

Cross-Systems Youth Policy Agenda

Recommendations for the 88th 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.**

Look for the following icons to understand the youth-serving systems that are impacted by each TNOYS policy priority. TNOYS focuses on seven key areas of youth services in order to break down silos and build meaningful change for Texas' most vulnerable yet resilient YYA:



Background

Years of underfunding and challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic have left Texas' youth-serving systems and youth-serving providers struggling to meet the needs of youth and young adults (YYA), and their families. What's more, the cost of providing services is increasing and quality, tenured staff are leaving youth services for higher paying jobs. These challenges have created a capacity crisis impacting the state's ability to effectively support the most vulnerable, highest-needs young people.

- Residential providers including residential treatment centers and emergency shelters are closing due to a lack of funding, increasing costs, and staffing shortages.
- When Emergency Shelters close, many communities are left without shelter for youth who run away or are experiencing homelessness.
- Child Protective Services (CPS) continues to struggle with children without placement (CWOP). Many foster youth are in unlicensed placements because placements which meet their needs are not available.
- Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) staffing shortages have led to youth being locked down for 23 hours per day, leading to increased suicidal ideation and self-harm among youth.
- County-run juvenile probation departments are holding youth in detention facilities without access to services for months. The youth are sentenced to TJJD, but cannot be admitted.
- Psychiatric hospitals that accept youth continue to have wait lists because of staffing shortages, youth staying longer than necessary because they have no place to go, and an increasing need for psychiatric services. Nearly every county in the state is designated as having a mental health workforce shortage.

With an estimated additional \$32 billion available for the legislature to spend next biennium, it is time for Texas to invest in our state's most vulnerable yet resilient YYA.

Texas needs substantial state investments in prevention and early intervention services to keep youth out of systems, as well as investments to support vulnerable YYA while they are involved in or exiting out of systems. TNOYS recommends a number of policy options to improve outcomes for Texas YYA.

Guiding Principles

The following principles drive TNOYS' policy priorities and efforts of the over 80 youth-serving organizations 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.

Prevention

Data show that preventing and addressing trauma early improves youth outcomes and keeps families safely together. When families have the resources to address physical, behavioral, or mental health challenges, they can better support young people at home and keep issues from escalating. In addition to benefiting youth and families, prevention efforts are also more cost-effective for the state.

- Increase investments in proven Prevention and Early Intervention strategies — including programs like Community Youth Development (CYD) and Family and Youth Success (FAYS, formerly known as STAR)— that promote positive youth development and address minor behavioral challenges and conflicts at home before they develop into more serious concerns.



- Invest in and develop a plan to implement Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) prevention services that will keep families safely together and out of the foster care system.



- Eliminate pathways into the juvenile and criminal justice systems by raising the lower age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 13 so that 10, 11, and 12 year olds cannot be arrested; decriminalizing the act of running away; and eliminating curfew ordinances.



- Increase access to mental health supports to young people by providing dedicated funding to school districts to provide or contract for mental health services for youth.



Systems Change/Cross-Systems Collaboration

When young people do become systems-involved, the state must work to ensure they are safe and have the support they need to overcome trauma and achieve long-term success. Because youth do not experience systems in silos, it is essential that state agencies, providers, schools, and families can work together effectively to meet this goal. Better coordination and collaboration across systems can help providers achieve better outcomes without duplicating costly services.

- Through Foster Care Rate Modernization, invest in the Texas foster care system and foster care providers to ensure quality placements and supports are available for youth.



- Address workforce shortages across youth-serving systems and provider types, recognizing that providers or systems risk losing high quality, tenured staff.



Systems Change/Cross-Systems Collaboration, continued

- In Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) Sunset legislation, prioritize providing justice-involved youth rehabilitative services in the least restrictive setting possible, close to their home or in their homes. Develop a timeline to close ineffective state facilities and ensure the state has capacity to serve the highest-needs youth.



- Develop a statewide interoperable data system that connects current data systems, allowing youth-serving providers to identify in real time when a youth is currently involved in another system and receiving services. This will help providers and systems work together to best meet the needs of each youth.



Transitioning to Adulthood

Youth exiting systems and transitioning into adulthood are often less prepared for life as adults than their peers. These YYA— as well as those who experienced systems-involvement earlier in life— are more likely to be disconnected from work or school and are at increased risk of experiencing homelessness. Moreover, YYA experiencing homelessness are at high risk of being commercially sexually exploited. Investments and increased supports can help ensure young people who experience systems haveup for a path to achieving their goals.

- Restore recent cuts and increase funding for Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) providers who teach critical life skills to youth aging out of foster care.



- Create a new grant program to increase state funding that provides housing and homelessness services to YYA. The program should make funding available to increase housing options and supports for YYA experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness.



- Require colleges and universities to prioritize on-campus housing for YYA experiencing homelessness and have a homeless liaison to help YYA navigate supports.



- Ensure workforce boards prioritize Opportunity Youth– YYA ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from work and school– and have appropriate opportunities available.



- Ensure that schools are supporting systems-impacted youth and preparing them to be safe and healthy as they enter adulthood.



- Ensure that YYA most at risk of abuse and trafficking are prepared to identify signs of exploitation and abuse so they can keep themselves safe.



- Ensure young people who have been systems-involved have access to health care and know how to navigate the healthcare system.



About Texas Network of Youth Services

For over 40 years, Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) has worked tirelessly to build better outcomes for our state's most vulnerable yet resilient youth, young adults, and families. We represent and partner with a diverse network of over 80 Texas organizations working across seven system areas: housing and homelessness services, child welfare, justice, victim services/ Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY), health and behavioral health, education, and workforce. Together with our members, TNOYS has shaped numerous policies and initiatives to prevent systems involvement, strengthen and improve systems that serve youth, and ensure that young people are best equipped to make the transition out of systems and into adulthood.

TNOYS' work is guided by a deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, youth-adult partnership, and cross-systems collaboration. 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.

Developing TNOYS' Policy Agenda

For policies and laws that concern youth, young adults, and the providers who serve them to create meaningful change, it is critical to center their voices. This value guided the creation of TNOYS' policy priorities for the 88th Texas Legislative Session, which were developed thanks to input from nearly 200 youth, young adults, and youth-serving providers in communities across Texas. Their powerful stories and experiences helped TNOYS to better understand the unique needs of the Texas youth services sector.

Over several months, TNOYS hosted nine listening sessions with 110 youth-serving providers, and four listening sessions with 73 youth and young adults.

- Listening sessions with providers were held regionally across rural, urban, and suburban communities. Additional stakeholders— including judges, juvenile probation chiefs, and government employees— joined these listening sessions to provide a fuller understanding of the needs of each community.
- TNOYS staff also worked with and sought feedback from participants of various workgroups that we host and participate in, including TNOYS' Statewide Collaborative on Youth Homelessness and our Systems-Change Committee.
- TNOYS' youth and young adult partners were instrumental to the creation of our policy agenda. TNOYS' Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC), our flagship leadership development program for youth and young adults, helped facilitate listening sessions with youth and young adults (YYA) and provided recommendations based on their own personal lived experiences.

The policy priorities we have put forward center the needs of two critical stakeholder groups: the youth-serving providers tasked with meeting the needs of YYA, as well as the YYAs who have experienced the systems and issues addressed. TNOYS looks forward to collaborating with legislators this session to make sure all Texas YYA have the support they need to thrive.

For more information, please contact:

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