



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BestSelf Announces New Initiative to Support Runaway Youth in Western New York

Buffalo, NY – BestSelf Behavioral Health, in collaboration with the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and the Buffalo Police Department (BPD) has launched a groundbreaking initiative to support runaway youth in Erie County. The two-year, \$175,000 pilot program—the first of its kind in New York State—aims to enhance the response to missing children by prioritizing their safety, addressing underlying trauma, and preventing criminalization.

With runaway cases on the rise, this initiative will serve as a model for Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) across the state. The project expands the capabilities of the **Scott Bieler Child Advocacy Center at BestSelf** to provide much-needed support for vulnerable youth.

Key statistics on local runaway youth include:

- In 2024, **Erie County** reported 680 missing child cases—**638 of which involved runaway youth**.
- In the **City of Buffalo**, 522 missing child reports were filed—**496 were runaway youth**.

BestSelf's initiative seeks to bridge the gap in services, ensuring that runaway youth are not just found but also provided with comprehensive care to address the root causes of their situation.

As part of the initiative, BestSelf is launching the search for a Youth Runaway Coordinator to strengthen the community's response to missing children. Currently, many runaway interventions are handled by the BPD. This new role will work alongside law enforcement, ensuring that once runaway youth are located, they receive the necessary group therapy, family support, and crisis counseling as they begin to heal. The coordinator will talk to the child to better understand the services they require, then connect families with resources at the Scott Bieler CAC at BestSelf, helping to address underlying needs through a multi-disciplinary team.

"We're incredibly proud that our Scott Bieler CAC at BestSelf was chosen as the pilot program, consistently proving itself as the premier CAC in New York State. We are looking at the youth runaway crisis through a preventative lens to address larger health issues down the road," said

Elizabeth Woike, CEO and President of BestSelf. “Our commitment remains strong to provide cutting-edge treatment and lead the way in collaboration and advocacy.”

Since a community-based response needs community input, BestSelf is holding two listening discussions to better understand the runaway youth crisis from those who it is affecting, learn how it is impacting them, and receive community feedback on what skills and knowledge they would like to see in this Youth Runaway Coordinator.

This program is made possible through funding from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo’s Racial Equity Roundtable, which is designed to create a more equitable approach to public health crises. Other key partners include the NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services, the NYS Missing Persons Clearinghouse, and the National Foundation for Missing and Exploited Children.

For more from Governor Kathy Hochul’s Office:

<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-new-initiative-connect-youth-who-repeatedly-go-missing-services-and>

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About BestSelf Behavioral Health

BestSelf Behavioral Health is the largest community-based behavioral health organization serving Western New York. It offers comprehensive services for mental health and substance use disorders. The organization serves over 40,000 individuals annually across more than 70 locations, focusing on trauma-informed care and person-centered treatment.