

Over the past year, it has become clear that Texas' foster care system is not adequately meeting the needs of the young people who rely on it. The majority of the youth services professionals TNOYS works with are incredibly hard-working and go above and beyond to provide the best possible care, but they can't address the system's problems alone. The 85th Legislative Session presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to come together to build on progress made in past sessions and further strengthen our state's child welfare system.

TNOYS recommends three specific steps for doing that:

1. INCREASE RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE RATES FOR PROVIDERS SERVING THE MOST CHALLENGING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In 2016, Texas media repeatedly reported on instances of youth in Child Protective Services (CPS) care going without placements and sleeping overnight in state offices. Everyone can agree this is unacceptable and must be fixed. But what many don't realize is that even as this is happening, there are emergency shelters and other residential child care providers in Texas with beds standing empty because they do not have the funds to care for the children and youth who need to use them. That's because the current state reimbursement rates paid to these providers to cover the cost of foster care placements are not adequate to meet the needs of the most challenging youth in the state's care.

Many providers work to supplement the funds they receive from the state with community support such as donations and grants. However, maintaining a stable environment for youth requires a reliable source of income to ensure the most basic needs of a facility are met, such as salaries for qualified staff. The financial burdens become even greater for those young people who have more challenging needs.

TNOYS recommends following the guidance of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and fulfilling their request for a reimbursement rate increase, which will be released in January 2017. The professionals at DFPS work with foster care youth every day and have the best understanding of the resources required to care for them.

2. INCREASE THE RESIDENTIAL RATE FOR THE SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM

The Supervised Independent Living (SIL) Program serves youth in extended foster care. These are young people between the ages of 18 and 21 who have aged out of foster care but choose to remain in the system because they are not yet prepared for the transition to adulthood. Just as with traditional foster care placements, the SIL program is facing

a capacity shortage, and many youth in extended foster care are staying in emergency shelters intended for minors or other less-than-ideal placements. Many more are opting not to leave care and try life on their own, which often results in homelessness.

The SIL Program is extremely important for ensuring a successful transition to adulthood for youth aging out of the foster care system. Becoming a healthy, successful adult can be very difficult for young people who may not have familial support, job training or college preparedness, or basic life skills. In fact, roughly one in four youth who ages out of foster care ends up homeless after they transition. This time period is a critical one for getting young people the support they need to get on their feet and become healthy, independent adults.

Many providers who would like to operate SIL programs are not doing so because the state reimbursement rate for this care is not adequate and they cannot afford to. TNOYS recommends following the guidance DFPS will release in January on increasing these rates to enable more providers to provide SIL programs and reduce the capacity shortage.

3. FULLY FUND THE FOSTER CARE REDESIGN INITIATIVE IN REGION 3B AND BEGIN TO CAREFULLY EXPAND IT

The Foster Care Redesign model developed and implemented in Texas' Region 3B is called "Our Community, Our Kids" (OCOK). The model promises better outcomes for children and youth in foster care, but only if it is adequately funded. The Texas Legislature made the important decision during the last legislative session to appropriate an additional \$1,200 per child to the Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC). This funding has been critical to the success of the redesign in Region 3B since the last session and TNOYS recommends that the Legislature continue to fund the program and increase the funding to \$1,900 per child, as requested by DFPS.

TNOYS is encouraged by the promising results Foster Care Redesign has achieved in Region 3B, and we look forward to seeing the best practices expanded across the state. However, we suggest that the rollout to future catchment areas be conducted cautiously. Youth in the state's care are in fragile situations and it is critical that any transition in the systems that serve them do not create interruptions in the care they receive. It is also critical that Foster Care Redesign only be rolled out to communities that have the capacity and are equipped to provide high quality foster care services.



THEIR FUTURE IS OUR BUSINESS.