

## Episode 142: Empowering Our Girls in 2023 (Transcript)

Ike Evans:

Into The Fold is part of the Texas Podcast Network, the conversations changing the world brought to you by the University of Texas at Austin. The opinions expressed in this podcast represent the views of the hosts and guests and not of the University of Texas at Austin. Hi, welcome to Into the Fold, the Mental Health podcast. I am your host, Ike Evans, and today we're delighted to bring you episode 142: Empowering Our Girls in 2023. But first, some mental health headlines.

The Hogg Foundation is accepting applications for the Moore Fellowship. The \$20,000 fellowship goes to support doctoral candidates who are in the process of completing a dissertation on the human experience in crises. This includes those resulting from natural or other major disasters or stress and adversity more broadly. Candidates should have a primary research interest in the mental health impact of crises, stress and adversity. For details, visit our website at [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu).

In other news, a new study found that Black and Native American patients are less likely to attend follow-up outpatient mental health visits after discharge from psychiatric hospitalization compared with white patients. This is according to a recent article published in *Psychiatric News*. These findings are important because to quote the authors, "Patients who successfully transition to outpatient mental healthcare have a decreased risk for hospital readmission, violence, homelessness, and criminal justice involvement." This amounts to a critical disparity in access to mental health treatment that has severe downstream effects.

Finally, the new 988 mental health crisis line has seen an eye-opening rise in calls, texts, and chats in its first six months. This is according to a recent report by CNN. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline launched last July with a new easy to remember three digit number similar to how people can dial 911 for medical emergencies. Since that transition in the past six months, about 2.1 million calls, texts and chats to the new number have been routed to a response center. And of those, around 89% were answered by a counselor. According to a CNN analysis of data from SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. And that does it for mental health headlines. Don't be left out of the loop. Become a Hogg insider by subscribing to Mental Health Headlines. You can find a signup link on our main website at [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu).

As we have said on multiple occasions on the podcast, public policy both matters and is very hard to do well. This is especially true for mental health policy. For many groups, their ability to engage in meaningful and effective policy work is constrained by time, budget, and lack of expertise. So to help address this, in 2010, the Hogg Foundation launched the Policy Academy and Fellows Program to increase individuals' and organizations' capacity to advance mental health policy in Texas. A second goal is to increase the consumer voice in policy development and implementation.

Now more than 12 years after the launch of this cornerstone initiative, it's still going strong and there is now a fresh cohort of Hogg policy fellows ready to make their mark on the state of mental health policy in Texas. One of those new policy fellows we're proud to say is here with us as well as her mentor to

discuss her hopes and aspirations for this year and beyond. Anna O'Quinn is a newly hired policy fellow for Girls Empowerment Network, an organization now making its second appearance on the podcast. To quote their mission, "Girls Empowerment Network seeks to ignite the power in girls by teaching them the skills to thrive and believe in their ability to be unstoppable." And she is joined by her policy mentor, Sarah Miller-Fellows, to shed some light on what unstoppable for girls looks like in the year 2023. Sarah and Anna, thank you so much for joining us today.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Thanks so much for having us.

Anna O'Quinn:

Thank you.

Ike Evans:

So Sarah, this is your second go round on the podcast. What has happened in the life of your organization since we last had you on In 2021,

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

I'm really excited to be back. I was on in 2021 with Vanessa Beltran, who was our first Hogg policy fellow. She was hired in 2020 and it was our organization's first time that we really got to jump into policy work as a core focus of our organization. Vanessa was instrumental in building our work. She created a curriculum for two Spark kits, which were mail out or take home boxes full of activities that helped build girls' self-efficacy. And her two Spark kits, Lead With Your Voice and Unstoppable Activist, both focused on teaching girls core advocacy skills. We also last spoke when we were in just the beginning of our first cohort of the Spark Change Project, which is a partnership between Girls Empowerment Network and the Excellence and Advancement Foundation that has the mission to center girls of color as leaders in advocacy who discover their activist voices and galvanize their peers to engage in their own passions for positive social change.

And we had sort of talked about the initiation of bringing on this first group of high school girls where they would work as paid employees of the Spark Change Project to learn advocacy skills. We're actually now in the process of hiring our third cohort. It's been incredibly successful. The Spark Change project has had 138 attendees at various programs as well as those Spark kits that I mentioned were distributed to over 2,700 youth across the state of Texas, which is just an incredible reach.

When we last spoke, we had talked about how our goal for the first cohort of the Spark Change Project was to train these youth in advocacy so that we might be able to have them testify in the current legislative session in 2023. And we actually had this incredible cohort that was fired up and ready to do advocacy right away, and we ended up having them testify on four separate occasions including provide invited testimony on specific bills during the previous legislative session. And we're just so excited to continue to grow this program and bring on a whole new group of youth.

We hired our current policy fellow Anna O'Quinn in summer 2022, and it's just been a very exciting experience to grow our work as an organization. The biggest change is that we now have a policy vision as an organization. Our policy vision is that we center girls' experiences and teach them the skills to speak truth to power. We support policies that promote girls' wellbeing so that they can thrive in achieving their goals and advocating for a world where girls are unstoppable. And we have four policy priorities for the current legislative session: mental health, safe and supportive schools, healthy relationships and equity issues.

I'd just also like to mention that we are going to use girls as a term throughout this podcast, but Girls Empowerment Network welcomes youth across the gender spectrum. We center the experiences of girls in grades 3 through 12, including those who are cis, trans, non-binary, and gender expansive.

Ike Evans:

Okay. Anna, it's nice to meet you.

Anna O'Quinn:

Nice to meet you.

Ike Evans:

Always exciting to meet a new policy fellow and I've had a good number on the podcast over the years.

Anna O'Quinn:

Great.

Ike Evans:

Well first of all, how are you getting settled in? What things have you had the chance to work on since you've started? And what do you anticipate will be occupying much of your time during the legislative session?

Anna O'Quinn:

Yeah, it's a great question. I'm glad we're starting with it because I think it could be tempting to talk for a whole hour about all that I've learned. I'm so privileged to be a girl, so privileged to be a Hogg fellow. The biggest takeaway as I was reflecting as I've been onboarding, preparing for session is really realizing how much youth voice is needed in the policy space. And it's something I had an inkling of, but what has been encouraging too is how open legislators and staff have been to having youth voice in the policy space. A big part of my role right now has been trying to navigate the political process. What's funny is I have a concentration in administrative and policy practice. I have my master's from the School of Social Work at UT. And even for me that had a focus on that, it is so difficult to navigate how complex the policy space can be. And so I think about all the people we're barring from that process with how complex it is.

So a big goal of mine has been making that more accessible not just to staff, but also to the youth that we are hiring and going to incorporate into our process through the Spark Change Program that Sarah just talked about. And so it's been really encouraging though to see how eager staff is to really hear these real world experiences. And so a huge part of my role is going to be being that bridge between youth voice and the political process, which is really a key passion of mine personally.

And I also, as I was reflecting, have really seen, and one thing I've learned from girls that's been encouraging is that self-care is really possible during session. Girls has really modeled that really well for me through supervision with Sarah. She's been great about being intentional about how much time I'm spending at the capital. Also, our work culture is just flexible to the reality that life really does happen. And that's been really cool to see that I can advocate and make really impactful change in a way that's sustainable and that's not going to run me to the ground. So that's been a really key personal professional growth in my own life.

And another focus this session, Sarah talked a little bit about the four priority areas. I'll go into more detail, but another key focus of ours, this is the second session that Girls has had a Hogg fellow. And one area that we're hoping to grow in is really to build a team of our grassroots advocacy network. So one action step is you can actually sign up for our action and alerts team, and we're hoping we have some goals around action alerts so that when bills are passed, we have a team of school partners, youth themselves, staff their friends and a network that can really respond. We know that power really comes from numbers, so we're excited to grow in that, our grassroots advocacy movement.

And then also Sarah talked some about the policy priorities that we have, those were created from serving staff and surveying youth. You'll notice that we don't have any priority bills yet. That's because it's really important for us to incorporate youth voice. So we're still working on hiring our peer facilitators, which are the high schoolers that are hired. So we'll let them guide what our policy key bills are. But within the general areas of mental health, we really are excited to see some progress and we still are seeing the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It's really important that we respond to that. And also we're excited for progress in school climate, for example, increasing the school mental health allotment is something we're looking at in terms of the budget surplus that we're seeing. We're hoping some of that money goes towards needed funding to schools that's flexible that they can use for mental health initiatives.

Safe and supportive schools is going to be a huge conversation at the legislature. So we're looking at bills around school climate, helping students cope with the trauma that they have seen and our currently still seeing. And also interventions that really support students holistically while also making them feel secure.

In healthy relationships, we really are in a unique space that we are a youth and girl serving organization that's actually dedicated to helping girls realize their own power and navigate their relationships with each other and the world. And so we're really posed well to see some builds around healthy relationships and how we can increase that for girls.

And then last but definitely not least, what Sarah mentioned are equity issues. We know we cannot be a girl serving organization without also being dedicated to equity. So we're really ready and we're prepped to advocate on behalf of our youth who might be marginalized by policies that we unfortunately are already seeing, such as our trans and non-binary youth, youth of color, and also youth that may be a part of different socioeconomic levels.

Ike Evans:

And so Sarah, the next question is for you. I was hoping that you could give our listeners maybe a little bit more background and context about Girls Empowerment Network. Why that name first of all? And what does it suggest about the particular niche that this organization fills compared in the whole constellation of girls advocacy organizations, I guess?

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Absolutely. Well, at our core, we help girls discover they're powerful people. That's really the core focus of every single thing that we do. We were founded in 1996 by a group of concerned parents who were seeing in the media and in books they were reading, these really huge drops in girls' self-esteem, particularly around middle school years. And over many, many years, over 25 years of experience, we've really focused in on this concept of self-efficacy, which is a person's belief in their ability to succeed and to reach their goals. And we help girls grow their self-efficacy in seven areas, what we call the 7 Cs: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, coping skills, creativity, confidence and change making. And I'll actually note we just went through a year long theory of change process where we had focus

groups with girls, with parents, with teachers, with staff to talk about the focus of our organization after our 25th anniversary, kind of doing a revisiting of what really is the need that we're meeting.

And over and over again, we heard an expanded need for advocacy as part of our work. That it wasn't enough to just help girls believe they were powerful people in their own lives, but also to teach them how to create power in their communities and to advocate for themselves. So we've actually added in a seventh C as of this January, of change making. We had it was the 6 Cs for years and years and we're at seven and change making has just been so core. And the goal there is that no matter what a girl's goal is or the barrier she faces when she has so strong self-efficacy from our curriculum, she's able to advocate for herself in many different spaces of power, whether it's her family, whether it's in her school, whether it's at the state legislature. And she realizes she has the ability to succeed and she becomes powerful.

We've noticed, learned over the years that self-efficacy is this really important concept for youth mental health. Strong self-efficacy is one of the strongest protective factors after experiencing trauma to help people prevent developing a trauma disorder. It's an important concept for overall wellbeing. And so that's really been our organizational focus. But at its core, self-efficacy is about helping people believe that they're powerful people. And that's why we're Girls Empowerment Network. Just a bit about our impact. The last school year we served over 4,000 youth at 70 schools across the state of Texas. 95% of our school programs are in Title I schools, so we serve predominantly lower income communities and 84% of our program participants were girls of color. So that's really our focus base and we really try to advocate for policies that will help those communities.

Ike Evans:

Okay, wonderful. Next question for both of you, and I guess we're sort of shifting focus to the particular state of affairs here in Texas. With everything that is going on, in what particular ways are the voices of girls especially needed right now?

Anna O'Quinn:

Yeah, I can go first. We're only nine days into session and we've been keeping an eye on what bills are being filed, and there's already an enormous amount of bills that really intimately affect the lives of girls. So just some examples of this. We've seen bills around menstrual equity, bills around contraception and sex education in school, and also ethnic study for girls. And I just really want to highlight that bills not only are going to be ineffective if we're not incorporating the voice of girls and the voice of youth, but they're actually going to become harmful to the very youth we're trying to help. So I think really it's key that policymakers are listening to not just youth opinions, but youth ideas, youth collaboration, and really highlighting that and prioritizing that in the bill making process.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Thanks so much, Anna. One of the things that we've really learned is that there aren't a lot of organizations in Texas that are teaching youth advocacy skills. There are certainly some, but that's a really unique space we've been able to expand our work in. And last session, having the privilege of having some of our first cohort of Spark Change facilitators testify. It has been some of the most powerful experiences I've had working in policy work for at this point over a decade.

I genuinely believe that the vast majority of our legislators are doing their jobs because they want to make an impact in their communities. And I've seen the way that they respond positively and the way that they are so deeply engaged when youth are doing advocacy, when girls are doing advocacy about the issues that affect them the most. And I really believe that the more that youth and girls are able to

talk about the issues that matter to them, the way that bills are going to impact their lives, the better educational systems, the better state we're going to create as long as we're listening to the voices and the needs of those who are going to be most impacted by those policies.

Anna O'Quinn:

Yeah.

Ike Evans:

Okay. And Anna, one question that I think I'm pretty fond of asking my guests in some way, shape or form. What from your own personal background and experience are you hoping to infuse into your work for Girls Empowerment Network?

Anna O'Quinn:

Totally. I love this question too. As I was thinking about this question, first and foremost, the lens that I really use to look at the world is through my background as a social worker. So I'm a licensed masters social worker, and in my work of girls and just in my life, I'm always going to be looking at things and thinking about them through values like dignity and worth of the person. I'm going to be thinking about social justice, looking at how power impacts relationships. And one thing I really appreciate about Girls is their culture really aligns with those values really well. And so that's the first thing I'm always going to be bringing to a job.

Also, one really impactful experience was where I got my undergrad in social work, which was from Baylor University. Spent a lot of my free time while I was at Baylor with youth and teens. I was always at a camp in the summer. And when I was not at camp, I was volunteering with something related to youth and teens. And I had a really wonderful professor in my life, Dr. Stephanie Body. She's one of the people who made me realize how powerful mentorship is, which also was a big part of Girl's programming. And she identified a research opportunity. There's a think tank in DC called The Center for Public Justice, and they were asking for research proposals from students to help write reports on really complex federal policy topics. I would have never applied, I would've been terrified, but she really encouraged me. Because of her encouragement, I was accepted and I spent, at the beginning, it was a semester, but it became almost a two year project that's still continuing with other students now. And we studied SNAP benefits and specifically how SNAP benefits were impacting the lives of teens.

And as I was doing my research, I realized that these teens that I was developing relationships with through my volunteer experiences we're all using EBT cards, and we're all navigating really complicated decisions, and we're being really innovative about how they dealt with food. So I thought, why am I writing a research paper on SNAP when I'm interacting with these teens that have all this experience? So we pivoted our project and we changed it to a community-based research project. We used something called PhotoVoice. So teens actually took pictures of experiences around their relationship with food, and then we used those as data. So the teens became the researchers themselves, and we did a focus group with them and we asked them what ideas would you have to make SNAP and EBT cards more accessible to you? And they just had a wealth of ideas way better than I could have ever come up with. And that was really what solidified my passion and realization that teen voice in the political process is so key and it's so transformative for everyone involved.

So after that, I knew I wanted to be a part of policy work, so I went to UT, Hook 'em Horns and got my masters in social work. That really equipped me with the skills that I needed to be able to advocate on a policy level. While I was there, I interned with NAMI Texas, which was my first legislative experience, and I had a wonderful experience there. That's been really helpful with just key tools and kind of

knowing how the legislative process works, the ins and outs and the behind the scenes with that. But before I started working, it was important for me that I had a year of work experience that was outside of school and outside of the policy space because I wanted to see what it looks like to do a little bit more direct service.

And so I was privileged to work for a year with a consortium. It's a program, and this is a mouthful called TCHAT. It stands for Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine. And what's great about TCHAT is it's actually a program that was started by the 86 legislature and its goal is to increase access to mental health services. And so I was our referrals coordinator, and an important note with TCHAT is it's really high quality and free mental health care, but it's short term. And so I was in charge of taking all the students from the 25 school districts and finding them long-term care. So I was partnering with local mental healthcare authorities, play therapy therapists, higher levels of care, anything you can think of.

And every day at work, I felt like I was working the most difficult job I could have worked and not because my coworkers weren't lovely and the program wasn't phenomenal, but I was realizing that there's just not enough mental health services in Texas for youth. And so it's been really helpful as I've worked in mental health space, that's one of our policy priorities at Girls to acknowledge those gaps. And it's really great to see a program and work for program that the legislature created that has done so much good, but realizing that there's still more work to be done. And it just helped me understand what does policy look like on the ground. And I've really been able to bring that and that's been a really unique experience.

Ike Evans:

Okay. So man, it is hard to evaluate policy work. I mean, because particularly in a conservative state, you can't map it in terms of bills passed or even damaging bills prevented. So how will you evaluate the impact that you have made during session?

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

I can start this off because evaluation is a core part of the work that I do for Girls Empowerment Network across our programs. My role is as Director of Impact, but also my background is as a PhD in anthropology. And so I have a very, I think different approach because I'm much more qualitative and I'm much more about the feelings that we've evoked than somebody who is only data. I love data. I think it's so important. It's a huge part of the work that we do, but it's also important for me that we incorporate those things that are a little bit harder to quantify. We have some very specific goals. Thinking about being in a conservative state, our goals are more things like taking action on a certain number of bills, not about whether we get them passed or not. Our goals are about having a certain number of calls to actions to our grassroots mailing list and getting some responses for those rather than any specific outcome from that mailing list.

Ike Evans:

Sure. Yeah.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

And also a big part of it is just having youth feel powerful in their ability to advocate. One of the most incredible experiences of our first Spark Change cohort was this incredible domino effect that happened. The first time one of our peer facilitators testified, it felt like such a huge deal. We probably went over five or six drafts of her testimony, did a lot of coaching, and then she went up and she testified and she came out and she was like, "That was not as hard as I thought." And so then she started telling the other

peer facilitators, "That was not as hard as I thought. I bet you can do it. It's not as big and scary as it is." And so then they would testify and it was almost this domino of one would do it and it would be like, oh, it's not that hard. I can testify for more bills. I can testify on different issues. I can follow these bills and identify when they would matter to me.

And my dream is that we get to have that same impact again of our facilitators, having that experience of, oh, I can do this. I can advocate, and it's not as big and scary as I thought it would be, and that they would start to spread that to some of their friends, and some of their community members, and the other youth around us. So we have some quantifiable goals about that. Things like we ask youth after they've participated in Spark Change Project events, if they can advocate for issues they care about. One of my favorite stats is that about 97% of them say that they can after one of our events, but it's also that more qualitative amorphous feeling and sense when I'm in meetings with the youth and I'm hearing them talk about their goals, that they'll feel confident in their ability to advocate and to inspire others to advocacy.

Anna O'Quinn:

Just want to add to that, Sarah put that beautifully. Our outcomes are not bill number pass, but it's action in making sure we're igniting the power in girls. And so I think that covers a lot of different areas. That's not just our Spark Change facilitators, that's not just the youth that are attending our programs, but that's also our staff. That's a personal goal of mine for our staff to feel equipped to be able to take action on bills, for our grassroots network to grow. So we're looking at numbers like subscriptions for action email that you can sign up for, engagement on Twitter. We just really want our community to also feel equipped and ready to ignite the power around Girls as well.

Ike Evans:

All right. Sarah Miller-Fellows, Anna O'Quinn, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. We are going to be checking in on our policy fellows at least a few more times in the coming months, and I think this is a great way to kick that off, so we really do appreciate it.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Wonderful. I'd love to invite your listeners to subscribe to our policy alerts email list.

Ike Evans:

Totally. Yeah.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

And also, if they have youth in their lives, we are having our third annual Spark Change Day on March 25th at the Texas Capitol, and I'll be sure to provide a signup link, it's free. It's a day of advocacy for youth in grades 6 through 12, and we're just really excited about it.

Ike Evans:

Okay. Yeah. And send me a ...

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Of course.



Ike Evans:

Yeah, send me all the info that you think would be good to signal boost, and I'll do that.

Sarah Miller-Fellows:

Absolutely. Thank you. And thank you so much for having us.

Ike Evans:

All right.

Anna O'Quinn:

Thank you. We really appreciate it.

Ike Evans:

At time of recording the 2023 Texas legislative session is just kicking off. From now until June, we will be regularly checking in with our policy team as well as other policy fellows organizations to give you a sense of what's happening around mental health at the Capitol. For our last episode, we turn to our policy team for a basic lay of the land. Here's a listen.

Allison Moore Boulware:

Yeah. I think when you look at what happened last session, we really saw this concentration of attention and focus on issues that don't matter to the majority of Texans. So what we saw last session was there were bills that impact a very small group of people, like transgender youth, really taking the focus away from issues that all Texans care about. I think education is a big one, and youth mental health is a big one. If you talk to average Texans, they know that our youth are suffering, they know that schools need more supports. We have teachers leaving in droves, we have in fighting within school boards and communities on how history is taught, and what books are in the libraries when we know that ultimately the students need help. And so my hope is that the legislators can kind of put away some of these more controversial flashy issues and really focus on meat and potatoes, budget, talk about resources that actually impact Texans.

Ike Evans:

The voice you just heard was Allison Moore Boulware, our Director of Policy. I have included a link to the full episode in the show description. As you listen to the episode, a great companion piece is our newly published policy priorities brief which you can find on the homepage of our website, [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu).

In other policy news, we're right on the verge of a significant update to the fifth edition of a Guide to Understanding Mental Health Systems and Services in Texas. This is our comprehensive guide to the Texas Mental Health System. It'll soon be available on our website so keep checking back. And that does it for this episode. We're glad that you could join us. Production assistance by Anna Harris, Kate Rooney, and Darrell Wiggins. Just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is as well that by being there for others, we enhance our own resilience. Please leave us a review. Subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play Music, TuneIn or Spotify. In fact, wherever you get your podcasts and taking us out now is Anna's Good Vibes. Thanks for joining us.