



## YMCA Camp Programs Respond to Emerging Mental and Emotional Health Needs of Campers

Partnership with Greater Nashua Mental Health (GNMH) brings more staff training and on-site support.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has given summer camps ample opportunity to practice keeping campers safe from illness and looking after their physical health, camps also need to watch over their campers' mental and emotional health. Indeed, the pandemic has shone a much-needed spotlight on the mental health needs of our children.

Many parents and educators are now well aware that we find ourselves amid a mental-health crisis, a situation profoundly impacting our communities and our camps.

“This summer, camp counselors received special training from [GNMH](#) during orientation to learn to identify mental health issues and how to respond. Additionally, we have had on-site support of clinical staff from GNMH to work closely with our counselors in supporting campers who are struggling in social situations, dealing with anxiety, or having trouble with following directions or keeping their hands to themselves. This support could include campers so young that they lack prior experience being in social situations,” said YMCA CEO Mike LaChance. “Having these support services from GNMH is providing a better camp experience for children and staff. Overall, this partnership has greatly improved the environment for kids and staff this summer. Our camp

director (Tiffany Joslin) has shared that we have not had to remove a child from camp for behavioral issues this summer. Our GNMH partnership has allowed kids to get the support they need to stay in the program. Camp is a place where we can provide a really amazing outlet for kids to get to learn, explore, create and make friends, and do it in a place that is open, inclusive, welcoming and where they're supported. Unlike school where they're held to academic standards, camp is a time for exploration with a new set of adults guiding, teaching, and engaging youth," LaChance said.

Last year, the [New Hampshire Department of Education](#) partnered with the [New Hampshire Community Behavioral Mental Health Association](#), which is made up of NH's 10 Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), to provide support to camps around the state. The CMHCs around the state, including [GNMH](#), developed a mental health training and had staff on site at a few camp locations to provide mental health support for children.

This year, GNMH provided training for YMCA staff before camp opened for the summer 2022 season. The intent was not to train camp counselors to be mental health providers, but to give them foundational skills about how certain behaviors might manifest in children and when it would be appropriate to reach out to camp directors to get additional support. For four days a week this summer, GNMH has had clinical staff on site at camp to offer guidance for staff and 1:1 assistance for campers who need support. For the month of July, GNMH was on-site at Camp Sargent for 60.25 hours and provided 22.5 direct hours of individual support to campers.



As kids were back at camp after many months in a remote school environment or in school with pandemic protocols in place, simple things like dealing with disappointment, learning to share, or taking turns was a challenge for them. After the isolation of the past two years, some children were struggling. These were things we always

taught at camp. Yet, more children have struggled and our counselors had to manage things on a different level than previous summers. These are not necessarily part of a counselor's skillset.

"Our summer camp staff are incredible young people, but they are not social workers. When we train our staff, we train them to spot red flags. They have the most important role: knowing their campers and spotting changes in behavior to be concerned about. It is their job to make sure their campers feel heard, and then immediately loop in the camp director or GNMH staff when they spot a red flag, so their campers can get the support they need and deserve. Summer camps can be a chance for children and teens to make friends, learn new skills, and spend time outdoors. Kids have missed out on a lot of these opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic," Mr. LaChance said.

According to Dr. Cynthia Whitaker, GNMH President & CEO, "We, along with the state's other community mental health centers, were provided funding from the Department of Education to support kids during camp last summer. The funding was received just before camps opened last summer, so we were not able to be as widespread in our assistance last summer as we had hoped. It did, however, give us time to develop a comprehensive training and have many conversations with camps before this camp season was underway to prepare for camp staff orientations. This summer, we approached many local camps offering to provide training for staff on the warning signs of mental illness, mental health challenges, and basic techniques on how to respond to, instead of potentially escalate, situations when children are experiencing a possible mental health challenge. We also offered to have mental health staff on-site at camps. Our agency also has mental health programs in the schools. Our staff often share stories of the positive impact of meeting kids where they are. We help at camp in a similar way, assisting when kids need it most in the moment. We can model to both kids and staff. We want kids to process challenges, but we need to allow them to process on their timeline." She also shared that funding for this program runs through 2023 and GNMH is already planning what next year's summer camp training and on-site assistance will entail. "We have always collaborated in less formal ways with the Y. Examples of this is our staff bringing clients to the Y and the Y allowing us to provide families with



memberships and camp experiences. This new partnership allows us to collaborate on a new level,” she said.



Barbara Merrill, LCMHC, Director of Child, Adolescent & Family Services at Greater Nashua Mental Health, has been the Y’s contact in developing staff training and planning on-site needs. “Our goal is to partner with many of our local community organizations. We were happy that the grant was rolled over into 2022 and we could connect with more organizations. Because of the effects of COVID-19, we were seeing how children were impacted by limited opportunities to develop social skills, family stressors, and loss and other trauma. This summer we were able to put clinical staff at [Camp](#)

[Sargent](#) four days a week, for six hours a day, to support staff and campers.”

“As a result of the pandemic we are seeing children with higher levels of anxiety and worry, more intense emotions, and difficulty navigating social situations. Most children have experienced a disruption in their education routine, and many have lost family members. Families may be stressed from losing income, experiencing a shift in jobs or now working from home, isolation from primary supports, and an increase in their own physical and mental health challenges. There have been a lot of fears that came with COVID, combined with political and social stressors happening as well. Even when we try to protect them from adult matters, kids pick up on the stress and tension. They are not able to understand or communicate what is going on, and that comes out in behaviors” Ms. Merrill shared.

“We are seeing a lot of this, noticeable especially with first and second grade age groups. These children had a disruption in important formative years for social development. Overall, children are dealing with regulating

emotions and not being able to cope with small challenges. They struggle with navigating basic social situations like how to take turns, share on the playground, and communicate frustrations with peers. When staff notice a child struggling, they are able to take the child aside and process what is going on. They can teach skills to help them play and work in a group successfully, how to join in a game or activity, or deal with the frustration of being tagged out of a kickball game. We are also working to help staff see behaviors through a different lens. If a child is being oppositional or having a 'meltdown,' we help staff to dig a bit deeper and learn why the child is overwhelmed. What is the underlying cause of this behavior? Instead of focusing on the behavior itself, we try to uncover the root of the problem.”

The goal of GNMH's training for the camp counselors is to give a broad overview about mental health and help them see how behaviors can be the way a child communicates a need. Our behaviors can be a symptom of something going on emotionally. According to Ms. Merrill, “camp staff are invited to be curious about what's going on in the young person's life and how to attend to these behaviors from more of a trauma-informed lens. This will hopefully allow the camper to be able to develop the skills they need to participate and enjoy their camp experience and continue developing the skills they need to navigate social situations and effective ways to communicate what they are feeling to get their needs met. We also share self-care tips with staff to help them know how to tend to what they need in order to be able to be present and supportive in their work in the camps.”

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