



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Empowering communities and transforming lives through targeted interventions, WYN is the catalyst for healthier, more resilient children across Watauga, Avery, Ashe, Alleghany, and Wilkes counties.



A Word from Our Executive Director

We hear a lot about what's wrong with our world. Consume any sort of media and you'll inevitably encounter the bad news. Rarely do we hear what is actually happening to help counteract the issues.

In the pages that follow, we are sharing not only some of the challenges our communities face (many of which you're likely already aware), but also what WYN is doing about these challenges, thanks to your support.

We're also going to give you a sneak preview into our visions for growth to more fully fill community gaps. There's a lot of need, but together, we can meet the need and create lasting change.

Jennifer Warren, Executive Director



Program Service Regions

Year Est.	County	Programs & Initiatives	Ages Served
1985	Watauga	Afterschool, Summer Camp, Mentoring, Community Health	Afterschool/Summer: 10-14; Mentoring: 6-18
2002	Avery	Mentoring, Community Health	Mentoring: 6-18
2009	Wilkes	Community Health	
2020	Ashe	Afterschool, Summer Camp, Community Health	Afterschool/Summer: 5-12
2021	Alleghany	Afterschool, Summer Camp, Community Health	Afterschool/Summer: 5-14

**Community Health programming is not a direct service focused on a particular age group. It is, instead, focused on big picture community education, systems change and policy change.

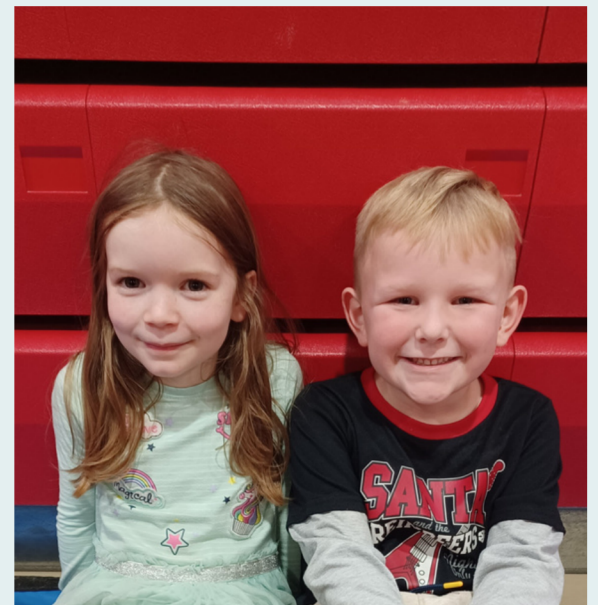
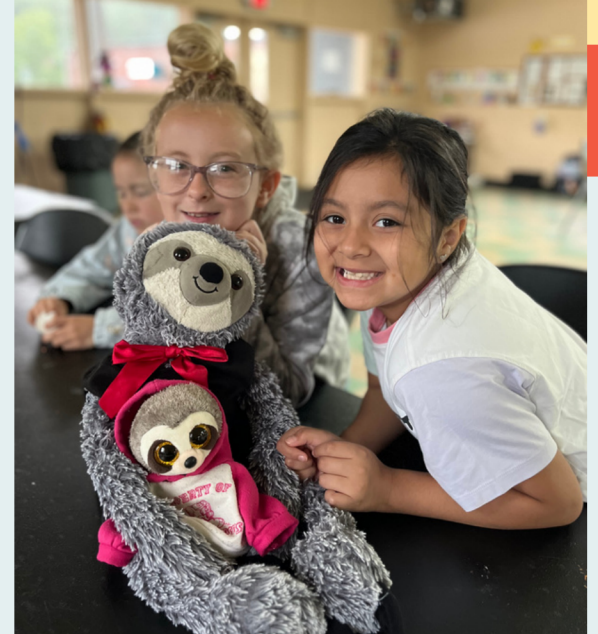
Unmet Need

The work of raising a community is never done. Like the horizon, the opportunities for improvement stretch on infinitely, and in our ongoing commitment to serving the needs of children and families within our communities, we are regularly surveying the landscape for gaps, needs, and opportunities. While each county in WYN's reach presents its own distinct needs, here are two common themes that persistently emerge:

Access to childcare is a huge need across our region. Caregivers need to know that their children are safely engaged with positive adults in the out-of-school hours so that they can gain and maintain employment.

Access to mental health care is another consistent challenge. At a time when youth are presenting with alarmingly high rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health needs, there is also a lack of mental health providers (particularly those who accept certain types of insurance).

As we navigate these challenges, many due to broken systems, WYN remains a constant for families and children – committed to advocating for and providing solutions to empower our children to thrive. It truly takes a community.



Allegheny

In 2023...

62

youth served in
afterschool

31

youth served in
summer camp

84

Catch My Breath
participants

Unmet Need

- More resources for afterschool care other than extracurricular activities and sports are needed
- High need for tutoring due to lower literacy levels
- Residents in Allegheny believe that the three most important issues they currently face are: **access to care** (i.e. access to healthcare providers), **family and social support**, and **housing**.¹
- While youth substance use rates are down, mental health needs are increasing, with over **50% of middle and high school students reporting feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge within a 2 week period**.²

1: Community Health Opinion Survey, administered by AppHealthCare Fall 2023; 2: Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS) 2023

Solutions

Throughout the year, WYN's **Community Health** team and the Allegheny Youth Task Force have worked to meet community needs by providing information and activities. One example was hosting the "Unity in the Community" event focused on **improving resilience** and **reducing the stigma** associated with substance use disorders and mental health needs. **Community Health** staff and **Allegheny Afterschool staff** collaborated on tabling at Back To School events and distributed lockboxes and medication disposal supplies. Staff also partnered with AppHealthCare to deliver **Catch My Breath**, a vaping prevention curriculum to Sparta Elementary School students.



Solutions

Both our **Piney Creek** and **Sparta afterschool** sites are housed in the elementary schools which provides many advantages for our newly established programs in Allegheny. The donated space provides access to school staff for enhanced collaboration and eliminates transportation barriers.

One of the things that makes **Piney Creek afterschool** so special is their connection to outdoor space. In this rural region, kids grow up loving fishing, four wheeling, rodeos, and animals.

A favorite at Piney Creek is climbing trees, often sparking debates over taking turns. Situations like this provide us the opportunity to foster problem-solving skills, empowering children to resolve conflicts independently. Access to nature is one of the seven factors known to reduce toxic stress, so our team adapts their programming schedule to include as much outdoor time as possible.



Alleghany

The staff at our **Sparta afterschool** site noticed that some of their **older students were struggling with lower reading levels**, resulting in students refusing to do homework because they felt embarrassed. Knowing that a lower reading level puts children at risk of dropping out of school and thus financial insecurity, our team worked with students to complete their homework and read books at their level. It has also been a joy to watch the older youth step up to help their younger peers learn to read. **This reading mentorship enhances the skills of the older and younger children alike.** Our staff also enjoys reading to the youngest students daily from books of their choosing to encourage interest in, and enjoyment of, reading.



Opportunities for Growth

- Expand programming to cover Glade Creek Elementary school
- Continue to build relationships with teachers, counselors and school staff at each site
- Market WYN's afterschool program more widely and build community connections so that parents and caregivers know WYN's afterschool program is available to everyone
- Obtain a WYN-owned space for afterschool and summer programming
- Obtain funding to hire an Alleghany Community Health Coordinator
- Provide resources that fill the gap of substance use and mental health care in the county



In 2023...

62

youth served in
afterschool

45

youth served in
summer camp

218

participants in
Catch My Breath

Ashe County takes pride in supporting its residents and our staff spent a significant portion of the past year **building relationships with Ashe partners to facilitate the biggest impact.** The mental health needs of the students showed up during the spring of 2023 and the Ashe Youth Task Force and community partners shifted to meet these needs by providing support to students and teachers. Staff also partnered with AppHealthCare to provide the evidence-based youth vaping prevention program, Catch My Breath to Ashe Middle School students.

Unmet Need

- Individualized support for students
- Better support for English as a second language students and families
- More accessible mental health services
- Childcare that extends into middle school
- Childcare solutions for days the school system does not operate
- Residents in Ashe believe that the three most important issues they currently face are: **access to care (e.g. access to healthcare providers), housing, mental health.**¹

¹: Community Health Opinion Survey, administered by AppHealthCare Fall 2023



“Family and social support” and “substance use and misuse” were closely tied for 4th priorities in the survey.

The Community Health team is working to address these needs through programming as well as the Ashe Youth Task Force.

Solutions

Our **Community Health** team is prioritizing building relationships with community partners and seeking funding that will facilitate increased caregiver education on youth substance use trends as well as primary prevention strategies.

WYN's **Ashe Afterschool** site has placed a high emphasis on relationship building, **structuring their program to make time for team bonding and one-on-one time with their students.** They have been particularly interested in GaGa ball this past year as a team bonding activity (essentially a less aggressive version of dodgeball, played in an octagonal pit). Our friends at Areté Engineers even built and installed a special GaGa pit at their afterschool site!

Many other afterschool programs have a much higher staff-to-student ratio, making it difficult to build strong connections between students and staff. Several WYN parents have highlighted this as one of their favorite things about WYN, and we have even had at least three students try out other programs only to return to WYN because **both the students and parents felt more seen, safe, and comfortable here.**

Opportunities for Growth

- A space, ideally owned by WYN, to accommodate the growth of the program
- Offering WYN's mentoring program to Ashe County
- Cultivate partnerships to bolster accessible mental health resources for the community



Unmet Need

- More social connections are needed due to high rates of loneliness and isolation. **19.5% of youth** in Avery report that they do not have two adults outside of their family that they look up to.¹
- More staff and services—mental health services, school social workers, & inpatient substance use services
- Adequate internet coverage is still needed in many rural areas
- Based on the data collected by the Avery Health Department (2022-2023 State of the County Health Report), the top three health issues were **mental health**, **substance misuse**, and **food & nutrition**.
- Enhanced mentoring services are needed to help combat drug and alcohol use (**31% of youth** in Avery report using alcohol or drugs previously),² negative peer influences (**66% of youth** report having a negative/delinquent peer influences compared to the state average of ²47%) and victimization (sexual vulnerability, bullying, physical assault are all **higher than the state averages**).²

1:2022/23 Avery Youth Survey; 2: 2022/23 Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument



Solutions

With the lack of mental health services, our **Avery Mentoring** volunteers help to fill the gap. They are another set of eyes trained to look for signs of distress and to advocate for intervention. Our team provides training opportunities and ongoing mental health resources to volunteers. With the limited availability of internet service in parts of the county, **our team takes a very “boots on the ground” approach** by making home visits with printed paperwork and by providing resources that are hand delivered.

In 2023...

766

volunteer hours
spent mentoring

17

youth served in
mentoring

23

youth served by
Angel Tree

WYN's **mentoring team** nominated Avery County's Jack Culotta (pictured, left) for the Youth Mentoring Collaborative's 2023 Mentor of the Year award and he was chosen as the overall winner! Jack attended the awards ceremony along with Watauga Mentoring finalist, Beth Shanklin (pictured, center) at the Governor's mansion in Raleigh.

Jack **mentors two youth and goes above and beyond what is required**, including engaging his mentees in acts of service. Both mentees have been directly affected by Avery's drug crisis and both are in kinship placements. School counselors of both of Jack's mentees have reported tremendous growth in his mentees since they started spending time with Jack. One counselor even said her student's "anger management has improved so much that **he could be the poster child for the effectiveness of WYN's mentoring program.**" One of Jack's mentees said **Jack is "like a father to me."**



Opportunities for Growth

- Explore paid mentorships and travel stipends as incentives for involvement since our waiting list exceeds our available mentors
- Bolster our partnership with Lees-McRae college to recruit more mentors
- Increase awareness of WYN in the faith-based sector (of which Avery County has 100+ organizations) for referrals, mentors, and collaboration

Solutions

The Avery Youth Coalition used data collected by the Avery Health Department to prepare the Avery Youth Survey, and staff presented new questions to be added to the survey to assess: students' access to firearms, current youth homelessness, access to food, attitudes/beliefs about eating, and mental health data.



The Avery Youth Survey was administered in Spring 2023. Data regarding youth substance use showed that **substance use is trending downward**, however, students overwhelmingly reported **increased negative mental health outcomes**. Data showed an increase from **11.9% in 2021 to 17.4% in 2023 of students reporting suicidal ideation in the past 12 months**.

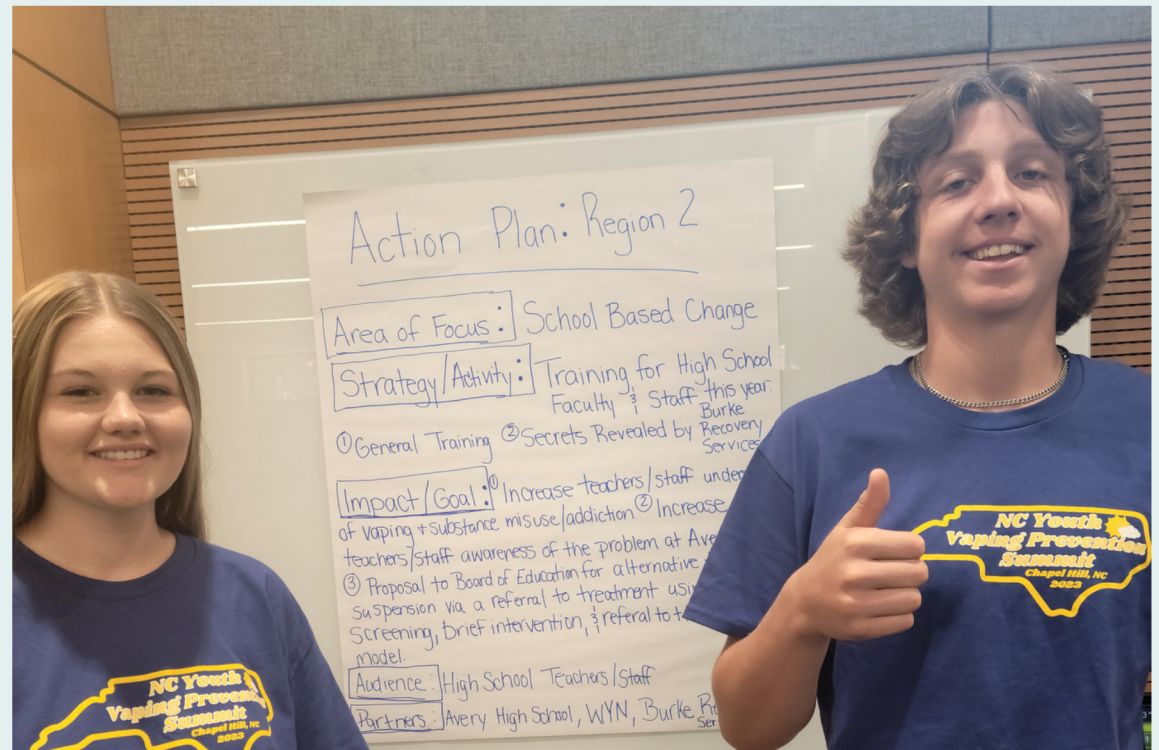
These data points shifted focus of the Avery Youth 2 Youth (Y2Y) program so that it could address Avery students' self-identified need for a place that **allows them to show up as themselves** and offers them the opportunity to create a positive impact on their peers.

- In June, Avery Y2Y hosted an **After Prom Launch Party** and there were about **25 students** who attended.
- In July, momentum continued as staff took two Y2Y high school students to the **NC Vaping Prevention conference** for three days at UNC Chapel Hill. Youth heard from an attorney who assisted in North Carolina and Minnesota's case against JUUL (a type of e-cigarette), as well as other speakers and workshops. The youth created an action plan to positively impact Avery High School by training teachers and staff on this epidemic. The ultimate goal was to create policy changes in the way schools use suspension for substance use related issues.
- Y2Y also participated in summer parties and an **AppState football game**.

Opportunities for Growth

Community Health staff capitalized on their strong community investment to apply for the highly competitive **CDC Drug Free Communities Grant**. The Avery Youth Coalition was awarded this grant in October 2023 which will provide **5 years of funding** to build capacity, offer the foundations for long-term sustainability, and fund community-identified initiatives for youth substance use prevention.

With these funds, the Community Health team hopes to hire more staff dedicated to Avery County, further developing partnerships that will increase opportunities for students with Y2Y.



Watauga

In 2023...

60

youth served in
afterschool

38

youth served in
summer camp

111

youth served in
mentoring

2920

volunteer hours
spent mentoring

Unmet Need

- More social connections for youth (due to high rates of loneliness & isolation)
- Access to mental health care
- Snow day and teacher workday programming
- More adult supervision on evenings & weekends
- Watauga residents' top three priorities were: **access to care** (i.e. access to healthcare providers), **housing**, and **mental health**.

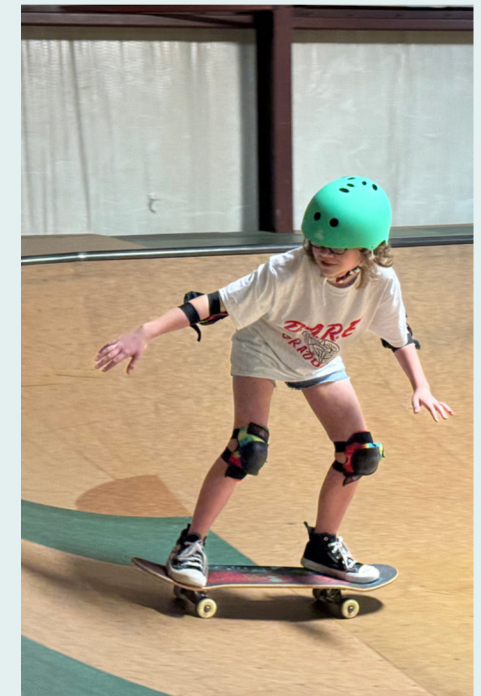
1: Community Health Opinion Survey, administered by AppHealth Fall 2023



Solutions

WYN recognizes that no one strategy is effective alone; **multiple strategies must exist and be woven together to truly make an impact.**

Thanks to more than a decade of work by the Watauga Substance Action and Prevention Coalition (previously funded by the Drug Free Communities grant), **Watauga has a lower rate youth access to substances via retail outlets when compared to other tourist and university towns.**



The 2023 Watauga Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS) data shows that only **3% of high school youth reported retail access to electronic vapor products** and **0.3% reported retail access to alcohol**. This is low for a college town (the NC rate is 4.4% access to vapor products), and while this data would suggest we could move on after a job well done, it is important to remember that it is *precisely because* of our efforts that numbers are low, so these initiatives remain in our scope of work. WYN works closely with AppState students to conduct Tobacco Merchant Education visits, Alcohol Purchase Surveys, and follow up visits to our local retailers.

Our team has begun to shift focus to **social access** to alcohol and tobacco products. The YRBS data shows that **43% of our high school youth obtained alcohol because someone gave it to them**, creating an additional layer of prevention work.

The community has also come to depend on WYN as a source of medication lockboxes and education on safely storing medications to prevent accidental youth overdoses. In 2023, WYN provided **260 lockboxes** to Watauga families, parents, and patients with medications who desired safe methods of prescription storage.

Opportunities for Growth

Thanks to innovative funding and forward-thinking partners, WYN provided a small amount of seed money to support the Watauga Housing Council (WHC).

The WHC seeks to address housing issues for cost-burdened Watauga residents by building partnerships and creating systemic change.

The NC Behavioral Health Equity Initiative funding (which aims to prevent substance misuse by addressing Social Drivers of Health) has enabled the WHC to conduct community listening sessions in neighborhoods not typically reached in order to gather ideas for long-term housing stability.



Watauga

Solutions

Watauga Mentoring focuses on providing protective factors to help outweigh the risk factors youth encounter. The presence of a safe, stable adult in a child's life is one of the most effective trauma-mitigation strategies that exists. Mentors facilitate community connections and hope.

- **100% of youth** surveyed in the mentoring program report that having a mentor helps them to **feel hopeful about their future.**
- **100% of youth** surveyed in the mentoring program report that their mentor **makes them feel good about themselves.**

Often families need extra support outside of WYN's interventions. The mentoring staff partners with community members and organizations to provide resources:

- **100 youth** received holiday gifts through an angel tree
- Back-to-School Fest served **1800 students**, including many WYN participants
- WYN connected families to: Watauga Recreation Center, Girls on the Run, Watauga Arts Council, extracurricular lessons, Quiet Givers, and local church funds



Opportunities for Growth ↩

- "Healing-Centered Mentoring Framework" training for staff & mentors to deliver "light-touch" mental health interventions
- Cultivate more therapeutic mentors for youth with high-level needs
- Paid mentorships for high-needs referrals

Solutions

Given **Watauga afterschool's** long tenure, there has been **capacity to offer more programming for students on snow days, teacher workdays, and evenings.**

This additional programming time equated to **146 extra hours** of direct service.

Favorite after hours trips in 2023 included: *App State sporting events, visiting various local restaurants and watching the movie "Elf" at the Appalachian Theatre.*



→ Opportunities for Growth

- Expand physical space and staffing capacity to serve elementary and high school aged youth
- In-person snow day programming
- More frequent programming opportunities in the evenings & on weekends





Unmet Need

- In 2021, the following were established as Wilkes County's health priorities for 2022-2025: **obesity and chronic disease, mental health and substance misuse, access to care, tobacco and smoking.**¹
- The majority of school-aged children in Wilkes are not participating in organized out-of-school care. **Only 12.4% of parents with children ages 5-12** reported that their child was in before or after school programs and an additional 23% reported their child was in a childcare center or program.²

1: 2021 Wilkes County Community Health Assessment; 2: Wilkes County Childcare Survey



Solutions

WYN's Community Health team focused on building relationships in Wilkes County in 2023, and they were thrilled to cultivate a strong partnership with Wilkes Youth Life Development (WYLD).

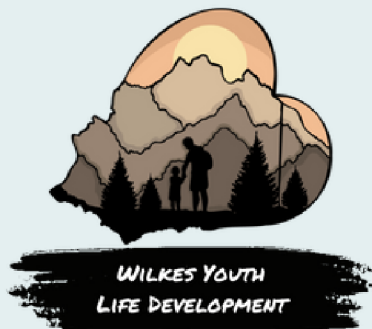
WYLD's mission ("to develop healthy and resilient youth in Wilkes County so that they have the skills and support to become mentally and physically fit adults") is close to the heart of WYN's mission. WYLD also applied for, and received, the federal Drug Free Communities (DFC) grant for their Teen Action Council.

WYN staff has worked alongside WYLD to strengthen Synar initiatives (to ensure that Wilkes tobacco and nicotine merchants are following proper ID and selling protocols to prevent purchase by underage individuals).

In this partnership, WYN secured the Substance Use, Prevention, Treatment & Recovery Services Block Grant Enhancement Funding and Synar Initiatives Funding to implement merchant education and tobacco purchase surveys, proven to reduce youth access to tobacco, nicotine, and vapor products.

Opportunities for Growth

We're looking forward to nurturing this new relationship with WYLD and supporting one another in our mutual goal of reducing substance use among youth.



Opportunities for Growth



Our children are depending on us to create the programs and systems that promote well-being and thriving in each of our communities. As such, we have big dreams for the future! In addition to the opportunities previously discussed, here are some of our future plans:

Purchase or construct teen center spaces in Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga Counties.

Watauga County's center is well underway and your investments can open the doors so that many more children can walk through.

Adding to our direct service team will allow us to increase the number of youth we can reach as well as our hours of operation.

Adding **counseling and paid mentoring** to our list of services will help address the mental health needs of our children.

Providing **alternative learning environments** within our facilities in the daytime hours, as well as an alternative to Out of School Suspension will advance WYN's ability to assist students academically and behaviorally.

Expanding WYN's array of services to all current counties and expanding to new neighboring counties will maximize our impact.

Expenses in 2023

83%

programmatic

17%

administrative

Revenue in 2023

2%

service fees

33%

grants

65%

contributions





Make a donation

Apply to be a mentor

Sign up to tutor

Host a Facebook fundraiser

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- Bob Holder
- Wayne Miller
- Wysteria White
- Billie Howell
- Brenda Lowman
- Tucker Deal
- Heidi Ragan
- Cindy Wallace
- Dave Robertson
- Greyson Summey
- Jessa Sebastian

 @wynstagram_1
 Western Youth Network
westernyouthnetwork.org



It takes a community to raise a community.

Use your talents and resources to make a difference in a child's life.

Dedicated Staff

- Jennifer Warren
- Caroline Davis
- Linda Holtkamp
- Angela McMann
- Carla Parker
- Hannah Margolis
- Haley McKinney
- Heather Canipe
- Kiersten Kleene
- Kylie Bernstein
- Tonya Sizemore
- Tara Worley
- Kelsey Ferrell
- Chanecka Schellhorn
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