

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 Beaumont, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services providers about YYAs' health needs in Southeast Texas. The event convened 37 stakeholders, including five 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 our participants identified as crucial to being addressed to improve YYAs' health outcomes.

Across all discussions was a broad acknowledgment that, for vulnerable youth and young adults, poor health outcomes often stem from factors outside of what we typically consider as "health needs." For example, youth or young adults 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 is a key component to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of concerning trends regarding access and quality of healthcare for YYA in Southeast Texas.

- Youth need more education on accessing health care and navigating insurance.
 - Many YYA do not know who to call when they need healthcare services or the best type of doctor for their needs.
 - YYA who age out of foster care often don't understand how to navigate their insurance or how to renew their health care benefits.
- Youth who feel they were unheard or overmedicated in the past often don't trust healthcare providers and avoid seeking out care.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid. Even when YYA have Medicaid, healthcare is still unobtainable.
- Concerns were brought up that YYA who contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs), can go to a doctor to get medications to address the infection, but still don't receive education about preventing the spread or contracting new STIs.

Neighborhood and Built Environment

When a YYA's neighborhood and built environment have high rates of violence, unsafe/limited housing, lack of transportation, or other barriers, young people can suffer lasting negative consequences. Southeast Texas providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Resources are needed to prevent Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY) and trafficking, as well as support survivors.
 - Groomers are exploiting the vulnerability of YYA who do not have community or familial safety nets.
 - There are no shelters for YYA who have experienced CSEY and one provider reported how they sat with a youth trafficking victim for four days while trying to locate a placement for them.
- 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.
 - Youth are not listened to. YYA shared that youth don't trust the system because they can report concerns about abuse at a placement, but it will not be investigated. At the same time, YYA and stakeholders share that youth need more opportunities to speak up for themselves such as in court or during placement decisions.
- Staffing shortages in youth services are widespread, making it difficult for YYA to get consistent, genuine support from their caseworkers and other professional staff.

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 Southeast 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 families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
 - When youth age out of foster care, they often do not have a place to live and immediately or soon after experience homelessness. With a lack of Supervised Independent Living programs (SIL) in Beaumont and surrounding communities, many youth have to leave the area to secure housing.
 - There is one SIL in the area serving young men aged 18–24 but it has limited resources for parenting fathers.
 - There are limited resources to support and house the increasing population of youth under 18 and those ages 18–24 who are experiencing homelessness on their own.
 - Youth under 18 cannot consent to their own housing, and shelter space is limited and only funded for short stays. YYA have very different needs and do not feel safe in shelters designed for adults.
 - Local shelters have limited resources and cannot provide the needed services.
 - Additionally, the area lacks drop-in centers that allow for youth experiencing homelessness to drop in for resources and support.

- The cost of housing has become a crisis, creating more housing instability and homelessness than ever before among families, young adults, and even the providers who serve them.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for Southeast 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 Beaumont and surrounding areas. Southeast Texas stakeholders reported the following concerns:
 - Stakeholders report that, because of high turnover rates, employers assume their new hires will soon leave and do not provide sufficient training. This leaves employees feeling unsupported and exacerbates employee turnover and an untrained workforce.
 - Stakeholders recommend that employers consider Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) training to support their workforce.
 - Parenting YYA need access to affordable or free childcare so that they can go to work or school. Often childcare costs more than the income they stand to earn.
 - Literacy is an increasing concern. Children, youth, and young adults of all ages are substantially behind reading levels, and the gap worsens as they grow older. Falling behind in school often leads to youth dropping out.
- In addition, stakeholders shared concerns that schools are not equipped to support students:
 - Truancy becomes a cyclical issue. Students who do not attend class fall behind, which causes them to feel overwhelmed and wary of attending again. This concern is exacerbated by exclusionary discipline, students being sick, and even the prospect of bullying from other students.
 - Both YYA and providers report that there is a great need for increased, quality sex education in our schools to support YYA and prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy.
 - YYA report wanting to learn about mental health in school. Too often, YYA are not taught what mental health is or how to actively support their own mental health until they are in crisis.

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 in Southeast Texas.

- Bullying and peer pressure are ongoing issues for youth and impact their self-esteem and long-term mental health. Schools need more resources to address bullying and peer pressure.
- Parents need more support and feel constrained by external pressures around parenting and guiding their children.

- The local Family and Youth Success program offers support and parenting classes to families, yet this resource is not widely known.
- The community needs to more proactively connect parents to parenting classes before their children are born, potentially in school.
- Many youth have unaddressed complex trauma, and the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are not well understood by community members. Those working with YYA need more training on trauma-informed care and TBRI (Trauma-Based Relational Intervention), including police officers in schools and in the community.
- Stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the number of students who have been leaving public schools to be homeschooled and no longer appear to be on anyone’s radar. The well-being of these youth may not be ensured if there is no accountability for homeschooling.
- Youth involved in the justice system lack access to the support they need. At the same time, the legislature funded increases to juvenile probation department staff salaries. While this has helped stabilize the workforce, staff are still leaving for other, less stressful jobs.
- Schools do not use appropriate discretion when referring students to probation. It was reported that minor classroom misbehavior is leading to unnecessary justice involvement for youth and probation departments are using their limited resources to support youth who should be getting support in the classroom.

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 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 than in the past— all while resources available to them fall behind.

Stakeholders also shared the following:

- The community does not have enough resources to address the mental health needs of YYA. For example, there are not enough in-patient mental health care options for youth in crisis. YYA have to be taken to the emergency room, where staff from juvenile probation or foster care may wait with them for days before a more appropriate placement can be identified.
- Stakeholders shared examples of local initiatives they feel are supporting youth that should be considered in other schools.
 - Bridge City has a mental health class for students.
 - Vidor ISD has both mental health professionals and behavior specialists on-site at schools, helping reduce disciplinary issues.
- 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.