

Courageous Imperatives for Human Services

Building a Better Future: Creating a Comprehensive Support System for Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs

APHSAs Transition Recommendations for the Administration and Congress



APHSAs
American Public Human Services Association

The following is part of APHSA's series, *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services*, which provides recommendations to the incoming Administration and Congress to help develop strategies that unlock the potential of human services. To learn more about this series and how we can work together to create a country where everyone thrives, visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#).



Courageous Imperative #5: Ensure the system of care for youth with complex needs in or at risk of foster care is coordinated and able to respond to the level of need of each youth through cross-system collaboration and person-centered, trauma-informed care.

Outcomes

1. Improve Youth Well-being and Care Continuity:

Youth with complex behavioral health needs experience fewer placement disruptions and greater continuity of care through integrated, trauma-informed, and person-centered services. This reduces their reliance on emergency placements like offices, hotels, and hospital emergency rooms.

2. Enhance Cross-System Collaboration:

Federal, state, and local systems align policies and resources to deliver cohesive, data-driven solutions. This ensures that youth receive seamless support across child welfare, behavioral health, education, housing, and justice systems, addressing gaps in care and preventing duplicative efforts.

3. Strengthen Youth Outcomes and Equity:

Youth with complex needs achieve improved mental health, educational attainment, and long-term well-being through equitable access to specialized services. Disparities, particularly for youth of color, are minimized as systemic inequities are addressed and youth voice is elevated in policy decisions.

Why It Matters

Youth with complex behavioral health needs represent a small but rapidly growing population grappling with profound and multifaceted challenges. These include severe mental health conditions, developmental and cognitive disabilities, and the lasting impact of trauma from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), often compounded by families or community services unable to meet the unique needs of the young person. These challenges are further exacerbated by frequent involvement in systems like child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and behavioral health, each operating with siloed policies, procedures, and eligibility criteria that are often misaligned. The result is fragmented coordination, creating significant barriers for youth and families and contributing to inconsistent support and poor outcomes.

Addressing these challenges is not just important, it is imperative. Without intentional cross-system collaboration, expanded access to specialized care, and significant investment in trauma-informed, youth-centered services, young people will continue to face instability and diminished prospects for success. While the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) has made strides toward improving access to treatment, critical gaps remain in delivering high-quality care and securing appropriate placements, especially for youth with complex needs.

When systems fail to meet their needs, youth with complex behavioral health needs experience profound harm. They often endure frequent placement disruptions, inappropriate care settings, and prolonged instability, compounding existing trauma. Many are housed in emergency settings like offices, hotels, or hospital emergency rooms—environments ill-suited to their developmental and emotional needs. The lack of specialized, trauma-informed treatment interventions and care exacerbates their conditions, leading to worsened mental health, higher risks of self-harm, and escalated behaviors that can push them into the juvenile justice system. For youth of color, systemic inequities further intensify these challenges, stripping them of opportunities to heal and thrive.¹

Building a comprehensive, integrated system of care is essential to transform outcomes for these youth. APHSA's research on youth with complex needs highlights the urgent necessity of shifting from fragmented, reactive approaches to proactive, coordinated systems that prioritize resilience, stability, and long-term well-being. This requires bold, systemic changes—grounded in collaboration and innovation—to ensure no young person is left behind in their journey toward a brighter future.

Taking Action—Opportunities for Impact

Fragmentation across systems is one of the greatest barriers to effective care. For youth with complex behavioral health needs, navigating between child welfare, education, healthcare, and justice systems often results in gaps in care, duplicative efforts, and missed opportunities for intervention. In many cases, service providers lack the resources or training necessary to address the unique challenges these youth face, leading to poorer outcomes.²

Key data from APHSA's research³ illustrate the depth of this crisis:

- Over 75 percent of agencies identify severe mental health conditions (e.g., depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation) as defining traits of youth with complex needs. Co-occurring disorders (e.g., intellectual disabilities, behavioral challenges, substance misuse) are common among this population.
- Youth with complex needs often exhibit risk taking behaviors like running away, self-harm, or aggression.
- Formal systems like juvenile justice are among the primary pathways through which high-acuity youth come to the attention of child welfare agencies.
- Agencies reporting unsustainable costs for emergency placements, such as \$30,000 per month per youth, with some agencies reporting annual expenditures exceeding \$7 million on emergency placement solutions.
- States struggling with workforce recruitment, turnover, and burnout may be particularly illustrative of systemic challenges.
- Cross-system collaboration remains limited, with few examples of coordinated care models that bridge behavioral health, education, and social services effectively.

Federal agencies play an essential role in addressing the challenges of serving youth with complex needs and developing sustainable solutions. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is central to coordinating care, funding Medicaid waivers, and expanding mental health and developmental disability services through programs like Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) addresses the housing instability faced by many high-acuity youth by supporting transitional housing, emergency shelter programs, and targeted services for homeless or at-risk populations. The Department of Education (ED) ensures that youth with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and other specialized educational needs receive the resources and equity they deserve, while also addressing disparities in access to quality education. The Department of Justice (DOJ) works to divert youth from the juvenile justice system through trauma-informed practices and ensures equitable treatment, particularly for youth of color disproportionately affected by systemic limitations. Finally, the Department of Labor (DOL) provides critical workforce training and employment pathways, enabling youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems to build skills for independence. Together, these agencies must collaborate to break silos, align resources, and implement comprehensive, cross-system solutions that address the root causes of these challenges while improving outcomes for youth.

The Trump Administration can play a critical role in driving systemic change by creating policy frameworks, funding priorities, and cross-agency collaborations to address the needs of youth with complex behavioral health needs. The following actions are essential for establishing a coordinated, youth-centered approach at the national level.



Integrate Systems to Foster Continuity of Care

Key Issues:

- Youth with complex needs often experience fragmented services due to disconnected policies and siloed funding streams across federal agencies. These challenges are exacerbated by limited coordination between agencies and a lack of data sharing that could help create more integrated, person-centered solutions. This results in inefficient service delivery, missed opportunities for collaboration, and limited long-term outcomes for youth who require multifaceted support.

Key Opportunities:

- **Establish Cross-Agency Councils:** Create a federal interagency task force on youth with complex needs, bringing together leadership from HHS, HUD, ED, DOJ, and DOL to align policies and funding streams.
- **Promote and Support State Innovation:** Offer competitive grants to support and incentivize states to design and implement innovations in service delivery and integration that engages multiple federal programs, funding sources, and coordinated technical assistance.
- **Develop Data-Sharing Protocols:** Develop federal guidelines for secure, cross-system data sharing that ensures privacy while enabling coordinated service delivery across child welfare, juvenile justice, and education systems.



Expand Access to High-Quality, Specialized Behavioral Health Services

Key Issues:

- Youth with complex needs, particularly those in rural and underserved areas, face significant barriers to accessing necessary services due to a shortage of behavioral health professionals and the lack of comprehensive, community-based care options. Existing federal funding structures often limit the flexibility and scalability of community-based models, such as wraparound services and mobile crisis units, which are essential for delivering personalized care. Moreover, the fragmentation of services and a reliance on state-specific waivers to access Medicaid reimbursement further complicates service delivery.

Key Opportunities:

- **Incentivize Workforce Development:** Fund training and recruitment programs to address shortages of behavioral health professionals, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- **Support Community-Based Models:** Streamline and expand access to federal funding for community-based care alternatives, such as wraparound services, intensive in-home therapy, and mobile crisis units, through enhanced Medicaid reimbursement without the need for additional state-by-state waivers.
- **Expand Evidence-Based Programs:** Establish a federal clearinghouse of evidence-based practices for youth with complex needs and provide grants to states and localities for program implementation.



Strengthen Workforce Capacity Nationwide

Key Issues:

- The ability to provide effective care for youth with complex needs is hindered by a lack of standardized, trauma-informed, and culturally competent training across child-serving systems. Caregivers, including foster parents, kinship caregivers, and family members, often face challenges in addressing the behavioral health needs of the youth in their care due to insufficient support and training. The absence of federally endorsed training protocols and resources results in inconsistent care and missed opportunities to equip caregivers with the skills necessary to support these youth. A unified approach to training and caregiver support is essential to ensure that these youth receive the care and stability needed to thrive.

Key Opportunities:

- **Develop National Training Standards:** Develop federally endorsed training protocols for trauma-informed, culturally competent care to be used across all child-serving systems.
- **Enhance Caregiver Supports:** Provide federal grants to train foster parents, kinship caregivers, and family members in managing the behavioral health needs of youth in their care.



Prioritize Youth Voice and Choice in Federal Policy

Key Issues:

- Youth with lived experience are often excluded from the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives, leading to policies and programs that may not fully address their unique needs. The lack of structured platforms for youth voices, such as youth advisory boards, limits the ability of policymakers and agencies to understand and respond to the real challenges faced by these youth. Additionally, the absence of national initiatives that actively engage individuals with lived experience in co-designing programs and resources further exacerbates the disconnect between policy and the lived realities of youth. Empowering youth to shape the policies and programs that impact them is critical for ensuring that their perspectives are central to the development of effective solutions.

Key Opportunities:

- **Fund Youth Advisory Boards:** Allocate federal resources to establish state and national youth advisory boards, ensuring youth with lived experience inform policies and programs.
- **Create National Youth Leadership Initiatives:** Partner with organizations led by individuals with lived experience to co-design federal initiatives and resource guides.



Bridge Youth and Adult Systems

Key Issues:

- Youth with complex needs, especially those transitioning from foster or kinship care, face significant barriers in accessing essential services such as Medicaid, housing supports, and foster care services due to restrictive eligibility criteria. This is further compounded by a lack of youth-specific housing models, such as host homes and transitional living programs, which are vital for providing stable housing during their transition to adulthood. Additionally, many youth aging out of care do not receive comprehensive transition plans that address critical areas like employment, housing, and health services, leaving them vulnerable to instability. To ensure these youth have the necessary resources and support to succeed in adulthood, a coordinated federal effort is needed to expand eligibility for services, prioritize youth-specific housing, and strengthen transition planning.

Key Opportunities:

- **Expand Eligibility for Services:** Expand eligibility for Medicaid, housing supports, and foster care services for youth who have complex needs or are transitioning from foster or kinship care.
- **Support Transitional Housing Programs:** Reprioritize federal funding and outreach tools through HUD for youth-specific housing models, including host homes and transitional living programs, for all HUD programs like Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) and Family Reunification Vouchers (FUP).
- **Support Transition Planning:** Encourage federally funded child welfare programs to develop comprehensive transition plans for youth aging out of care, covering employment, housing, and health services.

APHSAs and our members are committed to working with the Trump Administration to strengthen the nation's human services system so it continues to provide foundational support to families across the country. Through leadership, innovation, and executive action, human services programs can become an instrumental tool to attain our national priorities of health, well-being, and prosperity for all. To discuss our recommendations, please reach out to policy@aphsa.org. For media inquiries, please reach out to media@aphsa.org. Visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#) for additional publications.

APHSAs is a bipartisan membership association representing state, county, and city human services agencies that improve outcomes for people nationwide through the administration of programs that build resilience and bolster the well-being of people through access to food, healthcare, housing, employment, child care, community support, and other key building blocks. [Learn more](#) about APHSAs.

Endnotes

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9382888/>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740923004887>

³ https://aphsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-01_Addressing-the-Complex-Needs-of-Youth.pdf

