



## **Youth Advocacy Summit allows teens to discuss mental health, present potential solutions**

More than 30 teens gathered on November 6 for a Youth Advocacy Summit designed to encourage discussion around the topic of teen mental health. The event was hosted by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation in collaboration with Allegheny County DHS, Beaver County Youth Ambassadors Program, Consumer Health Coalition, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) Center for Loving Kindness and Civic Engagement, and the Healthcare Council of Western PA, and with support from The Staunton Farm Foundation and The Fine Foundation. Several staff members from the DHS Youth Support Partner (YSP) unit played a key role in the overall planning, coordination, recruitment and support of the event.

The Youth Advocacy Summit was attended by teens and adults from various school districts and organizations in Allegheny and Beaver Counties, including participants of the DHS-sponsored Stand Together program. Summit attendees began the day-long event with an empowering speech by Rabbi Ron Symons of the JCC Center for Loving Kindness and Civic Engagement. Rabbi Symons spoke about working together and finding hope, courage and strength when things may seem hopeless. Attendees were also treated to performances by The Krunk Movement and Dreams of Hope.

Between performances, participants broke into small groups to discuss gaps in care in four areas: school, primary and behavioral health care, peer support and crisis response. Youth participants also had an opportunity to address their concerns, and offer ideas for potential solutions, with a panel of influential decision-makers that included Marc Cherna, DHS director; Dara Ware Allen, principal of City Charter High School; Shannon Fagan, director of the Bureau of Children's Behavioral Health Services at the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS); Dan Miller, Pennsylvania state Representative; and Erika Strassburger, Pittsburgh city councilwoman.

"It was exciting to collaborate and see the evolution of this wonderful event," said Amanda Hirsh, director of the YSP unit. "The day offered youth the opportunity to direct activities, share their experience and share their personal perspectives on teen mental health issues."

Towan Hall, a youth voice specialist in the YSP unit who participated in the planning of the event, added, "The Youth Advocacy Summit provided an opportunity for teens to lead the discussion and let us know what matters to them and what they need most. Their message and the information gained during the event will help the collective 'us' more effectively support issues around teen mental health."