

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.
- 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:

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.
- 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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