Statement Release for World Mental Health Day

In an age where we are constantly connected through our screens, it has become easier than ever to stay updated on the lives of others. Yet despite this unprecedented connectivity, many continue to struggle with loneliness, isolation, and mental health challenges that often go unnoticed. The World Health Organization estimates that around **1 in 6 people globally experience loneliness, with young people reporting some of the highest rates** [1]. Being connected online, after all, does not always mean feeling connected in meaningful ways. This digital world can just as easily overwhelm as it connects, where repeated exposure to distressing events and graphic online cycles quietly heightens fear and anxiety among the youth [2]. Additionally, digital spaces can also expose young people to cyberbullying, harmful content, and other pressures that can further affect their mental health. The relationship between technology and mental health continuously becomes complex, with both benefits and risks.

Mental health awareness, therefore, cannot simply end with acknowledging that these struggles exist. There are things that a screen cannot show: the person who has quietly stopped reaching out, the friend who insists they are fine, or the classmate carrying burdens they do not know how to put into words. **Meaningful connection means creating spaces where people feel seen, heard, and supported**—not only when they are already in crisis, but long before they reach that point.

This disconnect is something we acutely feel across the country. For instance, the growing demand for mental health support is already visible in our own crisis services. In September 2026, the National Center for Mental Health reported that calls to its 24/7 crisis hotline had **quadrupled from pre-pandemic levels**, while suicide-related calls had increased from 10% to 35% of all calls [2]. NCMH also noted that callers were getting younger. These figures reflect a growing demand for support, but they should not be interpreted as a measure of how many people in the country experience mental health difficulties. More importantly, they remind us that people are already reaching out, and that our systems must be ready to receive them.

Furthermore, **recent policies have begun creating pathways toward stronger school-based mental health services**. Under Republic Act No. 12080, the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act, the Civil Service Commission approved in June 2026 the qualification standards for newly created positions including Schools Division Counselors, School Counselors, and School Counselor Associates in public basic education institutions [3]. These developments are incredibly important steps toward making support more accessible, but it is essential that policy must ultimately translate into services that students can actually reach. While these recent policies attempt to open doors

for counselor positions, our frontline tells a different story. **The shortage of mental health professionals is not an accident**: the Department of Health itself points to uncompetitive pay and poor compensation as the primary drivers keeping specialists out of public service [4]. In a nation of over 110 million people, **we are left with 548 psychiatrists and 133 psychologists** in the public health system, forcing hundreds of thousands to compete for scarce practitioners while public hospitals waitlists stretch for months [4]. Thus, even as crisis calls to national helplines surge into the tens of thousands, funding for operating expenses faces budget cuts, proving that recognizing mental health as a public concern remains an empty promise without government backing.

As public health advocates emphasize, our response must not begin only after a tragedy strikes; people should not have to wait until they are in an acute crisis before they can find someone to turn to. Last 2025, a joint call from WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the UN Youth Office urged governments to invest in prevention and early intervention and to connect community-based, school-based, and digital services through a whole-of-society approach [5]. This means recognizing that young people's mental health requires action across schools, healthcare systems, communities, families, and digital spaces. In addition, it called for young people to have a meaningful role in shaping the policies and services intended for them.

And this is where our communities matter. We can ask someone how they are doing and actually take the time to listen to the answer. We can make room for conversations that are difficult, be mindful of what people quietly carry, and encourage one another to seek help without shame. Small and quiet gestures, but they carry profound meaning when anchored in a community where no one has to carry their struggles alone. Yet compassion alone should never have to make up for the absence of accessible care. Mental health support must be something people can actually reach, whether they are in our classrooms, our workplaces, our homes, or our communities. Awareness must push us to look not only at how we treat one another, but also at whether the systems around us are truly built to sustain us. **No individual should have to carry the responsibility of keeping themselves or someone else afloat when the support they need remains inaccessible.**

Standing together as a community, we call on our institutions and leaders to match empathy with action. We urge the government and relevant agencies to ensure that mental health services are adequately staffed, funded, and accessible, particularly in public institutions where many young people rely on them. We call on the Department of Education, the Commission on Higher Education, and university administrations to fully implement and support mental health policies; expedite the deployment of qualified counselors and mental health professionals; institutionalize proactive psychological first aid and

early intervention; establish adequately funded and accessible Care Centers; and foster humane academic policies that protect the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. We further call for young people to be meaningfully involved in shaping the mental health policies and services intended for them—not merely as recipients of care, but as partners in building it.

This World Mental Health Day, as we observe Mental Health Month, let us remember that being connected is not simply about being reachable on social media. It is about making sure that when someone finally gathers the courage to reach out, **there is someone and somewhere they can safely turn to. True collective healing only begins when communal care is matched with systemic accountability.** We cannot build mentally healthy communities by asking individuals to simply become more resilient while leaving the systems around them unchanged. Beyond today, let us continue to build communities where people feel seen beyond their screens, heard beyond their words, and supported long before asking for help becomes a desperate last resort.

REFERENCES

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