

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.

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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:

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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. 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.