SUPPORTING POLICIES TO KEEP FAMILIES SAFELY TOGETHER
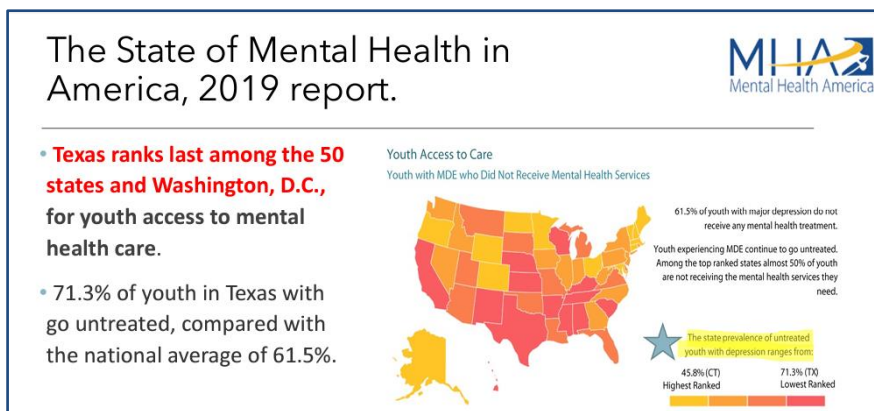
SUMMARY

CASA volunteers across the state advocate to keep families connected and together when safe and possible. Texas CASA has long supported efforts to keep families safely out of the child welfare system and to quickly reunify children with their families if they have to be removed and enter foster care. There are some current challenges in the State of Texas that make the need to focus on strengthening services for children and families even more crucial.

BACKGROUND

When a child is removed from their home, it is extremely traumatic for both the child and their family. The State of Texas should do all it can to provide services, support and resources to children and families to prevent the need for this traumatic intervention.

Inadequate Mental Health Services for Children

Mental Health America shows that Texas ranks last for access to children's mental health services and ranks 33rd for adult care.[1] 98 percent of the 254 counties in Texas are wholly or partially designated as 'mental health professional shortage areas.'[1] The shortages have gotten so dire that many families turn to the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to take care of their children when they cannot find mental healthcare for their child. Children should not enter foster care because their parents cannot find or access needed care for their children. Further, 44% of children without placement in June 2024 entered care because their parents could not find mental health services for them.[2] This is because DFPS does not have access to services beyond those that are available to families in communities.

The State of Mental Health in America, 2019 report.

- **Texas ranks last among the 50 states and Washington, D.C.,** for youth access to mental health care.
- 71.3% of youth in Texas with go untreated, compared with the national average of 61.5%.

Youth Access to Care
Youth with MDE who Did Not Receive Mental Health Services

61.5% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment.

Youth experiencing MDE continue to go untreated. Among the top ranked states almost 50% of youth are not receiving the mental health services they need.

The state prevalence of untreated youth with depression ranges from:
45.8% (CT) Highest Ranked — 71.3% (TX) Lowest Ranked

In addition, many of the children who enter foster care to receive mental health services were previously adopted out of foster care and their families have exhausted or do not know how to access post-adoptive services. Children may also experience intensified mental health needs amid continued trauma and instability once in foster care. Texas must strengthen access to and funding for mental health and disability services in communities to ensure that children and youth can receive the help they need to remain stable, heal and flourish.

Inadequate Services for Families

In Texas, most child removals are due to neglect, most often involving parental substance use, mental illness or domestic violence. Geographic location, workforce shortages or logistical barriers may hinder access to these services. In many cases, the child welfare system has become the mental health provider of last resort for both children and families. If more resources and interventions became available across communities, many more families could stay

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[1] Source : https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/dell/legislative-initiatives/RPC-LL-Babatope-FINAL.pdf
[2] Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Child_Protection/State_Care/documents/2024_06_CWOP_Agency_Actions_Visual.pdf

safely together and avoid the costly interaction with the child welfare system.

Alternative Response Expansion

Child Protective Investigations (CPI) plays a crucial role in safeguarding children. However, the traditional approach to investigations often breeds apprehension within families, resulting in a reluctance to collaborate with investigators or participate in services that can keep children safe at home with their families.[3] The Alternative Response (AR) approach offers a more supportive and flexible solution, helping families address their challenges without the stigma, anxiety or long-term consequences associated with traditional CPI investigations. CPI staff will screen reports of abuse or neglect to determine AR eligibility. In an AR case, the caseworker will schedule a meeting directly with the family and encourage the family to invite their support system to the meeting. Instead of focusing on whether a reported incident constitutes abuse, the AR caseworker focuses on assessing the family's needs and identifying solutions within the family's support system and community resources to help prevent the removal of the children. If necessary, an AR case is escalated to a traditional investigation to keep a child safe.

A pilot in Region 10 (El Paso) launched in February 2024 extends AR services to children of all ages. Since the launch of the pilot, El Paso has increased the percentage of Priority 2 cases (i.e., cases with no immediate risk of serious harm or death) that are handled through AR from 20% to 50%, showing that many families with young kids could benefit from this less intrusive approach.[4]

POLICY POSITION

> *Texas CASA supports policies that preserve families, promote family reunification when possible and minimize the time children spend in foster care.*

Texas CASA Supports:

1. Funding additional family preservation services, including evidence-based programs for parenting skills, in-home wrap-around services, behavioral health and substance use treatment
2. Increased funding for and increased utilization of post-adoption supports to provide stability and prevent foster care reentry
3. Policies and funding efforts to increase mental health services in communities for both children and families, with a particular focus on increasing services in rural areas of Texas
4. Monitoring the impact of the statewide scaling of the Alternative Response pilot in Region 10

If you have questions or concerns related to this or any other Texas CASA legislative priority, please email: publicpolicy@texascasa.org.

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[3] Source: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Alternative Response in Texas. (2024). https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Investigations/alternative_response.asp
[4] Source: Nicole Williams. (2024, May 23). Alternative Response and Region 10 Alternative Response Expansion Pilot [Presentation]. Child Protection Roundtable May 2024 Meeting, Austin, TX, USA [virtual]

TEXAS**CASA**
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN