

Advocating for Better Access to Mental Health Resources in Schools and the Community



By: Dalila, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council | May 2, 2025
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Dalila is a Youth Organizer with Brighton Park Neighborhood Council in Chicago, IL. She is a senior in high school and is in her second year as a Youth Justice Corps member with the Alliance for Educational Justice. Dalila draws from her lack of mental health resources in schools and the community to advocate for access to mental health services in schools and her local community. Dalila is already taking psychology courses and is interested in pursuing a degree in psychology to promote the importance of mental health access. She plans to continue working with community organizing groups to fight for access to mental health resources.

Becoming an Organizer

I am a youth organizer with Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BNPC), and I am advocating for mental health resources in my community as well as my school. I am 18 yrs old. I am a senior in high school in Chicago, IL.

I began my journey as a youth organizer two years ago when I signed up for One Summer Chicago, a summer program that provides jobs for youth ages 16-24. I saw an organization doing youth organizing and was intrigued. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I knew I wanted to know more about it. I began with BNPC and enjoyed it so much. When I saw they were offering another fellowship, I signed up as fast as I could because I wanted to get my voice heard. During my first year I spoke up at an event and was able to share my story. I was able to use my first-

hand experience to promote the need for community access to mental health services. It was a very impactful experience for me. Feeling heard allowed me to change my approach, I now know that having my voice heard, getting my thoughts and feelings out there, can really create change.

Working with BNPC I really feel like my voice is heard. We worked hard to advocate for "Treatment, not Trauma," a campaign to improve mental health services. We advocated for not having police being first responders for mental health issues and for increasing mental health access in the community, including opening more health centers.

I really appreciate my community organizer at BPNC, Vanessa. She makes me feel heard. She supports and encourages our ideas. She listens to us and makes sure we know our ideas and opinions are valid. There was one time where we were brainstorming ideas to call for mental

health services in schools and Vanessa reinforced our ideas. She makes me feel heard and that we can create real change using our voices.

I am happy I chose to work with BPNC. I have made great progress in my own abilities to speak up and speak out about mental health. When I first started with BPNC, I was nervous to speak up. Now I know I can use my voice to speak up and I can use my voice to create change.

Advocating for Change

When I first began my high school career, there was a lack of mental health resources. I know first-hand how necessary it is to have mental health support. I myself could have used resources, and I have friends who could have also used these kinds of supports. I am excited that I have helped create more resources to provide to my friends.

I have also advocated for safe spaces for teens to be able to just hang out with their friends after school. Freshman year I really enjoyed spending time with friends. Being a community organizer, I asked the student council to address this issue and pushed for us to have space and time after school to hang out with each other and build relationships. This could be a free space and a safe space.

I am still advocating for mental health support in schools. Right now, we have limited opportunities and limited time limits to get assistance with mental health issues. At my school we have a maximum of 15 minutes to meet with a counselor, which is not enough time. How does the administration expect us to express ourselves with limited time?!? I want to continue to advocate for mental health in schools so that students can feel comfortable speaking freely about their feelings. I don't want students to feel like they're looked down upon because of their feelings or if they're struggling. I want to continue advocating so that I can have access to mental health services where I can be free to open up without a strict time limit.

I have tried advocating in school for more mental health resources, but it doesn't always get heard. As student council member I wanted to push for more access

to mental health, but the student council was preoccupied with planning senior activities and pep rallies. Funding is primarily allocated to sports like football and basketball, and access to mental health supports is not as high in the priority list.

Growing in Organizing

Being a community organizer has allowed me to not only open up and advocate in my community and school; it has allowed me to open up at home as well. I have a greater ability to talk about my feelings, especially with those close to me. I am able to have better conversations with family members around my feelings, and I feel heard. I think all youth should be able to experience the effects of community organizing and having their opinions heard. I plan to continue to engage in community organizing either with BPNC or another organization that is doing the same or similar work even after I finish high school. Community organizing has had a profound impact on my life and has transformed me from soft spoken to someone who can speak in front of the community to advocate for what I believe in. I am extremely thankful for this experience, and I am excited to see what the future is for community organizing. ♦

About this Project

This essay was produced as part of a project with the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) and the Community Based and Participatory Research Course taught by Professor Mark R. Warren at the McCormack Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The mission of the Youth Justice Corps (YJC) of the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) is to support young people to develop as organizers and leaders of their peers in their local schools, communities and youth organizing groups. The program provides political education and organizing skills training and connects these emerging youth leaders across the country. The young people are typically youth of color from low-income communities attending secondary schools.

Doctoral students collected the stories of young people leading education justice organizing efforts in their local communities.

These stories are posted on peoplesthrinktank.us, the website of the People's Think Tank. PTT is a network of thought leaders from over forty community, parent and youth organizing groups, national alliances, and allied organizations committed to building knowledge to support movements for racial equity, educational and social justice, and community liberation, fiscally sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. For more information on other projects, check out [@peoplesthrinktank](#) (Instagram), and [@4edjustice](#) (Instagram).



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