

Cross-Systems Youth Policy Agenda

Recommendations for the 89th Texas Legislative Session



Our Approach: Advocating for Texas Youth and Young Adults Across Seven Systems

Each year, thousands of Texas youth and young adults (YYA) ages 10-26 are impacted by systems such as child welfare, housing and homelessness services, and the justice system. These young people do not experience systems in silos: When a YYA experiences one system, they are more likely to be involved in many during the journey to adulthood.

TNOYS focuses on seven key areas of youth services to break down silos and build meaningful change for Texas' most vulnerable yet resilient YYA:



Guiding Principles

The following principles drive TNOYS' policy priorities and efforts of the over 100 youth-serving organizations and professionals in TNOYS' member network.

- **Cross-Systems Collaboration:** Improve collaboration across youth-serving systems to improve service delivery and outcomes for YYA, decrease multi-system involvement, and create efficiencies.
- **Equity:** Address disproportionality and disparities of Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ youth and families who are overrepresented in youth-serving systems.
- **Youth Voice:** Ensure YYA have the opportunity to join in solving community problems, and that their voices are heard in decision-making that impacts their lives and the systems that serve them.

Background

Although the Texas Legislature made significant investments in prevention and youth-serving systems during the last legislative session, many young people are still being left behind, lacking critical supports and services and a place to turn for help:

- Service providers across Texas are reporting a large increase of youth as young as 13 whose parents are refusing to take parental responsibility. These youth are not entering foster care because there is no documented history of abuse or neglect. Instead, they are being kicked out of their homes, running away from home, or being dropped off at emergency shelters. Many end up sleeping on the street or left at psychiatric hospitals or in juvenile detention with no one to pick them up. With nowhere to go in the immediate or long-term nor systems in place to support them or pay for safe shelter, these youth are left without housing or services.
- YYA and providers both continue to share concerns that there is not enough access to early mental health supports that can prevent a need for systems involvement or crisis interventions.

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Background, continued

- Recent investments in foster care by the legislature have overlooked much-needed supports to help youth aging out of foster care to transition to adulthood successfully.
- Schools have adopted curricula to educate students about appropriate relationships and prevent sex trafficking. However, the youth most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking- such as those in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or with disengaged parents- are often the least likely to access this vital education.
- There are over 500,000 youth and young adults in Texas who are disconnected from school and work, referred to as Opportunity Youth (OY). Texas is home to 10% of all OY nationwide and many of these young people have experience with homelessness or the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Both YYA and providers continue to share the need for ongoing supports for OY such as childcare, mental health supports, and work-based learning opportunities to ensure their future success in education and employment.

Developing TNOYS' Policy Agenda

The TNOYS policy agenda is grounded in the belief that policies and laws concerning youth, young adults, and the providers who serve them must be informed by their voices and experiences. To that end, TNOYS developed policy priorities for the 89th Texas Legislative Session with input from more than 350 youth, young adults, and youth-serving providers in communities across Texas.

- TNOYS hosted town halls in six communities across Texas to bring together and hear from more than 235 youth services stakeholders including youth and young adults with lived experience. The communities and stakeholders represented urban, suburban, and rural Texas, as well as all seven youth-serving systems that TNOYS seeks to improve.
- In addition to continuously listening to the member network, TNOYS staff collaborated and gathered feedback from participants in various workgroups. These included TNOYS-hosted workgroups such as the Statewide Collaborative on Youth Homelessness and our Systems-Change Committee.
- TNOYS' youth and young adult partners were instrumental in creating our policy agenda. The Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC) and Texas Emerging Leader Board (TELB), TNOYS' leadership development programs for youth and young adults, helped facilitate town halls and offered valuable recommendations based on their own personal lived experiences.

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About TNOYS

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. Our members share a vision of 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 every aspect of our work, TNOYS engages a diverse range of youth and youth adults with lived experience in systems. We provide young people with opportunities to amplify their voices, shape systems change, and grow as leaders.

TNOYS encourages the legislature to support the following policy priorities for Texas youth, young adults, and families to help them overcome challenges and achieve healthy development.

TNOYS Policy Priorities

Ensure youth and young adults (YYA) have access to safe and supportive housing and shelter so that youth and young adult homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring:

- Invest state dollars in flexible funding to serve YYA experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.
- Increase the state's capacity of Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs.
- Allow youth to consent to shelter or housing when they don't have a parent to consent.

Promote a successful transition to adulthood when youth age out of foster care:

- Restore funding for Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) and Transitional Living Services contracts that provide transitional services to youth.
- Increase rates for SIL and TLP placements to ensure proper supportive housing is available for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Equip communities to meet the mental health needs of youth and young adults:

- Increase funding for the Mental Health Early Intervention and Treatment Grants created by the 88th Legislature.
- Increase YES Waiver reimbursement to promote community-based supports over institutionalization of YYA.

Strengthen schools' ability to support systems-impacted students and prevent systems involvement:

- Create a dedicated fund to support student mental health.
- Increase funding available to homeless liaisons (McKinney-Vento) so they can support students experiencing homelessness, including providing healthy foods, clean clothing, tutoring, and other essentials that will help keep students in class and learning.
- Ensure students most at risk of experiencing commercial sexual exploitation (trafficking) can access the trafficking prevention curriculum created by the 87th Legislature.

TNOYS Policy Priorities, continued

Make the juvenile justice system more age-appropriate by revising the ages at which a youth can be involved in the system:

- Raise the lower age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 13 so that children ages 10, 11, and 12 are supported in age-appropriate settings.
- Raise the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction so that 17-year-olds are not considered adults but rather juveniles.

Connect transition-age youth to workforce and higher education opportunities:

- Define “opportunity youth” in statute to help support youth and young adults aged 16-26 who are disconnected from school and work, helping them achieve long-term, gainful employment.
- Provide for a liaison on college campuses to connect students experiencing homelessness to resources and housing.
- Increase childcare scholarships to enable pregnant and parenting YYA to access jobs and education.

Bolster youth services providers to be more efficient while providing safe and effective services and supports:

- Implement recommendations from the “Texas HHSC & DFPS Independent Assessment of Residential Child Care Rules, Standards, and Requirements (SB 593)” report.

Systems Change Priorities

To improve outcomes for Texas youth and young adults (YYA), TNOYS works to prevent systems involvement, effect change in youth-serving systems, and ensure a healthy transition out of systems and into adulthood for youth and young adults.

- **Prevention:** Safely prevent YYA systems involvement by connecting youth and families to resources and support.
- **Systems-Change:** Ensure that systems-involved youth are safe, their voices are heard, and they have the supports they need to thrive.
- **Transition to Adulthood:** Ensure that when youth exit systems they are equipped to transition to adulthood successfully.

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