

TNOYS 2021 Cross-Systems Youth Policy Agenda

Recommendations for the Texas 87th Legislative Session

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), is a statewide network of youth-serving providers who share a vision where all youth and young adults in Texas are valued, their strengths are recognized, their voices are heard and respected, and they have access to the resources, support, and opportunities they need to meet their goals. TNOYS reaches this vision through an innovative and comprehensive systems change approach that includes policy advocacy for youth and families at the state and regulatory levels (“policy”), training and program development services for youth-serving professionals (“practice”), and engaging youth with lived experience in decision-making about their own lives and the larger communities in which they live (“partnership”).

The devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are reverberating across systems, closing down Texas schools, and forcing millions of Texas families and young adults out of jobs. Families are losing or at risk of losing their housing and children, youth and young adults are experiencing trauma at even higher rates. It is evident that Texas’ youth-serving systems will experience an increased need for critical services in the coming years. Even before the pandemic, Texas’ youth serving systems were over-taxed. More than 7 million young people ages 0-17 in Texas (21%) live within the national poverty limits and many youth and families were falling through the cracks.

KEY SYSTEMS

Housing/Homelessness Services:

Texas was among the top six states reporting the largest number of unaccompanied homeless youth ages 18-24.² More than 1,300 young adults spend the night on the streets in Texas on a given night.³ At the same time, Texas schools reported serving 78,296 homeless students in the 2019-2020 school year.

Child Welfare: There were over 370,000 reports of child abuse and neglect statewide in 2018.⁴ Nearly 30,000 children lived apart from their families in out-of-home placements including foster care, residential treatment facilities, and shelters.⁵

Juvenile Justice: Nearly 40,000 Texas youth aged 10-16 were arrested or referred to the juvenile justice system in 2019.

RACIAL DISPARITIES AND STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES EXACERBATE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

The racial disparities and biases that exist within these systems are alarming, especially considering that systems-involvement often leads to poor outcomes for youth. Statewide, Black students make up just under 13 percent of the overall student population but account for 23 percent of the students experiencing homelessness. A Houston specific study found that 65 percent of homeless young adults are Black, even though the Houston young adult population is only 25 percent Black. This disparity is also prevalent in the child welfare system. In 2019, Black families were more likely than other families to be reported to CPS, investigated, and have their children removed from their home than white families. Black youth were removed from their homes 1.9 times more often than their peers and are also more likely to age out of foster care with no family. While they make up 12 percent of the population, 27 percent of youth who age out of care are Black.

While research shows Black youth generally don’t misbehave at greater rates than their peers, they make up 27 percent of arrest and referrals to juvenile probation.

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KEY SYSTEMS

Health/Behavioral Health: More than 550,000 Texas children and youth have serious mental health needs each year.⁶ In 2017, 1-in-8 Texas high school students attempted suicide in the previous year, 66% higher than the rate of high school students nationally.⁷ 1-in-7 high school students used opioids without or in contradiction to a prescription.

Victim Services/Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY): In 2016, it was estimated there were approximately 79,000 victims of youth and minor sex trafficking in Texas.⁸

Education: Each year schools take more than 1,500,000 exclusionary discipline actions against students, most for behavioral issues that could be addressed in the classroom. Exclusionary disciplinary includes, in or out-of-school suspension and expulsion and means students are taken out of class and not learning.

Workforce: An estimated 134,000 Texas teens between 16 and 19 are neither in school nor working. In Texas, 13.8 percent of the state's 16–24-year-olds are out of school and not working compared with the national share of 11.5 percent. This translates to almost half a million (487,471) youth who are disconnected from both work and school in Texas.⁹

Once in the system, Black youth experience the harshest response at greater rates and are also much more likely to be moved deeper into the justice system. Latinx youth, though to a lesser extent, are also over-represented in the justice system compared to their white peers. Research also tells us that people of color are substantially more likely to be sexually exploited. A national study found that as many as 70 percent of trafficked youth are Black. Finally, racial disparities also affect the disconnection rates among Texas' opportunity youth as Black and Latinx youth are overrepresented. Black youth are 16 percent of the opportunity youth population despite only making up 13 percent of the population, while Latinx youth make up 52 percent of opportunity youth despite only making up 46 percent of the population.

THE NEED FOR CROSS-SYSTEMS POLICY CHANGE

Involvement in any of these systems is rarely mutually exclusive, and services and policy changes must be coordinated if they are going to effectively support Texas' most vulnerable yet resilient young people. As many as 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have had some contact with the child welfare system and nearly one-third of youth involved with the child welfare system will likely at some point be involved in the juvenile justice system. Research also shows that 34 percent of homeless youth in Texas reported experiencing abuse or neglect prior to being homeless and 33 percent reported having legal problems or prior convictions. Alarming, one-quarter of youth who age out of foster care will experience at least one period of homelessness before age 21.

Youth who have been involved in systems are also at greater risk of experiencing commercial sexual exploitation due to factors such as past trauma and income and housing instability. Young people are especially vulnerable upon aging out of foster care, exiting the juvenile justice system, or while experiencing

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homelessness. What's more, youth — including those who have been trafficked — often enter the juvenile justice system for minor offenses to get needed mental health, substance use or trauma treatment and services.

The need to support Texas' systems-involved youth extends to our school system. Last school year, Texas schools served 78,000 homeless students and 17,000 youth in foster care. Exclusionary school discipline actions taken by schools increase a student's likelihood for justice involvement later. In fact, with school-based police officers prevalent on campuses, at least 28 percent of referrals to probation are from a school campus. Unsurprisingly, each negative experience increases the likelihood that a youth will experience another one of these situations. All of these factors impede youth and young adults' ability to thrive and obtain economic success. Additionally, young people with systems involvement are more likely to be disconnected from school and work than their peers.

RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic not only magnifies gaps in support for Texas's vulnerable youth, young adults, and families; it also creates new ones as Texans face job loss, school closures, social isolation, mental health challenges, and mounting tensions at home. The long-term impacts of the pandemic will likely exacerbate child abuse, commercial sexual exploitation of youth (CSEY), youth homelessness, and unemployment. Long-term economic consequences mean service providers will be asked to do more with less, underscoring the importance of collaboration and resource sharing across youth-serving systems. TNOYS has been in regular communication with providers across the state to identify their needs and connect them with resources and assistance where appropriate. The policy priorities identified by TNOYS, youth-serving providers, youth, and young adults are not specific to the pandemic, we recognize that the needs for systems change and long-term investments are especially vital right now for the success of Texas youth and young adults.

As legislators and state leaders look to pass policies to support Texas youth, young adults, and families, TNOYS proposes that they consider the following three guiding principles. These principles are the driving force behind TNOYS' policy priorities.

- *Promote cross-systems collaboration as well as information and data sharing.*
- *Focus on addressing and ending disproportionality and disparities of Black, Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth and families in youth serving systems.*
- *Prioritize healing from the trauma and financial hardships the Covid-19 pandemic caused for youth and families.*

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DEVELOPING A YOUTH-CENTERED CROSS-SYSTEMS POLICY AGENDA

TNOYS' cross-systems policy agenda aims to break down the silos of reform focused on individual systems to better meet the needs of families, youth, and young adults, and ultimately prevent systems involvement altogether.

On an annual basis, TNOYS engages roughly 550 providers and organizations across youth-focused systems. Of those, 70 organizations are members of the TNOYS network. To develop the cross-systems policy agenda, TNOYS staff hosted meetings across the state— both virtually and in-person— to hear concerns and recommendations from stakeholders about issues and gaps they see when serving youth and families. TNOYS engaged approximately 180 stakeholders during meetings in East Texas, El Paso, the Panhandle, South Texas, San Antonio and Dallas and at our annual conference. With staff based in both Houston and Austin, TNOYS regularly convenes policy meetings and works with youth-serving stakeholders in the Houston and Austin areas. TNOYS also gathered information from over 1,000 Texas school staff from all 20 Education Service Centers and over 365 independent school districts, including homeless liaisons, foster care liaisons, social workers, and counselors to understand their needs to support Texas school-age youth. Finally, TNOYS engaged over 80 foster care providers to understand their unique experiences supporting youth involved in the Texas child welfare system.

TNOYS centers youth voice in all aspects of our programming and we work to empower youth and young adults to shape systems by sharing their stories and experiences. Three young adult staff members with lived experience helped to guide our work, and TNOYS conducted one-on-one virtual interviews and hosted six virtual listening sessions to learn from 80 additional youth and young adults. Current or previous involvement with all the systems TNOYS seeks to reform were represented throughout the meetings. The youth and young adults, aged 13-26, were from cities across Texas and included Black, Latinx, white and Asian-American youth. To ensure appropriate representation of the seven youth serving systems and to create comfortable environments for sharing, TNOYS also hosted specific Black and LGBTQ+ listening sessions.

END NOTES

1. Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center. (2017). Poverty (0-17). Accessed July 2019 at <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/3065-poverty-0-17?loc=45&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133,38,35/any/8190,8191>.
2. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2018). Number of unaccompanied youth ages 18-24 experiencing homelessness on a given night. Accessed July 18, 2019 from <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/tx>.
3. Ibid.
4. Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. DFPS Data Book. (2019). CPI Completed Investigations: Alleged & Confirmed Types of Abuse. Accessed July 19, 2019 from https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Investigations/Investigations/Types_of_Abuse.asp.One
5. Child Welfare League of America. (2017). Texas's Children. Accessed on August 2, 2017 from <http://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TEXAS.pdf>.
6. Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute. (2019.) Children. Accessed July 2019. <https://www.texasstateofmind.org/focus/children/>
7. <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/chs/yrbs/pages/YRBS-Data-Briefs/>
8. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/44597/idvsa-2016-human-trafficking-by-the-numbers.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>
9. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. <https://www.dallasfed.org/cd/pubs/19youth/part2.aspx>

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Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) members serve our state's most resilient youth and young adults. Our advocacy campaign for the 87th Texas Legislative Session identifies 14 policy priorities and guiding principles across systems that will ensure all of Texas' young people have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to meet their goals. To inform these priorities, TNOYS heard from over 80 youth and young adults in Texas, as well as over 1500 youth-serving providers from across the state. Many of these young people and providers are quoted below.

- ✔ Protect and increase state funding for services and supports to vulnerable families, youth, and young adults.
- ✔ Invest in programs that keep families together and prevent child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency and system involvement by addressing the underlying factors such as poverty, family instability, and behavioral health concerns.

Families have experienced a lot of hardship and trauma over the last year. As a state, we need to invest in helping them respond to their trauma and mental health needs early so that we can keep families together and thriving. Strategies like investing in broadband internet access can help us continue to support families remotely, while also overcoming transportation issues.

– Jeff Reed, DETCOG, East Texas family and youth services provider

- ✔ Maximize opportunities to draw down federal funding to support families, youth, and young adults.
- ✔ Ensure appropriate rates for youth-serving providers so they can provide the care and supports youth and families need.
- ✔ Ensure that youth get age-appropriate supports in the least restrictive, age-appropriate settings to meet their treatment needs.

It felt like I got a lot [support] more of it in elementary school when they saw me as the more innocent kid that was getting hurt by systems.

– Sock, Age 17, Pflugerville

- ✔ Increase capacity around the state to better serve high-needs youth in the least restrictive settings possible, to include youth with co-occurring (physical, mental, substance use, intellectual and developmental disabilities) needs as well as youth who have been commercially sexually exploited, no matter the system in which they are involved.

The Texas Foster Care system is the safety net for thousands of abused children, youth, and young adults. Unfortunately, the system is taxed and lacks resources and capacity, especially for high-needs youth. If we do not support these youth the cycle of child abuse, substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies, and trafficking will continue.

– Allicia Graham Frye, Jonathan's Place, Dallas-Fort Worth foster care provider

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- ✓ Ensure youth, young adults, and families, have access to the health and behavioral health services they need, no matter the system they are involved in or to prevent them from becoming systems involved, including access to individual counseling and peer mentorship.

They're not really checking in with the youth about how they're feeling. It's always about...are your needs as far as food, clothing, and whatnot being met, but there's never really a concern for how that child is doing there on an interpersonal level.

– Bryce, Age 22, Stafford

- ✓ Ensure youth and young adults who have been sexually exploited are identified and have access to the supports and services to heal, no matter how or where they are identified as CSEY victims/survivors.
- ✓ Improve supports for transition-age youth, like youth aging out of foster care, the juvenile justice system or experiencing homelessness, to help them transition to adulthood successfully, including access to workforce opportunities, college supports and stable housing.

When it comes to me and homelessness, I think there's definitely a little bit more demand, more need for stable housing support for youth, especially since we're just getting out of childhood and into adulthood and we don't have money or experience.

– Crimson, Age 19, El Paso

- ✓ Ensure schools are prepared to support students through trauma and respond to behavior in a way that supports students and keeps them in class learning.

Emotional support is just as important as school supplies. And I needed more of both.

– Helaina, Age 18, San Marcos

- ✓ Support a two-generational (2GEN) approach across systems that focuses on connecting and healing families and addresses intergenerational trauma, such as supporting pregnant and parenting foster youth.

Guiding Principles

Promote cross-systems collaboration as well as information and data sharing.

Focus on addressing and ending disproportionality and disparities of Black, Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth and families in youth serving systems.

Prioritize healing from the trauma and financial hardships the Covid-19 pandemic caused for youth and families.