Support for Youth and Families of Undocumented Status

For immigrant children, fear of being forcibly separated from family through deportation is clearly traumatic and threatening, especially due to many immigrant populations’ emphasis on the centrality of family. Many youth risked their lives to come to the United States to reunite with family members and have themselves often escaped traumatic and life-threatening events in their home countries that propelled them to seek refuge among family and relatives in the U.S. The threat of separation from family, or of the return to life threatening circumstances, generates a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. The uncertainty for the immediate future and shift in life plans can be especially distressing. At the same time, LGBTQ youth may be particularly frightened that civil rights and broader social acceptance that has been advancing in recent years are at risk. Taken together, these fears increase a sense of isolation and hopelessness for these youth and families. As a result, many people are reaching out to community organizations for support, and these organizations can benefit from information about mental health supports and crisis response.

Those who were anticipating continuing work and attending school are now experiencing uncertainty about their futures and the looming threat of deportation. For many of these youth, the US is the only country they have ever known and they are scared of both educational/employment disruption and deportation to their countries of origin, many of which are plagued by violence, and where they would be completely alone, without family, education, or employment. The heightened level of distress may put young people at risk for severe mental health concerns. Among those especially vulnerable are:

- Recipients of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)
- Those whose family members also may be undocumented and experiencing the same distress and may not be able to obtain adequate support
- Visible minorities – due to skin color, style of dress (e.g., hijab)
- Gender non-conforming youth
- And those with pre-existing risk factors for suicidal behavior, such as:
  - Depression and anxiety disorders previous to the election
  - Prior suicide attempts or non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors
  - Substance use
  - Impulsive aggressive behavior
  - Socially withdrawn/isolated
IMPORTANT STEPS ADULTS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT YOUTH

1. Model positive coping and stay calm. Communicate with your words and your behavior that you will keep them safe.

2. Ensure and promote safety.
   - Many of the racist and hateful things people say or do are not only wrong, but also against the law. Reach out to authorities and leaders who can help hold individuals accountable for promoting hatred.
   - Help youth identify safe spaces and safe adults who can speak up on their behalf.
   - Know your rights – attend a know your rights presentation
   - Make a family preparedness plan

3. Connect with social support and decrease sense of isolation
   - Universities and schools can offer circles of support, and other safe spaces for students to express concerns and seek support
   - Connect with faith communities, a source of support for many refugee/immigrant communities

4. Raise awareness of organized support for refugee/immigrant/LGBTQ rights. Just knowing that there are organizations who will safeguard their rights can be reassuring to youth. Increasing their sense of control and influence over their environment and their future promotes hope. By donating to or volunteering with these organizations, adults and youth both increase social support and sense of control over their situation.
   - It's important not to challenge or dismiss a young person’s fears that prejudice will harm them. However, reassure them that there are people and organizations who will help.
   - Affirm LGBTQ identities by actively showing support for LGBTQ youths' orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Support can include helping the young person attend LGBTQ youth groups, advising or attending the LGBTQ student groups at your school if you are an educator, or including a young person's LGBTQ friends in family events if you are parent or family member.

5. Promote healthy coping. Good ways for youth to cope include:
   - Keeping family and school routines
   - Relaxation practice
   - Talking and spending time with family, friends, or faith communities
   - Distraction
   - Using humor
   - Scheduling pleasant activities
   - Exercising
   - Writing in a journal
   - Being creative or artistic
   - Avoiding substance use and isolation
   - Limiting media use to avoid repetitive images and messages that remind them of bad events.
6. Link with available services & familiarize yourself with signs of distress and signs of potential suicidality

- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Dramatic mood change
- Threatening to kill him/herself
- Talking, thinking, or writing about death or suicide
- Feeling hopeless or helpless
- Unusually reckless behaviors
- Giving away prized possessions

**CRISIS RESOURCES**

**FOR ADULTS:**
- Call 911 or go the emergency room
- Contact Crisis/Emergency Mental Health Partners (listed by city in IL)
  
  http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=30893

**FOR CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS:**
- Call 911 or go the emergency room
- Call CARES Crisis Line, SASS Services (Illinois crisis mental health services program for children & adolescents)
  - 1-800-345-9049 (voice)
  - 773-523-4504 (TTY)

When calling 911 in Chicago, request Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) officer

- Crisis Text Line
  - Text HOME to 741741
  - http://www.crisistextline.org
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
KEY WAYS ADULTS SHOULD COMFORT CHILDREN

1. Remind children that ‘Adults around you will protect you.’
   ○ Kids are scared by adult reactions, like strong emotions, violence, or talking about moving to Canada. This makes kids think that adults in their life are not in control and cannot keep them safe.
   ○ It is important for parents to model taking care of themselves and good coping skills.

2. Remind individuals we have a system of checks and balances.
   ○ There are democratic processes in the US government that keep one person from acting like a dictator and ruling forever.
     ○ These processes take time
   ○ Lawmakers can use democratic processes to prevent the president from making decisions alone.
   ○ There are already proposals of legislative actions that would provide some relief for individuals with DACA

3. Remind them there is still hope, and people will fight for them.
   ○ The United States is a country of immigrants.
   ○ Our country is founded on the principles of freedom of religion.
   ○ Human and civil rights organizations will fight for individuals’ rights and to prevent unlawful decisions.