

# Ensure Kids with Complex Mental Health Needs — like CJ — Have Access to YES Waiver Services

A real family's experience — and our policy recommendations — to improve mental health support for children with complex mental health needs

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## The YES Waiver allowed CJ to stay with his family and get healthy instead of entering foster care or a psychiatric hospital.

CJ is a thriving high school student today, balancing homework, friendships, and time at home with his mom, Maggie. Their life now reflects stability and connection, but getting there took persistence, advocacy, and the right kind of support at the right time.

Years earlier, Maggie struggled with substance use disorder, and child protective services became involved. She was arrested and lost custody of CJ. Maggie served her time, and when she was ready to rebuild her life, she fought to reunite with her son. The path home was not simple. CJ had significant mental health needs and developmental disabilities. He had been hospitalized multiple times for suicidal ideation and struggled in school. When Maggie sought to regain custody, she was met with concerns that CJ's needs were too high and that she would not be able to manage them on her own. Still, she pushed forward. "Let me try," she insisted.

Reunification brought both hope and new challenges. Maggie and CJ were trying to rebuild a relationship while each carrying their own trauma. "His mental health and my mental health were at points where we didn't know how to interact with each other," she shared. Without the right tools or guidance, their interactions often escalated into conflict. His school lacked the mental health resources to meet his needs. Maggie found few places to turn. Services in Maggie's community were limited, and navigating the mental health system felt overwhelming. Both mother and son needed help, not just to manage crises, but to understand how to break the cycle they had been caught in.

That turning point came through the YES Waiver. For the first time, CJ and Maggie had access to consistent, community-based mental health services that met them where they were. **CJ connected with an occupational therapist who built trust through everyday moments, cooking meals together, hiking, and creating a sense of safety and routine.** He also participated in equine therapy, which helped him feel calm, engaged, and understood in ways traditional settings had not. These relationships became a foundation for healing.

**With the right support in place, CJ began to stabilize.** His crises decreased, and he avoided further hospitalizations. He started to build trust in others and in himself. Maggie, too, gained the support she needed to better understand her son and respond to his needs.

Today, CJ is on fewer medications, succeeding in school, and building a hopeful future. The YES Waiver helped CJ and Maggie do more than access services; it helped them find a path forward, together.

## Families in crisis are too often left waiting for critical mental health support for their children.

While Maggie and CJ were able to access the YES Waiver, many families have to wait to receive this life-changing service. **During a typical month, more than 450 Texas children are waiting on the inquiry list for a clinical assessment and YES slot to become available.**<sup>1</sup>

**The YES Waiver is limited to children who are determined to be at risk of entering a psychiatric facility or foster care**, meaning families must meet a high threshold of need to access these services. While waiting, the LMHA provides the highest level of care available; however, YES offers the level of care necessary to stabilize families and avoid costly institutional placements.

The Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Waiver provides:

- Non-traditional therapies such as art, music, or animal-assisted therapy
- Respite care to give caregivers temporary relief from caregiving responsibilities
- Youth peer support to connect young people with others who have lived experience
- Skills training and development, such as coping skills and daily living skills, for all family members
- Crisis support and planning to prevent and respond to mental health crises
- Support with basic needs, helping families address barriers that impact mental health (e.g., transportation, access to services)
- Service planning through a team-based approach, centered on the family's voice and choice

**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.**<sup>2</sup>

**Over the past four years, the number of inquiries for YES Waiver services has held steady at around 3,000 youth, while the number of youth served has dropped 38%.** The YES Waiver served just over 1,500 kids in 2025, down from about 2,400 youth in 2022.<sup>3,4</sup>

The YES Waiver has lost 397 providers since the end of 2019 (Q4), partly due to financial challenges and low funding levels.<sup>5</sup> Currently, there are only 548 YES providers in the state, fewer than 60% of the number in FY 2019.<sup>6</sup> The program could help more youth, but there aren't enough providers to deliver the services.

## The Legislature should increase funding for the YES Waiver program to stabilize the provider network and assure high-quality care for families.

These recommendations are drawn from the state's 2024 Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan:

- Increase YES Waiver reimbursement rates to reflect the true cost of care, stabilize the provider network, and expand access, especially in rural and underserved areas where families face long waitlists and service gaps.
- Fund essential administrative and care coordination work that is currently not reimbursed — like case management, crisis support, and system navigation — to improve service quality and ensure families receive timely, well-coordinated care.

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission. 2026. YES Waiver program data. [Unpublished data].

<sup>2</sup> Texas Health and Human Services [Presentation to the House Youth Health & Safety Select Committee](#).

<sup>3</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission. 2024. YES inquiry data and number served, 2019–2023. [Unpublished data].

<sup>4</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission. 2026. YES Waiver program data. [Unpublished data].

<sup>5</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission. [Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan](#). December, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission. 2026. YES Waiver program data. [Unpublished data].