



TEXANS CARE
for CHILDREN

2015 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

For over 30 years, Texans Care for Children has been speaking up for kids at the state Capitol. As the legislature meets for its 84th regular session, we continue to advocate for state policies that help Texas children grow up healthy, secure, and successful.

Our legislative agenda outlines priorities in child protection, early education, early opportunities, health and fitness, juvenile justice, and mental well-being. Texas children need reforms in these areas. And they need the legislature to prioritize strategic, targeted investments in these systems rather than leaving money on the table or delivering tax breaks to big business.

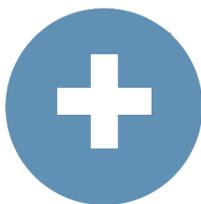
This agenda is for the fragile, frightened Houston boy who CPS removes from his home because it suspects neglect, and then sends to a foster home where he might be abused.

It's for the bright-eyed kindergartner in McAllen who will learn more if she and her classmates start school with the skills taught in high-quality child care and pre-kindergarten.

It's for the 17-year-old high school junior in Plano who makes a mistake one night and will automatically go to an adult jail rather than the juvenile justice system -- and end up with a record that will make it difficult to ever go to college or get a good job -- unless state law changes.

It's for all of us who will either get stuck with the future long-term costs of kids who fall short of their potential, or enjoy the benefits of living in a community where children reach their potential and grow into good neighbors, good co-workers, and good parents.

By helping every child get off to a solid start in life, we can fulfill our obligation to the next generation of Texans and build a stronger, more prosperous Texas for years to come.





Child Protection

In addition to high rates of abuse and neglect, the state has seen an increase in the number of children who died in the very foster homes where the state sent them for their safety. After a number of tragedies, strengthening CPS to prevent abuse and find safe, permanent homes for kids has emerged as a top priority for this legislative session. In particular, CPS needs the funding to ensure child abuse investigators and other CPS caseworkers are no longer responsible for an average of 28 vulnerable children at once. For those children our state never finds a home for, our responsibility continues, and we should help these youth on a path to success in adulthood.

- Improve child safety in foster care through standardized, quality home studies and training of foster parents.
- In order to prevent further victimization of foster youth, identify gaps in the foster care system that lead to foster youth becoming victims of sex trafficking while in state care.
- Develop a clearer understanding of the factors leading to a continued cycle of child welfare involvement among pregnant and parenting foster youth through tracking the parenting supports and services these young parents are provided.
- Provide consistent, standardized trauma screenings and assessments for all families upon entering the CPS system.
- Provide CPS caseworkers with manageable caseloads and adequate work supports to promote retention, effectiveness, and resiliency of CPS caseworkers.
- Provide health care, educational access, housing, and other support for youth who leave the foster care system without ever having found a permanent placement.



For more information contact our Child Protection Policy Associate, Ashley Harris, at aharris@txchildren.org.



Early Education

Ample research has demonstrated that strong cognitive, social, and emotional development of children from birth to age five provides the foundation for success in school and in life. Yet the state currently allows a single child care teacher to monitor up to 15 three-year-olds at a time, for example. That makes it difficult to read the children a book and provide the other kinds of attention they need to learn and stay safe. The state's public school pre-K program can effectively prepare eligible four-year-olds for elementary school, but it will accomplish more with greater focus on quality and resources.

- Establish an Office of Early Learning at the Texas Education Agency to increase accountability for pre-K funds, better align resources, promote local solutions, and develop statewide strategies to improve early education.
- Reduce student-teacher ratios in child care to increase safety for children and provide them with greater learning opportunities.
- Improve pre-K quality and access throughout the state by pursuing greater investment, new funding strategies, heightened outreach efforts, and public-private collaborations.



For more information contact our Early Education Policy Associate, Andrea Brauer, at abrauer@txchildren.org.



Early Opportunities

Helping a child reach his or her full potential begins with ensuring that all women get the health care they need before, during, and after pregnancy, and that babies have access to health services right from the start. Yet in Texas, 35 percent of women receive no prenatal care before the second trimester if at all, and more than 12 percent of babies are born preterm. Particularly after past budget cuts, young children with developmental delays and disabilities, women, and infants need access to programs and services that ensure the best health outcomes for Texas families.

- Improve birth outcomes, prevent prematurity, and promote infant health by increasing family access to a seamless continuum of care before, during, and after pregnancy through:
 - increased funding for and access to family planning services, prenatal care, and interconception care;
 - increasing the length of postpartum services for pregnant women who qualify for CHIP perinatal coverage and Medicaid; and
 - policies streamlining eligibility determinations and enrollment for health care systems.
- Support a strong, sustainable Early Childhood Intervention system in the state through adequate funding, robust outreach, and maintenance of the key features of the program.
- Support breastfeeding mothers by creating incentives to increase breastfeeding resources and accommodations in early care and education settings.
- Protect access to programs that support family well-being, increase family financial security, and assist families through times of crisis.



For more information contact our Early Opportunities Policy Associate, Alice Bufkin, at abufkin@txchildren.org.



Health & Fitness

Healthy children are stronger students and grow into healthier adults. Yet one of six Texas kids is uninsured, and one of every three is obese. The legislature can help by ensuring more children can go to the doctor for an important check-up or help with a bad earache. It can help by ensuring that children – who rely on adults to set the table and their eating and exercise habits – have access to nutritious food and physical activity opportunities in their schools and communities.

- Ensure every Texas family has options for accessing health care coverage and services by accepting increased Medicaid funding and strengthening other health care coverage policies.
- Restrict school-based advertising of unhealthy food and beverages that are already prohibited from being served on school campuses.
- Promote “complete street” policies, physical activity in school, and fitness incentive programs.
- Ensure access to affordable, healthy foods through school-based feeding programs, repurposing of unused public lands for community gardens, and support of farmers’ markets.
- Reduce the consumption of sugary drinks and increase the consumption of healthy beverages by:
 - instituting a sugary drink tax;
 - creating a targeted public health campaign; and
 - reducing the availability of sugary drinks in early care settings.



For more information contact our Health & Fitness Policy Associate, Lauren Dimitry, at ldimitry@txchildren.org.



Juvenile Justice



When kids make mistakes, both big and small, we need to hold them accountable in a way that puts them on track to get an education and become good neighbors, rather than pushing them towards a life of crime and unrealized potential. We should keep more kids in the classroom and funnel fewer kids into the justice system. When kids do end up in the justice system, we need to ensure they are kept safe, have access to appropriate rehabilitative programs and services, and aren't limited in adulthood by their childhood mistakes.

- Raise the age of youth who enter the juvenile justice system to include 17-year-old offenders so they receive appropriate rehabilitative treatment in age-appropriate settings rather than automatically going to the adult system.
- Ensure youth in the justice system are kept safe; receive an education and appropriate health, mental health, and rehabilitative services; and do not face fewer opportunities in adulthood because of their history.
- Reduce use of force against students in schools and ensure police in schools have appropriate youth-specific training so that our schools are kept safe.
- Reduce the number of youth involved in the justice system by:
 - increasing services available for children ages 10-13 in age-appropriate settings;
 - investing in diversion and prevention; and
 - increasing accountability for schools that disproportionately discipline students of color, students with disabilities, and children who identify as LGBT.



For more information contact our Juvenile Justice Policy Associate, Lauren Rose, at lrose@txchildren.org.



Mental Well-Being



Mental health is a cornerstone of healthy development. Texas can do more to prevent kids from experiencing things we know interfere with their mental well-being and to mitigate the impact of adversities when they occur. About one out of every five Texas kids has a mental disorder during the course of a year. That's five children out of a classroom of 25 students. And 60 percent of those with a diagnosable mental disorder don't receive the services they need. By ensuring that parents, schools, and communities have the tools they need to address the mental health of all kids, the legislature can give every child a better chance to succeed in school and in life.

- Enhance prevention and early intervention efforts that impact root factors linked to many social, emotional, and behavioral challenges children and youth often face by:
 - requiring a coordinated state-level prevention strategy and improving how state agencies measure and report the impact of these programs; and
 - adopting a set of common outcome measures that can be tracked across child-serving agencies to strengthen planning and accountability.
- Promote the success of all students by disseminating information, training, and technical assistance to schools on effective practices such as PBIS, trauma-informed practice, and social emotional learning.
- Strengthen state efforts that help communities provide services for children and youth with complex mental health challenges, including Community Resource Coordination Groups, the YES Medicaid Waiver Program, and the use of Certified Family Partners.



For more information contact our Mental Health Policy Associate, Josette Saxton, at jsaxton@txchildren.org.