

# Improving Access to Services for Children with Complex Mental Health Challenges

## Four Gaps in Services and Ways the Legislature Can Address Them

This policy brief outlines four opportunities to improve access to services for children with complex mental health challenges, including those at risk of entering foster care due to their own unmet health needs. Those four opportunities are Medicaid coverage for certain children’s mental health services, the YES Waiver, Family First Pilots, and services eligible for federal matching funds through the Family First Act.

## Texas Children with Complex Mental Health Challenges — Including Those at Risk of Entering Foster Care — Need Better Access to Services

Texas youth are facing a mental health crisis, with sharp increases in sadness, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.<sup>1</sup> In fact, from 2005 to 2023, the number of Texas high school students reporting suicide attempts rose by 31 percent.<sup>2</sup> Mental health crisis visits at Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston increased by 800% from 2019 to 2022, highlighting the need for services that reduce reliance on emergency rooms and jails.<sup>3</sup> Demand for the YES Waiver, a program for children with complex mental health needs, has grown by 43% since 2021, while the number of youth served has declined by 19% during the same period.<sup>4</sup>

Insufficient access to mental health care often forces families to relinquish or share custody of their children with the state to secure necessary services. In FY 2024, 6% of children who entered foster care did so due to mental or behavioral health concerns unrelated to abuse or neglect, and even more families agreed to share custody to access care.<sup>5</sup> While this represents a small number of children, the impact is profound — on the child, their family, and the foster care system. Many of these children still face significant barriers to receiving the services they need in foster care, leading to unregulated, temporary placements such as hotels or church floors, which worsen their challenges. Addressing these service gaps is essential to prevent unnecessary foster care entries and to ensure stability for children with complex mental health needs. **Texas leaders should ensure that no child enters foster care solely because their family cannot access adequate mental health services.**



# Programs for All Youth With Acute Mental Health Challenges (Including Those in or at Risk of Entering Foster Care)

## Program to Leverage: Medicaid Coverage

Medicaid provides health insurance to one in three Texas children.

### Services that could be provided:

- *Crisis services* such as crisis respite, mobile crisis, and crisis stabilization provide immediate support during mental health emergencies.
- *Intensive outpatient programs* offer structured therapy and support to help youth manage mental health challenges while living at home.
- *Partial hospitalization* provides a higher level of care for youth needing more intensive treatment but not requiring inpatient care.
- *Home-based services* such as *Multisystemic Therapy* and *Functional Family Therapy* offer intensive in-home, family-centered interventions to address behavior challenges and improve family dynamics.

**Current challenge:** While health plans are permitted to cover some of these services, Texas Medicaid insurance plans do not consistently or reliably cover these services, leaving gaps for many children with complex mental health needs.

**Policy recommendation to improve access:** The Legislature should make these services reimbursable through Medicaid. This recommendation is included in the Health and Human Services Commission's (HHSC) December 2024 Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan.

## Program to Leverage: YES Waiver

The Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Waiver is a Medicaid Waiver that helps children with serious mental health needs by providing team-based support to keep them at home and connected to their community.

### Services provided:

- *Specialized therapies* like art, music, and animal-assisted therapy.
- *Family support* and connections to others with shared experiences.
- *Employment support* to help youth find and succeed in jobs.
- *Respite care* to give families a temporary break.
- *Transportation* to ensure access to services.
- *Therapeutic homes* for short-term family-based support.
- *Home modifications* and adaptive aids to enhance daily functioning.

**Current challenge:** Despite increased demand for YES Waiver Services, the state is serving fewer families than in the past. Low reimbursement rates and administrative barriers prevent provider participation.

**Policy recommendation to improve access:** The Legislature should increase funding for YES Waiver Services to serve more children. This recommendation is included in the HHSC December 2024 Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan.

# Programs Specifically for Youth at Risk of Entering Foster Care Due to Unmet Mental Health Needs

## Program to Leverage: Texas Family First Pilots

The Texas Family First Pilots, created in 2021 by HB 3041, established a framework to provide high-quality, effective family preservation services to some families at risk of entering foster care in Community-Based Care Regions.

### Services provided:

- Region 1 (Panhandle), St. Francis:
  - *Family Centered Treatment* helps families build healthy, supportive relationships.
  - *Motivational Interviewing* encourages positive behavioral change.
- Region 2 (Northwest Texas), 2ingage:
  - *Functional Family Therapy* addresses family dynamics to improve youth outcomes.
  - *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy* enhances parent-child relationships.
  - *Trauma-Focused Behavioral Therapy* helps children process trauma.
  - *Motivational Interviewing* encourages positive behavioral change.
  - *Trust-Based Relational Intervention* strengthens attachment and trust between parents and youth.
- Region 3W (Metroplex West), OCOK:
  - *Functional Family Therapy* addresses family dynamics to improve youth outcomes.
  - *High Fidelity Wraparound* provides individualized, family-driven care coordination.
  - *Motivational Interviewing* encourages positive behavioral change.
- Region 8A (Hill Country and South Central Texas), Belong:
  - *Brief Strategic Family Therapy* focuses on resolving family conflicts and improving communication.
  - *Parents as Teachers* provides parent education to support child development.

**Current challenge:** The Texas Family First Pilots, which help families avoid foster care, are at risk of ending when federal grant funding expires in 2025.

**Policy recommendation to improve access:** The Legislature should replace expiring federal grant funding with state funds to sustain the pilots until Texas secures Title IV-E Prevention Plan approval for federal matching funds.

## Programs to Leverage: Services Eligible for Federal Matching Funds through the Family First Act

The Family First Prevention Services Act, passed in 2018, created a federal funding incentive to amplify state investment in high-quality, effective family preservation programs for children at risk of entering foster care.

### Eligible services currently available in parts of Texas:

- *Trauma-Informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* helps kids and families process trauma by understanding emotions and building coping skills.
- *Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI)* focuses on trust and connection to support kids with compassion.
- *Functional Family Therapy (FFT)* strengthens communication and resolves family conflicts to improve relationships.
- *Intensive Care Coordination Using High Fidelity Wraparound* brings a team together to create a personalized family support plan.
- *Dialectical Behavior Therapy for Adolescents* helps teens manage emotions and make better decisions.
- *Family-Centered Therapy* focuses on solving problems and strengthening family bonds as a team.
- *Brief Strategic Family Therapy* quickly identifies and addresses family patterns causing conflict.
- *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)* helps process trauma and unstick painful memories with bilateral stimulation.
- *Multisystemic Therapy (MST)* tackles serious teen behavior problems with support from family, schools, and communities.

**Current challenge:** These services are only available in a limited number of communities in Texas. When families miss out on these services, children are at risk of entering foster care or joint managing conservatorship, where their needs may continue to go unmet.

*Note: In addition to the services listed above, other services are eligible for federal Family First Act matching funding but are not currently available in Texas.*

**Policy recommendation to improve access:** Texas leaders should take the necessary steps — including submitting a plan to the federal government and investing state funds — to draw down federal Family First matching funds to increase access to these services.

## Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). YRBS Explorer. <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/>.
2. *Id.*
3. Bauman, Anna. (2022). Texas Children's ER sees massive spike in kids with mental health crises like suicidal thoughts. Houston Chronicle. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/health/article/Texas-Childrens-Hospital-ER-visits-17589153.php>.
4. YES Waiver Inquiry List and Enrollment data provided by HHSC from FY 2018 - FY 2023. (On file with author).
5. Department of Family and Protective Services. (FY 2024). Number of Children Removed During Selected Fiscal Year by Age and Removal Reason. [https://databook.dfps.texas.gov/views/cps\\_sa\\_19\\_dfps/fyagereasonsummary?%3Adisplay\\_count=n%3Aembed=y%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y%3Aorigin=viz\\_share\\_link%3AshowAppBanner=false%3AshowVizHome=n](https://databook.dfps.texas.gov/views/cps_sa_19_dfps/fyagereasonsummary?%3Adisplay_count=n%3Aembed=y%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y%3Aorigin=viz_share_link%3AshowAppBanner=false%3AshowVizHome=n).