

Choose Mental Health Announces Winners of 2nd Annual SMILE Award Program

Recognizing an individual, organization and young professional driving real change in the fight for youth mental health.

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EINPresswire.com/ -- Choose Mental Health, the national voice for children's mental health, today announced the "Sustained Mental Health Initiatives and Lifetime of Excellence" (SMILE) Award recipients. This award celebrates organizations, individuals and young professionals across the United States that are actively working to address the ongoing youth mental health crisis.

Individual Winner

[Vaquisha Black](#) received the individual SMILE Award for her outstanding contributions to youth mental health advocacy. A beacon of hope, Black's tireless work and expertise shines through her commitment to foster supportive environments for young people. Through her roles in behavioral health counseling and her involvement with organizations like NAMI Chicago and Young Invincibles, she has emerged as a leading voice in mental health advocacy. Her efforts include promoting initiatives like the Healthy Minds Checklist and advocating for expanded access to mental health visits under the Affordable Care Act.

"I'm inspired to advocate for youth mental health because adolescence is a critical and formative time. Young people are particularly susceptible to mental health challenges," said Black. "This stage of life is pivotal in shaping the adults that they will become, and providing the right support during these years is essential to helping young people grow into well-rounded, resilient individuals which is what drives me daily."



Young Professional Winner

[Clementina Jose](#) received the SMILE Award for young professionals for her commitment to youth mental health, particularly in underserved communities. At 22 years old, Jose has achieved significant milestones, including earning her social work license and overseeing 11 programs across New York City as a social work supervisor. Her holistic approach focuses on providing essential mental health support to students, fostering safe spaces in schools and afterschool programs, and working with organizations to bring critical resources to underserved areas.

“As a young Black woman, I saw firsthand how many people in my community felt disconnected from mental health support, believing it wasn't something meant for them. This realization ignited my passion for advocating for youth mental health,” said Jose. “I wanted to bridge that gap, ensuring that every child—especially those from marginalized communities—knew they were not only deserving of mental health services but that such support was their right. I believe every young person should have access to the tools, resources, and care they need to thrive, and I'm committed to making that a reality for future generations.”

Organization Winner

The [Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design \(MIAD\)](#) received the organization SMILE Award for its commitment to promoting mental health and well-being among its students. As a nonprofit institution, MIAD has developed a comprehensive support system that addresses the unique mental, physical and emotional challenges faced by its student body. Through its Student Services Center and Equity + Inclusion Center, MIAD provides non-clinical mental health support to help students adjust to college life, manage stress and build coping skills, as well as fostering a safe space for all. It hosts an annual wellness fair, partnering with local organizations like Marquette University Counseling Center, NAMI of Southeast Wisconsin and the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center to provide students with vital mental health resources.

This work is made possible by the leadership from MIAD staff including, Mónica Lloyd, Dean of Students; Holly Vanderbusch, Associate Dean of Students; and rhi anderson-martinez, Executive Director of Equity & Inclusion.

“At MIAD, we create an environment where students feel supported not just academically, but also mentally and emotionally. We hold space where all are welcome, and we look to our values of inclusion, community, kindness and courage to further dialog and encourage the success of our students as individuals,” said Stacey Steinberg, Executive Director of Marketing & Communication at MIAD. “It is an honor to receive the SMILE Award in recognition of our efforts to champion student wellness.”

“We're proud to honor these outstanding champions of youth mental health. This year's winners have made a profound impact through their advocacy and unwavering commitment to

supporting young people as they navigate mental health challenges,” said Dan Pontius, President of Choose Mental Health. “Their efforts not only inspire us but remind us of the urgent need to continue investing in and expanding mental health resources across the country.”

Visit <https://www.choosementalhealth.org/smileaward/> for more information about the SMILE Award program.

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