



**Testimony to the Sunset Advisory Commission
Health and Human Services Commission and System Issues
November 13, 2014**

Texans Care for Children acknowledges the Sunset Commission Staff Report has accurately identified many gaps in services and many areas where there is insufficient accountability, oversight and transparency. Many of the issues identified are longstanding and must be addressed without further delay or distraction. Burying existing agencies within another layer of bureaucracy at this point only stands to further delay many lingering challenges. **Texans Care for Children therefore opposes the consolidation of the agencies underneath a super-structure as proposed by the Sunset Commission Staff and instead calls for the implementation of a variety of solutions correctly identified by the Sunset Commission Staff Report as having potential for greatly increasing the effectiveness of our social service agencies.** Only once these immediate challenges are addressed should the Legislature consider overhauling the organization of these agencies. Otherwise, our state risks dragging these continued problems with it well into creation of these new structures, agencies and positions of leadership -- greatly impeding the potential success of this administrative overhaul and leaving unaddressed many of the problems that advocates and Legislators alike have identified time and again.

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH:

Increase coordination and collaboration across the multiple systems that serve children and youth with serious emotional disturbance.

The 83rd Legislature recognized the multisystem nature of mental health when it established within HHSC the Associate Commissioner for Mental Health Coordination position and the Texas System of Care Consortium, which specifically addresses the needs of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance. Both were significant steps and have already resulted in real improvements in bringing systems together and implementing solutions. However, the level of coordination and collaboration that is needed goes beyond the current authority of the new position and that of the consortium. Texas needs to move forward on strategies to help communities provide coordinated, individualized services and supports to children and youth who have complex mental health needs, including the coordination and blending of funds, improving information and data sharing between systems, and establishing common outcomes across systems to help the state better track and analyze the collective impact of its services to children and youth. All of this not only can happen without consolidation, and will in fact not be addressed by consolidation as the agencies involved reach beyond those involved in the proposed consolidation.

Elevate and coordinate prevention and early interventions targeting common risk factors.

Many of the challenges children, youth and families face - mental illness, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, delinquency, school dropout, and suicide - share common risk factors and often co-occur. Efforts to address these issues often target the same risk factors, although their services are planned, delivered, and evaluated in isolation from one another. This siloing of efforts thwarts their individual and collective impact. Creating a division that focuses on prevention and early intervention will elevate and coordinate these “upstream” strategies in a way that cannot happen if these efforts continue to be buried within crisis driven systems focused on singular outcomes. A prevention and early intervention division will best enable the state to coordinate strategic planning and better measure and report outcomes that reflect the more broad human and fiscal impact of prevention and early intervention programs.

Statutory protections are needed to ensure meaningful stakeholder input into systems serving children, youth and families.

We agree there is a need to better structure and coordinate the various bodies that advise or assist the state in the planning and delivering of effective services to children and families. However, leaving advisory bodies to the discretion of the executive commissioner risks a lack of continuity at best, and a loss of transparency and a silencing of public input at worst. Some level of statutory protections is needed to ensure meaningful and independent advisory opportunities exist, include robust consumer, family and community voice; and are maintained and utilized, particularly in times of budget austerity.

Before any reorganization or elimination of advisory groups occurs, the state must thoroughly examine the impact it would have on the focus and/or functions of each group involved. Combining committees with broadly similar goals can jeopardize their individual efficacy. Some committees work because they have a narrow focus that enables their members to use their expertise to produce targeted recommendations. Consumers, families, and community stakeholders should be consulted in any reorganization of advisory bodies to prevent populations, specialized issues, or unique functions from getting lost in the shuffle. Developing and maintaining family and/or youth voice in the policymaking process is critical, as is the ability to report directly to the legislature and not be constrained by agency filtering or approval.

*Josette Saxton, MSSW
Mental Health Policy Associate
Texans Care for Children
512.473.2274
jsaxton@txchildren.org
www.txchildren.org*

Texans Care for Children is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fulfilling the promise of children through improved state policies and programs on child protective services; juvenile justice; mental well-being; health and fitness; and early childhood education and opportunities.