

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 Waco, Texas, to learn directly from youth, young adults (YYA), and youth services professionals about YYAs' health needs in Waco and the surrounding communities. The event convened 44 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 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 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 low-barrier, quality healthcare services is essential to meeting their needs. Stakeholders identified a number of trends regarding YYAs' access to quality healthcare in the Waco area.

- There is a lack of access to preventative healthcare services, particularly for youth living in unstable environments. Preventative care for conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is critical, but many youth are uninsured and cannot afford care or they face transportation barriers. Uninsured YYA would like health insurance to obtain preventative care but instead resort to using the emergency room to meet healthcare needs.
- Dental care coverage is inadequate, leading to more extreme interventions like tooth extraction when YYA cannot access preventative care earlier.
- Changes to healthcare coverage, such as when youth age out of foster care, lead to disruptions in care continuity. In particular, stakeholders see youth experiencing gaps in coverage for birth control. Lack of access to sexual health services makes it difficult for youth to receive treatment for STIs and access to birth control.
- Stakeholders shared a belief that all YYA, not just those exiting foster care, should have access to free health care through age 25 if they can't access insurance through a parent.

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. Waco providers and YYA shared the following concerns:

- Lack of transportation— particularly in rural communities or cities without robust public transportation— makes it difficult for YYA to access services, housing, employment, or pick up medication and get to doctor appointments. Public transportation ends before night shifts begin, making it unsafe for youth to commute to higher-paying jobs.
- The affordable housing crisis is contributing to a growing need for emergency shelter beds, especially for youth transitioning to adulthood.
 - YYA shelter beds, particularly those supportive of LGBTQ youth, are scarce.
 - The community does not have enough YYA shelters to meet its needs, making it difficult for YYA to navigate services. Standard emergency shelters aren’t designed for YYA and are often unsafe, with YYA at the town hall reporting that they were assaulted while staying in adult shelters.
 - YYA emergency shelters do not have adequate resources to meet the growing need for pregnant and parenting YYA experiencing homelessness.
- 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 to meet the basic needs of youth. Relative caregivers don’t know where to turn for support, particularly when they are not a licensed foster family home.
 - There are not enough housing options or placements for older youth, including enough Supervised Independent Living placements for youth in extended care.
 - Many youth who age out of care often don’t know about or understand extended foster care.

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 Waco 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.

- Large rent increases (e.g., from \$1,000 to \$2,500) are forcing families out, exacerbating housing instability in Waco.
- Providers are struggling to find permanent housing solutions for youth. Permanent supportive housing is extremely limited, as are funding options to cover increased housing costs.
- Because healthcare is intrinsically tied to employment, education and employment barriers can significantly impact health outcomes for YYA. Stakeholders reported the following concerns:
 - YYA shared that there are not enough protections for them in the workplace. At times they were required to work long shifts during high school and had to miss school in order to keep their job.
 - YYA experiencing homelessness and living in a shelter report being unable to accept or keep better-paying jobs, such as late shifts at a warehouse, because this would necessitate breaking curfew to go to work. YYA feel they have to choose between safe housing at the shelter and a job that can support them.
 - Shelter providers shared similar concerns, acknowledging they cannot afford the staffing to allow YYA to come and go for late-shift jobs.
 - Additionally, youth must consider whether working a late shift means losing access to meals at the shelter.
 - YYA often don't understand their options for learning work-based skills, especially if they are not yet ready for college. There is a need for more education about workforce training, skills development, trade schools, etc.
 - Stakeholders share that schools are quick to criminalize student behavior rather than address the underlying issues causing the behavior.
- Schools are so focused on “teaching to the test” that they are not listening to students to understand the support they need to learn.
- School personnel, including teachers and police, need more and ongoing training on trauma-informed care, understanding youth substance use, and children’s mental health.
- Housing instability means youth and families are moving a lot, causing education instability.

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 Waco Area area identified the following factors as key social and community concerns impacting YYA health and well-being:

- Waco and surrounding areas do not have enough resources to support families or promote youth success. Stakeholders reported a need for greater investment and emphasis on prevention in their community.
- YYA survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking do not have access to the supports they need to recover.
 - YYA who have had hard lives often feel no one cares about their safety. They do not feel there is someone in their lives who can offer support when they are victimized, or they think nobody will believe them because they were not believed in the past.

- YYA experiencing homelessness often fear reporting their abusers or traffickers because this person is providing for them and potentially other YYA.
- When they do report, YYA share that perpetrators of abuse aren't held accountable, and survivors face challenges obtaining restraining orders.
- Stakeholders share that there aren't enough resources to support domestic abuse and trafficking survivors and resources for male survivors are lacking.
- YYA involved in the justice system lack access to the resources they need, and affected youth and their families are often afraid to seek out support. The justice system isn't always equipped to meet the needs of YYA in their care. Stakeholders shared:
 - The juvenile system is punitive, criminalizing youth for minor misbehavior rather than addressing root causes and supporting youth rehabilitation.
 - There are systemic barriers between local and state agencies like Juvenile Justice and Child Protective Services (CPS), making it difficult for youth to access consistent support as they move between the agencies.
- Space for youth at mental health hospitals is in high demand, but once the youth is ready for release there is not an appropriate place for them to go.
 - When DFPS is unable to find the next placement for a youth, they are slow to pick the youth up.
 - Parents are refusing to pick up their children from the hospital, either because they do not feel equipped to support the youth and want a step-down placement or because they want to relinquish custody of the child to the state.
- The community lacks a sufficient number of healthcare providers who accept Medicaid, making it difficult for YYA with Medicaid to access mental health treatment.
- Parent or custodial consent is required for psychiatric care for youth under 18, but many parents don't provide it. This leaves youth untreated and increases self-medication and substance use among YYA.
- Healthcare providers are hesitant to send youth to hospitals for psychiatric care due to concerns about trafficking.
- 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.

Mental Health and Behavioral

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 uplifted the increasing need for mental health and behavioral health support and that YYA have greater needs than in the past— all while the resources available to them fall behind.

Waco stakeholders also shared the following:

- Available mental health services do not meet the community's needs, particularly the needs of YYA.