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Kids Minds Matter announces March 18 mental health event: Unmasking the Epidemic

*Free public event will educate the community on the pediatric
mental health epidemic facing the community*

January 28, 2021) – It is no secret that COVID-19 has impacted our community, businesses, nonprofits and families. The isolation and uncertainty have also led to long-term mental health implications. To help address the mental health impacts to area children, Kids' Minds Matter is holding a free "Unmasking the Epidemic" virtual event on March 18.

The keynote speaker for the event is Brad Hunstable, founder of Hayden's Corner. The world lost Hayden Hunstable to suicide in the middle of the mandated stay-at-home orders on April 17, 2020, just four days before his 13th birthday. Hayden did not struggle with depression nor did he have a history of mental health problems. His parents attribute Hayden's emotional suffering to a "perfect storm of routine disruption, social isolation, increased gaming, and a pressure stack of activity cancellations," all created by the government's mandated stay-at-home orders in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Brad posted a heartbreaking video two days after burying his son and spoke of an "emotional bubble" that he believed was about to burst in America. His video hit home with parents all over the world, immediately going viral, and amassed more than 110 million views with countless comments.

The Unmasking the Epidemic virtual program officially kicks off at 7 p.m. with emcee Kellie Burns from NBC-2. Virtual doors will open at 6:30 p.m. with a pre-show preview of programs and resources from area mental health agencies and community partners of Kids' Minds Matter, Golisano Children's Hospital and Lee Health. Featured during the event will be local high school students who will share their personal struggles with mental health issues and why they are advocating for enhanced mental health services.

Kids' Minds Matter is dedicated to fostering partnerships that support existing services, identifying and filling gaps in the continuum of care, and innovating new treatments to meet the pediatric mental and behavioral healthcare needs in Southwest Florida. The goal of Kids' Minds Matter, Golisano Children's Hospital and Lee Health is to expand availability of mental health programs and services for area youth and their families. An estimated 46,000 Southwest Florida children are impacted by mental and behavioral health disorders including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, psychosis, substance abuse, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, all conditions that have been exacerbated by the isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic.

"There are many, many cases of families we have been able to

help and individuals who are better, but the delta between the need and the resources available continues to grow,” said Armando Llechu, chief officer of Hospital Operations and Women and Children’s Services at Lee Health. “That’s why we need help and support of the community to address this problem.”

In 2017, Golisano Children’s Hospital had more than 6,900 pediatric mental health visits. In 2020, those visits surpassed 16,000. However, the need continues to grow.

“Our children are suffering and keeping up with the growing demand continues to be a challenge,” said Dr. Paul Simeone, VP of mental and behavioral health services at Lee Health. “While we have continued to increase our services, programs and support, the need continues to surpass available resources. With ongoing awareness and work to reduce the stigma associated with mental health, more families are calling us to help their children in need.”

The event also offers the community the opportunity to support efforts to expand access to area pediatric mental health services by making a donation, facilitated by auctioneer Rick Gallo. Community philanthropic support is needed to add pediatric mental health personnel, expand availability of services, particularly for underserved portions of Southwest Florida, and grow programs, including education, workforce development and lobbying efforts.

Kids’ Minds Matter would like to thank the sponsors who have made the event possible, including presenting sponsors Dr. Rick and Ellie Klein of Bonita Springs. Additional leadership sponsors include Audi Fort Myers and Audi Naples, LeeSar, FineMark National Bank & Trust, Gillian Draper, Susan Goldy and Scott Spiezle, Stock Development and Jill Kushner.

To register or for more information on the event, visit kidsmindsmatter.com/unmasking.

About Kids’ Minds Matter

Founded in 2016, Kids’ Minds Matter is a unified movement in Southwest Florida dedicated to advancing pediatric mental and

behavioral health services. By developing clinical pathways to screen and treat patients, enhancing public awareness through education, and lobbying for systemic change and sustainable funding, Kids' Minds Matter aims to align mental health providers, local agencies, the judicial system, law enforcement, schools and faith-based organizations. Kids' Minds Matter is managed through the Lee Health Foundation. Please visit KidsMindsMatter.com or call 239-214-0921 for more information.

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