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# NCCs at Work: Advocating for Equitable Access to Mental Health Care

[home \(/\)](#) / [resources \(/resources/\)](#) / [nccs \(/resources/nccs/\)](#) / [newsletter \(/resources/nccs/newsletter\)](#) / [nccs-at-work-advocating-for-equitable-access-to-mental-health-care](#)



## The NBCC Creed »

Advocacy represents the very nature of the work that counselors do in helping others to be their best. In addition to providing care for their clients, counselors also have opportunities every day to effect change and promote social justice. Taking even the smallest steps to educate others about mental health care can make a difference.






This month, we reached out to some National Certified Counselors (NCCs) to hear about the work they are doing in their communities and how they are advocating for equitable access to mental health care services.

**Zori Paul, MA, NCC, PLPC, PCIT**, is a 2021 fellowship recipient through the NBCC Minority Fellowship (MFR). She is currently pursuing her PhD in counselor education and supervision at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on mental health in the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly bisexual women and cultural mentorship relations.

## The NBCC Creed »

“For counselors to truly advocate for equitable access to mental health care in underserved and neglected communities, we also have to realize that mental health care for these communities goes beyond affordable therapy sessions,” Paul says. “We need to advocate for issues that may not seem very mental health related, like affordable housing and increasing the minimum wage, legislation that protects the LGBTQ+ community, immigration laws, legislation that protects reproductive rights, anti-racism, anti-sexism, disabilities, and so much more. Creating equitable access to mental health care includes addressing the issues that we don’t see in our country and the world.”

In 2020, Paul co-founded Black in Mental Health (<https://www.blackinmentalhealth.com/>), which celebrates excellence in mental health and provides helpful resources and a place for counselors to support each other.

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“Black in Mental Health is an online initiative I co-founded that focuses on highlighting and amplifying Black mental health professionals, researchers, students, and advocates,” she says. “It originated, Black in X initiatives, in 2020 as a response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and experiences of anti-Black discrimination that occur every day that either go unheard or are covered like our annual Black in Mental Health Week, we have provided space for Black mental health contr share stories, and advocate for each other and the rich diversity in the Black community and menta Black in Mental Health continues to grow, I hope it can become an invaluable resource for Black m advocacy and continue to highlight the fantastic work that Black people in different areas of menta

**Pamela Fullerton, MA, MEd, NCC, LCPC, CCTP, C-DBT**, is a 2021 doctoral counseling MFP Fellow student at Governors State University in Illinois, she is the owner of Advocacy & Education Consult instructor at Northeastern Illinois University.

Fullerton, a Latinx counselor and clinical supervisor, along with two other MFP Fellows, recently cre Decided (<https://nbccf.org/about/article/fellow-led-giving-circle-seeks-to-support-undocumented-c-training>), an NBCC Foundation Giving Circle, to raise scholarship funds for undocumented counsel students. She often holds workshops for local agencies, schools, and organizations to support men awareness training and improve community involvement.

“I recently presented to National Louis University’s school counseling students on how to increase social justice, and advocacy in the schools as a school counselor,” she says. “The students enjoye learned new information, and created tangible action plans to implement into their work at their sch sites.”

Fullerton says she lives by the social justice and advocacy values she brings to her work, and that i means action.

“I remember working for a school during a time when the sociopolitical climate spewed falsities and undocumented immigrants on almost a daily basis,” she says. “I decided to wear a shirt that statec undocumented students.’ This was not a political statement (though I believe we cannot take politia as social justice advocates); it was an advocacy and social justice statement. I was asked by the a my shirt off or be reprimanded. I did not take my shirt off and instead washed it and wore it again. I your action is joining a protest or calling a legislature to help change laws to benefit underserved cc as you routinely engage in actions that will lead to social change in the spirit of diversity, equity, and advocating.”

Though we can all advocate for equity and access, Fullerton believes there is strength in numbers : others in the counseling profession to act now.

“Look at the research. We are still falling short in serving minoritized populations,” she says. “The b access to services and advancing social justice causes is a LARGE battle that none of us can take Where do you want to put your energies? Where do you believe you can make the most difference underserved populations? Find that area(s) and make a plan of action to do your part.”

**Kapil Nayar, MA, NCC, ACS, LPC, ChT**, a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision advocacy is concerned, counselors should ask themselves “If not me, then who?”

“It is an inquiry that my mentors have said to me time and time again,” Nayar says. “Generally spee we individually are a direct reflection of the field. Much of our work is emulated by our clients, and t clients’ nuclear homes, and transitively, more macroscopically, society. If we do not petition and ad clients, we are part of the problem.”

Nayar stresses that it’s every counselor’s responsibility to be an advocate.

“It’s through this front-line work that we have an obligation to advocate for our clients, not only bec ethical thing to do, but also because this is what we want our clients to eventually do for society,” f only way to spark change.”

He would like to see more movement in the political and legislative spheres, adding that counselors need stronger voices.

“I think there has been a lack of oversight specifically as it relates to nonprofit and for-profit accredited facilities, and that falls into loopholes established by our congressional bodies and lawmakers. Often this impacts most—folks suffering with mental health and/or substance use disorders—are not being listened to. I think this is the most important thing, we, as a field need to drive momentum toward change.

It is critical for counselors to speak up, even in difficult circumstances, he adds.

“Practice raising issues that you see to the highest echelon. I know our field is inundated at the moment more than enough on our plates, but how many of us shy away from doing the moral or just thing? To normalize this, I’ve started publicizing concerns I hear on social media just to prove that folks are endorsing such concerns. Counselors need to unite and petition for the field, just as we do for our clients. When a counselor advocates for a client, another counselor, or the profession in general, there is a ripple effect.

**Turesa Gilchrist, MSED, NCC**, a 2019 master’s counseling MFP Fellow and a school counselor in Virginia, says being an advocate for her students is essential to their success.

“I think it’s important for school counselors to advocate for equitable access to mental health care for underserved communities because it is an integral part of our role as agents of change. To best support academic motivation and achievement, we must first foster their social and emotional needs,” Gilchrist includes using our knowledge and skills to positively contribute to students’ mental health and psychological well-being. Building the success of our students means advocating for our most vulnerable populations to receive the services that they need to be adequately supported, represented, and empowered, both inside and outside of school. As school counselors, we can make sound, impactful practices by consistently working to ensure access to care for our communities in need.”

Gilchrist encourages other school counselors to take part in programs in their schools and to create their own as well.




“I serve as the Multicultural Education Advocate (MEA) at my school, as well as a member of the Multitiered System of Support (MTSS) team. My role as the MEA is to lead programs and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion. This includes leading a book study using Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain to facilitate discussions, as well as provide monthly awareness such as honoring Black History Month and National History Month. Through MTSS, I work to create a welcoming, positive, and supportive school environment through schoolwide initiatives for student and staff wellness through themes such as Virginia Kindness Week activities.”

Education is the heart of all advocacy efforts. By raising awareness about mental health, counselors can help remove barriers to care, increase access, and reduce the associated stigmas. Understanding social, economic, and cultural factors that impact mental health highlights the need for additional resources to address discrepancies.

“We have to keep in mind that not all students have the same protective factors in place,” Gilchrist adds. It is important to be intentional in collaborating with stakeholders and building necessary partnerships to best cultivate and utilize counseling resources and learning opportunities, especially for marginalized students. Through the ability to build genuine relationships and create a sense of belonging amongst our schools and communities, we can make a difference.

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


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