

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 consentor 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.

- 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:

Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth

Feedback from Central Texas 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. 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.