

With Budget Surplus, Texas Eyes Investments in Child Welfare

imprintnews.org/top-stories/with-budget-surplus-texas-lawmakers-will-consider-investments-in-child-welfare/237938

1/25/2023 2:26pm

With Budget Surplus, Texas Lawmakers Will Consider Investments in Child Welfare

By [Annie Sciacca](#)



Texas State Capitol. Photo: Houston Public Media

Buoyed by a hefty boost in revenue at the launch of this year’s legislative session, Texas lawmakers will consider a slew of budget and policy decisions aimed at improving the state’s troubled foster care and juvenile justice systems.

According to the state comptroller, Texas has more than \$188 billion in general revenue for the fiscal year 2024-25 — a 26% increase from the last budget cycle.

In the House and Senate’s preliminary budgets, state lawmakers call for an increase of roughly \$200 million over the current two-year budget for child welfare services. The enhanced funding includes proposals to increase pay rates for foster parents, boost hiring of caseworkers and roll out the expansion of “community-based care” — a yearslong effort to privatize foster care in the state.

The move to privatize foster care has been met with skepticism. It has also been slow to establish since the effort was launched in 2017, although some funds have been earmarked in the state budget to expand the initiative.

The budget drafts are still in early stages, so funding proposals are shifting, said Kate Murphy, director of child protection policy for the nonprofit Texans Care for Children. But there are initial recommendations before committees such as the Senate Special Committee on Child Protective Services and others that “reflect a desire to do more,” when it comes to funding, Murphy said.

In the meantime, child welfare advocates are calling on lawmakers to invest. Advocates also support the request by the state Department of Family and Protective Services for additional “prevention and child wellbeing” funds, which would enhance mental health, substance use and parent skill-building services to keep children with their families and out of foster care.

“The historic budget surplus is a chance for long-overdue investment in Texas’ most vulnerable youth, young adults, and families,” said Lauren Rose, the director of public policy for Texas Network of Youth Services. “The time is now to increase funding for services that will safely prevent involvement in the child welfare system, and provide critical resources for young people who are either in or exiting the system.”

The preliminary budgets call for an increase of more than 50% to the state’s beleaguered Texas Juvenile Justice Department, which struggles with staffing shortages and has been under federal investigation for systemic maltreatment of youth.

The proposed budget would fund the construction of new state detention facilities and salary increases for staff.

But Texas youth advocates — partnering with the Texas Center for Justice and Equity in a campaign called “Finish the 5” — call for a different approach. They want lawmakers to commit to a plan that would shutter the state’s five remaining youth prisons, with funding shifted to community-based settings and violence-prevention programs. A recent policy brief by the Texas Center for Justice and Equity urges state officials to invest in “tailored treatment plans and case management outside of prison walls” for the state’s youth. The center also calls for a dedicated state office that would “ensure that children and their families are provided the appropriate public health-focused resources to aid in violence prevention and mitigation.”

“The historic budget surplus is a chance for long-overdue investment in Texas’ most vulnerable youth, young adults, and families.”

Lauren Rose, Texas Network of Youth Services

Several bills aim to improve the lives of foster youth by expanding their access to higher education. A bill by Rep. James Talarico (D) expands on current law allowing tuition waivers for foster youth by automatically enrolling those eligible. The bill, [House Bill 68](#), would direct the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to develop a digital system that makes it easier for high school students in foster care to apply.

As [The Imprint reported last year](#), researchers at Texas State University and the University of Texas at Austin have found that just 60% of the state's eligible foster youth who are enrolled in college use the tuition waivers, leaving the others to rack up debt or drop out before getting degrees.

Another bill, [Senate Bill 455](#), authored by Sen. Jose Menéndez (D), and its counterpart in the house, [House Bill 1406](#), would direct state education officials to further streamline the application process and eligibility determination for students in foster care who are receiving the tuition exemption.

Other legislative proposals involve Child Protective Services operations.

[House Bill 1289](#), sponsored by Democratic state Rep. Elizabeth Campos, would require the state to develop a robust training program for anyone who investigates suspected child abuse or neglect at the local or state level, as well as for their investigative supervisor.

“Those investigators, they have a lot on their plate. If they're inexperienced and they're not getting the support, it's not their fault. It's leadership, and that's why I'm getting involved,” Campos told Bexar County [news outlet KSAT](#).

The bill would require further instruction on defining abuse and neglect, giving notice to parents accused of maltreatment about their rights and providing information about investigative procedures, and how best to assess proposed caregivers. Investigators would be required to pass an exam before working on cases.

Carrie Wilcoxson, the former investigator who contributed research for the bill, told KSAT that the new program would be a serious upgrade from the current training program.

Finally, state Rep. James Frank has proposed a bill related to investigating child abuse or neglect. The Republican lawmaker's [House Bill 635](#) would require investigators to immediately “upon first contact” outline parents' rights when it comes to the child welfare investigation, such as their right not to speak to investigators or other child welfare staff without an attorney present.

“When you look at foster care, or the investigative side — to me, it's a police action,” Frank [told](#) the San Antonio Express-News. “I am threatening you with removal of your child' — that's scarier than going to jail. But yet there's very limited due process.”

Explore The Imprint

-
- [child welfare](#)
 - [foster care](#)
 - [legislation](#)
 - [Texas](#)

About the Author

Annie Sciacca

Annie Sciacca is a freelance reporter for The Imprint based in Oakland, California. She can be reached at [\[email protected\]](#)

[View all articles by Annie](#)