



SOLUTIONS
to our
TEXAS
CHALLENGE

**30 Ways to
Build a Better Future
for Kids
and Our State**



**TEXANS CARE
for CHILDREN**

A decade ago, a team of researchers, led by former state demographer Steve H. Murdock, aimed to answer an important question: **What will the future of Texas be?** After examining the data, the answers they returned in their book, *The New Texas Challenge*, led to some alarm. Tomorrow's Texas, the researchers found, would be one with less prosperity, poorer health, and more limited opportunity.

None of this was set in stone, the team pointed out. Changing direction was possible, but it would take some effort. Most of all, it required addressing unmet needs in Texas children—the challenge Texas still must rise to today.

“If these were mere demographic changes, they’d be interesting. They’d be great for cocktail parties and all that sort of stuff. The reason they are important is that due to a variety of historical, discriminatory, and other factors, these demographic factors are tied to socioeconomic factors. They are tied to resources that people have to buy goods and services in the private sector. They are tied to the resources people have to pay taxes in the public sector. And as we change our population, if we don’t change those relationships, we will change the very socioeconomic structure of Texas and the country as a whole. . . **If we don’t change the socioeconomic factors that go with the demographic factors, it is hard to see anything but a Texas that is poorer and less competitive in the future than it is today. . . The reality of it is that our fates are intertwined.**”

– Dr. Steve Murdock,
March 11, 2010, The Texas Tribune

The challenge we face

For generations, Texas has been a place of big dreams and bold plans. Right now, though, our state faces a test.

Our challenge is to change the odds for Texas children.

Demographic researchers and those who make forecasts about the economy say Texas is on a collision course with history: our children are falling behind kids in other states in too many ways to count. At stake for all of us is our security in old age, our workforce of tomorrow, and our state's place in history.

One thing is clear: the old ways of doing things, the passive ways, won't help us in this test. Our changing, growing state needs attention right now. Today's kids make up more than one-fourth of Texas' total population. They have just this one childhood, one shot at a beginning that leads to lifelong success.

We, as a state, get just this one chance, too, because in a few more years, it's pencils down. Either we will have passed the test, finding some way to rise to the challenge before us—preventing that foretold disaster of lost competitiveness, lost prosperity, and declining health across Texas—or we won't have. If that happens, we won't just fail our kids but ourselves.

We can't ask someone else to take this test for us. Trying to pass the buck to families or other governments doesn't make the challenge go away; neither does burying our heads in the sand, ignoring warnings. Texas can't expect or wait for someone else to take notice and do something with this information if we won't.



It's up to us as Texans to fix our shared future.

The good news is the shifts in Texas don't have to mean a change in our way of life. We don't need to abandon our historic promise to leave a better tomorrow to our children.

We have the solutions, test-driven and proven to work, right at our fingertips.

In fact, perhaps like no time before, we now *know* how to upend rotten odds for children. How to give kids solutions and opportunities instead, the sort that turn lives around.

This report aims to provide a road map. It looks at what Texas can do, immediately in 2013, with resources on hand.

Some of the strategies in this report are about changing the ways we as a state do business for all 6.6 million Texas kids. Other strategies seemingly touch the lives of only a small handful of our most vulnerable children, but they carry no less serious a weight. That's because the attention we as Texans give these children—the ones who have no families, the ones who are seriously ill, the ones who, for one reason or another, live life in the state's official care—reflects our deepest values as Texans. When we improve these lives, when we treat children with dignity and intentionally act in the best interest of those unable to defend themselves, we grasp the key to a brighter future. We demonstrate how *Texans care for children*.

Texans are capable of rising to this challenge. We are the state that oversaw putting man on the moon, the people who made thriving cities out of barren frontiers, the place that tapped vast riches literally underfoot. We can find unearthed wealth again by realizing the potential in today's children.



For us together, it will prove as challenging as any good test. Still, acing this exam is doable. It requires only that we set our minds to it.

What Texans stand to gain by solving our challenge

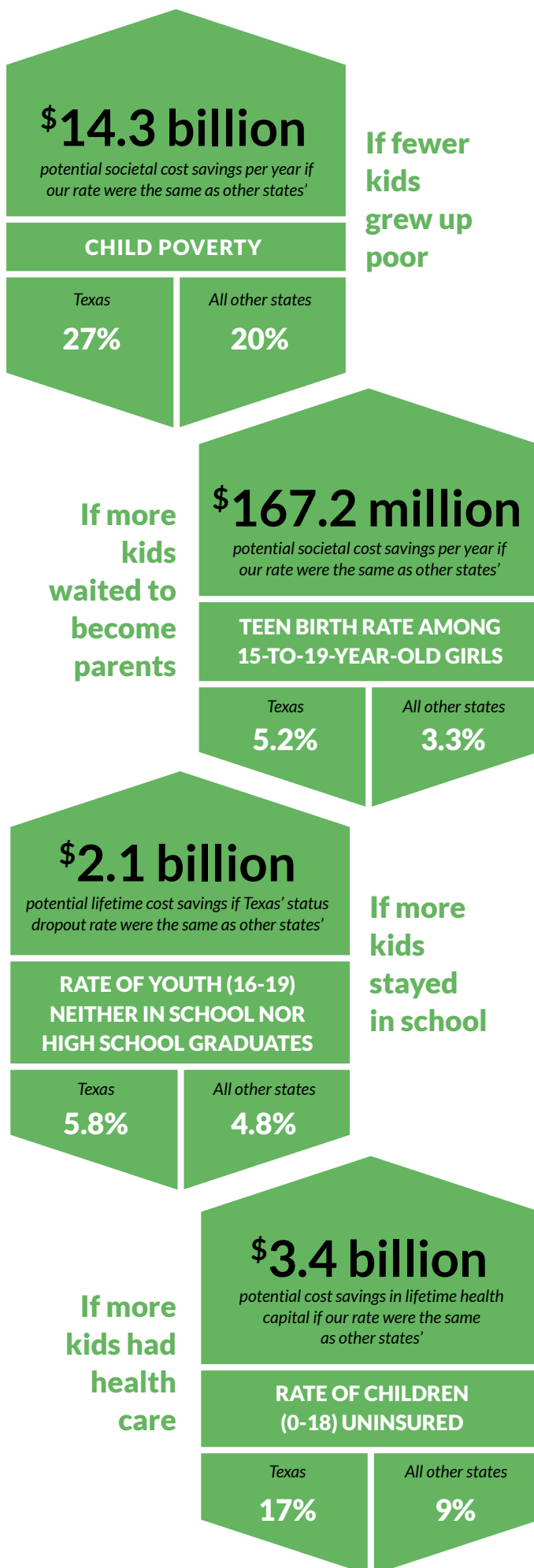
At the heart of Texas' challenge are longstanding gaps, not only among groups of Texas children but between our kids and those in other states. As we look to a future where the gaps between Texas kids and those in the rest of the country continue to grow, we should account for the real cost of doing less than what's within our power to help children succeed.

Consider the potential savings for everyone if the wellbeing of Texas children rivaled that of kids in the rest of the country today (see graphic at left).

Because improving odds for children so often brings positive returns for our communities and the economy, throughout this report you'll find that financial link spelled out. In the "Thinking About Costs" boxes, the contrast is clear between the real costs of inaction and the potential returns on investment should Texas move forward in improving children's lives.

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Giving children a strong start affects us all

Cascading Effects of a Strong Start

Building success in childhood leads to ripple effects, in one child's life and in the community. When we do what works to ensure children have their early needs met—that they receive quality early education, schooling and family supports and that they have nutritious foods, pediatric care, and services to prevent them from falling behind—the positive outcomes cascade over a lifetime. They ripple beyond one life and into many.

Ages 0-5

Good birth outcomes due to prenatal & maternal health

Secure attachment between parent and child

Preschool or similar early learning opportunity

Positive early development as basic needs are fulfilled

Elementary

Successful start in school

Fewer behavioral problems

Adolescence

More successful learning

More rewarding interpersonal relationships

Less tobacco and drug use

Less delinquency, truancy

Fewer juvenile justice encounters

Higher rate of entrance to
&

Higher high school graduation rates

Early Adulthood

completion of college

Adulthood

Higher inventory of & more diverse, flexible job skills

Overall

Higher income

More durable family life

Better jobs

More upward social mobility

Greater engagement in civic life

Resulting in:

Thriving Individuals

Capable employees, innovators, family members

Successful Workforce

Strong Communities

Fully participating citizens; more successful economy

Brighter Texas Future

Adapted with permission from a framework by Dr. Alvin Tarlov of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University

About the 30 Ways

This report looks at how to achieve the things all Texans want for our children, things like:

- success in school and an opportunity someday to do honest work for honest pay,
- a healthy life, in every sense of the word, and
- the chance to discover and reach their potential.

Good science and common sense say it isn't just one thing that decides all those things. *Many* parts of a child's life work together to shape his or her chances. Fortunately, it's possible now to know *what*—in schools, in communities, in doctors' offices, in families, and in our public systems—matters most for a child's later success. The strategies outlined in these pages are among them.

Texans Care for Children's recommendations result from a careful process, involving parents, educators, advocates, public servants, researchers, and community, faith and business groups. Together, these Texans work to answer questions such as:

- How can Texas **do more of what is proven to work** in helping children?
- How can ordinary Texans **avoid paying more later** through thoughtful state choices today?
- How can Texas get the best results and **ensure opportunity for all children**?
- What must our state do to **match plans with reality**, and not rely on wishful thinking about our future?
- How can Texans **work together to improve children's lives** and the outlook for our state?

This report shares the results of those discussions, with a focus on six areas for action:

- Provide children with **early opportunities**, so they have building blocks to succeed in school and life.
- Give Texans healthy beginnings to promote good **health** over a lifetime.
- Foster social and emotional health and **mental wellbeing** in children, so they grow up thriving.
- Ensure **protection** of children from abuse and isolation for a stronger society tomorrow.
- Prepare **youth** for **success** by keeping kids in school and learning, not pushing them into the criminal justice system.
- Secure the **resources** to invest in meeting children's needs, so we secure our own Texas future.

Doing each of these things would make a real difference for children and our future. Throughout the report, you'll know a strategy relates to one or more of the goals above when you see the symbols on this page.

The 30 strategies here are not the only ways, nor a ranked list of ways, to help Texas children. They simply are a starting place for this moment, beginning with things we can do for all children, even those yet to be, and progressing through ways we can help the kids who are most deeply enmeshed in our state's care.

Icon Guide



Health



Protection



Early Opportunities



Youth Success



Mental Well-Being



Resources

30 Ways at a Glance

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Use the dollars we've got and the ones it takes to pave the way to a better future.



To build opportunity, improve health, increase safety, and pave the way forward for the next generation, Texas has to identify and use resources today, so we create greater prosperity for our state tomorrow.

Most Texans want the best for our state in the future, something that happens when we “pay it forward,” budgeting in ways that bring about what we want our state to be in years to come. What many Texans don't realize is that in good financial times and in bad, our state has pretty consistently held the line on low investments, even when more is needed to deliver what Texans want and expect from their state. The only variation in spending we see are deep cuts during economic downturns,¹ leading to stark results: continued declines in outcomes for Texas families and children and worsening forecasts for our state's economy in the future. In times of true financial crisis like the recent recession, the cuts made to Texas services are severe, with vulnerable populations continuing to be hardest hit, but major across-the-board cuts affecting every community and our shared state future.



What to Know

- Because **nearly half of all state funding directly benefits children**,² kids are arguably the population most affected by the state budget.
- In 2011, **among states, Texas already spent the least per capita on its people, when service cuts removed an additional \$14 billion** from our state budget.³ One of the most dramatic cuts made to the budget by the 82nd Legislature, was an unprecedented \$4 billion cut to the basic operations funding for Texas public schools, along with an additional \$1.3 billion in cuts for programs like full-day prekindergarten, services for at-risk students, and merit pay for teachers.⁴
- Those cuts were **due to projections of revenue that turned out to be greatly underestimated**. Now the Comptroller reports that there is nearly \$9 billion in unanticipated revenue.⁵
- **Texas additionally will have \$11.8 billion in the state's replenishing savings account**, the Economic Stabilization Fund (sometimes called the Rainy Day Fund).⁶

How to Make it Happen

- **Meet the needs of Texas children today with cash balances on hand, the Economic Stabilization Fund and available federal funding**. Rather than let money sit in state coffers while Texans' needs go unmet, our state should use resources on hand to make strides for our people and give all of us a more secure Texas future.

*Focusing on Resources & Children
Having more to invest in children and Texas.*

- **Support creation of new revenue sources that are equitable and can grow along with the growth in need for public services.** The Texas revenue base has long been inadequate in meeting the needs of our state. Our revenue base relies heavily on a form of taxes that hits the poorest among us hardest—the sales tax.⁷ At the same time, Texas has more outsized tax breaks and incentive packages for big businesses than any other state.⁸ Texas should look at eliminating loopholes and carve-outs that don't serve the needs of our state and explore other possible sources of revenue, such as a sugary drink tax (See “Make clear the real costs of unhealthy substances”).⁹ Similarly, taxing non-medical professional services the way we tax goods would be an added measure to modernize our system, so we have new revenue and an equitable way to collect it.
- **Support ongoing reviews of tax exemptions and improved openness and transparency in the budget process.** Our state public investments undergo multiple layers of scrutiny, but the big breaks we give to corporations are not given that same sort of attention and accountability. When big businesses are given a pass on paying their fair share, we should require a careful, transparent review of the reasoning of this policy choice—and weigh it against the benefits of meeting our state's needs now and in the future.

Thinking About Costs

Being responsible managers of our state's future today would help usher in an era of positive growth for Texas' economy. By 2040, if Texas could close its achievement gaps and put all children born over the next decade on a good and level educational playing field, it would result in an additional \$300 billion per year being pumped into the state economy. To put that in perspective, that is more than what our state oil and gas industry contributes to the economy now.

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Help moms have healthy babies, and give Texans the strongest possible start.



Good health in childhood begins before birth, with the health of mothers-to-be. It is forged early on with the care and attention we give our babies.

Newborn Texans deserve a level playing field. Yet some babies enter the world with better chances than others. The infants whose mothers receive consistent prenatal care, who time their pregnancies right for healthy outcomes, who receive doctors' advice even before conception—these are the children less likely to be born prematurely or at a dangerously low birth weight. Likewise, infants who have medical care, including the right supports for any concerns that arise, face better odds than the children who have to go without seeing a doctor. To make sure more young Texans start life out right, it's important to pay attention to health care supports for women, healthy newborns, preemies, and infants with special needs.

What to Know

- Prenatal care—routine maternal health care that monitors a pregnancy's progress and the health of the mother and fetus—is **one of the best ways to ensure children start life in good health**. Adequate, early prenatal care has a proven track record of leading to healthier births¹ and reducing the risk of



low birth weight, prematurity, and neonatal and infant mortality.²

- As vital as prenatal care is, **40% of Texas babies' mothers receive no prenatal care or none before the second trimester**.³ Texas ranks 40th in the U.S. for prenatal care.⁴
- Two reasons so many women miss out on this care are: 1) many Texans lack health care;⁵ and 2) many pregnancies—49% in Texas—come as a surprise.⁶ **Women with pregnancies they didn't plan are less likely to seek out prenatal care,⁷ which puts their babies at higher risk** for low birth weight, prematurity, and other challenges in infancy.⁸
- When women have a chance to get good health care, including screenings for breast and cervical cancer and birth control to prevent mistimed pregnancies, whole families benefit. In 2011, the Texas legislature cut state investments in family planning by two-thirds and made it more difficult for many providers to receive any funding at all.^{9,10} Consequently, an estimated 284,000 Texas women were set to lose access to birth control and cancer screenings over the biennium, and 20,500 more births⁷ would have to be covered by Medicaid. The general revenue **cost to the state, following the family planning cuts, is 59% higher** over two years than what it would have cost to hold the line on women's health care services.¹¹
- **Babies, too, see proven benefits when they receive preventive health care** and early and periodic screenings.^{12,13} Unfortunately, Texas has one of the nation's highest rates of uninsured children, and some who have coverage still miss getting routinely

screened. Children born prematurely or with special health care needs may need extra resources, beyond what their family insurance policy covers, to reach their full potential later in life.

How to Make it Happen

- **Make sure babies, including children born prematurely and with special needs, have the health care they need:** Many Texas leaders recognize the importance of giving children a healthy start. Texas has made progress in recent years and needs to continue its track record of working to get to the finish line, where every baby born can see a doctor for preventive care in his or her first years of life and every child with a special need receives the resources vital to his or her later success.
- **Help see that more babies are born healthy by ensuring women have public and private access to health services.** Women need adequate prenatal care during pregnancy and good health care before conception, between pregnancies, and to prevent unintended or mistimed pregnancies that, in turn, lead to too many premature and low birth-weight beginnings for Texas children.

For more on this topic, visit <http://txchildren.org/Report/Health>

Thinking About Costs

In its first two years, the Women's Health Program (WHP) saved Texas more than \$37.6 million in general revenue: a savings of more than \$10 for every \$1 the state invested.

The average annual Medicaid cost when a woman has a mistimed pregnancy due to lost access to family planning services is \$11,268. The annual costs associated with a preterm birth, which might be prevented with better access to prenatal care, is \$51,600. Last legislative session's budget cuts of roughly \$61 million could cost Texas four times more than that, Legislative Budget Board analysts say. By contrast, if the state had decided to expand Women's Health Services it would have led to savings of \$142.5 million in 2012-2013.

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Make sure the earliest environments are good ones.

When we get child development right, it is a foundation for community and economic development. The environments in children's early years play a crucial role in the ongoing process of building young minds. That is why high quality child care has such a far-reaching impact on kids, communities, and schools alike.

Building prosperity for tomorrow's Texas starts with building up our children for success. Science now shows that the environments where children first begin learning, including the child care settings where many spend a good part of their day, determine that success in ways not previously well understood. Unfortunately, the current child care system in Texas designed to provide child care services for low-income families can stand in the way of high-quality early education. Reimbursing child care services at a better rate would spur growth in the number of high-quality child care centers willing to serve low-income kids through our state's child care subsidy system; increase the number of children enrolling in high quality centers; and lead to more young Texans entering kindergarten ready for school and success. The impact of an enhanced rate would grow if linked to an incentive system that considers quality measures.



What to Know:

- **A child's environment and early experiences shape the brain's architecture.** When positive, they have been shown to set a critical foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.¹ But when an early environment that a child spends time in is negative, it can increase levels of a stress hormone found to be harmful to the developing brain's architecture. This, in turn, can make it harder for kids later on to learn language and mathematical, reasoning, and memory skills.²
- **Texas makes an investment in its child care system but could be even more strategic** to ensure those dollars 1) provide care during the day so low-income parents can work and contribute to the economy; and 2) prepare at-risk children for success in the K-12 system. Economists have found that society gets the greatest returns on investments when low-income kids, from birth to age five, have opportunities that prime them for later learning.³ Texas limits these investments now and doesn't do enough to align services in the early years with what we know builds state prosperity later on.
- **The child care subsidy system refers to Texas' statewide child care assistance program for low-income working families** who need affordable child care options. Providers who participate in the program—child care centers, homes, and friend-family-neighbor care—agree to care for the children of low-income working families at a discounted rate.

- Providers are reimbursed through one of 28 local Texas Workforce Development Boards, which govern local child care subsidies and receive state support. **Funded primarily through federal dollars, the subsidy system also includes state and local dollars.**
- **Children are missing out on high quality child care because of current subsidy rates.**⁴ States should reimburse providers at the 75th percentile of market rate to ensure quality options for children, according to the federal government, but none of Texas' local workforce boards are meeting this recommendation.⁵ In some areas, the reimbursement rate is below half of the recommended rate, leading to fewer high quality child care options for families.⁶
- **Nearly 30% of Texas' children, ages birth through age five, are growing up in poverty, and most of them have parents who work, so they need a child care subsidy.**⁷ The subsidy system serves roughly 110,000 children per year, and there is always a waiting list for families that need care.⁸
- **Poor children are the most likely to arrive at kindergarten behind their peers, requiring immediate interventions in the K-12 system,** such as special education referrals, assistance from teaching specialists, and retention in early grade levels.⁹ These interventions cost Texas millions of dollars, but improving early child development environments could save these expenses by helping more children enter kindergarten school-ready.
- The research is clear that children attending **high quality early learning environments promote school success and life success,** thus decreasing costs for schools and society.¹⁰ A 2006 study conducted a cost-benefit analysis of investing in Texas' current early learning programs. The study found a 350% return on investment with savings realized through fewer children being referred to special education, fewer children being retained in school, more children graduating high school, and more Texans entering college.¹¹

Thinking About Costs

American economist Dr. James Heckman, who is considered one of the ten most influential economists in the world, won the Nobel Prize in 2000 for his research. He found there is no single better investment that local communities can make than in high quality early childhood development.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Improve the child care subsidy system** and increase reimbursement rates to ensure more children who qualify for subsidies receive high quality early learning, school readiness preparation, and social emotional development.

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Help infants and toddlers with delays and disabilities develop.



For young children with developmental delays or disabilities, Early Childhood Intervention greatly improves success rates in school and later in life.

Children born with a disability or a delay in their development can start out at a disadvantage that lasts into their school years and beyond. However, numerous studies have shown that these children can catch up with their peers and even erase early setbacks with targeted help early in life. In Texas, some children under age three with disabilities and developmental delays receive services that improve their health and their physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development through a family-centered system called Early Childhood Intervention (ECI). Unfortunately, due to state budget cuts in 2011, thousands of young children in Texas are missing out on receiving these services, crucial to their development and growth.

What to Know:

- **ECI services work:** Roughly three out of four children who receive Texas ECI services make impressive gains, with increases in rates of growth and changes in development beyond what would be expected without intervention.^{1, 2} Studies show that societies that invest early in infants and toddlers have better health outcomes and lower levels of health inequality.³
- **One key to ECI's effectiveness is its family-centered model.** ECI providers visit children in their natural environment, such as in their home or child care setting, and work with families to create a care plan that addresses children's specific needs.⁴ ECI providers give parents tools and practical, routine exercises that empower the family to improve the child's development between ECI provider visits. This approach allows families to develop strategies to improve outcomes for their children⁵ and adjusts the cost of care to what families can afford to pay.⁶
- As the child population has grown, so has the number of Texas children needing services,⁷ yet **Texas' Early Childhood Intervention system met a 14% budget cut** in the 2012-2013 fiscal year. The legislature allocated for thousands fewer babies and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities to receive services.^{8, 9} Stricter eligibility requirements that went into effect in September of 2011 prevent many young children from receiving services and supports that would greatly improve their chances of overcoming a developmental delay or disability.¹⁰
- Among the young children who continue to qualify for ECI services, many won't receive the level of services optimal for impact. Although children in other states receive as many as 10 ECI hours per month,¹¹ children enrolled in ECI here, on average, receive fewer than three hours of service per month, meaning many **Texas babies and toddlers get below the expert-recommended minimum** of four hours.¹²
- Failure to invest in a strong and sustainable ECI system has widespread ramifications for children, families, schools, and society. **ECI is a vital community support** for parents of premature infants and pediatricians, child care providers, and others who work with families and refer parents to ECI when they suspect developmental delays, find indicators of autism, or perceive social and emotional concerns.
- When children don't receive early intervention, the alternative isn't an absence of intervention—it's late intervention. As children enter public systems with greater delays and more severe problems, **their challenges grow more difficult and costly to treat over time.**¹³ A weakened Texas ECI system leaves other systems, such as special education and

specialized medical care, to deal with unaddressed problems, as those challenges become more entrenched and more difficult and expensive to treat.

How to Make it Happen

- **Fund ECI to meet the need:** Providing more young children with services to change their developmental trajectory, during a period in their development when they are most receptive to intervention, begins with providing adequate funding. Texas recently made it more difficult for children to qualify for ECI, so the remaining infants and toddlers served are those with the most acute needs. These kids need to get the right level of service, and ECI funding should be set to match the need for every child who needs services.
- **Protect a family-focused approach to helping kids:** Providing the level of services known to have the most impact for young children with developmental delays and disabilities will require more than the current average of less than three hours per month of contact between families and ECI providers.

Learn more about this strategy at <http://txchildren.org/ECI>

Thinking About Costs

When young children do not receive needed developmental services, the alternative is later intervention, often made through schools or the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. These interventions not only cost more, but they also prove less effective. Later in life, children's developmental delays and disabilities are far more difficult and expensive to treat.

Economists have found that services provided in early childhood "decrease grade repetition, reduce special education spending, enhance productivity, lower welfare costs, increase tax revenues, and lower juvenile justice costs." As a result, the cost-benefit ratio for high-quality early childhood development programs ranges from 2.5:1 to 4:1.

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Help families who play by the rules when they hit hard times.



Every person has just one childhood to develop the foundation for later success. Today's kids happen to be living through childhood under a shadow of economic trouble. Whether their families bounce back after falling on hard times and avoid plummeting into long-term crises is sometimes decided by the number of holes in the safety net.

A brighter future for Texas rests with Texan kids having their basic needs met today. Fortunately, across Texas, there are children growing up healthier, better fed, and with more successes in the classroom, because their families had secure services and supports during tough economic times. In just as many places, however, there are children with the very same needs who aren't so lucky: kids without health care, without reliable meals, and without the same opportunities for success. If Texas could cut through the red tape that stands between these children and the basic support they need, a brighter outlook would lie ahead for all Texans.

What to Know

- **Deprivation in childhood leads to long-term health challenges** that can keep kids from meeting their potential and prove costly. Scientists from the National Cancer Institute and the University of Calgary found that children who coped with



hunger at any point were 2½ times as likely to experience poor health a decade later, compared to children like them who never went hungry.¹ Rice University researchers found something similar about kids who went without health coverage: their long-term health was so much worse than people like them who had health insurance during childhood that the cost to society of leaving kids uncovered is believed higher than the cost of extending public coverage to every child who needs it.²

- When a child has better financial stability at home, he or she is significantly more likely to do well in school and be successful later in life.³ Unfortunately, **Texas ranks 42nd among states in preventing child poverty.**⁴ An estimated 27% of Texas children live in families that meet the federal government's definition of poor, annually earning less than about \$17,000 for a family of three or \$22,000 for a family of four.⁵
- For these children, the safety net—which includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Medicaid—offers basic support until their families can get ahead. However, the safety net is only as effective as its ability to reach families during times of crisis. The system for enrolling kids eligible for support in the benefits they qualify for in **Texas lags behind other states' systems,** meaning more who qualify here remain shut out.⁶

- Texas has taken important steps in improving families' access to public benefits, following national attention and the threat of federal fines for delays and errors in processing applications for SNAP. While work remains, **the Texas Health and Human Service Commission made major improvements** in its system, improving its application processing by increasing the eligibility workforce.⁷ Improvements were such that Texas was awarded federal performance bonuses.⁸ During the most recent legislative session, these administrative efforts were further bolstered by new legislation to increase efficiencies and remove ineffective red tape.

How to Make it Happen

- **Keep improving the enrollment and eligibility system:** While Texas' enrollment system is better than it used to be, it will take continued effort and leadership to ensure Texas meets standards for timeliness and accuracy. More use of online applications, simplified enrollment documents and processes, and ongoing assessment of the barriers to timely enrollment would help.
- **Ensure good outreach to parents of children eligible for benefits:** Many Texas families don't know their kids are eligible for support, but helping community-based organizations reach out to the families of eligible kids with this important message would close the information gap. By improving the gateways to accessing public programs, more working Texas families will be protected from crisis, and their local communities will benefit from the infusion of public dollars.
- **Ask regularly whether we are responding to children's needs or someone else's:** In economic downturns, kids' needs grow, yet Texas sometimes lowers its standards for children receiving public benefits when funds are tight. Texas should thoughtfully plan for the future, so that revenue coming into the state's coffers better matches the growth in service needs during economic downturns.

Learn more at <http://txchildren.org/Report/Poverty>

Thinking About Costs

Numerous studies by economists in Texas and beyond have found that communities spend more when their children are left without. For example, leaving kids uninsured carries more costs over time than the price of giving children Medicaid or CHIP health care. Similarly, national research into the effect of childhood hunger over a lifetime shows preventing kids from going hungry can save society more in the end than it costs.

Today, the estimated annual cost to Texas of allowing children to grow up in poverty is \$67 billion. That cost is expected to rise, as a growing number of kids miss out on their basic needs being met.

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Make sure kids can see a doctor when they need to.



If you're looking for a success story about health for Texas children and families, consider Children's Medicaid and CHIP. They improve all sorts of outcomes, ranging from vaccination rates to preventing infant mortality to securing treatment for acute diseases. Medicaid and CHIP also fund children's hospitals statewide and give families greater peace of mind during tough economic times.

We don't need a scientific breakthrough to solve every health challenge kids face. What's standing in the way of 1 in 6 Texas kids getting the care they need in a doctor's office—being uninsured—is something easy to remedy. Having health insurance helps children receive preventive care and essential screenings, visit a doctor at the first sign of illness, and get ongoing care for chronic conditions, mental health concerns, and injuries that might otherwise go undiagnosed or untreated.¹ Kids also attend more school when they're insured, so they gain valuable time in the classroom; their parents show up for work, rather than staying home more often with a sick child; and their classrooms and communities are better able to limit the spread of disease.²

What to Know:

- For too many years, Texas was the state with the highest rate of uninsured children, but with state leaders' help, that is no longer the case.³ In recent



years, the Health and Human Services Commission, with support from the Texas legislature, has given Texas a stronger and more effective Children's Medicaid enrollment and eligibility system that resulted in more children getting the care they need. Even as the economy has seen parents losing jobs that provided health care for their children, the rate of uninsured children here has plummeted by several percentage points: **200,000 more Texas kids are insured, thanks to these efforts.**⁴

- Most of that gain came with the Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicaid. Thanks to them, **Texas improved more than any state in the country in insuring children** between 2009 and 2011.⁵
- Despite the gains, **Texas still has a long way to go.** Our state continues to have the highest number of uninsured children of any state—1.2 million kids—who account for 17% of the *nation's* uninsured child population.⁶
- Because **6 out of 10 uninsured children in our state already qualify for Medicaid or CHIP,**⁷ the best way to continue to reduce the uninsured is to get those children enrolled, while working to keep them insured.
- Access to health care goes beyond insurance status. Texas needs to have enough health and mental health professionals of all kinds, and doctors must be willing to see children with all types of insurance. Today, **families' patient satisfaction with Medicaid is high.**⁸ However, Texas experiences concerning

shortages of health and mental health professionals. When the state reduces reimbursement rates for providers' services, doctors become less likely to accept patients on Medicaid or CHIP. Following rate cuts in 2010, Texas doctors willing to accept new Medicaid patients hit an all-time low in 2011: just 31%, according to the Texas Medical Association.⁹

- It should come as little surprise then that **Texans overwhelmingly oppose state cuts to children's health insurance and to rates for Medicaid providers.** By far wider margins, voters support raising state revenue, not reductions in children's health care or provider rates.¹⁰

How to Make it Happen:

- **Protect Medicaid and CHIP:** Maintaining these effective public health care options and making sure more families can enroll their children in them is one of the most important strategies available for preventing children from being uninsured or otherwise unable to access health or mental health care.
- **Address Medicaid and CHIP provider rates:** Texas kids can ill afford further shortages of health providers able to meet their unique needs. The state will reap more benefits from the health services it offers when more providers can participate in Medicaid and CHIP.

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

Thinking About Costs

Several studies by Texas economists have shown the cost to society when kids remain uninsured is higher than the cost of covering children in CHIP and Children's Medicaid. The uninsured get most health care in the most expensive place, the emergency room, and that leads to higher local tax burdens and higher premiums in private health plans, as hospitals try to recoup lost costs.

Each \$1 cut from the state's budget for children's health insurance results in \$1.85 more paid by Texans in higher premiums and local taxes, and \$2.81 less in Texas' economy due to reduced federal matching funds.

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Get early childhood education right.



Early education programs, proven to work here in Texas with Texas kids, have made possible significant improvements in children's school readiness, particularly when it comes to literacy and math. Texas should capitalize on what we know works, so families and Texans know which programs are delivering results.

Quality early education has been shown to break the cycle of poverty and allow for lifetime achievement and success. With such a significant portion of Texas' young population growing up in poverty,¹ supporting early education is a way to help significant numbers of Texas children overcome challenges and prepare for success.² The Texas School Ready! project is an example of a research-based model that works in pinpointing the early education components that lead to the best results. It works in partnership with communities and is proven to produce measurable academic gains.

What to Know

- **Many Texas children grow up in households where risk factors, such as poverty and lack of parental education, lead to gaps in school readiness.**

These result in what is commonly referred to as the "achievement gap," where family financial resources and other factors are shown to put some students at a disadvantage that, left unaddressed, can persist throughout the school years.



- Over the course of a child's academic career, the achievement gap can continue to widen and result in increased likelihood of grade retention, dropping out of high school, juvenile and adult crime, and fewer employment and earnings opportunities. The good news is that **the achievement gap can be prevented in the first place with the right kinds of early childhood education interventions.**
- **The Texas School Ready! project (TSR!) serves children between the ages of 3 and 4 who are disadvantaged** according to guidelines established by Head Start, the local school district, or child care programs. Community-based collaboration partnerships have been the cornerstone of the Texas School Ready! project, which has brought Head Start, child care, and public school pre-K providers together throughout 200 cities across Texas.
- Texas School Ready! has served more than 330,000 students since it began and has a track record of success. **Children in the program have made significant improvements in their school readiness³** since the implementation of the program, particularly in the areas of literacy and math testing. However, this progress is at risk if Texas School Ready! is not funded.
- A study conducted by a UT Health consortium of elementary school researchers found that less than 50% of all students pass the Texas Primary Reading Index.⁴ But **among Texas School Ready! low-income students, the passing rates were much higher than the passing rate for students from all incomes:** 82% of those served in school-based TSR! sites passed, as did 67% in TSR! child care and 69% in TSR! Head Start.

*Focusing on Early opportunities & Youth success
Getting kids Texas School Ready!*

How to Make it Happen

- **Support the continued funding of quality pre-k reform programs** like the Texas School Ready! project that are proven to produce measurable academic gains and lay the foundation for other reforms in the K-12 system.

For more on this strategy, visit <http://txchildren.org/Early-Education>

Thinking About Costs

During the economic downturn, Texas saw a spike in the number of children growing up in poverty. Giving disadvantaged children a good start in a high-quality early education setting doesn't just help those kids get the start they need for a life of learning and success; it helps generate revenue for Texas and saves the government dollars in the end.

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Equip the people in our child protection system to keep kids safe.



High turnover and oftentimes unrealistic demands create serious challenges for the state employees who work in our child protection system. Meeting the needs of the children in the state's care and protecting and serving these children's best interest requires giving these workers supports they need.

If Texas could better prevent or address adversity in childhood, the results would be far-reaching: better health outcomes for our people, more productivity in our workforce, and fewer costs for our state systems.¹ ² The people at the forefront of the effort to achieve that for some of our most vulnerable Texans work in the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). Due to difficult and often unreasonable job expectations, however, there is a high turnover rate among these workers, which puts at risk our state's ability to protect children from abuse, neglect, and isolation.

What to Know:

- **Caseworkers are the people charged with protecting some of our most vulnerable kids.** Investigations caseworkers look into allegations of child abuse and neglect. Family Based Safety Services caseworkers intervene when a family is at risk of losing a child they are unable to care for. Conservatorship caseworkers assume responsibility over foster children as they make their way through the system.
- **Currently, 38% of entry-level Child Protective Services (CPS) workers leave within the first two years of employment.**³ This reflects an increase from 2011. High turnover rates are deeply problematic for CPS and the families it serves, as instability in this workforce reduces the quality of care remaining workers are able to provide.
- **High CPS turnover leads to worse outcomes for abused children and for society.** The average caseload for all CPS workers in Texas is well above

the recommended average of 15.⁴ In 2011, the average daily caseload was about 27 children for every one investigations caseworker.⁵ There were roughly 32 children for every conservatorship caseworker—more than double the recommended average.

- **High caseloads contribute to turnover.** A study conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that high caseworker turnover can leave remaining staff without enough time to establish relationships with families and make appropriate decisions to ensure the child's wellbeing.⁶ Each caseworker having more cases than they can handle means children must wait longer to find a permanent home, which, in turn, means Texas pays more in foster care costs while kids miss out on stability they need.
- **State red tape and cost-cutting efforts contribute to the problem.** CPS caseworkers spend much of their working day traveling to visit clients, handle placements, and perform other case-related activities, but many struggle with a DFPS travel reimbursement policy that causes workers to wait up to 20 working days before out-of-pocket travel costs get reimbursed.⁷ Additionally, 2011 budget cuts reduced the number of support staff available to CPS caseworkers, eliminating many positions such as transporters (staff that help families with transportation needs) and administrative technicians (people who provide caseworkers with support in documenting their casework). When caseworkers must assume responsibilities that used to fall to these positions and run into bureaucracy on the job,

*Focusing on Protection
Retaining the caseworkers Texas needs.*

it is harder for them to do the vital work of helping young victims of abuse and neglect.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Increase morale at CPS by cutting red tape:** One targeted strategy for improving job morale and reducing turnover would be to revise the DFPS travel reimbursement policy to minimize caseworkers' job-related out-of-pocket expenses. DFPS should also look at eliminating other administrative challenges to doing the critical work of protecting kids.
- **Maintain a workforce that's the right size to meet the needs of the kids in Texas' care.** Hiring more caseworkers is one important element of this. Along with providing immediate relief to caseloads, this is also a strategy that will bolster morale of existing staff.
- **Train caseworkers adequately in the skills they need.** Caseworkers are under immense pressures and have the heavy responsibility of safeguarding the wellbeing of vulnerable children. For the sake of staff morale, as well as to ensure that there is staff capacity to make critical judgment calls, staff should be trained at a level that allows for confidence. Exit interviews of entry-level staff demonstrate that workers feel unprepared and undertrained for their emotionally and physically demanding work.⁸
- **Maintain support staff:** The extra demands that resulted from eliminating support staff has hindered caseworkers' ability to work directly with families and meet the timelines for their case management tasks. This has consequences for staff morale and for efficiency and effectiveness in carrying out the work of caseworkers.

For more on this, see: <http://tinyurl.com/CPSmorale>

Thinking About Costs

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study surveyed over 17,000 adults and examined the relationship between health outcomes and experiences of abuse, neglect, or exposure to other trauma such as violence during childhood. Researchers found that people who experienced more adversities in childhood were far more likely to suffer from a host of health and mental health challenges, to engage in risky behavior, and to meet an early death. Intervening so that children meet fewer of these adversities in the first place and have the chance to heal faster would lead to better lives, as well as savings in Texas' health, mental health, and correctional systems for years to come.

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Keep more families together safely.



It is within Texas' power to halve the odds that a child will ever experience child abuse or neglect and to make sure no child suffers unnecessarily the trauma of being separated from a safe family.

Recently, science has shown that a great deal of child abuse, neglect, and dysfunction doesn't have to be a fact of life. Rather, proven services that involve families make a life-altering difference: they prevent tragedy outright or address troubles to keep crises at bay. Many of these services keep children from experiencing more serious adversity by addressing whatever is the root cause of instability in a child's home. This leads more children to remain safely with their families instead of entering foster care, which improves their lives and their trajectory in the future and leads to cost-savings for society.¹ Children in foster care, too, are better off when the system addresses their wellbeing by improving wellbeing in their families, something that leads more kids into permanent safe homes and fewer parents to have to surrender their children to the child welfare system.²

What to Know

- **Too many kids today are growing up experiencing trauma that's preventable.** Stress from early experiences with abuse, neglect, or dysfunction can alter the chemistry in a child's brain, leading to sometimes debilitating challenges later in life.^{3, 4}



- **There are proven ways to keep vulnerable kids from ever suffering abuse or neglect.**⁵ In 2011, Texas confirmed nearly 66,000 cases of child abuse or neglect,⁶ yet the state legislature that year also slashed by 44% state resources for child abuse prevention that already reached only a fraction of the families who could benefit from it.⁷ Child abuse prevention services use proven strategies that give families the help they need to keep their kids safe. These services are shown to dramatically reduce children's chances of experiencing abuse or neglect—in some cases, cutting bad odds by as much as half.⁸
- **Many kids can remain safely with their families** even after being found at risk for abuse or neglect. Early interventions help put families on a better path.
- When it is safe and appropriate, **keeping families together is best for kids.** Texas law and our Department of Family and Protective Services acknowledge this, noting that *safe family reunification* is the best outcome for children.⁹ Policies, programs, and service-delivery models within the child welfare system that involve and engage parents in a meaningful way have a proven effect: they help families identify their specific needs and strengths, as well as get access to community resources that lead them to create a safe home for their child.¹⁰ Healing a child's family of origin shows support for the child when it reduces the trauma of being taken away from home in the first place.

How to Make It Happen

- **Do what we know works early on, including prevention, early intervention, and in-home services:** These areas are often the first to be cut from our child welfare budget, despite their proven track record at keeping children safe.

- **Meaningfully engage parents involved in the child welfare system at all stages of services** (Investigations, Family-Based Safety Services, and Conservatorship). Parental engagement allows parents to recognize their own needs and strengths, and connect to resources that will support their ability to create a safe home for their child.¹¹
- **Strengthen family reunification efforts.** Measures that make it more difficult for parents to be involved and ultimately reunify with their children don't serve the best interests of children.

For more on this strategy see: <http://txchildren.org/Report/Protection>

Thinking About Costs

Preventing child abuse, neglect, and family disintegration makes a tremendous difference, not just for individual kids but for society as a whole. Right now, Texas spends an estimated \$5.2 billion more per year in greater correctional, health care, and workforce productivity losses that are "indirect costs" resulting from past child abuse and neglect. To put that in perspective, that's more than Texas spends on its entire prison system in a year.

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Increase school success.



The things known to work in helping kids get ahead in school need our investment and attention. Strategies such as strong pre-kindergarten offerings and student supports that look at the whole child so that children can succeed academically are key in ensuring success for tomorrow's Texas.

Giving all children the opportunity to succeed, with tools to become productive, contributing members of society, is a goal that's both worthy and attainable. A growing body of research shows how education and soft skill-development in children occurs in concert: kids learn the most when they develop cognitive and social-emotional skills in an integrated way in classrooms. Starting from very early in life into the years when we focus most on preventing high school students from dropping out, Texas' approach to education can stay relevant for the times we live in by helping kids develop *all* the tools they need for later success.

What to Know

- Right now, Texas falls behind the rest of the nation in educational attainment. Among states, **Texas has the lowest percentage of residents with a high school diploma** or GED.¹ Persistently high dropout rates are a threat to the state's economy in the future.²
- A contributing factor to our dropout rate is that many children in Texas miss out on early experiences linked to later success. **Texas has the eighth-highest**



percentage of children growing up in poverty nationwide.³ For these children to break into the middle class and thrive in later life, education is essential.

- Economists and social scientists have proven that **quality early education is one of the most cost-effective ways to support children's future success**; it can have the effect of leveling the educational playing field for disadvantaged children.⁴ Early child development reaps economic benefits in the future. Giving a solid foundation for learning helps children grow into productive and contributing members of society.
- Early education and public education have long attracted bipartisan support, but more recently Texas moved in the wrong direction. With the nation's third-lowest per-pupil education spending, **Texas' legislature in 2011 eliminated full-day pre-kindergarten and cut public education overall by \$5.4 billion**, representing a 15% reduction in services, compared to the prior budget.⁵
- **Full-day pre-kindergarten helps children grow up primed for success**, as do other services that met cuts. These included reading, math, and science initiatives; physical education and fitness programs; and proven school-based drop-out prevention efforts, like the Ninth Grade Transition and Intervention Program and the Limited English Proficiency Student Success Initiative. Services for students with limited English proficiency, as well as many of the student support services that are critical to students' wellbeing and academic success, met setbacks in the budget.

*Focusing on Early Opportunities & Success
Preventing dropout and failure.*

- These choices will result in displacing costs to local communities, and they carry a high price tag in future budgets. A study by the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University found that **the cost to Texas of a single year's class of high school dropouts is up to \$9.6 billion annually** due to lost revenue and outright expenses over their lifetimes.⁶ Critical, cost-effective investments in education, including early education now, would prevent later costs that result from having too many Texans under-educated.

How to Make it Happen

- **Restore funding of the Pre-Kindergarten Early Start (PKES) grant program** to ensure Texas' eligible children have access to the school-readiness preparation they need.
- **Count costs responsibly:** Texas should continue to fund school-based services and pilot programs shown to improve student retention and provide the necessary support to struggling students. The state should engage in forward-thinking budgeting when it comes to preparing our future workforce and should restore funding cut from the public education budget last legislative session.

For more on this strategy: <http://tinyurl.com/whyPreK>

Thinking About Costs

According to a report by the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, high quality pre-kindergarten education in Texas returns over **\$3.50** for every **\$1** it requires, thanks to reductions in delinquency and increased earnings and workforce participation. A more recent long-term study of a publicly funded preschool program in Chicago demonstrates consistent and enduring benefits for children who began preschool at age 3 or 4. Higher educational levels, incomes, socioeconomic status, and rates of health insurance coverage—and lower rates of substance abuse and criminal justice system involvement—occurred as a result of having attended preschool. The study's lead researcher found that the returns to society over the lifetime of the child were close to **\$11** for every **\$1** society invests.

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Measure how well pre-kindergarten programs deliver on their promise.



Laying the groundwork for later school success—and lifetime successes that can help Texas get ahead tomorrow—begins before kindergarten. Making sure children are prepared for success in the K-12 system requires Texas to measure the effectiveness of child care, Head Start, and public school pre-kindergarten programs in preparing children to enter kindergarten school ready.

Research suggests that social/emotional development, sometimes called “soft skills,” and language development are the greatest predictors of future success in school.¹ Although the circumstance a child is born into “plays a powerful role in determining adult success,” disadvantaged children overcome tough odds frequently when they get help developing these skills early on.² In 2005, the Texas Legislature created a school-readiness certification system in order to measure the effectiveness of child care, Head Start, and public school pre-K programs in preparing young children to obtain these skills prior to kindergarten. The piloted system has evolved over the years, and is now assessing the effectiveness of 7,800 classrooms in preparing 113,000 children in pre-literacy acquisition prior to kindergarten. While pre-literacy is one indicator of kindergarten readiness, the research demonstrates that other factors such as social and emotional development, language and communication, and mathematics and numeracy (just to name a few) are critical in preparing children for

success in the K-12 system.³ Expanding our state’s assessment system to include more key areas of school readiness would ensure Texas knows whether and which early education programs are providing the most bang for the buck.

What to Know

- In the first three years of life, brain cells become increasingly interconnected as a child is exposed to new experiences. Beginning at age three, the brain starts eliminating brain cells not being used. **With a quality early childhood education, the brain works faster**, as more connections are made. Children wind up better prepared for the increased demands on learning and behavior they encounter in elementary school and beyond.⁴
- **A quality early childhood education leads to higher IQ scores**, improved academic achievement, lower welfare utilization, lower criminal activity, and higher employment rates.⁵
- The Texas Education Code requires districts to administer a literacy test to all Kindergarten students within the first 60 days of the school year to determine their “school readiness,”⁶ and since 2011 the state has had a system that uses literacy test results to determine which pre-K providers will be designated as “Pre-K Centers of Excellence.”⁷ Though assessing literacy is one indicator of school readiness, research demonstrates that other **factors such as a child’s social and emotional development, pre-numeracy, and**



physical development are critical determinants of their ability to enter kindergarten ready to learn.⁸

- **The state and federal governments spend almost \$2 billion a year in early childhood education in Texas.**⁹ Research-based, developmentally appropriate measurement tools help decision-makers know how effectively this money is being used.

How to Make it Happen

- **Fund research-based developmentally appropriate tools** that measure the effectiveness of pre-kindergarten, Head Start, government subsidized, and other community-based child care programs in preparing children for kindergarten. Texas needs a statewide evaluation system to ensure taxpayers are getting a return on investment from pre-K programs serving hundreds of thousands of four year olds in public schools, private child care settings, and Head Start centers. Pre-K reforms over the last decade have built an expectation that taxpayer investments in early childhood programs prepare children to succeed when they enter public school. Assessment helps inform lawmakers, communities, and parents on how well providers are achieving this public policy goal of school readiness and identify areas where children ultimately need to be better prepared for future success in school. The opportunity for pre-K programs to seek a quality designation encourages practitioners to review their programs and make local, independent decisions on best practices.
- **Allow the commissioner of education to allow for a multidimensional assessment tool to be included in the list of approved and funded assessment tools.** By revising the Texas Education Code so that our state assessment system considers other factors, Texas would help encourage early childhood teachers to focus on a range of skills in preparing pre-K students. This would also give Texas the ability to recognize child care providers, Head Start, and public school pre-K schools with a designation of “Pre-K Center of Excellence” based on testing a broader domain of skills proven to lead to school readiness.

Thinking About Costs

Kindergarten and first-graders are retained more often than any other students in elementary or middle school. When pre-K providers prepare their students well, the public schools benefit from fewer early grade retentions. Promoting school readiness is a cost-effective alternative to spending over \$1.3 million every school day re-educating students who have already attended these grades.

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Be sure Texas kids get the same health opportunities as children in other states.



“In this new world, the single best way to ensure kids access the coverage and care they need is by covering their parents.”

– Joan Alker, Georgetown University’s Center for Children and Families

Giving children the healthiest possible start in life reaps returns for decades to come. That’s why Texas chambers of commerce, faith interests, and leaders from across the ideological spectrum have worked so hard over the years to bring down Texas’ persistently high rate of uninsured children. For all the progress of recent years, more than 16% of Texas kids are at risk of falling behind in their development and getting sick more often because they live without health coverage.¹ The good news is Texas has a powerful new ally in the campaign to cover more children: the Affordable Care Act.

What to Know:

- Efforts at the state level to improve the lives of uninsured children have helped bring down Texas’ uninsured child rate by a few percentage points since 2009.² However, Texas still has the nation’s second-highest rate and the largest number of uninsured kids. Experts say major improvement could lie ahead because, if implemented correctly, **federal health reform has the ability to reduce the rate of uninsured kids by 40%.**³
- Some Texas kids have already gained or kept coverage under the reform law, which bans denying health insurance to children with pre-existing conditions, ends lifetime caps on health care, and ensures existing CHIP and Medicaid services continue to work well for children.^{4,5} But the Affordable Care Act’s greatest impact may well come from the parts of the law that provide **coverage for more parents, something shown to lead to healthier kids,** as more children get coverage and services they need to thrive as a result, and more children experience healthier development as parents’ health and mental health needs are met.^{6,7}
- Most children in Texas who are uninsured already qualify for Medicaid or CHIP, and one of the things contributing to their remaining uninsured is how few of their parents are eligible.⁸ Earning just \$3,400 per year is too much for a parent of one child in Texas to qualify for Medicaid coverage today; income limits for parents here have not changed since 1985.⁹ Few low-income parents can afford or are offered private health care through their jobs, so they stay uninsured and often their children do, too. **Leaving a child’s low-income parents uninsured roughly triples the odds that that child will be uninsured,** even if he or she is eligible for Medicaid or CHIP.¹⁰
- One part of the Affordable Care Act that would help cover 40% of the state’s uninsured parents of young Texans is the Medicaid extension, a solution that would offer approximately 710,000 Texas parents earning up to 133% of the federal poverty level health insurance.¹¹ **Medicaid extension is entirely paid for by federal dollars** for three years, with the federal contribution never falling below 90% after that. Texas must pass legislation in order to take advantage of this opportunity.
- The Affordable Care Act also provides subsidies for middle-income families who will purchase health insurance in an online marketplace called the exchange. This is especially important in Texas because so **many middle class children and families lack affordable health care through their jobs.**¹² In fact, in 2011, the one group of Texas children more likely to be uninsured than in the year before were kids in families earning 200%-300% of the federal

poverty level (roughly \$38,000-\$57,000 a year for a family of three).¹³

How to Make it Happen:

- **Approve the Medicaid solution** that allows low-income adults to enroll for coverage starting in 2014 at no added cost to Texas until 2017. The strategy helps give families economic stability, potentially saves lives, and promises to help children get covered and grow up in healthier households due to their parents being insured.
- **Give kids here maximum opportunities** as Texas implements health care reform, including seeing that the Texas Department of Insurance does its part to enforce the law in ways that benefit family consumers over insurance companies and includes the full scope of pediatric health and mental health services families need.
- **Monitor the establishment of the health care exchange**, which will initially be federally facilitated but later can involve more partnership with the state, leading to reforms customized for Texans. Tailoring the exchange for Texas could allow for more affordable health coverage options for more Texas families.

For more on this topic, visit <http://texaswellandhealthy.org>

Thinking About Costs

Texas economists have found the solution that would provide Medicaid for more Texas parents, starting in 2014, would provide a windfall for state and local governments, as well. According to the Perryman Group, the influx of tens of billions in federal dollars if Texas moves forward with the Medicaid extension over the decade would affect Texas' economy in numerous ways. For example, it would generate \$1.29 more in state revenue for each \$1 Texas puts in, while also saving \$1.21 at the local level.

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Make sure children's schools and communities have healthy foods.



Children are better nourished in environments where affordable, healthy foods abound.

Good nutrition sets a foundation for children to grow into healthier, more secure adults. Healthy foods not only help fight off diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, and prevent obesity; these foods also help children develop and grow, perform better in school, and get into healthy habits to last a lifetime.¹ In many parts of Texas, rural and urban communities face challenges finding fresh, healthy, affordable foods nearby. Having good foods readily available ensures more children grow up with a healthy diet and weight.²

What to Know:

- **Texas has the second-highest rate of children who are food insecure,**³ meaning that their families report it isn't always possible to have an adequate meal available for their children.⁴
- **Texas has a severe shortage of supermarkets** — in fact, fewer per capita than any state.⁵ A scarcity of affordable, healthy food is linked to poorer health, especially diet-related illnesses in many areas.
- Having fresh, affordable food options leads to



healthier eating and less weight gain. One study found **the presence of grocery stores or fresh food retailers can increase fruit and vegetable consumption by up to 32%.**⁶

- Texas schools, with the support of the legislature and Texas Department of Agriculture, are helping address gaps through farm-to-school initiatives, which increase the availability of fresh, healthy foods in school cafeterias from Texas farms⁷ in all 1,200 of the state's school districts.⁸ According to the National Farm to School Network, **Texas is among the top eight states for farm-to-school efforts.**⁹
- Another innovative effort, underway in Houston, is looking into a **public-private financing effort that would stimulate supermarket development** in places that need grocery stores.¹⁰ The initiative in Pennsylvania that served as a model for the Houston effort received an award from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for its contribution to obesity prevention efforts, after it improved over 500,000 people's access to healthy food.¹¹ Attracting farmers markets and "healthy corner stores" (i.e., convenience stores that sell fruits and vegetables) also fits in with the healthy food financing approach.
- **School and community food gardens and urban agriculture increase the availability of fresh produce** in underserved areas, while giving communities a role. For example, school garden programs aim to teach children about nature and plants, alongside the importance of growing and eating nutritious foods.¹²

How to Make it Happen:

- **Fight food insecurity and child obesity at the same time** by improving access to affordable, healthful foods, a solution which is easier, better for families, and more cost-effective than trying to change what low-income families can purchase with federal food assistance funds.
- **Expand access to farmers markets** and other retailers offering fresh fruits and vegetables, with support for innovative and effective public-private efforts like healthy food financing.
- **Continue to strengthen farm-to-school** linkages as an effective way to bring healthy foods into the school environment.
- **Support the growth and sustainability of local community food gardens**, for example, by establishing a process for cities to apply to use available state land for community gardening purposes and by continuing to support efforts to have gardens at schools.

For more information, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/FoodEverywhere>

Thinking About Costs

Obesity and child hunger cost Texas billions of dollars each year, as they contribute to lost productivity, higher health care costs, and children missing more school. Efforts to bring healthy foods to communities lower these costs and can provide a boon to local economies. Such an effort in one state involved public-private financing to stimulate supermarket development in areas without access to healthy, fresh foods. The effort did more than prevent obesity for over a half-million people. It created and saved an estimated 5,000 jobs.

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Help children not just eat well, but drink well.

With the cooperation of parents, schools, and communities, we can change how much kids consume the #1 contributor of added sugar in their diets: sweet drinks. Raising awareness would help make sugary beverages an occasional treat again, instead of the increasingly harmful staple they've become in many children's diets.

Texans know children need healthy foods and exercise, and that's one reason why, among states, our state has often been at the policy forefront of efforts to battle childhood obesity in schools and communities. Despite our initiative, our childhood obesity rate remains stubbornly high. One reason might be that one of the biggest contributors to weight gain still needs addressing: the big spike in kids' consumption of sugary drinks.

What to Know:

- Though many parents and educators have a sense that sugary drinks—sodas, sweetened teas, sweetened fruity drinks, and sports drinks with extra sweeteners added—are unhealthy, few know just how much they hurt Texas kids. No single category of food accounts for more sugar and calories in the average child's diet than these drinks.^{1,2} In fact, **43% of the rise in calorie intake over the last thirty years is due to sugary drinks** alone.³
- Nearly one-third of 10- to 17-year-old Texans are overweight or obese.⁴ It's no coincidence that



almost **1 in 3 Texas teens has three or more sugary drinks per day**—the equivalent of two pounds of liquid sugar every week.⁵

- Research shows that even one 12-ounce sugary drink each day can lead to annual weight gain of up to 15 pounds⁶ and **increase the risk of type II diabetes 26%**,⁷ which can devastate a child's long-term health. Diabetes and obesity also contribute to projections that **this generation will have a shorter life expectancy** than the prior one.⁸
- Today's teenagers get 13% of their calories from soft drinks,⁹ which **add no nutritional value and don't fill them up.** (Sugary drinks don't make kids feel less hungry the way food does, so they can keep consuming them without feeling a need to stop.)
- Most kids and even adults are unaware that this many calories come in a cup. Few know, for instance, that at McDonald's **a 32-ounce soft drink has more calories than a cheeseburger.** To work off the beverage's 310 calories, a child would have to run for 30 minutes at a racing nine-minute mile pace.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Raise children's and families' awareness about healthy vs. unhealthy beverages:** Texas needs to make sure its schools follow existing rules limiting sugary beverages in educational environments. Federal law already prohibits most of these drinks during meal times¹⁰ and state law bans them during the school day.¹¹ Studies show limiting access to sugary drinks in schools can reduce kids' consumption of them and increase consumption of healthier alternatives.^{12, 13, 14} Educational campaigns

like the Austin Independent School District and Dell Children's Center No Soda Challenge and labeling vending machines where these drinks are still offered on school campuses bolster awareness, therefore helping in reducing consumption.

- **Institute a penny-per-ounce tax on sugary drinks:** Revenue from such a tax could help pay for children's health programs, while also raising awareness about the problems sugary drinks pose and reducing their consumption.

For more on this topic, visit <http://drinkwelltexas.org>

Thinking About Costs

Texas and its businesses will soon spend \$32 billion per year on diet-related illnesses, nearly all of them linked to increased sugary drink consumption. These illnesses affect quality of life, worker productivity, and associated medical costs.

Hospitalization costs for obese children nearly doubled in just the six years between 1999 and 2005. Average healthcare costs for a child deemed obese triple that of an average child.

Instead of picking up some of the costs that their industry leaves taxpayers to bear, beverage companies market these drinks extensively to children. In 2006, they spent \$1.6 billion marketing unhealthy drinks to consumers aged 2-17, more than marketers spent on any other food or beverage.

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Bring more of the positive into schools.



When schools are strategic and thoughtful about student behavior and classroom discipline using a proven framework, like school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, it does more than reduce classroom disruptions and bullying. It results in school-wide improvements in academic performance, attendance, and feelings of safety.

An emerging consensus among researchers shows schools are not only a primary place for children to learn academics but where they hone social, emotional, and behavioral habits just as important as school-smarts to their long-term success.¹ Many teachers report feeling ill-equipped to address behavior concerns in the classroom. However, a growing number of Texas schools are adopting frameworks and strategies that guide children and youth to make good choices, while providing teachers the tools necessary to address students' needs and identify those kids who might need additional help to be better prepared to learn in the classroom. State-level support for efforts like these would bring strategies already shown to work to schools and classrooms across Texas.

What to Know:

- A 2012 national survey of school teachers found that **87% of teachers teach students with behavioral challenges** and 72% of those say they need more resources to address the behavioral needs of their students.² Social and behavioral challenges contribute to a host of other issues for schools and Texas: from bullying to disciplinary actions, from truancy to dropping out of school.³
- An extensive study by the Council of State Governments published in 2011 found an astounding **60 percent of Texas students were suspended or expelled** at least once between 7th and 12th grade. Kids punished this way are also about five times more likely to drop out of school or repeat a grade.
- While any child can act out sometimes, **not all students face the same type of discipline** for their errors in behavior. Among kids with an emotional disturbance, half are suspended 11 times or more.⁴ African-American students, and in particular African-American males, are substantially more likely than their peers to receive a discretionary disciplinary action that removes them from the classroom, even though they are not more likely to receive a mandatory removal for more severe offenses.
- **School disciplinary referrals are the single greatest predictor of juvenile justice involvement in Texas.**⁵ According to the Council on State Government's analysis, "When a student was suspended or expelled for a discretionary school discipline violation, this action nearly tripled (2.85 times) the likelihood of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent school year."⁶ Although not factored into the Council on State Government report, many disciplinary challenges fall to school resource officers, who issue Class C misdemeanor tickets for misbehavior. This, too, increases justice system involvement.
- **Educators report feeling ill-equipped to handle behavior issues** and related concerns at school.^{7, 8} Nearly 1 out of 3 special education teachers and 1 in 4 school health service staff say they feel they do not have the training, support, or supervision to deal with students' behavioral health challenges.⁹ Despite that, most children who receive mental or behavioral health services get them at school.¹⁰
- The good news is schools that deliberately plan a successful approach for children can see progress school-wide.¹¹ One effective framework, called school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS or school-wide PBIS), can

*Focusing on Youth Success, Mental Wellbeing
School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.*

cut bullying by half or more; what's more, research shows **PBIS can cut disciplinary actions by up to 60 percent**, while also improving attendance, academics, and the school climate.^{12, 13}

How to Make it Happen:

- **Link more schools to PossiBillitleS, by promoting and assisting schools in the use and implementation of school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports:** When implemented to fidelity, school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports improves schools' climate. When schools effectively use the "PBIS" approach school-wide for all students, teachers have the tools they need to prevent and address students' behavior concerns early. Schools can implement PBIS with little or no outside funding, and federal grants can support schools that need extra resources.

For more on this recommendation, see <http://txchildren.org/PBIS>

Thinking About Costs

Providing supports that allow children to stay in school and complete their education benefits Texas. It lowers public costs and increases residents' wages and tax revenues. One analysis found for every one student Texas gets through school who otherwise would have dropped out, the state saves an estimated \$4,935 per year in public costs.

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports helps schools keep kids engaged. It also increases their funding, improving attendance rates and reducing truancy and exclusionary disciplinary practices. Dallas ISD, for example, lost more than \$1.5 million dollars from out-of-school suspension alone in the 2010-2011 school year.

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Make sure, wherever kids grow up, they can be active.



Part of reducing and preventing childhood obesity is ensuring kids can grow up in communities and schools supportive of active, healthy living.

Doctors and researchers have looked into the question of where children tend to be most physically fit. Not surprisingly, it's in the places that make it easy for children to live a healthy life. Where children can safely walk or ride a bike, where schools offer quality physical education, and where there are parks to play in and child-friendly spaces outside, more kids exercise in their daily life. Yet in the places with a lot of barriers to physical activity, Texas' obesity challenge is growing.¹

What to Know:

- Fitness in childhood promotes a host of physical, social, and cognitive benefits, including improved focus and behavior in the classroom.^{2,3} **Kids with good fitness tend to perform better in school** and score higher on achievement tests,⁴ including Texas' own exams.⁵
- Researchers have found that infrastructure like roads, schools, parks, neighborhoods, and transit systems—**our built environments—factor into how active kids are** in a community. In 1969, 87% of children in elementary and middle school who lived within a mile of a school walked or rode a bike there. By 2009, with more cars on the road and many neighborhoods without sidewalks, that number dropped to 35%.⁶
- **Texas has the seventh-highest rate of childhood obesity** in the country; more than 20% of our 10- to 17-year-olds are already obese,⁷ and lack of exercise is one reason why. Obesity is preventable, but it's linked to a host of other health problems: higher levels of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, breathing problems, musculoskeletal discomfort, social/emotional challenges, and serious health problems later in life.⁸ Preventing obesity in childhood would make a huge difference for communities' health for years to come.
- Kids spend a lot of their day learning, and **the amount of exercise children get at school factors into their fitness**. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that children participate in 60 minutes or

more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day.⁹ Physical education encourages exercise, but many Texas school districts are eliminating physical education and related courses in some grade levels.¹⁰

- **Fitness and opportunities to be active and maintain that fitness in childhood affect a person well into adulthood.**¹¹ The documented links between fitness and academics¹² suggest increasing physical activity is a good way to curb the obesity epidemic while putting kids on a path to school success, followed by life successes. School attendance¹³ and overall school performance¹⁴ would likely improve if fewer Texas youth were obese.
- **Networks of safe sidewalks and bike paths would also help kids be more active.**^{15,16} To encourage active transportation, the Centers for Disease Control and The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies recommend complete streets, which are roads thoughtfully designed to be safe for not just driving but walking and bicycling, too.¹⁷
- **The Texas legislature has shown bipartisan support for improving the built environment and improving P.E.** over the years. One example is Safe Routes to School.¹⁸ In 2010, the Texas Transportation Commission administered \$54 million in grants for 200 new Safe Routes to Schools projects, which have been shown to increase weekly physical activity levels for children.¹⁹
- **Children can't control the safety of their neighborhoods, the condition of sidewalks and bikeways, or the amount of time allowed for physical activity in school.** It falls to us and our policies to help improve the built environment and promote fitness in schools.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Make it safer for kids to walk or bicycle for health:** Texas can make sure future transportation projects and plans include complete streets that are safe for motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit users of all ages. With more walkable communities, more Texans will grow up with active transportation of the sort most of today's adults grew up experiencing.^{20,21}
- **Increase the physical education requirement in middle school by one semester:** Increasing PE from four semesters to five semesters in middle school will not only help improve fitness and address youth obesity in early adolescence; research shows it's also a good strategy to put more students on the path to academic success. Increasing fitness now would lead to a more vibrant future workforce, healthier families, and ultimately a more prosperous Texas.

For more information: <http://tinyurl.com/PoundsofCure>

Thinking About Costs

Helping Texans get fit and implementing complete streets policies can bring economic benefits: Our state would save \$19 billion over the next decade if average body mass index here could be brought down by just 5%. If smarter infrastructure design occurs, we also may avoid costly retrofit projects and see improved economic activity. For example, adding a Dallas public rail line in the 1990s reduced car use and led more people to navigate downtown shops on foot, while increasing retail sales in the area by 33% (compared to only 3% sales growth in the rest of the city).

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Make clear the real costs of unhealthy substances.



Texas can improve children's health, reduce state spending on widespread health problems, and raise revenue to support a healthier future. We can do it all at once with careful planning about how and what we tax.

Over the last century, there have been many times when widespread improvements in people's health followed smart public health campaigns. From getting more children vaccinated against diseases to reducing smoking, our most successful public policies can save lives. We don't often think this way about the tax system, but evidence shows it can have a powerful public health impact. Research points to how we can improve children's health, raise revenue for health services, and curb medical spending—all at the same time—through targeted, health-focused taxes to improve our state's outlook.

What to Know:

- From 1975-2000, our nation helped prevent 800,000 smoking-related deaths,¹ and **the most effective tool in public health advocates' toolkit was the tobacco tax.**² Youth, who are particularly sensitive to price increases, see some of the greatest health gains from tobacco taxes.³



- **It has been nearly three decades since Texas reexamined its alcohol tax**, despite that Texans drink more than residents of other states and that alcohol abuse is linked to a host of health challenges. Texans between the ages of 17 and 27 are the most likely to abuse alcohol; due to their price sensitivity, they are also the group most likely to start consuming less alcohol if the tax on it rises.⁴
- Obesity, especially in children, is a growing public health concern in Texas. **Preventing obesity requires curbing consumption of the biggest contributor of extra calories and sugar in Texans' diets.** To reduce obesity and overweight prevalence and raise revenue for obesity prevention initiatives, health scientists recommend a tax on sugary drinks like soda.
- The Institutes of Medicine,⁵ the U.S. Conference of Mayors,⁶ the U.S. Department of Agriculture,⁷ and public health officials nationwide agree that a tax on sugary drinks would help reduce obesity, just as the tobacco tax decreased smoking. The United States Department of Agriculture has found that a tax on sweetened beverages could result in the average adult losing an estimated 3.8 pounds a year, while **the average overweight child would lose 4.5 pounds a year**, bringing down rates of obesity and diabetes for both children and adults.^{8, 9}

How to Make it Happen:

- **Enact a penny-per-ounce tax on sugary drinks to improve kids' health:** Science shows how such a tax would curb obesity, while providing funding to offset the cost of diet-related illnesses. A portion of revenue from the tax should be allocated for obesity prevention and children's health services.
- **Explore other measures that reduce public health spending while increasing public health revenue,** such as tobacco and alcohol taxes. Polls show more Texans prefer these health-focused taxes rising over seeing our children's health care or school funding cut.¹⁰

For more on this topic, visit <http://tinyurl.com/HealthyTax>

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Thinking About Costs

Public health challenges like alcoholism, widespread tobacco use, and obesity carry real costs for Texas and its taxpayers. The Texas Comptroller estimates that the obesity epidemic alone will cost Texas businesses \$32.5 billion by 2030.

Each year, nearly 4,000 Texas babies are born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. The estimated lifetime cost to society for just *one* of these cases is up to \$2 million.

It makes fiscal sense for Texas to plan ways to cover these costs while reducing the health problems that lead to them. In 2014, a penny-per-ounce tax on sugary drink sales in Texas would bring the state an estimated \$1.1 billion. A conservative estimate of the impact of bringing Texas' alcohol tax up to the national average was calculated in 2004 as \$152 million, the equivalent, with inflation, of \$180 million in 2011 for the state.



Prevent kids from getting into trouble with the law.

Kids who otherwise faced a good chance of entering the juvenile justice system avoid it altogether instead when we pay enough attention to their needs upfront.

Many children face serious hardships growing up, and these types of environments can lead to higher risks of entering the juvenile justice system. The good news is there are demonstrated ways to lower the risks. The kids with really challenging odds—for example, children growing up with child abuse or poverty or in homes scarred by substance abuse—frequently stay out of trouble and even thrive, when given the right supports and services. Texas reformed its juvenile justice system in 2011 with more focus on addressing misconduct early and preventing delinquency altogether.

What to Know:

- Many kids, even in tough circumstances, go on to lead a healthy life when they are involved in situations that show them people care about them and have high expectations for their future, and when kids are able to engage in a positive ways with the world around them. Research says **having those things matters more to a child's odds of avoiding crime** than not having risk factors around them, like poverty or drug use.¹ Giving kids skills for



problem-solving, self-awareness, and interpersonal relationships also helps at-risk kids meet success.²

- **Many delinquency prevention services and supports are evidence based**, meaning they are shown to lower kids' odds of committing crimes. Effective mentoring programs, social skills training programs, and family support services all have been demonstrated to work in preventing delinquency.³
- The 2011 Texas juvenile justice system reform law gave a **prevention responsibility to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department**. The agency was required to develop a statewide prevention system around programs that are proven to work, cost-effective, and held accountable for preventing "delinquency, truancy, dropping out of school, or referral to the juvenile justice system."⁴ However, the legislature did not allocate funding for prevention services.
- Prioritizing services with a proven effect in preventing delinquency reduces juvenile justice system involvement. As a result, **prevention substantially reduces costs for the state.**⁵

How to Make it Happen:

- **Prioritize delinquency prevention:** Ensuring evidence-based prevention services for youth would bring down costs in our juvenile justice system and benefit children. While the 2011 juvenile justice reform law's mandate for prevention seems promising, in reality, TJJD won't have an obligation to do more with this requirement until it has funding to carry it out. The new agency's underfunding means prevention-focused reforms risk being little

more than words on paper. Increasing dollars for prevention and early intervention now would mean paying less later, and it would give more Texas youth a pathway to success.

- **Improve coordination at the state and local levels** to minimize duplication of prevention services and ensure efforts are strategic and cost effective.

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

Thinking About Costs

Failure to prevent delinquency brings expensive financial and social consequences.

On average, the cost to house a youth in a juvenile justice facility costs \$169 per day in a county facility or \$359 per day in a state facility. As of 2010, it cost the state \$131,247 per year to imprison one child in a Texas secure facility, and youth generally stay longer than one year.

However, the costs of not preventing delinquency do not stop at the juvenile justice system. As the Texas Legislative Budget Board reported, "Youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system are more likely to become adult criminals which will ultimately cost the state more resources in future incarceration and public assistance, as well as endanger the public with future criminal activity."

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Make school discipline fair and equitable.



When children misbehave, they should be held accountable; similarly, when schools treat children unfairly and consign certain children to harsher punishments than others, they, too, should be held accountable for their actions.

The more school children receive supports to reach their potential, the better off Texas will be. We expect our schools to provide a welcoming climate for every child and to help guide kids to success. Unfortunately, schools can stunt children's potential, too, with misguided punishments that remove students from the classroom and are unfairly directed toward some groups of kids more than others. Research shows Texas schools can act as a child's portal into the juvenile justice system¹ and that this practice does a great disservice to kids and their communities alike, causing fewer children to reach their potential. With certain kids consistently removed from their classroom regardless of the frequency or level of their wrongdoing, some Texas students miss out on the equal shot at completing their education that every child deserves.

What to Know:

- **Despite comparable rates of misbehavior with white children, kids of color are far more likely to be removed from the classroom.** Where the punishment for a disciplinary issue can be decided at the discretion of school personnel—usually for misbehavior included in the local code of conduct



(referred to as discretionary violations, which differ from a punishment at school that's mandated by law)—African-American and Latino children are much more likely to receive harsher punishment than their white counterparts.

- A Council of State Governments study of nearly 1 million Texas students' records showed that African-American kids have a 31% higher likelihood of receiving a discretionary disciplinary action compared to white students.² Yet for nondiscretionary violations—misbehaviors for which the punishment is already prescribed—African Americans were 23% less likely than their white peers to receive a suspension or expulsion. **The Council of State Governments study controlled for factors like poverty and absenteeism before confirming race as a predictive factor** in Texas students' expulsions and suspensions.
- Students in special education are more likely to be disciplined harshly, too. While the Council of State Governments study found an alarming **15% of all Texas middle and high schools students were expelled ten or more times over a six-year period, for children with an emotional disturbance, this climbed to a full 50% of students.** Additionally, Texas Appleseed reports that 317 Texas school districts disproportionately suspend special education students.³
- **Schools don't collect consistent data about disparities in how they use police-based discipline.** Only 26 of 42 school districts responding to a 2012 survey by Texas Appleseed were able to report the race and ethnicity of the children whom they had arrested or issued Class C misdemeanor tickets to at school.⁴ However of those 26 that could report

this data, 23 reported African-American students were overrepresented in ticketing and/or arrests. Hispanic students were overrepresented in three districts (however, not all districts collected data that could separate Hispanic students from white students).

How to Make it Happen:

- **Improve school districts' transparency and accountability regarding school-based police disciplinary practices.** Data on arrests and school ticketing, including race, ethnicity and special education status, should be collected uniformly in all districts across the state and made available to the public, so parents and communities can gain a better understanding of practices within their local schools.
- **Require that school districts that consistently direct harsh discipline towards certain groups of kids set a course for change:** When school district data collected by TEA shows disproportionate discipline of students of color or special education students, the district should be required to create and make public an improvement plan.

For more on this, see <http://tinyurl.com/RepairDiscipline>

Thinking About Costs

School discipline practices that remove students from the classroom are linked to devastating outcomes for Texas youth. Students who get suspended or expelled face five times higher odds of having to repeat a grade or eventually dropping out of school. Being expelled or suspended even one time roughly doubles a child's odds that, by the end of the following school year, he or she will come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Allowing our schools to become gateways to the criminal justice system instead of to achievement and employment carries a heavy cost for society. That's because every additional 100 students Texas helps to keep in the classroom through graduation, when they might have otherwise left school, is believed to save \$200,000 in annual crime costs for society, while netting an *additional* \$200,000 in annual economic activity due to improved productivity and human capital growth.

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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>

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Let children who need treatment get it.



Children diagnosed with illness ought to be able to get available treatment when their doctor recommends it. Unfortunately, for too many kids with mental health challenges, their health insurers' refusal to treat their concerns the same as physical health concerns stands in the way of them getting care they need to thrive.

When children receive necessary mental health care most are able to function successfully at home, in school, and in their community. There have been some great strides forward in the past decade at the federal level to ensure that when children need mental health services, they get them at the same level as they do physical health services.¹ Now, Texas children need the state to ensure that federal mental health protections are enforced by the Texas Department of Insurance.

What to know

- More than 1.3 million Texan children or **1 out of every 5 kids has a mental illness** or disorder during the course of a year.²
- **Nearly 60% of these children and teens with a diagnosable mental disorder do not receive services**—a rate 20% higher than the national average.³



Photography courtesy of Any Baby Can

- Research shows that physical health is closely linked to mental health.⁴ In 2009, **mental health conditions were the fourth most common reason for children to be admitted to hospitals.**⁵ Making sure children's mental health needs get met is key to improving kids' overall wellbeing.
- In 2008, Congress passed the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, which required certain health insurance markets to cover mental health and physical health equally.⁶ Parity means, for example, that **companies can no longer put arbitrary limits on treatment or assign higher co-payments or deductibles for those who need mental health services.**
- The Affordable Care Act, passed in 2010, **expanded mental health parity for qualified health plans.**⁷
- A current Texas Department of Insurance rule enforces the 2008 Wellstone and Domenici Mental Health Parity Act,⁸ but **Texas' rule has yet to be updated to include changes under the Affordable Care Act.**
- The Texas Department of Insurance has a process for hearing parity complaints and ensuring parity is a consideration in health plans' certification. But **we need to ensure the higher federal standard of making sure health plans give equal treatment to physical health and mental health services is met.**⁹
- Children with public health coverage and mental health concerns face challenges, too. **Managed care in Children's Medicaid has allowed insurers to deny many Texas kids care** that their doctors or mental health professionals deemed medically necessary

but that insurers themselves do not. Part of the reason is that these plans authorize care for addressing mental health concerns in children in a more limited way than they do for adult patients and define medical necessity benefits differently for kids.¹⁰

How to Make It Happen

- **Update Texas' mental health parity rule** to reflect the changes made in the Affordable Care Act. With the millions of new individuals who will be covered through reform, it is all the more important that we have our state law in order and are able to enforce mental health parity.
- **Ensure the Texas Department of Insurance has a consumer-friendly portal** for parity complaints and grievances. Texans should feel empowered with information on whether their plan meets parity requirements.
- Mental health parity is an issue that involves the Texas Department of Insurance, Health and Human Services Commission, and the Department of State Health services. Each agency plays a vital role in the provision of mental health services to Texas children. **Coordination between state agencies is necessary for parity to be enforced throughout the state's insurance markets.**
- Require that payers—Medicaid, private insurance, and managed care organizations—of mental health services **reimburse for medically necessary mental health services** Texas children need.

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

Thinking About Costs

When children miss out on needed mental health services early on, their risk of developing more acute and harmful conditions that cost more to treat rises. Kids also often resort to poor coping strategies such as skipping school, social withdrawal, and risky behaviors like substance abuse. Each of these has an economic impact that intensifies as children age without the capacity they would otherwise have to achieve in school and in the workplace. When children lack options for proper treatment covered by their health insurance, they sometimes are left to get treatment in the juvenile justice or child welfare system at taxpayers' expense.

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Equip school staff to help troubled kids.



Too many Texas students are getting pushed out of school because of behavior or emotional challenges. The key to helping more kids succeed is equipping the adults around them to respond in ways that make a difference.

Meeting children's emotional and mental health needs leads to greater school success for individual students¹ and fewer classroom disruptions for everyone. Mental illness, experiences with trauma, and chronic stress affect many students' performance at school. Fortunately, there are ways schools can help address students' mental health needs. When done right, these efforts improve academic achievement and competence; reduce problem behavior; improve children's relationships; and lead to substantive, positive changes in the climate at school and in the classroom.²

What to Know:

- Mental health concerns in students are not uncommon. About **1 in 10 children between the ages of 9 and 17 have mental health issues** significant enough to severely interfere with their ability to function at home, in school, or in the community.³
- **Traumatic experiences and chronic stress can physically alter the structure of a child's brain**, which can get in the way of learning. Kids growing up in poverty or who experienced child abuse or neglect often face the type of ongoing stress or trauma linked to changes in how the brain processes information and responds to normal levels of stress.⁴ These experiences put them at higher risk for behavior problems and mental health concerns.^{5,6}
- Many teachers and other **school staff report lacking training** or support they need to effectively address their students' behavioral health, according to a survey done by the Texas Mental Health Transformation Project.⁷
- With growing academic pressures, teachers and school administrators increasingly let **school**

police and resource officers handle classroom disruptions, but these officers aren't required to have training that would help them respond to all students appropriately (e.g., de-escalation techniques and trauma-informed strategies, which have proven effective in working with kids with mental health concerns or a history of trauma).

- A disproportionate number of **Texas students with mental health concerns are removed from their classroom through expulsions and suspensions**. Between 1999 and 2009, 9 out of 10 students classified as having an emotional disturbance in a Texas public school got suspended or expelled on "discretionary" grounds (meaning the school's policy, and not state law, led to the punishment).⁸
- **Kids with mental health challenges are being funneled out of school and into the youth justice system**.⁹ In 2011, 44% of youth offenders sent to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department had a need for treatment by a licensed or specially trained provider for a mental health-related issue.¹⁰ That is more than twice as high as the rate for all kids.
- **Schools can effectively address behavior challenges linked to mental health concerns**, but it will require avoiding "zero tolerance" discipline policies. Texas lawmakers have worked already to make that the rule here. Now schools need tools and resources that help keep students with mental health concerns in school and learning, rather than pushing them out of school and into a system that criminalizes their behavior.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Make sure school personnel, including school**

police and resource officers, have proper training. Students' success, academically and otherwise, improves when those working with them have skills and tools they need to respond to mental health concerns. School personnel should be able to recognize, respond to, and make community-based referrals for students with suspected mental health concerns. This will let more students overcome or manage their symptoms, increase their chances of school success, and prevent them entering the juvenile or criminal justice system.

- **Weave social and emotional health into coordinated school health:** Since 2001, the Texas legislature has required grades K-8 to use coordinated school health, a strategy that gets educators, health and mental health staff, and community groups, including parents, to work together so kids' learning and health improves.¹¹ Mental and behavioral health fit into coordinated school health, but in 2011, legislators threatened to do away with coordinated school health altogether. Coordinated school health helps many Texan children already, and providing schools guidance and support in implementation would help still more kids.
- **Fully fund the systems and structures that help school staff address students' positive development** and mental health. This includes coordinated school health, Educational Service Centers, school counseling, and Communities In Schools—all services linked to academic success, as well. Educational Services Centers can also help schools use school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which assists schools in preventing behavior concerns early and linking students with mental health concerns to effective interventions, while also reducing disciplinary issues campus-wide.¹²

For more on this topic, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/TXSchoolNotPrison>

Thinking About Costs

With about 1 in 5 Texas kids experiencing a behavioral or mental health concern of some sort, it will be costly to Texas if schools miss the opportunity to help kids, when it is most effective—and when it results in the most cost savings—to do so.

Today annual public costs related to mental illness, substance abuse, and related 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, Texas schools' action could help curb a costly epidemic and draw billions more into the state's economy and coffers.

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Keep schools from criminalizing kids.



Minor student misbehavior should be handled within the school setting – not the criminal justice system. When police officers are in our schools writing students criminal tickets, students are more likely to be pushed into the justice system instead of guided towards the positive behaviors that can help promote lifetime success.

Each year, many of the Texas children who come into contact with the criminal justice or juvenile justice system enter it through our public schools.¹ This phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” occurs when discipline actions lead to immediate or later involvement with the justice system, whether through school-based citations, arrests, or discipline practices that remove kids from the classroom instead of redirect student behavior. Police officers were placed in schools to protect students’ safety, but these days schools rely more and more on police officers to address discipline in the classroom.² Officers have been found to ticket children for offenses as minor as chewing gum, using inappropriate language, or being disruptively noisy on the school bus. A choice to ticket a child is a choice against redirecting or teaching positive behavior in a more constructive way. As our state criminalizes youthful misbehavior, it misses opportunities to prepare children to be successful adults.



What to Know:

- Until quite recently, Texas students as young as six years old had been ticketed in school. During the 82nd Texas legislative session, **the state acknowledged ticketing is a problem** and eliminated the practice for students in sixth grade and below.³
- The presence of law enforcement in school environments is growing. **Policing on campuses across Texas represents the fastest-growing area of law enforcement in the state.**⁴
- **Students can be issued tickets in schools that range in cost from \$250 to \$500.** Failure to pay fines can result in community service or even incarceration.⁵
- **More than 275,000, non-traffic related tickets are issued to kids each year in Texas.** It is estimated most of these tickets are given to kids at schools.⁶ Most common citations written for misbehavior in schools send youth into adult municipal courts or justice of the peace courtrooms not developed to handle children.⁷
- **Whether a kid will receive a citation for misbehavior at school is largely dependent on what school the student attends.** Police presence and ticketing practices vary by district. Research shows that, as with other discipline practices, schools disproportionately give black students citations.⁸
- **School ticketing information is not readily available to parents** or even to schools themselves. This means districts and families alike have no way

of tracking how ticketing practices compare on their school campuses versus others in the state.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Collect information on school ticketing and make the information publicly available and easily accessible.** Having the Texas Education Agency keep data on ticketing would help school administrators evaluate how they compare to other school districts. It would also allow parents to gain a better understanding of the practice within their child's school.
- **Reduce the options of ticketing on school campuses further** as the next logical step towards complete elimination of school-based ticketing for Texas students.

For more on this strategy, see <http://tinyurl.com/TicketedKids>

Thinking About Costs

Children and their families miss school and work to deal with school citations because tickets often require a court appearance. Not only are there costs for parents who can't be on the job while in court with their child, there are costs to schools. For each instance when a student is absent for the day to deal with a ticket in court, their school registers a lower average daily attendance, receiving fewer dollars with which to educate the children in their charge.

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Take statewide a solution that’s already helping kids with mental illness.

In some parts of Texas, children with multiple challenges are finding great success in a coordinated, thoughtful approach that utilizes a family’s strengths to deliver effective treatment and services.

When children struggle with serious mental health challenges and can’t get help, it’s much harder for them to succeed at home, at school, and in the community. Many times, they require services from several different programs and agencies. Too often, these services are disconnected, causing gaps in service and ineffective treatment. Fortunately, several Texas communities have changed the way they do business to help kids and families connect with the services and support they need using a “system of care” approach. The results they’re seeing show why this way of helping kids with mental illness should be taken to scale.

What to Know

- Children with serious emotional disturbances *can* be successful in their communities, but it takes meeting their needs—not in a patchwork, uncoordinated way—but purposefully. **System of care is a method that’s proven to work right here in Texas.**
- The system of care approach helps communities



work with families to plan and deliver a range of services, treatments, and supports that **address whatever barriers are getting in the way of a child’s success.**

- Too often, without a system of care approach, the services kids and families really need are unaffordable. System of care has innovative funding strategies, so **children and families get the services they need affordably.**
- **Experts nationally and within Texas recommend the system of care approach** as a way to help kids with serious mental health concerns avoid unnecessary stays in hospitals, treatment centers, or even the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.¹
- More children could benefit from this strength-based, family-focused, youth-guided, and culturally informed model, and **Texas can help by expanding on what some of its communities have already started.**²

How to Make it Happen

- **Implement the Plan:** Texas has developed a road map already of how the system of care approach can be expanded statewide. If that happens, more communities would improve the way they help children with serious mental health concerns and their families. Putting the Texas System of Care Plan into action would better serve kids and families and save the state resources now going toward more costly care in hospitals, foster care settings, and juvenile justice facilities.³

- **Seek Texas experts' guidance.** In making decisions about building and sustaining an effective system of care, Texas should capitalize on the expertise that exists within its own ranks—several state agencies provide services to kids with mental health concerns—and on the ground in local communities, including from families themselves. A Texas System of Care Consortium, made up of these experts, could make recommendations on how the state can do better by its kids with mental health concerns.
- **Say “YES” to Youth Empowerment Services:** This Medicaid waiver from the federal government has been in place and working successfully since 2009. Currently, the waiver covers only a few counties. If more counties had the funding flexibility provided by the waiver, more kids with serious emotional disturbance would have access to mental health care and non-clinical supports promoted by the system of care approach.⁴ The Texas legislature needs to provide additional funding for more communities to take part, knowing that it leads to positive results: keeping kids out of hospitals and the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- **Strengthen Community Resource Coordination Groups (CRCGs).**⁵ In every county, there is a CRCG, where agencies come together often to figure out a coordinated plan of action for children and families close to crisis. About half of kids referred to CRCGs have mental health concerns, and nearly 3 out of 4 struggle with issues like challenging behaviors or anger management.⁶ Texas can help these local groups serve families approaching a crisis by making training, technical assistance, and flexible funding available to CRCGs.
- **Engage family partners.** Parents who have had the experience of caring for a child with a mental health concern can be a supportive resource for other parents navigating the maze of programs. Texas has begun to use trained and certified Family Partners to assist families. It should expand the use of this effective, family-focused practice.

Thinking About Costs

When mentally ill kids get fragmented services that don't work, many youth go on to experience higher rates of school dropout and criminal justice involvement, and fewer options for future employment. All this is estimated to cost Texas in the end. Doing nothing leads us to spend an estimated \$13 billion per year on adult mental illness and substance abuse, a lot of it preventable if the problem had been addressed earlier in life.

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

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Do better at identifying how to help abused and neglected children heal.



Whether we as a state get it right for a child, from the moment he or she comes into the child welfare system, helps determine a lot of what happens next—both during that kid's time in foster care and later in life.

When child victims of abuse or neglect get appropriate services and a suitable placement right at the beginning of their time in the child welfare system, it has a proven, positive effect on their success, both during and after their time in the system. First, though, the people working with that child need good information to make the right decisions about what's best, and, for that to happen, they need accurate assessments. Child Protective Services (CPS) uses psychological, developmental, neuropsychological, and psychiatric assessments now to help judges, caseworkers, and providers determine what services children need, what medications to prescribe them, and where to place kids removed from their homes. What's missing is standardized, quality-control measures and accountability in these assessments.

What to Know:

- **Identifying developmental and behavioral challenges in children and providing them with early interventions and services is vitally**



important, according to professional organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Child Welfare League of America, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP).¹

- **Trauma inherent in entering the child welfare system affects many parts of a child's life**, from behavior and emotions, to relationships, beliefs about the world, ability to concentrate and succeed in school, and physical and mental health.² In addition to whatever form of abuse or neglect foster children may have experienced prior to entering foster care, removal from home is itself a painful and potentially traumatic experience. Yet not all kids entering the child welfare system receive the type of trauma-informed assessment that leads to helping kids recover from the experiences they've been through. When professionals don't know how to identify trauma, they may misdiagnose a child, leading to a child receiving the wrong treatment for their needs.
- **Service providers report not having all they need to feel like they're making informed decisions about what's best for kids.** Right now, a clinician performing an assessment can use any sort of tool. That, in turn, can get in the way of caseworkers, foster parents, or judges understanding how to interpret an assessment's results. Variance in the variety of tools clinicians use, as well as in the quality of those assessments and their content, formatting, length, and depth of analysis, have all been cited as serious problems in Texas.³

How to Make it Happen:

- **Make assessments accurate.** Trauma-informed assessments that consider the psychological and developmental consequences of exposure to traumatic events give a more accurate assessment than assessments that overlook how trauma might affect a child's state and development.
- **Make assessments comprehensive.** A multidisciplinary approach considers how different factors in a child's life interact, instead of using a single lens or person working alone to make important decisions. Instead, teams of professionals, along with the child and appropriate caregivers and caseworkers, have a role in providing the information that informs service planning and placement.
- **Ensure assessments are useful.** Reports are helpful for their non-clinical audiences only when they have some level of analysis or recommendations of ways caregivers, including foster parents, educators, and case workers, can best meet a child's needs.
- **Standardize the assessments.** Follow-up assessments should be completed using a standardized format that builds upon initial assessment. A menu of assessment tools should be developed and periodically updated to provide clinicians sufficient flexibility to select the most appropriate tool for each child, while also limiting approved tools to those proven to be effective.

For more on this, see: <http://tinyurl.com/assessingkids>

Thinking About Costs

In 2007, the direct costs to Texas of mental health services for children in the child welfare system was \$32.4 million. Making sure today's services to children are effective and their placements appropriate would bring down Texas' spending on adult mental health, criminal justice, and substance abuse challenges in the future. Even more directly, providing one quality, useable assessment when a child enters the system could potentially reduce the need for multiple reassessments. Also, in getting a child placed appropriately the first time, there is much greater likelihood of their finding success in the foster care system, rather than languishing in the system.

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Don't leave families of severely challenged kids facing no-win choices.



Children should not have to be separated from their families to get services and supports for serious mental health challenges. Some families find themselves in a tragic position few Texans know about: parents are having to choose between doing nothing for a child in crisis or breaking up their family to get that child help.

Caring for a child with severe mental health concerns places unique stresses on a family.^{1,2} Families often are challenged in securing treatment for their children and the supports needed to continue a functioning family life. When families' options run out—when they can't access or afford the help they need—some families make the devastating decision to give their children up to the state, rather than watch a child continue to suffer without services. This choice is costly to the state and unnecessarily harms families. It is time for Texas to examine what's going on so that leaders can take smart, informed action to rectify it.

What to Know:

- **A child living in Texas has less chance of receiving necessary mental health treatment than children living in any other state.**³ Treatment often costs more than families can afford.^{4,5,6} Even with health coverage, insurance limitations often prevent children from accessing the level of care they need to get better.
- **Treatment may be available — but sometimes only if a child is in state custody.** When no other options remain, families are advised to relinquish custody of their children as a means to access care.⁷
- Faced with a no-win choice, some Texas families follow this advice, and **this trend is so common it has a name: parental relinquishment.** The federal government reports it is not uncommon for families, across all income levels, to give up custody of their child to get needed mental health services.⁸
- **Relinquishment has far-reaching consequences for families.** In addition to disrupting children's lives, parents may be unable to seek or keep a job in their profession, such as teaching, law enforcement, or social work, if they have relinquished their child to Child Protective Services (CPS).⁹ This threatens the stability of the entire family and may make it more difficult for the child to return home.
- Texas acknowledges this problem exists,^{10,11} but it is difficult to address because **the state does not collect information on an ongoing basis regarding whether children are entering the CPS system because their families were unable to access mental health treatment for them.** Reported figures likely underestimate the problem, because finding out and reporting why parents relinquish custody is not yet standardized practice. Texas CPS does not officially take custody of a child just because the child needs mental health treatment, but it will take custody if a parent “refuses to accept parental responsibility,” and this is the category families giving up custody as a means to access mental health services or treatment likely fall under. In 2008, nearly 300 kids who entered foster care due to parental refusal to accept responsibility had emotional problems documented as disabling.¹²
- **Other families may resort to having their child arrested** following a mental health crisis where the child became aggressive. In 2001, an estimated 400 youth were arrested in Dallas and Harris counties to obtain mental health services.¹³
- **Children with mental health concerns need care and treatment that works, and they shouldn't have to enter the foster care or juvenile system to get it.** These agencies focus on child protection and on rehabilitation and public safety, not mental wellness. Placing kids in restrictive settings to address their mental health needs doesn't work nearly as well as serving children in their communities. It strips children of the benefits of being with their family.
- In 1996, the Texas legislature recognized that **parental relinquishment is a system failure, not a parenting failure,** and passed a law requiring an interagency plan to identify solutions.¹⁴ A plan followed, but action did not. Families across the state still report finding themselves

torn between two impossible decisions—keeping their family together or providing their child with much needed mental health care.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Collect and report relinquishment data:** Texas legislators and service providers agree relinquishment needs addressing, so the first step is to ensure Texas tracks when and why it happens. To understand the factors associated with relinquishment that result from children’s mental health concerns and make decisions about how to prevent these children from ending up in systems where they don’t belong, state policymakers need good information.
- **Give families better community options:** Several communities in Texas are starting to use innovative approaches that help families get the care their children really need. (See “Take statewide a solution that’s already helping kids with mental illness.”) Texas can help communities provide better options to families by strengthening and expanding these efforts.
- **Don’t penalize parents who access the only care available to their children.** When parents do make the hard choice to give up custody of their child for the sole reason of obtaining needed care, they should not have their families further disrupted by having their names placed on a central registry banning them from a job.

For more on this issue, see <http://tinyurl.com/TreatDontPunish>

Thinking About Costs

Having a child become a ward of the state when there are better alternatives costs Texas. Consider that the cost of incarcerating one child in a Texas Justice Juvenile Department facility is over \$131,000—before even accounting for mental health services—and you get the idea.

By contrast, providing better service options to children with serious mental health concerns in their community can result in surprising savings. Bexar County, which received a special “YES” waiver from the federal government to pilot an effort that connects children with serious mental illnesses to Medicaid, saw major benefits. Not only did kids make real progress, they cost less to serve than the county’s average Medicaid patient.

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Improve the academic odds for foster children.



Students in foster care face barriers to school success that can be overcome. Texas can help more children thrive at school and achieve educational and lifelong success by cutting red tape that gets in kids' way and being responsive to the circumstances that foster children face.

When children are taken out of their homes because of child abuse or neglect, upheaval naturally follows. Separating kids from their families also means, many times, separation from their communities and their schools, and this can create barriers to lifelong success. Removing red tape that stands in the way of foster youths' school enrollment and ensuring schools have resources to help these child victims would remedy some of what is keeping more foster children from succeeding at school. Texas has made some pilot efforts at this, but sustained, statewide improvements would ensure all Texas schools with foster students promote youth success.

What to Know:

- Studies show **kids in the foster care system are more likely to wind up homeless, jobless, and in poverty**, compared to their peers,¹ but those who receive supports and services that help them stay in school and achieve success face better lifelong odds.
 - Right now, Texas foster children face an average of 2.9 placements,² which means **a typical foster child moves three times** while in foster care. Each of those placements can mean not only a new caregiver, but a new school system, too.
 - Changing schools is a big transition for any child, but foster youth have added burdens, including delays in their enrollment. When **records, like personal information and school paperwork, get lost in the shuffle**, it can keep kids from getting into school and the right classes for them. Under current law, the state uses a paper education portfolio for foster kids' personal and school-related records, but if these files were brought into the digital age, it would be easier to update them and lessen the
- bureaucratic delays when kids move between schools.
- **Texas has started working on better communications** between the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The two agencies entered an agreement in 2010, allowing them to share education-related data, like graduation rates and enrollment numbers, about youth in foster care in the aggregate. Additionally, the federally funded Texas Court, Child Welfare, and Education Collaboration (TRIO) project gets key child-serving agencies to collaborate on delivering consistent and coordinated school services and supports. TRIO has put tools, policies, and procedures in place to promote communication, data-sharing, and shared standards of practice among the court, child welfare, and education systems, **but the program is set to expire in February 2013**.
 - **A clear, statewide process for streamlined school enrollment doesn't yet exist**, and the same is true for tracking foster youths' school outcomes. This means kids are missing out on coordination and planning that would improve their educational odds. Improvement will come from routine data-sharing between agencies, so Texas can evaluate progress and barriers to foster kids' academic achievement. It will also come from findings ways to help these youth enroll, withdraw, and transfer between schools without red tape and get the appropriate services and supports that they need at school.
 - **Children in foster care experience higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems at school than their peers.**³ Although these behaviors are many times a direct result of trauma and experiences in foster care, these behaviors sometimes lead schools to respond with disciplinary measures that only add instability and create more hurdles to academic achievement.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Along with the other key pieces of information schools collect about their students, have schools indicate whether a child is a foster youth.** School districts already collect student demographic and academic performance data using the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Adding a specific student demographic code for youth in foster care would allow for more appropriate and expedited education planning by each school and strengthen education data-sharing between DFPS and TEA, as required by the agreement signed in 2010.
- **Enable schools and TEA to collect and share student-specific data electronically:** DFPS uses an education portfolio to collect personal and education related paperwork during a child's time in foster care. Making that information available electronically would make updating it easier and would ensure timely school enrollment, transfers, and service delivery for children in foster care.
- **Collect and track data on foster students**—like graduation rates, discipline outcomes, grade retention, school mobility, and enrollment—so the state can understand and address educational barriers for these children.
- **Identify who is helping foster kids enroll and transfer in school.** All school districts are supposed to appoint a liaison whose job it is to help foster youth enroll, withdraw, and transfer. Having a public list of these liaisons on the TEA website would create accountability and allow training for, support of, and communication between these liaisons. For example, the Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families⁴ is developing training materials for these appointed liaisons, but is challenged in identifying who these liaisons are.
- **Expand trauma-informed training to all school personnel.** Trauma-informed care has been recognized as a best practice for addressing the social and emotional needs of children in foster care, as it helps them heal and respond to, learn from, and interact with others better.⁵ Many people in foster children's lives receive training in trauma-informed care, and extending this training to school staff would help them respond appropriately to students affected by trauma, so their educational, social, emotional, and ultimately academic needs are met.
- **Promote school-wide implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS),** which is the recommended intervention for promoting a positive school environment and dealing with challenging behavior in children with emotional disturbances and other behavioral needs.

For more on this idea, see <http://tinyurl.com/InCareInSchool>

Thinking About Costs

Educational achievement is a big determinant of future success: kids who make it through school are more likely to become healthy and productive adults. Often, youth in foster care struggle to succeed in school and experience poor outcomes in adulthood, and that carries a high price for Texas and taxpayers.

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Empower the youth with no family to turn to.



Giving youth in foster care a voice in the decisions that impact their lives and the opportunity to save for their own future would improve some of our most vulnerable children's life chances, so they can leave the child welfare system and meet a bright tomorrow.

Becoming an adult proves challenging for most people, but it's especially tough for youth leaving foster care. Kids who "age out" of foster care leave the child welfare system never having found a permanent home or family beyond that of the state system. They need support during the transition from childhood that other kids get from their families. While all foster children cope with the trauma of likely abuse, neglect, or upheaval, youth who age out have the added challenge of never having found a stable home yet needing to create one for themselves at a young age. Texas can help these kids have the skills and supports to navigate life independently by giving youth opportunities to develop skills for effective decision-making and self advocacy and supports to help them manage their finances—strategies that, in turn, would lead to more self-sufficient, productive adulthood for these vulnerable youth.

What to know

- **Foster youth, as a group, struggle more than other young adults** and experience high rates of homelessness, joblessness, and poverty.¹ One-third of foster care alumni have household incomes at or below the federal poverty level, according to a 2003 study. After six years of independence from the foster care system, only half of alumni hold a job, compared with 75% of similarly aged peers. Fully 36% of homeless adults report having been involved in the foster care system.
- **Many youth who age out of foster care have trouble completing school and managing money, which contributes to poor outcomes.** Former foster youth are more than three times less likely to have a high school diploma or GED than their peers.² This makes it difficult for them to earn a good wage, and many never learn to save for long-term goals, such as a car or higher education.
- **During their time in foster care, many youth feel disconnected from the decisions being made about**

their lives. Feeling they lack control can lead youth to put too much emphasis on their own limitations. The system can empower kids to contribute to healthy decisions instead with:

- individualized and appropriate service planning that listens to youth;
- opportunities for foster kids to take ownership of and joint responsibility in planning transitions in their lives;
- timely notification to youth of the critical turning points in decisions being made about their lives; and
- processes in the court system and with other legal parties to a youth's case to make sure pertinent information comes directly from the youth.

All these changes would help empower foster youth and show them they are individuals capable of setting a course forward.

- **Developing life skills and good financial habits, such as learning to save, would help more kids succeed.** Foster youth are required to have opportunities to learn some life skills already. While that can include things like grocery shopping, meal preparation, using public transportation, handling household tasks, and balancing a checkbook,³ other skills related to responsible savings are not yet part of the basic package. Youth who don't learn about and get experiences with traditional banks may be more vulnerable to financial predators.
- **Individual development accounts (IDAs)—a form of matched savings account that ensures for every dollar a person saves they receive another dollar—have a proven track record of helping individuals establish patterns of regular saving.**⁴ Providing youth who are often in greater need of support in

adulthood with opportunities and incentives to save not only will help them acquire long-term assets, but will also help promote better life outcomes.⁵

How to Make It Happen

- **Don't just protect a child's body; protect the child's voice:** In order to fulfill the state's responsibility to foster kids still in care and those aging out of it, we need to prepare children for future success. Meaningful opportunities to engage in the decisions that impact their lives and to develop crucial financial skills would do that.
- **Give youth 10 and older and those deemed capable by the court no less than ten days' notice of a placement review hearing.** At each such hearing, a judge reviews information from stakeholders to make appropriate decisions for a child. Notice of these hearings is given to certain parties on a child's case—the caregiver, child-placing agency, ad litem, and child's attorney—and the Texas Family Code also requires youth to attend certain hearings. However, the notification provided to the other parties isn't extended to kids. Affording youth notice of their court hearings would help ensure kids get the chance to express their positions to the court, engage appropriately in the process, and benefit more from hearings.
- **Give youth a bank account that matches every dollar deposited (an IDA):** Texas has its own examples of IDA success to model such an effort after. For example, the City of San Antonio's matched savings for low-income, working families helped 210 San Antonio families purchase a home, assisted 525 individuals in obtaining post-secondary education, and led to the creation of 45 micro businesses.⁶ Matched savings accounts can help youth become financially literate, gain familiarity with mainstream banking institutions, and save money for future assets, while allowing former foster youth to overcome the hurdle of being without the adult cosigner they would otherwise need to open many types of financial accounts.⁷ This modest investment for the benefit of child victims can help set them on the path to good financial practices and financial independence as they transition out of state care.

Thinking About Costs

When youth in foster care struggle to find their voice in a system that overlooks their strengths, values, and opinions and when they miss out on opportunities to develop life skills, worse life outcomes often follow. These problems in adulthood carry a high price for Texas and taxpayers, due to lost productivity and higher social welfare costs.

Giving kids a chance to exercise more control over their future, by contrast, has been linked to real gains later in life. A study by the Center for Social Development, for example, found that youth who had a savings or bank account were up to seven times more likely to attend college than those with no account, even while controlling for variables like family income, race, and academic achievement.

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Keep kids, even those who make mistakes, safe.

Keeping the kids in the juvenile justice system safe and rehabilitating them while we hold youth accountable for their actions is more than just the right thing to do. It's also how we prevent future delinquency and crime.

The Texas youth justice system aims to increase public safety by getting the kids it works with to accept responsibility for their actions and plan for future success.¹ For that to happen, youth need quality services and supports and safe conditions while they're in the system. These kids will eventually leave the system, and incarceration alone won't improve their behavior. What will is providing age-appropriate specialized treatment, mental health and substance abuse treatments, and community-based services shown to bring about real, positive change by rehabilitating youth so that they don't reoffend.²

What to Know

- **Placing kids in small, homelike settings close to their communities has been shown to reduce recidivism.**³ It also increases safety and positive youth outcomes.⁴



- Texas has moved toward keeping more kids in their communities. In 2007, Texas had 5,000 kids scattered throughout the state in far-flung secure facilities. Reports began to surface of multiple instances of children being sexually and physically abused at the hands of state juvenile justice facility staff, which led policymakers to implement **reforms that limit the numbers of kids locked up and increase safety and transparency.** Reforms also focused on educational and reentry supports to secure better outcomes for kids once they leave facilities.
- Building on these reforms, changes to the law in 2011 created a new Texas Juvenile Justice Department in place of two earlier juvenile justice agencies. The law creating the new department also gave the department **responsibility for delinquency prevention and called for the agency to move towards the use of small juvenile justice facilities** that prioritize youth's treatment needs, providing meaningful rehabilitation in a therapeutic environment. Additionally, TJJD was charged with locating youth in or near their home community to help promote success.
- While changes in law are a critical step in ensuring youth in our juvenile justice system are safe, reports of **facility chaos and youth violence in 2012 show the need for adequate funding and accountability** in reform implementation.

How to Make it Happen

- **Prioritize delinquency prevention:** Texas needs to invest in prevention programs proven to keep kids on the right track and out of the juvenile justice system, while promoting collaboration among service providers.
- **Budget for success:** Texas needs to appropriately allocate resources so our community-based programs can deliver on their promise and so all communities have the resources to support kids close to home.
- **Ensure consistent, high-quality rehabilitative and diversion-focused programming** across all juvenile probation departments statewide.
- **Implement effective performance measures** at the county level to evaluate, compare, and improve program effectiveness.
- **Work with counties to ensure adequate funding at the county level** for proven, non-residential rehabilitative programs such as anger management programs, drug and alcohol counseling, and mental health programs.
- **Establish clear timelines** and provide careful, thoughtful planning for a successful transition to state secure facilities that are sized appropriately for effective rehabilitation.
- **Ensure training and effective oversight** for corrections officers, probation officers, and staff who interact with youth in the system, and make sure these folks have clear accountability for implementing a reform-oriented approach.

For more on this, see <http://tinyurl.com/MonitorReforms>

Thinking About Costs

Keeping youth closer to home isn't just better for youth and their families, it's also more cost effective for the state.

In 2010, the average cost of community-based supervision ranged from roughly \$18-\$40 per day, depending on how intensive the treatment.

The cost to hold youth in secure facilities at the county level that year averaged over \$169 per day, and the cost of keeping a youth in a state-secure facility was over \$359 per day.

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Hold kids accountable for their actions without pretending they're adults.

Steering kids into adult prisons and courts instead of the juvenile justice system compromises safety—not just for the youth but for society as a whole. It leads to higher recidivism and less public safety.

Texas created its juvenile justice system to hold kids accountable and rehabilitate them, preventing crime for years to come. This youth-focused justice system exists for good reason. Multiple studies have found public safety improves and the likelihood of further crimes diminishes when young offenders receive age-appropriate rehabilitative services that will help them turn their lives around. While the juvenile justice system was tailored for rehabilitating young offenders and designed especially to respond to youths' still-developing minds and special propensity to change,¹ the same cannot be said for the adult justice system. Common sense and research both say the best way to rehabilitate young offenders is to keep them safe and away from adult criminals. Putting kids in adult prisons, on adult probation and parole, and in adult court increases chances of reoffending.



What to Know

- **Children in the adult system are 34% more likely to be rearrested after release** compared to their counterparts in the youth justice system.² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared it “counterproductive” to transfer youth to the adult system, since it has no deterrent value and just increases the chances that youth will commit other, more serious crimes later on.
- **It's not uncommon for children to be certified to stand trial and be sentenced as adults in Texas.**³ In FY 2012, judges transferred 170 juvenile cases to adult courts for trial and adult sentencing. A study looking at five years of certifications found that the best predictor for transfer was not the young person's history of crime—72% of children certified as adults had no prior history of violence—but the county in which the sentencing occurred.
- **Nonviolent crimes can lead children into the adult system.** The majority of certifications are for offenses considered violent. However, from 2009 to 2011, the percentage of non-violent offenses that made up all certifications increased from 11% to 27%.^{4,5}
- **The Texas juvenile justice system has proven treatment programs shown to reduce recidivism.** For example, the Capital and Serious Violent Offenders Treatment Program reduces the chances of later crime by 74%, while Aggression Replacement Training has proven effective in decreasing

aggression and improving decision making. Neither of these effective programs is available in the adult system.^{6,7}

- About 120 Texans under 18 are housed in adult prisons. **Many kids in adult prisons are the same age and committed the same crimes as teens in juvenile facilities, but they face greater dangers.** Children in adult facilities are more likely to be isolated,^{8,9} more likely to face mental health challenges, and 36 times more likely to commit suicide than those in juvenile facilities.¹⁰
- **Nearly all youth—96%—in the juvenile justice system receive some schooling, but only 38% of youth in the adult correctional system do.**¹¹ This leaves the majority of them unprepared for life that awaits them after prison.

How to Make it Happen

- **Hold youth certified to stand trial as adults in juvenile facilities** both before and during trial. While a 2011 law gave counties the option to hold certified youth in juvenile facilities while they await trial, it does not require that they do so.
- **Allow effective rehabilitation programs to run their course:** When a child serving a determinate sentence turns 19, the youth should be given the opportunity to complete his or her course of treatment and programming within the juvenile system before a determination is made on whether the youth should be paroled or sent to adult prison.
- **Acknowledge that nonviolent offenses are different:** Because kids are not adults and because the adult system carries serious risk of harm to a child and to a child's likelihood of recidivating, the decision to certify a child as an adult should not be taken lightly. At the very least, it should be reserved for only circumstances involving the most violent offenses.

For more on this idea, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/NoKidsInPrisons>

Thinking About Costs

Holding youth accountable and rehabilitating them in the justice system created specifically for them makes a lot more sense than sending children to adult courts and prisons. By one estimate, society saves \$3 in later correctional costs for every \$1 spent on rehabilitation in the youth justice system. By contrast, a child offender sent to adult prison is 100% more likely to commit a violent crime than someone who committed a similar offense but entered the juvenile justice system instead.

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Editors:

Christine Sinatra, Communications Director
Eileen Garcia, Chief Executive Officer

Photography:

Liz Moskowitz
Any Baby Can
Richard Ross for photos within TJJD facilities

Contributing writers and researchers:

Alice Bufkin, Lauren Dimitry, Eileen Garcia, Ashley Harris, Kara Johnson, Katie Malaspina, Elisabeth Reise, Josette Saxton, Christine Sinatra, Clayton Travis, Lipika Ahuja, Casey Bangs, Marie Bucciero, Ben Ellinor, Andrew Feller, Huijie Feng, Liza Getsinger, Michael Kajehour, Michael Kellerman, Hafeez Khan, Rebecca Larsen, Chase Norris, Rhea Racho, Cody Rothschild, Monica Sharma, Ram Srinivasan, Laura Stelling, and Zoe Zhang.

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Graphic Design: Graphic Granola

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811 Trinity, Suite A • Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 473-2274 • <http://txchildren.org>
Twitter: @putkids1st • Facebook: @TexansCare

