

YOUTH CREATING CHANGE FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026 IMPACT REPORT

Prevention, Early Intervention & Crisis Response
in Schools and Communities



OUR MISSION:

Youth Creating Change is a non-profit organization 501(c)(3) dedicated to placing young people's voices and creativity at the center of suicide prevention and mental health programming. Our mission is to educate young people about mental health, suicide prevention and other critical health and social justice issues through the creation of art and film projects; to facilitate healing and belonging through creative expression; and to support schools and communities through curriculums, trainings, and awareness activities in creating safe spaces where young people feel seen, heard, and supported in reaching out for help.

youthcreatingchange.org



YOUTH CREATING CHANGE



CREATING STORIES TO SAVE LIVES

Directing Change and the Hope & Justice Initiative are about helping young people work through personal stories of loss, creating stories of hope, and changing the stories of young people who are thinking about suicide.

By integrating mental health curriculum into film and art contests, our programming places youth at the center of the solution to create safe places where young people feel seen, heard, connected, and supported in reaching out for help. Youth learn about mental health, substance use, suicide prevention and other critical health and social justice topics through the lens of different cultures, apply what they learn to film and art projects, and share their work through events and campaigns to reduce disparities and promote well-being among their peers.



“ We spent a lot of time in my class going over the curriculum and talking about mental illness and suicide prevention as we prepared our submissions for the Directing Change Film Contest curriculum. I later learned that one student participant noticed warning signs in a friend and talked to a trusted adult. The student said that everything they had learned in their project came rushing back to them and they knew what to do when something didn’t feel right with her friend. The friend ended up being rushed to the hospital and received help. I can honestly say that Directing Change was the most important and valuable curriculum we studied all year.”

- Teacher



STATEWIDE IMPACT & LOCAL INTEGRATION



1,134

professionals representing schools, districts and community-based organizations were trained in suicide prevention, intervention, and crisis response after a suicide loss.

3,401

youth participated in the programs and 193 schools and organizations implemented the program.

1,435

films, art and other media projects about mental health, suicide prevention and other health and social justice issues were created by youth for youth.

58,413

youth, parents, and community members reached through awareness activities created by youth and educators through mini grant funding to 44 schools and organizations.

342

people were trained in suicide prevention and mental health messaging and applied training to judge films.

1,506

people attended events, including the award ceremony.

960,455

online views of youth-created films.



21,140

Youth Participants
since 2012

7,566

Number of films
submitted by
youth since 2012

960,455

Number of times
films have been
viewed online
since 2012

DIRECTING CHANGE FILM CONTEST

The Directing Change Film Contest trains young people ages 12 to 25 to combine creative expression with making a difference in their communities by creating stories about mental health, suicide prevention, substance use, and other topics that matter. Submission categories include: Suicide Prevention, Mental Health, Through the Lens of Culture, Boys, Young Men and Those Who Care About Them Mental Health, Substance Use Prevention, and Walk in our Shoes. Learning objectives embedded into these categories include understanding warning signs for suicide, healthy coping skills, and how to find help for themselves or a friend.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Without The Piece



Johansen High School
Viking Production Network
Stanislaus County
vimeo.com/1169676960

MENTAL HEALTH

You Are Not Alone



Joseph Gregori High School
Stanislaus County
vimeo.com/1169455422

SUBSTANCE USE

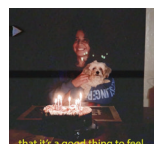
Devil's Advocate



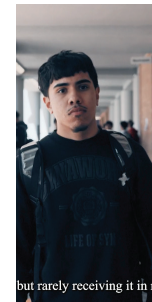
Johansen High School
Viking Production Network
Stanislaus County
vimeo.com/1169195072

THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURE

Echale Ganas



Heritage High School
Riverside County
vimeo.com/1169418573



BOYS, YOUNG MEN, AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM MEDIA CHALLENGE

The Suppressed

Johansen High School
Viking Production Network
Stanislaus County
vimeo.com/1169617219



WALK IN OUR SHOES - SUICIDE PREVENTION

Hidden

Hillcrest Middle School
Sonoma County
vimeo.com/1171860095

WALK IN OUR SHOES - MENTAL HEALTH

We Need Allies!



DEAR – Disabilities, Education,
Accessibility, and Resources
Santa Clara County
vimeo.com/1169473344

HOPE & JUSTICE

Choose to understand



JFK Middle College High
School-EVOLVE Program
Riverside County
vimeo.com/1169199472



CREATING SAFE PLACES FOR INCLUSION AND BELONGING

In partnership, ARCADIA & Youth Creating Change conducted a mixed-method randomized trial between 2022-2025, examining the impact of Directing Change on high school students in schools across California. Directing Change was found to produce meaningful improvements in help-seeking norms and adult connectedness. Among LGBTQ+ students, these gains were accompanied by increases in peer connectedness and supportive behaviors that facilitate peers' access to care. Overall, results show that a scalable, youth-centered approach can reinforce protective social processes for adolescents, with particularly notable benefits for LGBTQ+ youth.



HOPE AND JUSTICE

The Hope & Justice Art and Film Contest centers topics youth are grappling with in their day-to-day lives – including mental health, racism, economic uncertainty, climate change, and health disparities – with monthly prompts that ask them to express and process their feelings in a positive and impactful format. Youth are asked to share how they find hope, ways they cope with tough times and complex feelings, and the changes they hope to see in their communities.

WHEN YOUTH ARE AT THE CENTER OF THEIR OWN WELL-BEING, CHANGE CAN HAPPEN.

And when schools and community-based organizations have the training, tools, and procedures they need to promote mental health and facilitate healing, belonging, and help-seeking, then more young people feel seen, heard, and safe to reach out for help.



PROMOTING HEALTHY COPING, SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND THRIVING

The Mental Health Thrival Kit (available in English, Spanish, Korean and Tagalog) is a journal for youth that promotes positive coping skills and enhances social emotional wellness.

"I am currently working with a teen who is in foster care. This teen has experienced significant trauma in their life. In speaking with their assigned clinician, I asked if it was okay to provide the teen with the Mental Health Thrival Kit and the clinician gave his approval after reviewing its contents. He expressed that this kit offers teens the opportunity to truly identify emotions and express how those emotions make them feel. It has been an awesome tool and I hope to obtain additional kits in the near future." - **School Social Worker**

SUBSTANCE USE CATEGORY & VAPING AWARENESS CHALLENGE

For the 2025-26 program year, Youth Creating Change introduced a new Substance Use Prevention curriculum encouraging young people to explore the power of influence, spot the signs of an overdose and how to help a friend, and explore what healthy coping can look like. In partnership with County of Monterey Public Health we also launched the Truth Unfiltered Vaping Awareness Media Challenge.

"The videos made the topics feel more real because they were made by students and not just adults telling us what not to do." – Student, Rancho San Juan High School



COUNTY OF MONTEREY HEALTH DEPARTMENT



Air that Kills

Judah-Joseph G.

"I hand-painted a skeleton vaping to show that vaping kills, and the arm with the vape for a hand (connected by veins) is a visual representation of how hard it can be to quit vaping even if a person wants to. The background of red swirls shows the dread and confusion that vaping can cause."

BOYS, YOUNG MEN, AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM MENTAL HEALTH MEDIA CHALLENGE

Youth Creating Change was excited to partner with the California Children & Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) to create this special media challenge for youth of all genders from across California as part of the Governor's Executive Order to create pathways to help reconnect men and boys with the support, assistance, and help they need.



RECOGNIZING CREATIVITY, COURAGE, AND CHANGE



Youth Creating Change held its 14th annual Directing Change Film Contest Award Ceremony at the historic United Theater on Broadway in downtown Los Angeles on Thursday, May 21st. Featuring screenings of youth-created films, a youth musical performance, announcement of statewide contest winners, and a range of esteemed guest speakers and presenters, the event celebrated excellence in mental health storytelling, youth creativity, and the true power of young people to shape important narratives, support one another, and advance change. This year's ceremony was attended by nearly 800 middle and high school students (as well as parents, contest judges, mental health providers, entertainment

professionals, and others working to advance the wellbeing of young people across the state).

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Thank you to our signature sponsors:



A Body of My Own

Honorable Mention | Artist: Kody Herrejon-Rutte | Grade: 11
Tri-City (Los Angeles County) | Claremont High School
Advisor: Tamara Kirkpatrick

"This artwork is about how I'd like to sculpt the body I wish I had. Since my transition, I've experienced gender dysphoria because my body doesn't look like I think it should. However, I've come to be comfortable in my own body while also knowing there is hope of gaining muscles and getting top surgery."



Connect

Claremont High School, Grade: 10,
Tri-City (Los Angeles County)

"Men's mental health tends to be neglected in society because they feel that it isn't masculine or strong to reach out to people when they are struggling. They are less likely to have access to support when they need it because of the stigma around therapy and talking to friends about how they are feeling."

MINI GRANTS DRIVE YOUTH-LED AWARENESS

The Mini Grant Program is a packaged version of our suicide prevention, mental health, and substance use prevention curriculum delivered through our Annual Directing Change Film Contest. Schools and community groups apply for the program and, using our Learn Apply Share model, teams teach a lesson on suicide prevention, substance use, or mental health; create and submit PSAs to our annual contest; and host a youth-led awareness event that shares their projects with their peers and the broader community.

During the 2025-26 program year, we awarded and managed 44 mini grants. Here are a few spotlights!



INTEGRATING WELLNESS INTO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Notre Dame High School hosted a schoolwide film screening during its morning assembly, featuring mental health and substance use films created by its freshman seminar class for the Directing Change Program. Students and staff discussed the films and received green ribbons and sensory stickers as reminders of the conversation. During finals week, the group continued its focus on well-being with campus activities including yoga and visits with therapy cows, creating opportunities for students to connect, engage with mental health, and practice healthy stress-management strategies.



SHARING FILMS AND EXPERIENCES WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The City of Salinas Youth Council shared their films at the city’s annual State of the City Address, engaging the Mayor, City Council, and community members around local issues explored through their projects. Following the event, the films were shown on a continuous loop at a resource table, where community members could learn more about the projects and speak directly with Youth Council members about their work. This created an opportunity for young people to share their perspectives with local leaders and the broader community while fostering dialogue around issues that matter to youth.



CREATING ALLIES AND FOSTERING BELONGING

As part of Ally Week, the Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at Sage Creek High School shared their queer-focused suicide prevention and substance use films with fellow students.

“I learned a lot from making my video. It helped me understand the struggles of others and gain a deeper understanding on my classmates.”

– GSA member, Sage Creek

“Creating my video helped me gain a bit of perspective in how identity can affect mental health and the reasons behind why someone may struggle with their mental health.”

– GSA member, Sage Creek



YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: YOUTH LEADING CHANGE

Youth Creating Change empowers youth leaders ages 12 to 25 to guide our work while building their advocacy skills. This year, council members engaged in workshops covering safe messaging, marketing for good, and suicide prevention research. Applying what they learned, members designed individual advocacy projects to spark conversations in their community.

Gurneet Kaur developed a carousel graphic addressing mental health myths and realities, and Ashley Hein published a custom comic book examining how culture intersects with eating disorders and mental health. The council’s impact reached both state and national levels this year. Katelyn Gooneratne delivered a presentation on Digital Wellbeing to the California Department of Public Health Office of School Health. In addition, three members traveled to New York University for the Youth Suicide Research Consortium, where they received professional field-interview and data-collection training to implement in their own communities.

Youth Council members are creating powerful change in their schools and communities through creativity, advocacy, and leadership.

Yvette Paez said, *“The trip to NYU was great! The NYU team introduced the process and helped us practice and conduct interviews. Overall, I got to learn more about how important data is when it comes to Youth Suicide Prevention, how to conduct professional interviews, and I learned more about research being created! Also, after the conference we got to explore the city a bit, which was really great to see. Overall, I am working to bring back some ideas and plans being implemented in New York to my hometown.”*

PARTNER WITH US:

As a non-profit organization, we can't continue to do this work without youth, volunteers, partners and funders. Here are a few ways you can support our work:

"Thank you for these opportunities you give us as adults to see what is on young people's minds – and thank you for giving our kids a way to express themselves!"

- Judge

Adults, Educators, and Everyone:

Volunteer to judge youth-created films and art pieces or become a youth mentor. Elevate youth voices by sharing youth-created films and art on social media, on websites, in trainings, or in your next media buy.

Youth:

Join our advisory group. Participate in outreach events. Learn how to bring our program to a youth school, club, or organization. Create a film or piece of art to submit to one of our contests!

"Being involved showed me another perspective on suicide and mental health. I know how to speak to people or friends struggling with suicide. I can work together with my friends and other people to show people coping with mental issues that they aren't alone and that if they reach out and talk, they'll receive the support they need."

- Youth Participant

Learn more at YouthCreatingChange.org/partner-with-us/

