

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a town hall in Austin, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services professionals about YYAs' health needs in Central Texas. The event convened 35 stakeholders, including seven YYA with lived experience, for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that participants identified as crucial to improving YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable YYA, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as "health needs". For example, YYA experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental capacity, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where to sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or "social determinants of health", fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Participants emphasized that YYA should be listened to by healthcare and youth services providers to ensure they have autonomy over their lives, they have a say in their CPS placements, they are heard in court cases, and they are supported to advocate for themselves and their needs.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors play into health outcomes for YYA, access to healthcare and the quality of healthcare are key to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified many concerning trends regarding access and quality of healthcare for YYA in Central Texas.

- Youth need more education about accessing health care and navigating insurance.
  - Many YYA with health insurance, particularly those impacted by systems, do not understand how to use their health benefits, what is covered, or how to renew benefits.
  - YYA who lack insurance often do not know if they are eligible for affordable coverage or how to obtain insurance, particularly if they do not have a parent/guardian in their life.
- YYA don't understand their diagnoses or how to navigate filling prescriptions.
  - Youth, particularly system-impacted youth, need to be allowed to be their own medical consenter at an early age so that they can begin learning how to navigate the system and their diagnoses.
  - Youth exiting foster care often don't know what medications they take or how to refill their prescription. As such, many stop taking their medications and need to be trained on their own medication management.

- Healthcare providers need additional training on working with YYA and educating them about their diagnoses and health needs. This information needs to be communicated effectively to the YYA, not just their caregiver.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid. Even when YYA have Medicaid, healthcare is still unobtainable.
- Medicaid reimbursement rates are too low for many healthcare professionals or clinics to accept, leaving many YYA uncovered.
- The foster care system can be viewed as a young person’s “neighborhood” when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:
  - Kinship placements that would allow youth to stay with relatives still do not receive adequate financial support or training for relatives to feel comfortable taking in youth
  - There are not enough foster families of color so youth do not have access to culturally responsive homes.
  - Many foster care placements have closed and more are anticipated to close due to heightened monitoring, which is leading to fewer placement opportunities to meet the needs of youth. It has also impacted the capacity of emergency shelters serving youth experiencing homelessness.
  - There are not enough housing options or placements for older youth, including enough Supervised Independent Living placements for youth in extended care. In addition, many youth who age out of care often don’t know about or understand extended foster care.

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

A YYA’s neighborhood and built environment can have a great impact on their health and well-being, and neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, or other environmental concerns can create lasting negative consequences. Central Texas providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Lack of transportation— particularly in rural communities or cities without robust public transportation— makes it difficult for YYA to access services, housing, employment, or pick up medication and get to doctor appointments.
- Transportation to and from school for students experiencing homelessness is a barrier. Schools should be providing transportation to these students, but they do not always have the resources.
- Schools have funding to provide food for low-income students, though more is needed to address hunger for children and youth who are not in school or do not attend consistently. Funding mechanisms should be in place so local community providers can connect families and youth to food outside of school and school hours.

## Economic Stability and Education

Economic instability creates many barriers to positive health outcomes, including housing instability, homelessness, lack of access to healthy food, and much more. Although education and employment can help to address some of these challenges, stakeholders in Central Texas report that there are significant barriers to education and employment opportunities as well as gaps in life skills training.

# Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth

Feedback from CentralTexas Youth–Services Stakeholders on the Needs of the Youth and Young Adults they Serve

- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for many families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
  - There are limited resources to support and house the increasing population of youth under 18 who have been kicked out of or run away from their unsafe home. They cannot consent to their own housing, and shelter space is limited and only funded for short stays. For example, San Antonio has no emergency shelters for YYA experiencing homelessness and the only shelter for young adults in Central Texas (located in Austin) is closing due to funding constraints.
  - Federal definitions of YYA homelessness are not in alignment across agencies and funding mechanisms, which means YYA who are couch surfing are not eligible for free or discounted housing support.
  - When youth age out of foster care, they often do not have a place to live and immediately or soon after experience homelessness.
  - Housing YYA who have backgrounds with sexual offenses is particularly difficult. Even YYA who do not have juvenile records but have reported sexual aggression in their foster care case file cannot get housing in Supervised Independent Living programs.
  - The criminalization of homelessness creates greater disparities for YYA. Camping bans and the criminalization of homelessness should be prohibited.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for Central Texas YYA. The American Communities Survey (ACS) shows approximately 27 thousand opportunity youth in the greater Austin area. Opportunity youth are YYA who are 16 to 24 years old and not sufficiently engaged in education and employment. Central Texas stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - Schools that have predominantly low-income students and large food insecurity issues can see increased behavior challenges in the classroom and increased justice system involvement among students.
  - Parenting YYA often have to miss high school and/or college when they do not have child care for their children. In addition, when parenting YYA are out of school they struggle to find and maintain employment due to the lack of available childcare.
  - Schools often do not match students with appropriate career training and opportunities based on their interests and abilities. Central Texas stakeholders recommend more career preparation opportunities and dual credit classes with colleges.
  - College is unattainable for many due to high costs, and many YYA would benefit from a mentor who could help them apply for FAFSA and scholarships. This is exacerbated when YYA have disconnected parents or no parents, as they lack the support students need when in college.
  - Many students face barriers to skills training support through local workforce boards. Often, funds for this support are earmarked for those who are not in school nor working.
  - When young people do not have access to workforce opportunities that pay enough to make ends meet, they are at increased risk of Commercial Sexual Exploitation or trafficking.

## Social and Community Context

While YYAs' relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts. Participants from the Central Texas area identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- Not only do youth involved in the justice system lack access to the supports they need, affected youth and their families are often afraid to seek out support. The justice system should ensure YYA have access to key supports, including preventative resources. These include:
  - More public defenders, diversion programs, classes, and supports for parents of juvenile justice-impacted YYA, and specialized courts for YYA who have experienced Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY) or Trafficking, as well as for dual-status youth who have experienced both foster care and juvenile justice.
  - Transitional, step-down housing that is available before a YYA returns home.
  - A shift toward considering seventeen-year-olds as juveniles in the criminal justice system, instead of as adults, so they have access to rehabilitative supports

- YYA want and need access to mentors across many areas in their lives including navigating the workforce, housing, and personal financial management. Many youth are not getting the support they need to build a stable foundation or navigate adulthood, either through youth-serving organizations or in their community.
  - YYA have not learned to navigate health care, housing, or the workforce, nor have many been taught basic life skills like managing their finances, cleaning, or doing laundry.
  - Caseworkers in foster care and homelessness services report being overworked and an inability to meet the needs of the youth they serve. YYA shared that they seek consistent support from their caseworkers and other professional staff.
  - Discriminatory practices by landlords make it difficult for YYA living on their own to obtain and keep housing.

## Mental Health and Behavioral Health

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person's mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders most frequently raised the increasing need for mental health and behavioral health support. Not only are stakeholders seeing more youth in need of mental health support, but YYA have greater needs than in the past— all while the resources available to them fall behind. Stakeholders also shared the following:

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- Because of the shortage of mental health professionals, many have stopped taking insurance and only accept private pay, further reducing the availability for YYA who cannot afford therapy. Providers cannot retain mental health professionals on staff due to low pay. It was recommended that the range of mental health professional licenses that can bill Medicaid and insurance be expanded to make mental health care more accessible.
- Particularly for those who are systems-involved, YYA are receiving too many diagnoses without professionals working to address the root of their trauma. YYA need more education on what “mental health” means and how they can support their own mental health.
- YYA, particularly youth who are experiencing homelessness without a parent, should have access to free mental health care.
- Recent law changes around addressing substance use are causing YYA to get felony charges for THC vaping, both overwhelming juvenile probation due to the substantial increase in felony referrals and unnecessarily pushing youth into an overburdened juvenile justice system unequipped to meet their needs.

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a town hall in Beaumont, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services providers about YYAs' health needs in Southeast Texas. The event convened 37 stakeholders, including five YYA with lived experience, for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that our participants identified as crucial to being addressed to improve YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable youth and young adults, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as "health needs." For example, youth or young adults experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental capacity, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where to sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or "social determinants of health", fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Participants emphasized that YYA should be listened to by healthcare and youth services providers to ensure they have autonomy over their lives, they have a say in their CPS placements, they are heard in court cases, and they are supported to advocate for themselves and their needs.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors play into health outcomes for YYA, access to healthcare and the quality of healthcare is a key component to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of concerning trends regarding access and quality of healthcare for YYA in Southeast Texas.

- Youth need more education on accessing health care and navigating insurance.
  - Many YYA do not know who to call when they need healthcare services or the best type of doctor for their needs.
  - YYA who age out of foster care often don't understand how to navigate their insurance or how to renew their health care benefits.
- Youth who feel they were unheard or overmedicated in the past often don't trust healthcare providers and avoid seeking out care.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid. Even when YYA have Medicaid, healthcare is still unobtainable.
- Concerns were brought up that YYA who contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs), can go to a doctor to get medications to address the infection, but still don't receive education about preventing the spread or contracting new STIs.

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

When a YYA's neighborhood and built environment have high rates of violence, unsafe/limited housing, lack of transportation, or other barriers, young people can suffer lasting negative consequences. Southeast Texas providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Resources are needed to prevent Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY) and trafficking, as well as support survivors.
  - Groomers are exploiting the vulnerability of YYA who do not have community or familial safety nets.
  - There are no shelters for YYA who have experienced CSEY and one provider reported how they sat with a youth trafficking victim for four days while trying to locate a placement for them.
- The foster care system can be viewed as a young person's "neighborhood" when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:
  - Kinship placements that would allow youth to stay with relatives still do not receive adequate financial support or training for relatives to feel comfortable taking in youth.
  - Youth are not listened to. YYA shared that youth don't trust the system because they can report concerns about abuse at a placement, but it will not be investigated. At the same time, YYA and stakeholders share that youth need more opportunities to speak up for themselves such as in court or during placement decisions.
- Staffing shortages in youth services are widespread, making it difficult for YYA to get consistent, genuine support from their caseworkers and other professional staff.

## Economic Stability and Education

Economic instability creates many barriers to positive health outcomes, including housing instability, homelessness, lack of access to healthy food, and much more. Although education and employment can help address some of these challenges, stakeholders in Southeast Texas report that there are significant barriers to education and employment opportunities as well as gaps in life skills training.

- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
  - When youth age out of foster care, they often do not have a place to live and immediately or soon after experience homelessness. With a lack of Supervised Independent Living programs (SIL) in Beaumont and surrounding communities, many youth have to leave the area to secure housing.
    - There is one SIL in the area serving young men aged 18–24 but it has limited resources for parenting fathers.
  - There are limited resources to support and house the increasing population of youth under 18 and those ages 18–24 who are experiencing homelessness on their own.
    - Youth under 18 cannot consent to their own housing, and shelter space is limited and only funded for short stays. YYA have very different needs and do not feel safe in shelters designed for adults.
    - Local shelters have limited resources and cannot provide the needed services.
    - Additionally, the area lacks drop-in centers that allow for youth experiencing homelessness to drop in for resources and support.

- The cost of housing has become a crisis, creating more housing instability and homelessness than ever before among families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for Southeast Texas YYA. Opportunity Youth (OY) are YYA who are 16 to 24 years old and not sufficiently engaged in education and employment. Prior to 2020, the national average of OY was 11%, in Texas it was 13%, and in rural Texas, it was 27%. Rural disconnection is more than twice that of urban areas and the effects of COVID have exacerbated unemployment in Beaumont and surrounding areas. Southeast Texas stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - Stakeholders report that, because of high turnover rates, employers assume their new hires will soon leave and do not provide sufficient training. This leaves employees feeling unsupported and exacerbates employee turnover and an untrained workforce.
  - Stakeholders recommend that employers consider Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) training to support their workforce.
  - Parenting YYA need access to affordable or free childcare so that they can go to work or school. Often childcare costs more than the income they stand to earn.
  - Literacy is an increasing concern. Children, youth, and young adults of all ages are substantially behind reading levels, and the gap worsens as they grow older. Falling behind in school often leads to youth dropping out.
- In addition, stakeholders shared concerns that schools are not equipped to support students:
  - Truancy becomes a cyclical issue. Students who do not attend class fall behind, which causes them to feel overwhelmed and wary of attending again. This concern is exacerbated by exclusionary discipline, students being sick, and even the prospect of bullying from other students.
  - Both YYA and providers report that there is a great need for increased, quality sex education in our schools to support YYA and prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy.
  - YYA report wanting to learn about mental health in school. Too often, YYA are not taught what mental health is or how to actively support their own mental health until they are in crisis.

## Social and Community Context

While YYAs' relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts in Southeast Texas.

- Bullying and peer pressure are ongoing issues for youth and impact their self-esteem and long-term mental health. Schools need more resources to address bullying and peer pressure.
- Parents need more support and feel constrained by external pressures around parenting and guiding their children.



- The local Family and Youth Success program offers support and parenting classes to families, yet this resource is not widely known.
- The community needs to more proactively connect parents to parenting classes before their children are born, potentially in school.
- Many youth have unaddressed complex trauma, and the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are not well understood by community members. Those working with YYA need more training on trauma-informed care and TBRI (Trauma-Based Relational Intervention), including police officers in schools and in the community.
- Stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the number of students who have been leaving public schools to be homeschooled and no longer appear to be on anyone’s radar. The well-being of these youth may not be ensured if there is no accountability for homeschooling.
- Youth involved in the justice system lack access to the support they need. At the same time, the legislature funded increases to juvenile probation department staff salaries. While this has helped stabilize the workforce, staff are still leaving for other, less stressful jobs.
- Schools do not use appropriate discretion when referring students to probation. It was reported that minor classroom misbehavior is leading to unnecessary justice involvement for youth and probation departments are using their limited resources to support youth who should be getting support in the classroom.

## Mental Health/Behavioral Health

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person’s mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders frequently uplifted the growing need for mental health and behavioral health support as a major barrier to YYAs’ overall health. Not only are more youth in need of mental health support, but their needs are greater than in the past— all while resources available to them fall behind.

Stakeholders also shared the following:

- The community does not have enough resources to address the mental health needs of YYA. For example, there are not enough in-patient mental health care options for youth in crisis. YYA have to be taken to the emergency room, where staff from juvenile probation or foster care may wait with them for days before a more appropriate placement can be identified.
- Stakeholders shared examples of local initiatives they feel are supporting youth that should be considered in other schools.
  - Bridge City has a mental health class for students.
  - Vidor ISD has both mental health professionals and behavior specialists on-site at schools, helping reduce disciplinary issues.
- Recent law changes around addressing substance use are causing YYA to get felony charges for THC vaping, both overwhelming juvenile probation due to the substantial increase in felony referrals and unnecessarily pushing youth into an overburdened juvenile justice system unequipped to meet their needs.

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a town hall in Lufkin, Texas, to learn directly from youth services providers and stakeholders about youth and young adults (YYA) health needs in Deep East Texas. The event convened 17 stakeholders for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that participants identified as crucial to being addressed to improve YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable YYA, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as “health needs”. For example, YYA experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental capacity, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where they will sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or “social determinants of health”, fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Participants emphasized that YYA should be listened to by healthcare and youth services providers to ensure they have autonomy over their lives, they have a say in their CPS placements, they are heard in court cases, and they are supported to advocate for themselves and their needs.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors influence health outcomes for YYA, access to low-barrier, quality healthcare services is essential to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of trends regarding YYA's access to quality healthcare in Deep East Texas.

- Stakeholders report that many youth view medical care as unimportant.
- East Texas areas that are more rural lack nearby healthcare providers, shouldering residents with lengthy travel times for care in other cities.
- Telemedicine isn't accessible to all due to poor internet connectivity.
- School-based providers report that vulnerable students have a significant, unmet need for access to hygiene products and education.

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

A YYA's neighborhood and built environment can have a great impact on their health and well-being, and neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, or other environmental concerns can create lasting negative consequences. Deep East Texas stakeholders shared the following concerns:

- Lack of transportation options makes it difficult for YYA to access services, housing, employment, or pick up medication and get to doctor appointments.
  - Public transportation is limited, and people in rural areas often rely on informal networks for transportation. TxDOT has a program allowing people to hire someone they trust to drive them to appointments, but many aren't aware of this option.
  - Public transit systems like the local trolley service in Lufkin stop running early and don't service all necessary areas, limiting access to jobs, healthcare, and education.
  - Some rural residents won't use public transit due to privacy concerns, creating transportation barriers for accessing health services because they don't want others to know they are going to the doctor.
- The foster care system can be viewed as a young person's "neighborhood" when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:
  - Stakeholders in East Texas describe the foster care system as disorganized, with a lack of support and transparency for foster parents. They shared that training for foster parents is insufficient, especially in preparing them to handle YYAs' mental health concerns.
  - The transition to Community–Based Care and the closure of DFPS offices have created gaps in service delivery, making it harder to support youth in foster care.
- Prevention programs that screen for trafficking or other safety concerns are rare and usually only available after youth have already faced significant challenges.
  - Programs that aim to help youth, particularly in areas like trafficking and foster care, are often met with resistance from the community. This resistance curtails needed services, leaving youth without the support they need.
  - Stakeholders expressed dismay and frustration at local resistance to creating trafficking prevention programs, despite evidence that trafficking occurs in the area.
- Lufkin and surrounding communities are food deserts; YYA and their families don't have easy access to fresh and affordable food, which impacts health and overall well-being.

## Economic Stability and Education

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- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
- Specialized housing options and shelters are needed for youth experiencing homelessness or transitioning out of state systems.
  - Stakeholders report that youth experiencing homelessness without a parent sleep in the woods near their school because it is the safest option that allows them to get to school.
  - The area lacks affordable housing options or placements for youth transitioning out of systems like foster care.

- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for East Texas YYA. Opportunity Youth (OY) are YYA who are 16 to 24 years old and not sufficiently engaged in education and employment. Prior to 2020, the national average of OY was 11%, in Texas it was 13%, and in rural Texas, it was 27%. Rural disconnection is more than twice that of urban areas and the effects of COVID have exacerbated unemployment in Lufkin and surrounding areas. Deep East Texas stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - Students need more vocational training and work programs as many are not planning to attend college.
  - Rural schools struggle with funding tied to attendance, leading to reduced vocational opportunities.
  - Stakeholders described the absence of vocational programs as harmful to students' future opportunities and highlighted the need to re-establish co-ops that were previously eliminated.
  - Dual credit classes, allowing students to get college credits in high school, are available but inaccessible because students are required to pay for the college credits if they do not successfully complete the course
  - There is a strong need for more flexible job training programs for YYA, including second-chance programs for those exiting incarceration.
  - Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) funding has too many restrictions, limiting access to strongly needed, flexible funding options for youth and summer work programs.
- Many YYA are unable to obtain a driver's license or ID card because they cannot access their birth certificates. Without a personal ID, YYA have difficulty securing jobs.
- In addition, stakeholders shared concerns that schools are not equipped to support students:
  - Due to a fear of receiving a poor rating, schools focus on performance scores rather than student learning or well-being.
  - Rural schools face challenges meeting requirements due to a lack of funding and staff, affecting educational quality.
  - School counselors are overwhelmed with administrative duties, leaving little time to address students' mental health or academic needs.
  - Teachers are under significant stress due to overburdened curricula, rising student behavioral issues, and a lack of classroom support staff.

## Social and Community Context

While YYAs' relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts. Participants from Deep East Texas identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- Youth involved in the justice system lack access to the support they need. In addition, youth and their families are often afraid to seek out support when they are involved with the system. The justice system should ensure YYA have access to key supports, including preventative resources. These include:
  - Programs to support parents before their children enter the justice system or face serious issues, as schools often wait too long before referring youth for help.
  - Assistance for parents navigating support services for their children before there is court involvement.
  - Supports, including workforce training, for youth in the juvenile justice system as they transition back to the community.
- Disparities in resource allocation for YYA are clear in the community and schools, with Black and brown students not receiving the same support or programs as white students.
- YYA aren't learning about, or receiving hygiene products at home. Stakeholders reported that schools ask for hygiene kits instead of school supplies, signaling a need for basic hygiene education and resources for YYA and their families.

## Mental Health and Behavioral Health

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person's mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders frequently uplifted the growing need for mental health and behavioral health support as a major barrier to YYAs' overall health. Not only are more youth in need of mental health support, but their needs are greater needs than in the past— all while

the resources available to them fall behind.

Stakeholders also shared the following:

- Access to mental health services in the community is limited. There is a need for more school counselors and partnerships with outside agencies to meet the mental health needs of students.
- The community is seeing rising rates of student anxiety, vaping, and self-medication due to a lack of mental health services.
- Bullying, social media pressures, and increased stress from challenging curricula add to mental health concerns among YYA.
- School personnel often trigger mental health crises due to a lack of understanding, with teachers not equipped to handle students with mental health challenges. More and ongoing training around trauma is needed.
- There is cultural resistance to mental health care, particularly within Black and brown communities, due to stigmas that prevent them from seeking help. Many families avoid addressing mental health issues, and more education around stigmatization is needed.

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a town hall in Houston, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services professionals about YYAs' health needs in the Greater Houston area. The event convened 53 stakeholders, including 17 YYA with lived experience, for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that participants identified as crucial to improving YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable YYA, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as “health needs”. For example, YYA experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental capacity, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where to sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or “social determinants of health,” fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Participants emphasized that YYA should be listened to by healthcare and youth services providers to ensure they have autonomy over their lives and are supported to advocate for themselves and their needs.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors play into health outcomes for YYA, access to healthcare and the quality of healthcare are key to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified many concerning trends regarding access and quality of healthcare for YYA in the Greater Houston area.

- YYA require more education on accessing health care and navigating health insurance.
  - Many YYA with health insurance do not understand how to use their health benefits, what is covered, or how to renew benefits.
  - YYA who lack insurance often do not know if they are eligible for affordable coverage or how to obtain insurance, particularly if they do not have a parent/guardian in their life.
  - YYA need more education on how to address their own healthcare needs. Stakeholders share that YYA turn to social media to get information on healthcare, which is frequently inaccurate.
- Healthcare is not affordable and, therefore, not attainable, particularly for YYA experiencing homelessness. Stakeholders shared a belief that state-covered health insurance eligibility should be expanded to YYA experiencing homelessness.
- YYA would benefit from preventative and ongoing health care to improve their long-term health outcomes.
  - YYA often access healthcare through emergency rooms; however, emergency rooms are better utilized in a crisis as they lack follow-up with patients.
  - YYA need more access to reproductive health care and supportive care such as gender-affirming services.
  - Vulnerable YYA need holistic healthcare to address their physical and mental health needs.

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

A YYA's neighborhood and built environment can have a great impact on their health and well-being, and neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, or other environmental concerns can create lasting negative consequences. Providers and YYA in the Greater Houston area shared the following concerns:

- Stakeholders would like to see long-term planning and investment in Greater Houston area communities and the built environment to increase community-based supports and better meet community needs. Specifically:
  - Stakeholders identified transportation as a key barrier for many YYA accessing services, housing, employment, or picking up medication and getting to doctor appointments, particularly for YYA living outside of bus systems. YYA noted that buses often do not run on schedule, making them late for work and that multiple bus transfers makes navigating to doctor's appointments difficult.
  - Stakeholders noted that a better community infrastructure like quality, affordable grocery stores and affordable housing could make communities healthier and safer by preventing crime and delinquency and improving nutrition.
- The foster care system can be viewed as a young person's "neighborhood" when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:
  - YYA in care do not feel listened to or heard when they try to express their needs. Additionally, there are not enough culturally responsive foster families to support youth of color or LGBTQ youth.

- The system is not preparing YYA to live on their own when they age out of care. YYA are not ready to navigate housing, employment, or health care. YYA share that the funding available to support youth as they age out of care is not enough to promote stability and they would like funding to support basic needs.
- Some stakeholders shared concerns regarding foster care system accountability when it transitions to Community Based Care.
- Youth experiencing homelessness on their own without a parent can't consent to housing or shelter, leaving stakeholders in the community struggling to support them.
  - There are limited resources to support and house the increasing population of youth under 18 who have been kicked out of or run away from their unsafe home. They cannot consent to their own housing, and shelter space is limited and only funded for short stays.
  - The community needs options for housing YYA under 18 without CPS involvement.

## Economic Stability and Education

Economic instability creates many barriers to positive health outcomes, including housing instability, homelessness, lack of access to healthy food, and much more. Although education and employment can help to address some of these challenges, stakeholders in the Greater Houston area report that there are significant barriers to education and employment opportunities as well as gaps in life skills training.

- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for many families and young adults.

# Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth

Feedback from Greater Houston area Youth–Services Stakeholders on the Needs of the Youth and Young Adults they Serve

- Substantial rent increases create housing instability; stakeholders want a way for rent increases to be capped or flexible funding to support families and YYA experiencing rent increases they cannot afford.
- Federal definitions of YYA homelessness are not in alignment across agencies and funding mechanisms, which means YYA who are couch surfing are not eligible for free or discounted housing support.
- When youth age out of foster care, they often do not have a place to live and immediately or soon after experience homelessness.
- Even after being housed, youth struggle with balancing jobs, benefits, and managing living expenses. There is a need for more resources to support youth transitioning into adulthood to prevent long-term financial insecurity or mental health challenges.
- There are limited resources to house the increasing population of youth under 18 who have been kicked out of or run away from their unsafe home. They cannot consent to their own housing, and shelter space is limited and only funded for short stays. Specifically, housing options to support 16 and 17-year-olds who are experiencing homelessness without CPS involvement are lacking.
- Funding and resources to support housing are often limited and rigid in what they can fund. Providers need flexible funding that can better meet the needs of YYA to prevent homelessness and connect youth to safe housing.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for the Greater Houston area YYA. Opportunity youth (OY) are YYA who are 16 to 24 years old and not sufficiently engaged in education and employment. Texas accounts for more than 500,000 OY, with one in four (over 125,000) in the Greater Houston region. Houston area stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - The minimum wage needs to be raised.
    - A minimum wage job does not cover the cost of basic needs.
    - Parenting YYA cannot afford child care while making minimum wage.
    - Employment can make youth ineligible for services like rent and childcare assistance, SNAP, etc. As a result, youth will question if working is the best choice.
  - There is a need to increase work-based learning opportunities to ensure YYAs' employment stability. This includes additional training and support, mentors to answer YYA workplace questions, and on-the-job training.
  - High schools need more career development opportunities for YYA who will be going into the workforce rather than to higher education. YYA recommend introducing young people to diverse career options that would not require a college degree, such as in technology or human services.
- In addition, stakeholders shared concerns that schools are not equipped to support students:
  - Stakeholders noted great disparities among the resources available in schools, leaving some students without the support they need. The disparities are within districts, not just between districts.



- School personnel need more and ongoing training in trauma-informed care so they can better support students; schools also need more counselors. Students need higher quality education around health and sexual health, development, and life skills in schools.
- Schools are too punitive instead of trying to identify the root cause of students' behavior. School personnel often dismiss youth voices, sometimes opting to speak with parents who may be the student's abuser.
- Stakeholders want an increase in community resources to build a sense of belonging and connection, such as support groups, youth councils, and community centers.
- The community needs more proactive measures to support families and prevent systems involvement.
  - Families want to support their children and youth but don't always know how or understand the community resources are available. The community needs to be proactive in helping families understand and navigate resources and provide training.
  - Families need more wraparound support and earlier.
- The juvenile justice system needs to be less punitive and should focus on supporting youth and families and addressing the underlying causes of behaviors. 17-year-olds should be considered juveniles instead of adults in the justice system so they have access to rehabilitative supports.
- The criminalization of homelessness, like camping bans and trespassing charges, only creates greater stigma and disparities for YYA.

## Social and Community Context

While YYAs' relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts. Participants from the Greater Houston area identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- YYA do not always feel connected to their community and many report they do not have a caring adult in their life to turn to ask questions or get support.
  - YYA want access to mentors across many areas in their lives including navigating the workforce, housing, and personal financial management. Many youth are not getting the support they need to build a stable foundation or navigate adulthood, either through youth-serving organizations or in their community.

## Mental Health/Behavioral Health

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person's mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders most frequently raised the increasing need for mental health and behavioral health support. Not only are stakeholders seeing more youth in need of mental health support, but YYA have greater needs than in the past— all while the resources available to them fall behind. Stakeholders also shared the following:

# Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth

Feedback from Greater Houston area Youth–Services Stakeholders on the Needs of the Youth and Young Adults they Serve

- Because of the shortage of mental health professionals, many have stopped taking insurance and only accept private pay, further reducing the availability for YYA who cannot afford therapy. Providers cannot retain mental health professionals on staff due to low pay. Stakeholders recommended that the range of mental health professional licenses that can bill Medicaid and insurance be expanded to make mental health care more accessible.
- Particularly for those who are systems-involved, YYA are being overdiagnosed and overprescribed medications without professionals working to address the root of their trauma. YYA want more therapy, not more medication.
- YYA need more education on what “mental health” means and how they can support their own mental health.
- YYA, particularly youth who are experiencing homelessness without a parent, should have access to free mental health care.
- Schools need to understand the difference between mental health and behavioral health and be better equipped to support the mental health and behavioral needs of students.
- There is a strong need to destigmatize mental health and normalize talking about it.
- YYA want peer support services; stakeholders share peer supports could help to address the mental health provider workforce shortage.
- Recent law changes around addressing substance use are causing YYA to get felony charges for THC vaping, both overwhelming juvenile probation due to the substantial increase in felony referrals and unnecessarily pushing youth into an overburdened juvenile justice system unequipped to meet their needs.

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a Town Hall in Fort Worth, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services providers about YYA’s health needs in North Texas. The event convened 29 stakeholders, including four YYA with lived experience, for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that participants identified as crucial to improving YYAs’ health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable YYAs, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as “health needs.” For example, YYA experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where they will sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or “social determinants of health,” fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town Hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Finally, participants emphasized that access to sex education is critical, that medical providers show negative bias towards YYA who are on Medicaid, and that finding a healthcare provider who accepts Medicaid can be difficult and feels impossible.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors play into health outcomes for YYA, access to low-barrier, quality healthcare services is essential to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of concerning trends regarding YYAs’ access to quality healthcare in North Texas.

- YYA have difficulty accessing health care. They lack resources to navigate the healthcare system, especially after aging out of foster care or losing access to support systems.
  - YYA transitioning out of foster care may lose Medicaid coverage and not know how to reapply or that they can keep their coverage until they turn 26.
  - Youth exiting foster care often do not know how to manage their medications, leading many to stop taking essential prescriptions.
  - YYA experiencing homelessness without a parent have difficulty obtaining coverage on their own, as they cannot receive coverage through a parent.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid, leaving YYA without access to medical care even when they are insured.
  - YYA report watching families with private health insurance get the care they need while they are unable to find a healthcare professional who accepts their insurance.

- Healthcare providers often lack the training they need to work effectively with YYA, particularly those who have experienced trauma.
- Participants noted that doctors and medical professionals should communicate directly with YYA about their health, rather than speaking through caregivers or caseworkers.
- Youth who don't speak English experience language barriers in the medical system.
- YYA need dental insurance and require plans that cover more complex needs (such as wisdom teeth removal) in addition to standard preventative care.

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

A YYA's neighborhood and built environment can have a great impact on their health and well-being, and neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, or other environmental concerns can create lasting negative consequences. North Texas providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Transportation is a significant barrier for many YYA in the DFW area, particularly those living on the outskirts of the cities or in more rural areas. Without reliable transportation, it is difficult for YYA to access healthcare services, employment opportunities, or educational programs.
  - YYA report they need housing in more walkable parts of town to increase job access.
  - Neighborhoods where landlords will accept housing vouchers often leave YYA feeling unsafe. YYA will turn down this housing and instead choose to live on the streets. These unsafe communities put YYA at much higher risk of being trafficked.
  - Participants noted that the criminalization of homelessness further exacerbates housing challenges for YYA and causes young adults to cycle in and out of jail.
- There is a lack of community-based resources, such as youth centers or programs, which allow youth to engage in positive activities. Stakeholders and YYA need more community support to help YYA feel connected and secure.
  - The number of older youth under 18 who have been kicked out of their home or have run away with no place to go is on the rise. These youth don't necessarily need to go into foster care, however federal funding to provide shelter for YYA under 18 experiencing homelessness on their own is limited to short-term shelter stays. There is no state or federal funding available for long-term shelter or placement for youth under 18 who are not in foster care or juvenile justice. Ft. Worth providers cite the following critical issues to sheltering YYA:
    - Youth shelters report parents bringing youth to their shelter with the intent to relinquish custody. Additionally, youth will arrive at the shelter alone because their parents will not allow them to return home.
    - Stakeholders report that when parents refuse to accept parental responsibility, CPS may not investigate the case for months. Shelters do not have resources to support months-long placement.
    - Youth who are ready for release from mental health hospitals also have parents refusing to accept parental responsibility, and there is no entity to care for the youth.
  - The foster care system can be viewed as a young person's "neighborhood" when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:
    - Stakeholders report that foster families are taking in youth with substantial medical needs when they are not equipped to care for them.

- Kinship families are not getting the resources they need to support the placement of youth
- YYA are not connected to supports as they age out of care and have not been educated on the resources and supports for older youth.
  - Youth will sometimes sabotage their aftercare placement assuming they can get a better one, as they have not been made aware of the limited housing options available.
  - Youth need more information on their educational options, navigating healthcare after they age out, etc. Stakeholders report youth can go years after aging out of care before learning they were eligible for healthcare benefits during this period.
  - Youth aging out of care need a caseworker who has the time and will to work with them, understand the supports available, and listen to the youth to truly understand what they want and need.

## Economic Stability and Education

Economic instability creates many barriers to positive health outcomes, including housing instability, homelessness, lack of access to healthy food, and much more. Although education and employment can help to address some of these challenges, stakeholders in North Texas report that there are significant barriers to education and employment opportunities as well as gaps in life skills training.

- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for many families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
  - There is a severe shortage of affordable housing options in the DFW area, making it difficult for YYA and families to secure and

maintain stable housing.

- Homeless liaisons (McKinney–Vento liaisons) in schools express frustration with the lack of bed space in shelters for youth locally because they cannot connect their students experiencing homelessness on their own to safe shelter.
- There are not enough Supervised Independent Living or Transitional Living Programs available for youth aging out of care.
- It is difficult for YYA to qualify for permanent supportive housing. Landlords can legally discriminate against YYA for using housing vouchers, meaning even fewer affordable options for this vulnerable population.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for North Texas YYA. North Texas stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - Many YYA in Fort Worth struggle to find stable, well-paying employment due to a lack of job training and workforce development programs tailored to their needs.
  - Many youth do not have appropriate work attire or work experience and do not know where to turn to get their needs met.
  - Parenting YYA struggle to find child care and manage their work–life and school–life balance.
  - YYA are often told that college is the only option for long-term success and are not provided information on other workforce development and career readiness opportunities. Many YYA who enroll in college before they are ready will leave a program early without a college degree and with significant student loan debt.
- In addition, stakeholders shared concerns that schools are not equipped to support students:
  - With ESSR (Elementary and Secondary School

Emergency Relief) funding ending, already underfunded schools will lose funding for after-school programs and behavior supports.

- Schools are unequipped to practice restorative justice. As a result, YYA enter the juvenile justice system for misbehavior that should be addressed at school.
- Counselors are focused on other needs, leaving students without counseling support.

## Social and Community Context

While YYAs' relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts. Participants from the North Texas area identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- YYA frequently mentioned the need for consistent, reliable mentors who can provide long-term support in areas such as employment, education, and life skills. YYA feel they lack the guidance necessary to navigate the transition to adulthood successfully. Specifically, youth aging out of care feel isolated and ill-prepared for independence.
- Youth often feel disconnected from their communities, especially those involved in foster care or juvenile justice systems, as well as those experiencing homelessness.
- The community needs more prevention programs for parents and families so parents are equipped to support their children.

- Services frequently lack cultural competence; providers need more, ongoing training to better support the diverse clientele they serve.
- There are limited programs or supports in place to help YYA build strong relationships and develop life skills. Participants stressed the importance of community-based programs that provide social engagement and foster personal growth.
  - Because of insufficient sexual behavior treatment services, youth are being unnecessarily added to the sex offender registry for behavior that occurred out of curiosity when they were not taught appropriate boundaries and healthy relationships.
- YYA involved in the justice system lack access to the resources they need, and affected youth and families are often afraid to seek out support. The justice system should ensure YYA have access to key supports, including preventative resources. These include:
  - A shift toward considering seventeen-year-olds as juveniles in the criminal justice system, instead of as adults, so they have access to rehabilitative supports.
  - Access to substance use treatment.
  - Free or affordable access to record sealing and expunction so that YYAs' juvenile or criminal records do not follow them.
- Stakeholders shared that the community is very fortunate to have organizations that are working to address Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY) and trafficking, however, more is needed to meet community needs:
  - Foster parents and foster youth need more education on the risks of trafficking and the signs of grooming.
  - Foster care placements need support to accept youth with histories of running away.
  - More support is needed to prevent runaway youth from being victimized.

- Trafficked youth need more options to bypass parental consent and receive support services.
- More resources are needed to support male trafficking victims.

## Mental Health and Behavioral Health

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person’s mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders most frequently raised the increasing need for mental health and behavioral health support. Not only are stakeholders seeing more youth in need of mental health support, but YYA have greater needs than in the past— all while the resources available to them fall behind. Stakeholders also shared the following:

- YYA shared that providers do not directly communicate with them about available mental health resources and how to access them. Communication is often directed to caregivers, leaving out YYA who do not have strong family systems.
- YYA want more resources that help navigate and heal from stress and trauma.
- Mental health supports for trafficking survivors are insufficient, creating substantial delays in trauma-related services for victims of domestic violence and trafficking.
- Suicide rates among youth are on the rise, posing a threat to the health and safety of YYA who do not know how to access resources.
- YYA want peer and community mentorship on how to self-advocate for health and mental health services.

- When parents don’t have access to mental health supports for their children or don’t know how to navigate those supports, they may refuse to accept parental responsibility. Stakeholders shared instances where parents drop their children at youth shelters and safe spaces, expecting the state to take custody.
- Recent law changes around addressing substance use are causing YYA to get felony charges for THC vaping, both overwhelming juvenile probation due to the substantial increase in felony referrals and unnecessarily pushing youth into an overburdened juvenile justice system unequipped to meet their needs.
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Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of over 100 youth-serving providers that work to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families facing homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice, trafficking, and other vulnerable situations that threaten their futures. Earlier this year, TNOYS hosted a town hall in Waco, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services professionals about YYAs' health needs in Waco and the surrounding communities. The event convened 44 stakeholders, including five YYA with lived experience, for robust conversations around systems that impact vulnerable YYA and policy changes to better address their health needs. Below are the key factors that participants identified as crucial to improving YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable YYA, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as "health needs". For example, YYA experiencing homelessness often do not have the time, mental capacity, or financial capacity to focus on their health or see a doctor, as they are solely focused on the immediate, daily burden of where to sleep safely that night or where their next meal will come from. These non-medical factors, or "social determinants of health," fall into five broad categories: Health Care Access, Neighborhood and Built Environment, Economic Stability, Education, and Social and Community Context, with the special addition of addressing the mental/behavioral health needs of youth. Town hall participants broadly acknowledged that vulnerable YYA are disproportionately affected by non-medical factors compared to their peers. Participants emphasized that YYA should be listened to by healthcare and youth services providers to ensure they have autonomy over their lives, and they are supported to advocate for themselves and their needs.

## Healthcare Access and Quality

While many factors play into health outcomes for YYA, access to low-barrier, quality healthcare services is essential to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of trends regarding YYAs' access to quality healthcare in the Waco area.

- There is a lack of access to preventative healthcare services, particularly for youth living in unstable environments. Preventative care for conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is critical, but many youth are uninsured and cannot afford care or they face transportation barriers. Uninsured YYA would like health insurance to obtain preventative care but instead resort to using the emergency room to meet healthcare needs.
- Dental care coverage is inadequate, leading to more extreme interventions like tooth extraction when YYA cannot access preventative care earlier.
- Changes to healthcare coverage, such as when youth age out of foster care, lead to disruptions in care continuity. In particular, stakeholders see youth experiencing gaps in coverage for birth control. Lack of access to sexual health services makes it difficult for youth to receive treatment for STIs and access to birth control.
- Stakeholders shared a belief that all YYA, not just those exiting foster care, should have access to free health care through age 25 if they can't access insurance through a parent.



## Neighborhood and Built Environment

A YYA’s neighborhood and built environment can have a great impact on their health and well-being, and neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, or other environmental concerns can create lasting negative consequences. Waco providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Lack of transportation— particularly in rural communities or cities without robust public transportation— makes it difficult for YYA to access services, housing, employment, or pick up medication and get to doctor appointments. Public transportation ends before night shifts begin, making it unsafe for youth to commute to higher-paying jobs.
- The affordable housing crisis is contributing to a growing need for emergency shelter beds, especially for youth transitioning to adulthood.
  - YYA shelter beds, particularly those supportive of LGBTQ youth, are scarce.
  - The community does not have enough YYA shelters to meet its needs, making it difficult for YYA to navigate services. Standard emergency shelters aren’t designed for YYA and are often unsafe, with YYA at the town hall reporting that they were assaulted while staying in adult shelters.
  - YYA emergency shelters do not have adequate resources to meet the growing need for pregnant and parenting YYA experiencing homelessness.
- The foster care system can be viewed as a young person’s “neighborhood” when they enter foster care. However, the system often does not create the same community and supports that a neighborhood creates for many:

- Kinship placements that would allow youth to stay with relatives still do not receive adequate financial support to meet the basic needs of youth. Relative caregivers don’t know where to turn for support, particularly when they are not a licensed foster family home.
  - There are not enough housing options or placements for older youth, including enough Supervised Independent Living placements for youth in extended care.
  - Many youth who age out of care often don’t know about or understand extended foster care.
- Access to healthy food was acknowledged as a barrier to promoting positive YYA health. In particular, YYA and stakeholders shared:
    - The rising cost of food means more youth and families are not getting the nutrition they need.
    - State food benefits do not cover the cost of feeding a family for a full month, which contributes to economic instability and food insecurity.
    - Food available in food pantries is often of poor quality, not healthy, and is frequently expired.

## Economic Stability and Education

Economic instability creates many barriers to positive health outcomes, including housing instability, homelessness, lack of access to healthy food, and much more. Although education and employment can help to address some of these challenges, stakeholders in Waco report that there are significant barriers to education and employment opportunities as well as gaps in life skills training.

- Stakeholders report that, due to a lack of affordable options, housing is often unattainable or unsustainable for many families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.

- Large rent increases (e.g., from \$1,000 to \$2,500) are forcing families out, exacerbating housing instability in Waco.
- Providers are struggling to find permanent housing solutions for youth. Permanent supportive housing is extremely limited, as are funding options to cover increased housing costs.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for YYA. Stakeholders reported the following concerns:
  - YYA shared that there are not enough protections for them in the workplace. At times they were required to work long shifts during high school and had to miss school in order to keep their job.
  - YYA experiencing homelessness and living in a shelter report being unable to accept or keep better-paying jobs, such as late shifts at a warehouse, because this would necessitate breaking curfew to go to work. YYA feel they have to choose between safe housing at the shelter and a job that can support them.
    - Shelter providers shared similar concerns, acknowledging they cannot afford the staffing to allow YYA to come and go for late-shift jobs.
    - Additionally, youth must consider whether working a late shift means losing access to meals at the shelter.
  - YYA often don't understand their options for learning work-based skills, especially if they are not yet ready for college. There is a need for more education about workforce training, skills development, trade schools, etc.
  - Stakeholders share that schools are quick to criminalize student behavior rather than address the underlying issues causing the behavior.
- Schools are so focused on “teaching to the test” that they are not listening to students to understand the support they need to learn.
- School personnel, including teachers and police, need more and ongoing training on trauma-informed care, understanding youth substance use, and children’s mental health.
- Housing instability means youth and families are moving a lot, causing education instability.

### Social and Community Context

While YYAs’ relationships and interactions with family, friends, and community members can significantly impact their health and well-being, factors like where they live, who they associate with, and personal safety are often outside their control. Parental incarceration and youth involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system impact both their community relationships and lack thereof, while also creating negative interactions and experiences. Positive relationships at home, at school, or in the community can help reduce these negative impacts. Participants from the Waco Area area identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- Waco and surrounding areas do not have enough resources to support families or promote youth success. Stakeholders reported a need for greater investment and emphasis on prevention in their community.
- YYA survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking do not have access to the supports they need to recover.
  - YYA who have had hard lives often feel no one cares about their safety. They do not feel there is someone in their lives who can offer support when they are victimized, or they think nobody will believe them because they were not believed in the past.

- YYA experiencing homelessness often fear reporting their abusers or traffickers because this person is providing for them and potentially other YYA.
- When they do report, YYA share that perpetrators of abuse aren't held accountable, and survivors face challenges obtaining restraining orders.
- Stakeholders share that there aren't enough resources to support domestic abuse and trafficking survivors and resources for male survivors are lacking.
- YYA involved in the justice system lack access to the resources they need, and affected youth and their families are often afraid to seek out support. The justice system isn't always equipped to meet the needs of YYA in their care. Stakeholders shared:
  - The juvenile system is punitive, criminalizing youth for minor misbehavior rather than addressing root causes and supporting youth rehabilitation.
  - There are systemic barriers between local and state agencies like Juvenile Justice and Child Protective Services (CPS), making it difficult for youth to access consistent support as they move between the agencies.
- Space for youth at mental health hospitals is in high demand, but once the youth is ready for release there is not an appropriate place for them to go.
  - When DFPS is unable to find the next placement for a youth, they are slow to pick the youth up.
  - Parents are refusing to pick up their children from the hospital, either because they do not feel equipped to support the youth and want a step-down placement or because they want to relinquish custody of the child to the state.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid, making it difficult for YYA with Medicaid to access mental health treatment.
- Parent or custodial consent is required for psychiatric care for youth under 18, but many parents don't provide it. This leaves youth untreated and increases self-medication and substance use among YYA.
- Healthcare providers are hesitant to send youth to hospitals for psychiatric care due to concerns about trafficking.
- Recent law changes around addressing substance use are causing YYA to get felony charges for THC vaping, both overwhelming juvenile probation due to the substantial increase in felony referrals and unnecessarily pushing youth into an overburdened juvenile justice system unequipped to meet their needs.

## Mental Health and Behavioral

The social determinants of health have a direct impact on a young person's mental and behavioral well-being. When discussing barriers, stakeholders most frequently uplifted the increasing need for mental health and behavioral health support and that YYA have greater needs than in the past— all while the resources available to them fall behind.

Waco stakeholders also shared the following:

- Available mental health services do not meet the community's needs, particularly the needs of YYA.