



**Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council
Hearing on Mental Health Needs of Children in Kensington Kids
Donna Cooper, Executive Director
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Good afternoon, Council members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm Donna Cooper, the Executive Director of Children First.

We know that the opioid crisis has devastated communities across Philadelphia, and nowhere is that more visible than in Kensington. However, our conversations often focus only on clinical treatment services for adults. When we talk about the impact of the opioid crisis on kids and the resources to address kids' mental health, we usually talk about intervening with kids after a crisis or mental illness is clearly present.

I want to thank CM Lozada for convening this hearing on how to tackle the traumas kids in Kensington experience. My main point in today's testimony is that if we want to break the cycles of trauma for kids in Kensington, we must broaden the touch points for kids to receive support for their mental health. In addition to treating the most extreme mental health needs for kids, we must invest in children BEFORE they reach the point of crisis intervention.

Right now, the children growing up in Kensington are carrying trauma that shows up as academic or social struggles in school, difficulty regulating emotions, or withdrawing from their peers. This can be a widespread experience for kids in Kensington because the traumas they encounter are baked into their daily lives. Reactions to trauma like struggling in school, withdrawing from friends, or lashing out with extreme behavior are early warning signs that, when left unaddressed, will escalate.

The opioid settlement funds give Philadelphia a unique chance to do something different. Instead of piecemeal programs that stand to disappear when a grant ends, we can use these dollars to test and build innovative funding approaches that sustain prevention and early engagement services for kids. This means:

- Supporting schools to provide more access to Tier One and Tier Two services – screenings, light-touch counseling, and mentoring
- Investing in training for teachers, out of school time workers, and parents and caregivers, who are the frontline in noticing when a child is struggling
- Creating braided funding models where the City, CBH, and philanthropy are backing these prevention services so that they don't disappear when the opioid funds are spent.

In addition to the opioid settlement dollars, the City has county funds available to support kids' mental health services. The county block grant dollars are a flexible source of funding that can support the trauma-informed prevention services that our kids so desperately need. Council, in collaboration with the MDO and DBHIDS, can guide the use of these funds to ensure that the great services and programs we've heard about today are reaching all children in the District.

Additionally, the unique relationship between CBH and DBHIDS presents the opportunity to leverage Medicaid dollars innovatively to promote mental health and wellbeing. Whether through reinvestment funds or a state-approved pilot program, CBH can apply IBHS regulations to fund more community-based mental health programming. Piloting innovative programs in Kensington could serve as a model for a broader reach across the City and state.

Protecting and promoting youth mental health prevents future substance use. It gives kids the tools to break cycles of poverty and addiction that they may witness everyday. This is about giving children in Kensington the same chance as any child in our city to grow up with safety, resilience, and hope.

Council has the opportunity to set a precedent: use existing funding streams innovatively, including the opioid settlement dollars, county block grant, and Medicaid funds, not only to respond to today's crisis, but to build upstream supports that prevent tomorrow's crisis. If we miss this moment, we risk seeing another generation grow up in the shadow of addiction. If we seize it, Philadelphia can lead the way in demonstrating how communities can heal.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to our city's children.