

NCDHHS & HBCU Mental Health Summit - Peeling Back the Layers on Minority Behavioral Health

Secretary Kinsley Remarks

2.23.22

- Good afternoon. Thank you so much for joining us here today. The opportunity to hear directly from North Carolinians at events like these is among some of the most important work we do.
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities are an integral part of not only the work we do at DHHS; but, I also truly believe, they are integral to the progress we make as a nation.
- I am proud to serve a state that is home to the second largest concentration of HBCUs. With 10 academic institutions across the state, our opportunities are many. And, perhaps, never more needed than they are today.
- As you all know, the pandemic has brought with it unprecedented stressors for all of us, our state's young people in particular.
- The time spent at an institution of higher education can be freeing, inspiring, and full of growth. But transitional-aged youth who make up the bulk of our college students also face many challenges with newly found independence, transition of life phases, and a greater sense of responsibility for one's own life. This was true before the COVID-19 pandemic, and without normal coping mechanisms, such as social activity and regular peer interaction, these stressors have only increased over the past two years.
- North Carolinians across our state are struggling with increases in mental health conditions and substance use disorders; the system to serve these individuals is strained and stretched. Action is needed now.
- To focus our attention and resources, I have renewed my Department's commitment to addressing these issues by making Behavioral Health and Resilience one our Department's top three priorities.
- I see HBCUs, and all of you, as central to advancing this priority. We know that students have experienced greater rates of anxiety and depression. And beyond that, African Americans are more likely to experience these symptoms than their white counterparts.
- A 2020 survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows 15% of Black, non-Hispanic respondents seriously considered suicide in the

past 30 days — compared to 8% of Whites and just under 11% of all respondents.

- The pandemic has undoubtedly shined a light on the disparities in our healthcare system. However, we are committed to ensuring that **all** of North Carolina’s young people have the ability to thrive. We do not want lack of access to care or lack of information to ever be the reason someone does not realize their potential.
- As we work to embed equity in every aspect of our work, we are guided by our Department’s core value of “Belonging”, which commits us to intentionally promoting an inclusive, equitable workplace that reflects the communities we serve, where everyone feels a sense of belonging and our diverse backgrounds and experiences are valued and recognized as strengths.
- We took several steps during the pandemic to ensure our behavioral health care system stayed strong and accessible, particularly to traditionally underserved communities.
- We stood up the Historically Marginalized Populations workgroup to ensure diverse voices are heard and informing policy decisions – particularly during critical points through the pandemic.
- The Department has also established a regular and routine connection with our behavioral health minority providers, established a new Chief Health Equity Officer role, and expanded flexibilities to provide telehealth and open up access. We need to build on and expand those efforts.
- Hearing directly from students and administrators about what works and what does not work will be invaluable to us in our planning and policy-making efforts. We are relying on you for help.
- We are committed to our existing partnership with HBCUs and are excited about the work done through our partnership with the HBCU Network to address substance misuse and enhance the leadership path for minority students to join the behavioral health workforce.
- During this Black History Month, I am so pleased we at the Department have the opportunity to gather with all of you today, where we can share, problem-solve, and listen.
- This is a tremendous chance to learn from the deep talent at our HBCUs, gain from your insight, and chart a path forward together.

- I know the task among us is great; but I also know that with our collective action and focus, we can truly change the lives of millions of North Carolinians. Thank you.