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UB Got \$3.5 Million to Boost Rural Mental Health. The Trump Administration Cut The Funding

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The University at Buffalo last year received a five-year, \$3.59 million federal grant to develop a fellowship program that would help address the shortage of school-based mental health professionals in rural communities.

But in the spring, UB received an abrupt notice from the U.S. Department of Education. It informed UB that the program no longer aligned with “current administration priorities.”

No more money will be coming, and the program is at risk of shutting down.

Katie C. Stalker, associate professor in the UB School of Social Work and the grant’s principal investigator, said the grant that established the **Buffalo Mental Health Service Professional Fellowship program** will end in December, after just one year of funding. All told, more than \$3 million of the grant has been cut, she added.

It means the program will train only one cohort of graduate social work students, rather than the four cohorts that had been planned over the course of the five-year grant. And it means the four participating school districts where the fellows will work – Alden, Akron, Niagara-Wheatfield and Medina – will get to benefit from the program for only one school year.

“In terms of who will be hurt the most,” Stalker said, “these cuts impact the youth in rural schools who were poised to benefit from additional school-based mental health supports, as well as our UB

graduate social work students who have a passion for working with youth and a desire to train in school social work.”

New York Attorney General Letitia James and 15 other attorneys general have sued the Department of Education and Secretary of Education Linda McMahon for “unlawfully terminating more than \$1 billion in bipartisan federal funding for school-based mental health services.” The attorneys general are challenging the Trump administration’s decision to stop funding for the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program, which Congress created in the aftermath of tragic school shootings and a worsening youth mental health crisis. Through the lawsuit, the attorneys general are asking the court to reinstate the funding.

In New York, at least \$19 million in previously approved funding was included in the cuts, including more than \$7.6 million in the State University of New York system. According to a list provided by James’ office, the **Niagara Falls City School District lost nearly \$734,000 in funding** that it was using to provide wraparound support services to students and families – services such as providing emotional support to students by placing mental health interns in district schools.

The reason for the funding cuts is unclear. In published statements about the cuts, the Department of Education claimed that “under the deeply flawed priorities of the Biden administration, grant recipients used the funding to implement race-based actions like recruiting quotas in ways that have nothing to do with mental health and could hurt the very students the grants are supposed to help.”

Stalker said recruitment for the Buffalo Mental Health Service Professional Fellowship was not based on race or ethnicity. When UB applied for the funding, one of the priorities of the U.S. Department of Education’s Mental Health Service Professional grants was to increase the number of qualified school-based mental health service providers from diverse backgrounds or from communities served by the high-need school districts. The Buffalo project, she said, opted to focus on increasing the number of school social workers in Western New York’s rural communities.

At the same time of the funding cuts, the Trump administration acknowledged the youth mental health crisis in a **report released May 22** by the Presidential Commission to Make America Healthy Again.

The report, which identified the main drivers behind the childhood chronic disease epidemic, noted that teenage depression rates nearly doubled from 2009 to 2019, with one in four teenage girls in 2022 reporting a major depressive episode in the past year. Under a part of the report named “American Youth face a Mental Health Crisis,” the authors note that three million high school students seriously considered suicide in 2023.

“Parallel to the decline in physical activity, American youth face a deepening psychosocial crisis,” the report reads. “This is marked by rising mental health disorders, significant sleep deficits, chronic stress, and pervasive loneliness, all exacerbated by the widespread influence of technology. The crisis persists despite rising therapy rates, with some suggesting it may exacerbate issues.”

While the American Academy of Pediatrics disagreed with many parts of the report, it agreed with the assessment that youth mental health is in crisis. The organization, made up of 67,000 pediatricians, believes children need a full continuum of mental health services, and it advocates to improve the pediatric mental health care workforce shortage.

Cutting the fellowship program at UB is unlikely to help.

The Buffalo Mental Health Service Professional Fellowship's first cohort includes nine graduate social work students who will begin their work in the fall. Stalker said two to three fellows are placed in each of the four school districts in the program: Alden, Akron, Niagara-Wheatfield and Medina.

The fellowship is for two semesters – fall and spring – to align with the K-12 school year.

Stalker said the cancellation has “caused a financial gap for the spring semester, disrupting financial support for students, as well as the personnel and infrastructure needed to provide intensive training to prepare fellows to respond to youth mental health concerns.” Without federal funding, she said UB can no longer offer the fellowship after the 2025-26 academic year.

Rural schools, in particular, face major issues in meeting students' mental health needs due to staffing challenges and the limitations of nearby local mental health service systems.

“Compared to children in metropolitan and urban areas, children in rural communities have higher rates of depression, suicidality and other mental health conditions,” Stalker said in a statement in the fall when the grant was announced. “This program prepares our (Master of Social Work) students for the unique concerns found in these rural schools.”

For fellows, the program gives them hands-on experience in working with youth and families, and also further develops their skills through intensive training seminars, which focus on evidence-based practices for rural schools such as family engagement and trauma-informed approaches.

Another component of the program that was planned to begin in fall 2027 was called UB STARS, which stands for Small Towns and Rural Schools. The plan with UB STARS was to recruit graduate social work students to UB from the grant's participating rural communities who were interested in social work positions at their local school districts.

UB STARS, Stalker explained, aimed to address mental health workforce challenges by “training members of the rural communities to become social workers in their own community.” UB STARS fellows would receive full tuition and fees support, a field placement stipend, travel reimbursements and other covered expenses.

But with the funding cut, Stalker said, UB STARS will not be launched.

Over the course of the original five-year grant period, UB projected 46 fellows would participate in the program, of which six would be UB STARS participants.