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:

Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth
Feedback from Deep East Texas Youth-Services Stakeholders on the Needs of the Youth and Young Adults they Serve

TNOYS
TEXAS NETWORK OF
YOUTH SERVICES

- 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

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 East Texas report 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.
- 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.

Improving Health Outcomes of Texas Youth
Feedback from Deep East Texas Youth-Services Stakeholders on the Needs of the Youth and Young Adults they Serve

TNOYS
TEXAS NETWORK OF
YOUTH SERVICES

- 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:

📞 512-815-3299 | 🌐 www.tnoys.org | ✉ info@tnoys.org

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.

- 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.