

WE RISE INTERNATIONAL

FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER



New Grant Expands We Rise Support for Youth Mental Health

We Rise is excited to announce that we have received a 2025 Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health Innovation Award to expand support groups for youth. The grant funds and advances transformative mental healthcare solutions for adolescents and young adults.

Since October 2023, We Rise has been providing adult mental health support groups to Spanish-speaking adults through our Mental Health SEEDs program/Programa Semillas. The group facilitators are graduate and undergraduate university counseling and social work students placed at We Rise for mental health training practicums. The students learn expert mental health treatment and support strategies while serving their local community. The partnerships provide the students with credit from their universities (Millersville University, Shippensburg University, and Lancaster Bible College) and training and supervision in mental health counseling from We Rise's two licensed counselors. The graduate students, experienced at crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries, are dedicated to meeting the needs of Hispanic and non-Hispanic youth and adults living in and around Lancaster, PA. Through the support groups, they are planting seeds of hope so that individuals who struggle with mental health concerns don't feel so alone.

(cont. p4)

“Our program aims to seed fund transformative mental healthcare solutions for children across the U.S. It helps address the lack of investment in youth mental health, connect innovative ideas with capital, and build capacity for nonprofits.”

*Morgan Stanley Alliance
for Children's Mental
Health Innovation Awards*

LOCAL YOUTH
JOINED A FILM
CREW FROM D.C. TO
MAKE A VIDEO TO
SUPPORT WE RISE
MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORT GROUPS
FOR TEENS.



Teen actors and focus group members shared their thoughts on the importance of mental health support for youth and highlighted what they feel are the key mental health needs of youth today. Themes included school stress, family stress and societal issues. Their feedback will strengthen our work!



WATCH THE VIDEO
weriseinternational.org/youth-mental-health



A big thank you to our teen actors and focus group members, including: Alex Zambrano, Andrés Sánchez, Genesis Viera, Israel Mejia De la Rosa, Nadira Ressel, Rosh Arias and Shania Duharte Nunez.

Photos by Janelle Bitikofer and Morongo Films

Upcoming Events

November 30 - Lancaster, PA

Come visit We Rise staff at the 18th annual Gifts That Give Hope Alternative Gift Fair. Gifts that Give Hope celebrates community and conscious consumption while supporting local nonprofits and social enterprise. Come by the Farm & Home Center, 1383 Arcadia Road, Lancaster between 11:00 and 3:00 to purchase symbols of hope from We Rise.

December 2 – Anywhere & Everywhere

Give a gift of hope on Giving Tuesday or any day of the year. Donate to the work of strengthening communities to support their members' mental health. We Rise is registered as a 501(c)3 nonprofit and all donations are tax deductible.

Go to weriseinternational.org/donate

January 18 - February 28, 2026 – Online

Encourage congregational leaders, health professionals and social workers to join the Churches Care course, 18 hours of training designed to increase effective support around mental health in the Christian faith community. CEUs are available. For information see page 6.

Churches Care Course Presenters:



Get Involved

We Rise welcomes volunteers with expertise to share. You could:

- support our online education programs
- assist with community outreach
- help with upcoming events in Lancaster, PA
- write for the newsletter or blog
- provide IT support
- assist with fundraising and grant writing as an intern *or* volunteer (training provided)

Introduce yourself and your interests with the form at this link:

<https://forms.gle/xHPUCPJK6kfmMTyC8>

Or use this QR code:



Email questions to health-team@weriseinternational.org

Are you a **Spanish-bilingual university student** interested in an internship in **Programa Semillas** ?

Learn more:

weriseinternational.org/join-our-team

Contact:

Janelle@weriseinternational.org

Expanded Support for Youth

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The MH SEEDs program has been successful in providing accessible no-cost support groups for adults using a community-based approach to battle stigma and remove barriers to services. The support groups reach people who often face linguistic, cultural, economic, and other access barriers that prevent them from receiving mental health services.

Receiving the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health Innovation Award provides funding that allows us to expand our services, adding a focus on youth mental health. In his article entitled "Mental Health Disparities in Latino Youth" Alfonso Mercado, PhD states that "Children and youth significantly underutilize mental health services and ethnic minorities are even less likely to receive mental healthcare." According to The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, even though high rates of mental health concerns exist in Latino youth, they are less likely than other groups to receive clinical or school-based treatment. Having culturally sensitive services is one key identified as important in the care of youth.

National estimates also suggest that Latino adolescents have higher rates of suicidal ideations, internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school. The results of the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2023) further support the need for these services, acknowledging "more than 4 in 10 (adolescent) students felt persistently sad or hopeless during the past year with nearly 1 in 5 seriously considering suicide."

We Rise's new youth mental health aspect of the MH SEEDs program will provide opportunities to support youth of all backgrounds and provide



culturally sensitive support groups to vulnerable populations.

Youth groups have a similar framework to our adult program but focus on youth needs and concerns. Each group is personalized to the individuals attending the particular host site.

We are excited for this opportunity to help educate, encourage and come alongside youth at risk for and experiencing mental health challenges. In addition to the support groups, referrals for individual counseling and case management services will help parents of participants to connect with services and resources (educational supports, after school programs, summer programs, etc.) as needed.

The first youth support group began this fall at a local high school. In a focus group to seek input from local youth about the mental health needs the high school group should cover, the youth suggested "Tranquillo" as the name for the groups. The Spanish word means both "don't worry" and "calm." We are very grateful to all those involved in getting ready for this new program and look forward to providing future updates on the positive impact it is having on the youth involved.

**Mental Health SEEDs:
Spanish-speaking, Educated,
Experienced, Dedicated**

We Rise Support and Education for Congregational Leaders in 2025



Pastor Joel Peña of Alpha and Omega Church of the Brethren leads morning singing.



Pastors Epi Cozme and Ana Gonzalez (Iglesia Nuevo Renacer, Mountville, PA) and Pastor Betzaida Droz (Un Nuevo Amanecer, Allentown) discuss strategies for addressing mental health challenges experienced in their churches and communities.



The Churches Care Online Course provides **18 hours of resourcing** in English to church leaders, administrators, and health professionals so their congregations can better support people experiencing mental health and substance use challenges. See page 6 for information about the January - February 2026 course.

Emotional Health and Pastoral Self-Care was the theme of a retreat in Spanish in March for pastors and their spouses in the Latino Community of the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren (CLIDHANE). Janelle Bitikofer was the primary presenter. Photos on this page are from the event.



Event Leaders (Maira Calix from *Part Time Pastor, Full time Church*; Pastor Joel Peña from *Alpha & Omega Church of the Brethren*, and Pastor Leonor Ochoa from *Iglesia de Ebenezer de Lampeter*) celebrate the end of a great weekend of mental health and self-care education.

Churches Care Online Course

18 hours of self-paced training over six weeks

Since 2019, the Churches Care Program has been strengthening the ability of church leaders and their congregations to provide effective support to individuals and families experiencing mental health or addiction struggles. One of the key components of this program is this 18-hour **training for clergy and lay leaders, health professionals, and social workers in churches.**



The Churches Care training includes:

- **Knowledge and skills for responding to mental illnesses & addiction.**
- **Stigma reduction strategies to strengthen the ability of your congregation** to support people who are experiencing mental illnesses and addictions.
- Tools to **increase your ability and confidence** for providing appropriate and effective referrals.
- **Educational resources** that include mental health and addiction/SUD agencies to empower links for effective support and treatment.
- **Networking** with cohort church leaders.
- **1.8 Clergy CEUs** are available from Brethren Academy.

2025 participants recommend the training:

“It literally gives all the information you need to know about understanding and helping people (and families) who struggle with the complexities of mental health and addiction. It truly is a work of art.”

“I think everyone in the church should know how to help someone who is struggling with their mental health. I think this would lessen the stigma around mental illnesses and make people feel more comfortable about asking their church to support them during their treatments.”

“It really gives a good overview of mental health and addiction and how the church can come alongside.”

Join the 2026 Winter Cohort

Sessions will be open January 18 - February 28. Visit weriseinternational.thinkific.com or contact Deborah Miller at health-team@weriseinternational.org for information.

We look forward to having you in the course!

CREATING A SPACE, FINDING OUR VOICE: WE RISE'S SEMILLAS PROGRAM

Benedict Corona, MH SEEDs/Semillas Program Assistant

My role as a Program Assistant with We Rise International's Semillas de Salud Mental Program has shaped me professionally and personally as I compile scholarly research and materials to support this program. One of my most pivotal projects to date was for the Latino Youth Mental Health Support Group Manual where I dived deep into research from reputable organizations such as CDC, MentalHealth.org, Morgan Stanley's Alliance for Children's Mental Health, SAMHSA, and We Rise's own data. As a Latino, I can attest that the information uncovered reflects an urgent mental health need.



There is an expectation to endure life's hardships without making a fuss, but that unyielding endurance has its price.

What struck me the most was the persistent mental health stigma Latino communities face. As a Latino, I have witnessed what is considered a silent struggle in one's own mind. There is an expectation to endure life's hardships without making a fuss, but that unyielding endurance has its price. As the CDC reports, more than 40% of teenagers in the United States are persistently sad or hopeless. Many Latinos experience cultural shame and a fear of judgment, which makes it even harder to seek help. On top of feeling shame, they are also enduring many struggles, such as translating for their parents, enduring financial struggles, and dealing with intense academic pressure, all while feeling the need to hide their emotions because they don't want to "bring their families down."

In the process of putting the manual together, I couldn't help but think about the people I know from my childhood, my education, and even the Latino folks I see on a daily basis. I reflect on many of the interactions we don't have too often, as well as the urgent need for healthy environments where young people feel comfortable, embraced, and free to express what is truly going on deep inside. For me, putting the manual together wasn't just a task, it felt like helping build a resource I would have wanted when I was younger, and something I know others in our community still need today.

Programs like Semillas de Salud Mental aren't just important, they're necessary. I see how support groups can change lives, and how shared language and shared understanding can help people open up in ways they never have before. Even in my assistant role, I've learned so much from watching this work unfold. It reminds me that healing doesn't always come from big moments; it often comes from small, consistent ones. A conversation, a story, a safe room full of people who truly listen. I'm proud to be part of this work with We Rise, and I hope what we're creating helps even just one young person feel a little more understood... a little less alone.

I'm on a journey of faith, learning, and growth. Nursing isn't just a career goal for me; it's a calling to care, to heal, and to serve. Beyond academics and work, my heart belongs to volunteering with MCLNPC Jovenes (Ministerio Conquistando Las Naciones Para Cristo Jovenes). This movement is part of an international Catholic outreach whose mission is to bring spiritual renewal, healing, and transformation through retreats and community for youth. Outside of everything else, I'm all about enjoying life's simple joys. I love playing music and I play the violin, guitar, and trumpet. It's my way of expressing emotion and finding peace after long days. And when I'm not making music, you'll probably find me out fishing, soaking up quiet moments by the water. -Benedict Corona



This Giving Season

**Support
We Rise International!**

Your financial support makes our work possible.

All donations are tax deductible.

Please [click here to go to the donate page](#) for We Rise International,
contact us via Janelle@weriseinternational.org
or visit weriseinternational.org/donate