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### **IWES awarded \$1.2M for Initiative to Promote Black Youth Mental Health in Louisiana**

The Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (IWES), a national public health organization based in New Orleans, Louisiana, has been awarded a \$1.2M grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to promote Black youth mental health (BYMH) in Louisiana. IWES and seven other organizations across the United States are creating three-year initiatives to demonstrate policy effectiveness to promote Black youth mental health, including a focus on suicide prevention. In Louisiana, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 and Black students had the highest rates of suicidal ideation and attempts among Louisiana high school students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019)<sup>1</sup>. In New Orleans, IWES' school-based Emotional Wellness Screener found that 12% of the youth surveyed since 2012—the majority of whom are Black—endorsed suicidal ideation, which underscores the need for impactful policies to address this issue.

According to IWES' Founder Denese Shervington, MD, MPH, psychiatrist and public health practitioner,

*“Black youth experience disproportionate mental health conditions due to racially biased environmental factors, not due to biologic predisposition. This grant will help us better understand how to disrupt these socially constructed factors, in addition to providing culturally resonant and compassionate psychosocial supports for Black youth and their families. It is time that we come together as a city to show youth that they matter, and that we care.”*

The urgency behind this work is also illustrated by Ekundayo Akinlana, a current high school senior and former IWES youth intern,

*“I feel the highest contributing factors to these issues [suicide, substance abuse and depression] are poverty. Poverty has deep psychological impacts on everyone, and I feel like for some people it heightens their need for escapes through suicide or substance abuse. Organizations should try to consider some way of meeting more youth, especially teens, with programming on an individual level. Older teens especially need a lot of support, because a lot is lost when teens are afraid to express themselves.”*

Over the course of the three-year demonstration project, IWES will convene youth ambassadors, core implementation partners (CIPs), and an advisory council to identify and assess existing policies in education, the juvenile legal system, and the social services sector that impact the mental health and wellbeing of Black youth.

*“As a social service agency serving unhoused youth for over 35 years, we've witnessed firsthand the impact of individual, community and societal trauma on the mental health and well-being of Black youth in our community,”* says Rheneisha Robertson, Executive Director of Covenant House New Orleans, one of the CIPs. *“While policies and systems exist to mitigate poor mental health outcomes, far too often they fail to adequately and meaningfully address the multi-layered and complex intersection of factors that lead to these outcomes. Covenant House looks forward to working with IWES and the other partners to improve mental health outcomes and reduce suicidality of Black youth in New Orleans,”*

Other partners involved in this project include:

- Children & Youth Planning Board
- City Councilmember Oliver Thomas
- Community Academies of New Orleans
- Covenant House
- Institute of Mental Hygiene
- Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights
- Louisiana Public Health Institute
- Mayor’s Office of Youth and Families
- Metropolitan Human Services District
- National Alliance on Mental Illness – New Orleans
- NOLA Public Schools
- Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO)
- Trauma-Informed School Learning Collaborative
- WWL-TV

The project period for the Demonstrating Policy Effectiveness to Promote Black Youth Mental Health initiative began on September 30, 2022. IWES hopes that the learnings from this grant can be applied in further contexts to impact other local, state, and national policies, and champion this systems-thinking, interdisciplinary approach to improve youth mental health. As an organization that has been dedicated to the emotional health and well-being of all youth in New Orleans for more than 25 years, especially youth that are most highly impacted by poor mental health conditions, IWES is honored to be selected to continue to further this work, and in a manner that centers the wisdom and guidance of Black youth in New Orleans. For more information on IWES, visit [www.iwesnola.org](http://www.iwesnola.org).

#### ABOUT IWES

Founded in 1993, IWES is a national, non-profit health organization that creates initiatives to heal communities, especially those facing adversity. Through community-driven research programs, training, advocacy and partnerships, IWES helps to build emotional and physical well-being, resilience and capacity among women, their families and communities of color, especially those which are disadvantaged. IWES uses a Social Ecological Model (SEM), which recognizes that individual behavior is shaped by the intersection of multiple influences occurring at the interpersonal, community and societal levels. Through this in-depth, multi-dimensional approach, IWES creates culturally proficient programs, activities and research to address and advocate for the emotional and physical well-being, resilience, and capacity of women of color, their families and communities to heal and create sustainable change. IWES works in the following areas: Resilience, Well-Being, and Mental Health; Adolescent Health; Maternal and Child Health; and STI/HIV Prevention & Care.

#### REFERENCE

- 1) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.  
<https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app/Results.aspx?LID=LA>