

YES Waiver is Key for Youth with Complex Mental Health Needs

The Legislature Should Support HHSC's Exceptional Item Budget Request to Improve Access to YES Waiver Services

Texas children urgently need improved access to mental health services.

Over the past decade, behavioral health challenges among Texas youth have increased significantly, mirroring a global trend where mental health and substance use disorders are the leading cause of disability for children and youth.¹ In Texas, nearly a quarter of parents (23 percent) surveyed from 2021-2022 reported their child has one or more mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problems.² **From 2005 to 2023, the number of Texas high school students reporting suicide attempts rose by 31 percent.**³ This dramatic increase underscores the urgent need for improved access to mental health services for children and adolescents.

The YES Waiver effectively supports youth with complex mental health challenges.

The Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Waiver provides home and community-based mental health services to children who are struggling with their mental health. Parents are often stuck making a gut-wrenching decision to leave their children, who are experiencing a crisis, at the hospital for days or even weeks at a time. Instead of having dinner at home with their family and sleeping in their own bed, kids are stuck in hospitals. But when kids get the YES Waiver services, they are often able to keep going to school, play on their sports teams, create memories with their friends and remain at home where it feels comfortable, safe and familiar.



YES Waiver services address a broad range of mental health challenges by offering specialized therapies, community living, family supports, employment assistance, respite services, transportation, and adaptive aids tailored to prevent out-of-home placements, ensuring youth remain with their families.

Studies have shown that youth enrolled in the YES Waiver demonstrated significant improvements in emotional and behavioral problems.⁴ **Additionally, recent data show the effectiveness of YES Waiver services in preventing crises.** Youth who participated in the program saw a 48% decrease in crisis service use, demonstrating the program's impact in stabilizing children in their communities.⁵

“First time that I had a group of providers who I felt like were on my team.”

Amelia*, a Texan teen with Bipolar Disorder, was struggling with self-harm and thinking about suicide. She had a substance use disorder, and she ran away from home. Janice, her adoptive parent, felt helpless as she watched Amelia struggle and searched for available options. Janice found the YES Waiver, allowing her to get Amelia help. For the next two years, YES provided Amelia with services, allowing her to progress at her own pace and find stability with the support of her community and family.

“We had great supports through the YES Waiver, and for us, it was very positive. It was the first time that I had a group of providers who I felt like were on my team. They were very understanding and good at supporting us. Amelia received therapies that she loved like recreation, art, and equine and really connected with her providers.”

** We have changed her name in this story to protect her privacy.*

The YES Waiver keeps children out of foster care and supports children currently in foster or kinship care.

The YES Waiver effectively prevents or reduces out-of-home care, including placement in foster care. In FY 2024, 6% of youth who entered foster care did so because they have complex mental health challenges that their families are unable to manage without additional support.⁶ Even more parents agreed to share custody of their children with the state to try to obtain mental health services. The YES Waiver is a better alternative, allowing youth to remain at home with their family while receiving the care they need.

The YES Waiver not only helps keep children out of foster care, but it also supports their stability in foster care. Twelve percent of the 2,692 children who received Yes Waiver services between April of 2022 and March of 2023 were foster youth.⁷ The YES Waiver can keep a child stable in a foster or kinship home and help children avoid psychiatric hospitalization or placement in a Residential Treatment Center. In FY 2023, 242 children in DFPS conservatorship were waiting to be assessed for YES Waiver services.⁸

Unfortunately, the number of Texas children served in the program is falling — even as demand rises.

As more Texas parents desperately seek help for their children with complex mental health challenges, there's been a sharp increase in families asking for YES Waiver services, with 3,109 inquiries in FY 2023 — a 43% increase since 2021.⁹ However, during the same period, the number of children enrolled **dropped by 19%**, and only 2,227 children received services, which means that nearly 900 children were left waiting for services.¹⁰

Mental health providers cite low reimbursement rates set by HHSC as a major obstacle preventing them from serving more children.¹¹ According to the Statewide Behavioral Health Coordinating Council's recent Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan, the Yes Waiver lost 386 providers between 2020 and 2023, with numbers continuing to decline.¹² Administrative barriers, including limited case manager training and caseload limits, further challenge provider capacity.

Despite bipartisan support for a proposed increase in YES Waiver reimbursement rates in the budget, the conference committee removed this increase during the 2023 legislative session.

There is interest among lawmakers in prioritizing services for kids with complex mental health needs.

This past interim, the House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety recommended increasing reimbursement rates for the YES Waiver as a way to reduce barriers in access for youth and families.¹³

The Legislature can improve access to these services by supporting HHSC’s funding request.

As part of its 2025-2029 Strategic Plan, HHSC included the YES Waiver as a strategy to provide intensive mental health services to more children and families in Texas.¹⁴ Additionally, Governor Abbott’s proposed budget recommends that the Legislature make additional investments in behavioral health services and supports for children with the most complex needs. The Governor’s proposed budget specifically prioritizes children without placement – those who have been removed from their homes and are unable to be placed in foster care.¹⁵

The Legislature should approve the HHSC’s Exceptional Item #12 in the Legislative Appropriations Request for the FY 2026-2027 state budget. This request will provide \$61.9 million for the biennium to expand critical services, including the YES Waiver, so that every child in Texas has the opportunity to grow up healthy, empowered, and supported.

Endnotes

1. Erskine HE, Baxter AJ, Patton G, Moffitt TE, Patel V, Whiteford HA. The global coverage of prevalence data for mental disorders in children and adolescents. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci.* 2017;26(4):395–402.
2. Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. 2021-2022 National Survey of Children’s Mental Health.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
4. Youth Empowerment Services Program Evaluation
5. Texas Health and Human Services Presentation to the House Youth Health & Safety Select Committee
6. 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.
7. House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety December 2024 Interim Report
8. Health and Human Services Commission. (2023). *YES Waiver Inquiry List and Enrollment from FY 2018 - FY 2023*. [Unpublished data].
9. *Id.*
10. *Id.*
11. Texans Care for Children. Texas Leaders Must Help Parents Seeking Mental Health Support for Their Children (June 2022). <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/62b39015de529c420ab8f46b/1655934997320/Children%27s+Mental+Health+Policy+Brief+June+2022.pdf>.
12. Children’s Behavioral Health Strategic Plan
13. House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety December 2024 Interim Report
14. Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). (2024). Health and Human Services Commission Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-2029, Part II. <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/hhsc-strategic-plan-2025-2029-part-2.pdf>.
15. 2026 -2027 Governor’s Budget, Greg Abbott