

# INTRODUCTION

The 2015 legislative session produced significant breakthroughs for Texas children, some disappointments, and a few reminders about what it takes to pass state policies that support kids.

We directly weighed in on hundreds of bills impacting children, but were ever conscious that encouraging a mom or youth to testify or a business leader to speak out is sometimes more effective than anything we could say ourselves. The juvenile justice and children's mental health amendments we helped tack onto other bills serve to show there's more than one route to the Governor's desk. Passing one of our foster care proposals after steadily building support for three sessions was a good lesson in persistence. It reminds us we really did make progress this session on some of our priorities that didn't pass, such as moving 17-year-olds out of the adult criminal justice system.

The details of the session's reminders, breakthroughs, and disappointments are outlined in the following pages of our policy issue recaps. But first, we present a few highlights below.

This year the Legislature passed four Texans Care for Children proposals to ensure that some of the most vulnerable children in our state are safe and have the support they need to overcome the difficult challenges they



face. A pair of those bills ensures more children in foster care receive the services and home placements they need. Those bills improve assessments of children when they enter foster care and the screening and training of prospective foster parents. Another bill expands the authority of the state's juvenile justice ombudsman to protect the rights, safety, and services of more youth in the juvenile system. The fourth strengthens the System of Care approach of providing coordinated, community-based care for children with severe mental health needs while maintaining a system for making this approach available statewide – a system that was set to be eliminated in an early draft of the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) Sunset bill.

The Legislature also took a few modest steps to help children get off to a good start in their early years, which will help them and taxpayers down the road. The Governor's pre-K legislation, for example, provides a bump in funding for school districts that meet new requirements. We're disappointed the new early education strategy doesn't set limits on student-teacher ratios, provide more funding for all districts, or address important safety and quality issues in licensed child care for our youngest learners. However, we can build on the foundation provided by the new pre-K program and the Governor's strong endorsement of early education.

Other legislative initiatives address needs even earlier in a child's development. Budget-writers set aside up to \$50 million in additional funding to help women plan and space healthy pregnancies, although the funding and provider network still fall short of demand. More infants will also enjoy the health benefits of breastfeeding under a new state law providing teachers and other public employees basic accommodations for expressing breast milk at work.

To address the health and fitness of young children and teens alike, the Legislature approved additional funding

for programs that deliver healthier food to schools and food banks. The funding was a top priority for the Partnership for a Healthy Texas, the health coalition we chair. Yet the Legislature showed little interest in proposals to reduce consumption of sugary drinks, expand PE in schools, or address childhood obesity in other ways.

Unfortunately, the Legislature also missed a number of opportunities to strengthen families with parents working low-wage jobs – or two or three low-wage jobs.

The Legislature could have provided more stability for children in these families by accepting federal Medicaid funding for low-wage workers, for example.

While this was a big session for juvenile justice reform, with legislation passing to move youth in the juvenile justice system closer to home, decriminalize truancy, and expand the juvenile justice ombudsman’s role, one of our greatest disappointments was the Legislature’s failure to pass the “Raise the Age” bill. There was strong momentum for including 17-year-old offenders in the juvenile system rather than sending them all to the adult system, but the bill ultimately came up short.



This Legislature also got its budget priorities wrong.

It approved a permanent, massive tax cut for large businesses and other taxpayers, raising the specter of another round of deep education and health cuts the next time the economy slows down. It continued to shortchange key investments in children, failing to provide funding to reduce caseloads for Child Protective Services caseworkers, for instance.

This session lawmakers also approved significant organizational changes to state agencies as part of the Sunset process. We were pleased that they slowed down the plan to consolidate all health and human services agencies into a single mega-agency. However, the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and



the Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) will be consolidated within HHSC. Other organizational changes include moving home visiting, substance abuse treatment, and other prevention programs to the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS).

Between now and the 2017 legislative session, we’ll closely monitor these organizational changes and implementation of other legislation. We’ll continue to work closely with stakeholders from around Texas to shape these efforts and prepare for the next legislative session.

We appreciate all the Texans who helped us advocate for children this legislative session and hope you’ll join with us as we roll up our sleeves and get to work in the interim.