

## **STUDENTS GET A FIRSTHAND LOOK AT MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF STIGMA**

### ***School-based performance “Walk in Our Shoes” returns to local schools***

The school-based performance “Walk in Our Shoes” returns to California elementary and middle school campuses this fall, shedding light on complex and often misunderstood issues related to mental health. Research shows that stigma associated with mental illness develops during the teenage years, so “Walk in Our Shoes” was created to provide students with a first-hand look at what life is like for their peers living with a mental health challenge, fusing key information with the power of storytelling to block stigmatizing beliefs before they set in.

The “Walk in Our Shoes” tour is re-launching this school year following a successful tour in 2013 that performed in 31 counties to more than 18,000 students. Research conducted after the tour showed the performance significantly increased knowledge among students and also increased their compassion for students with mental health challenges. Teachers and administrators reported a positive change in tolerance, understanding and empathy around mental illness among students.

“Walk in Our Shoes has surpassed our own high expectations,” said Maureen Bauman, President of the California Mental Health Services Authority. “In addition to the powerful survey results, we also heard from teachers and students across the state about how the performance sparked positive dialogue on mental health in and out of the classroom. We are excited to re-launch the tour and give more students the knowledge and also the ability to speak up and ask questions to beat stigma.”

The storyline for “Walk in Our Shoes” is tailored directly to tweens’ current beliefs about mental illness; a recent survey of more than 600 11- to-13 year olds identified gaps in knowledge that can result in stigmatizing beliefs among this age group. The survey found that few students could correctly identify a mental illness and most knew little about the potential for someone diagnosed with a mental illness to lead a full and productive life.

Following the lives of four high school students, “Walk in Our Shoes” introduces their various experiences with both mental health challenges and stigma. It is performed by a touring group from B Street Theatre in Sacramento, a professional children’s theater with more than 20 years’ experience bringing subjects to school-based audiences including literature, history, math/science, cultural studies, and character education.

The facts demonstrate the need for this innovative approach. One-in-four American adults suffer from a diagnosable mental illness in any given year, but many don’t seek help because of fear of judgment, isolation and discrimination. Research shows that half of all mental disorders start by age 14 and three-quarters start by age 24. But, an average of 6-to-8 years pass after the onset of mood disorder symptoms and 9-to-23 years for anxiety disorder symptoms – before young people get help.

Through October 25 the tour will visit schools throughout California. A detailed list of tour dates is below.

“Walk in Our Shoes” is part of the multi-faceted campaign aimed to reach 9- to-13 year olds throughout the state. The school-based performance is supported by an interactive website featuring real-life narratives from California youth. In addition, it includes a place to design a virtual shoe that portrays and communicates each visitor’s unique perspective, thoughts and feelings. The resource-rich site also includes tools to aid parents and teachers in discussing mental challenges with their children. To learn more, visit [www.walkinourshoes.org](http://www.walkinourshoes.org). The full site is also available in Spanish and can be found at [www.ponteenmiszapatos.org](http://www.ponteenmiszapatos.org).

“Walk in Our Shoes” is part of a comprehensive statewide effort to increase the number of people who seek early help for mental health challenges by reducing stigma and discrimination around mental illness. It is a Prevention and Early Intervention program of California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), which is funded by the voter-approved California Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63).

### **“Walk in Our Shoes” Tour Dates**

August 25 – August 26:	Elk Grove
September 3 – September 5:	San Francisco
September 9:	Lake
September 12 – September 19:	Sacramento
August 27 – September 16:	San Joaquin
August 28 – September 5:	San Mateo
September 4 – September 11:	Yuba City
September 9 – September 23:	Greater Sacramento Region
September 24 – September 25:	Fresno
September 29:	San Luis Obispo
October 1 – October 3:	Kern
October 20 – October 24:	Greater Riverside Region

### **About the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA)**

CalMHSA is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Prevention and Early Intervention programs implemented by CalMHSA are funded by counties through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63). Prop. 63 provides the funding and framework needed to expand mental health services to previously underserved populations and all of California’s diverse communities.

### **About Prevention and Early Intervention**

Prevention and Early Intervention initiatives are voter-approved Prop. 63-funded programs aimed at preventing suicides, reducing stigma and discrimination, and improving student mental health. These initiatives transform California’s mental health services approach by uniting California’s diverse communities to embrace mental wellness and delivering the tools individuals need before they reach the crisis point. They are implemented as a coordinated effort by California’s counties for maximum statewide impact and cost effectiveness.

The Stigma and Discrimination Reduction initiative uses a full range of Prevention and Early Intervention strategies to confront the fundamental causes of stigmatizing attitudes and discriminatory and prejudicial actions toward people with mental illness, across ages and backgrounds.

### **About B Street Theater**

For more than 25 years the mission of the B Street School Tour has been to provide entertainment to children while encouraging in them a love for the theatre and a specific appreciation for the art of playwriting. B Street School Tour also offers playwriting workshops and an annual playwriting contest for children throughout Northern California. The Tour reaches approximately 200,000 children in 12 counties. For more information on B Street Theater visit [www.bstreettheatre.org](http://www.bstreettheatre.org).

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