

# Community Voice

## How a Youth Panel Informs Health Equity Research

In 2021, community partners worked with URMC to identify five priority health issues and inequities facing Rochester and the Finger Lakes region—housing, mental health and substance use, violence, incarceration, and chronic disease. Soon after the Office of Health Equity Research (OHER) was formed to coordinate scientific studies of these and other health equity issues, the office recruited 15 high school students from across Monroe County to serve on OHER’s Youth Advisory Board (YAB).

### Starting Point: Many Child-Health Studies



*“We have a number of investigators focused on pediatric populations across the spectrum—from vaping and smoking all the way to cancer and sickle cell disease,” explained Edith M. Williams, PhD, MS, director,*

*Center for Community Health & Prevention and founding director of OHER. “Serving on the Youth Advisory Board really empowers our members, who feel like they’re leading an effort. Their input is important and valued, and in many cases it instills an interest in science.”*

### Answering the Community’s Call

“Youth want their voices to be heard and they are willing to share, so we have to welcome them to the table — especially since we are doing research that could affect them,” said Arielle Sheftall, PhD, associate professor for the URMC Department of Psychiatry and co-director of the Youth Advisory Board.



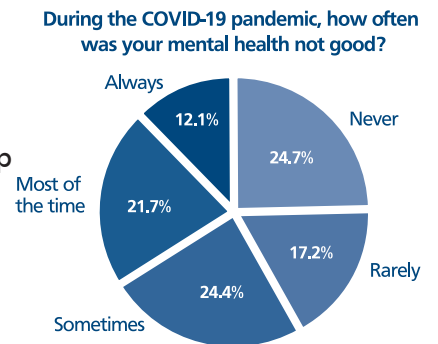
“Being on the Youth Advisory Board is an amazing opportunity,” said Matthew Mammen, a high school freshman and advisory board member, who said science and medicine are both very interesting fields. “It gives me the tools to think about inclusivity and the barriers that people face, and the information to try to solve these problems in the future.”

### Exploring Mental Health & Wellness

Sheftall reports that attendance at Youth Advisory Board quarterly meetings has been near 100% —

no small feat considering the many activities and responsibilities most high school students juggle. “We’re grateful for their commitment to our work,” she said.

Among the Youth Advisory Board’s top priorities for 2024 is to explore youth mental health and wellness, especially as teens and young adults grapple with the lingering effects



Source: Monroe County Dept of Public Health Youth Risk Behavior Survey; Analysis by Coordinated Care Services, Inc. (CCSI)

of the pandemic. It’s a timely and relevant topic, with new mental health centers and telehealth services now available for RCDSD students and public awareness about youth mental health on the rise. URMC Health Equity Investigators will present research findings to the Youth Advisory Board this summer to get feedback from young people in our region on this important topic.

### Spotlight: Preventing Teen Violence and Building an Accessible Playground

In December 2023, OHER invited the Teen Anti-Violence Alliance (TAVA) to share their progress towards engaging youth in gun violence prevention. According to TAVA’s website, the group “provides students with a greater understanding of structural racism, disparities and inequities, and their effects on community health and violence.”

Youth Advisory Board members were highly engaged in this session and at least one member joined TAVA after learning about their work.

At the March 2024 board meeting, the group focused on engaging youth and families in exercise and physical activity. After watching a lecture on promoting physical fitness opportunities for children of all abilities, board



members shared ideas for how to make exercise more inclusive and equitable.

Board members agreed that families and kids will engage in more exercise when the equipment is equitable. Board member Giana Bisnett has put this theory into practice over the past several years, advocating for wheelchair accessible playgrounds in the Rochester area, including at her former school, Pine Brook Elementary in Greece. Attendees were inspired by her story, especially when she shared the thought process behind making the playground a more inclusive experience.



“That was a really great conversation,” said Dr. Sheftall. “The Youth Advisory Board is changing the way we think about our research and how we engage people from all backgrounds. It reminds us to include them in the process and not just do what we think is best.”

## What’s Next: Celebrating Graduates and Recruiting New Members

The next board meeting in June will include a cookout to thank all Youth Advisory Board members and

celebrate four who are graduating. “We’ll have great food, games, and other activities, including a ‘Conversation Café’ where youth can talk to researchers in a casual, interactive format,” said Dr. Williams. Board members will have the opportunity to ask researchers about their career paths, what they are currently researching, and anything else they want to know about careers in science and medicine.

OHER is currently recruiting four new Youth Advisory Board members to replace those who are graduating. Members receive \$50 for each one-hour meeting they attend (at least one per quarter). To learn more, [click here](#).

The Youth Advisory Board is available to meet with URMIC investigators to inform health equity research. If you are interested in consulting with the board, please fill out our online [Researcher Inquiry form](#) or contact [heya@urmc.rochester.edu](mailto:heya@urmc.rochester.edu).

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## About Health Equity Updates

Faculty and staff members across URMIC are working to reduce health inequities through research, education, and improved access to care. These updates provide snapshots of our work with community partners toward the ultimate goal of equal life expectancy for all.