

Invest in Keeping Families Together and Supporting Mental Health

Testimony to the House Appropriation Subcommittee on Article II of the Texas Budget -
Department of Family and Protective Services

Prioritize Family Preservation Services to Keep Kids Out of Foster Care and Families Together

The Texas budget, as introduced, reflects the House's commitment to improving the well-being of Texas children and families, primarily through the initial increase in children's mental health services in the Health and Human Services Commission's budget. The House budget bill also rightly allocated \$21 million in General Revenue to DFPS for behavioral health services, including Intensive Psychiatric Stabilization for children in foster care during the 2026-27 biennium. However, the House should also focus on funding family preservation services to prevent children from entering foster care and keep them safe with their families, especially for the small, vulnerable population of children who enter care not because of abuse or neglect but because of unaddressed behavioral health challenges. Insufficient access to mental health care often forces families to relinquish or share custody of their children with the state to secure necessary services, including the children most in need of intensive psychiatric stabilization services. While most children enter foster care because of concerns about abuse or neglect, **in FY 2024, 6 percent (530 children) were removed from their homes because their families could not manage their children's complex mental health challenges without additional support.**¹ Additionally, 224 children entered foster care after their parents voluntarily shared custody with the state to access necessary behavioral health services.²

Texas Family First Pilots Require State Funding to Continue

The Texas Family First Pilots, established in 2021 under HB 3041, deliver essential family preservation services to families at risk of foster care involvement in Community-Based Care (CBC) regions. These pilots offer:

- **Mental health services** like Functional Family Therapy, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Trust-Based Relational Intervention to support family stability and help children heal from trauma.
- **Family-centered supports** such as High Fidelity Wraparound and Family-Centered Therapy, which coordinate care and empower families to stay safely together.

These services effectively keep families intact, but federal grant funding for them expires in 2025. The House removed the rider that allocated funds from the Family First Transition Act, and no state funding has been

designated to replace it. Without legislative action, Texas will lose these essential programs, and families who could safely remain together may instead face separation through foster care placement.

Texas Should Sustain and Expand Family Preservation Services

The Texas Family First Pilots Keep Families Together

The Family First Pilots provide essential services in CBC regions, including:

- **Region 1 (Panhandle), St. Francis:** Family-Centered Treatment, Motivational Interviewing.
- **Region 2 (Northwest Texas), 2ingage:** Functional Family Therapy, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Trust-Based Relational Intervention.
- **Region 3W (Metroplex West), OCOK:** Functional Family Therapy, High Fidelity Wraparound, Motivational Interviewing.
- **Region 8A (Hill Country and South Central Texas), Belong:** Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Parents as Teachers.

These programs strengthen families by addressing family dynamics, providing therapy to help children process trauma, and equipping families with the necessary tools to remain together safely. Losing these services due to funding gaps will leave families without the critical support they need.

Texas Has Yet to Access Available Federal Funding for Family Preservation

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) offers federal funding for effective family preservation services, yet Texas has neither submitted nor secured approval for a Title IV-E prevention plan, which is necessary to access this funding. Meanwhile, 47 other states have accessed over \$172 million in federal funds to support these services.^{3,4} Without investing in evidence-based services and submitting its plan for connecting eligible families to those services, Texas will continue to miss out on resources that could expand family preservation services, including trauma-informed and family-centered children’s mental health services, preventing unnecessary foster care placements.

Investing in Children’s Mental Health Services Will Keep More Families Together

Without early intervention, children with complex mental health needs—and their siblings—face a higher risk of removal. Texas must prioritize state funding for effective children’s mental health services and ensure their inclusion in the Title IV-E prevention plan. Key services eligible for federal matching funds include:

- **Trauma-Informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT):** Helps children and families process trauma.
- **Multisystemic Therapy (MST):** Provides intensive therapy for youth with behavioral challenges.

- **Functional Family Therapy (FFT):** Strengthens family communication and conflict resolution.
- **Intensive Care Coordination Using High Fidelity Wraparound:** Coordinates services for families with complex needs.
- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy for Adolescents:** Helps youth regulate emotions and improve decision-making.
- **Brief Strategic Family Therapy:** Identifies and addresses negative family dynamics quickly.
- **Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI):** Focuses on building trust and connection.

These services remain limited in availability across Texas. Families of children with complex mental health needs who are unable to access them face an increased risk of their child entering foster care or joint managing conservatorship, where children’s needs often remain unmet. Texas must take necessary steps to expand these services by investing state funds in these services and submitting a prevention plan for federal approval.

Recommendations

To protect Texas families and prevent unnecessary foster care placements, the Legislature should:

1. **Sustain the Texas Family First Pilots by replacing expiring federal grant funding with state funds,** ensuring the continued delivery of these essential services that keep families together until Texas secures approval for federal matching funds.
2. **Invest state funds in effective children’s mental health services** eligible for federal FFPSA matching funds, ensuring at-risk children receive the support they need before foster care becomes necessary.

While the House’s investment in psychiatric health services for children already in foster care provides necessary support, Texas must prioritize family preservation. By sustaining the Family First Pilots and expanding access to mental health services, families will remain stronger, foster care placements will decrease, and Texas children will have a healthier, more stable future.

Endnotes

1. Department of Family and Protective Services. (FY 2024). Number of Children Removed During 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.
2. Department of Family and Protective Services. (FY 2024). *Summary of Children in JMC of DFPS with Prior Conservatorship (CVS)*. [Unpublished data] (on file with author).
3. Administration for Children and Family Service (February 2025). Status of Submitted Title IV-E Prevention Five Year Plans. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data/status-submitted-title-iv-e-prevention-program-five-year-plans>.
4. Administration for Children and Family Service (FY 2023). Title IV-E Programs Expenditure and Caseload Data 2023. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/programs-expenditure-caseload-data-2023>.