

“Mental health is not partisan”: Amy Runyon-Harms and Bill Smith of Inseparable on transforming mental health policy in the United States

Ambar Castillo
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Ambar Castillo: Could you start by briefly introducing yourself and speaking about how you came into this work?

Bill Smith: I'm Bill Smith, the founder and CEO of Inseparable.

Amy Runyon-Harms: I am Amy Runyon-Harms, the COO at Inseparable.

Bill Smith: Amy and I have worked together for years, and have known each other from previous campaigns around marriage equality and LGBT rights. I launched Inseparable five-and-a-half years ago after losing my brother to suicide after a long battle with depression and bipolar.

We interviewed a ton of people in the mental health field to understand who's doing what and what were the gaps. One of the biggest things we saw was that there wasn't anyone specifically focused on building the power needed to transform mental health policy in the United States.

Ambar Castillo: What was it that you found that was needed that wasn't happening in the way you thought it should?

Bill Smith: There were so many brilliant people that knew what needed to happen, but they weren't focused on how you change broken systems, and how you build political power.

That's what Inseparable was built to do: create strategies to win and pass policy.

We are systems-change people who have gone through the advocacy process over the last number of decades across a number of issues.

That's the specific experience that we brought to creating Inseparable. We essentially got better at the process of taking the field of mental health and turning it into a movement that's really focused on winning and changing policy.

Amy Runyon-Harms: I come from the advocacy and campaign world. Everyone has a connection to mental health in one way or another, whether that's personally or through family or through friends. I believed in the model and what he was building.

Ambar Castillo: What is distinctive in your approach to youth mental health?

Amy Runyon-Harms: What is unique about Inseparable is the way we're purpose-built to pull all of the different levers that you can pull to achieve these policy goals. That's why we have a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4), and a sister organization, Mental Health PAC, to build that political power.

We've got flexibility to do a whole lot of public education and research and the work that needs to be done, but then we've also got the capability to hire the best-in-class lobbyists in states who know how to pass laws. Then, where needed, we can separately deploy PAC dollars as well to get the right people elected.

Ambar Castillo: How do those entities help achieve those outcomes or give you flexibility to work on these different sectors?

Bill Smith: If you think about the fact that what we're trying to do is achieve transformative change, you have to activate a lot of different levers at the same time. We have state and federal work. There are state policy campaigns. There are federal efforts. That requires communication and storytelling, so that people understand this isn't just some strange Byzantine policy.

It requires equipping policymakers to turn them into champions and building a real movement around all of this. What that looks like is running a strategic campaign that does everything from hiring lobbyists to conducting public opinion polls to mobilizing grassroots supporters to come and tell their stories to working with regulators. What Inseparable does is bring all those different tools together.

Because we focus on doing that in a way that's maximum compliant with the law, you have some things that the non-profit Inseparable can do and some things that our C4 does, like hire lobbyists. Then if you want to support political candidates who are champions, that would require the PAC.

Ambar Castillo: Can you speak about how the 503(c) helps? Is that the arm that's responsible for the education efforts you mentioned?

Bill Smith: One of the biggest things we do is policy development to research and work with the field on what are the policy changes that would matter the most. For example, we know that if we want mental health problems to be identified and treated early in youth, early intervention is what is required to make that happen.

We do that so that everyone has a chance to thrive and have a healthy future. To make that happen, we have to figure out a payment structure to make sure that young people have care and support around them. One excellent mechanism for this is states taking advantage of an option that allows Medicaid to cover school-based mental health services. But states have to opt in. To achieve that, we've got to run campaigns, to raise awareness and pass policy.

Ambar Castillo: What piece of the education and advocacy aspects do you think were missing? Was there a missing piece in the narrative that wasn't allowing for some of the kinds of policy changes you want to happen?

Bill Smith: It's two things. One, it's the singularity of our focus. If you look at a lot of organizations in the mental health space, they do a lot of other things. They may do some policy advocacy, but they also have more direct service-oriented things. We don't do any of that.

We're only focused on winning and changing policy over time.

Then the second thing that's different is how we do it, which is around that strategic campaign management of bringing all these different tools to bear. It's not that other groups don't do different pieces of it, but we run our organization like an ongoing campaign because of the fact that our job is only to change the policy

Ambar Castillo: Have you seen progress in certain areas of youth mental health, and what have those been?

Bill Smith: We've had over 90 wins so far across states, across the country. That's making sure there's a mental health services coordinator in every school system in my home state of Alabama. We also did that in Georgia and in Delaware. In Pennsylvania, we just got \$100 million for school-based mental health. Colorado passed a bill that every young person under the age of 21 has access to up to six free sessions with a mental health clinician. Montana is building tiered support systems for the school systems.

Ambar Castillo: Why do you think you needed these levers for these policy wins to happen? What is it about the narrative?

Bill Smith: We work in four areas: youth, mental health crisis, workforce, and access. There are probably eight more areas that we could list that somehow touch or impact mental health. What we do in a state is go in and say, "We're going to focus on two."

That focus is what it takes to push something.

We don't win them all. Some things blow up, and some things break, but we're winning more than we're losing because we're focusing and running specific campaigns around those.

Ambar Castillo: What would you say when things break or don't go through? What are the themes that come up, or what are the common reasons why those don't go forth?

Bill Smith: The first issue we run into is when things cost money. When we're saying we want more people to have access to services, where's the money going to come from?

The second challenge we run up against is our work around coverage. When you are working to make sure that insurance coverage, whether it's public or private, covers mental health services for young people, you can run into pushback from the industry.

Then in limited examples, we've had extreme groups say, "We don't think you should talk about mental health in schools at all. That should be done in the home." You have a culture piece as well. So on a very rare occasion, mental health policy brushes up on these culture war conversations, but the reality is that the vast majority of Americans, 80% from both parties, support the policies we're advancing, so we try to remember that loud dissent in this case doesn't translate into meaningful policy or electoral will.

Ambar Castillo: Where do you see that more likely to happen?

Bill Smith: Sometimes you get it from a very small segment of the far right politically.

Generally, advancing youth mental health in schools is something that we've done a lot of public opinion research on. We know people across the political spectrum care deeply about kids' mental health and are ready to have more solutions and more access in schools. Anytime you talk about school policy anywhere in the United States, you run into people with different opinions on it.

You have to get in the advocacy process and educate people, and bring voices to the table to convince policymakers to do the right thing.

Ambar Castillo: Have you found themes around why folks who care about this issue might not want to support policies you're trying to put in place?

Bill Smith: It's different in different places. For instance, in New Jersey, when we were working to make sure that they expanded Medicaid reimbursement for school-based mental health services, there was someone in the legislature who wrote the bill in a way that made it seem like it was going to cost the state money when it actually was going to bring money from the federal government to the state government.

That was an error in a lack of understanding versus outright opposition.

In Colorado, we were working on a bill to provide more access. There was political opposition from significantly far-right folks, saying, "We don't want you to talk to our kids about mental health. We do that at home." We think it's important for parents and schools to partner to make sure kids have the mental health resources they need to

thrive. We think every kid should have access to resources in their school, no matter what.

Amy Runyon-Harms: That's where having research and polling can be helpful to show policymakers. It provides them the backup to say, "Most of my constituents agree on this, and I'm going to have the political courage to move forward."

Ambar Castillo: At what point in the process or in these campaigns are you gleaning insights and then pivoting?

Bill Smith: Every day because the public policy process is such a dynamic one, and it can be slightly different in every state.

The process from coming up with a legislative concept, finding sponsors, to then introducing it and going through committees in both houses of the legislature, and then getting it all the way to a governor's desk, you have to be able to pivot at every possible turn to deal with what is changing.

Ambar Castillo: How does your structure allow for you to pivot quickly when you're working across the nation on this?

Bill Smith: Part of it is a deeply experienced team with the ability to work on a lot of things in a lot of places simultaneously.

Angela Kimball, our chief advocacy officer, David Lloyd, our chief policy officer, and their teams, they've been doing this for decades. I've worked on legislative campaigns for almost 20 years. Amy's been doing this for a long time, too. We have people that work with us in states, and people that we make grants to from other organizations who then become a part of a coalition with us. We all work together in concert to get there, but it's pretty dynamic.

Ambar Castillo: What are things that have made you successful in being able to reach people across the ideological spectrum on this issue?

Bill Smith: The single biggest factor is everyone has a mental health story and so we start from a place where mental health is not partisan. We don't believe it's partisan.

Whether you are super progressive or super conservative, you care about kids, and you want what's best for them. We named our coalition around youth mental health the Hopeful Futures Campaign.

That's intentional because we are grounded in this idea that everybody wants their child to have a hopeful, healthy, happy future, regardless of where they may argue on a lot of other political points.

Amy Runyon-Harms: I was thinking about Colorado again in terms of the storytelling aspect and how powerful that is because we had some parents and folks who shared their stories during committee hearings, and it didn't matter the elected official's party.

There was nobody who could vote against it. You got the data side of things to show them the facts, but nothing can beat those personal stories.

Bill Smith: One of the things we've tried to do with Inseparable is learn from other movements about the successful strategies and tactics you should apply when you think about communications and building the broadest possible coalition or tent to bring people in.

Ambar Castillo: Have you seen the narrative change since you first started Inseparable?

Bill Smith: One dynamic that has changed a little bit on the youth front is figuring out how to be more solutions-focused rather than crisis-focused, and that young people don't want to constantly be told about the crisis piece of it as much as given an opportunity to focus on solutions.

Ambar Castillo: Who are your in-state partners, and how do you build that partnership or decide on the partnership in the first place?

Bill Smith: It varies state to state. In Delaware, it was the National Alliance for Mental Illness, Delaware Chapter. In Colorado, it was a group called Healthier Colorado, which works on public health issues writ large, and then it was Mental Health Colorado. In Georgia, it's Voices for Georgia's Children as one of our key partners.

What you do is you find out it's a pretty small advocacy community in each state when you talk about these issues.

What we try to do is go find the partners who can bring the right voices to the table for the public policy work. What we are interested in is folks who can help us win. It looks a little different in every state because groups are different in every state.

Ambar Castillo: Do you have someone on your team that specifically coordinates and manages communications with each partner?

Amy Runyon-Harms: The way we have our team structured is that different folks on the team are the main points of contact within each state.

We go in and have a conversation, learn what they are interested in pursuing, talk to them about what our priorities are, see where there's common ground, and figure out how we can work together on that. Most important is the communication aspect and having that consistent relationship.

Ambar Castillo: What do you think is the most challenging aspect of maintaining those relationships, especially when so many different partners are involved?

Bill Smith: Being able to stay in connection while moving quickly because we have to listen to each other in coalitions, but so much of our work is connected to the calendar

of the policymaking process. We have to stay in sync and know before we get into a legislative session what our goals are.

Also, what we're working on is not the only goal that that partner may be working on because a child advocacy organization in a state might have a lot of things that aren't necessarily mental health, but they're also focused with us on one or two pieces of legislation. You have to work hard to stay connected and aligned.

Ambar Castillo: The CO-Lab uses different categories to talk about youth mental health, building youth resilience, agency, and belonging. Which of these areas do you think your work most contributes to directly?

Bill Smith: We touch all three. If I had to pick, I would say agency. At the end of the day, what we're about is making sure that people have access to the support they need. For young people, that includes, especially in the US context, schools and school-based services, so that you're equipping someone to have resources when they need them.

Ambar Castillo: Where do you see Inseparable positioned in the broader youth mental health ecosystem?

Bill Smith: We're adding strength to the ability to advocate and change policies and broken systems, because the systems that govern all of these things and the way that they work, it's messy. It's a complex and difficult process.

Ambar Castillo: Could you speak about who else, even if not the same, is doing work that's complementary to your mission?

Bill Smith: If you look at the Hopeful Futures Campaign, there are almost 30 organizations that we work with in one form or another quite regularly. I mentioned in a lot of states, it could be the Mental Health America chapter or the NAMI chapter, or Active Minds — an organization that is organized by young people in high schools and colleges who want to advocate for their own mental health and the health of their friends.

Ambar Castillo: If you could redesign or strengthen this ecosystem, what roles or other partners or structures do you wish existed to accelerate progress?

Bill Smith: We believe there has to be a bigger movement, and that's not just a bigger Inseparable, but a bigger ecosystem of organizations.

One of the things we do both with the policymakers is something we call “champion success,” which is we want more champions. How do we help equip them, educate them, connect them with others, create a space where they can advance a lot of policies, so even if we don't work on it, we've equipped champions to work on it.

Within the movement, we've started a fellowship, where we had four or five policy fellows who we went on a long journey with, and this last year has been specifically about teaching a small cohort of people. A lot of them are youth leaders.

What we need are more organizations that have highly skilled people that know how to run and win public policy campaigns that matter, because Inseparable can't be in all of them, even though we need to be in more of them in more places.

We know we can't do it alone, so what can we do to contribute to the movement so that the movement gets bigger and better at this?

Ambar Castillo: Is there something specific that makes a campaign successful or not?

Bill Smith: Are you about addition, not subtraction? Even if you have a very firmly held belief about something, can you talk about it in such a way that you bring in more people? That's strategic communication, and how you do it to build the biggest possible universe of supporters is an art, and it's hard.

The political and public policy advocacy system can be rough, and it can move fast. You have to know how to work the inside game while you're also building the outside pressure of people telling their stories.

Ambar Castillo: Can you speak a little bit about how this moves so quickly, especially when public perception is that policy moves slowly?

Bill Smith: It can be a lot of hurry-up and wait. If you look at Montana and Texas, the legislature meets every other year for a certain number of days. There's a legislative calendar that moves fairly fast during that couple of months period — a bill has to be introduced, go through a committee, go through the floor, go to the other chamber, committee, floor. If they change, it goes back. You can have that a couple of times, and then it goes to the governor.

If you are an activist who has a full-time job or you're in school, there's a lot to keep up with. Then when you add the fact that we're doing that in 18 or 20 states at a time, and you layer all those calendars on top of each other, that's when it gets fast-moving.

It's a lot to track. It requires the professionalization of the movement and capacities of people that do that all the time. We're not overwhelmed by the process because we are used to the rhythms of it and deal with it all the time.

Ambar Castillo: Earlier you mentioned it would be great if there were more champions. Were you speaking about more champions that work on other issues or more champions that work on similar policies that you're working on?

Bill Smith: All of it because if you think about access, crisis, workforce, and youth mental health, those are the things that we work on in specific lanes, so that we can measure our success and contribute what we know we're supposed to be focused on.

When we're in a fight with an insurance company over what ought to be covered and what's not, we need a lot of people in that fight because the insurance companies are big and powerful. They've got a lot of money, and they've had influence for a long time.

Listening to young people and their families about what they want their coverage to look like versus a giant insurance company requires a big movement.

If we were building another one, I would want more people in what we're doing but also want more people in the adjacent lanes. That's both on the activist side and on the policymaker side. There's something like 7,000 state legislators in our country. It's going to take a lot of us to talk to all of them.

Amy Runyon-Harms: That's why we try really hard to make our reports or any of the products we're putting out into the world very actionable and accessible. We put out these 50-state reports that clearly lay out how a state is doing on youth mental health and school mental health, for example.

For a policymaker, it's very easy to see that there's a roadmap of some of the things that they could work on. We want to make everything as easy and accessible and understandable as possible.

Bill mentioned the Win Workshop earlier, which is that cohort of folks who we're training on all those different levers within the strategic campaign management. When we conclude our first year of this, we're going to turn that into a podcast or a video series or webinar series so that other folks can go watch those and learn too. We're hoping it creates a little bit of a ripple effect, and it's not just the 18 or 20 states where we're working, but other folks in Wisconsin or other states we're not working can pick it up and run with it.

Ambar Castillo: Have you heard yet from that cohort any general trends and what's been the most challenging in training on all this?

Bill Smith: It's time and resources that come up time and time again, of having the time to do the advocacy as well as the resources to build their organizations.

Some of the young people in that cohort have been doing things like working with states to pass legislation so that your student ID has 988 on it. Just smart, common-sense things that will make it more accessible for young people. They're leading it, and they're digging in and writing legislation and getting people to contact their legislators and do the whole process.

Our job is not to say, "You must work on these four policies that are Inseparable policies." It's more like "You are the advocates who know long-term where youth mental health policy needs to go. We want to equip you to drive things that we will support that you will lead."

Ambar Castillo: What are the challenges for folks training in these areas or wanting to work at the intersection of these areas, especially when we're talking about the healthcare insurance companies?

Bill Smith: Two things. One is that I've found that when you have people who come into this space and want to make a difference, you have to distinguish working in mental

health versus working on mental health policy advocacy and systems change because they're different things.

There are a lot of people who want to help people in the mental health space. There's an entire professional track around providing care.

That's different from what it takes to get a bill through the Alabama legislature and what it takes to successfully advocate for a policy change.

Then the second thing is just the advocacy process. When we showed up at the Alabama legislature working on our bill to get a mental health services coordinator in every school system, we had to think about that policymaker who right before we met, met with the car dealers about something that has to do with car tags. Then, after your meeting, they're going to go into something that has to do with tax policy. Then the next meeting is going to be about something wildly different.

Ambar Castillo: What would you say is the thing that makes it successful?

Bill Smith: It's being able to have a sophisticated understanding of not just the policy you're advocating for, but the storytelling component, the data that you need to bring to the conversation. Then it's understanding the policymaker that you're talking to, the process that they're having to work in, and atmospherics and systemic things that matter for them being able to get to yes or no in supporting you on your issue.

You have to have an understanding of all of that as an ecosystem. That means understanding people that get elected to office. We may not like the electoral process, and we may not love politics, but we have to understand that that's the reality for those people. That's why we do things like polling and focus groups, and bring data and things that can help them.

Ambar Castillo: Could you speak about some kind of approach you tried, or some partnership that you tried that didn't work, and what you learned from it?

Bill Smith: Any time we haven't been prepared, both on the coalition side of things and understanding different stakeholders and how they sit.

In Michigan, we tried to advance a bill to require insurance companies to use transparent, fair standards for reimbursement decisions, and we didn't fully understand how deeply the health insurance industry had its tentacles into every single person in the Michigan public policy process.

We weren't as prepared as we could've been because we didn't understand all the coalition dynamics.

Ambar Castillo: What are structural or political factors that are specific to the US that make it difficult to enact mental health reforms, particularly for young people?

Bill Smith: In a lot of countries, if you have data that says, “This is what we should be doing to give young people the best chance to thrive,” you show up with the data to the health minister, and the health minister says, “This makes sense, let's do it,” and then the system does it.

In the United States, if we say, “This should be covered by insurance, and it's not,” we have to have that fight in 50 different states and in Washington.

We don't do the rational thing. We do the thing that the political system, which is dominated by moneyed interests, like insurance companies, says should happen.

If you look at it from a pure public health lens, the United States is not optimally set up to deliver good care. Other countries try to do the right thing through their health ministries.

Ambar Castillo: Are there any resources or tools, or frameworks that you have found especially useful in helping advance your work?

Bill Smith: The biggest one that we've talked a bit about already is strategic campaign management and taking lessons from other successful movements, like marriage equality and others, about how you blend together storytelling, messaging, research, framing, movement building, lobbying, engaging with policymakers. That framework is the most important difference maker for why we are successful versus not being successful.

Amy Runyon-Harms: We bring our experience from other movements into this work. Bill is constantly meeting with leaders from other movements to see how they've been successful. The Building Hope Summit is a convening that we put on every other year to bring together funders and advocates, and others from the mental health movement. We try to bring in leaders from other movements to take the stage and share some of their lessons learned, too.

Ambar Castillo: Can you speak about how you hear from and incorporate youth voices in shaping your strategy, your campaigns, or your narrative work?

Amy Runyon-Harms: We've got some young people who are members of our advisory board. We count on them to help shape our programming. We have a close partnership with Active Minds, so that we can coordinate with student leaders all across the country on college campuses.

Then, through our coalition partnerships, Hopeful Futures Campaign, and some of our more state-specific and state partners, we try to elevate youth voices.

Ambar Castillo: Is there any advice you would give to other organizations trying to do similar work?

Bill Smith: Get in the game on policy and systems change. There's a timidity in a lot of philanthropy and in certain organizations that are more direct service-focused. The way

that we scale change is to change broken systems, and you fix entire systems, not just components of it. The more people that we have in the advocacy process, the better product we're going to get out of it. It's an invitation more than anything else.

Ambar Castillo: Thank you. Take care.

Ambar Castillo reports for Epicenter NYC, covering access and equity in some of the nation's most diverse neighborhoods. A former STAT health equity fellow through MIT's Knight Science Journalism program, her award-winning reporting bridges storytelling and public health. Supported by fellowships like the Solutions Journalism Network, Fulbright and Pulitzer Center, she has carried her reporting across communities from Queens to India.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*