



2023 Mid-Year Report

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Sisters and Friends,

Finding a sense of grounding and connection becomes crucial in nurturing our collective mental well-being—especially in a world that often feels turbulent and overwhelming. It is within our community of individuals seeking solace, understanding, and support that Sista Afya Community Care (SACC) embarks on journeys toward self-discovery and resilience. Together we strive to cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and a deep-rooted connection to ourselves, others, and the natural world.

Creating access to these wellness journeys is what we've always been about. It is why we exist. That is why we were thrilled this past March when SACC was designated by the state of Illinois as a Behavioral Health Clinic. This designation allows us to serve women who have Medicaid—expanding our engagement of women with income barriers to care. **We are well on our way to serving more people this year than ever before.**

I myself am humbled and grateful to have received recognition for my leadership that allows us to head toward this milestone. This year I was selected for the Mental Health Equity Catalyze cohort at New Profit. The award comes with both unrestricted funding for SACC and the opportunity to grow our impact. Additionally, I was named one of the Chicago Foundation for Women's South Side Giving Circle Leadership Awardees, which invests in the economic, social, and political power of Black Women and girls in our communities. It is not just my work but the work of the SACC team that is reflected in both of these honors, and we will continue to leverage them in a way that allows us to reach more women.

We are excited by the momentum this first half of this year has brought for SACC. Together, let us continue on this path of healing, growth, and shared understanding.

Be well,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Camesha L. Jones". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Camesha L. Jones, LCSW
Executive Director, Sista Afya Community Care



Thrive in Therapy: Finding Solid Ground

When we think about being grounded in terms of mental health, what comes to mind? For us, it is a state of inner stability, centeredness, and presence. SACC's Thrive in Therapy program helps women to become more grounded, a feat that requires them to put in the work during individual therapy sessions. Participants find it is an ongoing practice that requires self-awareness, self-care, and intentional efforts—and ultimately making a huge difference in their lives.



“I have seen a huge improvement within myself. Self-regulating was very hard for me. Now I am able to handle my emotions in a much better way. I don’t feel like my therapist is just “doing her job”—I truly feel heard and understood.”

—S., age 28

Thrive in Therapy by the Numbers:

809

**Free
Therapy
Sessions**

90

**People
Served**

“I came into this program in a time of crisis and have since found a lot of clarity in my life. Sometimes when an event or relationship is near and hurtful it can cast a large shadow on everything else, making it difficult to see who you are. Through Thrive in Therapy I’ve begun the difficult task of removing the many masks I’ve upheld so that I can truly find healing and wellness mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.”

—N., age 32

Meet the next generation of mental health leaders

By L’Oreal Thompson Payton

You could say that SACC interns take the phrase, “Be the change you want to see in the world,” to heart. Both Sameka Gates, the Community Care Program Intern, and Madison Sparkman, the She Heals Intern, entered the field of mental health counseling with the goal of being the support they needed when they were younger.

“I went through a lot of emotional and physical trauma as a teenager and young adult, so I always knew I wanted to be what I needed when I was younger,” shares Gates, who is currently undergoing the clinical mental health counseling master’s program at Concordia University. “But there was a lot of fear and self-doubt because I didn’t really have a support system.”

Gates spent the earlier years of her career in higher ed before moving on to teaching, but she’s always had a goal of opening her own nonprofit and becoming a counselor.

“I’ve been on this journey of self-healing and regaining my confidence,” she says. “I really thought about the things I wanted to do and I decided to go back to school.”

Currently, Gates is in a master’s program for clinical mental health counseling at Concordia University.

“I finished my first master’s five years ago and when I started that, I knew I wanted to do this program but I didn’t have the confidence to do it,” she reflects. “But when I started this program last year, I decided this is what I want to do and I’m not going to be afraid anymore.”



As the Community Care Program intern, Gates manages clerical work, such as sending email reminders. She also co-facilitated a four-week program for young women involved with Gyrls in the H.O.O.D., another Chicago-based nonprofit, along with Camesha Jones, the executive director of SACC.

“I was a middle school teacher, so I really love working with kids, specifically girls,” says Gates, who plans to open her own practice someday and provide free and low-cost therapy to girls. “As I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized girls need us because they’re being overlooked. Whatever I can do to support them and help them understand that they’re worthy to be here and their situations don’t define them, I want to do that. I want to make things accessible to them.”



“When Black women are free, everyone is free . . . that’s what this is for all of us. When people are caught up to speed, they’ll be able to recognize there’s so much to celebrate when we’re all equal and the playing field is, too.”

—Madison Sparkman,
She Heals Intern

Meanwhile, Sparkman shares a similar goal. The Spelman graduate is currently earning her master’s in clinical mental health counseling through DePaul University. As the She Heals Intern, Sparkman provides free therapy to clients as part of the Thrive in Therapy Program. On a typical day, she sees about three to six clients.

She’s also been hands-on with the “What’s Tea?” Mother’s Picnic and the Mama’s Making Moves: Mother’s Shower as part of her vested interest in Black maternal health, as well as intimate partner violence.

“I joined the field of counseling because I wanted to become the counselor that I needed in various points of my life,” says Sparkman, who initially wanted to become a hairstylist. “My mom, who’s a social worker,

had me think about what I enjoy about doing hair and it’s the experience of making someone feel better about themselves. I think hair salons in the Black community are very therapeutic, and I wanted to translate that experience into a different capacity and that’s when I decided on therapy.”

Eventually, Sparkman would also like to start her own practice and she’s on a mission to make the mental health field more equitable for clients and clinicians.

“When Black women are free, everyone is free,” she shares. “That’s what this is for all of us. When people are caught up to speed, they’ll be able to recognize there’s so much to celebrate when we’re all equal and the playing field is, too.”

Community Care

The Power of Connection

The power of connection in terms of mental health cannot be overstated. Human beings are inherently social creatures, and our mental well-being is intricately tied to the quality of our relationships and connections with others. Connection provides emotional support, a sense of belonging, reduces isolation, increases resilience, fosters empathy, promotes growth, and enables collective action. We utilize our Community Care program to nurture connections and build supportive communities—creating a world where mental wellness is prioritized, and individuals can thrive.

Community Care by the Numbers:

228 women served

5 workshops

12 wellness classes

1 retreat

“I was able to sit in the quiet space and be vulnerable in front of others. It was so peaceful and allowed me to think about what my role is in my healing and how I have been giving out more of me to others than I should.”

—S., age 38

Wellness as a Birthright

By L’Oreal Thompson Payton

Wellness, much like one’s healing journey, isn’t linear and it’s impacted by a variety of factors: culture, genetics, socioeconomic. For Amin Bell, a wellness facilitator for SACC, wellness is an ongoing practice. Her own journey began shortly after college while job searching. A friend who also happened to be a movement instructor invited her to class and the rest, as they say, is history.

“At that time, especially around 2016 and 2017, there were not a lot of people who were Black, brown, or people of color in those wellness spaces, whether it be yoga classes, Tai Chi, or meditation classes,” Bell recalls. “So I began to seek that community.”

Today, Bell is a yoga instructor, intuitive, doula, and divine feminine healer. At SACC, she serves as a wellness facilitator who provides monthly meditation, journaling, and yoga classes for SACC’s community. She was also a retreat session facilitator at the Spring Retreat earlier this year.

“I really love that Sista Afya gives a tailored approach, a cultural approach, and a community approach to healing,” Bell says. “So when I’m in those classes, I have the capacity to share the experiences, anecdotes, and journal prompts—whatever else I feel may be useful to the community—without having to shy away from certain conversations or try to make [palatable] for a broader audience even though I know I’m speaking to a specific group of people.”

As a wellness facilitator for SACC, Bell aims to make every participant feel at ease.

“Even though it’s a virtual space, it’s a safe space to share and a safe space to practice,” she says. “No matter where you are, the way you look, your age, or your body, it’s an open space for everyone to come and join in community and have a safe space for healing.”

And that idea is resonating with participants. After having attended a wellness session, one attendee wrote: “I entered the space with the anxiety of a first-timer but left feeling virtual hugs and assurance that



I am on the right path toward improved self-care this year. I appreciate the space given to us and for free!”

Another was in awe of a newfound ability to “sit in the quiet space and be vulnerable in front of others.” “It was so peaceful and allowed me to think about what my role is in my healing and how I have been giving out more of myself to others than I should,” she reflected. “Thank you for giving us prompts to journal after meditation.”

Among Bell’s favorite classes to facilitate is the monthly Sister Circle where community members join in person to engage in open and honest dialogue, in addition to restorative yoga, guided meditation, and journaling sessions.

“It is imperative for us to slow down and not ignore our bodies,” Bell urges. “It’s important for Black women to slow down because it allows the spaciousness for us to know and address what our needs truly are—not the needs of everyone else or what we think we need.”

Whether it’s a group of young women, elders, or anyone in between, Bell has a poignant reminder about our relationship to rest: “People look at it as a luxury and it’s not a luxury,” she says. “It’s a birthright to be well.”

Developing Mental Wellness Warriors

Creating a Compassionate Culture

Just as physical first aid knowledge is vital for addressing immediate medical needs, Mental Health First Aid equips individuals with the tools and understanding to support those experiencing mental health challenges. SACC's Developing Mental Wellness Warriors program provides low-cost professional development training to local organizations and businesses, fostering a workplace environment where mental health is prioritized, and colleagues are educated about mental health conditions.

Empowering individuals with the knowledge and skills to recognize signs of distress, provide initial support, and direct individuals to appropriate resources can make a profound difference in someone's journey toward recovery. Mental Health First Aid not only contributes to the well-being and resilience of individuals but also enhances productivity, reduces stigma, and creates a more compassionate and understanding workplace community.

Developing Mental Wellness Warriors by the Numbers:

57 people trained in Mental Health First Aid

10 Virtual Trainings

“This [virtual] format was perfect for this type of training. I felt safe and the environment supported my healing without condemnation.”

—A., age 60

New Faces



Monica Jordan, LCPC—Therapist

Monica is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor with 15 years of experience in the mental health field working with individuals facing Depression, Anxiety, Psychosis, ADHD, PTSD, and Personality Disorders. She spent many years providing Crisis services to individuals needing immediate interventions. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Psychology from The University of Illinois Champaign/Urbana and her Master's degree from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Monica enjoys supporting others on their journey to self-fulfillment. She uses an integrated approach to best suit each individual's needs while providing a warm and safe therapeutic environment.



Sameka Gates, Community Care Program Intern

Sameka is an innovative, resourceful, forward-thinking educator and servant leader with a track record of meeting the needs of diverse populations and creating safe environments for adolescents to authentically express themselves while providing them with the tools to be positive, responsible, and respectful members of the community. Sameka loves working with youth and her therapeutic style is person-centered, solutions-based, and holistic. Sameka earned a Master's degree in Human Services and is currently matriculating through a Clinical Mental Health Counseling Master's program at Concordia University.



Amin Bell, Wellness Facilitator

Amin is a Chicago native, yoga instructor, intuitive, doula, and Divine Feminine Healer. Since 2019, she has dedicated her many spiritual practices to helping over 1,000 women heal their feminine energy. She has been featured in several articles and recognized by her community as a person of great influence. Her commitment to spiritual enlightenment and self-healing is reflected in everything she offers.

Funding SACC's Future

SACC is grateful to the funders supporting our mission to deliver quality, no-cost mental wellness care.

New Profit

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