

For Immediate Release:

December 9, 2022

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Mental Health is Health . . . Period

Join the Conversation by Talking About Mental Health Concerns

Lewiston, Maine – Lewiston community members talked and truly listened to each other at the December 8 **Be Kind To Your Mind Community Conversation About Mental Health Awareness** held at Connors Elementary (photos attached). The point that mental health is health period—just like a cold, broken leg, or another physical condition was repeatedly stressed.

The exchange was honest and powerful, and Mayor Carl L. Sheline praised the hosting Lewiston Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) for being in tune with the community’s needs. Councilor Linda Scott, City Council liaison to the youth council, also praised LYAC for helping people feel comfortable to open up and share.

“Mental health is a topic we shouldn’t shy away from. By courageously talking about it, we can start to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and, even better, focus on getting the help and resources to those who need it the most within our community. I am incredibly proud of our Lewiston youth for taking the initiative to have this conversation. They are in touch with our community needs, and we should follow their example by bravely engaging in discussions like this with our families, friends, and neighbors. I am inspired by their advocacy work, as it demonstrates the impact that can occur when communication is at the forefront,” said Mayor Carl L. Sheline.

Mayor Sheline also led a moment of silence in honor of the recent passing of former youth council member Omar Osman.

A panel of professionals fielded audience questions from elected officials, parents, youth, and teachers. On site were: Colin O’Neill, Tri-County Mental Health Services Chief Clinical Officer; Amran Osman, Generational Noor Executive Director and Founder; Megan Parks, Licensed Social Worker/Substance Use Counselor/Clinical Supervisor; Lisa Escobar, Lewiston Public Schools Substance Use Coordinator/Licensed Counselor; and Lewiston Police Detective Joe Philippon.

Questions were thought provoking to include, “Is it OK for teen boys to cry; what do you do if your parents or guardians are struggling with mental health; and what if your feelings are dismissed by others?”

Other topics included the importance of validating people's feelings, understanding emotional triggers, knowing you aren't crazy if you are struggling, looking at root causes, de-stigmatizing mental health challenges through education, knowing it's ok to express yourself if you are sad, understanding that mental health isn't the absence of stress and anxiety but having the ability to manage it, increasing mental health cultural competency, recognizing that those with struggles aren't second tier individuals, enhancing communication, and securing more mental health resources and funding.

Mental health reflective artwork were on display from Generational Noor and Sadrii Mohamed, and mental health resources were also available, to include LYAC's QR Code that provides a listing of places to contact for assistance.

In addition, post-its were available for people to express how they were feeling upon arrival and how they were feeling after the community conversation. Arrival post-its included "feel like giving up" and "overwhelmed." Departing post-its were encouraging and included comments like, "there's hope because people are listening" and "clarity and hope in our youth."

Attendees mingled and further discussed mental health with youth council members and fellow audience members after wrap-up. Kaydence Gibson, LYAC member, looked around and said, "I'm really proud of us." More on the Lewiston Youth Advisory Council and resources from the event can be found at www.lewistonmaine.gov/lyac

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Lewiston, Maine, is a growing city full of possibility. Vibrant and culturally diverse with a strong sense of community, Lewiston delivers affordable, accessible and abundant opportunity. Urban to suburban, downtown to rural, Lewiston is home to families and entrepreneurs from around the world, generations of locals, and new faces. With its convenient location, desirable resources and services, and affordability, Lewiston is where legacies continue to be made.

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