



## **TOP CHILDREN'S ISSUES OF THE 2017 LEGISLATIVE SESSION AND TEXANS CARE FOR CHILDREN'S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Heading into the 2017 legislative session, a few children's policy issues have dominated the past year's headlines, legislative hearings, and Texas leaders' statements about their current priorities:

- 1. Protecting services for children with disabilities** and developmental delays is a top priority in 2017 following the outcry from legislators, parents, community leaders, and others about the loss of therapies for children with disabilities and the recent findings that enrollment of babies and toddlers in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) has fallen sharply.
- 2. Protecting children from neglect and abuse and ensuring they are safe and successful if they enter foster care** has been declared a priority by state leaders following disturbing reports of abuse, a backlog of CPS investigations, and an unsafe and ineffective foster care system.
- 3. Supporting children's and parents' mental health** is a high priority for 2017, as reflected by the work of the House Select Committee on Mental Health as well as other efforts by state leaders.
- 4. Supporting healthy mothers and babies** has become the subject of renewed focus following several developments: a disturbing spike in pregnancy-related maternal deaths, the recent launch of new state women's health programs, legislative hearings on healthy birth outcomes, calls for a Texas plan to address the state's high number of uninsured, and the Governor's and Legislature's focus on postpartum depression and other mental health challenges.
- 5. Maintaining and building on the state's new commitment to pre-k & early childhood development** will be necessary to ensure the state's new high-profile HB 4 pre-k grant program is a success and more children start school ready to succeed.
- 6. Ensuring the juvenile justice system is effective and safe** will continue to be a key issue this session as momentum builds to end the practice of automatically sending 17-year-olds to the adult criminal justice system, the links between CPS and juvenile justice become more clear, and Texas maintains its role as a national leader in juvenile justice and criminal justice reform.

To address these priorities, Texans Care for Children has developed and shared with policymakers a number of recommendations, which are outlined below.

Following these recommendations will ensure more children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise.

Texans will be watching to see if state leaders make real progress on the high-profile, high-stakes children's policy challenges facing the state.

# OUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS THE STATE'S 2017 CHILDREN'S POLICY PRIORITIES

## Protect Services for Babies and Toddlers with Disabilities and Delays

Protect and strengthen Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) for kids under age three with disabilities and delays by ensuring sufficient funding for ECI and improving program administration.

Prevent Medicaid reimbursement rates cuts to therapies for children with disabilities.

## Improve Child Protection and Ensure Children are Safe and Successful if They Enter the Foster Care System

### Prevent Child Neglect and Abuse

Ensure community-based support for children and parents through continued funding for Texas' Home Visiting Programs, the Helping through Intervention and Prevention (HIP) program for parenting and pregnant youth in foster care, and other effective prevention programs.

Reduce CPS investigations caseloads by providing additional funds to hire and retain caseworkers and improve caseworker salaries.

### Ensure Children in Foster Care Are Safe and Successful

Reduce CPS foster care caseloads by providing additional funds to hire and retain caseworkers and improve caseworker salaries.

Increase therapeutic foster home capacity, increase reimbursement rates for services for children with complex mental health needs, strengthen training and support for caregivers, and improve timely identification of children's needs.

*See our recommendation on residential treatment center accountability in the section regarding mental health and our recommendation on juvenile justice and CPS data sharing in the section regarding juvenile justice.*

## Support Children's and Parents' Mental Health

### Safe and Supportive School Practices to Promote All Students' Success

Dedicate staff at TEA and DSHS to focus on mental health-related barriers to student learning, including offering districts guidance on research-based strategies that help students with mental health concerns be successful in school and identifying resources in other state agencies that can be better leveraged to help address barriers to student learning.

Direct TEA to identify and report on innovative and promising practices related to student mental health that are already happening in schools and facilitate peer-to-peer learning among schools and communities interested in replicating them.

Provide early childhood educators with additional training, technical assistance, and access to supports that have been shown to prevent suspension or expulsion of young students.

Encourage or require districts to address school climate and positive behavior management within their annual planning and evaluation efforts.

Expand youth-specific training for school police to all school districts and improve data collection on school police actions.

Require school districts to report to TEA the number of behavioral health specialists and school officers that are employed and/or contracted to work on school campuses.

### Support for Children with Complex Mental Health Challenges

Increase state technical assistance to community providers on working effectively together so children with mental illness have access to all available community-based resources and are only placed into more restrictive settings when appropriate and necessary.

Expand access to family peer support services as part of treatment plans for children with serious mental illness.

Improve the quality and accountability of state-contracted psychiatric residential treatment centers (RTCs) by evaluating their use of evidence-based and trauma-informed treatments and practices, linkages to community-based services, rates of family reunification, and rates of readmission.

### **Support Parents' Mental Health**

*See our recommendations on health coverage and women's health in the section regarding healthy mothers.*

Improve the quality of Texas child care by setting effective maximum child care group size and child-caregiver ratios and ensuring the state collects key data on class size and ratios in licensed child care.

Ensure kids in child care have access to nutritious foods and opportunities for active play by updating the state's child care standards, training requirements, online directory, and quality rating system.

*See our recommendation on Early Childhood Intervention in the section regarding young children with disabilities and our educator training recommendation in the section regarding school practices that support mental health.*

### **Support Healthy Mothers and Babies**

Ensure the success of the state's new women's health care programs by maintaining funding and addressing administrative barriers to enrollment.

Address maternal depression during and after pregnancies by giving women more opportunities for screening during doctor's visits, improving access to peer support services, and removing barriers to mental health care.

Improve access to health care by improving CHIP/Medicaid renewal procedures for children and developing a Texas plan to expand health coverage to low-income adults.

Ensure adequate funding for Medicaid and CHIP and prevent reduction in critical health services or payments that will adversely affect children's and mothers' access to care.

*See our recommendation on child care nutrition in the section regarding pre-k and our Early Childhood Intervention recommendation in the section regarding young children with disabilities.*

### **Ensure the Juvenile Justice System is Effective and Safe**

Improve outcomes of youth involved in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems by improving data collection and data sharing between DFPS and juvenile probation departments.

Raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction so that 17-year-olds have access to rehabilitative programming and are not automatically sent to the adult criminal justice system.

Reduce 10- to 13-year-olds' involvement with the juvenile justice system and prohibit them from being confined in secure facilities, including detention and post adjudication facilities.

Reform juvenile records policies to ensure kids' mistakes do not follow them into adulthood.

Maintain juvenile justice funding to ensure appropriate services for youth in the system.

*See our recommendations on residential treatment centers, school policing, and school climate in the section regarding mental health.*

### **Maintain and Build on the State's New Commitment to Pre-k & Early Childhood Development**

Improve access to high quality pre-k by maintaining full funding for the HB 4 grant program, expanding full-day options, and setting effective pre-k class size and student-teacher ratios.

## **ABOUT TEXANS CARE FOR CHILDREN**

We envision a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise. We are a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization. We develop policy solutions, produce research, and engage Texas community leaders to educate policymakers, the media, and the public about what works to improve the well-being of Texas children and families.

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