

East End Group Answers 'Desperate Need' For Helping Youth with Mental Health Challenges



Luna Paucar, 19, outside her Bridgehampton home on Monday. She reached out to OLA of Eastern Long Island's mental health program called Youth Connect for help with social anxiety during her freshman year of college. Credit: Randee Daddona

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Luna Paucar was in her freshman year at Boston College last fall when her social anxiety became too hard to ignore.

"Entering college was very difficult for me," said Paucar, 19, of Bridgehampton. "Boston College supports their students and makes sure we have all the resources we need, but I still felt alone and very timid around my professors and classmates.

"I couldn't pinpoint exactly why I was feeling this way and how to deal with it. My grades started reflecting my emotions and that was my biggest concern," said the nursing major.

Paucar decided it was time to address her anxiety. She remembered a presentation she saw while a junior at Bridgehampton High School about OLA of Eastern Long Island's Youth Connect, a mental health program focused on young people on the East End.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **The Youth Connect program** offers mental health support for East End youth.
- **While the program is** part of a Latino-focused group, it offers service to any youth who needs it.
- **The program recently got** a \$100,000 infusion of state money to help it expand.

Youth Connect offers a helpline, as well as in-person workshops with middle and high school students, and connections to an assortment of organizations outside of schools, such as houses of worship, parents, health care providers, school personnel and more.

The program recently got a \$100,000 infusion in state funds — \$50,000 in a line item in the state budget and another \$50,000 in discretionary funding, which OLA credits to the support of Assemb. Fred Thiele (D-Sag Harbor). That state financing, said Minerva Perez, OLA's executive director, “is acknowledgment [that] legitimizes in other people's minds” OLA's work.

Thiele said in an interview with Newsday that there was “desperate need” for mental health services on the East End, and that he applauded the work OLA was doing on the issue. “She wanted to expand services,” Thiele said. “It's consistent with an effort I've tried to make, to provide more community-based, more school-based mental health” programs.

Thiele, who is retiring from the State Legislature in December, said while “nothing is guaranteed in the New York State budget ... the important part was getting that line item in the state budget. They tend to stay year to year, while discretionary money changes.” That line item for Youth Connect, he added, “provides some stability and expectation of future funding” for the program.

Adam Fine, superintendent of East Hampton Schools, said the work OLA has done “with us has been immense ... If there's a situation brewing at the school, they give us a heads up ... There's nothing bad to say. It's just another tool in the box to work with kids having mental health challenges.”

The program focuses on middle school students up to people age 25. OLA is a Latino-focused and Latino-led organization, but Youth Connect is not limited to Latino students, and there is no cost involved.

Paucar texted the Youth Connect helpline — 631-810-9010 — as more than 1,800 others have since the helpline, staffed by bilingual counselors in Spanish and English, was established in late 2022.

Youth Connect, she said, “had always been at the back of my mind, but part of me was scared to try it because I was so anxious about being identified, even though a large aspect about Youth Connect is the fact that it's anonymous,” she said in an email.

After she sent her message to Youth Connect, “I felt relieved,” Paucar said. “I didn't speak about much detail, as it takes time for me to open up. But they reassured me to go at a pace I feel the most comfortable at. I was tremendously grateful to have had that experience and I appreciated that they stayed beyond their normal working hours to ensure I was in a better emotional state.”

Perez said Youth Connect wants to “saturate the East End with the helpline,” to make sure young people can reach out to the confidential resource with any mental health or emotional issues they face.

The program recently got another big boost from the Manhattan-based Hispanic Federation, which provided \$146,000 in 2024 for the program, said federation president Frankie Miranda. “We know that there is a lack of culturally competent services around mental health, specifically for bilingual or Spanish-language people.”

Miranda said OLA was one of three Long Island organizations the federation made grants to, and OLA's Youth Connect program was the only one to address mental health needs. Miranda said the federation has made grants to 41 organizations statewide to address mental health and basic needs, with a specific focus on programs that he said provide cultural competency.

While all the organizations provide services to all people, he said the Hispanic community “continues to struggle to find services that are culturally competent.”

Through a combination of in-person workshops and the helpline, Perez said Youth Connect counselors' engagement involves “making sure they understand that we are ready to receive any kind of texts or calls from them,” such as topics of anxiety and depression.

The workshops with students involve going “in health class by health class,” Perez said, adding, “We don't do assembly-style” programs.

“Right now we're in 14 middle and high schools,” said Perez. “Our goal is to be across all 21 middle and high schools” in the East End.

She said Youth Connect staff has conducted 276 workshops since its launch in 2022 through June 1, 2024; received 1,853 texts between Dec. 21, 2022 and June 20, 2024; and 442 calls. She said a majority of the texts were “general interest,” but 427 or texts and/or calls were young people “in need of support.”

Perez said the helpline is confidential. “We're not going to ask people their information. That knowledge makes a difference in what we offer.”

Faith Evans, one of Youth Connect's half-dozen counselors, said, “We hear a lot about family dynamic issues ... a teen doesn't feel understood by family; stress from school work; friendship dynamics, relationship problems, substance misuse.”

Evans said, “We basically ask a lot of questions to get them to a place where they feel heard ... Sometimes that's all they need. In some cases they're guided on their own to a solution just from talking with us.”

Paucar said she is glad she reached out to Youth Connect and “strongly” recommends it to other young people, saying: “It's important to know that there is someone always willing to listen to you.”