

Utah's teens are struggling. One school program is saving lives.

A chain-smoking teenager is a horrifying thought, but it's also one with a relatively straightforward fix. We warn them about the risks and tell them to stop. Policy measures have also been put into place, with laws that ban youth-focused tobacco marketing and taxes that make smoking an expensive habit. Yet studies have shown that the effects of loneliness and social isolation can be as detrimental as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, impacting a person's overall health and, importantly, their mental health.

But addressing the issue of teenage mental health is much more complicated. Teen centers, which are now based in dozens of schools across the state, can help.

The teenage years can be challenging and complex, with various pressures including tough academic workloads, after-school jobs and activities, new boundaries to set, questions about the influence of social media, and of course, fluctuating hormones. It takes a lot to navigate this phase. Adults who care for these teens often also struggle with their own mental health issues, adding to the challenges faced by families.

Beyond the reports of loneliness that began and increased even after the pandemic, Utah teens face a number of mental health challenges and risk factors. The 2021 Utah



Teen Centers "provide valuable assistance to teenagers grappling with mental health issues, family problems, homelessness, substance abuse, bullying, and other difficulties," writes Sidni Shorter, a board member at The Policy Project.

Adolescent Health Report found that more than one in five students has seriously considered suicide, with 18% reporting they have made a suicide plan, and 41.5% saying they felt sad or hopeless. Children in Utah also face mental health problems at a rate that's 14% higher than the national average. The number of Utah teens who have experienced a major depressive episode has doubled over the last decade.

A growing number of K-12

students in Utah are also facing significant challenges in meeting their basic needs. There has been a 9.6% increase in students experiencing homelessness from 2022 to 2023, with 13,049 Utah students classified as homeless and lacking a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence in 2023. One in three Utah students are economically disadvantaged and qualify for free or reduced lunches.

Addressing these challenges

requires a concerted effort from families, communities, and policymakers to ensure that all students have the support they need to thrive. One initiative spearheaded by The Policy Project is the creation of Teen Centers across Utah. Teen Centers are physical facilities in Utah schools that provide food pantries, laundry facilities and showers to meet the basic needs of students. The Centers are also staffed by adults who are there to provide resources help with homework, social work and family advocacy, and connections to other community resources. Simply having a trusted person to connect with can often prevent and alleviate mental health issues. The Teen Centers provide valuable assistance to teenagers grappling with mental health issues, family problems, homelessness, substance abuse, bullying and other difficulties.

Since The Policy Project's work beginning in 2022, \$15 million was secured from the Utah Legislature to fund these centers, and \$3 million was raised by private donors. All \$18 million of these funds were distributed by 2024 for construction and opening, showing how great the need is for this type of resource. More than 70 schools have been awarded funding, in all areas and corners of Utah.

With the factors affecting teens'

mental health ranging from financial to social, these Teen Centers are and will become an essential part of the educational landscape in Utah. The ultimate goal of these centers is to help teenagers succeed in all areas of their lives. They act as a conduit and a connector, linking teens to various resources and opportunities beyond academics. By providing a safe and supportive environment, Teen Centers help teenagers cope, address and overcome obstacles and barriers. They offer resources and support that help them navigate challenges and prepare them for a successful future. Teen Centers are an investment in the future of Utah and those who will soon lead it.

Sidni L. Shorter, PsyD, is President and CEO of the Utah Black Chamber of Commerce and a board member of The Policy Project. As a servant leader, Sidni prioritizes relationship building and authentic engagement. An advocate for change and a social entrepreneur, her career and efforts are directed towards her passion for entrepreneurs and business leaders in their pursuit of access to affordable capital with growth, progress and just outcomes encompassing diversity, equity and inclusion as the goal.

I know the heartbreak of radiation exposure. Our government has a moral obligation to make it right.

Before filmmaker Mark Shapiro came to interview me a few years ago for his film about the long shadow of nuclear testing in Nevada, "Downwind," I sat on the floor of my office surrounded by piles of articles — some I had written — press clips, studies, obituaries and photographs. I sat in those piles sobbing because in the more than 30 years I had been working to fix the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) nothing had changed for those of us it excludes.

In comments to the press earlier this month, Utah Sen. Mitt Romney implied that all those who were affected have been covered. No. We have not. We have been abandoned by our government and left to bear the cost of toxic radiation exposure alone.

Only 10 counties in Utah and a handful in Arizona and Nevada are currently covered. Salt Lake City, where I grew up, is not included even though we received levels of radioactive fallout as high as counties that are covered in southern Utah. Nor are so many other communities throughout the West, including New Mexico where the first atomic bomb was exploded. Nor is Guam which suffered from fallout from U.S. nuclear testing in the Pacific. Nor is Missouri where nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project is stored near St. Louis, where it is still leaching into creeks and making people sick. Nor are uranium miners who worked after 1971, most of them on tribal lands, without protective gear and whose land and water is still contaminated with uranium that is making them and their families sick.

I know the heartbreak of a cancer diagnosis. I know what it's like to watch so many loved ones get sick and die. I suffered thyroid cancer and underwent surgery and radiation treatments in my late 20s. I stood with my family and my sister's children around her hospital bed as she took her last breath at age 46 after suffering for nine years with Lupus. Another sister had to move to the East Coast a few years ago to be treated for a rare stomach cancer. Our youngest sister has been plagued by autoimmune disorders.

I've counted too many people in my childhood neighborhood who developed cancer and other radiation related illnesses. Many didn't survive. I was lucky. I got better. My cousin, who lost her husband to colon cancer, likes to remind me that "your story didn't end tragically so that you could carry the tragic story forward." I feel an incredible responsibility to see that justice is served for all of them.

Last week in Washington, I got to publicly thank Senators Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) and Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), Representatives Theresa Leger Fernandez (R-N.M.), James Moyle (R-Guam) and Cory Bush (D-Mo.) as well as affected community members — some who drove all the way from New Mexico at their own expense — for working so tirelessly to expand RECA and correct the

injustices of the past. They give me hope and inspire me to carry on when my own delegation has failed to champion us, instead pushing a two-year extension of RECA that merely delays doing the right thing yet again while more people die waiting.

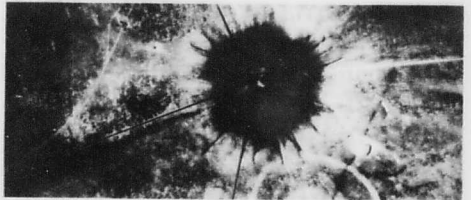
Even Utah Sen. Mike Lee admits that affected areas should be covered, that it is the right thing to do and that cost should not be the deciding factor. Likely feeling pressure from constituents, Sen. Lee on Thursday introduced a fast-track bill requiring unanimous approval on the Senate floor to extend RECA and include Utah and parts of Nevada, Arizona and Missouri. This was baffling, given that the Senate has already passed the far more inclusive S.3853 with strong bipartisan support. Why introduce a much more limited bill that was doomed to fail, which it did, instead of supporting

the existing bill and encouraging Utah representatives in the House to do the same? The best thing he could do for Utah and our country is support S.3853. It is time at long last for our government to do right by us. Expanding RECA is not an expense, it is a repayment for the costs we've already born, in hospital bills, sleepless nights and lost loved ones. It represents a tiny sliver of the trillions of dollars this country has spent and intends to keep spending on nuclear weapons. Part of the price of those weapons should include taking care of those they harmed.

We are casualties of the Cold War. Our government knew the winds in this country blow toward the east and would carry radioactive fallout across the nation when they exploded 100 bombs above ground in the desert of Nevada. They knew that radiation exposure makes people sick. And they poisoned us anyway, causing untold suffering that continues to this day. We have paid a terrible price.

A government that knowingly sacrifices its own people has a moral obligation to them. The U.S. Senate easily passed S.3853. Now it is up to Speaker Mike Johnson and our House of Representatives to right the wrongs of the past by strengthening and expanding RECA before it expires on June 7. The two-year extension introduced in the House by Representatives Celeste Maloy and Burgess Owens is not enough. Utah's representatives — particularly my own representative, Blake Moore, who has leverage as vice chair of the Republican conference — can make a difference for their constituents and other long-suffering Americans harmed by our government's nuclear weapons program by supporting S.3853. We deserve nothing less.

Mary Dickson is Salt Lake City-based writer and a long-time advocate for survivors of nuclear weapons testing. She was recently in Washington D.C. to meet with members of Congress and speak at a press conference on the Capital Triangle.

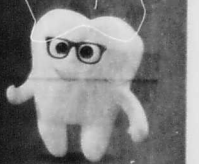


A July 16, 1945, photo shows an aerial view after the first atomic explosion at Trinity Test Site, N.M.

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