



Connecting the Dots for
Children's Mental Health,
A behavioral health strategic plan for
Austin and Travis County

February 26, 2026

Kids Living Well Oversees Community Plan

- Kids Living Well assumed oversight of our community's children's mental health planning efforts in 2016.
- The Children's Mental Health Plan Steering Committee is a sub-committee of Kids Living Well that has guided development of this 5-year update to the 2021 Travis County Plan for Children's Mental Health and Substance Misuse.
- The 2026 Children's Mental Health Plan will be released during Mental Health Awareness Month in May 2026.

CMHP Steering Committee

- John Hellerstedt, MD, Hellerstedt Consulting LLC
- Amber Hillanbrand, LCDC, PMP, LSSGB, Operations Manager for Mental Health, Addiction Care & Justice Involved Health, Central Health
- Kimberly Holiday, Pflugerville City Council Member and a person with lived experience
- Joyce James, LMSW-AP, Joyce James Consulting
- Leah Kelly, CFP, Travis County parent, Austin ISD School Health Advisory Council Co-Chair
- Courtney Lucas, MEd, Assistant Division Director - Health Planning & Partnerships, Travis County HHS
- Susan Millea, PhD, Model Community Team, United Way for Greater Austin
- Puja Patel, PhD, Dell Medical School and Dell Children's Medical Center
- Laura Peveto, Division Director – Office of Children's Services, Travis County HHS
- Stacy Spencer, LCSW-S, Practice Administrator, Integral Care
- Ann Teich, Mental Health Sub-Committee Chair, Austin ISD Student Health Advisory Council
- Kate Volti, MPA, Sr. V.P. for Child and Family Policy, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute
- Desmar Walkes, MD, Austin/Travis County Health Authority and Medical Director, Austin Public Health

Gathering community input

- 16 focus group sessions with 95 participants
- A caregiver survey with 78 responses.

At each focus group we asked -

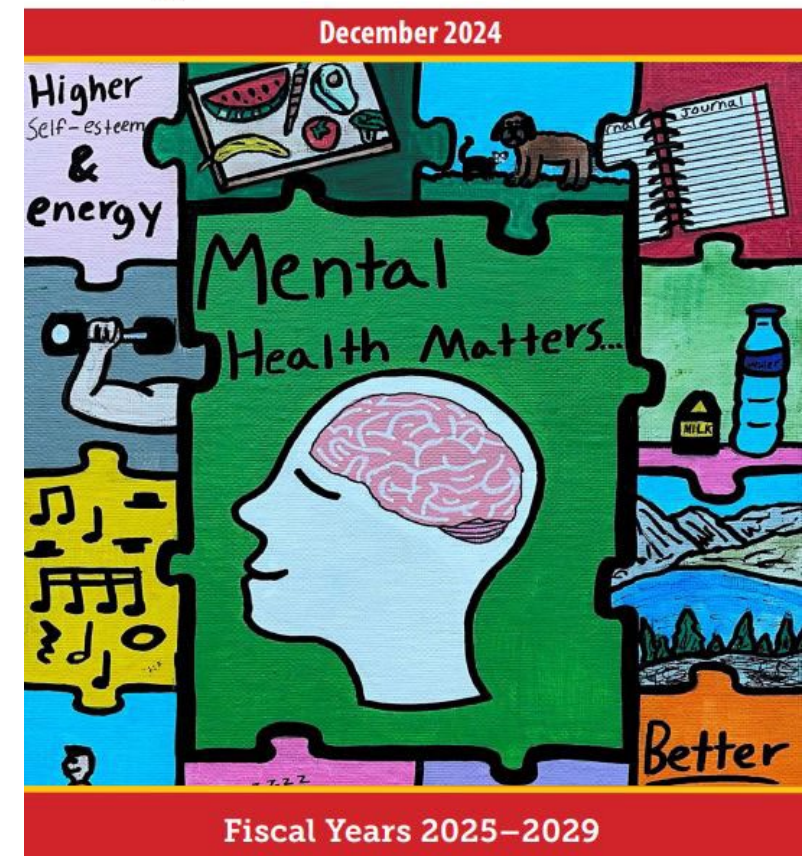
- What community assets are helping to improve children's mental health?
- What needs persist?
- What can our community do to address these needs?



Alignment with Texas Strategic Plan

Many recommendations in the State Plan align with findings and recommendations in the local plan:

- Expand services that are reimbursed by Medicaid to include more intensive services and residential treatment.
- Fund the expansion of Certified Family Partners and make these peer services a Medicaid state plan benefit.
- Expand the Children's System Navigator program.
- Establish a mental health allotment for schools and expand school-based mental health services.
- Expand substance misuse prevention and treatment.
- Improve and strengthen child and youth crisis response.



Vision: We envision a community that supports children's mental health and well-being.



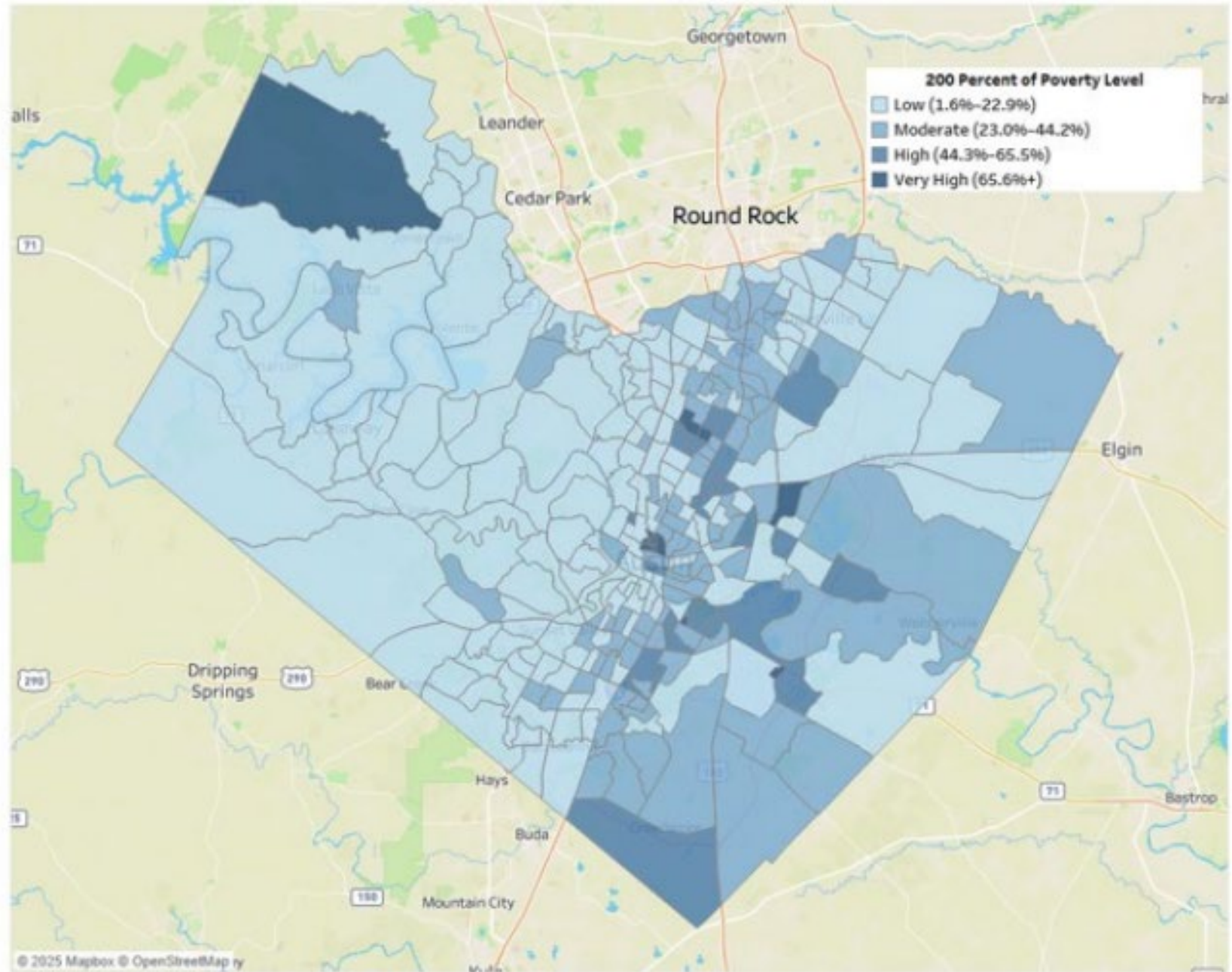
Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences

- 89% reduction in suicide attempts among high school students
- 84% reduction in prescription pain medication misuse
- 66% reduction in persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- Reduce chronic diseases and behavioral health conditions among adults.



- Life expectancy for Travis
- County residents ranges from 69 to 88 years of age...

Depending on where you live.



DATA SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2019-2023

What is going well – new initiatives since 2021

Wellness and Resilience

- Ask, Listen, Talk, Repeat <https://asklistentalk.org> is a joint public awareness campaign by Austin Public Health, the City of Austin, Integral Care, and Travis County.
- Expansion of Mental Health First Aid and Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Travis County voters approved a 2.5-cent property tax increase in 2024 to expanding high quality, affordable childcare and after-school care.

What is going well – new initiatives since 2021

Access to Care

- Expansion of school-based mental health resources and the use of Certified Family Partners in schools.
- Central Health has expanded access to healthcare with new clinics in Hornsby Bend and Del Valle and is planning additional clinics in North Austin and Colony Park.
- Central Health is collaborating with CommUnity Care and Integral Care to integrate mental health care and primary care.
- The Texas Legislature created the Texas Child Mental Health Consortium in 2019 and expanded it in 2022. The Consortium connects schools and doctor's offices to psychologists and psychiatrists in Texas medical schools.

What is going well – new initiatives since 2021

Crisis Response

- The National Suicide Lifeline number was changed to 988. People can text or call to reach a mental health professional.
- Crisis services were expanded with a new children’s crisis respite center and a mobile crisis response team specifically trained to respond to children in crisis and their families.
- LifeWorks opened an emergency shelter for children aged 13 to 17 and created a peer led youth crisis respite program. Teens receive shelter, basic needs, case management services, and individualized care planning.
- The Travis County Transformation Project diverts teens from the juvenile justice system to a restorative justice program.

Goals and Recommendations



Goal 1: Strengthen the resilience of children and families.

Families are struggling to meet basic needs

- One-third of Travis County families are housing cost burdened.
- BASTA reports that evictions in Travis County increased by 25% from 2023 to 2024, with trends continuing upward in 2025.
- In 2024, there were five times the number of families with children, youth, and parenting youth households experiencing homelessness compared to 2020, according to the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO).
- One in four Central Texas children and one in six Central Texas adults are food insecure, according to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap Report.

Changes in Policies and Priorities

- Shifting priorities, government policies, and funding cuts to education, public health, housing, food, and health care are contributing to feelings of fear, vulnerability and insecurity.
- **Technology introduces new challenges and increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.**

Goal 1: Strengthen the resilience of children and families.

- Help families meet their basic needs for housing, food, and healthcare.
- Teach children empathy, compassion, sharing, cooperation, and kindness from an early age so they can understand their feelings and learn to regulate their behavior.
- Provide programs that allow children, youth and their families to make connections and build relationships with others.
- Promote healthy child development in the first 2,000 days of life, as recommended in the United Way for Greater Austin Success by Six Strategic Plan.
- Support caregivers in helping children set healthy boundaries for technology use.
- Empower youth voice and community engagement. Explore ways to use technology to engage youth and learn from them what their needs and interests are.
- Provide recreational activities and enrichment opportunities for children and youth.
- Provide youth with opportunities for leadership, job skills training and internships.

Goal 2: Ensure services are financially, geographically, and culturally accessible.

- Caregivers cite cost as the number one barrier to getting care for their child.
- Families who rely on Medicaid have an especially difficult time finding services.
- Focus group participants from Del Valle, Manor, Lago Vista and Pflugerville said they must travel long distances to access services. Not every job gives time off to take children to appointments, and long commute times add to the difficulty.
- It is challenging to find providers who speak a family's language or who understand their culture.

There are few lucrative employment opportunities in Manor, so residents must travel far for jobs. If their child needs help, they have to miss work. If they have a child with special needs, it is very difficult.

Manor focus group participant

Goal 2: Ensure services are financially, geographically, and culturally accessible.

- Expand access by increasing collaborative care in primary care clinics, expanding school-based mental health services, utilizing mobile clinics, and expanding tele-health options.
- Advocate for increased Texas Health and Human Services funding for Certified Family Partners and Children's System Navigators, as recommended in the Texas Children's Behavioral Health Strategic Plan.
- Provide technical assistance to organizations to bill for Medicaid services and/or to participate in provider networks.
- Increase the use of the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium's programming that connects schools and doctor's offices to psychologists and psychiatrists in Texas medical schools.

Goal 3: Expand services for children with complex needs and dual diagnoses.

- Focus group participants noted that children are having increasingly complex mental health needs, often with co-occurring diagnoses, yet intensive services for these children is difficult to find.
- Many evidence-based practices are not included in the Texas Medicaid benefits.
- Strengthening the full continuum of care is essential to preventing crises, reducing hospitalizations, minimizing out-of-home placements, and avoiding involvement with the juvenile justice system.

“There is parental involvement and an attempt to seek help, but something is missing. Temporary hospitalization doesn’t do the job. Often the minor has significant needs beyond what the family can manage... We get calls from many of the same families because that is all they know to do.”

Pflugerville focus group participant

Goal 3: Expand services for children with complex needs and dual diagnoses.

- Support Texas Children’s Behavioral Health Strategic Plan recommendations to increase funding for intensive mental health services, crisis services, and community-based services for youth with complex mental health needs.
- Update the Texas Resiliency and Recovery model to include newer evidence-based practices within the Texas Medicaid state plan benefits.
- Create a Service Maximization Task Group, in collaboration with Texas Health and Human Services, to explore ways to expand access to services. Stakeholders could include the Local Mental Health Authority, Medicaid Managed Care Organizations, UT Health, Dell Medical School, service providers, and parents.
- Advocate for expansion of substance misuse prevention and treatment.
- Provide continuing education for pediatricians, educators, service providers, family partners, and other child-serving professionals on how to work with children who have complex mental health issues and dual diagnoses

Goal 4: Clearly communicate how to access care.

- Families are uncertain how to access mental health and substance use resources.
- Organizations that serve children and their families do not have a shared understanding of how our local system for mental healthcare and substance use treatment works.

“It would be helpful to be able to bypass emergency departments altogether and go directly to the care you need, but this requires understanding treatment options and how the system works.”

NAMI parent focus group

Goal 4: Clearly communicate how to access care.

- Create a mental health roadmap of the local system of care for behavioral health services so our community has a shared understanding of how to navigate care.
- Share the mental health roadmap with parents, schools, hospitals, healthcare providers, clinics, service providers, school resource officers, school district Student Health Advisory Councils, Region 13 Education Service Center, law enforcement, Travis County Juvenile Justice, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and houses of worship.
- Share the mental health roadmap with Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium's TCHAT and CPAN programs so the mental health professionals at Texas Higher Education Institutions are familiar with local care options so they can advise educators and physicians how to connect patients and students to on-going behavioral health care in the community.
- Provide training for 211 Call Center staff on mental health, substance use, and crisis resources available and how to refer callers to the most appropriate resources.

What recommendations are you on board with?

- What could Kids Living Well do over the next 5 years to help achieve these goals ?
- What can community partners do?
- What can you or your organization do?



What could Kids Living Well do?

1. LeShawn Arbuckle – said transition aged youth should be called out in the report. They are a population that se social to recruit providers unique to community needs who reflect families and children being served. Targeted outreach.
2. RE: Cost of treatment – Educate state legislators to increase funding for IDD services.
3. Stay engaged with the Raising Travis County effort to fund childcare services and how it is increasing access. Invite Cathy McHorse to present to KLW.
<https://www.traviscountytexas.gov/health-human-services/raising-travis-county/rtc-newsroom>
4. Invite more peer specialist voice at the table - MH Peer Specialists, Certified Family Partners, peer support specialists.

What can community partners do?

1. Katherine Austin ABC said funding losses have been devastating for service providers and are leaving a big information and services gap. We don't know who is doing what now. What programs still exist, where there are openings, keeping this knowledge up to date will help us work together better.
2. Julie Weeks said Austin Voices has family resource centers in AISD. Kids Living Well website section on resources is great. She suggested we encourage member organizations to link to the resources.
<https://kidslivingwell.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Mental-health-flier-for-families-SPN-ENGL.pdf>
and <https://kidslivingwell.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/What-to-do-when-child-has-mental-health-crisis-SPN-ENGL.pdf>

What can you or your organization do?

1. Encourage organizations to link to the mental health road map and to help keep the information updated.
2. Susan Millea – any org using promotoras or community health workers – let them know about this plan so they understand needs of families and potentially provide training on how to align and look for resources.
3. Ellyn E – brief video snippets are a good way to get information out on social media.