



# Building a Statewide Learning Healthcare System for Early Course Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders

Laura Yoviene Sykes, PhD

ACCESS Mental Health – 11/6/25



Yale SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

# Outline



- **Psychosis Background**
- **STEP Learning Collaborative – Statewide Learning Health System**
- **Why? How? What you can do?**
  - Asking about psychosis, role of cannabis
- **Resources**
- **Q&A**



The program for **Specialized Treatment Early in Psychosis (STEP)** is a public-academic collaboration between Connecticut's Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services and Yale University's Department of Psychiatry.



The Specialized Treatment Early in Psychosis **(STEP) Clinic @ CMHC** provides treatment for individuals experiencing FEP within Greater New Haven.



Mindmap is an **early detection campaign** to improve pathways to care and reduce the duration of untreated psychosis (DUP).



Connecticut's **statewide learning healthcare system (LHS)** for treating individuals ages 16-35 experiencing recent-onset schizophrenia spectrum disorders (FEP).

Supported by:



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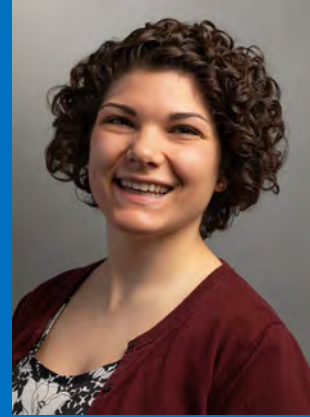
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Director & Founder of STEP  
Program



**Laura Yoviene Sykes, PhD**  
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Liaison to First Responders



**Cenk Tek, MD**  
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Undergraduate Student



## What is psychosis?

Psychosis is a medical syndrome that can be diagnosed based on a cluster of characteristic changes in thinking, feeling, and behavior.

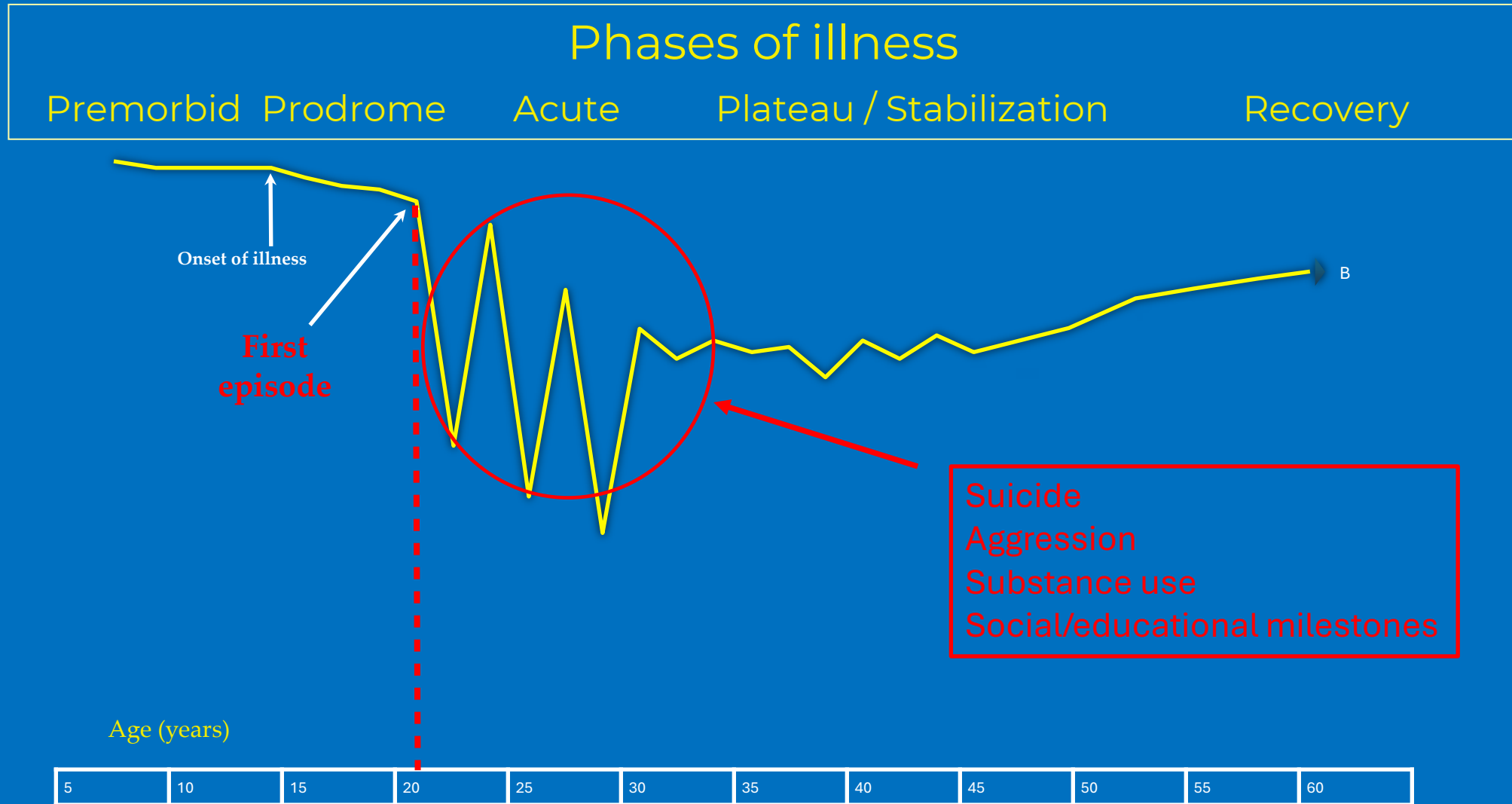
During an episode of psychosis, individuals can **struggle to differentiate what is real from what is not** and may come to believe false explanations for their experiences.

Most common explanation is a mental health disorder (schizophrenia spectrum, bipolar, major depression)



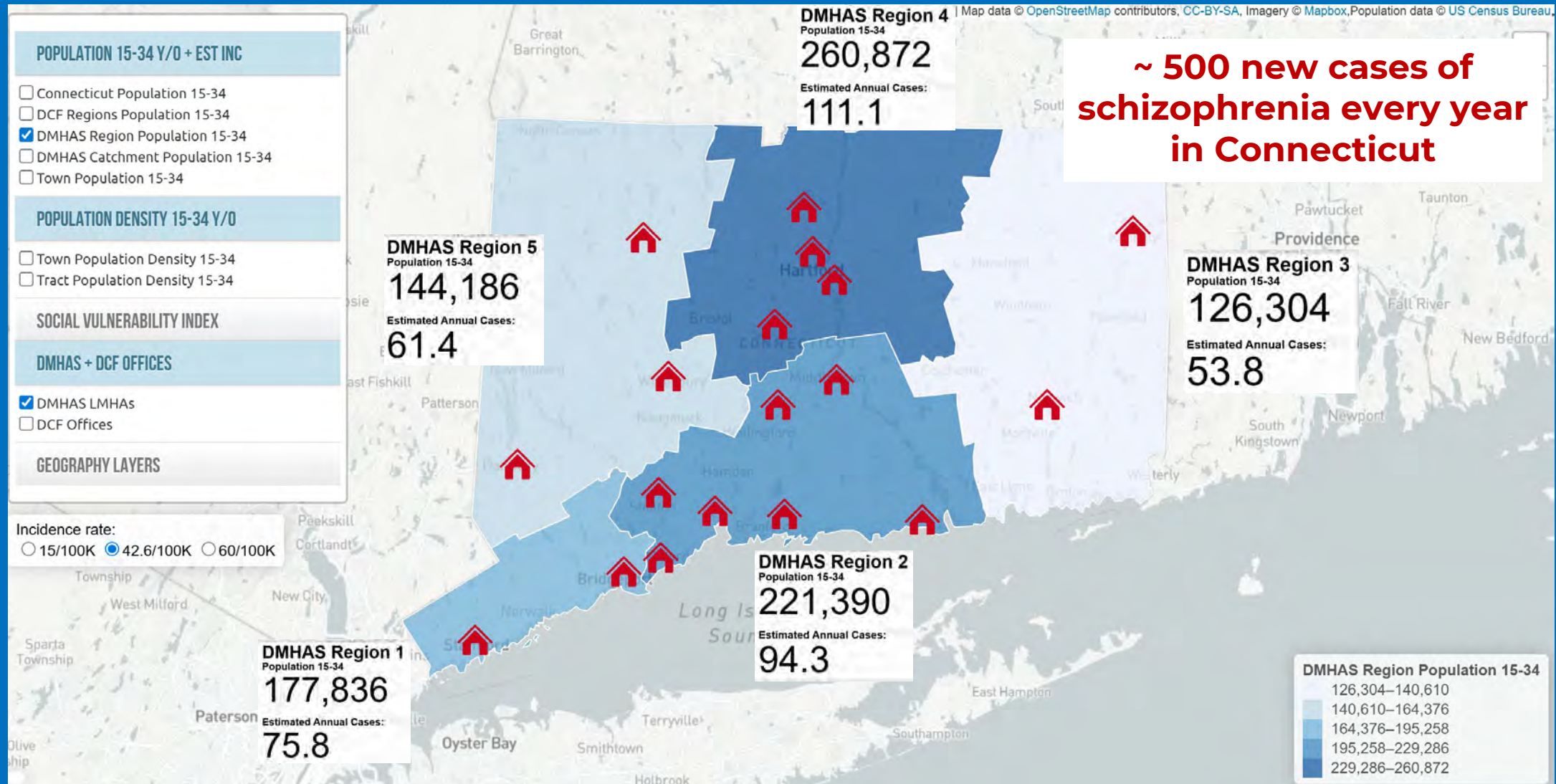
# Why is early treatment important?

# Why Early Intervention for Schizophrenia ?





# STEP Learning Collaborative



<https://stanmathis.pythonanywhere.com/STEP>



step Learning  
Collaborative :



# Goals of STEP Learning Collaborative

*Delivering **safe, timely, and effective** pathways to and through care for **every** young person experiencing first episode psychosis in Connecticut*

- Improve **Access** - shorten the Duration of Untreated Psychosis
- Improve **Outcomes**
- Expand **Workforce Capacity**
- Establish robust statewide **Informatics** to drive continuous improvement
- **Stakeholder** inclusion: improve public awareness and active involvement in pathways to and through care
- **Sustainability** support policies to adequately resource a system of care for all FEP across the state.

**How are we  
addressing this issue  
in Connecticut?**

# STEP Learning Collaborative

*A Statewide Network of Care for FEP*



Region 1:  
SWCMHS  
GBCMHC  
FS DuBois

Region 2:  
Bridges  
STEP Clinic at CMHC  
BHcare  
RVS  
Rushford

Region 3:  
SMHA  
United Services

Region 4:  
CHR  
CMHA  
Capital Region MHC  
Intercommunity

Region 5:  
Western – Waterbury  
Western – Torrington  
Western - Danbury

 **203-200-0140**

[Online Referral Form](#)

*\*For some u18, we connect to DCF clinics*

# Early Detection & Assessment Coordinators



Philip Markovich, BA



Sumeyra Tayfur, PhD



Deepa Purushothaman, MD

Via **Centralized Referral System** EDACs provide:

- Screening & rapid eligibility assessment
  - *Support for ineligible referrals*
- Facilitate rapid referral and engagement into outpatient care, **regardless of insurance** (*goal < 7 days*)
- Evaluation & ongoing assessment
- Ongoing engagement support
  - *90% still in care at 3 months*
- Support to receiving agencies to improve access and care quality

## Eligibility:

- 16-35 years old
- Recent (~3 years) primary psychosis
- Live in Connecticut

 **203-200-0140**

[Online Referral Form](#)



# How to make a referral

 203-200-0140

## online inquiry

**\*\*If you or someone you know needs immediate attention, please call 9-1-1\*\***

If you or someone you know may be eligible for The STEP Learning Collaborative, home to the Mindmap Campaign, please fill out the form below and someone will be in touch with you within 1 business day.

What is your first name?

\* must provide value

What is your last name?

\* must provide value

What is your best call back number?

\* must provide value

Does this phone accept text messages?

\* must provide value

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

reset

What is your email address?

What is your relationship to the person you are calling about?

\* must provide value

- ☐ Self  
☐ Family  
☐ Police  
☐ Teacher or School Professional  
☐ Mental Health Provider  
☐ Other

How old is the person you are calling about? (Use whole numbers only, no decimals)

\* must provide value

In what town does the person you are calling about live?

\* must provide value

How did you hear about Mindmap / The STEP Learning Collaborative?

\* must provide value

- ☐ Brochure/Flyer/Mailer  
☐ Newspaper/Radio/TV  
☐ Bus Ad/Billboard/Cinema Ad  
☐ Website/Social Media  
☐ Infoline/211/988  
☐ Presentation  
☐ Provider/Clinician/Agency  
☐ Unknown/Cannot Remember  
☐ Other

Submit

## PATH TO TREATMENT



# 203-200-0140

(or online referral form)

### Referral via the EDAC referral line

#### Eligibility:

- FEP (3 yrs)
- 16-35 yrs old
- Consent
- **All/no insurance**

Ineligible individuals  
will be directed to the  
appropriate service

### EDAC Assessment

To provide overview  
of symptoms,  
demographics, and  
service outcomes

#### Rapid referral to local LMHA

Assessment  
summary made  
available to LMHA

### LMHA Treatment

Assist with  
engagement to  
local LMHA

EDAC + LMHA  
ongoing meetings

Support with  
consultation line and  
trainings

### EDAC Follow-up

Every 3 months:

- Access
- Outcomes



# Referral Sources

Figure 2b: Clinical nodes

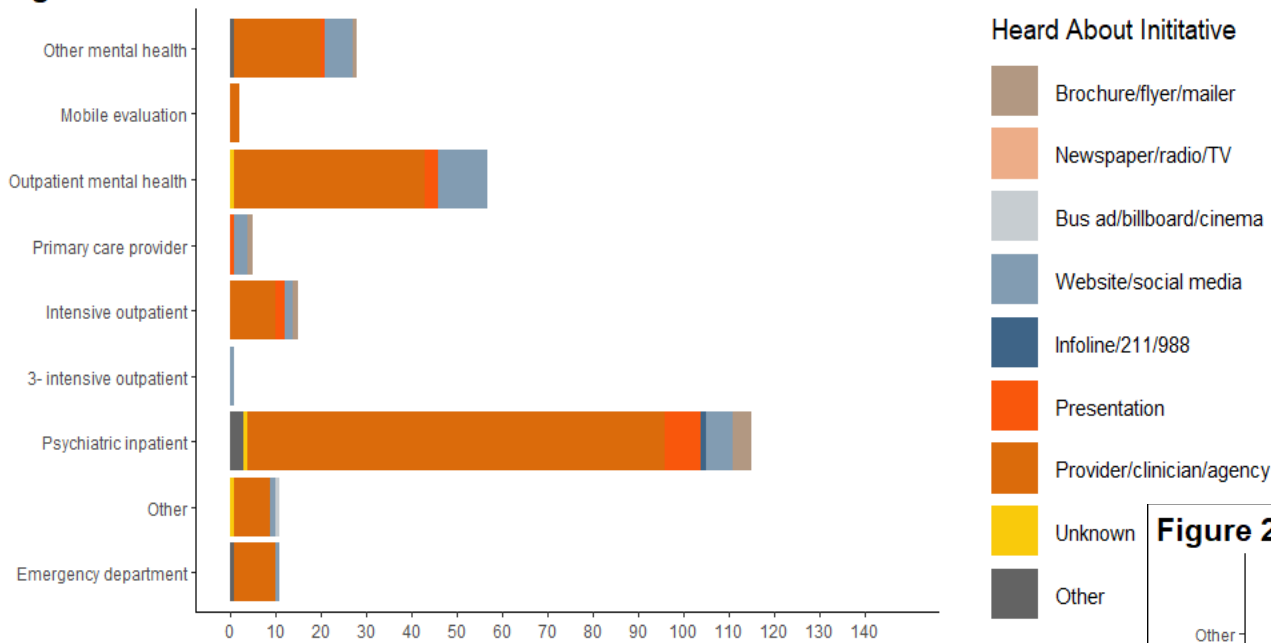
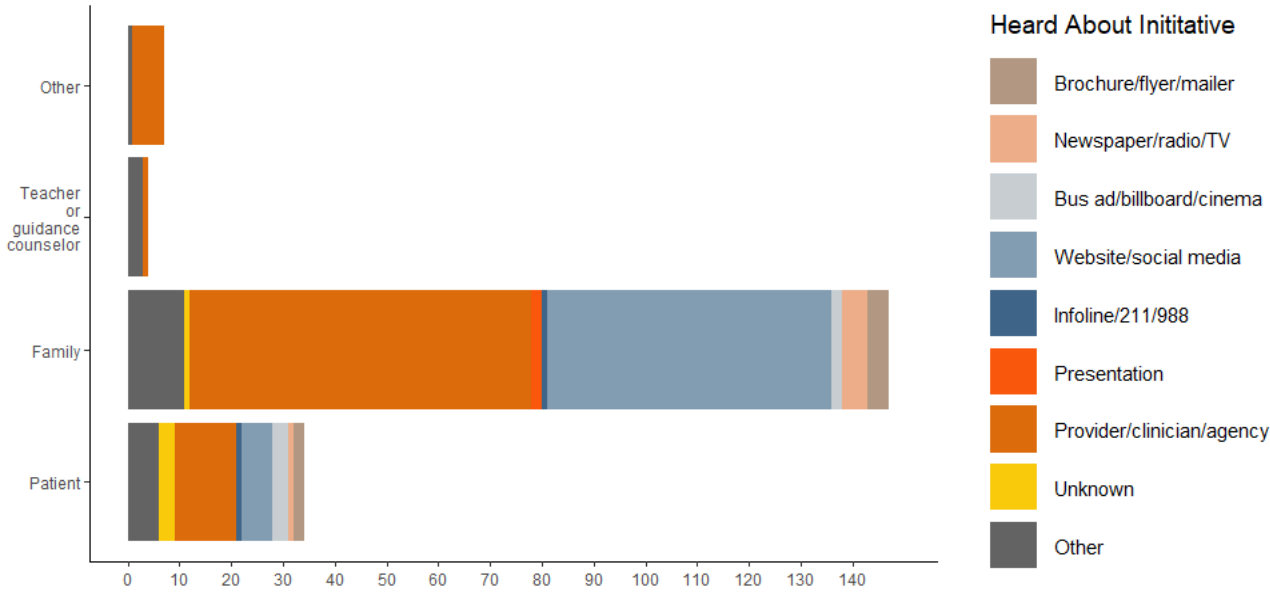
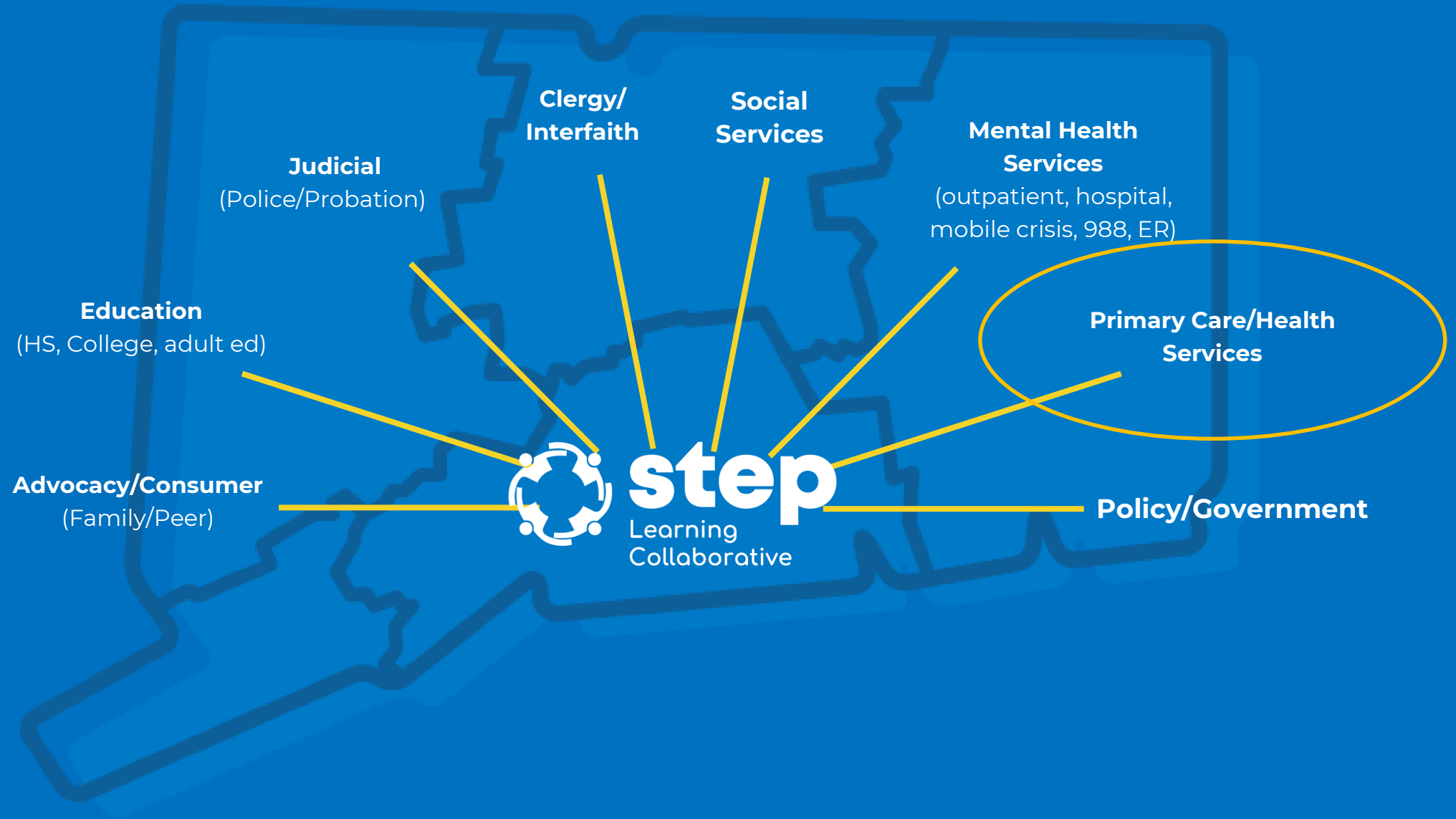


Figure 2a: Community nodes



# Professional Outreach & Detailing







**Billboards across CT**



**RVS CEO Sarah Gadsby, Mayor Ben Florsheim, Chief Erik Costa,**



**College Outreach - University of New Haven**



**CIT / Crisis Response Officer Training**



**Bus Ads**

# Early Detection



## Partnering with High Schools & Colleges



**Southern Connecticut State University Resource Fair**



**University of New Haven**




**UCONN Stamford – Fresh Check Day**



**University of Hartford**




# Materials




## Learn about Psychosis


**Anyone can call us.  
We can help.**





Screenings and rapid referrals to care.




**203-200-0140**

Brochures




[m.yale.edu/STEP](https://m.yale.edu/STEP)

## STEP Learning Collaborative



Delivering **safe, timely,** and **effective** pathways to and through care for **every** young person experiencing first episode psychosis in Connecticut

Call our confidential referral line for a free screening and referral to care for eligible participants. All insurance statuses accepted.

**203-200-0140**





Individuals seeking treatment must:



- Be between the ages of 16 and 35
- Have recently experienced psychosis symptoms or episodes of psychosis
- Live within the state of Connecticut

### Why the STEP Learning Collaborative?

- Rapid access to a network of outpatient care, regardless of insurance
- Individualized support for engagement into care
- Ongoing monitoring of outcomes
- Trainings and consultation for providers
- Education and workshops for families
- Virtual resources
- Participation in a statewide system to improve access and care quality

The STEP Learning Collaborative is a public-academic collaboration between Connecticut's DMHAS, DCF and Yale's STEP Program.





1 Page Flyer

Not every  
brain likes  
weed.



For some young  
people, cannabis can  
lead to **psychosis**.



✓ **Learn the facts.**

Cannabis can cause  
short-term psychosis.

**The long-term  
risks are real too.**

Young people who use  
cannabis regularly are at  
significantly **higher risk of  
psychotic disorders** over  
time.

Are you at risk?  
Scan here to find  
out more.



📞 203-200-0140

[m.yale.edu/step](https://m.yale.edu/step)

**Supporting  
Communication  
in Psychosis**

**Keep Calm. Be Clear.  
Don't Argue.**

Scan here to  
learn more:



[m.yale.edu/step](https://m.yale.edu/step)

📞 203-200-0140



Experiencing psychosis can be frightening  
and confusing. People may hear, see, or  
sense things, feel paranoid, and become  
overwhelmed by their environment.

**One Voice -- One person should be the sole  
communicator**

- Keep statements short, clear and one  
directive at a time

**Don't Argue with Psychosis -- Agree to  
disagree**

- Accept the individual's reality, "I don't hear  
those voices, but I know you do"

**Feelings are Valid -- Respond with empathy**

- "That sounds scary" "I understand how you  
might feel that way"

**Be Curious -- Ask open ended questions**

- "Tell me more" "Help me understand that"

**Ask Permission -- Help others feel in control**

- "Is it okay if I ask you some questions?" "I  
have an idea about how to help, is it okay if  
I share my thoughts?"

**Stay Calm**

- Give space, move to quieter environment

**Take threats seriously!**

  
**Are you concerned  
about yourself or a  
loved one?**

**Connect to care here.**



[m.yale.edu/step](https://m.yale.edu/step)

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**Is it psychosis?**

- Hearing or seeing things others  
can't
- Feeling suspicious or paranoid
- Thinking or speaking in a  
confused way
- Believing that one has special  
powers or abilities
- Avoiding social interaction or  
withdrawing from others
- Showing significant changes in  
behavior

Scan here to  
learn more.



📞 203-200-0140

**Feel like your  
mind is playing  
tricks on you?**

**Help is available.**



Scan here to  
find out more.



📞 203-200-0140



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**A person suffering from  
psychosis may have  
difficulty telling what is  
real from what is not.**

Learn more **here.**



[m.yale.edu/step](https://m.yale.edu/step)

📞 203-200-0140



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**Pocket Sized Cards**



# Why should pediatricians and primary care physicians be thinking about psychosis?

- Overlapping age range (peak incidence at 21 years)
- DUP is important, early intervention in the "critical period," especially in the first 1-2 years
- Individuals with early psychosis contacted primary care over **twice as frequently in the 6 years preceding first diagnosis** relative to the general population, with a sharp increase in contacts **10 months prior to diagnosis** (Schoer, et al., 2020)
- Most people first present early non-specific sx (e.g., insomnia, inattention)
  - \*\*late ADHD as red-flag
  - “anxiety”
- Also presenting for routine physicals/vaccinations

# How to ask about symptoms of psychosis

## Strategies:

- Ask soft questions, be patient, normalize, be curious... try not to overreact
- consider cultural explanation - *how does the family view what's going on?*

***Don't argue/dispute delusions! Validate underlying feelings***

## Questions:

- Do you ever feel that your mind is playing tricks on you? (Déjà vu, mind reading)
- Have you ever felt that you are not in control of your own ideas or thoughts?
- Do you hear things other people don't hear? Name being called?
- Do you see things other people don't see? Flashes, flames, vague figures or shadows out of the corner of your eyes?

**Look for changes in functioning**



# Cannabis and Psychosis – Key Considerations

- **Cannabis use is a risk factor for Schizophrenia spectrum disorders**
- Adolescent cannabis exposure = at least **4x more likely to develop schizophrenia** spectrum disorder (earlier, heavier, longer use = more risk)
- 50% -75% of those with cannabis induced psychosis, later develop schizophrenia
- 15% of new cases of psychosis are attributable to cannabis use
- Inform your patients of the risk of cannabis, especially if there's a family hx of psychosis
- Consider delaying use until at least 25 years
- Potency matters, risks of high THC content

**Educate your  
patients and  
families!**

**Not every  
brain likes  
weed.**



**For some young  
people, cannabis can  
lead to psychosis.**



✓ **Learn the facts.**

Cannabis can cause short-term psychosis.

**The long-term risks are real too.**



Young people who use cannabis regularly are at significantly **higher risk of psychotic disorders** over time.

Are you at risk?  
Scan here to find out more.






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[m.yale.edu/step](https://m.yale.edu/step)


# Resources on Cannabis & Psychosis




mindmapct.org




## Cannabis & Schizophrenia

 **THC and Short-Term Psychosis:** Studies indicate that THC, the psychoactive component in cannabis, can cause short-term psychosis until the drug is metabolized.

**Adolescence Exposure:** Research shows that individuals exposed to cannabis during adolescence are ~ 4x times more likely to develop schizophrenia spectrum disorders compared to those not exposed. Heavier exposure, or the more potent forms of cannabis can increase risk even greater.


 **Factors Affecting Risk:** Frequency, amount, age at first use, duration, and potency of cannabis significantly impact the risk of psychosis. Greater frequency, longer duration, earlier first use, and higher THC potency increase this risk.


**Long-Term Risks:** Those initially diagnosed with cannabis-induced psychosis have higher rates of developing schizophrenia over time. 

**Not a Universal Outcome:** Not all cannabis users develop psychosis, and not all individuals with psychosis have used cannabis. However, the risk is substantial if the individual has a family history of schizophrenia.


**Delayed Use Recommended:** To reduce risk, consider avoiding or delaying cannabis use until after age 25, especially if you have a family history of psychosis.




**Increased Potency Today:** Modern cannabis tends to have higher THC levels than in past decades. Daily and higher potency cannabis leads to increased risk of psychosis.

 **"Self-Medication" Myth:** There is no evidence to support that cannabis use improves any of the core symptoms of schizophrenia, in fact cannabis use in those with an established schizophrenia spectrum disorder leads to worse outcomes.

**Substance Comparisons:** The risk for developing schizophrenia spectrum disorders is greatest with cannabis use, although other substances such as amphetamines, cocaine, PCP (phencyclidine) also increase risk. 

**Help is Available:** Psychosis is treatable. It is widely accepted that the earlier people get help the better the outcomes. If you or someone you love is experiencing these symptoms and live in Connecticut, call our number today.

 **203-200-0140** Call for a psychosis screening & rapid referral to care. Calls are confidential.




The STEP Learning Collaborative is a public academic collaboration between the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and Yale's Program for Specialized Treatment Early in Psychosis (STEP), which is based at the Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC).

Mindmap is an Early Detection campaign to increase the Duration of Untreated Psychosis (DUP). Mindmap was developed and successfully tested by STEP with grant support from the NIH. This campaign will now be deployed across the state.

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[Cannabis and Schizophrenia Tip Sheet](#)



## Behind the smoke: Unmasking the link between cannabis and Schizophrenia

[READ MORE](#)

[Educational Blog](#)



[Dr. D'Souza – The Effect of Cannabis on Psychosis Training](#)

# Free Educational Offerings

- **STEP LC Educational Series**– Thursdays 12-1pm (virtual)
  - Provider Focused Trainings (*1.0 free CME credit*)
  - Family and Community Workshops
- **STEP Consultation Line** – free provider-to-provider consultation
- **Virtual course** – Overview of EIS for Schizophrenia – 6 sessions
- **Resource Library:**  
<https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/step/education-and-training/>
- **YouTube Channel:**
  - <https://www.youtube.com/@STEPLearningCollaborative>



**[m.yale.edu/STEP](https://m.yale.edu/STEP)**



# FAMILY EDUCATION SERIES

## Strategies to Understand and Support A Loved One Experiencing Psychosis

### About the Series

Families and supporters play an essential role in recovery. The STEP LC Family Education Series offers supportive, educational information for families to learn about early psychosis and gain practical tools for communication, support, and self-care. Opportunity for discussion.



Laura Yoviene Sykes, PhD  
STEP Psychologist and Director of the STEP Learning Collaborative



Aisha Farra, MA, MS  
Psychology Fellow, Yale School of Medicine

Open to all  
who are  
interested!

### WHAT WE COVER:

Join us on Thursdays 12-1pm via Zoom

Dec 4th - Understanding Early Psychosis & Reducing Stigma  
Jan 8th - Strategies for Supporting Your Loved One  
Feb 5th - Communication Tools for Common Scenarios  
March 5th - Caring for Yourself While Supporting Someone Else  
April 2nd - TBD



**Continuing Education**  
1.0 Yale CME credit available for qualified attendees



## EARLY PSYCHOSIS EDUCATIONAL SERIES 2025



June 5: Informatics in the Learning Health System



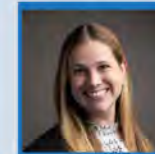
Stan Mathis, MD

June 26: "Entendiendo la Psicosis temprana y cómo podemos ayudar" [Understanding early psychosis and how we can help]



Javier Ponce Terashima, MD

July 10: Catatonia



Sarah Riley, MD

August 7: Supporting Young People with FEP in Schools



Josina James, LCSW

Sept 11: ECT for Treatment of Psychotic Disorders



Rachel Katz, MD

Nov 20: ASD and Psychosis



Apurva Bhatt, MD



### Did you know?

The STEP Learning Collaborative offers a **FREE** provider-to-provider consultation service.

This consultation resource is for clinicians, administrators and leaders of healthcare systems who would like to consult about their continuing care of young people with recent onset schizophrenia between the ages of 16 and 35.

Submit a consult request here.

<https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/step/consultation-service/>



More trainings coming soon. Check back for additional offerings.

\* 1 Free Yale CME/Equivalent available for all provider focused offerings hosted by the STEP LC

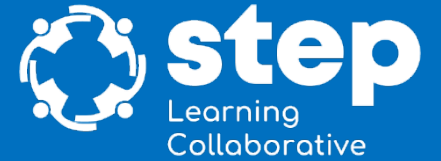
### Register now for webinars here!

[https://yale.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_3afNaPKcSKyrSX2QvRS48g](https://yale.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3afNaPKcSKyrSX2QvRS48g)



Trainings are recorded and made available @STEPLearningCollaborative on YouTube

# Educational Blogs



**Supporting Young People with Psychosis in School: How to Help Them Succeed**

**READ MORE**



**Behind the smoke: Unmasking the link between cannabis and Schizophrenia**

**READ MORE**



**Understanding Depression and Suicide in Early Psychosis: What You Need to Know**

**READ MORE**

<https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/step/about-us/archive/>



# Summary: What you can do?

- **Ask about symptoms of psychosis**
  - Soft, normalizing, curious (don't argue)
- **Consider psychosis in your differentials (ADHD, anxiety, substance use)**
  - Look for changes in functioning relative to that individual
- **Seek Consultation**
- **Connect to STEP Learning Collaborative – *let us figure it out!***
  - (203) 200-0140 or online referral
- **Provide resources to families** – have our brochures and cards in your office

# Why the STEP Learning Collaborative?

- Rapid access to a network of outpatient care, **regardless of insurance**
  - *67% getting access to care within 7 days,*
  - *~80% getting access to care within 14 days*
- Individualized support for **engagement** into care
  - *At 3 months, 90% are still in care*
- Ongoing monitoring of individual outcomes
- **Trainings** and **consultation** for providers
- Education and **workshops for families**
- Virtual resources
- Part of a statewide system to improve access and care quality in first episode psychosis

# STEP Learning Collaborative

*A Statewide Network of Care for FEP*



Deliver **safe, timely, and effective** pathways to and through care for **every** young person experiencing first episode psychosis in Connecticut



**203-200-0140**

**[m.yale.edu/STEP](https://m.yale.edu/STEP)**

[Online Referral Form](#)



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**m.yale.edu/step**



**Search:** STEP Learning Collaborative

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