TEXAS DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES:
Impacts on Children, Youth, and Families

TNOYS
TEXAS NETWORK OF
YOUTH SERVICES

Texas Disasters and Emergencies: Impacts on Children, Youth, and Families
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Executive Summary

Texas has declared more major disasters than any other state in the country.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges to emergency responders, social service providers, health professionals, and decision-makers across the world. Children and youth have unique needs and vulnerabilities during emergencies and natural disasters, but those needs may be overlooked in the urgency to address physical consequences of disasters, such as medical attention, shelter, and access to basic necessities. Texas' most vulnerable youth and families are at particular risk of experiencing long-term impacts of disasters and emergencies if they lack safety nets, social supports, or other resources needed to return to normalcy.

Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, emergency response systems have taken great strides to improve child and youth safety during and after natural disasters, creating a complex and structured web of federal, state, and local resources and services prepared to meet the unique needs of children and youth. Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide research and advocacy organization working to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families to help them overcome challenges and achieve healthy development. Through this report, TNOYS aims to better understand what gaps might still exist for young people in emergency response systems and how we can support our network of members to fill those gaps.

As part of TNOYS' ongoing work to center the voices of youth and young adults, our team spoke with young people who have been impacted by disasters or emergencies to learn about their perspectives and experiences. TNOYS also spoke with stakeholders in the emergency response and youth services fields to learn about what they see in their work. These conversations with youth and professionals revealed many overlapping themes concerning access to resources, barriers to collaboration and coordination, trauma and mental health, lack of equity in recovery resources, need for social support, and desire for normalcy. The themes that both providers and young people identified align with the evidence base for promoting healthy outcomes for youth and improving safety during and after emergencies.

TNOYS developed broad recommendations for policy, practice, and partnership that service providers, legislators, regulatory agencies, youth advocates, and other stakeholders can implement in their policies and programs.
- Offer widespread training opportunities for a diversity of audiences.
- Expand availability and accessibility of mental health services.
- Allow for flexibility in regulations and requirements.
- Prepare for emergencies before they occur.
- Promote youth resilience and success.

Introduction

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide membership organization with the mission to strengthen services and support for Texas youth and families to help them overcome challenges and achieve healthy development. Texas has declared more major disasters than any other state in the country, and the frequency of disasters is increasing.[2] The COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges to emergency responders, social service providers, health professionals, and decision-makers across the world. Children and youth have unique needs and vulnerabilities during emergencies and natural disasters, but those needs may be overlooked in the urgency to address physical consequences of disasters, such as medical attention, shelter, and access to basic necessities. Texas' most vulnerable youth and families are at particular risk of experiencing long-term impacts of disasters and emergencies if they lack safety nets, social supports, or other resources needed to return to normalcy.

TNOYS has a history of providing critical resources, funding, and support to serve youth and families during and after emergencies. During Hurricane Harvey, TNOYS responded immediately to address the needs of youth-service organizations and youth evacuees. In the months after, TNOYS awarded capacity-building grants to community-based organizations, reaching over 2,250 families, including over 3,700 youth experiencing homelessness. As part of this support, TNOYS awarded 19 mini-grants to school entities to support over 2,500 students, and we trained more than 1,000 educators and service providers on topics including crisis intervention, trauma-informed care, and strengthened collaborations between school districts and providers.

TNOYS responded quickly to support youth-serving organizations in adapting to challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. TNOYS distributed $42,000 in mini grants to 21 member organizations to support their continued operations and service provision amidst the pandemic, roughly 2,000 cloth face masks to organizations providing direct services to youth and young adults, and $32,000 in necessary supplies (including laptops, tablets, clothing, sanitation and health items, personal protective equipment, and more) to member organizations. Additionally, TNOYS launched an online Emergency Response Resource Center to provide guidance for providers on implementing emergency response protocols, accessing needed supplies and resources, and addressing workforce challenges. TNOYS hosted over 300 individuals in a series of virtual stakeholder meetings and training events for organizations to share information, troubleshoot challenges, and learn new skills. TNOYS continues to elevate the needs and concerns of providers to state leadership, regulatory agencies, and the philanthropic community in order to secure guidance and support for providers. TNOYS also shares information and best practices from state agencies, decision-makers, and national experts with youth-serving organizations across the state through virtual events, the Emergency Response Resource Center, and a robust social media strategy.

More recently, TNOYS collaborated with stakeholders across Texas to identify, develop, and implement policies, protocols, and best practices for keeping children and youth safe from abuse, neglect, and exploitation during and after natural disasters and emergencies. Despite these efforts to address the immediate impacts of these disasters and emergencies, TNOYS knows that the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are reverberating across youth-serving systems which will experience an increased need for critical services in the coming years. TNOYS works to advance systems change and organizational capacity building to positively impact youth outcomes across the following youth-focused systems: housing and homeless services, child welfare, justice, education, workforce, health and behavioral health, and victim and survivor services. As part of TNOYS' ongoing work to center the voices of youth and young adults, our team spoke with young people who have been impacted by disasters or emergencies to learn about their perspectives and experiences. Quotes from interviews with both youth and stakeholders in the field are featured throughout the report. Very little research exists that examines the lasting impact of natural disasters and emergencies on the lives of children and youth, and this report tells these stories from the youth perspective.

Understanding Impacts Across Systems

Natural disasters are on the rise, and Texas experiences more natural disasters than any other state in the country. Since 1953, Texas has recorded 100 major disasters, or one disaster every eight months.[3,4] In Texas, children and youth under the age of 25 make up over one-third of the population.[5]

Given the unique vulnerabilities of children and youth during disasters and emergencies, response efforts must include the specialized services youth need to stay safe and recover successfully. Children, youth, and families who are displaced by natural disasters experience trauma and instability that heighten their risk of victimization and exploitation. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing gaps in support for Texas' most vulnerable youth and young adults. It has also created new gaps as youth who were already working to overcome difficult obstacles now face job loss, school closures, social isolation, loss of normalcy, and mounting tensions at home.

Natural disasters and emergencies are also likely to create or exacerbate community disadvantage. This is defined as the interplay between individual characteristics of a community's residents, such as unemployment, low income, and low educational attainment; and the social and environmental context within the community, such as weak social networks and relative lack of opportunity. Young people may be at greater risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation because of stressors associated with disasters and emergencies, and because of long-term consequences following these events such as financial instability and housing insecurity.

Immediate Impacts of Natural Disasters on Youth

Immediately following disasters and emergencies, communities may see damaged infrastructure, increases in homelessness, children and youth cut off from school and other resources, families and youth facing job loss, and increased mental distress in the population. Research tells us that during emergencies like natural disasters and economic recessions, mental health disorders, substance use, and rates of violence and child maltreatment all increase.[6,7,8,9]

Housing 🏠

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"I know from experience: A homeless person would do a lot for a place to stay."

– Timothy, age 21

Community destruction creates health and safety hazards in the home and the community, such as mold exposure, bacteria from floodwater, debris, electrical hazards, and gas or carbon monoxide leaks.[10] Additionally, vulnerable youth and families may face homelessness if their houses are destroyed, and displaced youth and families rely on shelters to provide basic needs while they work to rebuild their lives.[11] The COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of youth homelessness as a number of youth shelters across Texas reported limiting or prohibiting new placements, at least temporarily, to protect the health and safety of staff and clients. This reduced Texas youth's access not only to housing, but also to critical resources such as counseling, food, and technology. Nonprofit providers across Texas also reported increased demand for services, expansion in clients' needs, and disruption in service provision as a result of the pandemic.[12]

Education 🏫

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"Online school has been harder: harder to concentrate and get assignments."

– Blue, age 13

Children and youth may be cut off from school for many reasons. Young people may experience school closure as a result of damage to the school or community; physical barriers to getting to school like damage to community infrastructure, lack of transportation, or family displacement; school closures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases; and emotional distress preventing families from maintaining a normal routine. When youth are unable to attend school, they lose access to critical resources, including free meals, child care, referrals to services, and similar programs that benefit children and families. This is especially challenging for those who rely on services that schools provide. These children and youth are less likely to have the resources needed to stay on target with schoolwork during an emergency.

Employment and Finance

"COVID has really made it pretty difficult due to a lot of people can't be on the job site, and not all jobs are work from home type jobs, so it's really a burden."

– Robert, age 19

Similarly, as businesses close temporarily or permanently in the wake of a disaster or emergency, youth and families may face job loss, which increases financial vulnerability. For example, data show that the majority of jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic have been in low-paying industries, with the lowest-paying industries accounting for 30 percent of all jobs lost and over 50 percent of jobs lost from February to September 2020.[13] Youth who are on their own or marginalized based on socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of disasters and emergencies.[14] They are more likely to live in areas at high risk of disaster impact, and they are less likely to have a safety net or access to the resources and support they need to cope with the distress of a disaster or emergency.[15,16] Additionally, low-income populations generally have fewer areas to cut back when unexpected expenses arise or income suddenly decreases. This population is less likely to have savings to support them through hard times, and any assets they do have are likely concentrated in their homes or property which may be damaged during the disaster or emergency.[17]

Health and Mental Health

"They I can't go outside, and you're bottling up, your anger is bottling up from being so frustrated, and one day you just explode."

– Shane, age 17

Following natural disasters and emergencies, between one-third and one-half of survivors will experience mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[18] Children and youth differ from adults physically, emotionally, and developmentally, and they have unique reactions to emergencies and natural disasters. Children are at particular risk of developing PTSD because they do not have the cognitive abilities to put the disaster into context, may see traumatic events as punishment for misbehavior, and could have difficulty discussing the event if they have limited language skills.[19] In addition to depression, anxiety, and PTSD, children and youth may experience functional impairments, traumatic stress symptoms, and psychiatric disorders in the aftermath of a disaster.[20] Finally, a new study of patients 18 and older finds that COVID-19 diagnosis is linked to a greater risk of developing mental health disorders, including anxiety, PTSD, depression, and dementia.[21]

Child Welfare 📋

"My caseworker tried to look for other placements for me, maybe like a foster home that was willing to hold me until I turned 21, but he didn't find any, of course, because of the coronavirus situation."

– Kedrick, age 19

Longer-term impacts of disasters and emergencies include risk factors for abuse, neglect, and exploitation such as loss of a social network, community violence, and concentrated community disadvantage.[22] During the pandemic, youth and families face social isolation, fear and anxiety, and prolonged periods of sheltering in place, which are likely to increase tensions at home and elevate risks of child maltreatment. Natural disasters and emergencies may produce a number of challenges for child welfare agencies, including maintaining connection with foster and biological families; communication with caseworkers, personnel, and other stakeholders; disruptions to court proceedings; reduced capacity and availability of child placements; interruptions to provision of services; and ability to locate children and youth under state conservatorship.[23] The Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 requires state child welfare agencies to develop comprehensive disaster response plans, but actual levels of preparedness vary dramatically from one state to another. This puts children and youth at risk of falling through the cracks.[24]

Juvenile Justice ⚖️

"Emergencies like COVID-19 can be devastating for youth and young adults, especially those who are locked up. I worry for young people who are getting exposed in detention."

– Alex, age 22

A natural disaster or emergency may cause many problems for juvenile justice providers. Issues can include damage to facilities, large-scale evacuations and relocations, disruptions to court proceedings, inability to locate children and youth under state supervision, loss of communication with key stakeholders and personnel, and interruptions to services (including education, mental and physical health care, substance use treatment, probation programs, and more).[25] When juvenile justice agencies fail to prepare for emergencies, they risk the safety of youth in their care. For example, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, unprepared city-run juvenile facilities in New Orleans evacuated youth to adult-populated prisons that were not adequately prepared to meet the needs of young people, leading to children being trapped for days without food, water, or medical care.[26] The National Commission on Children and Disasters developed recommendations to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) that aim to reduce the impact of emergencies on the juvenile justice system and support rapid recovery for the young people under state supervision. Finally, COVID-19 directly impacts youth and young adults in juvenile detention facilities, where outbreaks are highly likely to occur.[27]

Exploitation

"During Hurricane Katrina the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) handled 34,045 calls related to missing children and helped resolve 5,192 missing child cases."

– Joy Paluska, NCMEC

Many of the vulnerabilities that disasters and emergencies create— including economic need, unstable living conditions, and social isolation— present opportunities for predators to exploit impacted communities and increase the risk of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY).[28,29] Specifically, young people are spending more unsupervised time on social media and online as a result of the pandemic.[30] According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the majority of traffickers recruit children online, and they use the information obtained through social media to relate to children and youth and build their trust. Not only does more time spent online increase the risk that youth will be targeted by traffickers, but it also creates more time for traffickers to groom potential CSEY victims.[31]

Time & Location Amplify Negative Effects of Disasters & Emergencies

Lasting Consequences Over Time

Barriers to receiving aid prolong the impacts of a disaster or emergency on youth and their families.[32] Vulnerable and low-income populations struggle to access disaster assistance because they lack familiarity with the systems providing aid, face bureaucratic barriers, lack access to transportation and child care, and often do not have job flexibility that allows them to visit disaster assistance centers.[33] Further, youth and families frequently face complications with FEMA eligibility for grants and services, experience denied insurance claims, and risk further deterioration of their homes because of delayed

"I think it's something no one should have to go through because it's traumatic and painful, but it's a reminder of just how serious natural disasters can be, and it shows how difficult it can be for people to rebuild their lives after something like this happens."

– Silas, age 19

damage mitigation.[34] This leaves youth and families even more vulnerable to homelessness, unsafe housing, financial insecurity, and exploitation by predators.

Trauma exposure and stress associated with emergencies can result in long-term behavioral, physical, and mental health consequences for children and youth. In fact, trauma is a risk factor for nearly all behavioral health and substance use disorders.[35] Constant or extreme stress impacts development of the body's immune and stress response systems, and traumatized youth may suffer from body

Factors that influence how children and youth experience and recover from disasters and emergencies:

- Duration of life disruptions, severity of ongoing stressors and safety concerns, and ability to get back to a routine life course all impact a young person's ability to establish normalcy for healing.

- Family and personal property loss, extent of familial disruption, and impacts on caregivers contribute to how a young person perceives the impacts of a disaster and how well they are able to recover physically and emotionally.

- Inner resources of the family, including relationships and communication skills, play a role in how well a young person is able to process the trauma of the event and overcome harmful or confusing thought patterns.

- Experienced adversity, including violence, abuse, separation from caregivers, poverty, racism, discrimination, and social exclusion will all impact how a young person responds to an emergency and their ability to recover long-term.

- Community stress, disorganization, and response, as well as the presence of social supports, determine how youth recover in the aftermath of an emergency.

- Gender is shown to be a non-modifiable risk factor for how youth recover from emergencies, impacting girls more severely.[41,42,43,44]

dysregulation: over- or under-response to sensory stimuli.[36] Complex trauma also impacts a young person's emotional responses, including their ability to identify, express, and manage their emotions, as well as their behaviors and impulse control. Youth who have experienced complex trauma are more likely to withdraw from activities, live in constant fear, experience depression, anxiety, and anger, and engage in high-risk behaviors such as self-harm, unsafe sexual practices, and illegal activities.

Further, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study found a significant relationship between childhood trauma exposure and long-term negative health outcomes later in life. These outcomes include high-risk behaviors that impact health, chronic illness, and early death. Additionally, childhood trauma is associated with cognitive deficits later in life, including reasoning, problem-solving, language development, and learning.[37] Youth who have experienced trauma also earn lower grades in school than their peers who have not experienced trauma, and they receive more suspensions and expulsions.[38] Finally, childhood trauma creates long-term economic impacts for society as a result of the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, system involvement, and special education.[39]

Many of the responses that children and youth display after experiencing a disaster or emergency are normal reactions to a traumatic event, and a young person's ability to return to prior levels of functioning depends in large part on the availability of services and protective factors.[40] Left unaddressed, the impacts of natural disasters and emergencies can have lifelong consequences for healthy youth development and impede the goals and achievements of young people.

Inequities Exacerbate Impacts of Disasters

Disasters and emergencies do not impact all communities equally. Not only do certain regions experience natural disasters more often than others, but many communities

lack the resources and support to fully recover from a disaster or emergency, engendering lingering trauma and leaving communities more vulnerable to future disasters and emergencies. Research reveals that disasters have a greater impact on people in poverty, with low incomes, and of low socioeconomic status (SES). For those affected by natural disaster, income-based disparities are present in disaster preparedness, the ability to respond to warning communications, housing stability and damage sustained, the locational risk of disaster impact, the rate and severity of injuries, economic losses and recovery, obtaining and receiving aid, access to housing and necessary resources, mental distress, and long-term health problems.[45] This is important because prior trauma exposure and inadequate post-disaster recovery are two major risk factors for long-term mental and behavioral health concerns in children and youth following a disaster or emergency.[46]

More specifically, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color in the United States. Research shows that people of color tend to receive lower-quality healthcare compared to white people. Further, compared to white Americans, Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are up to two times more likely to develop a number of chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, lung disease, and heart conditions, that are major risk factors for severe COVID-19 health complications. The economic consequences of the pandemic also disproportionately impact BIPOC. Black workers make up 11.9% of U.S. employees but 17% of essential workers, and they are 50% more likely to work in the healthcare industry than white workers, increasing risk of COVID-19 infection and death. Workers of color are also overrepresented in the service industry, which is experiencing higher rates of unemployment and lost income as a result of the pandemic. Specifically, 49% of the Latinx population has been impacted by job loss or pay cuts because of the pandemic, compared to 33% of the U.S. population as a whole. Finally, BIPOC are experiencing COVID-19 infections and deaths at disproportionate rates. Black people account for less than 15% of the U.S. population but nearly 30% of COVID-19 cases. Black people and Latinx people are dying from COVID-19 at roughly 2.5 times the rate of white people, and the Navajo Nation has the highest infection rate of COVID-19 per capita in the United States compared to any individual state.[47]

Protective Factors and Resilience

Protective Factors Mitigate Impacts of Disasters

Despite the many risk factors for negative outcomes following a disaster or emergency, a number of critical factors have also been shown to protect the long-term wellbeing of young people after an emergency. Some of the same factors that put youth at risk of long-term maladjustment also have the potential to protect youth from the impact of disasters and emergencies. For example, when the duration of life disruptions is short, ongoing stressors are addressed and reduced in severity, and individuals and communities return to a routine life course fairly quickly, youth are able to establish normalcy, reduce ongoing trauma, and begin the healing process. The strength of community

response, including the availability of resources in the community, provides safety and security for recovery from the traumatic event. Similarly, social supports lessen the emotional impact of a disaster or emergency. Additional protective factors promote a sense of agency and self-efficacy, provide emotional support and stability to heal, and re-establish a sense of safety and normalcy. These include secure and ongoing relationships with a caregiver, access to education and health services, an ongoing supportive social system, and social, community, and governmental support networks that provide critical resources for recovery.[48,49,50,51]

> *"People need someone to check on them to ensure people have everything they need and then be able to get those services. Also, a place of clear information -- this is what you need to do to be safe, here's how to minimize risk, things you should follow."*
>
> **– Elliot, age 14**

In addition to protective factors specific to disasters and emergencies, research tells us that youth-adult partnerships and the centering of youth voices strengthen outcomes for young people, foster resilience in youth, and make youth services more effective.[52] This belief is supported by evidence-based approaches, including Positive Youth Development and Trauma-Informed Care. When youth who have experienced trauma have the opportunity to use their voice to advocate for themselves and others, they are given back the power they lost through the initial trauma.[53] Caring adults, positive peer groups, a strong sense of self, and involvement in the community are all protective factors that promote healthy development and improve life outcomes for youth. Finally, normalcy is paramount to a young person's recovery. Research shows that normalcy leads to better social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes for youth and young adults. In the aftermath of a disaster or an emergency, normalcy provides the safety and security that youth and young adults need in order to heal.[54]

Importance of Resilience

The pace of recovery following a disaster or emergency depends in large part on a community's resources, paired with assistance from private, state, and federal emergency response agencies.[55] Moreover, the economic impacts will become increasingly dire the longer communities are in a state of disaster, pushing more families into poverty, homelessness, and mental distress. Research tells us that a community's level of social cohesion following a disaster predicts how quickly that community regains stability and normalcy.[56] Moreover, a more supportive environment lessens the risk for long-term emotional disorders.

The resilience of a community and an individual, or the ability to bounce back from a traumatic event, is an important determinant of how well a young person recovers from a disaster or emergency. Resilience encompasses not only individual strengths/vulnerabilities, adaptability, and coping skills, but also the capacity of the child's larger environment to provide resources that will

mitigate the impact of the event. Protective resources may exist in families, cultures, communities, or social settings such as school or church. Resilience is the manifestation of the risk and protective factors listed above, and it often depends in large part on how those different factors interact. In particular, equity can have a major impact on the resilience of a community because inequitable access to resources, systemic racism, and intergenerational poverty all contribute to how a community is able to recover from adversity.[57,58]

Assessment of the Field

TNOYS sought to more fully understand the effect of disasters and emergencies on Texas youth and the youth services field. Over the past year, TNOYS engaged its network of members, disaster response stakeholders, and government agencies across the state to identify, develop, and implement policies, protocols, and resources to keep children and youth safe during and after emergencies and natural disasters. TNOYS launched the initiative with a statewide convening of stakeholders, including youth-service providers, government agencies, school district personnel, disaster relief agencies, first responders, and other stakeholders. Shortly after the beginning of the project, the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented effect on the youth of Texas, the U.S., and the world.

In order to assess the field, TNOYS convened stakeholders to discuss child and youth safety during and after disasters, held one-on-one calls with dozens of emergency response agencies, service providers, and government officials, and hosted 10 virtual stakeholder meetings. These meetings provided the opportunity for stakeholders to discuss their challenges and concerns, hear regulatory updates, and share best practices in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. TNOYS also did extensive research on youth safety during and after natural disasters and emergencies.

Existing Services for Youth and Families

Local, state, and federal actors contribute to emergency preparedness and response efforts to support impacted communities. Emergency response is inherently local, meaning that local governments are expected to use their own resources to respond to a disaster or emergency before requesting assistance from the state. This structure means that communities with more resources are better equipped to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters.

Local Level Response

Local actors include health care providers, first responders, nonprofit organizations, local United Ways, local offices of emergency management, churches and religious organizations such as the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, corporate donors such as H.E.B., and more. National organizations with regional operations, such as the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the National Center

for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), also provide critical response services in the aftermath of a disaster or emergency. Services include evacuation shelters, feeding, supply distribution, physical and mental health services, case management, resource coordination, and deployment of volunteers.[59,60,61] Specific to children and youth, Save the Children provides child-friendly spaces in evacuation shelters to promote safety and respite for children and families.[62] Save the Children also provides longer-term support to impacted communities, such as child care and education program recovery and social emotional programs for young people and their caregivers.[63]

State Level Response

Actors at the state level include the Governor of Texas, Texas Division of Emergency Management, Texas State Guard, and numerous state agencies such as the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and Texas Education agency.[64] Additionally, Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), a membership organization made up of voluntary disaster response organizations across the state, plays a critical role in ensuring collaboration and coordination of resources and knowledge throughout the disaster cycle, from preparation to recovery and mitigation. Regional chapters of the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army are also key players at the state level, the former of which coordinates evacuation shelters, and the latter of which coordinates mass care.

Federal Level Response

At the federal response level, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides government resources to the state, such as public financial assistance, individual assistance, and hazard mitigation assistance. Federal agencies such as UNICEF, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also typically contribute to emergency response efforts. Depending on the nature of the event, agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Small Business Administration (SBA) may play a role in recovery (such as during the COVID-19 pandemic).[65] In compliance with federal recommendations to address more than 5,000 cases of missing children following Hurricane Katrina, FEMA, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and the American Red Cross developed a nationwide approach to reunify children with their families following a disaster or emergency.[66] As part of this approach, NCMEC operates the National Emergency Child Locator Center (NECLC), which works to unify children and parents who become separated during disasters; the Unaccompanied Minors Registry (UMR), which provides a resource for reporting, identifying, and investigating missing children during disasters; and Team Adam, which assists law enforcement agencies and families during missing children cases and partners with FEMA to provide child reunification services during federally declared disasters.[67]
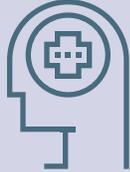
Training and Technical Assistance

Finally, a number of organizations offer training and technical assistance to strengthen community preparedness and response to disasters and emergencies. FEMA's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program provides disaster preparedness education to individuals and trains and organizes teams of volunteers to support their communities during disasters.[68] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC) provides tools and guides to help communities plan for and respond to behavioral health needs after a disaster.[69] Additionally, NCMEC, the American Red Cross, Save the Children, the Salvation Army, and the Just in Time Disaster Training Library all offer training and technical assistance resources for first responders, law enforcement agencies, educators, healthcare professionals, youth-service providers, volunteers, and other stakeholders in the community.[70,71,72,73]

Major Themes from the Field

TNOYS spoke with a number of key stakeholders in both the emergency response and the youth services fields in order to better understand child and youth safety during and after disasters and emergencies:

- **National level:** FEMA's National Advisor on Children and Disasters, FEMA's Region 6 Emergency Management Specialist, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Office on Trafficking in Persons, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the U.S. Marshals Service, and Save the Children.
- **State level:** Texas VOAD, the Salvation Army, Texas Division of Emergency Management, Office of the Texas Governor's Child Sex Trafficking Team, Texas Municipal Police Association, and Texas DFPS Statewide Intake.
- **Local level:** Children at Risk, BCFS Health and Human Services, the City of Houston's Mayor's Office Department of Education, Harris County Office of Emergency Management, Dallas Office of Resilience, and hundreds of youth-serving providers across the state of Texas.

Through these conversations, TNOYS uncovered consistent themes regardless of expertise, level of response, or services provided:

Resources exist but are not well-known or accessed.	Stakeholders want more training.	Trauma impacts response and recovery, and stakeholders want more mental health services.
Equity in support services and outcomes is a strong concern.	Services operate in silos.	Barriers to collaboration exist.

Resources Exist but Aren't Well-Known or Accessed

Many of the resources and training content that stakeholders identify as a need already exist in some form. The challenge lies in disseminating knowledge of available resources, training content, and funding opportunities. It is important to facilitate collaboration and connections to maximize efficiencies and make materials accessible to those who could benefit from them. Similarly, emergency response plans already exist at the state and community levels in most cases, meaning the work is to ensure that children and youth are included in those plans and that youth-service stakeholders have a seat at the table in emergency planning, response, and recovery.

"We know that one of the most important things families can do is to have a plan to prepare for disasters. While there are resources available to help families plan, they are not always accessed. In addition, many state and local emergency management officials are unaware of the breadth of NCMEC's resources to help with planning, reunification, and the recovery of missing children."

– Joy Paluska, Program Manager, Special Projects, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

Stakeholders Want More Training

Almost every single stakeholder TNOYS spoke with discussed training needs. The need for training is universal. From the moment a disaster or emergency strikes through two or three years later, stakeholders from every system and at every level of care would benefit from additional training. Moreover, stakeholders want a diversity of training options in terms of depth, specificity, target audience, length, and content. Many stakeholders believe that anyone who comes into contact with children or youth who have experienced an emergency should undergo training so they can identify and address concerns, refer them to services, and generally support their recovery. Specific topics that came up repeatedly include mental health, trauma, identification of vulnerable youth, how to work with young people, and understanding services available to the community.

> *"Educating our youth and providers at the community level to raise awareness of the issues, needs, and available resources during and after disasters and emergencies is critical. As we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing virtual training opportunities are beneficial to providers because they are accessible and affordable."*
>
> **– Celeste Garcia, Executive Director of BCFS Health and Human Services**

Trauma and Mental Health Services are Critical

Consistent with our research findings, stakeholders emphasized that trauma permeates almost every aspect of youth safety during and after disasters and emergencies. The impact of trauma on youth and young adults is even more prominent in light of COVID-19. Stakeholders attest that trauma compounds itself, and the stress, change in routine, and uncertainty that the pandemic creates are all likely to severely impact individuals with histories of trauma. Moreover, the trauma that families, providers, caregivers, first responders, and others experience can impact the way they interact with children and youth. The adults in young people's lives are also experiencing heightened anxiety and confusion as a result of COVID-19, which may cause past trauma to resurface as well as create new trauma. Stakeholders across systems shared the belief that the complex repercussions of trauma mean that services must address it throughout the continuum of care.

Because trauma undergirds resilience, response, and recovery, stakeholders consistently reported the need for more mental health services, including in the immediate aftermath of an emergency, in the long-term recovery phase, and ongoing in advance of future natural disasters to promote resilience. Stakeholders assert that more mental health care is needed for first responders, volunteers,youth services providers, educators, parents and caregivers, caseworkers, and of course children and youth. Additionally, caregivers want and should be trained to identify the effects of trauma on children and youth, and know how and where to refer children and youth to the appropriate services.

Equity in Supports and Outcomes is a Strong Concern

The issue of equity surfaced repeatedly in discussions about improving child and youth safety during and after disasters and emergencies. Stakeholders pointed out the many ways that disasters and emergencies disproportionately impact some communities. Several stakeholders discussed communities in high-risk regions where disasters such as hurricanes occur repeatedly, but citizens are unable or unwilling to relocate. Others discussed how the availability of resources and support for recovery varies from one community to the next. Others still mentioned disparities in social and emotional support, and most stakeholders acknowledged the impact that ongoing marginalization, discrimination,

"Almost every youth we serve lost their job as a result of the pandemic, creating more uncertainty for youth experiencing homelessness and additional roadblocks to achieving independence. The cruelness of this pandemic and increasing unemployment rate prevent these youth from moving forward, establishing normalcy, and achieving their goals."

– Leslie Bourne, Executive Director, Covenant House Texas

and exclusion can have on a community's and an individual's resilience or ability to recover. Some stakeholders discussed the role of hope and imagination in developing resilience among children and youth, pointing out that youth with more protective factors (access to resources, severity of ongoing stressors, presence of social supports, etc.) are able to resume normalcy more quickly than those with fewer protective factors, mitigating disruptions to their progress on hopes and goals.

Services Operate in Silos

The emergency response process is extremely complex, and no two emergencies are exactly alike. Every individual, institution, and system in a community is impacted at once; resources become scarce and coordination becomes paramount; and interruptions to processes and protocols are unpredictable. For this reason, highly specialized stakeholders occupy the emergency response space to ensure the most successful recovery possible. Unfortunately, this level of specialization also means that emergency response services tend to work in silos. The "stay in your lane" mentality asserts that each player has a distinct role, and there is no need to understand or keep an eye on what others are doing alongside you. In the immediate response phase, this strategy saves lives and mitigates serious consequences of an emergency. When stakeholders fail to communicate across sectors or share ideas and feedback, however, it becomes much more difficult to identify and address gaps in emergency response plans and processes. This concern is especially prominent when discussing child and youth safety during emergency situations. For example, first responders and volunteers are not necessarily trained to understand the unique needs of young people because another service exists to address those needs. In the event that a responder does need to ensure the safety of a child or youth, they may not have adequate training or knowledge to do so in a trauma-informed, effective manner.

Barriers to Collaboration Exist

Although stakeholders are interested in collaboration, a number of barriers to effective collaboration exist. Inconsistent data and poor communication between stakeholders and regions is one such barrier. Without reliable data and communication across regions, organizations struggle to identify the highest-needs populations, and we make little progress toward future understandings of disasters and emergencies. Another barrier is that each system divides its regions differently, making it difficult to coordinate services between these providers. The populations each organization serves do not necessarily align, making it difficult to recommend additional services, communicate between systems, or establish any sort of functional operation. Next, unsurprisingly, limited staff time and funding also pose a significant barrier. Most organizations operate on tight budgets with staff that are already overworked, making it nearly impossible to carve out the time or funding necessary to maintain productive collaborations. Finally, as a result of many of the barriers mentioned, organizations often put collaborations on the backburner between emergencies. Consequently, stakeholders are underprepared when a disaster does strike, and left scrambling to collaborate in the midst of an emergency. Notably, this pattern especially impacts the disaster relief agencies and first responders, who must prioritize basic safety immediately following disasters and are therefore unlikely to engage in additional work during states of emergency. Despite these many barriers, stakeholders assert that youth-focused emergency response task forces are necessary and effective to improve youth safety during and after emergencies.

Assessment Of Youth Experiences

In order to develop a complete understanding of the needs of children and youth during and after emergencies and natural disasters, TNOYS spoke directly with young people who have lived through disasters or emergencies to hear their perspectives. TNOYS partnered with member organizations across the state of Texas to help facilitate these interviews. Because of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted virtually.

Between May 2020 and October 2020, TNOYS conducted 28 interviews with youth and young adults across Texas to learn about their experiences with an emergency or a natural disaster. Participants range in age from 13 to 22 years old, with an average age of 17 years old. 60.7% of participants identify as male, 28.6% as female, and 10.7% as transgender or genderqueer. 21.4% of the youth we spoke with identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT+). The youth have a diversity of experiences, including involvement in the child welfare system (60.7%), homelessness (28.6%), and refugee status (3.6%). The majority of interview participants (75%) chose to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic because it is currently impacting their daily lives; however, nearly one-third (28.6%) discussed their experiences with a hurricane, and 7.1% of participants discussed another

disaster, such as a tornado. Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% because a number of youth have varied experiences and involvement with multiple systems and/or chose to discuss more than one disaster/emergency.

Major Themes from Youth Voices

Throughout the 28 interviews, a number of themes emerged repeatedly across youth's experiences with, and perspectives on, natural disasters and emergencies.

The emergency put their lives on hold and created a major barrier to achieving their goals.

There is a lack of long-term support to help impacted communities fully recover.

Communities need more mental health services that are accessible to all.

Youth's secondary needs are not prioritized, and they long for normalcy and social connections.

A consistent, caring adult to support youth and help them navigate their experiences is important.

Youth are optimistic about the future, and they have a strong desire to help others who go through similar experiences.

Lives Are Put on Hold

Almost all interviewed youth mentioned feeling like their lives were put on hold by the disaster or emergency. They want to keep moving toward their goals, but the pandemic or disaster created major barriers to their

"This is putting my dreams on hold."

– Jaylon, age 16

progress. Roadblocks to employment were most commonly cited. Youth were affected by hiring freezes, the inability to submit a job application or access the resources needed to complete an application, businesses closing down or significantly reducing hours, and restrictions that residential service providers place on youth. Youth transitioning to adulthood feel especially stalled because the disaster or emergency impacts their ability to graduate high school, enroll in college, or begin a career. These youth become particularly vulnerable as they lose momentum on their goals, begin to worry about the future, and question their plans. Additionally, a number of youth described challenges with securing services or housing because a disaster or emergency delayed the admissions process. This delay in receiving services leaves youth vulnerable to homelessness, mental health challenges, tensions at home, and exploitation by those who promise to meet their needs; all of which impact youth's personal growth and progress toward their goals. As mentioned, emergencies and disasters exacerbate inequities, and youth's stories underscore this point. Young people who do not have access to the resources and safety nets that non-system-involved youth have are more vulnerable to barriers and roadblocks to achieving their goals. We see this across domains, from adjusting to online schooling to obtaining a driver's license to graduating high school to beginning college or a career.

Youth Lack Long-Term Support

Youth also shared frustration with the lack of any structural support system to help those impacted by a disaster or emergency to get back on their feet. This is especially true among youth who witnessed their families or communities struggle to recover from the impacts of a natural disaster. Youth who were living with their families or experiencing homelessness at the time of the disaster or emergency saw increased access to primary needs, such as shelter, food, and clothing, in the immediate aftermath of the event. However, many of those supports and services dissipated after a few months, leaving hard-hit communities with little to no resources to help them recover their losses or continue to meet their basic needs in the long-term. Moreover, a number of youth feel that they never received adequate services to address the damage that the disaster or emergency produced. Youth discussed being unable to rebuild their homes, bouncing from house to house and never knowing when their host might kick them out, feeling hunger and fear when feeding programs began to dissipate, experiencing a scarcity of jobs in their communities, and witnessing agencies seemingly cut off services with little to no consideration for how it might impact families who lost everything and are still in need. These experiences add to the trauma of the disaster, which leaves youth feeling helpless and vulnerable. Once again, equity is a prominent component of youth's experiences. The resources and support available to individuals, families, and communities impact how they are able to recover from an emergency and can create long-term negative consequences for underserved communities.

> *"I hope nobody ever has to experience being in a homeless shelter."*
>
> **– Alexis, age 20**

Youth Want and Need More Mental Health Services

Almost all youth express the need for increased and more accessible mental health support for children and young adults, especially in the aftermath of an emergency or a natural disaster when youth are struggling to cope with the trauma and dramatic changes that disasters bring to their lives. Even those who personally have access to mental health supports assert that other youth in similar situations should be entitled to receive the emotional support they need. These sentiments echo both the research on children and disasters and the feedback stakeholders provided. Because trauma compounds itself, youth who have experienced past traumas are at greater risk of developing behavioral or mental health concerns in the wake of an emergency.[74] Mental health services are especially important for young people who have experienced prior trauma as well as the caregivers and providers who interact with them.

> *"My emotions have been up and down everywhere. I'll feel happy and sad the next moment. I'll be depressed and lonely and then right back to happy again."*
>
> **– Amaya, age 17**

Youth Crave Normalcy and Social Connection

Most of the youth we interviewed, especially those in foster care or an emergency shelter, report that immediate needs such as shelter, food, and clothing are generally met. However, secondary needs such as spending time with friends and family, maintaining a job, playing outside, and enjoying hobbies become deprioritized during emergencies and disasters. This is especially pertinent when one considers the importance of normalcy in the lives of system-involved youth. Normalcy encompasses the collection of age and developmentally appropriate activities, experiences, and opportunities that should make up the daily lives of young people within the context of a caring and supportive family.[75] This includes participating in typical adolescent experiences that system-involved youth often miss, such as obtaining a driver's license, playing on a sports team, or attending a sleepover.[76]

> *"It's different for me. Other kids, they at home; other seniors, they relaxin'. They having fun, while I'm locked down in this place. You can't do nothing, you can't go nowhere."*
>
> **– Jamieon, age 19**

Research shows that normalcy leads to better social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes for youth and young adults.[77] It is no surprise, then, that the federal Strengthening Families Act requires state child welfare systems to prioritize normalcy and youth-adult partnerships in their services. In almost every interview, youth emphasize the need for a return to normalcy in the aftermath of a disaster or emergency. Youth are eager to see loved ones, attend in-person school, engage in hobbies,

go outside, and return to work. This desire for a return to normalcy following a traumatic event is supported by research, which shows that youth and young adults cannot begin to heal from a traumatic experience until they feel safe and secure in a new or established routine.

Similarly, youth express the need for continued social connection during and after an emergency. Especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, providers are taking every precaution to protect their clients and their staff. These new safety measures often mean that young adults are unable to participate in routine activities, visit with friends, or see their family members. Although these practices keep youth safe, they are detrimental to mental health and may result in maladaptive behaviors, poor performance in school or work, loss of interest in activities, or a mental health diagnosis. Providers must find ways to establish normalcy during emergency situations while maintaining safety.

Youth Recognize the Importance of a Consistent, Caring Adult

Almost every youth we interviewed discussed the importance of having a stable, caring adult in their lives who is invested in the youth's long-term success and happiness. This caring adult may be a parent (foster or biological), a sibling or family member, a caseworker, a

> *"All I needed was a support system."*
>
> *– Tori, age 18*

lawyer or court-appointed advocate, or a staff member at a provider organization. Not only does this adult ensure that the youth's basic needs are met, but they demonstrate that they care for the youth and can be depended on when times get tough. This adult advocates for the youth and helps them navigate complex systems, commits time and resources to helping the youth excel, invests emotionally in the youth's outcomes, motivates the youth to set and accomplish goals, intervenes when the youth goes down the wrong path, and supports them in setting things right. They act as a role model for what the youth can accomplish if they commit to their dreams. Alternatively, some youth report not having a caring adult like this in their lives, and they recognize the impact this has likely had on their trajectories. These youth wish for someone in their lives who cares about them and their futures, and they assert that they would be better off if someone believed in them and demonstrated that their dreams are attainable.

Youth are Optimistic about their Future, and They Want to Help Others

Despite the setbacks that youth identify, most of the youth we interviewed are optimistic that the future will be better. They believe that they are capable of achieving their long-term goals, especially if the community invests in their futures. While the youth we interviewed naturally have grand dreams for themselves,

> *"When I was 10, I was thinking about my life ahead. I wanted to give back to the community. And it didn't change; it stuck with me."*
>
> *– Dejah, age 16*

the goals and milestones they have planned for their futures are actually very reasonable. Interview participants aim to graduate from high school or earn their GED, enroll in college, start their own businesses, and give back to their communities. They are working toward independence, which entails objectives like securing a birth certificate, finding stable housing, and buying a car. Many of the youth we interviewed have a plan for how they will reach their goals, and they know the steps they need to take to succeed. Youth-serving organizations should prioritize supporting youth in achieving their goals and providing the resources needed to do so. This finding is consistent with TNOYS' vision for a Texas where all youth and young adults are valued, their strengths are recognized, their voices are heard and respected, and they have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to meet their goals.

In the same vein, many youth expressed a strong desire to help others. They have dreams of opening specialized schools and residential facilities, creating policies and programs to support youth, and embarking on careers as veterinarians and teachers. Interview participants hope to support future youth and young adults who go through similar experiences by providing mentorship, opportunities to travel and expand their horizons, guidance and education they wish they had received, and access to healthcare, housing, and jobs. The young adults we interviewed have overcome countless obstacles, and many have witnessed the most exploitative and unjust sides of humanity. Despite these obstacles, they endeavor not just to achieve personal success, but to make the world a better place for all.

Recommendations to Improve Child and Youth Safety and Well-being During and After Emergencies

Based on research and discussions with youth and young adults, youth-service providers, state and federal agencies, national nonprofits, and emergency response stakeholders, TNOYS developed the following recommendations to improve youth safety and well-being during and after disasters and emergencies. The recommendations below are organized by policy, practice, and partnership. **Policy** recommendations focus on policies and priorities for state agencies and decision-makers. **Practice** recommendations focus on the services that youth-serving organizations, first responders, and other stakeholders provide. **Partnership** recommendations focus on including youth and young adults in the decisions that impact their lives.

Offer Widespread Training Opportunities for a Diversity of Audiences

Stakeholders across systems and levels of care expressed the universal need for further training opportunities. TNOYS has a long history of providing training and technical assistance to youth-serving organizations, and we know the critical value it plays in bolstering Texas' capacity to serve youth impacted by disasters and emergencies. Providers, policymakers, and funders should invest time and resources into creating and facilitating training opportunities.

Policy

- Incorporate mental health first aid into training curriculums for first responders, educators and school personnel, and all government employees who come into contact with young people.
- Ensure appropriate rates for youth-serving providers so they can invest in the training they need to provide appropriate care and support to youth in the aftermath of a disaster or emergency.
- Require first responders to complete training on preventing, identifying, and responding to abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Practice

- Ensure youth and young adults who have experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation are identified and have access to support and services to heal, no matter how or where they are identified.
- Train stakeholders, including first responders and youth-service providers, on addressing and ending disproportionality and disparities of Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ youth. The most vulnerable and marginalized populations are at the greatest risk of becoming further disadvantaged following a disaster, so response efforts must understand and address those inequities.
- Train and provide technical assistance to youth-service providers on emergency preparedness, including emergency response and recovery plans and emergency management systems literacy, to ensure that providers understand the potential impacts of emergency situations and are prepared to respond effectively.

Partnership

- Partner with youth to develop and deliver training content to emergency response teams across sectors on normalcy, successful youth-adult partnerships, and effective youth engagement to ensure proper support for youth following a disaster.

Expand Availability and Accessibility of Mental Health Services

Youth-service providers, emergency response stakeholders, and young adults consistently cited the lack of accessible and affordable mental health care as a major barrier to recovery following emergencies. Research tells us that the trauma of experiencing a disaster or emergency can produce long-term behavioral, physical, and mental health problems for children and youth. Fortunately, proper interventions and social support are proven to effectively mitigate most long-term consequences of trauma exposure. Studies also show that the trauma first responders, service providers, and caregivers experience during an emergency, as well as the secondary trauma of caring for a traumatized child, can impact the way these adults respond to children and youth. Therefore, it is critical that mental health services are available not only to youth, but to all members of a community in the aftermath of a disaster or emergency.

Policy

- Ensure schools are prepared to support students through trauma and to respond to behavior in a way that supports students and keeps them in class learning.
- Maximize opportunities to draw down federal funding, such as Medicaid, to subsidize mental health care and support youth, families, and young adults.
- Ensure young people, families, and stakeholders have access to the health and behavioral health services they need, no matter the system they are involved in, including access to individual counseling and peer mentorship.

Practice

- Prioritize mental health care and trauma-informed approaches in provider services.
- Prioritize healing from the trauma and financial hardships that the COVID-19 pandemic created for youth and their families.

Partnership

- Empower young people to play a role in their plans for mental health services to create a sense of agency and ensure providers adequately meet young people's stated needs.
- Expand mental health peer mentorship services to those who experienced a disaster or emergency to facilitate help and support from people with lived experience of a mental illness.

Allow for Flexibility in Regulations and Requirements

The requirements and regulations imposed by statute and state agencies that are important and beneficial when we are not facing widespread emergencies can become cumbersome, restrictive, or counterproductive during a disaster or an emergency. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, TNOYS

has been a key player in connecting providers with state leadership so that they may communicate these barriers directly. State agencies and state leadership were responsive to these concerns and created flexibilities for youth-serving providers and state staff so they could adapt to meet the needs of youth and families. Moving forward, state agencies and service providers can be proactive to ensure flexibility when future emergencies arise.

Policy

- State agencies should evaluate the regulations and requirements of contracts with youth-service providers, consider how various disasters or emergencies might impact the efficacy of those regulations, and develop a plan for modifying regulations and requirements to best meet the needs of youth and those who serve them in future emergency situations.
- Provide financial support, technical assistance, additional support staff, curated training content, and similar investments to youth-service providers to streamline providers' ability to implement guidelines and protocols, access needed resources, and maintain continuity of services when possible.

Practice

- Service providers should review and understand the requirements to which they are held, and develop contingency plans in the event of a future disaster or emergency.

Partnership

- Establish feedback loops with youth to understand their needs and priorities in the event of an emergency to ensure their needs continue to be met even when services are compromised.

Prepare for Emergencies Before they Occur

Governments and communities have an obligation to better prepare for high-impact events, both more frequent events like natural disasters and less frequent events like COVID-19. Organizations like TNOYS are a critical partner in emergency preparation and response. TNOYS is well-equipped to oversee organizations' response plans and protocols; facilitate information-sharing among peers; provide guidance and resources in the form of training content, recommended best practices, and physical resources like funding and supplies; and serve as a liaison between decision-makers and providers on the ground.

Policy

- Develop youth-focused cross-system and cross-sector disaster task forces at the state and/or local level that include state agencies, local child-serving stakeholders, federal agencies, and national NGOs such as Save The Children. Ensure that youth-serving sectors are included in existing emergency response task forces. Ensure that stakeholders maintain collaborations and communication between emergencies, develop emergency response plans ahead of time, and prepare to listen to the needs and concerns of providers and youth and respond with urgency and flexibility. The ACF provides excellent guidelines for creating a youth in disaster task force.[78]
- Identify the most pressing needs of Texas' vulnerable youth and families during emergencies and allocate resources accordingly to ensure that emergency preparation and response plans build resilience, are equitable, and do not inflict further harm.
- Develop clear guidance and protocols for youth-service providers to follow in emergency situations so they can respond quickly to future disasters and emergencies. Providers are eager to listen and learn, but they do not have the capacity to reinvent the wheel amidst a crisis.
- Promote cross-systems collaboration, facilitate information and data-sharing, and increase state funding for services and support to vulnerable families, youth, and young adults to ensure communities are prepared to respond to an emergency.

Practice

- Develop detailed emergency response plans at the organizational level, including clear contingency plans in the event that regularly used tools or resources are no longer accessible.
- Provide longer-term support and services that step down slowly over time to ensure that youth are supported throughout the entire transition to self-sufficiency.
- Actively participate in cross-systems state and local task forces focused on protecting children and youth during and after disasters and emergencies.

Partnership

- Partner with youth to develop organizational emergency response plans to ensure the plans center youth's needs, and create space for continued feedback during and following an emergency.
- Actively involve youth in cross-systems state and local task forces focused on protecting children and youth during and after disasters and emergencies.
- Hold space for feedback and discussion with youth, families, youth-service providers, and emergency response stakeholders before, during, and after emergencies to ensure that all perspectives are heard and recognized.

Promote Youth Resilience and Success

The youth TNOYS spoke with were very clear about what they need to succeed in life and achieve their goals. Youth who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing homelessness, the child welfare system, juvenile justice involvement, sexual exploitation, or challenges with mental health, education, or workforce often lack a safety net, which leaves them more vulnerable during and after an emergency. Ensuring youth have a strong support system of services, caring adults, and their own internal resources prior to, during, and after a disaster or emergency is paramount to their resilience and success.

Policy

- Invest in programs that develop protective factors that will help youth recover from future emergencies and disasters. Prevention and early intervention programs that keep families together and prevent child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency, and system involvement by addressing underlying factors such as poverty, family instability, and behavioral health concerns strengthen a young person's resilience and support healthy development in spite of adversity.
- Improve supports for transition-age youth to help them transition to adulthood successfully, including access to workforce opportunities, college support, and stable housing.
- Support a two-generational approach across systems that focuses on connecting and healing families and addresses intergenerational trauma. Disasters and emergencies do not happen in a vacuum and it is critical that the whole family receives services and supports.

Practice

- Support youth in achieving their goals as a priority of provider programming, and provide the resources youth need to prosper. In the event of a disaster or emergency, ensure that youth's ambitions remain a central component of case management services.
- Create opportunities for youth to develop professional skills, a strong sense of self, and self-esteem. Research shows that youth build resilience skills through structured learning. Programs that help young people enhance feelings of self-worth, build relationship skills, learn to take safe risks, practice problem solving, and discover their strengths and limitations lead to improved life outcomes for youth and better function in their daily lives.

Partnership

- Ensure youth have opportunities to develop protective factors and have a voice in decisions that impact their lives. Research shows that youth-adult partnerships and centering youth voices strengthen outcomes for young people, foster resilience, and make youth services more effective. All of these outcomes will ensure youth are resilient in the face of adversities like disasters and emergencies.

- Prioritize a return to normalcy following a disaster or emergency, and create space for open discussion about each youth's needs and strategies to meet their needs. Returning to a routine helps children and youth cope with their experiences and recover successfully from a traumatic event.

Conclusion

Robust emergency response systems are in place at the local, state, and national levels, and emergency response policies and protocols have made tremendous strides over the past 15 years to prioritize child and youth safety. That being said, gaps still exist in addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of children and youth during and after emergencies. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic creates new challenges for vulnerable youth and families who may experience job loss, social isolation, mental health challenges, and reduced access to resources.

Emergency response, child welfare, and youth services stakeholders consistently identified the following challenges to keeping children and youth safe during and after emergencies: limited access to resources and training, lingering trauma and unaddressed mental health concerns, lack of equity in recovery resources, and barriers to collaboration and coordination. Youth and young adults reported emergencies putting their lives on hold, frustration with a lack of long-term support for impacted communities, the need for more prevalent and accessible mental health services, a desire for normalcy and social connection, and the benefits of a consistent and caring adult. Unsurprisingly, the themes that both providers and young people identified align with the evidence base for promoting healthy outcomes for youth and improving safety during and after emergencies.

It is critical that policymakers and youth-serving providers make changes to truly meet the needs of young people during and after disasters and emergencies. Fostering youth-adult partnerships is a good first step to bringing youth and young adults to the center of the discussion to understand their perspectives and help them inform and shape the systems that most affect them. A true partnership is one where policymakers, providers, and youth all have the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions, and the contribution of each stakeholder is recognized and valued. This is vital as we seek to respond to consequences of disasters and emergencies in Texas.

Appendix 1 – Existing Services for Youth and Families

Response Level	Organization
Local	First responders, health care providers, volunteers
	Local nonprofits (ex: BCFS Health and Human Services, United Ways), churches, charitable organizations, corporate donors
	Mayors, county judges, local offices of emergency management
	Texas Citizens Corps: Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), Fire Corps, Volunteers in Police Services (VIPS), Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), National Neighborhood Watch Program
Regional/ Umbrella	Episcopal Diocese of Texas, Lutheran Social Services Disaster Response, etc.
	American Red Cross
	Salvation Army
	Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD)
	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)
State	Texas Governor
	Texas Division of Emergency Management
	Texas State Guard
	Texas Emergency Management Council, which includes the American Red Cross, Texas VOAD, the Salvation Army, and 36 state agencies
	Texas OneStar Foundation
Federal	Federal Emergency Management agency (FEMA)
	Administration for Children and Families (ACF), including the Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response (OHSEPR)
	United States agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA)
	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), American Red Cross (ARC), National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)
	Save the Children, Unicef

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