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Piloting a Special Olympics Initiative at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

Purpose: The focus of this practicum project was to pilot the Strong Minds initiative at the Tennessee Special Olympics. The Strong Minds initiative is a program aimed at encouraging adaptive coping skills in athletes. This project fits into the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's mission of promoting best practices to improve the lives of persons with developmental disabilities.

Structure: The interprofessional group of the Strong Minds initiative included representatives from social work, law, medicine, psychology, and advocacy. This group created the infrastructure to initiate Strong Minds at the Tennessee Special Olympics. Project members trained in how to perform effective screenings for coping skills and mental health concerns as well as provide interventions and education per Special Olympics guidelines.

Outcomes: The Strong Minds project was first piloted at the Tennessee Special Olympic games in October 2019. Participants learned to identify areas of stress, gained adaptive techniques to help to deal with this stress, and received a copy of mental health resources in their hometown. Other practicum projects included participating on an interprofessional panel discussion related to child development, meeting with visiting federal officials from the Administration on Community Living at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, and involvement in the Academy of Country Music Lifting Lives Music Camp, a week-long residential camp for individuals with William's Syndrome.

Interpretation: These projects emphasize the importance of understanding individuals in the context of their environment and how that influences their access to healthcare, as well as their health outcomes. The Strong Minds initiative will continue to grow and evolve with time with the goal of becoming an established part of all Special Olympics games.

