

TNOYS Legislative Advocacy Toolkit

Policy Advocacy for the 88th Texas Legislative Session

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About Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS)

Overview of TNOYS Advocacy

At Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), we believe that young people should have a voice in decisions that impact their lives and communities. To build positive change in youth-serving systems, it is critical for policymakers to hear directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and the providers that serve them.

Youth-adult partnership in advocacy ensures policies are grounded in real-world experiences and leads to stronger, more effective solutions. Since TNOYS was founded in 1980, we have secured many policy advancements thanks in part to the powerful testimony of the YYA and providers who join us each legislative session. When those with lived experiences share their stories, legislators gain an important, often unheard perspective on gaps in services and the supports that our communities need most.

Your Role in TNOYS Advocacy



This toolkit aims to guide and support YYA and providers to advocate for legislative change. There is power in numbers, and speaking up about issues that are important to you is what makes advocacy so powerful. In this toolkit, you'll learn about the Texas Legislature, best practices to identify and talk with your legislators, and strategies to advocate for the priorities in TNOYS' Cross-Systems, Youth-Focused Policy Agenda.

The TNOYS team is working closely with legislators and their staff throughout the 88th Texas Legislative Session. We will update our network of providers and YYA about relevant legislation and opportunities to advocate for TNOYS' policy priorities. If you have questions about any legislation or get questions from legislators that you need help answering, reach out to policy@tnoys.org. The team is happy to support you.

Youth-Adult Partnership in Advocacy

Youth-adult partnership acknowledges that youth and young adults (YYA) are the experts in their own lives, and their voices should be included in any plans, strategies, and services to support them. Successful youth engagement strategies take the view of youth as being resilient, resourceful people who can partner with adults in a joint effort to solve community problems.

During TNOYS' Day of Action for Youth (D.A.Y.), providers and YYA may wish to work together to develop an ask and hold a joint meeting with legislators. As you prepare to advocate at the Texas Capitol and with legislative offices, we encourage you to keep a few tips in mind.

- **Prioritize shared decision-making:** Have an open and honest discussion as you plan. Listen to and value the input of everyone, especially YYA with lived experience in systems.
 1. Work together to list possible actions to take. Next, narrow down your list according to priorities, goals, and constraints like time and resources.
 2. Find time to follow up, reflect, and debrief on the outcomes of your partnership. Next, find takeaways to apply to your next legislative visit.

- **Be open, curious, and practice active and reflective listening:** Whether you are a YYA or a professional with many years of experience, remember that it is OK to ask questions when you don't understand something. Be sure to communicate needs and boundaries while empathizing with the other person's perspective. This can help ensure a respectful and safe environment.
- **Clearly establish goals and expectations from the beginning:**
 1. Work together to establish reasonable goals and expectations of behavior and conduct. Make a list and discuss what success from your advocacy will ideally look like so you both are on the same page.
 2. Follow the SMARTIE Goals model to set achievable goals that are Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Timely, Inclusive, and Equitable.

Example: I will speak with three legislators today about the need for better prevention and early intervention resources, especially for marginalized or rural communities. I will share my experience with the FAYS program with at least one legislator.
 3. Discuss how you will support one another as you work towards these goals.

Texas Legislature 101

How the Texas Legislature Works

- Like the United States Congress, The Texas Legislature comprises two chambers: the Texas Senate and the Texas House of Representatives. Both the House and the Senate must approve all legislation before it can become law. Therefore, it's critical that advocacy and education efforts are directed towards both the House and the Senate.
- The Texas Constitution requires the Legislature to convene every two years, starting on the second Tuesday of January. This is called a "regular session" and generally lasts 140 calendar days. During this time, legislators can file and pass legislation to change laws on any topic or issue, though they are only required to pass a balanced budget. Session can not last longer than 140 days, but legislators can end early if they have finished all of their business.
- Additionally, legislators can be called for a "special session" at any other time. Special sessions last for no more than 30 days and can only happen when the governor "calls" a special session. During a special session, legislators can only pass legislation that addresses topics and issues identified by the governor.

Who Represents You

Legislators (state senators and state representatives) are elected to represent their constituents - the people who live in their district. It is important to know who represents you because your voice has the strongest impact in your own legislator's office, and your legislator wants to hear directly from you.

In the Texas Legislature, each Texan is represented by:

- One State Senator
- One State Representative

Go to "Who Represents Me?" at wrm.capitol.texas.gov/home to find your state senator and state representative.

You can search by address, city or county.



The screenshot shows the 'Who Represents Me?' website interface. It features two search sections. The first section is titled 'Find by street address, city, or ZIP' and includes input fields for 'Street address', 'City' (with a dropdown for state, currently showing '.TX'), and 'Zip'. There are 'Clear' and 'Find' buttons below these fields. The second section is titled 'Find by County' and includes a dropdown menu for 'County' and 'Clear' and 'Find' buttons.

When you find who represents you, you will see many different elected officials. When it comes to advocating for state laws at the Texas Capitol, we are only concerned with the state senator and state representative.

There are three ways to think about who represents you:

- **Your legislators:** The specific state senator and state representative who represent your personal, permanent address (the address on your driver's license and/or where you are registered to vote). When meeting with them, you should make clear, "I am a constituent."
- **Your organization's legislators:** Check to see if the legislators who represent the address of the organization you work for or are served by is different from those who represent you. These legislators will also be interested in what you have to say because the organization is in their district. When meeting with them, you should make clear the organization you work for or are representing is in their district and serves their constituents.
- **The legislators representing the communities served by your organization.** TNOYS' member network includes many organizations that serve large areas or densely populated counties. If you represent a large organization, keep in mind that each legislator in the areas/counties you serve wants to hear from you because your organization serves their constituents. When meeting with them, make clear that your organization serves their constituents and supports their community.

About the Texas Senate

The Texas Senate has 31 state senators, each representing a different senate district. Senators serve a four-year term. The Senate is led by the lieutenant governor. The lieutenant governor is elected by voters in a statewide election every four years.

About the Texas House of Representatives

The Texas House is made up of 150 state representatives, each representing a different house district. Representatives serve a two-year term. The Texas House of Representatives is led by the speaker of the house. On the first day of session, the 150 Representatives vote to elect the speaker from among the members of the House. A speaker of the house serves a two-year term, but can be reelected to serve more terms.

About the Governor

The Governor of Texas is the head of the Texas State Government. The governor signs legislation into law, shares legislative priorities, and holds veto power. Every law that is passed by the House and the Senate must go to the governor before it can become law.

- Each governor has 10 days to act once a bill gets to their desk. During that time, they have three options:
 1. Sign the bill into law, showing their approval.
 2. Do nothing and allow the bill to become law without the governor's signature.
 3. Veto the legislation and prohibit it from becoming law.

Legislative Advocacy 101

What is Legislative Advocacy?

Legislative advocacy refers to activities that educate legislators and their staff in an attempt to influence policies and laws. Legislative advocacy can promote meaningful systems-change by inspiring new policies and laws or needed changes to existing ones. Meaningful advocacy includes:

- Uplifting concerns and providing insight into issues that should be a focus for legislators.
- Educating on current practices and outcomes.
- Storytelling: sharing personal examples of what is happening and why change is needed.
- Providing solutions to address the concerns shared.
- Coordinating with others so that legislators and their staff repeatedly hear the same message and ask from different sources.
- Building relationships and staying engaged.

How to Advocate Effectively

Advocacy can be very complicated and sometimes requires a lot of experience. But there are also basic rules to advocacy that anyone can follow to be effective.

Rule #1: Be ready with an ask. First, reference the [TNOYS policy agenda](#) to identify the policy recommendation and solution you will ask the legislator (or their staff) to support. Use V.O.S.A. messaging (described below) to lay out the problem(s) and policies you want to see addressed and the policy solution you propose. Next, make a specific ask to your legislator or their staff, sharing personal examples of how the change could or would help you or the youth you serve. End with a clear request of your legislator or their staff.

Rule #2: Practice what you will say beforehand to be quick, informative, and concise. Your ask is important, but you are not the only person they will hear from today.

- Write an outline of what you want to say. Depending on how many people join your meeting, you may have only two or three minutes. Make sure it includes:
 1. Your name and where you live (if in the district).
 2. The organization or coalition that you represent.
 3. Why you are there.
 4. How the issue or policy you are talking about has impacted you or would impact you.
 5. Your ask of what you want them to do.
 6. Finally, hand over a one- or two-page fact sheet to share if you have one.

Rule #3: Do your homework and learn about your legislator to ensure that what you plan to say holds personal relevance for them. It is helpful to know the following information about your legislator beforehand:

- The district they represent, and information about their constituents. For example, is their district rural or urban? What are the concerns of their constituents?
- The policies and issues that are important to them.
- The values they hold and their opinions on current issues.
- The legislative committees on which they serve.

Rule #4: Don't ever write anyone off.

- Your relationship with your legislators and their staff matter equally. Leave a positive, lasting impression to keep current "friends" and make new ones. Remember names, and thank those who help you for their ongoing support.
- Also, the surest rule of politics is that today's opponent is tomorrow's potential ally — and vice-versa. Because it is tough to predict how someone will vote, our aim is to keep the conversation going so our arguments can continue to be heard by key decision-makers.
- Just because you and a legislator disagree on one issue does not mean you will disagree on all issues. Find the issues you can work together on.

Rule #5: Think in terms of "50% + 1", knowing that bills have passed by only one vote. Elected officials themselves have to think in terms of how they will reach 50% + 1 votes. They know they need 50% + 1 of the voters in their district to get elected or stay in office, and they need 50% + 1 of their colleagues on a committee of the full House or Senate to get something passed. This is why it is essential to be polite and gracious to everyone in case you make all the difference for that crucial "plus one".

Rule #6: Follow up. If a legislator or their staff asks a question and you don't know the answer, let them know that you will get them the answer — and then make sure to keep your word. TNOYS staff will be happy to help you email or call them back with the information you promised. If you prefer, TNOYS can follow up as well. Even if there are no answers you need to follow up with, it is always worthwhile to write an email thanking the legislator or staff for their time and reiterating the request you made.

Rule #7: Say who stands behind you. A pro-tip to advocacy is finding a way to convey that more people support your issue than you alone. Mentioning groups or coalitions you belong to conveys bigger numbers and that your issues have the potential to attract broad voter support.



Meeting with Your Legislator

Remember the following tips:

- Meetings with a legislator or their staff will not be longer than 30 minutes, and some offices may need the meeting to be only 15 minutes. Be concise in your self-introduction, the specific issue you're talking about, and how it impacts you.
- Always ask to meet with your legislator, but know they are very busy and have limited time between all their responsibilities. You will likely meet with their staff.
- Meet with issue-specific staff and present yourself and your policy issue as you would to a legislator.
- Be prepared to come back and meet with the legislator at another time if they are away or unavailable.
- Meetings can be phone calls, virtual meetings, or in-person engagements at their Capitol or district office. You can schedule appointments in advance, but it is also acceptable to call or just drop by the office. If you call or drop by without an appointment, you'll likely need to be particularly brief or they may ask you to call back or drop by in 30 minutes as they are meeting with other constituents and advocates.

Presenting Yourself

- Look your best. Dress to impress. If you can, wear business or business casual attire and comfortable shoes.
- Remember how important it is to present yourself well. You are not only representing yourself: you are also representing your organization and other systems-involved YYA.
- Introduce yourself and use a firm handshake.
- Remember what you prepared in your elevator speech.
- State your name, your district, and that you vote.
- Focus on what they are saying. Listen and respond.
- Don't forget to thank them for their time.

Messaging: Creating an Effective Ask

It is important to come prepared to meetings with legislators with an effective ask. The V.O.S.A framework can help you connect with your audience, articulate a clear solution, and ultimately help achieve the desired outcome. Consider the following when you develop your ask:

- Identify **values**. Create broad points of agreement and shared goals that resonate with nearly any audience.
- Find an **opportunity** to connect. Be explicit about the problem and how it threatens shared values. Create a sense of urgency and connect individual stories to broader issues. Use data and stories.
- Offer a **solution** that provides a sense of hope and motivation. The best solutions are connected directly to the problem. For *Day of Action for Youth*, these solutions are the priorities in TNOYS' policy agenda.
- Have a call to **action**. Assign an action with a concrete next step for the legislator.

Example:

TNOYS' Policy Recommendation: Create a new grant program to increase state funding that provides housing and homelessness services to YYA. The program should make funding available to increase housing options and supports for YYA experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness.

V.O.S.A messaging to support this recommendation:

Values: Every youth and young adult deserves a safe place to lay their head at night. They should be able to go to school and learn instead of sitting at their desk and wondering where they will sleep that night. We all want to help youth and young adults heal from the trauma of experiencing homelessness and connect them to work or school. We must increase the availability of safe housing and supports and services that put young people experiencing homelessness on a path to success.

Opportunities: Factors like rising costs and limited affordable housing have led to housing instability for many young people. Youth aging out of foster care are much more likely to experience homelessness than their peers, despite the amazing efforts of many Texas organizations that work to prevent this outcome. Sadly, many of these organizations are struggling to maintain staff and provide services amid rising costs.

Solution: Increase the resources available to housing and homelessness services providers by creating and funding a new grant program at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA). Funds would supplement other grant and federal funding such as supplemental rental assistance, incentives to landlords (including vouchers specifically for former foster youth), mental health supports, workforce training, and other services for YYA experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness.

Action: Please support legislation to use some of the state's budget surplus to create a new grant program at TDHCA for \$20 million per year. Currently, \$1.5 million of state money is dedicated to supporting housing and homelessness services for youth and young adults each year. However, that money only goes to the nine largest cities in the state. This new grant program would allow services providers in all 254 Texas counties to seek additional funding.

Create an Agenda to Prepare for Your Meeting

Use the space below to create an agenda plan for meeting with legislators and to write your story. Feel free to use the V.O.S.A. messaging formula (above) to hit all the main points.

What Else Can Advocacy Include?

Advocacy is ongoing work. Below are other ways to advocate before and after Day of Action for Youth:

- Email your legislator.
- Call and talk to staff or leave a voicemail.
- Meet with legislators and their staff in their Capitol office or their district office.
- Testify at a committee hearing on specific legislation.
- Use social media to engage your representatives. Comment on their posts and tag them in yours. Twitter is an ideal platform because many legislators and their staff follow it closely, especially the #txlege hashtag. Use the #txlege hashtag to share what is important to you this session and why.

About Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS)



For over 40 years, Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) has advocated for young people ages 10-26 who have experienced homelessness, foster care, the justice system, and other vulnerable situations. In collaboration with over 80 member organizations and youth and young adult partners, TNOYS works in every Texas region to prevent systems involvement, strengthen and improve systems that serve youth, and ensure that young people are best equipped to make the transition out of systems and into adulthood.

TNOYS' work is guided by a comprehensive systems-change approach that encompasses policy advocacy, professional development, and partnership with youth and adults. We advocate for stronger supports and systems, equip those in the field with the tools and resources to better serve youth, and collaborate with young people across the state.

A deep commitment to youth-adult partnership and diversity, equity, and inclusion underscores TNOYS' work. In everything we do, TNOYS listens to and learns from youth and young adults with lived experience so we can effectively center their needs, amplify their voices, and invest in them as leaders.

Our Mission

The mission of Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families to help them overcome challenges and achieve healthy development.

Our Vision

Our members share a vision of Texas where all youth and young adults are valued, their strengths are recognized, their voices are heard and respected, and they have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to meet their goals.

Talking Points About TNOYS

- For over 40 years, Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) has strengthened systems and support for young people ages 10-26 who have experienced homelessness, foster care, the justice system, and other vulnerable situations.
- TNOYS is a statewide member network that includes over 80 youth-serving organizations and over 40 professionals.
- Because youth often touch multiple systems on their journey to adulthood, TNOYS works across seven systems that serve young people: child welfare, housing and homelessness services, health and behavioral health, justice, victim/ survivor services, education, and higher education/workforce.
- TNOYS works in every Texas region to prevent systems-involvement, strengthen and build change in systems that serve youth, and ensure that young people are best equipped to make the transition out of systems and into adulthood.
- TNOYS' work is guided by a comprehensive systems-change approach that encompasses policy advocacy, professional development, and partnership with youth and young adults.
- TNOYS advocates for stronger supports and systems, equips those in the field with the tools and resources to better serve youth, and collaborates with young people from across systems and around the state.
- A deep commitment to youth-adult partnership and diversity, equity, and inclusion underscores TNOYS' work. In everything we do, TNOYS listens to and learns from youth and young adults with lived experience so we can effectively center their needs, amplify their voices, and invest in them as leaders.