

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

2018 Texas Policy Agenda

Introduction

Millennials are at risk of being worse off economically than their parents as wages for young workers have fallen across industries.¹ If not addressed quickly, this state of affairs will carry serious ramifications for years to come as Texas's economy continues to rely on young adult workers.²

For young Texans, economic security is built on the pillars of access to affordable, quality health care and completion of higher education credentials that leads to good jobs. Despite recent gains, however, significant numbers of young adults remain uninsured in our state—especially Latinos and low-income individuals.³ Further, students are accumulating education debt at a rapid pace; the average graduating senior at a four-year college in Texas owes over \$26,000 in student loans.⁴ But even with a degree, finding work is challenging as employers increasingly expect relevant experience for entry-level jobs. Students who must work to pay tuition often forgo unpaid internships that would bring this experience, putting them at a disadvantage when attempting to enter the job market.

While the Texas legislature is not scheduled to convene again until 2019, several opportunities exist through the interim period and the regulatory process for Texas policymakers to foster the ability for all young Texans and their families to build strong futures, specifically in the areas of health, higher education, and workforce development.

Health Care

The following recommendations would improve young Texans' economic competitiveness through improved health outcomes, with a special focus on 1) college students suffering from mental health conditions; and 2) the particular health challenges facing young moms in Texas. These populations are particularly at-risk for dropping out of school, making prioritizing these students' needs a necessity.

Young Adults' Mental Health Care

Mental health issues have a severely negative impact on degree completion which, given the importance of higher education in today's workforce,⁶ can threaten the economic standing of young Texans for years to come. Students across the state face long waiting times for appointments: In recent report, the Texas Legislature found only one state college or university meeting the national counselor-to-student recommendation of 1:1000.⁷ Further investments must be considered to improve these ratios in upcoming sessions. But college campuses and state health officials can also improve the mental health of students by collaborating to create a comprehensive approach to helping young people suffering from mental health conditions.

Young Adults' Mental Health Care, cont.

Statewide Approach for Campuses to Destigmatize Mental Health Illness: Texas Health and Human Services should partner with Texas higher education officials to design a set of guidance that will allow institutions across the state to implement best practices for addressing mental health care on -campus. This guidance should have three essential parts:

- ***Destigmatizing Mental Health Illnesses***
 - Strategies could include peer-to-peer engagement efforts, required workshops during Freshman orientation, and campus-wide days of awareness.
- ***Normalizing and Increasing Awareness of Current Mental Health Treatment Services***
 - While Texas schools are already required to provide information on mental health warning signs to students, as well as post information on available treatment options online, more proactive efforts are needed to get information into the hands of students and decrease stigma in seeking out care. Educational tools and toolkits should not only have clearly laid out accessible resources, but also have statistics and stories that show mental illness can happen to anyone. Further, as part of orientation, schools should require a mental health peer-led discussion of current resources, warning signs, and what to do when a friend needs help.
- ***Increasing Access to Care***
 - Telemedicine strategies should be explored to increase on-campus counseling opportunities. For example, Texas A&M University, the University of North Texas and Baylor University implemented an initiative utilizing video conferences between counselors and students to provide mental health treatment. Early results from these efforts should be examined, along with best practices from other states, to create an initial set of recommendations for on-campus telemedicine.

Young Parents and Women's Health

Young women and parents in Texas are in need of better access to health care. Texas has the highest rate of maternal deaths in the country—and while African American women make up only 11 percent of births in the state, these women account for 29 percent of deaths.¹⁰ The state's Task Force on Maternal Mortality and Morbidity ("Task Force") identified a lack of access to early prenatal care as a key reason for this tragedy,¹¹ in line with recent reports finding that many young women lack access to basic preventative health care, including birth control.¹² It is imperative that the state explore all avenues to increasing access to essential health care, including expanding access to private and public health insurance.

At the same time, the state can also act to improve young parents' health in the following ways:

Establishing Best Practices for Telehealth Strategies Among Young Moms

Thanks to recently enacted legislation, the Task Force is directed to report on strategies to reduce maternal deaths and morbidity, including expanding treatment options for postpartum depression in economically disadvantaged women.¹³ When reporting on treatment options, the Task Force should recommend best practices in the use of telemedicine strategies that have proven successful in other settings,¹⁴ such as video and texting mental health services and virtual pregnancy homes.

Young Parents and Women's Health, cont.

The Establishment of a Select Committee on Maternal and Child Health: To ensure the state legislature continues to stay engaged during the interim period in the Task Force's work and other related efforts, the legislature should establish a Select Committee on Maternal and Child Health to explore potential policy solutions (including telemedicine) that would reduce state costs while improving women's health, pregnancy health, and birth outcomes.

Improve Strategies to Increase Enrollment and Usage in Existing Health Programs: While Texas's Medicaid eligibility standards for childless adults are extremely restrictive, pregnant women do gain access to Medicaid for the duration of their pregnancy ("pregnancy Medicaid") and 60 days postpartum.¹⁵ Unfortunately, many young people experience delays in enrolling in pregnancy Medicaid that further blocks their ability to receive early care during pregnancy. Texas's state-run Healthy Texas Women ("HTW") program, designed to take the place of the former federal-state Medicaid family-planning program, still enrolls approximately 65,000 *fewer* women than its predecessor.¹⁶

In partnership with the Task Force and possible Select Committee, Texas Health and Human Services should report on strategies to:

- Identify, and address, enrollment barriers to pregnancy Medicaid and Health Texas Women while increasing the number of women who actually receive health services under these programs.
- Improve awareness of, and access to, long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) immediately postpartum under Medicaid and in HTW.

This report could then be used as the basis for legislative action in the next interim session.

Higher Education & Workforce

The barriers to economic security Millennials face are clear. Soon, over 62 percent of Texas jobs will require some form of postsecondary education,¹⁷ but employers also increasingly expect career-relevant experience.

As a result, a key objective in higher education policy must be connecting more students with paid training opportunities.

Increase In-Demand Experience through the Texas College Work-Study Program: Texas is one of 14 states to invest in student work-study opportunities through the Texas College Work Study (TCWS) program, which helps students work their way through school by connecting them to part-time work paid for by the state and employer.¹⁸ This program can serve as a vital way for students from struggling backgrounds to gain paid experience in their chosen career fields. Thanks to recently enacted legislation, the state is now required not only to report on participating employers in the program but also on demographic, major, and class year designations of participating students.¹⁹

Higher Education & Workforce, cont.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board and Texas Workforce Commission should leverage the availability of this information to:

- Identify gaps between offered positions and declared majors;
- Prioritize recruiting 50 employers in those underserved fields; and
- Identify the students (both in regard to demographics and class year) most likely to underutilize TCWP and improve outreach to these populations, exploring digital outreach strategies and counselor education.

Study on Integrating Youth Apprenticeship Programs into High Schools: While a key aim of the establishment of Texas’s Foundation High School Program was to connect high school students with more career pathways, few opportunities exist for students to gain corresponding, real-world experience. Apprenticeships provide valuable paid career training opportunities; individuals who participate in registered apprenticeships earn over \$300,000 more than those who do not over the course of their lifetimes.²⁰

The Texas Workforce Commission recently received a \$1.3m grant to implement apprenticeship programs for youth, women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, and more.²¹ The state, either as part of the legislature’s interim work or in concert with the Texas Education Agency, should build on that progress and study the feasibility of:

- Implementing an optional youth apprenticeships program into the Foundation High School Program, looking to other states (such as Wisconsin), as well as speaking directly with students, for best practices.
- As part of the study, the state should examine ways to use any apprenticeship program to connect students with apprenticeship opportunities in fields where that students’ demographics may be underrepresented as well as in promising fields that already recruit diverse applicant pools in order to expose students to possible career paths they may not have considered.

Endnotes

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- ⁸ *Ibid* at 3. (Note: Both passed during the state’s 84th Legislative Session, HB 197 required all public institutions of higher education to post information about treatment services online, while SB 1624 stipulated that such information couldn’t be provided in paper only and also must include warning signs and appropriate intervention practices.)
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- ¹¹ Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Task Force, *2016 Biennial Report*, 16, July 2016, https://www.dshs.texas.gov/mch/maternal_mortality_and_morbidity.shtm.
- ¹² Munira Z. Gunja, Sara R. Collins, Michelle M. Doty, and Sophie Beutel, *Telemedicine: cost-effective management of high-risk pregnancy*, *Managed Care*, 10(11): 42-6, 48-9, November 2001, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11761593>.
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