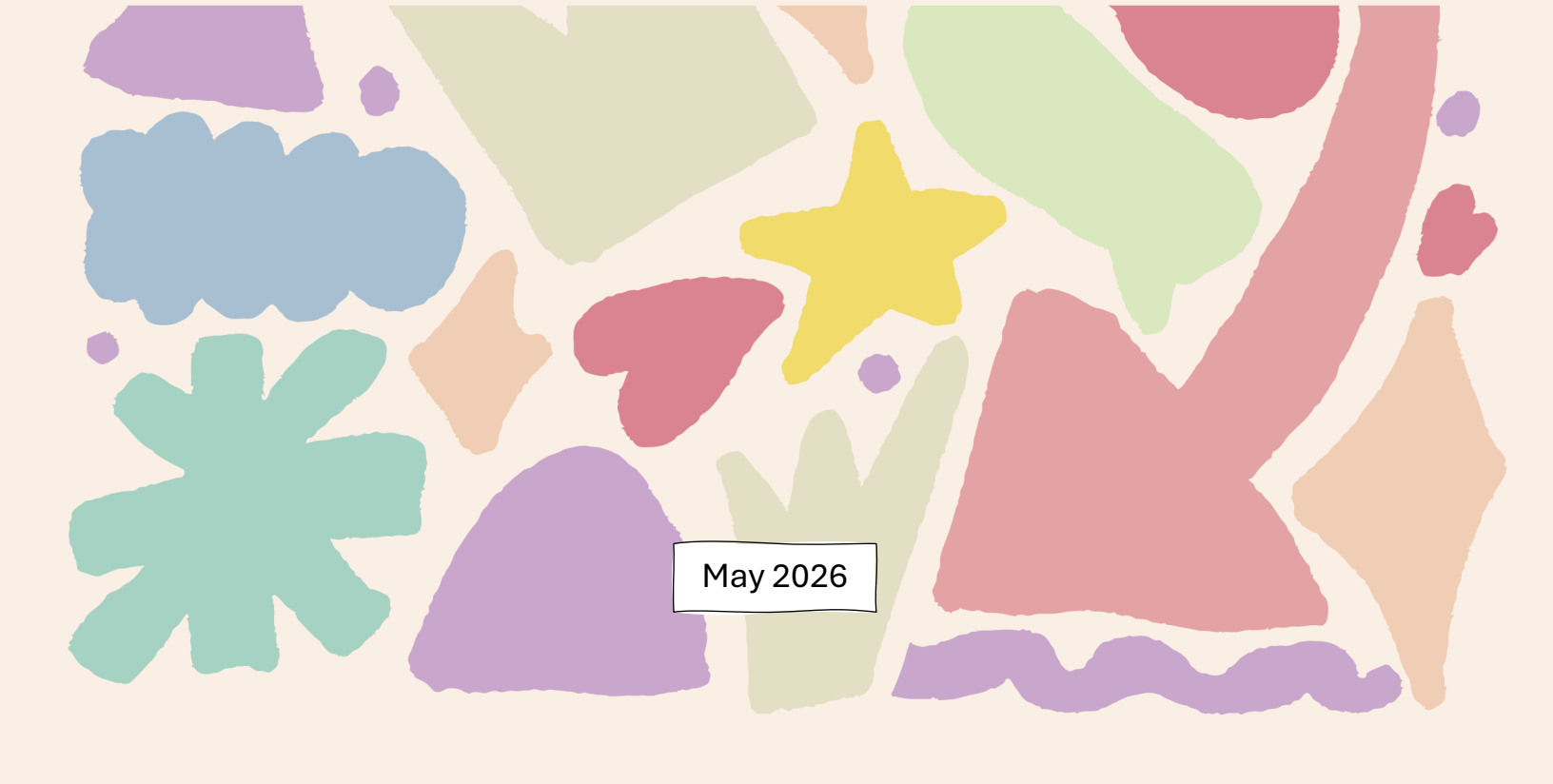




# Connecting the Dots for Children's Mental Health

**A behavioral health strategic plan  
for Austin and Travis County**



May 2026



# Executive Summary

Building a future where every child’s mental health and well-being are prioritized requires community-wide commitment to fostering the resilience of children and families and breaking down barriers to accessing care. The goals and strategies below are informed by direct feedback from focus groups and a parent and caregiver survey. This strategic framework outlines a vision for an inclusive, accessible, and responsive system of care.



**OUR VISION:**

## We envision a community that supports children’s mental health and well-being.



-  **GOAL 1** Strengthen the resilience of children, youth, and families
-  **GOAL 2** Ensure services are financially, geographically, and culturally accessible.
-  **GOAL 3** Expand services for children and youth with complex needs.
-  **GOAL 4** Clearly communicate how to access care.



Implementing a new children’s mental health strategic plan requires a synchronized effort across our community to ensure every child and youth can thrive. This Connecting the Dots Behavioral Health Strategic Plan for Austin and Travis County includes specific actions that Kids Living Well, its member organizations, and other community stakeholders can take to implement the Plan over the next five years.



# GOAL 1

## Strengthen the resilience of children, youth, and families

Families are struggling to meet basic needs at a time when federal and state funding for healthcare, education, and social services has been reduced or is at risk. Immigration enforcement is causing stress and impacting health and mental health appointments, church and school attendance, and community engagement. There are also concerns about the negative impact of technology on children’s lives.

### Recommendations:

- Support programs that help families meet their basic needs.
- Promote healthy child development and teach prosocial learning skills from an early age so children can understand their feelings and how to regulate their behavior.
- Empower youth to have a voice and to be active in their communities.
- Provide opportunities for recreation, leadership, and job skills development.



# GOAL 2

## Ensure services are financially, geographically, and culturally accessible.

Mental health and substance use services are often inaccessible due to cost, a lack of services in outlying areas, and a shortage of providers who speak the family’s language or who understand and respect their culture.

### Recommendations:

- Expand access by increasing collaborative care in primary care clinics, expanding school-based mental health services, utilizing mobile clinics, and expanding telehealth options.
- Advocate for increased Texas Health and Human Services funding for Certified Family Partners and Children’s System Navigators.
- Provide technical assistance to organizations to bill for Medicaid services and 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 and youth with complex needs.

The community lacks intensive services for children and youth with dual diagnoses of serious mental illness and substance use, autism, or developmental disabilities. Expanding community capacity for treating children and youth with complex needs can help avoid traumatic crisis visits to emergency departments and psychiatric hospitals, out of home placement, and Child Protective Services or juvenile justice involvement.

**Recommendations:**

- Increase funding for intensive mental health services, crisis services, and community-based services for children and youth with complex mental health needs.
- Update the Texas Resiliency and Recovery model to include 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 evidence-based services.
- Expand substance misuse prevention and treatment for children and youth.
- Provide continuing education for pediatricians, educators, service providers, family partners, and other child-serving professionals on how to work with children and youth with complex mental health issues and dual diagnoses.



## GOAL 4

### Clearly communicate how to access care.

The mental health care system is difficult to navigate. Families are unsure of how to access services. School counselors, healthcare providers, and other child-serving professionals do not have a shared understanding of the services available and how to access them. Clearly articulating our system of care will make it easier to connect to resources and will optimize the utilization of existing resources.

**Recommendations:**

- Create a mental health roadmap of the local system of care.
- Share this resource widely with parents, caregivers, and the community.
- Share information about local resources with Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium’s Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHAT) and Child Psychiatry Access Network (CPAN) programs so mental health professionals at Texas Higher Education Institutions are familiar with local community care options. This will help them advise educators and physicians on how to connect patients and students to ongoing mental health care in the community.
- Provide training to United Way for Greater Austin’s 2-1-1 Call Center staff on mental health, substance use, and crisis resources available and how to refer people calling for assistance to the most appropriate resources.