

# **Adapting and Innovating to Promote Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Young People of Color: COVID-19 and Beyond**

**A Report from The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force**

**Executive Summary**

**Fall 2020**



## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast deeply-ingrained inequities in American society into stark view. Just as pre-existing health conditions have made individuals more vulnerable to COVID-19, structural racism has made certain communities more vulnerable to the disease. For example, Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Latino populations are at least three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as their white neighbors.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting people of color economically and psychologically as well.<sup>2</sup> In the second quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate among Black and Latino people was more than 16%, compared to 12% for whites. With regard to psychological impacts, more than 30% of Asian-American adults say they have experienced interpersonal racism since the pandemic began,<sup>3</sup> and Blacks and Latinos report higher rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms as a result of the pandemic than do whites.<sup>4</sup> The multiple and intersecting marginalized identities carried by many students of color — such as socioeconomic, immigration and ability status; sexual orientation; gender identity; and cultural background — can amplify these disparities and trauma-related symptoms.



Further exacerbating an already extremely difficult situation, George Floyd's death and the nationwide protests and conversations about systemic bias and racism it sparked have rapidly escalated the stressors already burdening communities of color.

The pandemic, the economic crisis, and the nation's racial reckoning also have created new challenges for students in higher education and those entering the workforce. In spring 2020, campuses shut down abruptly due to public health concerns, and in fall 2020, students face continuing uncertainty about their ongoing learning and living conditions. With the sudden shift to distance learning, students are losing not only in-person contact with faculty, staff, and peers, but also



on-campus housing, food, support services, and social communities. Furthermore, internships and jobs are disappearing. On top of all of this turmoil, students are now having to process what today's racial awakening means for them. Many of these students are directly or indirectly involved in demonstrations, adding a layer of mental and emotional stress. Despite the universal nature of these disruptions to students' lives, students of color, who comprise approximately 45% of college undergraduates,<sup>5</sup> are bearing the weight of these challenges most acutely.

## **The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force**

The Steve Fund, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the mental and emotional well-being of students of color, created a Crisis Response Task Force to develop recommendations for mitigating the mental health risks for these students caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic and social upheaval that has followed. Its 21 members include students; diverse mental health experts; senior executives from corporations, colleges and universities; and representatives from the philanthropic, nonprofit, and policy sectors (see Appendix).

The Task Force conducted an extensive literature review, engaged in expert consultations, and after careful deliberations, arrived at consensus on the recommendations put forth herein. The Task Force's work represents the first time leaders from across sectors have come together to consider the mental health status and needs of young Americans of color, a population that is the driving force of our nation's future economic and social well-being.

Students of color face significant and consequential obstacles on their path from adolescence to adulthood — in their transition to higher education, in their college experience, and in their transition into the workforce. It is against this backdrop of needs, and the risks of failing to address them, that the Task Force has developed recommendations to inform and prompt effective actions, investments, and innovations promoting the well-being of young people of color in higher education and in their transition to the workforce. The Task Force has focused its recommendations on these two periods because they both play a critical role in determining students' life trajectories. However, we recognize that it will take a sustained effort to address the mental health needs of young people of color, one that incorporates the expertise of nonprofit organizations, and benefits from investments by the philanthropic and public sectors to fill gaps and support best practices. These recommendations are intended to catalyze meaningful conversation and action.

# The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force Recommendations

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## Higher Education Recommendations

### Institutions of Higher Education should:

#### **1. Build Trust Through Racial Trauma-Informed Leadership**

by prioritizing listening, demonstrating empathy towards injustices and inequalities experienced by students of color, and creating and adapting resources that respond to their mental health needs.

#### **2. Take a Collaborative Approach to Promote Mental Health for Students of Color**

by having offices such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Student Affairs partner with counseling centers to enhance capacity; provide customized outreach to students of color; and bolster equity, inclusion, and belonging.

#### **3. Engage Faculty and Staff to Support Mental Health of Students of Color**

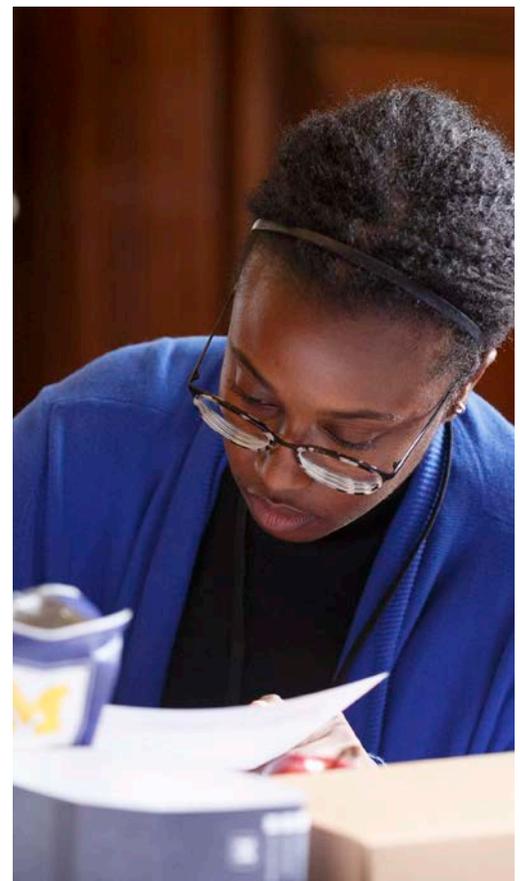
by incorporating practices to promote inclusion and belonging in both virtual and in-person classrooms and across the campus, and equipping faculty and staff with the skills to identify signs of mental distress.

#### **4. Treat Student Mental Health as a Priority Area for Investment**

that must be strengthened for students of color even in these times of great financial strain on higher education so that high-quality virtual and in-person mental health services are easily accessible to these students.

#### **5. Leverage Community and External Stakeholders to Promote Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Students of Color**

by partnering with local communities, nonprofits, employers, and faith-based entities to generate creative strategies and augment resources.



## Workforce Recommendations

### Employers should:

#### **1. Focus on Students' Transitions from Higher Education to the Workplace**

by convening conversations between higher education and workforce leaders to ideate programming and solutions; developing strategies to smooth the transfer of mental health supports, knowledge, and resources from college to work settings; and investing in employees' development of social capital through internships and mentorships.



#### **2. Help Young Employees of Color Navigate the Workplace**

by integrating mental health and emotional well-being into all aspects of workplace operations; retaining diverse, culturally competent mental health experts to equip leaders and managers to serve as mentors and allies; and paying special attention to workplace challenges commonly affecting employees of color.

#### **3. Conduct a Workplace Culture and Practices Assessment with a 2020 Lens**

by carefully evaluating whether the values employers espouse in the workplace, whether virtually or in person, are the same ones experienced by all employees, particularly new employees of color.

#### **4. Promote Understanding of Racial Trauma, Mental Health, and Emotional Well-Being in the Workplace**

by recognizing the traumatic experiences of Black and Brown communities and the impact of that trauma on employees of color, and providing mental health and peer support resources that are accessible to these employees.

#### **5. Develop Allies, Advocacy, and Mobility**

by leveraging mental health experts and insights to support employees of color at early career stages.



## Call to Action

The disparate impact of the pandemic and ongoing racial and economic injustice makes it critical that strategic and decisive action be taken to support the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. Higher education and workforce leaders should make this issue a top priority. While clearly a moral and social imperative, it is also an economic one, given our nation’s rapidly changing demographics and increasing dependence on contributions from people of color.

The Task Force’s recommendations are designed to stimulate thoughtful discussion and measures to address the concerns and opportunities described herein. The Task Force hopes that our cross-sector collaboration model will help spur the creation of a broader “community of action”<sup>6</sup> engaging all key stakeholders to address the mental health needs magnified by our current crises. Time is truly of the essence. The recommendations in this report provide opportune pathways to action, and we urge you to join us.

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### Citations

1 “The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.,” *APM Research Lab*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race#age>

2 Jeff Green and Donald Moore, “Covid-19 Is Hurting Black Americans More in Almost Every Way,” *Bloomberg*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-14/covid-19-is-hurting-black-americans-more-in-almost-every-way>

3 Neil G. Ruiz, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Christine Tamir, “Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak,” *Pew Research Center*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

4 CDC, MMWR, Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24 – 30, 2020, August 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

5 Sarah Brown, “Nearly Half of Undergraduates Are Students of Color. But Black Students Lag Behind,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/nearly-half-of-undergraduates-are-students-of-color-but-black-students-lag-behind/>

6 2020 Summer Executive Workshop-Black Economic Forum, McKinsey & Company Presentation

# Appendix



## Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force Membership Roster

**Evan Rose**, President, Board of Directors, The Steve Fund

**Sandra E. Timmons**, Interim Executive Director, The Steve Fund

**Farha Abbasi, MD**, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Michigan State University

**Linda Akutagawa**, President & CEO, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP)

**Byron D. Clift Breland, Ph.D.**, Chancellor, San Jose - Evergreen Community College District (SJECCD)

**Ronald L. Copeland, MD, F.A.C.S.**, Senior Vice President & Chief Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Officer, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan and Hospitals

**Lorelle L. Espinosa, Ph.D.**, Program Director, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

**Forest T. Harper, Jr.**, President and Chief Executive Officer, INROADS

**Damien Hooper-Campbell**, Chief Diversity Officer, Zoom Video Communications, Inc.

**Ryan Houston-Dial**, College Junior, The University of Texas at San Antonio

**Paula A. Johnson, MD, MPH**, President, Wellesley College

**Marvin Krislov, MA, JD**, President, PACE University

**Meeta Kumar, Ph.D.**, Director of Student Counseling Service, University of Chicago

**Carlota Ocampo, Ph.D.**, Provost, Trinity Washington University

**Wil Del Pilar, Ph.D.**, Vice President for Higher Education, The Education Trust

**Annelle Primm, MD, MPH**, Senior Medical Director, The Steve Fund

**David Rivera, Ph.D.**, Associate Professor, Queens College, CUNY

**Mary Hasbah Roessel, MD**, Psychiatrist, Santa Fe, New Mexico

**Joan Steinberg**, President, Morgan Stanley Foundation

**Fidel Vargas**, President & Chief Executive Officer, Hispanic Scholarship Foundation

**Chevaughn Wellington**, Medical Student, Quinnipiac University



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