

## Youth Insights

## Report

2023-2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

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## Youth Advisory Council Overview

#### What is a YAC?

Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) are groups of young people who help support organizations. These councils are a great way to engage youth and incorporate their voice within organization-wide initiatives, fostering social connectedness and subject matter expertise.

#### **The Benefits**

According to the CDC, YACs offer opportunities for youth and adults to work together and build strong partnerships. They can blend youth points of view and experiences with that of adults to build strong partnerships. There are several Youth Advisory Councils across the state that focus on a variety of community topics, including ours, which focuses on public health topics.

#### **How to Start a YAC**

Whether <u>your YAC</u> is for a school, local health district, or non-profit organization, it's essential to begin by aligning the YAC's objectives with the organization's mission. Identify the key issues or areas where youth perspectives can have the most impact, and use these as a foundation for the council's focus. Recruit a diverse group who reflect the community's demographics and have a range of experiences and viewpoints. Foster an inclusive environment where their input is genuinely valued and acted upon. Keep communication open and provide them with leadership and decision-making opportunities that truly help shape the organization's initiatives and policies.

## Youth Advisory Council Overvier

#### Virginia Department of Health YAC

The Virginia Department of Health's YAC is led by two Youth Advisors that are paid employees of the state. These youth advisors work on planning projects, meetings, and discussion points for councilmembers in addition to collaborating with staff at VDH to represent youth of the state. Councilmembers of the YAC are aged 14-21 and apply to become part of the council in the spring of each year. The council holds monthly meetings and in the 2023-24 session, there were about 90 councilmembers across 20 counties in the Commonwealth.

#### **VDH YAC Structure**

Our first cycle had just over 160 applicants, 80 accepted members, and 3 subcommittees, culminating in 1 general body meeting every month of the school year. YAC subcommittees met multiple times a month and focused on targeted issues decided on by

youth.



Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee



**Community Health** Subcommittee

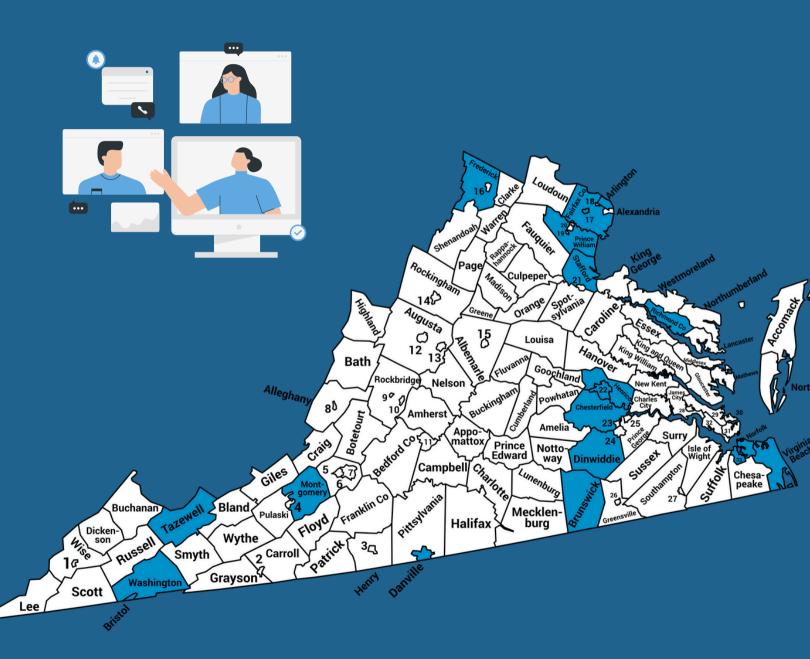


Mental Health Subcommittee



**General Body** Meetings

## VDH YAC Members Across Virginia

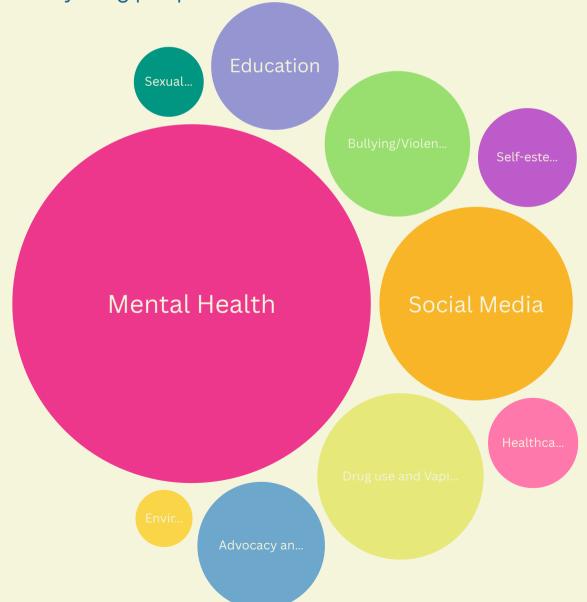


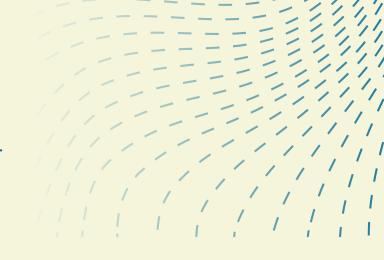
# VDH YAC Regional Diversity

Virginia is a well-established rural-urban state. Nearly 88% of the state is considered rural, but only 26% of Virginians live in those rural areas. In contrast, 74% of Virginians live in neighborhoods considered urban or suburban, which cover only 12% of the state's land (Virginia Rural Health Plan 2022-2026). As such, the youth living in disparate rural and urban areas face markedly different challenges, and have different needs for their communities.

Being a state-wide council, we've put a focus on regional diversity and have managed to reach nearly 25% of the 95 counties in the Commonwealth in our first round of applications. We hope to reach even more diverse areas in the future.

We kicked off the beginning of our Youth Advisory Council with our first general body meeting on October 19, 2023. We had 76 members attend our online meeting where we discussed the topics that are most important to youth. The results are represented below, with the bubbles' sizes representing the volume of young people who selected that issue:





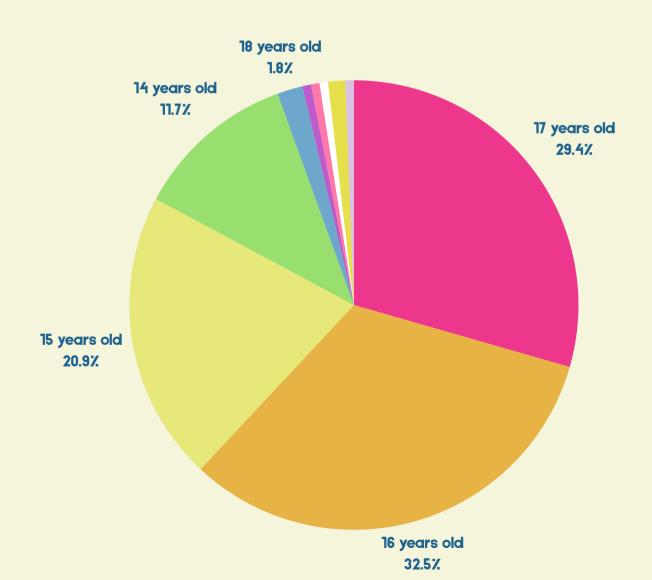
Ranked in descending order from most to least responses:

- 1. Mental Health
- 2. Social Media
- 3. Drug Use and Vaping
- 4. Bullying/Violence
- 5. Education
- 6. Advocacy and Community Involvement

- 7. Self-esteem
- 8. Healthcare Disparities
- 9. Sexual Health
- 10. Environmental
- Reform

Qualitative thematic analysis helped us identify that mental health is the biggest challenge that Virginia youth feel they are facing today. This is unsurprising, as Virginia is ranked 48th in the nation for youth access to mental health care, according to Mental Health America.

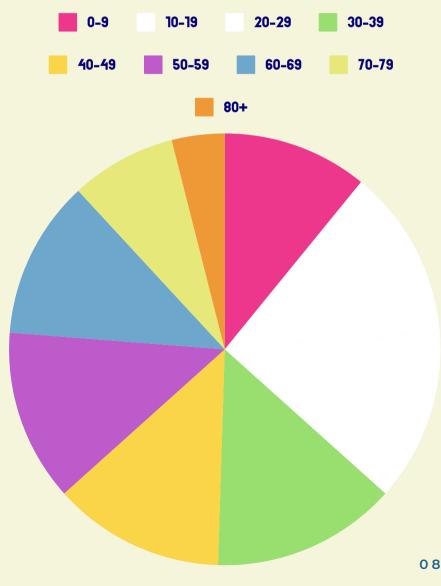
Our age ranges for the Youth Advisory Council are from 14-21, aligning with the typical ages of people progressing from the start of high school to the end of undergraduate schooling. Our age range is also keeping with the <u>CDC</u> recommended definition of Adolescents and Young Adults being from 12-21. According to the data presented below, our average member's age is 16 years old. The next most commonly represented ages are 15 and 17, which are immediately below and above the average age, respectively.



Population data indicates that adolescents, young adults, and youth overall make up a sizable portion of the population in Virginia, representing over 1 in every 4 Virginians. Yet, these same populations often feel severely underrepresented in the decision-making processes for their communities and themselves.

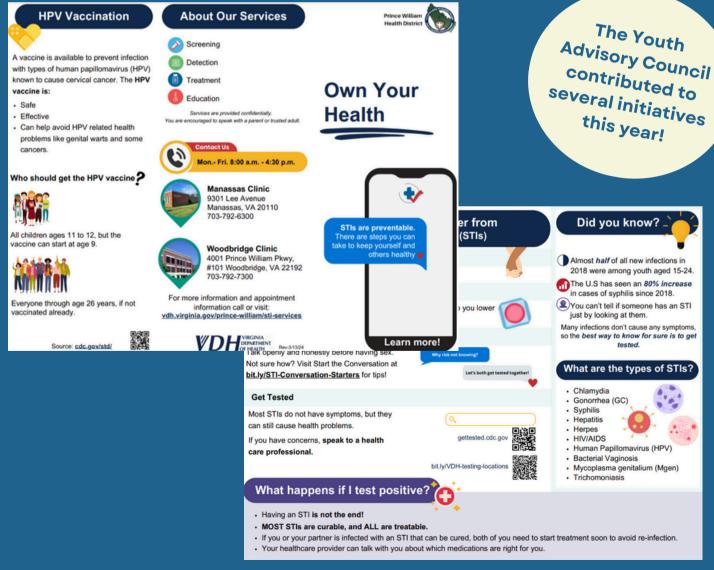
Using recent data from the 2022 Census, it was reported that a total of 26% of the Virginia population are youth and young adults aged 10-29 (10-19: 13%, 20-29: 13%).

The data depicted in the chart shows percentages of the state population by age, with ages 10-29 being highlighted in white to emphasize their representation.



#### STI BROCHURE

The YAC was asked to provide feedback on a sexually transmitted infection (STI) brochure to be handed out to school-age adolescents. Councilmembers provided significant constructive feedback, contributing to Prince William County's development of health education materials. Their feedback was taken into consideration and became vital to the creation of the materials produced and disseminated by the local health district.



## **IMPRUVON** FOCUS GROUPS

20 Councilors were selected to participate in research and development focus groups for an app being built by the health management company Impruvon Health, funded in part by a grant through Prince William County Health District. This evolving app is focused on mental health care-providing motivation, coping skills, daily reminders, check-ins, and general mental health services that will be customizable for youth. Our members were compensated for their work, and they completed the following:

- Attend 1 hour Virtual Focus Group with Project Team
- Review C3 App Goals, Features, & Approaches
- Provide Targeted Feedback about C3 App Features





## APHA PAI

6 members of the Youth Advisory Council were sponsored to attend the American Public Health Association's Policy Action Institute with the VDH Youth Advisors. Hosted online and inperson, the Policy Action Institute brings together public health leaders, students, and professionals for a collaborative event to discuss proven and proposed policy solutions to tackle today's most pressing health threats at the local, state, and federal levels.

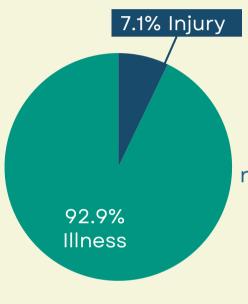
AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION
For science. For action. For health.

Councilors had the opportunity to hear from preeminent leaders in public health. Two Councilors even presented their own policy proposals on public health issues affecting youth in Virginia.



#### YAC Engagement

The YAC contributed to an informal survey conducted by the Youth Advisors, regarding School Nurses in Virginia. Councilors provided insight on the relationship between School Nurses and students, and how this relationship can be expanded to promote connectedness and safety within the school community.



#### What are students going to the school nurse for?

The results of this survey tell us that school nurses are often under-utilized for only minor physical ailments. Many of the students we surveyed did not see school nurses as a trusted adult to advise about mental health concerns, but we can change this!

#### **SOLUTIONS**

- 1. Mental health check-ins, visit students where they are
- 2. Meet your students, establish rapport early on in the school year by introductions
- 3. Show school nurses care about mental health too! (ie. awareness days, infographics)
- 4. Destigmatize/advocate for mental health
- 5. Collaborate with guidance counselors
- 6. Teach students how to approach nurses about mental health



#### **Hear Directly From Youth**

These YAC Councilor quotes are featured in the Virginia K-12 School Health Toolkit under the Adolescent Health Education Resources section. See more in the toolkit available <a href="https://www.nee.gov.nee

"I joined the youth advisory council to make a difference in my community. As a student, daughter, older sister, and friend in today's world, I want to make a difference in youth public health in Virginia."

-Nadia, 15

"I joined the Youth Advisory Council, because I am invested in my community and want to contribute in meaningful ways to the mental health crisis that is affecting youth today. I have found my local volunteer experiences to be very rewarding, which is why I am so excited at the opportunity to be involved in public health at the state level."

-Elizabeth, 16

"I feel as if no matter how serious or life-threatening Mental Health can be, some households and some schools don't promote it or talk about it or spread little to no awareness at all about any form of Mental Health. I believe we as the youth, as the future, need to start speaking up about mental health issues and struggles that are serious and some that are even less talked about." -Kade, 14

In addition to Council-wide initiatives, our members also engaged in a variety of independent and targeted projects that they chose to focus on throughout the year. One such targeted project was the creation of awareness materials, a few of which are highlighted below.

#### AW/ARENESS



#### MONTHS

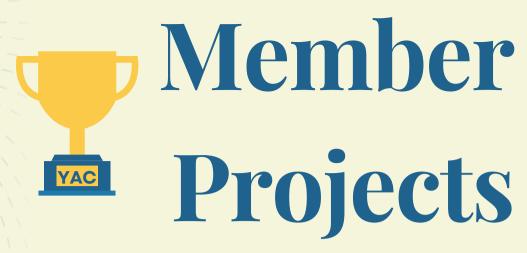
These flyers, infographics, and fact sheets were researched, compiled, and designed by our Councilors, focusing on both national and local public health issues. The materials shown above are from our November awareness month topics.

## Member Projects

#### **AFSP ADVOCACY DAY**

The Youth Advisory Council conducted a collaboration effort with the Suicide Prevention Interagency Advisory Group (SPIAG) to discuss proactive solutions to the issue of suicide among youth. Within this collaboration, the YAC was invited to attend the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Advocacy Day at the Virginia Capitol in Richmond. During this event, Councilor Clara O. had the opportunity to independently speak with Virginia state senator Aaron Rouse about suicide prevention among adolescents.





### EASTERN VIRGINIA MEDICAL SCHOOL COMPETITION



Eastern Virginia Medical School, also known as Virginia Health Sciences Center, hosts a yearly competition called Teen Health 360 for adolescents in Virginia to engage in an artistic and open dialogue about relationships, health, and wellbeing. 2023's theme was "What does a supportive relationship look like between an adult and a teen?". Two of our members received top places in the competition, emphasizing how public health thrives when it encompasses diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary fields, such as the arts.

- Councilor Maggie T. got 1st place for her haiku about the relationship between teens and their parents with a video breaking down the meaning behind every line in the haiku, which was written in both Chinese and English.
- Councilor Luna H. got 2nd place in the competition for her mixed media artwork depicting the often difficult process that teens and parents go through to find a healthy balance and understanding.

# Member Projects



One of our Councilors, Tanvi G., created a presentation to share with other Councilors at a general body meeting in April. Her presentation emphasizes the need for mental health professionals in schools and advocates for student accessibility to mental health care. See her presentation below.

School
Psychologists: Who
They Are and Why
We Need More

By: Tanvi Ganti



# Nember Projects

Another YAC Councilor, Elizabeth B., helped initiate a project in her own community. You can find details about the Green Pin Project below. In short, this project is about spreading awareness and destigmatizing mental health challenges among students in schools by visibly showing support using a green ribbon- an international symbol of mental health awareness.





#### What is the Green Pin Project

Elizabeth Buckman

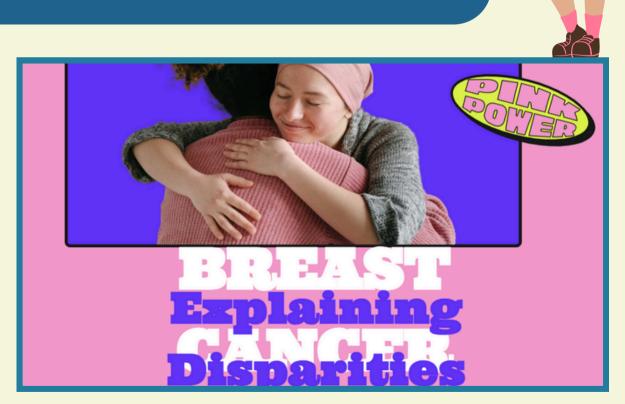
The goal of the Green Pin Project is for every middle and high school student in our county to receive a green ribbon pin to wear on their backpack. The hope is to show support and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues, so people don't feel alone and isolated. It's an amazing idea for all of the students in our schools to show support for each other.

I have worked with our county Student Advisory Board to implement the Green Pin Project in Stafford County. My goal is to spread it state-wide!

# Member Projects



Councilor Nyla E. presented her project on breast cancer disparities to our Community Health subcommittee in April. In her presentation, she discussed raising awareness about the disparities in breast cancer prevalence and closing the gap in health.





# Member Projects

Councilor Nadia L. initiated a project advocating for mental health literature in schools. Nadia recommended books that delve into age appropriate mental health topics as suggestions for schools to incorporate. Check out the flyer she made below to review some of her suggestions.





### Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee

We established the Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee because members expressed interest in policymaking. This group discussed public policy's relevance to Virginia's public health initiatives. Together, we spent time learning about the General Assembly and its processes that affect us. Members of this subcommittee learned about different bill tracking methods-including VPAP and LIS.

#### HIGHLIGHTING ADVOCACAY

During this cohort, we've highlighted the importance of advocacy among young people. Prior to joining the YAC, many members expressed a lack of avenues to learn about policy, legislation, or government functions. To address this, we taught them about open-access resources and informed them of local advocacy events tailored to their interests. By the end of the cohort, Councilors expressed more confidence in their ability to stay informed on public health issues and utilize opportunities to increase civic engagement.

#### Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee

#### **SUICIDE PREVENTION**

Suicide is the <u>second leading cause of death</u> in Virginia for people aged 10-24. Some legislative priorities regarding suicide prevention that were discussed in the Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee include:

- HB 498/SB 225: Parental Notification of Secure Storage Responsibilities
- **HB 37:** Mental Health Professional Loan Repayment Program
  - Members of the YAC want to see more mental health professionals in schools
- HB 224: Mental Health Awareness Training for Public School Personnel



IN A CRISIS?

It's okay to ask for help.

CALL OR TEXT 988

or text TALK to 741741



### Mental Health Subcommittee

We formed the Mental Health Subcommittee after Councilors prioritized it as the key issue for the year. As a Council, we broached several topics about mental health over the cohort. One important subject became mental health in schools. We began to follow legislation in the General Assembly on this topic. Like the policy and advocacy subcommittee, we honed in on one specific bill.

#### **HB603 SUMMARY**

Requires health instruction provided to elementary and secondary school students to include certain topics relating to mental health that are enumerated in the bill, including (i) general themes of social and emotional learning, including self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness; (ii) signs and symptoms of common mental health challenges; and (iii) mental health wellness and healthy strategies for coping with stress and negative feelings, including conflict resolution skills.

### Mental Health Subcommittee

#### **COUNCILMEMBER THOUGHTS**

Generally, HB603 had a positive reception as students are acutely aware of how important it is do address mental health in schools. However, several questions seemed to be unanswered in the outline of this bill. How is this going to be implemented? Are teachers going to be comfortable teaching this content? Will teachers be paid more to teach this content? Who is creating the curriculum? What other supports will be put in place to aid students struggling?

What are the specifics of this bill?

A good idea would be to have a student/adolescent task force to help implement the complexities of this bill, as students know the most about youth mental health.



## Community Health Subcommittee

The Community Health subcommittee was created to address several public health topics that affect communities, including: drug use, sexual health, violence prevention, healthy relationships, and more. In the beginning of the cohort, this subcommittee's members grouped together to make resources for the awareness days of that month. The awareness days included were:

- National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month
- International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day
- National Diabetes Month
- International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against
   Women



## Community Health Subcommittee

#### **COUNCILMEMBER THOUGHTS**

Because community health is such a broad topic, most councilmembers agreed that next year we should incorporate more subcommittees that focus on different aspects of community health. Some member ideas included subcommittees on reproductive health, nutrition, and school health to name a few. Our members also emphasized creating some community-specific committees or councils that represent the interest of targeted areas in Virginia, emphasizing the need for more community engagement in diverse localities.



### Lessons Learned and Key Takeaways

- Youth Advisory Council meetings allow adolescents to learn about different public health topics, share their perspectives and opinions, and hear experiences from their peers across the state.
- Youth enjoy the opportunity to provide input and feedback, feeling that their voice is being heard and taken seriously in professional settings.
  - Their feedback has proven to be valuable to stakeholders across the state.
- Adolescents across Virginia value in-person events and community-oriented spaces. This seems to be lacking for many youth in the aftermath of COVID-19.

### Bird's Eye View On Mentorship

One of the most poignant takeaways that we found from our introductory cohort was that many youth have an unmet need for mentorship. Specifically, they have a great need for peer-to-peer mentors, in which they can directly relate to the individual advising them, as well as adult mentors who can create inclusive and welcoming environments with mutual respect.

Youth are also in need of mentorship that equips them with practical and usable skills and resources, whether it be professionally, academically, or interpersonally. We've made efforts to practice all of these kinds of mentorship in the YAC through conferencing, networking, check-ins, group activities, and workshops on important skills, like the workshop shown below:

# Index HOW TO WRITE ABOUT THE YAC ON CVS FOR COLLEGE/GRAD SCHOOL HOW TO WRITE ABOUT THE YAC ON RESUMES FOR JOBS HOW TO WRITE ABOUT THE YAC IN ESSAYS AND COVER LETTERS HOW TO ASK FOR REFERENCE LETTERS FROM THE YAC

## Future Plans for the YAC

Based on our takeaways from this cohort along with member feedback, our plans for the next cohort include:

- Implementation of leadership positions
- Planned in-person events (advocacy days, conferences, etc.)
- Creation of new subcommittees
- Collaborations with other youth-serving organizations
- Updates to the VDH Adolescent Health webpage
- Eventual creation of chapters of the YAC across different counties in Virginia to promote more in-person collaboration and connection among councilmembers
- PSA's on Adolescent Health created by councilmembers and promoted by VDH
- Peer-led Public Health education programs designed by councilmembers



#### A Special Thanks To...

- Rachel Brown Adolescent Health Coordinator
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- Dr. Vanessa Walker Harris Office of Family Health Services Director
- Joanna Pitts Virginia School Health Nurse Consultant
- The Division of Child and Family Health
- The Office of Family Health Services

...for supporting the Adolescent Health Team, Youth Advisors, and the YAC!

## Thank you to our Councilors!

SAMIKSHA P. ZYANA F. MUNIBA I. RILEY H. STEPHANIE F. BELLE D. CAROLINE L. KANIKA S. NAOMIY. MARON G. ZAREEF S. AMY S. TYLER F. NADIA L. OWEN N. B. AZADEH H. NATALIE S. MORGAN S. RIA C. JAMIL T.

WILLIAM X. AWA B. ANANYA G. MAX K. SAVANA J. ANKITA M. KATIE R. MAX L. CORA B. AARYA M. AAHANA P. TOPANGA M. AAIZA R. ANNIE E. LANNAH O. EMALEE M. GABRIELLE C. CHANDLER H. EMILY T. TANVI G. JESSICA T. SHRIYAA A. PAULA A. NAOMI B. MEDHA P.

PRANAVIA. NAZIFA P. NEHA B. LANE S. MONONA Z. ANKITH B. AVA W. EMILY M. ISABELLA C. KENNEDY C. TATIYANA K. STACY R. MAGGIE T. MAEVE C. LUNA H. RANIA L. MAHIKA D. LACY D. ELIZABETH B. RADHIKA B. VIRINCHI K. GABRIELA M. THAELIA L. ALIANYS R.V. BETHANY A.

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## Thank you for your interest in the YAC Cohort

2023

2024