

# Virginia is Building a National Model to Address Teen Mental Health

From The Hill

*By Dr. Marc Siegel*

This month is National Suicide Prevention Month, an important focus in the midst of a catastrophic mental health crisis in this country. The suicide rate, suicidal thinking and emergency room visits continue to rise, especially among vulnerable teen girls.

Consider that according to recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2021, close to two-thirds of teenage girls felt persistent sadness or hopelessness, emergency room visits related to mental health increased by 22 percent and a whopping one-third considered suicide. Provisional CDC data show that 2022 marked the highest number of suicide deaths ever recorded; more than 1,000 deaths higher than the previous record.

There are multiple reasons for this disturbing trend, including loneliness and increased social media use, a rampant drug crisis involving alcohol, fentanyl and stimulants, and even worry and anxiety about politics.

These problems were made far worse by the social isolation imposed by the pandemic combined with the growing use of social media, which often takes the place of real human interaction for teens. Consider that a teen on TikTok is sized up statistically by an algorithm created in China that can directly impact content choices and promote further alienation and anxiety.

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) has developed a visionary plan to battle the mental health crisis. The plan, Right Help, Right Now, focuses on family and community, improved access to services with increased insurance coverage and providers and careful follow-up. This is not just another series of government platitudes, it has real teeth to it. In fact, 24 bills were passed by the Virginia legislature in June alone.

“This has been a nonpartisan topic,” Youngkin told me in an interview on Fox News. “I think this is a moment for us to put politics down.” He said it would take three years to ramp up capacity in facilities and workforces, and that the program will provide preventive care as well as in-crisis and post-crisis care.

Youngkin said that the rise in the suicide rate is directly linked to social media and the restrictions and closures put in place in schools during the pandemic. He said that our “crisis of isolation,” “is only exacerbated by the intrusion of social media in every aspect of so many Americans’ lives.” He said parents are “at the head of the table in their children’s lives” and should be empowered to “have the right to make decisions with their child” regarding their education.

Right Help, Right Now addresses the impact of the mental health crisis in schools by expanding services and providing crisis intervention. This includes \$15 million to expand mental health programs in elementary, middle and high schools and \$9 million to increase virtual services for behavioral health in public schools, colleges and universities. These measures were passed as part of the state budget earlier this month.

The drug epidemic is another key factor in the mental health crisis. Youngkin called fentanyl the most damaging illicit substance the nation has ever dealt with, due to “an unsecured border” that’s “turning every state into a border state.” He pointed out that teens and others can unknowingly take it by borrowing pills, painkillers and other things that are laced with the drug, including “vape cartridges.”

To confront what Youngkin called “a horrible drug that is killing our kids and our friends,” Right Help, Right Now proposes “developing better mobile treatment and crisis response.” The goal is to “invest additional funding to wage war on fentanyl overdoses, and reduce barriers to recovery and re-entry.” Funds for the effort include \$15 million for “opioid abatement initiatives” which include “a campaign to reduce fentanyl poisoning among our youth.”

Between TikTok and Instagram infiltrating brains and drugs polluting bodies, our most precious treasures — our kids — are at risk. For this to change, parents need to take charge, aided and abetted by historic programs like Youngkin’s.

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