

# NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2023 / VOLUME 23



## Quarterly News & Updates

### Youth Success Story



When Calvin began with Tri County CMO (TCCMO) in 2021, he was struggling to regulate his emotions and manage his impulsivity. Calvin's family was feeling stressed, and their home environment was often filled with conflict.

### From the Desk of... James Parauda, CEO



Can the use of smart phones affect your child's mental health?

As a country, we are in the midst of a mental health crisis, and our youth are significantly impacted. In a recent Center for Disease Control (CDC) survey, one out of three teenagers reported having poor mental health. Nearly 20% of high school students have serious thoughts of suicide and 9% have attempted to take their life. In addition, about 31% of adolescents meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder by age 18. Depression rates almost doubled from 2009 to 2019.

There are many variables that contribute to a crisis of this nature. It is natural to think about how the effects of a pandemic would impact the post-pandemic world. There were traumatizing events that none of us had ever experienced in our lifetime during the pandemic. Many people were learning to deal with the death of loved ones without effectively having the ability to have closure. In addition, we had to adjust how we worked and attended school. We were thrown into a virtual world with little to no advance notice, and adolescents experienced forced withdrawal and lack of social support.

Another variable that potentially contributes to the rise in mental health needs is the use of electronic devices.

Calvin's parents would report concerns about bringing Calvin into the community because they weren't sure they could manage his behavior or trust that he would make safe choices. Calvin has always been energetic and athletic. Even when having emotional and behavioral challenges, he remained engaged in sports and would release his energy through physical activities.

Throughout his enrollment with TCCMO, Calvin worked hard and was supported by multiple providers and services. Calvin and his family were "wrapped in services" including family counseling, individual counseling, behavioral assistance, and special education services. With this support and hard work, Calvin has made great progress with managing his impulses and expressing himself appropriately. Calvin utilizes his strength of being athletic to channel his energy in this way. Calvin and his family are excited to be able to go on vacation again and enjoy quality time together as a family. Their recent trips have been to Miami, Costa Rica and Hawaii!

Calvin's care manager Katie is very proud of him and happy that the family is feeling more at ease. Calvin has recently graduated from CMO services and will continue to work on goals in out-patient counseling. Tri County CMO wishes Calvin and his family the best and lots more enjoyable traveling!



The reliance on a virtual world increased our use of electronic devices, in particular the smart phone. The smart phone has become commonplace over the past ten years. Forty-two percent of kids have a smart phone by age ten. Seventy-five percent of kids have one by the age of 12. The advanced features of the phone make it simple to access any information in just minutes. These features also make it easier for children to stay in touch with parents and to be entertained and connect with friends. You can visit social media sites and post pictures anytime you want. One of the effects of so many advanced features is a twenty-four-hour, seven day-a-week news/entertainment cycle. It's just wonderful what technological advancements have done for us – or is it?

Many parents are concerned about their child's mental health and are worried that their child is struggling with anxiety or depression. Research is new in studying the connection of phone usage to mental health disorders; however, the initial research is showing a potentially serious problem with smart phone addiction. Although not an official mental health diagnosis, there is evidence that supports the damage that can be done both physically and mentally to our children. Rates of depression and anxiety have shown to increase with higher use of social media sites. Heavier use of the phone also has the potential to disrupt sleep patterns and therefore has a negative effect on work, school or daily functioning.

How is cell phone addiction defined? There are some key elements to determine if you or a loved one may be falling victim to a cell phone addiction, such as:

- Inability to resist the impulse to use the smartphone.
- Feelings of anxiety, or irritability after a period of withdrawal from use.
- Using the smartphone for a period longer than intended.
- Unsuccessful attempts to reduce smartphone use.

The full criteria being considered are outlined in the article by Linda Pickel below. In addition to this article, here are links to several other articles on cell phone use and addiction. As a parent, educating yourself on the signs of cell phone addiction and being aware of potential solutions are important steps in assisting your child in maintaining positive frame of mind.

#### References:

- <https://therapybrands.com/blog/what-is-the-impact-of-smartphone-addiction-on-mentalhealth>
- <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/op-eds/america-is-facing-a-mental-health-crisis>
- <https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/topics/addiction/criteria-for-identification-of-smartphone-addiction/>
- <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/23/surgeon-general-issues-new-advisory-about-effects-social-media-use-has-youth-mental-health.html>

# Getting to Know TCCMO...

## The Resource Department

Tri County CMO's (TCCMO) Community Resource Department has significantly grown over the last year to meet the needs of the agency and families that are served. The department is led by Chief Development Officer Deja Amos.

- Deja has been with TCCMO for 13 years. In her current position, she enjoys planning events and interacting with individuals in the community and with provider agencies.
- Amanda MacDonald is the department's administrative support who has returned to TCCMO after she previously was a Care Manager for 5 years. Amanda assists Deja with developing relationships in the community.
- Rossana Amorim is TCCMO's Bilingual Community Resource Assistant. She has been with the agency for 4 years. Rossana focuses on TCCMO's communications, social media accounts, newsletter, website, and ResourceNet.



Deja Amos



Amanda MacDonald



Rossana Amorim

# Community Corner

## Hope For All Learners interview

Hope For All Learners, located in Lebanon, New Jersey, has been offering a variety of services and programs since 2021. Founder Zoe Petitt has a background in special education and elementary education. She felt the need to open an inclusive educational center for two reasons. Her primary motivator was her own daughter, who was struggling behaviorally in school, camps and after school programs. Zoe's daughter has ADHD and anxiety. Zoe knew that her daughter was capable of amazing things, but the family was struggling to find the right programs to meet her needs. Secondly, Zoe wanted to meet the needs of the community. Zoe offered a social skills group at a local park and received a huge response, which is when she realized that this was a tremendous need in the community.

Hope For All Learners currently offers more than 20 services and programs for toddlers to adults of all abilities. Their original programming and the heart of what they do are social skills groups, which are available for ages 3 through young adult. Their social skills groups include different themes, such as science, engineering, coding, crafting, and more!



- Nicole Russo and Marlin Hernandez are the Community Engagement Coordinators. Nicole has been with TCCMO for 16 years. She previously worked within the Operations Department as a Lead Care Manager and a Care Manager. She is also a member of the Race, Gender, and Equity Council at TCCMO. Marlin Hernandez, Bilingual Community Engagement Coordinator, is the newest member of the team. Marlin also recently completed an esthetician program. She is looking forward to collaborating with providers and increasing the community's knowledge about TCCMO.



Nicole Russo



Marlin Hernandez

- The department also has two interns, Emily Lam and Marliese Knill. Emily is a member of the social media team where she assists in expanding TCCMO's presence on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Emily is working towards becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and opening her own private practice once she completes her master's in social work (MSW) from Rutgers. Marliese is also working towards her MSW at Rutgers and recently began interning with the department. Marliese is also a Care Manager and has been with TCCMO for 3 years. Marliese has been assisting with auditing contracts with providers and planning community events.



Emily Lam



Marliese Knill

Other services and programs include:

- Extracurricular activities (skateboarding, art, dance, musical theatre and music classes)
- Support groups (girls' confidence, sibling/parents of special needs children, LGBTQ, children of divorced and single parents, anxiety/trauma)
- Tutoring for all ages and abilities
- Monthly respite events/parties
- Summer camps
- Executive functioning classes for students with ADHD

Hunterdon Happenings 2023 voted Hope For All Learners the best tutoring center and place to work in Hunterdon County. Over the past two years, Zoe and her team have been able to watch their educational center grow. Most importantly, they have been able to bring community members together and cultivate a space for attendees and staff to feel valued, supported, and successful. Hope For All Learners offers scholarships for those in need and they are hoping to increase their own fundraising goals to provide more scholarship opportunities in the future. Zoe feels grateful for the opportunities to connect with community organizations, such as Tri County CMO and the Greenwich Autism Alliance. Here at Tri County CMO, we can say we are also very grateful for the relationships that we have built with Hope For All Learners!

For more information: <https://www.hopeforalllearners.com/>



# PRIDE IN PARTNERSHIP

## Somerset County Office of Youth Services

This coming fall 2023, Tri County CMO will be partnering with Somerset County Youth Services in co-hosting a provider and community resource fair on 10/06/2023, from 5 pm to 8 pm, for parents/caregivers, youth, and community members. Attendees will have the opportunity to receive information from community providers serving Somerset County offering a variety of youth services stemming from mental health, substance abuse, recreational and developmental resources.

Somerset County Youth Services evaluates and coordinates initiatives of county and community agencies who work with vulnerable youth facing emotional or behavioral challenges. They design and implement programs and services to address the needs of our diverse communities. In addition, they provide training, continuing education and workshops to community professionals including schools, non-profits, and families on current topics related to youth and families. Through the Family Crisis Intervention Unit (FCIU), they offer 24-hour response, immediate intervention, assessment, and family counseling for youth and their families who are in crisis.



## TCCMO's Youth Art Gallery



There is no shortage of talent within Tri County CMO or the communities we serve. We recently began accepting artwork submissions from CMO-enrolled youth to display around our offices. Youth have submitted drawings, paintings, and photography and are also invited to send us photographs of their jewelry, pottery, or other designs. If it is art, we want to see it! If you are interested in sharing your pieces, please let your Care Manager know!



# Advocacy Corner

The TCCMO Advocacy Committee continues to meet with local legislators and follow legislation that is relevant to our families, staff and the services we provide. When there is something we feel that our community should know about, we post on social media and may even ask you to click a link to weigh in with your legislators as well. As part of this effort, we want to share the following significant legislative efforts with you.

On March 30, 2023, the New Jersey Assembly passed A5240, legislation that "requires DCF [Department of Children and Families] to publish and disseminate information on early childhood mental health to certain professionals." The bill crossed over to the Senate and is pending. If passed by the Senate and signed into law by Governor Murphy, the legislation would require social workers, teachers, and childcare providers who work with children 5 years of age and younger to receive information about early childhood mental health resources from the state. Resources would include information on the importance of early childhood mental health awareness, communicating mental health concerns to parents and guardians, and referring caregivers to state or community resources to evaluate children's mental healthcare needs. DCF would be in charge of determining which state programs the parents and guardians would be referred. Additionally, the legislation would allow the state to provide training to those social workers, teachers, and childcare workers receiving resources on early childhood mental health. This would set kids up for mental wellness early on.

Another major effort by mental health advocacy organizations includes the implementation of 9-8-8, the suicide prevention national hotline. While the lifeline is receiving substantially more calls and texts since its switch to a three-digit number, a recent poll for found **only 13% of individuals have heard of 988 and understand its purpose.** This reflects the need for a publicly funded campaign to educate our communities about this lifesaving resource.

There is currently a \$10 million budget resolution to fund such a campaign in New Jersey – Resolution 1007 in the Senate and Resolution 779 in the Assembly.

**Contact your legislators today** and ask them to sign on to these resolutions in the final budget, so that all our residents may know about this crucial option during a crisis.

[Click to website](#)



## Empowering Young Women in Warren County:

### *The Young Women Support Group*

The Young Women Support Group in Warren County was created out of a pressing need for a safe and judgment-free space where girls could freely express themselves. In the face of limited resources and few available providers, the group came to fruition through a collaborative brainstorming effort. Led by Morgan Smith, Amy Sutter, Erin Rehayn and other providers, the therapeutic sessions have been a resounding success, with an average of 4-6 girls attending each session from May 2nd to June 20th.

Focused on the overarching theme of relationships, the group delved into the various aspects of life that affected them, such as school, family, and friendships. Engaging discussions on healthy versus unhealthy relationships, effective communication, and the core elements of a healthy intimate relationship—consent, equality, trust, and safety—ignited a strong connection among the girls. Their active engagement and positive response highlighted the transformative impact of the support group.

Morgan, who grew up in Warren County and understands the struggles faced by local women, envisions the support group as an ongoing resource. Encouraged by the girls' desire for its continuation, Morgan aims to expand the group's reach, possibly establishing it in Branchburg and even introducing a teenage boy's group. Collaborating with other agencies, the Young Women Support Group has fostered personal growth and empowered these high school-aged girls to overcome their inhibitions and share their experiences in a supportive environment.

**EMPOWERED  
WOMEN  
EMPOWER  
WOMEN**

# Growing Greatness

Summer can be filled with nice weather and plenty of time spent with family and friends. As back to school season approaches, the exciting feelings of summer can start to fade away for many of the youth in our lives. Back to school season can evoke a variety of emotions; some youth experience excitement and happiness, while others feel worried or fear when they think about the upcoming school year. There are a variety of reasons as to why your youth may not want to return to school after the summer and the 3 Stands (Stand 1: Absolutely No, Stand 2: Absolutely Yes, Stand 3: Absolutely Clear) of the Nurtured Heart Approach can help you and your youth get back on track for a successful school year!

- Difficulties at home: we want to make sure we are ruling out outside factors before labeling them as school refusal and/or school phobia. Stressors, such as a sick family member, domestic abuse within the home, learning disabilities, medical symptoms, etc. can all play a role in a youth not wanting to attend school. We want to validate their emotions without energizing any negativity that may come from what they are feeling.
- Pressure: youth experience significant pressure to perform well in academics, as well as climbing the social ladder. A youth can feel pressure from their family, friends, teachers and themselves. Increase your youth's Inner Wealth by helping them see the greatness they have within themselves. Recognize them! They woke up as soon as their alarm clock went off? That shows that they are responsible and that being on time is important to them. They took a shower the night before school? That shows they are being proactive, and they want to be ready for their day! We want our youth to have Inner Wealth in order to handle the day-to-day pressures.

- Change in schedule: change can be difficult for both youth and adults. You have a more relaxed, unstructured summer and jumping back into the schedules of school and after-school activities can be hard to manage. Prepare your family for the change; practice having a more structured schedule a few weeks before the first day of school. This can include waking up earlier, having lunch at a specific time and going to bed earlier. Clarity and consistency are key!

Remember, this school year, we are going to say Absolutely No to energizing negativity, Absolutely Yes to energizing what is going right, and we are going to be Absolutely Clear with our directions and consequences.

Tri County CMO offers free individual and group *Nurtured Heart Approach* trainings. If you are interested in learning more about the approach please contact  
*Nicole Del Duca* at [ndelduca@tricountycmo.org](mailto:ndelduca@tricountycmo.org)



# SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

## The Back-to-School Scaries

BACK  
TO  
SCHOOL

The approach of a new school year can elicit a variety of emotions from everyone in the family – excitement, sadness, relief, and sometimes fear about what the new year will bring. As the summer draws to an end, some parents may notice that their children are more anxious than excited about returning to school. Some students may refuse to return as soon as school starts up again; others may start strong but find their absences becoming more frequent as the year progresses. Some students may show up to school but exhibit behaviors that seem avoidant, such as wandering the hallways or taking frequent and lengthy bathroom breaks to get out of the classroom. It is estimated that between 10-15% of students are “chronically absent,” or missing 10% of school days for the school year. This number is believed to have climbed even higher since the pandemic. Missing so many school days can lead to children falling behind academically and parents receiving that dreaded truancy letter from the district. What can families do when their students just will not go to school?

How you should approach it will depend on the reasoning behind the school avoidance. Does the youth have medical issues that make it challenging for them to participate consistently in school? In cases like these, districts should be able to provide accommodations through a 504 plan or an individualized health plan (IHP). This can help the school become more aware of barriers that may be making it difficult for students to participate comfortably in the school environment. The school can then work with your family to address these barriers and make appropriate accommodations to ensure your child's continued attendance and participation.

Sometimes it may seem that a child is simply being lazy or defiant, but could their avoidance be rooted in something deeper? These students can spend all day in their bedrooms on their cellphones, which may appear to the outside observer as if they are just slacking off. They may have no problem spending time with friends but retreat to their rooms as soon as the school bus arrives. Some students may express physical symptoms such as an upset stomach that magically vanishes once they are permitted to stay home for the day. As frustrating as it can be for parents to deal with, it is important to approach children from a place of curiosity and compassion. Many of the youth we work with at Tri County CMO who have challenges related to school avoidance also have mental health needs such as depression and/or anxiety. Unfortunately, anxiety can trap students in a vicious cycle; avoiding the thing that makes them anxious (school) can offer temporary relief but lead to greater feelings of anxiety over time.

Anxiety and depression can also lead to feelings of poor self-esteem, hopelessness, and other thoughts and feelings that reinforce beliefs that school is not a safe place for them to be.

Just as with students who have medical issues, you should get in touch with the school to let them know what you think is going on. Collaboration will be the key to moving forward in a good direction, as you may not always be aware of what the school can offer to support your child. Similarly, the school may not realize what is going on without input from the student's caregivers. Some schools can arrange for students to meet with a counselor or another trusted adult at the school prior to starting class. This allows the student to process their anxieties about school and start the day off on a good note. Some students may benefit from having access to a counselor throughout the day if they need it; others may benefit from scheduled breaks to step away from the classroom and reset by taking a walk. Students may not always need these accommodations, but it may be what helps them get through the door, which is the first step to returning to school.

As parents, you can support your child at home by celebrating the small steps. If you have a child who never leaves the house, encourage them to join you on a short walk or a trip to the store. If your child struggles to wake up in the morning, establish a consistent bedtime routine and ensure they are practicing good sleep habits by limiting electronic use. Limit or remove privileges that may make staying home a more attractive option than going to school. Let your child know that you are there to listen to whatever may be bothering them, but maintain the expectation that they will need to eventually return to school.

If your child is having a hard time with school attendance and you feel you've tried everything, don't hesitate to see what resources may be available through your insurance. You can also call PerformCare at 1-877-652-7624.





# NJ4S Initiative:

The New Jersey Department of Children (DCF) has launched a statewide, innovative hub-and-spoke model of services and resources intended to support youth mental wellness and promote prevention initiatives. The new model, the NJ Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) network has created 15 regional hubs which will be the organizational centers for prevention-oriented services (such as prevention of bullying, suicide, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse). To support the delivery of prevention services in schools, as well as other community-based locations, such as libraries, community centers, family success centers, to name a few “spokes”. The goal of the HUBS is to provide universal support to ALL NJ Schools (K-12) and will build relationships with local community resources to ensure the best outcomes for our youth and families. Each hub will be guided by a local advisory board, comprised of students, parents, elected and community leaders, business owners, faith leaders, and local social services organizations.

Center for Family Services was awarded the grant and will operate as the contracted service provider HUB for Vicinage 13 which covers Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties. Gregor Thomas, MSS, LCSW, Director of Programs: Youth and Rehabilitative Services is working diligently to hire prevention specialists and mental health clinicians to be ready to serve our youth for the 2023-2024 school year. The Center for Family Services HUB is located in Washington (Warren County) and a satellite location in Somerville (Somerset County).

Clinical services will be available to all public-school districts in the Tri-County area. Services will include programming in school buildings or in community locations that are accessible to the community. Services are on a three-tiered approach. Tier 1 includes district-wide programming, workshops, and evidence-based interventions to small group interventions. Tier 2 offers brief individualized early intervention services and mentoring. Tier 3 is assessment, brief individualized clinician interventions, and referrals for ongoing mental health counseling.

# MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS



Danette R. Robinson, BA, MSOL,  
MPA

DCF will work with each district to determine their point of contact and an online referral portal to submit requests for services. Gregor Thomas states that “Community partnerships are by far the most important piece of this grant and program. Along with the typical connections with service providers such as FSO, FSC, CMO, MRSS, we are really in need of community connections in the private sector such as gym owners, yoga studios, art studios, robotics clubs, township sports leagues, camps, YMCA’s, dojos, etc.” If you are interested in building community partnerships to serve our youth, please don’t hesitate to reach out to Gregor to collaborate and discuss your ideas on how you can help.



**Center for Family Services, Inc.**

SUPPORTING SOMERSET, HUNTERDON, & WARREN COUNTIES

General inquiries can be sent to  
**[NJ4SVicinage13@centerffs.org](mailto:NJ4SVicinage13@centerffs.org)**

# TCCMO & FSO COMMUNITY PICNIC



The rain and clouds were out in full force, but so were the TCCMO families! Despite the less than stellar weather conditions a good time was had by all! Whether it was marveling at "the great wall of donuts" or throwing bean bags in cornhole, families were present and absolutely having a great time! TCCMO staff were all decked out in their red "community picnic" t-shirts so that we could easily be recognized for assistance or questions. With the DJ spinning tunes under the gazebo and the children dancing, there was a party atmosphere that was easy to see and feel. TCCMO presents this annual family event to say thank you to our enrolled families and the providers that support us in *"Keeping families strong!"*



Face painting



Games



VolleyBall



Fun in the pool



Games



"The Great Wall  
of Donuts"

# UPCOMING events

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

**2023  
PROVIDER  
ORIENTATION  
FOR TRI COUNTY CMO**

Maintaining a successful partnership with TCCMO

ON TUESDAY,  
SEPTEMBER 12, 2023  
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM  
3040 ROUTE 22 WEST, SUITE 210  
BRANCHBURG, NJ 08876

BRUNCH WILL BE SERVED

 SCAN TO REGISTER



PRESENTED BY

  
DEJA AMOS  
CHIEF DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

  
NICOLE RUSSO  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
COORDINATOR

**SOMERSET COUNTY  
YOUTH RESOURCE  
FAIR**

October 6, 2023,  
from 5pm - 8pm

Please sign up to be a vendor at a free Community Resource Fair for parents, caregivers, youth, schools and providers held at Somerset County Vocational High School 14 Vogt Drive, P.O. Box 6350, Bridgewater, NJ 08807

 SCAN TO REGISTER

  
  


# Tri County CMO Board Members

Leslie Brusser - Board Chair  
Daphney Rene - Vice Chair  
David Yazujian - Secretary  
Pam Jacobs- Treasurer

Lynne Eaton  
Lesley Schwarzman  
Dan Kerr  
Erin Karl

Melissa Fowler  
Avril Okeke  
Sakina Ladha  
Shannon Twisler  
Anna Gray

## How to Get Referred to Tri County CMO

PerformCare can help a parent or guardian connect their child to Children's System of Care services. PerformCare staff are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide assessment and guidance to families facing challenges to their functioning and well-being.

***PerformCare / Contracted Systems Administrator (CSA)***

**1-877-652-7624**

<http://www.performcarenj.org/>

<http://www.performcarenj.org/families/index.aspx> (video guide)

## SCAN THE CODE TO FOLLOW US



Follow us on Social Media

