



Testimony to House Appropriations Committee

Department of State Health Services:
**Opportunities for the Prevention, Intervention & Treatment
of Behavioral Disorders**

February 18, 2015

Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness emerge in childhood.ⁱ Mental illness and substance abuse impact more than the individuals who suffer from them. It has been estimated that if all of the costs and related losses associated with severe mental health and substance abuse disorders could be eliminated, the Texas economy would be approximately 10% larger than its present size.ⁱⁱ

Strengthening state efforts related to the prevention and early intervention of mental health and substance abuse disorders in childhood and adolescence offers the greatest opportunity to avoid the high human and economic costs associated with these disorders.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Fund DSHS **Exceptional Item Request #4 to Enhance Substance Abuse Services**, including:
 - Expanding substance abuse prevention services for youth and families, and
 - Developing training for elementary school educators on appropriately recognizing and responding to a student who is in psychological distress.
- Fund DSHS **Exceptional Item Request #5** to increase the number of “**Relinquishment Slots**” that provide residential treatment beds for children with serious emotional disturbance so as to divert them from unnecessarily entering Child Protective Services.
- Increase funding for DSHS’s **School Health** programming to strengthen communication and linkages between the agency and schools in Texas.

Texans Care for Children is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fulfilling the promise of children through improved state policies and programs on child protective services; juvenile justice; mental well-being; health and fitness; and early childhood education and opportunities.

Prevention and Early Identification of Behavioral Disorders

Up to 30% of school-aged children experience at least moderate behavioral, social or emotional problems.ⁱⁱⁱ While schools are not the place to *treat* behavioral health disorders, they are a perfect place for adults to recognize when a young person is showing signs of concern and connecting them and their families with the help and resources they may need. The 83rd Texas Legislature called on school districts to provide their educators with basic training in recognizing and responding to students in distress, with brief online training made available at no cost to Texas middle and high school educators. The development of brief online training that is developmentally appropriate for elementary school educators will help ensure signs of distress in young students are recognized by teachers and that teachers know how to connect students with appropriate supports, helping to keep early concerns from growing into bigger problems.

In 2013, former DSHS Commissioner David Lakey testified before the Senate Finance, House Appropriations, and House Public Health Committees that he believes substance abuse is the number one cost driver in the Texas budget, citing its associated costs in health, child welfare, criminal justice systems and lost work productivity.^{iv} Preventing substance abuse by addressing risk and protective factors associated with it often has a greater impact than waiting until substance abuse occurs.^v Because many risk and protective factors for substance abuse are associated with other health and social outcomes, effective substance abuse prevention programs can also reduce the likelihood of students engaging in risky or delinquent behavior, dropping out of school, or even developing mental health concerns. The 84th Texas Legislature should fund DSHS's request to expand youth substance abuse prevention programs into counties that currently do not have them.

Providing Alternatives to Parental Relinquishment of Children with Serious Emotional Disturbance

When families cannot access or afford the help their children need - nor are willing to stand by as their children continue to suffer – some families feel compelled to give custody of their child with serious emotional disturbance over to the state's Child Protective Services as their last remaining option to get their child help. Once in state custody, the state has a responsibility to meet a child's service needs.

Recognizing such occurrences as being both unnecessarily harmful to families and costly to the state, the 83rd Texas Legislature appropriated funds to DSHS to provide residential treatment services to children and youth whom the Department of Family and Protective Services have identified as being at-risk for relinquishment due solely to unmet mental health needs. Children served by this program access the intensive services they need while keeping their families intact and involved in treatment. The demand for services quickly exceeded the program's capacity. Expanding this joint agency program from 10 to 30 beds will help more families access timely services instead of being placed on a waitlist when children are vulnerable to a psychological crisis.

Helping Schools to Address Student Health and Safety

Schools provide significant opportunities to assist Texas in identifying and intervening during public health threats, share critical public health information with families and educators, and promote life-long healthy behaviors in the more than five million students enrolled in Texas schools.^{vi} These public health issues include not only physical health concerns like communicable diseases and obesity, but also behavioral health concerns like suicide and substance abuse prevention. Potential impacts go beyond improved health outcomes. Extensive research shows students who are physically, socially, and emotional well are better learners, and they experience more success in school.^{vii}

Despite the rich opportunities strong public health/education linkages offer, the Department of State Health Services currently has only 3 FTEs within its School Health Program to meet the health services and program needs of the 5.1 million students enrolled in the more than 8,700 schools within 1,200 school districts in Texas.^{viii} Increasing staff and resources to this program would improve the School Health program's ability to serve as central resource to educators, develop and disseminate information, and establish an infrastructure that allows easy communication between our public health department and schools across the state.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Texas children and families. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,

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ⁱ Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. "Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication". *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 2005 Jun;62(6):617-27.

ⁱⁱ Perryman Group. (2009) *Costs, Consequences, and Cures: An Assessment of the Impact of Severe Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disorders on Business Activity in Texas and the Anticipated Economic and Fiscal Return on Investment in Expanded Mental Health Services*.

http://canatx.org/research_reports/reports/PerrymanMentalHealthReport.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Juvonen, J., Le, V., Kaganoff, T., Augustine, C., & Louay, C. "Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing American Middle School." Rand Education.http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG139.pdf

^{iv} Testimony before Senate Finance on January 30; before House Appropriations on February 13; before House Public Health on February 20. See Slide 23:

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=8589974939>

^v Ialongo, N.; Poduska, J.; Werthamer, L.; and Kellam, S. "The distal impact of two first-grade preventive interventions on conduct problems and disorder in early adolescence." *J Emot Behav Disord* 9:146-160, 2001; Hawkins, J.D.; Kosterman, R.; Catalano, R.; Hill, K.G.; and Abbott, R.D. Effects of social development intervention in childhood 15 years later. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 162(12):1133-1141, 2008

^{vi} Texas Education Agency. (2014) *Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2013-14*.

http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/Enroll_2013-14.pdf

^{vii} Basch CE. (2010) *Healthier Students Are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap*. Columbia University; http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf.

^{viii} Texas Education Agency. (2014) *Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2013-14*.

http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/Enroll_2013-14.pdf