

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ALCOHOL, OTHER DRUGS & YOUTH SERVICES

July 6, 2026 at 5:15 PM

Chairman Thomas called the meeting to order.

The Clerk called the roll.

Present: Aldermen Thomas, Barry, O'Neil

Absent: Aldermen Bonilla, Kantor

Messrs.: A. Thomas, N. Reimer, A. Kereage, Mayor Ruais

1. Presentation from the Health Department regarding Manchester's youth-serving ecosystem.

Anna Thomas, Public Health Director: I'm joined with two amazing community partners. One is Nichole Reimer all the way to my left, and she is the president and CEO of Granite United Way. And then we have Aimee Kereage, who is the executive director of Manchester Proud. So just to kind of tee this up, this is something the mayor has worked with us on. It's been some time since we've kind of pulled the community together to look at youth needs, broadly defined. So, we decided to convene the community together and just look at sort of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Manchester youth. This also is coupled with a lot of our work with community needs assessments that we've been doing in the city, and you've already seen some of the results of that. I will tell you that there's four markers to pediatric health, vital signs of pediatric health. One is infant mortality. Another is school readiness. The third is chronic absenteeism. And the fourth is high school completion. That's going to thread through in some of these themes as we talk about the results of this convening, but I wanted to kind of give you those big measures that happened during the pathway of child development as a precursor.

Nichole Reimer, Granite United Way: Thank you for having us today to present the results of this convening. When Mayor Ruais and Aimee talked a few months ago, I guess they were asked to convene some of the organizations that are serving youth around the city and as Anna said, talk to the ways that we are or are not working together and the work that they are doing in the community. So, this is just a presentation of that assessment. Granite United Way has been a supporter and fiscal sponsor of Manchester Proud for a number of years, and has done a lot of this convening work in the past to bring together partners around these issues. So, we're just here to support and figure out how we can next bring people together to convene and further align against some outcomes that we want to address in the city.

Aimee Kereage, Manchester Proud: Thank you all for having us be here, and who supported this work along the way. As you can see here, we met on April 23rd at the Manchester Health Department and hosted American Being Youth Service Strategic Planning meeting. The purpose was simple: bring together organizations serving youth and families to better understand what is working, where gaps exist, and how we can work together more effectively. This presentation summarizes what we heard not just from one organization, but from the collective voices of our community. So, the purpose of this

was not just to go back. This wasn't intended to create another plan that sits on a shelf. We wanted to hear directly from those doing the work every day. Participants completed surveys, and participants participated in a facilitated SWOT analysis that focused on our strengths, our weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The goal was identifying opportunities for stronger coordination across the city. Our participation snapshot: we are incredibly encouraged by its participation. We had 114 community partners that attended that signed in. We actually believe there were more than that, but 114 that signed in. We collected 82 surveys during the meeting and additional online responses before and afterward. Organizations represented education, health care, mental health, workforce development, nonprofit organizations, city departments, higher education, and community organizations. The diversity of participation gives us confidence that these findings represent system wide experiences rather than one organization's perspective. Representatives were also from all levels of organizations. We had C-suite there, as well as boots on the ground case managers. As we know, one of Manchester's greatest strengths is the breadth of organizations that already serve youth. I often say that we are a community that is rich in resources, but sometimes we just don't know how to access them. The room included schools, nonprofits, health care providers, city departments, colleges, etc. We believe this was one of the largest cross-sector youth convenings Manchester has held, and the community demonstrated a willingness to collaborate. What we found and came through very clearly over and over again, it's not that we lack services; we have many excellent programs. The challenge is families don't always know that they exist. Organizations aren't always connected and barriers prevent youth from accessing opportunities. The opportunity is improving coordination, not reinventing the work that's already happening. So, we did find some top barriers that were identified. Transportation emerged across all groups as the biggest barrier. Participants consistently discussed youth who can't reach programs, families with limited transportation opportunities, and evening programs that aren't accessible without reliable transportation. Mental health was also addressed across every age group. Family engagement also emerged repeatedly, not because families don't care and not that families don't want to be involved, but because navigating services is difficult and communication isn't always coordinated. Basic needs continue to affect a young person's ability to fully participate. And finally, organizations emphasize workforce and career readiness, particularly for our older youth as they prepare for adulthood. Part of the questions we asked were which age groups were to be identified as the highest needs. Participants in the room identified high school students and young adults ages 18 to 24, as the populations who experience the greatest unmet needs across the community. And why is that? Because this is where many young people lose the connection to their supports. They age out of programs. Transition from school becomes difficult. Career pathways aren't always clear. Middle school also emerged as a critical intervention point because prevention during these years has long term impact. But we really want to focus on what is working well. The convening wasn't only about identifying problems. We wanted to look at the things that we're doing great across the community. Participants highlighted tremendous strengths. Manchester has committed organizations, passionate staff, strong school partnerships, many existing youth programs, and a community who wants to collaborate. These are significant assets, but the challenge isn't over. It's about connecting these assets more intentionally. Transportation is only one piece of access. We also discussed language barriers, childcare, awareness of available services, geographic challenges, and just not knowing where to begin. Several participants described our system as having many front doors, but no clear entry point for families. Family engagement was one of the strongest

themes throughout the SWOT discussions. Organizations acknowledge that families often want to engage, but often information is fragmented. Communication varies between organizations, and navigating services can just be overwhelming for many, participants suggested creating easier navigation tools and stronger communication across agencies. Mental health was consistently identified as one of the community's most urgent priorities. Participants discussed increasing anxiety in youth trauma, behavioral health needs, long waitlists, difficulty accessing services. This requires a coordinated community response. Youth transitions, perhaps was the biggest opportunity identified, was on proving how we transition into adulthood. Participants described the need for internships, workforce pathways, apprenticeships, life skills, career navigation and stronger partnerships with employers and this directly aligns with Manchester's workforce needs and work that is happening across the community already supporting young adults as both a youth strategy and an economic development strategy. Organizations repeatedly said that they need better ways to work together. They had several suggestions that included a shared resource directory, referral pathways, common communication, shared calendars, and regular convenings. No one organization can meet every need, but together, the community can create a much stronger system that supports our youth. Overall, the vision that emerged from this work is very straightforward, envisioning a connected ecosystem where every child, youth and family can easily find and access the support they need. We don't need more programs, but better-connected programs, not more organizations, but stronger partnerships. The convening demonstrated something very encouraging. Manchester already has the people, the programs, and organizations that are ready to work together. The next step is how do we create stronger connections between all the organizations so families experience one coordinated system rather than dozens of disconnected services. Together, we really have an opportunity to build a system where every young person has access to relationships, opportunities, and supports that they need to thrive.

A. Thomas: I think the other thing we wanted to add to this too, is food for thought about next steps and where we could go with this. Certainly, we were overwhelmed with the response. I think when we originally set up the meeting, we thought there were going to be about 60 partners and we received more than double than that. I think the partners want to come together again. They haven't had the benefit of getting into the details of this. So, we definitely want to pull everyone together. They want to hear how they could work together. They're looking for that feedback. I also think this is a huge opportunity for our funding community. And it's one of the reasons why Granite United Way is so significant. I can't say enough about what each of these individuals have done in the city of Manchester. I have a little bit of history, especially with Granite United Way in particular, because we started looking at youth issues years ago and Granite United Way and I was on the Community Impact Committee at the time, made a conscious choice to invest \$1.5 million in two Manchester neighborhoods, the Beech Street School neighborhood and Gossler Park over a three-year period. Part of that investing was to build community schools and bring in community and wrap services around the families. And then even after that happened, they made another commitment of yet another \$1.5 million that went to just youth serving organizations to kind of build that network further. I think that's where we're seeing the fruits of that investment. The mayor has talked about when you're investing in CIP, I think there was 18 youth serving organizations that were funded through CIP. So as the city goes, the city is an investor as well. I think there's lots of other funding organizations who want to work together to fund things collaboratively, blend and

braid money to bring things to scale. And they've already done some of that work historically. I think they're both equally as important. I joke about a vision without resources is a hallucination. I think we have real goals that we could set with these community partners, but it also has to be fueled and funded. I think there's a real interest, and I don't want to speak on behalf of United Way, but I just can't thank the investing enough that they've done into the city's youth and families. It's been tremendous. Manchester Proud also has existed now for years, has worked collaboratively with the community and specifically with the school district. So, they kind of have an outside lens, if you will. It's a little more neutral at looking at all of the community partners because they're not a city department. They're in another sector, they just neutrally look at all of those needs. I think it's really the combination of those perspectives that has helped formulate this summation. But we would be interested to hear your comments or questions, your thoughts, because I think the next thing would be to convene the community again. I think all of you were at the event as well.

Chairman Thomas: That was a very good event. A lot of a lot of agencies.

Alderman Barry: Well, thank you for the presentation. I've been on this committee since I started as an alderman in 2014 and it means a lot to me. In the past, we've focused a lot on the opioid crisis and homelessness and everything. But talking with Chairman Thomas and even Alderman O'Neil and other members of this committee, we really want to focus on youth. You know, that's part of our committee is youth services. We've done a lot of work. We've got Kristen and Mario here from our Office of Youth Services. We've worked with them quite often. So, this means a lot to us. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it that day, but I did find out a lot of what transpired there. I think one of the things that means a lot to me is with all the organizations that were there is the collaboration that we need in the city, especially when we're dealing with youth. I know we had discussed with Mario and Kristen the importance of the graduation rates as well as tardiness. And one of the things that OYS is doing, I'm not going to say more than they used to, but they're focusing a lot more on after schools release in June, that those summer months that they stay involved with those kids, especially the kids that are walking that fine line whether to come to school or not go to school. And one of the things we're also doing in the city, Mark Gomez and the folks over at Parks and Recreation, we're doing everything we can to make recreation available for kids so that they can enjoy the outdoors because they should be outdoors especially in the summer months. And we do have a lot available. We have so many parks that are available to youth that they can use during the summer months. And again, that's what they should be doing. They shouldn't be enclosed in their homes and on their gadgets and things like that. They should be outside and enjoying it.

Alderman O'Neil: The four points of public health, that may not be exactly what you called them, but mortality, readiness, absenteeism, and high school completion. I'm not going to touch the first one mortality because that's a true public health issue.

A. Thomas: It really is.

Alderman O'Neil: Without addressing readiness and doing that well, can you address absenteeism? And without addressing those two can you address high school completion?

A. Thomas: They're clearly all connected. I think the other thing, as you've already pointed out, Alderman Barry, is the school district can only do so much. I think we try to hold the school district pretty accountable. But we all know that children leave the school and then they're off and running wherever they're going. And often that's some of the most troublesome times is when it's after school and certainly the summer months and then the weekends and evenings. I think the beauty of this is just kind of taking a step back and saying, let's look at all of the needs and then how do they all tie together? So, this notion of kids not being ready for school starts as early as birth to five. And you saw when we presented on the community needs assessment a few months ago that in some of the assessments that the school district has done for kindergarten, half of those kids coming into kindergarten were already a year behind in reading. So that's what we're starting with, baseline. And now you fuel it with this this habitual truancy issue. And that's the part that's concerning. I think it's at every grade level. I think it rises as they get older and there's lots of explanations for that. I think the challenge is getting to school is a dose response relationship. The more we can get kids to school on a regular basis, the better they're going to do academically and otherwise, and the better we can serve those kids to get them connected to services. It's when we lose them and they slip through the cracks. So, I think that's where an Office of Youth Services or other organizations come into play, because the district has them during a school day. But even then, we've got thousands of kids who are habitually truant. High school completion is sort of the final benchmark. I often use this as a story, my own pediatrician for my own kids says he measures his success by how many of his patients graduate from high school. I think there's something to be said about getting kids through that entire pathway. I think we have work to do. I think the Manchester school district is doing a lot to increase graduation rates. I'm more concerned about that sort of attendance issue and I think the school district is as well. I think they're looking to do some things. I think that's a real opportunity for the community to come into play to help kids get to school and help families support them to get the kids to school. I think that's a real opportunity for us.

Alderman O'Neil: You know, one of the things I think OYS has been flexible over the years, they were the court diversion provider for many years. They were also on the front line with our young people and their families on substance abuse. I didn't see substance abuse itself show up in the report. I can't believe it's not happening and it's not a factor in some of these other measurements. I don't know if anybody has any comments on that.

A. Kereage: I don't believe it was brought up several times and we really just pulled out the highest level. But we do know that there are a number of organizations who were represented at that event that are focusing specifically on that. Making It Happen comes to mind, who is doing a number of projects across the community to help with prevention and misuse prevention. I know they work with OYS and are doing some trainings and collaboration as well as other trainings that they do.

Alderman O'Neil: Were the three of you surprised that didn't stand out more?

A. Thomas: I wasn't surprised that it wasn't like the number one thing. I think there's risk behaviors across a bunch of factors. And whether it's substance use disorder or other risk-taking behaviors, that is the age that this will rear its ugly head in many ways. I kind of group it with other concerns and maybe in a bigger umbrella of mental behavioral

health. It's not absent by any means. I just think that it's actually weighted with a bunch of other needs too that we see in all youth.

Alderman O'Neil: Can you talk a little bit about this community school model at Beech Street and Gossler?

A. Thomas: I'll just talk quickly about the history. We started that with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and all of these other funders coming together. We tested this model at Beech and Gossler, and it really was to bring the community in. And actually, the hypothesis for change was that those two neighborhoods were persistently impoverished. We were seeing a lot of crime occurring in those neighborhoods. And we saw families disconnected. So, this model of community schools is to use the school as a focal point of the neighborhood intergenerationally. So, we brought in all of these resources and programs. So, we did HISET, for example, for the parents of the kids while their kids were going to school so the parents could get their high school diploma. We would do financial literacy courses for the parents. We did family fitness gyms, where we had fitness classes at both campuses where the families can work out together. And then we would have a meal, a community meal, served at the school. And the idea was just trying to get people to a place they trusted and felt safe, and then just kind of flood and co-locate resources. I mean, it was really the first time that we co-located Amoskeag Health to provide access to health care and also the Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester to do mental behavioral health intake, which both of those organizations still do today on site and help the staff as well. If the staff don't know how to deal with a particular condition that maybe a child has, they were there to provide technical expertise.

A. Kereage: I would just also mention that part of the work that was done with the first community schools models was around attendance and also leadership skills. And based out of that, fast forward ten years, and Gossler has one of the best attendance rates in the city.

Alderman O'Neil: It does?

A. Kereage: Yes.

N. Reimer: Some of the programming we funded there has continued there. They have the Leader in Me program, which is something United Way continued to fund even when funding priorities shifted in other areas.

A. Kereage: And in 2023, the school district was the recipient of a Federal Community Schools grant. Manchester Proud is the lead community-based organization of that similar model, bringing in different organizations to help provide services to families and students. So, the YMCA provides stay programming there for up to 20 youth during the day. The International Institute provides ESOL classes and on site after school for families to come and engage. It's a different model, but there is a specific facilitator that is an additional staff member at the school that helps.

Alderman O'Neil: Is there something you can provide us? The plan for the Gossler model and data?

A. Kereage: Absolutely.

Alderman O'Neil: I don't think it's overstepping.

A. Thomas: No, we have all that documented.

Alderman O'Neil: Tony Sapienza would say, if you want to make school district decisions, run for the school board. But this would be helpful where we're involved as a partner to get any information. I'm very interested in that. Thank you for the answer about the substance abuse might being rolled into mental health. And just one of the things I want to say about OYS, they have transitioned to address whatever the needs are of the community. My personal opinion is we have some great talent there and we need to get them out in the community. I think the model that's been around a little bit is they are in schools, which is good, but there's a lot of other services, and there's very little interaction out in the community. And that's where I think Mario, that's where he's at his best, is in the community and the other great staff at OYS. And they have been over the years. I heard a term this spring, you've got to meet the students where they're at. OYS has been doing that a long time. I think we need to encourage the school district. Looking at OYS, I think we need them out on the streets more than sitting in offices, in my opinion.

A. Thomas: Well, and to your point, not every single school has every single one of these positions, but most of them do. Every school should have a school nurse, a social worker, student assistance program for the middle and high, multilingual family liaisons, the police department, SROs, don't forget about them. And then certainly other partners like City Year, who have co-located and they work with families. And then we have our mental health center. We even go in for the dental program. And this is above and beyond what OYS is already doing. I feel like there is a large presence of key positions; your guidance counselors. I mean, there's lots of technical expertise in the schools. But I agree with you. I think there's really a need to expand beyond the school day and the school resources.

Alderman O'Neil: Is there data you can provide for us on absenteeism in each of the schools? I think that'd be important to learn. And one of you made the comment that this community school model cut down on absenteeism at Gossler, and that's great.

A. Thomas: It is.

Chairman Thomas: I just wanted to say two quick things. Speaking to your comment on the children who were a year behind, I am appreciative of the mayor starting your commission on child care. I know, Anna, you're on it with me too, because it really opens our eyes. It allows us to see everything across the board of what's happening. And that's super important for all of this. Because this is after kind of what we're doing on the commission. The second thing is being in the mental health field myself, I know that there's a lack of mental health providers. I've talked to the superintendent plenty of times about it. In the beginning of this year, I actually developed a bill and it was brought forward to the House. That was supposed to streamline providers to get licensed a little bit easier because we have no one, and they shot it down. I want to encourage people to kind of go talk to your reps to kind of get that in motion again, that would probably be really good.

Alderman Barry: I hope this doesn't stop here. I hope this continues. Too often we see presentations and then next thing you know, we don't hear another word about it. I think it's important that we work together: the mayor's office, this committee, you guys, and continue down this road because it's way too important. I think this city needs to focus a lot on the youth in our city. I've spent a lot of years, and Alderman O'Neil spent a lot of years, working with the youth in our city. So, we want that continued.

Mayor Ruais: I would just add briefly, I appreciate the chairman's comments. We've had this conversation in my office several times. I was on the phone this morning with the superintendent. Your comments, Chairman Barry, are very well taken. This will certainly not be the last word on this. I think the conversation that you and I have had previously, that to me, this is the beginning of this effort, and we have to continue building upon it and determine where are those gaps in the city and how does the board now want to respond. The conversation we had a couple months ago when I called that initial meeting was before we make any decisions going forward, let's hear from the community about where the gaps are. And then now as a board, now that we've had this presentation, now that we've worked with our community partners, now that we can bring it to the full board in August, we've had this committee meeting. We can pull it off the agenda off consent and have the discussion now, us as policy makers, the ball's in our court to start making some decisions on the best path forward.

*There being no further business, on motion of **Alderman Barry**, duly seconded by **Alderman O'Neil**, it was voted to adjourn.*

A True Record. Attest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Normand". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Clerk of Committee

Meeting Start Time: 5:15PM

Meeting End Time: 5:45PM

Minutes Prepared By: Michael Intranuovo