

Make meeting children's unique needs a priority in planning.



Texas is seeking to reform its public mental health system. Looking at how to address mental health early in life will be to key to reform's success.

Most mental health disorders first surface in childhood or adolescence.¹ Intervening early can make a huge difference for the kids affected, while preventing later costs to society. Addressing children's mental health can pay great dividends to both families and our state. As Texas considers changes in how our state delivers mental health services, it's important to take into account the unique needs of children and youth.

What to Know:

- **The human mind is still developing during childhood** and adolescence; it isn't fully developed until a person's mid-twenties.² The mind works differently during these years than in adulthood,³ so services for children and youth need to recognize and respond to those differences.⁴
- When trying to make changes in children's lives, **it's important to involve the people and places around kids:** their families, schools, and communities. When a parent has a mental health issue, a child is at greater risk for mental health concerns, too.⁵ Sometimes the best intervention for a child is



working with his or her caregiver(s).⁶

- **The earlier we intervene, the better.** Prevention and early intervention make a big difference in children's lives, and they lower the costs of treatment when concerns arise. Yet Texas largely waits until a child receives a mental health diagnosis before providing services.
- In 2013, **the legislature will be looking at ways to change delivery of public mental health and substance abuse services** to Texans in need. In 2011, the Texas legislature called for an independent analysis of the state's mental health system. The goal was to identify what Texas can do to improve access, outcomes, and efficiencies, and a report in 2012 offered strategies.⁷
- **Use what experts know works best for kids with serious mental health concerns: a "system of care" approach.** The approach coordinates a range of services to meet real needs of the child and family. This way of doing things helps keep children in their homes and schools and avoids unnecessary placements in hospitals, residential treatment centers, or even the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.⁸

How to Make it Happen:

- **Prioritize prevention and early intervention.** Texas can make sure those around kids—family members, caregivers, teachers, primary care providers—have the tools and strategies they need to promote children's mental wellbeing and know what to do when they suspect a concern.

- **Kids eligible for public services and supports should receive them.** Texas ranks near last in the nation in how much it spends on public mental health services.⁹ Only about 1 in 3 kids who qualify for services receive them.¹⁰ An underfunded system cannot produce success. The state should provide communities with funds needed to serve all kids who qualify for them. Kids with serious mental health concerns cannot wait.
- **Coordination and collaboration is key.** Kids with mental health concerns do best when the health, human services, school, and justice systems are working together in partnership with families. Texas should increase its own coordination and collaboration efforts and assist communities in doing the same. Great work is already happening in parts of Texas. However, commitment and action by state leadership is needed to ensure more children and families have access to “systems of care.”¹¹
- **Use what works.** It simply takes much too long for the things we know work to be put into practice.¹² Those who work with children should have training and technical assistance related to children’s development, mental health, and the best ways to promote their success.
- **Listen to families and youth.** Families and youth are in the best position to identify what they need, what works, and what doesn’t. If we want effective programs and policies, Texas should involve them in making decisions to help guide treatment, program, and policy decisions.
- **Show us the data!** Meaningful data on how Texas programs and services are influencing a child’s ability to do well at home, in school, and in the community would help policymakers make informed decisions on effective and efficient use of state funds.

Thinking About Costs

Today annual public costs related to mental illness, substance abuse, and lost tax dollars in Texas amount to \$13 billion, and unmet mental health needs cost Texas businesses \$270 billion in lost revenue and 1.6 million permanent jobs.

Given that many mental health concerns first surface in childhood, addressing children’s mental health is a crucial part of curtailing a costly epidemic.

To learn more about this idea, check out: <http://tinyurl.com/TXKidsMentalHealth>

Sources

Thinking about costs

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