

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Marian Sokol and I am Vice Chair of the Texas Office for Prevention of Developmental Disabilities, which is administratively attached to HHSC and governed by an appointed Executive Committee. I am here to urge you to allow TOPDD to maintain its current status and structure. I bring both a professional and a personal perspective to this work. My husband and I adopted a son who has developmental disabilities. I know first-hand the devastation of a disability and the pain of knowing that it was preventable. My son's disabilities were not genetic. His mother was a 19 year old who, without understanding the consequences, "partied her way" through her freshman year of college. The damage and the diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder was completely preventable....as is the birth of about 3,800 other affected babies in Texas each year. And this is just one of the issues that the Texas Office on Prevention addresses. Another is Head and Spinal Cord Injuries, also causing irreversible damage to thousands of children.

Many Texans are skeptical of the wisdom of the legislature. But I can proudly point to establishment of Texas Office for Prevention in 1989 and say that 25 years ago a group of legislators had wisdom and foresight and "got it right"! They understood that intervention and crises in health and human services can consume any amount of money. It is indeed like "putting a finger in the dyke". So they thoughtfully created an Office that would 1) focus solely on prevention 2) be a public- private partnership challenged with leveraging money outside of the legislature 3) be focused on collaboration and community involvement and 4) be governed by a 9 member appointed Executive Committee that is knowledgeable and nimble. We have a lean, mean and stellar staff and can turn on a dime!

I have devoted my professional life to public health, and children's needs, nationally and in Texas. I have a deep understanding of how structure can inhibit or facilitate a mission. One thing that I believe in strongly is the power of public

policy, which is a major focus of TOPDD. Internal HHSC entities are not in a position to make policy recommendations. Their staff members certainly do not have a team composed of legislators and policy experts to shepherd policy, and assist them and guide them in this work. TOPDD does. If we eliminate TOPDD's structure, this will be lost.

The Texas Office for Prevention is the only government agency to receive funds from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health to hire a policy fellow. I feel certain that the foundation would have never given the funds to HHSC. This is because an internal HHSC entity would not have the latitude, access to leaders and volunteer base that TOPDD has to impact policy. I believe that TOPDD's model as a private public partnership is the only way that the state can begin to succeed in addressing health and human service needs. As big as HHSC is, health and human service needs are far bigger. The private investment in TOPDD, both in terms of funding and in volunteer leaders, builds its power, effectiveness and reach. The change that is being proposed would drastically reduce it.

I understand that the Sunset commission staff may be seeking to expand the latitude of the HHSC Commissioner so that the Commissioner can make changes more quickly. But I am sure that it wouldn't want to do so to the detriment of TOPDD's ability to work in policy, thereby making it impossible for the Office to comprehensively address its mission. The only possible advantage I could see in this change is that it would create a neater organizational chart. However, Health and Human Services work is not neat. It is messy, complex and important work.

Also, our sister agency, Texas Council on Developmental Disabilities, which works on the "intervention" or "services" side of this equation, is also very active in policy development. They have a very similar structure to TOPDD that the Sunset report recommends leaving intact. Why isn't "Prevention" as important as "Intervention"???

Marian Sokol, Ph.D., MPH

Before TOPDD, there was no voice for preventing the disabilities that my son lives with every day. I am extremely proud to tell you that today, through the Texas Office for Prevention, entities across human services are collaborating and integrating prevention in their work. With your support, the voice of prevention will not be muffled or lost altogether within the large structure of HHSC. I am also proud to tell you that my granddaughter will graduate from high school this year as a member of the National Honor Society and has already been accepted at several Universities. Although her Dad was affected by FASD, her mother did not drink during pregnancy. This is just one small and very personal reason why you need to leave the Texas Office for Prevention intact with the current structure! ***Every Texas mind matters!***

Thank you,

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