



# 2017 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA IN SUPPORT OF TEXAS YOUTH AND FAMILIES

*Join our campaign to create a better Texas for young people!*

*There are nearly 10 million young people in Texas and many are at risk for abuse or neglect, criminal justice system involvement, or homelessness. All of these situations can be prevented, but only if adequate resources are committed to doing so. Over the past year, it has become clear that the state systems that support Texas' at-risk young people are facing challenges, and the 85<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session presents an opportunity to enact policies and commit resources to help.*

*Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a network of community-based organizations that serve our state's most vulnerable young people and their families. We have designed an advocacy campaign that invites state leaders and the public to join us in our work to recognize the strengths of young people and provide them with the resources and support they need to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Below are the guiding principles behind our campaign, which are informed directly by our experience with young people and those who serve them.*

## **1. PREVENT PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY START BY INVESTING IN PROVEN PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS.**

The best, most cost effective way to serve young people and their families is to prevent problems before they start and escalate to a crisis that threatens the health of a household. The Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) division at the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) contracts with organizations across the state to provide services and interventions that are proven to prevent youth from ending up in the more expensive foster care and juvenile justice systems. **Texas should invest more in important programs prevention and early intervention programs, which have a proven track record of successfully keeping children and youth at home with their families.**

## **2. PROMOTE A FULL CONTINUUM OF SAFE, NURTURING LIVING ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO CANNOT REMAIN WITH THEIR PARENTS AND ENSURE FOSTER CARE SERVICES ARE HIGH QUALITY AND TRAUMA-INFORMED.**

Children removed by the state from unsafe home environments are placed in foster care, which can take the form of foster families, relative caregivers, emergency shelters, residential treatment centers, and more. There is strong consensus among residential child care providers that current reimbursement rates paid by the state to cover the costs of foster care in these various settings are inadequate. **Texas should better fund all foster care services to ensure they are safe and promote health and well-being.**

**Texas should also promote the careful redesign of the foster care system, to improve outcomes for those in foster care.** However, it is important to recognize that some youth may not be able to enter the new system for many years, so we must continue improving the existing system at the same time.

## **3. PROVIDE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO MEET THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF YOUTH WHO ARE HOMELESS AND ON THEIR OWN.**

Another vulnerable population of young people in need of support are unaccompanied homeless youth. Last year, Texas school districts identified nearly 16,000 unaccompanied homeless students. Research suggests there are many more youth and young adults who are homeless as well but aren't being counted.

During the last legislative session, Texas lawmakers took a great step forward in better understanding this population by mandating the first-ever statewide count of youth experiencing homelessness. TNOYS worked with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs to conduct the study, which involved surveying nearly 900 of these young people about their needs. One of the key findings is that these young people experiencing homelessness have very unique characteristics and needs different from those of their adult counterparts. **Texas should further invest in services and supports to respond to the specific needs of these vulnerable but resilient young people in order to help them get on their feet.**

#### **4. PREVENT THE RE-TRAUMATIZATION OF YOUTH SERVED BY THE STATE BY PROMOTING TRAUMA INFORMED CARE PRINCIPLES AND REDUCING SECLUSION AND RESTRAINT PRACTICES WHEN APPROPRIATE.**

Some young people in the child welfare system may exhibit especially challenging behaviors as a result of trauma they have experienced. For example, a child may run away from a foster care placement when he or she is upset because running away is a coping mechanism learned while living in an abusive home. For these youth, addressing their behavior appropriately is especially crucial to their health and well-being, and practices that involve physically restraining or secluding them are proven to be dangerous and traumatizing. Many hard-working youth services professionals and organizations across Texas have already begun to voluntarily embark on the organizational culture change needed to ensure service environments are trauma-informed and seclusion and restraint practices are only used as a last resort. **It is critical to also incorporate these best practices into state policies, to ensure they become more widespread and benefit all youth served by the state.**

#### **5. SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS THROUGH THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD.**

Growing up is hard work, especially when you are on your own or are struggling with mental health conditions. Being successful requires completing school, getting a job, staying out of trouble, and learning skills like using money wisely and paying bills on time. Young adults who face challenges such as aging out of foster care, having a mental health condition, or being homeless are just as capable of meeting these milestones as their peers, but they need help. **Texas should continue to invest in resources including life skills training and job training to prepare youth who are struggling to grow into successful, independent adults.**

#### **6. WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUTH.**

TNOYS values the resiliency, capability, and insight of youth and strives to always work in partnership with young people. Service providers are increasingly sharing this view, recognizing that youth and their families often know best what they need and involving them in decisions about how to secure the resources to help them lead healthy, fulfilling lives. This should also be the case when it comes to policymaking that impacts young people – **Texas' lawmakers should ensure that youth have opportunities to be involved in policy decisions, including through task forces, councils, and committees.**

As in previous years, TNOYS will help facilitate this involvement by again hosting a Youth in Action Day at the Capitol during the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session, bringing youth partners to the Capitol to advocate for the needs of young people.



**THEIR FUTURE IS OUR BUSINESS.**