nice. He doesn't judge. He's neutral."

— Student served by a YMHC member, Minnesota

Start Conversations

Earlier Support

"She didn't know how to ask for help. To her, it was just a normal Tuesday... My job was to be a quiet advocate, someone in her corner, even when she didn't realize it."

— Berkeley Wall, YMHC alum, Alamosa, Colorado

Connect to Care

Resource Navigation and referrals

"Maya also helped us to bridge gaps in care. She would make referrals on behalf of patients... to ensure that the patients are getting the healthcare services that they need."

— Kayla Doyle, Director of AmeriCorps and Academic Programs, Cherry Health, Grand Rapids, Michigan

One model. Triple bottom line.

The Youth Mental Health Corps (YMHC), launched in 2024, deploys a common framework for training, service, and career development to help states address a triple bottom line. Young adults ages 18–24 are trained as near-peer supports and serve in schools, clinics, and community organizations, where they build trusted relationships, promote mental wellness, and connect young people to resources. As they serve, Corps members also gain hands-on experience and earn professional credentials that prepare them for meaningful careers in behavioral health. At the same time, schools and organizations gain additional capacity to address youth mental health and wellbeing.

Each state develops its own localized program, deploying members where needs are greatest and prioritizing credentials and career pathways that align with opportunities for employment and continued education.

STORY FROM THE FIELD | CARLTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA

Stretching scarce resources further

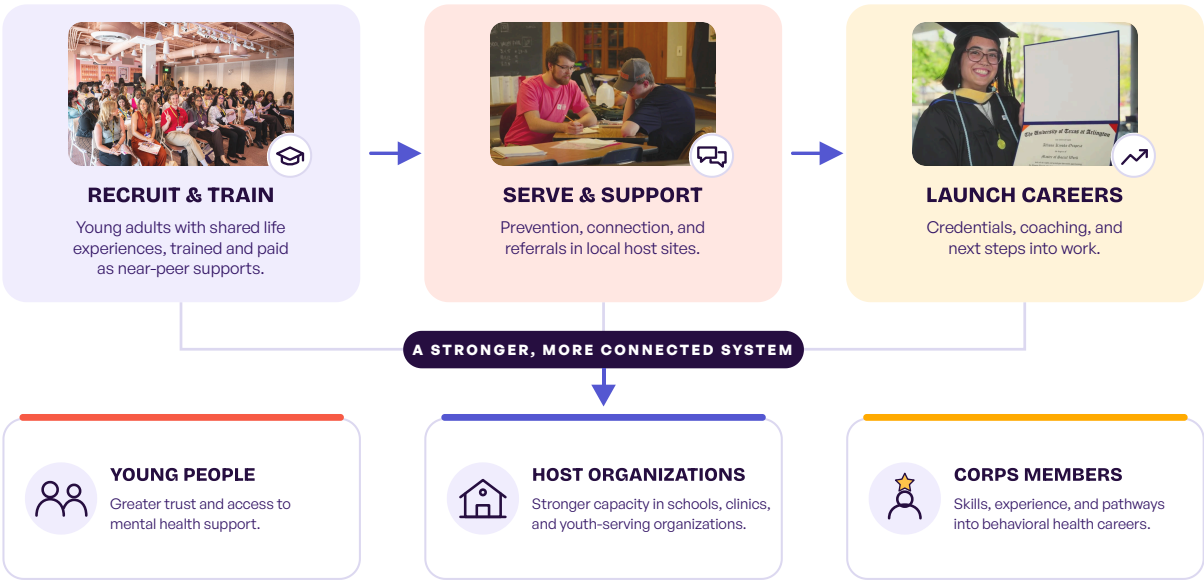
In rural Carlton County, Minnesota, "there's just not enough resources," says Donna Lekander, who directs the county's Community & Family Initiatives Department. "We can sometimes have wait lists for up to six months for a mental health appointment." To reach more young people, local leaders shared one YMHC member, Jonah McCauley, across five sites: a middle school, a high school, an alternative school, the public library, and a restorative justice program. "He's closer to a peer, but a mentor," Lekander says, "because he was them not too many years ago."

The impact showed up in individual students' lives. Jonah spent half a school year working one-on-one with a student who wasn't sure he would graduate, sometimes meeting him at the library after school. "Once he was able to graduate," Jonah recalls, "he told me, 'Without you, I don't think I'd be able to do this.'" According to teachers like Roderick Syck, who teaches math in Cloquet, that kind of support helps students realize, "yes, I can do this... It's just magic when it works."



The Youth Mental Health Corps Model

Paid service that connects young adults to meaningful careers while addressing youth mental health needs.



YMHC is growing rapidly. During the 2025–26 program year, more than 560 members served across 329 host sites in 11 states, earning hundreds of professional credentials while bringing near-peer support to schools, clinics, and community organizations. Since launching in 2024, nearly 1,000 YMHC members have served 75,000 community members and directly supported an estimated 12,000 young people through their caseloads. Supported by a growing coalition of partners, including the Schultz Family Foundation and Pinterest, YMHC is building on this momentum and poised for continued growth.

YMHC's growth

4 states 2024–25

11 states 2025–26

16 states 2026–27

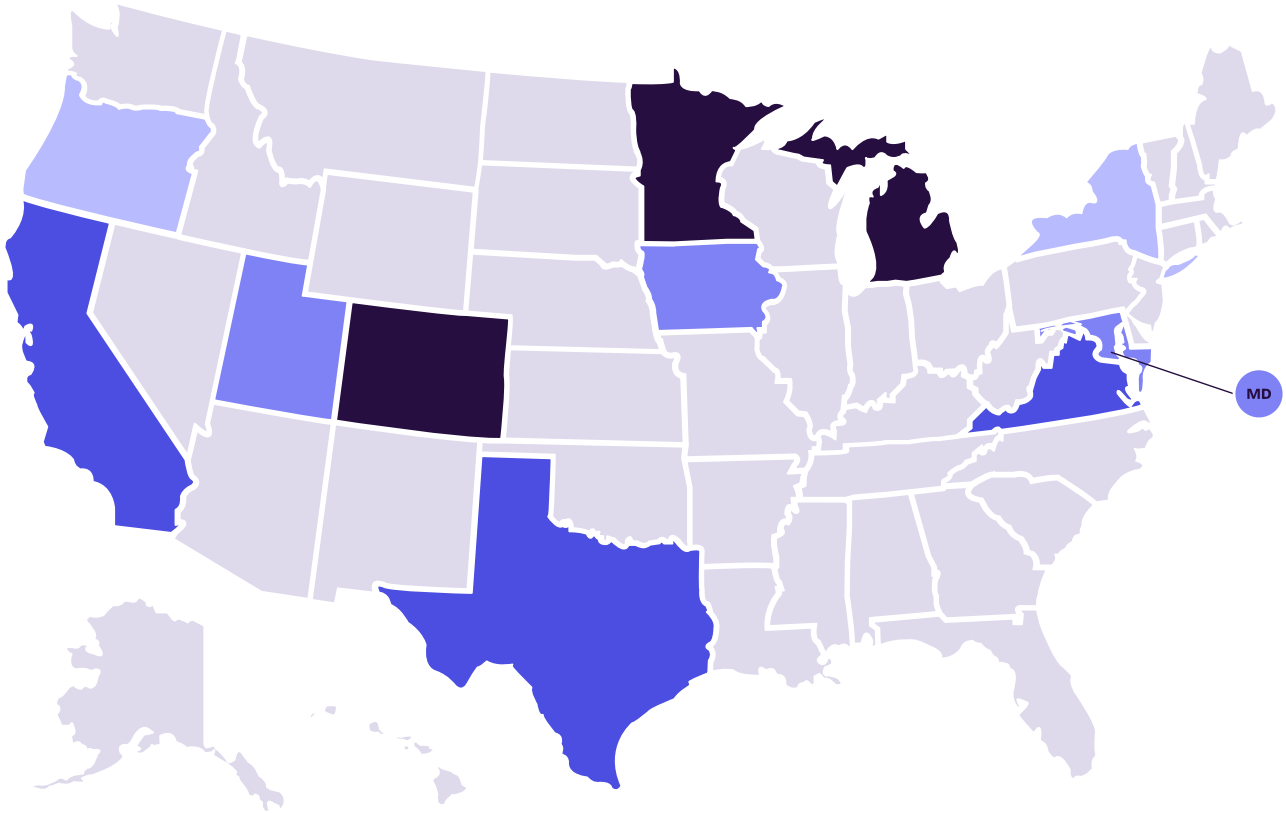
26 states by fall 2027

YMHC FOOTPRINT

Corps members by state

CORPS MEMBERS RECRUITED

Under 35 | 35–64 | 65–84 | 85+



A national footprint, rooted in local communities

YMHC launched in 2024 in 4 states and grew to 11 states during the 2025–26 program year, from Oregon and California to New York and Maryland. In the 2026–27 program year, it is active in 16 states, with plans to reach more than half the country by fall 2027.

Since launch, all states

Nearly **1,000** Corps members	**490** Host sites	**~12,000** Youth served on caseloads	**75,000** Community members served

Behind these numbers is a more important story about the difference YMHC is making. Findings from the program's second year offer promising early evidence that the model is delivering on its vision. Across three areas of impact, the results point to meaningful benefits for young people, the organizations that serve them, and Corps members themselves.

Understanding YMHC's Impact

Findings in this report draw on two complementary sources, an independent evaluation and a national member survey:

WestEd

A nationally recognized research and evaluation organization examining how YMHC impacts the young people members serve and the schools, clinics, and community organizations that host them. See the full data and methodology of their 2025–26 YMHC evaluation in "From Connection to Care: Year 2 of the Youth Mental Health Corps."

National Science & Service Collaborative (NSSC) at ServeMinnesota

A leader in evaluating the impact of AmeriCorps and service year programs on members and communities, NSSC conducted a national survey of YMHC members at the start and end of service and six months later to track their professional development, educational pursuits, and career pathways.

Together, these evaluations provide an emerging picture of YMHC's impact while identifying opportunities to strengthen the model and better understand its long-term outcomes.

How are YMHC members impacting the young people they serve?

FINDING ONE

1 A young person has someone to trust

98% of members said their service had a positive impact on the mental health of the young people they served

91% saw broader change take hold in their community

Mental health support is not always easy to access, even when services are available. Young people may be unsure where to turn or reluctant to ask for help, even from the adults that they see in their daily lives.

Because YMHC members are close in age to the young people they serve, and often share similar cultural backgrounds, communities, or life experiences, they bring a unique understanding of the pressures young people face today, from friendships and family challenges to social media and mental health. That shared understanding can make members more relatable and easier to talk to, especially about topics young people might hesitate to bring up with a teacher, counselor, or other adult. YMHC members don't replace those adults. Near-peers are not therapists: they don't diagnose or treat mental health conditions. Instead, they offer another person to turn to—someone who can listen without judgment, relate to what they're going through, notice when a young person is struggling, and help connect them with available resources or a higher level of care when it's needed. For many young people, these relationships can be an important first step toward seeking support.

WestEd's evaluation found encouraging evidence of how this approach is making a difference:

- **Trust and connection:** Strongest evidence that members' closeness in age and consistent presence made them approachable and helped young people build trust over time.
- **Awareness and access:** Substantial evidence that members complemented existing services, making mental health support more visible and accessible.
- **Help-seeking:** Emerging evidence that these relationships helped some young people feel more comfortable asking for help and connecting with qualified adults.

Connecting students to care in Maryland [8]

At one Maryland host site, the YMHC member is part of the student support team's daily check-ins. When the member notices a student who needs more help, there is a clear, direct path to a licensed clinician.



"Seeing a child who once held so much inside now feel safe enough to express herself reminds me why this work is so important."

— Serena Cisneros, YMHC member, Healthy Choices AmeriCorps, San Francisco, California

What makes this approach particularly promising is its potential to reach young people earlier, before challenges escalate into crises. Historically, mental health systems have relied on young people recognizing they need help, knowing where to find it, and feeling comfortable asking for it. YMHC helps address these barriers by bringing support into the places young people already spend their time and building trusted relationships that can make asking for help easier. Consistent with a growing body of research showing that youth peer support can strengthen coping and resilience, reduce loneliness, and increase engagement with mental health services, these early findings reinforce the potential of YMHC to strengthen prevention and early intervention by helping young people connect with support sooner.



Are YMHC members strengthening the organizations where they serve?

FINDING TWO

2 Schools and community organizations can serve more young people, and do it better

89% of members said their service increased their host site's capacity to provide mental health support

10→30+ One California site grew its mentoring caseload from 10 to 30+ students in a single year[8]

YMHC is also strengthening the schools, clinics, and community organizations in the 490 host sites where members have served since launch. By adding trained near-peer support, host organizations have been able to expand prevention and early intervention efforts, reach more young people, and strengthen coordination among staff and service providers. Importantly, members complement the work and relationships of licensed professionals, allowing organizations to extend their reach while maintaining appropriate clinical oversight.

WestEd's evaluation of YMHC's second year found:

- Member-supported activities helped create or strengthen site practices and routines. Members were most effective when they were integrated into day-to-day operations.
- Across most sites, YMHC members took on work the existing services weren't covering and broadened what sites could offer, helping them reach more young people.

Together, these findings point to an opportunity that extends beyond adding capacity at individual organizations. At a time when behavioral health professionals are in short supply and demand for youth mental health services continues to grow, YMHC offers a way to strengthen how organizations deliver support. For some young people, near-peer support may be enough to help with everyday stress; for others, a member's most important role is helping them reach a counselor or clinician. By introducing a complementary layer of prevention, navigation, and relationship-based support, YMHC can extend the reach of existing systems while allowing licensed professionals to focus on needs requiring their specialized expertise.

Bringing in YMHC members to help expand the capacity of existing systems and support requires strong supervision, clear roles, and organizational readiness. As YMHC grows, these lessons can help states and organizations develop more effective and sustainable approaches to supporting young people, with near-peer support playing a valuable role.

Expanding school and health clinic capacity:

At Madison Middle School in Oceanside, California, YMHC member Araceli Ceniceros built brain breaks, check-ins, and space for students to share their feelings into the school day. The pattern extends beyond schools: in YMHC's first year, WestEd profiled Cherry Health, a federally qualified health center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where members worked alongside clinicians on interdisciplinary care teams.



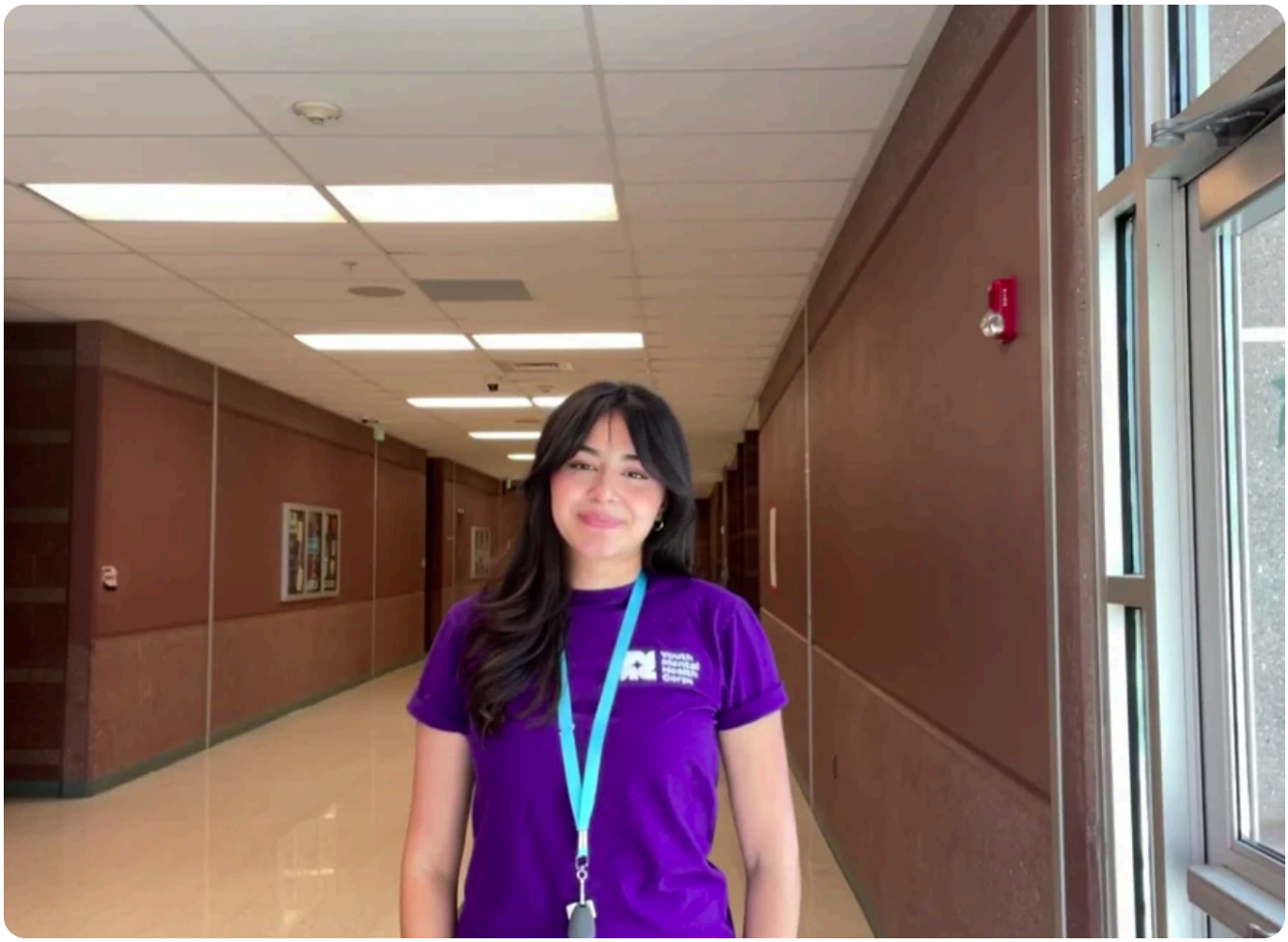
Does serving in YMHC help members advance their careers?

FINDING THREE

3 YMHC becomes a launchpad for careers

As AI reshapes the labor market and traditional entry-level career pathways become less predictable, young adults need new ways to gain experience, build professional networks, and launch meaningful careers. At the same time, the behavioral health sector faces a significant workforce shortage, creating an opportunity to connect young people seeking career pathways with communities in need of support.

YMHC helps bridge these challenges by combining paid service, hands-on experience, professional training, and credentials with individualized career development support. Through one-on-one career coaching, exposure to behavioral health professions, and leadership development opportunities, members gain practical skills, build professional networks, and explore pathways into meaningful careers while making a difference in their communities.



The national evaluation of YMHC members conducted by the National Science & Service Collaborative at ServeMinnesota found that YMHC is beginning to deliver on this promise:

9 in 10

Career commitment: Nearly 9 in 10 members intended to pursue work or training in mental or behavioral health, compared with 58% of peers in other national service programs. That commitment remained strong throughout service.

94%

Career readiness: 94% said YMHC supported their professional goals, while 72% reported being very or extremely confident about their career goals.

30→54%

Career knowledge: The share of members who knew how to get a job in mental health increased from 30% at the beginning of service to 54% at the end.

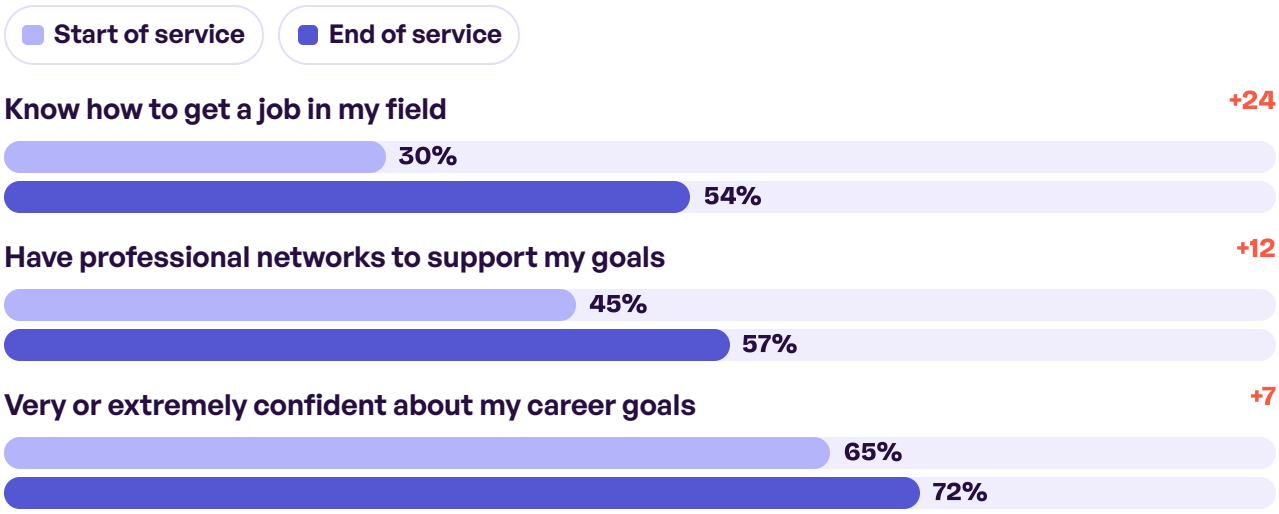
87%

Career progression: 87% of members finished their service year with a clear path forward: further education, employment, or another year of service.

These findings suggest that YMHC is helping young adults translate their commitment to serving others into practical skills, professional connections, and tangible next steps. They also reinforce that building a strong workforce pipeline requires more than training and credentials. Individualized coaching, professional networks, and support navigating financial and personal barriers can be essential to helping members advance. As YMHC expands, strengthening these supports offers an opportunity to open more pathways into behavioral health careers while helping address critical workforce shortages.

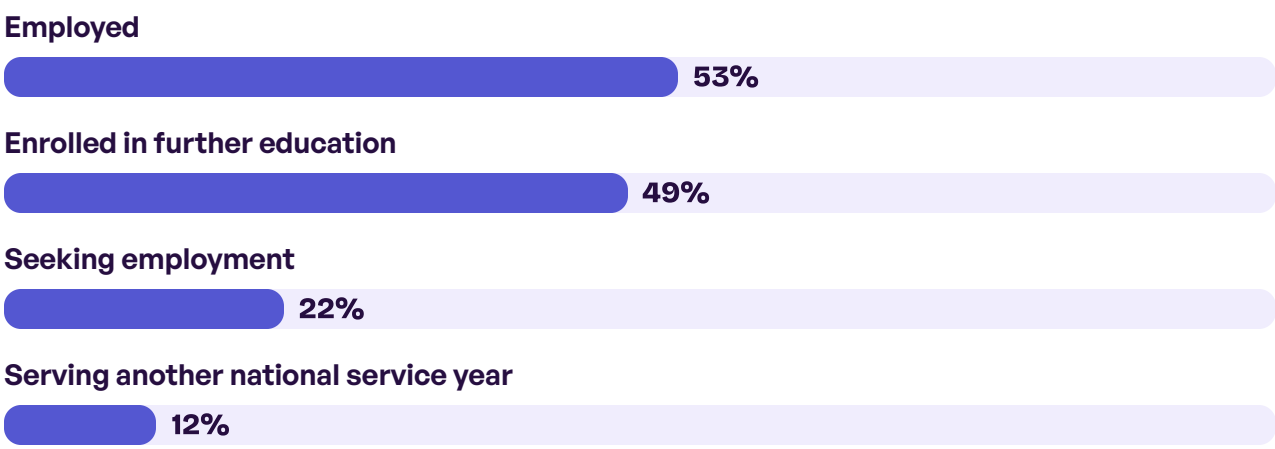
Members grew where it matters most

Share of members agreeing, start vs. end of the 2025–26 service year[9]



Where alumni are six months later

2024–25 YMHC alumni, January 2026 (N = 74)[10]





"The trainings that YMHC provided were incredibly eye-opening and broadened my perspective on how I can best support my students. I've learned tools that I continue to use in both my personal and professional life."

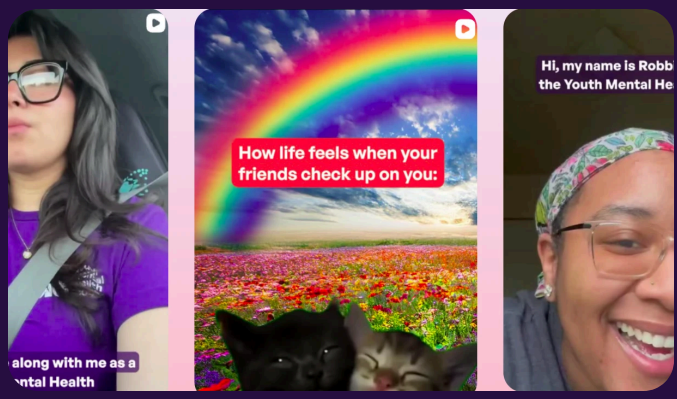
— Jaya Marshall, YMHC member, Columbia, Maryland

Youth Leadership



YMHC Leadership Fellows

Each year, two members from each participating state are selected as YMHC Leadership Fellows. Fellows help co-design and improve the program, represent members at national convenings, and complete a Career Vision Project that maps a path into the field aligned with their goals and values.



YMHC Digital Fellows

The YMHC Digital Fellows Program puts youth voice at the center of how the Corps tells its story. Up to 10 members serve as a paid, youth-led creative team, making social-first content about mental health, their member experience, and what it's really like to serve, in their own voice. Fellows pitch ideas each month, learn from working creators, and help shape the program as it grows.



FEATURED FELLOW

Jerica Barkley

Digital Fellow · PASS AmeriCorps, Vista, California

Since January, Jerica has checked in with two students every morning before school and every afternoon before they head home. Those daily moments built the trust to work on what mattered to them: setting achievable goals, celebrating progress, and reflecting on what they were proud of each day.

"Youth Mental Health Corps is just a really unique framework to address the youth mental health crisis in our country. I've seen my kids' confidence grow and their grades improve. I just seen students change their mind and open up to me."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, YMHC is poised for continued growth, with more than half of U.S. states expected to be leading their own YMHC programs by fall 2027. As the Corps expands, the focus will be on deepening its impact: supporting state-led strategies to increase the number of members serving in communities, strengthening training and credentials, and building clearer pathways into behavioral health careers. Helping states identify and direct available public funding toward prevention, early intervention, and workforce development will be critical to expanding and sustaining these efforts over time.

Continued evaluation will strengthen the evidence base for near-peer support, measure longer-term outcomes, and quantify the impact and potential cost savings of prevention and early intervention for schools, health systems, and communities. Together, these efforts will help establish YMHC as a sustainable model for meeting youth mental health needs while developing the next generation of behavioral health professionals.

That is the promise of near-peer support: meeting young people where they are today while building the mental health workforce we will need tomorrow.



NOTES

1. SAMHSA, 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. These figures describe adolescents nationally, not YMHC participants.
2. Kessler et al., National Comorbidity Survey Replication, 2005.
3. American School Counselor Association, 2024–25.
4. National Center for Education Statistics, School Pulse Panel, 2024.
5. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2025–35.
6. YMHC Career Development Survey, 2025–26 baseline.
7. Surgo Health, Youth Mental Health Tracker, 2024 (ages 10–24).
8. Huebner, T. A., Calisi, G. M., & LeFevre, L. (2026). From Connection to Care: Year 2 of the Youth Mental Health Corps. WestEd.
9. YMHC Career Development Survey, 2025–26 baseline (N ≈ 305) and exit (N = 160), conducted with ServeMinnesota. Group-level comparison.
10. ServeMinnesota alumni survey of 2024–25 YMHC members, January 2026 (N = 74); respondents could select more than one, so totals exceed 100%.

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Youth Mental Health Corps



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