

2024 END OF YEAR REPORT

# Wellness Without Limits:

Empowering Women by Removing Barriers to Mental Health





## Dear Friends and Supporters,

Thanks to your unwavering support, 2024 has been a landmark year in Sista Afya Community Care's mission to transform mental health care for Black women in Chicago. Your investment has helped us serve an unprecedented **650 women**, but numbers only tell part of the story. Each dollar you've contributed has created ripples of healing across generations, families, and communities. Through innovative, culturally-responsive care and peer support networks, we've built more than programs – we've created sanctuaries where Black women can finally prioritize their mental wellness without financial barriers or stigma.

Your partnership has powered bold initiatives that are reshaping community mental healthcare. This year, we launched **"Heal TogetHER," Chicago's first research-backed peer support program for Black women**, developed in collaboration with Dr. Marion Malcome of Loyola University Chicago. We expanded access to free therapy for teenagers through our groundbreaking "Thrive in Therapy for Teens" program, investing in the next generation's mental wellness. The opening of our

Bronzeville location marked another milestone, ensuring that quality mental health care is accessible to every Black woman, regardless of her ability to pay. Through **strategic collaborations** with Cent(her)ed Collective, Free Root Operation, and the Coalition on Urban Girls, we've amplified our impact across Chicago's communities.

**However, our work has never been more crucial.** In these turbulent times, Black women face unprecedented challenges – from economic instability to the highest recorded suicide rates in our community's history. The mental health crisis affecting Black women and girls demands urgent action, and with your continued support, **SACC stands ready to meet this moment** with innovation, compassion, and unwavering commitment.

As we look toward 2025, your investment in SACC does more than fund programs – it fuels a movement to **revolutionize Black women's mental healthcare**. We invite you to continue this journey with us, as we expand our reach, deepen our impact, and work tirelessly to ensure every Black woman has access to the mental health support she deserves.

**Camesha L. Jones-Brandon, LCSW**

Executive Director, Sista Afya Community Care



## Our Mission

Sista Afya Community Care builds sustainable mental wellness communities through providing affordable and culturally-centered community mental wellness care and education

## Our Vision

We believe in a world where mental wellness care is accessible and achievable for any woman that needs in their community.

# Removing Barriers, Building Futures

Black women have long faced systemic barriers to mental health care, compounded by the intersectionality of race and gender. Economic instability, community disinvestment, and the stigma surrounding mental health often leave Black women and girls without the resources they need to thrive. For the past four years, Sista Afya Community Care (SACC) has been a steadfast advocate and innovator, working to eliminate these barriers and provide culturally relevant, accessible care to those who need it most.



In Chicago, the need for organizations like SACC is undeniable. The city's decision to close half of its public mental health clinics in 2012, disproportionately affecting the south side, left a significant gap in care for historically underserved communities. SACC is stepping into this void with innovative programs and services that empower Black women to reclaim their mental wellness.

## A Vital Role in Accessible and Culturally Relevant Care

SACC is dedicated to creating pathways for Black women to heal and thrive. With a team of therapists who are all women of color, SACC ensures that clients are met with care providers who can understand their lived experiences and provide culturally aligned support. This approach has been transformative for countless women, who report improvements in their careers, relationships, stress management, self-regulation, and physical wellness after engaging in SACC programs.

As one client shared, "This was my first experience with therapy, and I felt so seen and supported. Having a Black woman as my therapist made all the difference in my journey."

Another client described SACC's impact, saying, "For the first time, I feel like I can put myself first and work through the things I've carried for so long. I'm finally free to live my life."

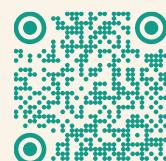
## Expanding the Pipeline of Black Mental Health Providers

In addition to its direct services, SACC plays a critical role in addressing systemic challenges within the mental health field. By providing clinical supervision for women working toward licensure, SACC helps increase the number of qualified Black therapists in the field. This is a significant step toward diversifying mental health care and addressing one of the profession's largest barriers.

## Breaking Barriers, Building Futures

SACC's work is more than just providing services—it's about dismantling systems of inequity that have long marginalized Black women. From free and affordable therapy options to the launch of groundbreaking programs like Heal TogetHER, SACC is making a meaningful impact that extends to families and communities.

As SACC continues its mission, the importance of accessible, culturally relevant care cannot be overstated. Black women and girls deserve a community that nurtures their well-being, and with organizations like SACC leading the charge, we are building a future where access to mental wellness care has no limits.

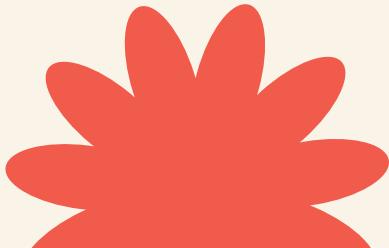


*SACC featured on PBS Newshour discussing the shortage of mental health providers in at risk communities*

# Thank You to Our Partners

We are grateful to our corporate partners and supporters, whose unwavering commitment and collaboration have been essential in breaking barriers to mental health care.

Your support has helped us empower women and teen girls and create a community that embodies Wellness Without Limits, ensuring access to quality mental wellness care for all.



## Foundation Partners

- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois
- Cigna Health Foundation
- Reva & David Logan Foundation
- The Aya Initiative
- Chicago Community Trust - African American Legacy Fund
- Chicago Foundation for Women
- Julian Grace Foundation
- Obama Foundation - Girls Opportunity Alliance
- Monarch Foundation
- Chicago LINKS

## Corporate Partners

- Northwestern Medicine
- Lululemon - Here to Be

- Loyola University Chicago (CHOIR and School of Social Work)
- Chicago Center for Relationship Counseling
- Sage Therapy Chicago
- Gro Community
- My Freedom
- Wintrust Bank
- Live Oak
- Mind Chicago
- Inclusive Therapists
- Flourish Counseling & Wellness
- Urban Wellness

## Government Partners

- Cook County Health
- Cook County Justice Advisory Council

# Program Highlights, Impact & Statistics

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# Thrive in Therapy

Thrive in Therapy provides free individual mental wellness care for people experiencing multiple barriers to care.

**Through our Thrive in Therapy program, SACC empowered women by breaking down barriers to mental health care.**

In 2024, we expanded access through Medicaid, insurance, and reduced fees, giving women more options to heal and receive care. By opening services to teen girls aged 13 and up through Thrive in Therapy for Teens, the program broadened its reach, offering a variety of care options without financial or systemic obstacles, ensuring more women and teens could prioritize their mental wellness.

## Thrive in Therapy By the Numbers



**165**

Total  
People  
Served

**2,559**

Free  
Therapy  
Sessions

**75**

Medicaid  
Recipients  
Served

# Community Care

Community Care provides free and low-cost workshops, groups, peer support, and wellness classes where Black women can connect, learn, and support one another with their mental wellness.

**Through Community Care, women were empowered to reconnect and build community after the isolation of the pandemic.**

The program offered both in-person and virtual engagement opportunities, fostering comfort and trust. Women participated in diverse wellness practices, including our first overnight retreat where eight women experienced healing and restoration in a fully supported environment. This transformative initiative helped women embrace community as a cornerstone of their mental wellness journey.

“

The Melanin Masterpieces was an awesome event that connected me with other women on the same journey of self discovery, awareness and improvement. The atmosphere was welcoming and safe. I was recharged after attending and I look forward to connecting in the future!”

#### Community Care Testimonial



*April Threatt, LPC,  
Maternal Mental  
Health Coordinator*

#### Community Care By the Numbers

**415**  
Total  
Program  
Participants

**19**  
Events,  
Workshops,  
& Classes

**20**  
Maternal  
Mental Health  
Participants

#### Advocating for Maternal Mental Health

In 2024, April actively engaged in advocacy by serving as a member of the Community Alignment Board in partnership with EverThrive and Family Connects Chicago, focusing on supporting new parents and their babies. The organization established strong relationships with other community partners to address mortality and morbidity rates among BIPOC-birthing individuals and to develop measures for birth equity. Throughout the year, Sista Afya attended community baby showers to raise awareness and improve accessibility for expecting parents. Additionally, the organization participated in the Chicago Department of Public Health's All Stakeholders Panel discussion as a community referral for maternal mental health services. Sista Afya also joined fellow community changemakers at the Bill Signing Ceremony for HB 5142, the Birth Equity Initiative, which aims to provide resources for community birth workers and enhance treatment options for outpatient mental health services.

# Developing Mental Wellness Warriors

Developing Mental Wellness Warriors (DMWW) provides low-cost professional development training to local organizations and businesses that focus on supporting people with mental health conditions. This includes Adult, Youth, and Teen Mental Health First Aid training relevant to the communities served.

**In 2024, Developing Mental Wellness Warriors equipped individuals to support others experiencing mental health challenges.**

With its highest attendance yet, the program trained 157 people, including participants from Chicago Volunteer Doulas, expanding its impact to maternal and child health. Empowered by their training, these mental wellness warriors became advocates and supporters, equipped to show up for women who are experiencing mental health crises.

## DMWW By the Numbers

157

People Trained

14

Virtual Trainings

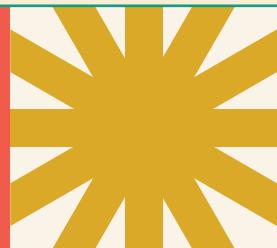
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**Organizations Trained: Artists Community Alliance, Chicago Volunteer Doulas, and Alternatives Inc.**

“

Ami was a stellar seminar leader and overall this gave me a valuable new awareness of how prevalent mental health issues are and the tools to be able to step in and hopefully make a difference in a crisis.

**DMWW Testimonial**



# Thrive in Therapy for Teens

Thrive in Therapy for Teens provides a range of therapeutic services, educational resources, and community engagement initiatives to empower teen girls in navigating their mental health journey successfully.

Adolescence comes with a distinct set of challenges and Black girls often face invisibility and harmful stereotypes that can hinder their mental well-being. Addressing these needs directly and intentionally is essential to their empowerment.

In early 2024, we expanded access to free therapy for teenagers by launching our innovative Thrive in Therapy for Teens program. Designed for girls aged 13-17, this program offers therapeutic services, educational resources, and community engagement

opportunities to help them successfully navigate their mental health journey. Thrive in Therapy for Teens is offered in collaboration with two girls-serving community organizations in Chicago—Gyrls in the H.O.O.D. and M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment.

This partnership has significantly increased the mental health capacity of our collaborators by ensuring that teen girls receive and have access to consistent mental health care. Through Thrive in Therapy for Teens, SACC is breaking barriers to wellness care and empowering the next generation to thrive without limits.

## Thrive in Therapy for Teens By the Numbers

**15**

Teens Receiving Individual Therapy

**46**

Teens Participating in VIBE Days



[VIBE Day highlight video](#)

# HEAL TogetHER

In April of 2024, we proudly launched Heal TogetHER, a free peer support program designed to provide Black women with a safe and empowering platform for shared experiences and mutual support. Developed in collaboration with Dr. Marion Malcome, social work professor at Loyola University Chicago, and informed by insights from 40 women from our community, Heal TogetHER stands as Chicago's first research-backed peer support program tailored specifically for Black women.

**The program's mission is to help Black women feel seen, heard, and supported by fostering meaningful connections that enhance their mental well-being.**

Through 30-minute virtual sessions, trained peer supporters provide one-on-one support to women facing mild to moderate mental health challenges. Participants gain emotional support, access to valuable resources, and a deeper understanding of mental health conditions.

Feedback from participants reveals the program's transformative impact. After working with a Heal

TogetHER peer supporter, women have expressed that they can better regulate their emotions and feel a sense of social connection. Heal TogetHER has proven to be a vital resource, breaking down barriers to mental wellness, offering Black women accessible, supportive care while strengthening bonds of community.



## Meet Our Peer Supporters:

*(Left) Corina Alexander, a persistent advocate for holistic wellness, who places a strong emphasis on movement for healing. (Right) Danielle Brown, an accountant and self-published author! She holds a dynamic background in trauma training for violence prevention and is a certified mental health first aider.*

“

The meeting I had with Corina was transformational for me. I can't even believe the "work" we did in 30 mins has had a better affect than my 6 months in therapy. This kind of support is NEEDED in our community because we can get lonely in a room full of people.”

[Heal TogetHER Testimonial](#)

## HEAL TogetHER By the Numbers



**45**

Women  
Received Peer  
Support

**89%**

of women either strongly agree(56%) or somewhat agree (33%) that they are better able to regulate their emotions.

**96%**

of women either strongly agree(70%) or somewhat agree (26%) that they feel a sense of social connection.



# Stories, Highlights, and Spotlights





# Authentic Alignment:

## Empowering Black Women to Thrive in Wellness and Work

We are proud to introduce Authentic Alignment, a mental wellness platform designed to empower Black women to embrace their authenticity, ambition, and alignment in wellness and work. This initiative reflects our commitment to addressing the unique challenges Black women face, particularly in their professional lives, while providing tools to support their holistic well-being.

Created specifically for early career professionals, Authentic Alignment is an empowering 4-month cohort experience tailored to uplift the voices and journeys of Black women in Chicago. Participants will explore topics including self-worth, Black women's workplace experiences, emotional intelligence, networking, resume writing, and how to enhance life beyond their careers.

Beginning in February 2025, this experience offers:

- **Biweekly Peer Support Groups**
- **Professional Development Workshops**
- **Topic-Based Wellness Classes**
- **Two In-Person Retreats**
- **Optional Mental Wellness Care**

Through Authentic Alignment, participants will thrive personally and professionally, building mental wellness and career skills while staying true to their authenticity and ambition. This initiative is a bold step in advancing our mission to make mental wellness care accessible, culturally relevant, and transformative.

We are excited to embark on this journey and are grateful to our donors and partners whose support makes programs like Authentic Alignment possible, enabling us to create opportunities for Black women to align their wellness and ambitions in ways that encourage growth and success.



**Learn more about  
Authentic Alignment**

# Partner Spotlight: M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment

## Removing Barriers to Mental Wellness Through Partnership

Sista Afya Community Care (SACC) proudly celebrates its partnership with M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment (MGE), a Chicago-based organization that has been empowering young Black girls to build confidence, pursue goals, and rise above negativity for over a decade. Founded by Shatina Edwards, MGE was born out of her personal experience with bullying in middle school—a struggle that deeply impacted her self-esteem and mental health. What began with four or five girls meeting in a library has grown into a transformative program that has served over 2,000 girls.

Shatina initially heard about SACC through word-of-mouth, but was officially introduced to Camesha Jones-Brandon when the two organizations received grants through the Girls Opportunity Alliance. With a shared mission of supporting young Black girls, a natural

partnership was birthed as a response to multiple requests from parents for additional support for their daughters, and SACC's commitment to expand its reach to teen girls.

While MGE focuses on mentoring and providing essential resources to its participants, SACC complements their efforts by offering therapy services to girls in need. This partnership has created a holistic approach to mental wellness, addressing both the emotional and practical challenges young girls face.

This partnership has also had a significant impact on MGE's organizational capacity. By offering free therapy services through SACC, MGE has been able to provide a more well-rounded experience for its participants. Parents have expressed their excitement and gratitude for these services, emphasizing the positive changes they've witnessed in their daughters.

Through its Girls Health Matters Initiative, MGE educates teens about mental and physical health, encouraging a holistic approach to well-being. Initiatives like mental health kits, yoga, and healthy living workshops empower girls to take charge of their overall wellness. As Shatina explains, "Education is key. We're teaching our girls not just

to recognize mental health concerns, but to advocate for themselves and seek the care they deserve."

By combining SACC's expertise in mental health care with MGE's mentorship framework, the two organizations are creating a brighter future for Black teen girls in Chicago by breaking barriers to mental wellness and ensuring that every girl they serve has the tools and support she needs to thrive.



**Shatina Edwards, Founder and Executive Director of MGE**



## **Karen Watts, MGE team member, describes the impact of the partnership with SACC**

One of the girls was dealing with bullying at school which really affected her self esteem and emotional well-being. Her mom signed her up for therapy with SACC and it has completely changed her. Her energy coming into our sessions has increased, she's happier, she's more mature, and has blossomed since she started working with Abajah (SACC Licensed Therapist). Parents consistently speak highly about the way Abajah works with their daughters—her rapport, relationship building, and the engaging activities. We've seen a lot of positive changes with our girls from the engagement with therapy, and their parents made it very clear that they don't ever want their children to go anywhere else, because they've had a phenomenal experience.

We've just seen a lot of growth with them just being able to have a greater level of self-confidence. My own mentee has talked about how she's able to have more control over her emotions, and is able to respond differently in situations where normally she would get angry. So she's gained a lot of coping skills from working with Abajah. That's so great.

# Looking Forward to 2025



## Looking ahead to 2025, SACC is excited to build on the progress we've made and embark on new initiatives to deepen our impact.

One of our primary goals is to strengthen our Heal TogetHER peer support model for Black women, not only by refining its approach but also by training other organizations to adopt and implement this transformative model within their own communities. Additionally, we aim to expand our reach beyond the South Side of Chicago by forming strategic partnerships with aligned community organizations, ensuring our programs touch even more lives across the city.

## In 2025, we are committed to enhancing our ability to provide holistic mental health care.

This includes introducing clinical case management services, expanding therapy options, and offering clinical therapy groups that foster healing in a community setting. These efforts reflect our unwavering dedication to meeting the evolving mental health needs of women and teens girls we serve and empowering them to thrive.

## Join Our Community

We believe that everyone has a part to play in breaking barriers to mental health care for Black women. We are creating a community embodying Wellness Without Limits, ensuring that Black women have the support they need to thrive and make lasting, positive change. Join our work!

**Give:** Become a monthly donor and join our Collective Care Giving Circle, or make a one-time gift at [communitycare.sistaafya.com/donate](http://communitycare.sistaafya.com/donate).

**Connect:** Sign up for our email list to stay informed and gain a deeper understanding of our work at [communitycare.sistaafya.com](http://communitycare.sistaafya.com).

**Volunteer:** Join Friends of Sista Afya Community Care and contribute your time and skills to support our work.

**Share:** Let women in your community know about our holistic mental wellness services by directing them to [communitycare.sistaafya.com/get-support](http://communitycare.sistaafya.com/get-support).

**Amplify:** Help spread the word by sharing our social media posts that resonate with you, and tag us [@sistaafya](https://www.instagram.com/sistaafya).

# Leadership



Executive Director  
**Camesha L. Jones-  
Brandon, LCSW**



President  
**Tandra M.  
Rutledge**



Treasurer  
**Dr. Arielle  
Smith**



Secretary  
**Rayell Grayson,  
LCPC**



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**Sarah Suzuki,  
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