NINA MOINI: Minnesotans know the state has been through a lot over the past six years. The COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the Annunciation Catholic School shooting, the killings of Melissa and Mark Hortman, and Operation Metro Surge. It's kept the state under a microscope and affected every individual in different ways.

A new report from the mental health advocacy group NAMI Minnesota looks at what happens when traumatic events affect not just individuals, but entire communities, and when those experiences start to pile up. Marcus Schmit is Executive Director of NAMI Minnesota. Welcome back to the program, Marcus.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Thanks, Nina. Always great to be with you.

NINA MOINI: It's sad to go through a list that we are all familiar with of these multiple traumas. And I understand this report here draws on interviews with 20 mental health providers, leaders in their communities. It documents some of these more lasting health impacts, or perhaps compounding. And you look at these series of events over the last six or so years, why did you feel it was an important time to put something like this together and take a closer look?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, well, you named a series of those traumatic events just a minute ago. Minnesotans have been through a lot. We're all tired, particularly providers who are on the front lines. They're experiencing a lot of secondary trauma. And months ago, as our team was thinking about how we could help, we felt like it was important to commission this report, engage with providers, community and cultural healers, health and grassroots leaders across the state to really focus on actionable solutions. We're proud of the work and we're ready to get started.

NINA MOINI: Can you say, Marcus, a little bit more about this idea of collective trauma? Is it just that, you know, we were all there? Or how does that appear in community? How does that go from person to person, and how do you see it?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Well, we know collective trauma occurs when there are traumatic events, and those traumatic events and their effect on entire communities disrupt people's sense of safety, disrupt relationships, and just really impact their daily lives. And we know Minnesotans have experienced overlapping and cumulative trauma over the last few years. And those impacts vary by individuals and cultural identity, geography, access to resources.

But we really need a collective response to this collective trauma. And that's what the report outlines, and focuses on those actionable solutions.

NINA MOINI: I do want to talk about solutions, but I also want to say a little bit more about some of the longer-term impacts that you're seeing, months, years later. How was that manifesting in people's mental health, but perhaps also physically, economically? Are there some connections there?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Of course. We still know that families are too afraid to go to work. They're too afraid to send kids to school. They stayed home for weeks, months, lost income, struggled to get access to food. A lot of the folks that we serve who are living with mental illness stopped getting care for a period of time, especially those who rely on Medicaid. And those needs grew more serious.

And, above all else, our kids absorbed a lot. And our parents also had to respond to their kids' needs. And I think people are just exhausted and still living with the mental health impacts of all of that and require support. They're living with anxiety, depression. We know that thoughts of suicide are rising in young people, and we need to talk to parents and teachers and coaches and community leaders and everybody in those kids' lives to make sure that they have the help that they need to talk with those kids.

NINA MOINI: And as you began to look into some solutions, how did you break that out? Just since so many areas of life are impacted.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, they are. Well, we applied the mental health lens, and the conversations really pointed towards the answers. Really appreciate the work that our researchers did who led the report. And ultimately the takeaways fell into three buckets. One was expanding access to care. People turn first to family, then trusted community members and then their doctor. And we need to figure out how to meet them there.

Our workforce, particularly in greater Minnesota, is really struggling. There's such a strain out there. And every interviewee described that burnout. Greater Minnesota has too few providers and too few that come from diverse backgrounds. And finally, we just need to continue to tackle stigma. When healing is community-led and uses familiar language, that stigma is going to lessen.

So we need to build that multilingual awareness effort within communities, and really make sure that it's being shared by trusted messengers. So giving parents, caregivers, teachers those practical tools to spot the distress, and then get the help that they all need.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hmm. Where are you hoping that this report could be used? Or is this something that everybody can read the report? And how are you hoping that not only lawmakers, but others can begin to use it?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, I mean, everybody. I think our legislature is going to play a really important role. We know that funding is an element of this. We also know that our state agencies are positioned to make smart changes to existing programs so that we are able to increase access. I think we really need to consider simplifying programs that are providing Human Services across the state, particularly mental health support, so that they're easier to use, they're simple, they're more sustainable.

We also recognize that philanthropy can step up and meet this moment, that our health partners can step up to meet this moment. And we need to make sure that we're continuing to provide support to our schools, where we know that kids are going to be present, adults are going to be present. It's a great place to deliver resources, but we need to be really conscious of the stress and expectations that we're putting on our educators right now.

NINA MOINI: When you did talk with community leaders, mental health providers, how were you identifying where-- which areas to locate people to interview and what types of different providers to interview? How did you get that group together?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Through community engagement. I'm really proud of our team. We do quite a bit of outreach in communities across the state and in the midst of immigration enforcement, particularly Metro Surge. But we knew that immigration enforcement was hitting communities across the state. Our staff just really stepped up to meet the moment and connected with other organizations and folks who are in their networks to identify various organizations that were providing mental health support.

Some of those individuals were interviewed as part of this process. We have great relationships across our health care community in Minnesota, and just really got connected almost through word of mouth. And we saw relationships were just so important over the last year, and they've been important over the last six years. And they're going to be part of the solutions here moving forward. So really relying on that lived experience, those who are on the front line are helpers to inform these actionable solutions.

NINA MOINI: What do you think healing actually looks like for Minnesota? I mean, are there metrics that you use? I mean, not to get so granular, but overall, as we assess history, and we're looking for trends, how do you know if some of these things that have been lost are being gained back or if people are doing better?

MARCUS SCHMIT: That's a great question. A couple of ways that we have measured our success at NAMI Minnesota are people served. Last year, through our education and support groups, we served over 53,000 Minnesotans. We think through this Healing Minnesota Initiative that helped fund the report, we're going to be able to double our impact over the next three years, but we're only going to be able to do that work through community partnerships.

And one of the elements of this initiative is to provide community funds to organizations that are already doing really important mental health support within communities. So that's one way. How are we-- how many people are we serving. And I think another way is what's our set of resources. We do have evidence-based practices. We know what works. And we know that we need these resources to be even more culturally informed to reach more Minnesotans.

And so that's also something that we're taking really seriously through this initiative is shaping our resources through these authentic relationships with community organizations that are already doing that hard work. How can we make sure that our resources are getting deployed there. They're accessible to families and individuals who have been impacted, but that we're really adapting those resources or classes or support groups to make sure that they're meeting their needs.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Marcus, December 1 coming up here for a lot of people feels like the one-year mark, at least of the height of the Operation Metro Surge, or the federal agents surge that came into Minnesota. The winter months are approaching. I mean, what is your message to folks just heading into winter about taking care of themselves?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, this is particularly a tough time of the year, regardless of the series of traumatic events that we've all been through. Make sure that people are connecting, right? The temperatures are getting cold. It's getting darker. It's doubly important to make sure that you're making time for family, friends, loved ones. You're also focusing on your own wellness, that you're really thinking about what you can do to take care of yourself.

And then relying on our resources, right? NAMI Minnesota provides a number of various resources-- classes, support groups, they're all free. So you can check that out at NAMIMN.org. And then 988, which is the suicide crisis hotline, it's available 24/7. It's confidential. We really encourage people to reach out to that lifeline if and when they need it. But Minnesotans, over the last few years, have really showed the world how we respond to crisis and trauma, and I'm heartened. I feel like we're going to be able to show the world how we recover.

NINA MOINI: Thank you so much for your time, Marcus. Appreciate it.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Thanks, Nina.

NINA MOINI: That was Marcus Schmit, Executive Director of NAMI Minnesota. If you or someone you know is struggling, you are not alone. You heard from Marcus there. We'll say it again. Call or text 988 to get connected with trained counselors who can help. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7.