



For Immediate Release:
Monday, Jan. 26, 2009

Contact:
Susan Craig, 212-265-3174
CraigS@childpsych.columbia.edu

National Initiative Launches at Columbia to Increase Access to Mental Health Checkups for Teens

NEW YORK – Columbia University announces today the launch of the **TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups**. The center's aim is to detect mental illness in youth early by facilitating greater access to mental health checkups as a routine part of health care. The ultimate goal is to reduce and prevent disability associated with mental illness and its most serious consequence – suicide. Supported by a 4-year, \$12-million commitment from the Carmel Hill Fund, the National Center is partnering with primary care providers, mental health organizations, schools, and community-based programs in more than 43 states as well as elected officials in Washington and key state capitols to ensure youth at risk are identified and referred to services.

“Of the 21 million young people who visited a health care professional last year, only one in five was asked about their mental health,” said Laurie Flynn, the National Center's executive director. “Yet almost 14 million youth have a diagnosable mental illness and sadly only one-third of those children get help¹. Our goal at the National Center is to make a positive difference by ensuring that mental health checkups become a regular part of primary health care for teens across the nation.”

The TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups serves as a resource and ally for partners and advocates from the public and private sectors, non-profits and academic institutions. TeenScreen mental health checkup programs in schools and community settings currently exist in more than 500 communities. The National Center currently has collaborations with managed care and primary care providers in five states, including New York, Colorado, Nevada, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Key partners in these states include ValueOptions, Kaiser Permanente, GHI and HIP, and Cincinnati Children's Hospital. These partnerships are exploring effective models of incorporating teen mental health checkups into wellness and other health care visits. In addition, a key National Center initiative is underway to help shape the policy environment around youth mental health with the aim of expanding the availability of evidence-based mental health checkups to all teens.

Mental health checkups are safe, effective and can be easily administered in a doctor's office, at school, and in other youth-based settings. Utilizing a brief, evidence-based questionnaire, the mental health checkup takes about 10 minutes to complete. In the questionnaire teens are asked about symptoms of depression, anxiety and substance abuse as well as about suicidal thinking and behavior. Teens that score positive on the screening questionnaire are briefly evaluated by a qualified health or mental health professional. Those who are then found to have a potentially impairing mental health problem are referred for further professional assessment and care.

The value of early detection as a key strategy to reduce the disabling consequences of serious mental illness and teen suicide has been established by numerous experts including the [President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health](#), the [U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), and the [U.S. Surgeon General](#). The recent enactment of the Mental Health Parity Act (Oct. 2008) provides timely and significant support for the expansion of mental health checkups by reducing barriers to any needed subsequent care.

“Physical examinations should include a mental health evaluation to help identify adolescents who may need help,” said Mark Olfson, M.D., scientific director at the TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups and professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University. “TeenScreen has been

effective at identifying at-risk teens early. My hope is that the expanded center will help increase the number of teens who are connected with professional care.”

The National Center is an affiliate of the Columbia University Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City.

To learn more about the National Center for Mental Health Checkups, [click here](#) to sign up to receive its quarterly newsletter.

TeenScreen Schools and Communities, formerly known as the Columbia University TeenScreen Program, is the National Center for Mental Health Checkups' flagship program, offering voluntary screening to teens and their families through more than 500 local TeenScreen sites in 43 U.S. states. TeenScreen Primary Care is a new initiative of the National Center that aims to integrate routine mental health screening into adolescent primary care. TeenScreen Primary Care is being implemented through partnerships with managed care companies, hospitals and health centers in five states.

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¹<http://www.cdc.gov/omhd/AMH/factsheets/mental.htm>