

OCTOBER 2024

NAMI Texas General Election Voter Guide

TEXAS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CANDIDATES



*Prepared By:
Lyssette Galvan, MSW
Public Policy Director*

Letter from the Public Policy Team



Dear Advocates,

We are elated to share this Voter Guide with all of you! We sent out a six question survey to all candidates on the ballot across the state to educate their voters (you!) on their positions regarding key mental health policy issues. We had 47 candidates for the Texas House of Representatives who filled out their survey. As some of you may notice, there may be some questions that were not answered by the respective candidate. Furthermore, there are two different resources that were used for the first question at different times due to availability.

The first report below was used from January 12th, 2024 through January 27, 2024 for question one. This report became unavailable and the second report was used moving forward starting on January 28, 2024 through General Election.

1. HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report:

<https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>

2. HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report:

<https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>

Additionally, please note NAMI Texas is a non-partisan 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, we do NOT endorse candidates nor did we rank or alter responses to this survey. A candidate's inclusion of answers here does not indicate a preference or endorsement by NAMI Texas. We encourage NAMI members and mental health advocates to continue asking important questions of legislative and local candidates and #Vote4MentalHealth!

In the Table of Contents you may find the numerical pages for your House District candidates. If you are unsure which House District you are in, please use Vote411's [website](#). Once you input your information it will generate a sample ballot, it will show you "Texas House of Representatives District #___." We highly encourage everyone to use this source to learn more about all of your candidates!

Friendly reminder, **Early Voting** begins **Monday, October 21, 2024** and runs through **Friday, November 1, 2024**. If you're unsure where to go vote, check out the Secretary of State's [Voter Portal](#). **Election Day** is **Tuesday, November 5, 2024**.

We hope this guide is helpful to you, please feel free to reach out with any feedback, questions, comments or concerns.

-The NAMI Texas Public Policy Team

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House District 6

Cody Grace (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

To address the shortage of mental health providers, especially in rural areas, I propose a comprehensive strategy: Increase state funding for mental health services to expand access in underserved regions, and offer educational incentives like scholarships and loan forgiveness to attract professionals to these areas. Expanding telehealth services can bridge geographical gaps, providing immediate relief. Collaborating with educational institutions can encourage more students to pursue mental health careers. Additionally, state-funded recruitment and retention programs, policy reforms to ease practice barriers for professionals, and public awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues are essential.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will focus on promoting strict enforcement of existing state and federal mental health parity laws within the scope of the state legislature. My approach will include introducing or supporting legislation that mandates regular compliance reviews of insurance providers to ensure they are offering equal coverage for mental health and physical health conditions. I will also advocate for the establishment of a state-level task force or committee dedicated to monitoring and addressing mental health parity issues. This task force would not only ensure adherence to parity laws but also serve as an informational resource for Texans facing challenges in obtaining fair mental health coverage. Additionally, I will work towards legislative improvements to close any gaps in the current laws, ensuring comprehensive and equitable coverage for all aspects of mental health and substance use disorder treatments. Public education initiatives will be crucial in this effort, raising awareness about individuals' rights under these laws and providing guidance on how to seek redress in cases of non-compliance. My goal is to ensure that mental health care is accessible and fairly covered for all Texans.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

As a Texas legislative candidate, my approach to diverting individuals with mental illness away from the criminal justice system focuses on intervention and support. Firstly, I propose increasing funding for mental health services in the community, which would provide more accessible and early treatment options to prevent escalation of mental health issues. Secondly, I advocate for the implementation and expansion of specialized training for law enforcement and first responders in dealing with mental health crises, emphasizing de-escalation techniques and identifying mental health issues. Additionally, I would support legislation that promotes the establishment and expansion of mental health courts in Texas. These courts focus on rehabilitation rather than incarceration for individuals with mental illnesses who commit non-violent offenses. Alongside this, I would push for the development of more diversion programs that provide alternatives to incarceration, such as community-based treatment and support services. I also believe in strengthening collaboration between mental health professionals, law enforcement, and the justice system to ensure that individuals with mental health issues receive appropriate care and intervention at every stage of the justice process. This approach not only addresses the immediate needs of those with mental illness but also contributes to reducing recidivism and enhancing overall public safety. My goal is to create a more compassionate and effective system where mental health is treated as a public health issue, not a criminal one.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

To effectively address the intersection of mental illness and homelessness, my plan includes a strong focus on partnering with local nonprofits. By increasing funding for permanent supportive housing, we can offer affordable housing combined with mental health services. I will advocate for more resources for mobile mental health units and community clinics, particularly those operated by local nonprofits, to extend care to the homeless population. Legislative efforts will aim to increase affordable housing stock and provide targeted rental assistance, while specifically supporting nonprofit organizations in these initiatives. Collaborating closely with local nonprofits, government agencies, and mental health providers is crucial for a coordinated response. This approach ensures that housing and mental health services are not only accessible but also tailored to the specific needs of communities. Additionally, public awareness campaigns, often led by these nonprofits, will play a critical role in reducing stigma and fostering community support. Emphasizing local nonprofits in our strategy is key to creating a compassionate, comprehensive, and community-driven solution for individuals with mental illness facing housing challenges.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

To promote earlier intervention for mental illness, particularly among young people, I will focus on enhancing mental health education and services in schools and colleges. This includes advocating for funding and policies that integrate mental health awareness into school curriculums, ensuring students are educated about mental health from an early age. I'll also push for the placement of more mental health professionals in educational institutions, to provide early detection and support for students showing signs of mental health issues. Additionally, I propose community outreach programs to educate parents and caregivers about recognizing early signs of mental illness and accessing available resources. Collaborating with healthcare providers and local nonprofits, we can establish accessible community-based mental health services, offering free or low-cost counseling and support for young people. These initiatives, combined with public awareness campaigns, aim to destigmatize mental health issues and encourage early intervention, ultimately reducing the likelihood of these conditions reaching a crisis point.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Advocating for Medicaid expansion is a priority, as it's crucial for increasing healthcare coverage among the uninsured. I'll work to secure more state funding for rural health clinics and community health centers, which are vital for these underserved areas. Attracting healthcare professionals to rural regions through incentives like loan forgiveness and competitive salaries is essential. Additionally, I'll support the expansion of telehealth services to overcome geographical barriers to care. Public awareness campaigns about health insurance options and preventative care are also key to informing residents and reducing the uninsured rate. This holistic strategy aims to ensure that all Texans, regardless of location, have access to quality healthcare.

House District 16

Mike Midler (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

Qualified providers, especially in rural areas, must be incentivized. Affordable (and available) housing and a financial stipend should be provided by the State. Facilities must be built-/established by the State on at least a regional, multi-county basis in rural areas based on patient/potential patient basis.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I would imagine this is not just a Texas problem. It should be addressed by Congress through legislation to insure equal treatment and enforced by HHS to make it a reality. If it is an isolated problem in Texas then the Legislature should address it through legislation and enforced by DSHS.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Some local courts are already being created to deal with this problem and they are models of success. Our local Veteran's Court has been created to consider mental health issues among veterans who commit crimes and has proven to be successful. The judge and staff have training to help them determine real solutions and not just jail. This program could be a model for the entire State in dealing with mental health issue within the criminal justice system.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

This issue is a major problem and one that infuriates me personally. In a country as rich as ours, I can't understand why we can't deal with the homeless issue. Many are veterans who have served the country and many do have mental health issues. The government has stuck its head in the sand on this issue. Shelter that are staffed with qualified professionals that can address these problems are essential and morally mandatory. The State needs to establish and fund an agency to deal with this crisis.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

The public needs to be educated to recognize the problems AND educated to realize they are health issues, not an embarrassment that needs to be hidden. When you bring a problem out in the open and provide people with assistance, then the problem will be addressed. Education, facilities, and providers statewide would go a long way in fixing this problem.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Encourage the State to accept federal Medicaid funding, seek federal veteran services funding, and use State funds to provide services would help millions of Texans with coverage. This should not be a political question; it is a basic healthcare right. Hurting instead of helping people is NOT the role of government. Our current Texas leader apparently feel differently.

House District 19

Kodi Sawin (I)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I support efforts to increase the number of mental health care professionals practicing in rural areas. Increasing the funding to the Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals from \$2 million to \$28 million last year was a good start although more funding is needed. We also need to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for mental health so that providers have an incentive to provide mental health care to Medicaid recipients, many of whom reside in rural counties. Finally, I support expanding mental health telehealth access in rural areas. This would allow practitioners in rural and urban areas to expand their reach in rural Texas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We need to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for mental health so that providers have an incentive to provide mental health care to Medicaid recipients, many of whom reside in rural counties. Many mental health providers do not accept Medicaid patients because of the low reimbursement rates. We also need to ensure that Managed Care Organizations have the proper mental health benefits in their plans to ensure parity with physical conditions.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I strongly believe we need to expand Mental Health Diversion Courts around the state. These courts advocate for incarcerated persons with mental illness and provide access to mental health treatment, community resources, and support to reduce their involvement in the criminal justice system. I would also champion jail diversion initiatives like the one in Travis County that sends certain people to a special diversion facility for treatment and recovery services instead of jail.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

We need to expand supportive housing for the homeless across the state. We need a mix of short and long-term supportive housing for individuals with histories of utilizing behavioral health services in the most expensive settings. This will allow the homeless in these facilities to access the services they need to move toward a more stable living situation.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I would expand the reach and the state's financial support of the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium. The broad work of the consortium from consulting and training primary care providers on mental health issues to providing in-school behavioral telehealth care to workforce expansion will all help with diagnosis and treatment for young Texans.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I would push for the expansion of Medicaid in Texas. I am supportive of finding a solution in Texas to expand Medicaid.

House District 23

Dev Merugumala (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

As a physician myself, I understand the critical need for mental health services. I would focus on increasing funding for mental health services in rural and underserved areas, incentivizing professionals to work there through loan forgiveness and competitive salaries, and expanding telehealth to improve access. Additionally, I would promote community-based programs, support legislation for better insurance coverage, and launch awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help. Collaborating with local stakeholders, both medical and non-medical, will ensure tailored and effective solutions.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

To improve mental health care coverage in Texas, I will focus on enforcing and strengthening parity laws to ensure insurers comply with equal treatment requirements for mental health conditions. These reforms include increasing transparency in insurance practices, launching public education campaigns about coverage rights, and advocating for legislative changes to close legal loopholes. Moreover, I'll fight for mental health practitioners via better funding to improve access and equity in care. These are just a few of the crucial initial steps to ensure that all Texans receive the mental health coverage they deserve.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I propose expanded mental health crisis intervention teams and also support training for law enforcement to handle mental health situations sensitively. We'll increase funding for mental health

courts and community-based diversion programs, ensuring individuals receive appropriate treatment instead of incarceration. Additionally, my plans to enhance access to mental healthcare and support services prior to any criminal justice involvement will likely help prevent these situations from arising from the get-go.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I'll advocate for increased investment in supportive housing programs that combine affordable housing with mental health services. We ought to expand outreach services to connect homeless individuals with mental health care and social services. By integrating healthcare with housing-first solutions, we can address both immediate needs and long-term stability, reducing homelessness driven by mental health issues.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Especially salient for me as a pediatrician, I aim to integrate mental health education and screenings directly into schools themselves to identify concerns early on. Increasing funding for school-based mental health professionals will ensure students have access to support. Expanding public awareness campaigns and training for educators and parents will likely help them to recognize early signs of mental health issues, facilitating timely interventions and improving outcomes for young Texans.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Medicaid expansion is the #1 priority for covering more low-income working Texans and reducing the uninsured rate, so let's join the 40 states that have already done so. The federal funds for Medicaid expansion have already been set aside. The only reason it hasn't happened yet is corporate-backed politicians in Texas who choose to play political games. The reality is that Medicaid expansion can and should get done immediately. If expanded, over a million more Texans would then qualify for health insurance through Medicaid. Medicaid expansion would close the coverage gap for the working poor who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but too little to afford their own health insurance. As a pediatrician, I am 100% pro-family. Anyone claiming to be pro-family must, like me, actively fight for Medicaid expansion by consistently voicing public scrutiny towards the cowardly Texas politicians who oppose it.

House District 26

Daniel Lee (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I would create infrastructure and put together staff and mental health professionals by creating new high paying jobs in those areas to encourage professionals to work there.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Amend the criminal codes to allow more Pretrial diversion and create more specialty courts that address mental illness instead of using the jails as the solution.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Stress can worsen mental illness. We should use the budget surplus to create at cost housing to alleviate this stressor which would likely help those with mental illness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Fund and promote screen in schools that are free and mandatory by age 14.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We need to expand Medicaid and use our budget surplus to support the expansion.

House District 26

Matthew Morgan (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Increase funding at Richmond State Supported Living center and allow them to have more Dr on staff that can assist with assessments via web doctor visits.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Depends on the crime and the their mental state at the time of the crime.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Work to help diagnose and treat the issues

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Suggest health plans screen for these issues during normal check ups.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

There is not a one fix for this it will take many steps towards a solution.

House District 29

Jeffrey Barry (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

We need to make sure that rural areas receive the funding needed to reimburse providers.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I agree with equal parity. We must stop treating mental disorders as a temporary issue with sublimits on insurance policies and temporary stays in facilities..

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

We need to invest locally in mental health facilities for these patients so that they get the care that they need while in our Justice system. i would also like to create an ID marker on their drivers license or personal ID that designates that they have a mental disorder so that law enforcement can quickly identify these individuals and get them to a mental health facility rather than a jail.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

We need to invest locally in mental health facilities for these patients so that they get the care that they need in our homeless shelters. We may not be able to fix their financial struggles but we can get them to a state at which they can fix it themselves.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We need to invest in mental health officers in the police departments around the State so that they can be called to the incident to potentially divert mental health officers to the scene. This would, hopefully, avoid the offender going to jail rather than a mental health facility.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Texas needs to bring back the high risk pool. This allows all individuals to have some sort of coverage even though they have health conditions.

House District 32

Cathy McAuliffe (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Funding is crucial. And encouraging young people to go into this field (with financial support). But we have to assure them that they can and will earn a living wage in this profession. We need to offer a myriad of incentives to recruit.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Taking away the stigma of mental illness would make a huge difference for patients. I will advocate for a robust PR campaign. But we also need to better educate medical and mental health providers to ensure that ALL patients who need care get the specific care they need. This should be happening at the college and university level.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I will work toward requiring that law enforcement professionals as well as judges have better training in identifying those who are in need of mental health care. We need to provide more funding for mental health facilities, as well.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I will work toward increasing the availability of housing for those suffering from mental illness as well as providing more funding for those who need assistance. We also need to do better PR work within neighborhoods whose citizens are afraid of those with mental illness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

A robust awareness program for all communities is something I will work toward. At the age of 14, children are still being seen by a pediatrician. So we need to ensure that pediatricians are better trained to screen for mental health conditions.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Work with other legislatures to provide more and better health care for Texas citizens. Medicaid expansion would certainly be a goal.

House District 34

Solomon Ortiz, Jr. (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

As you know over 95% of Texas counties are wholly or partially designated by the federal government as mental health professional shortage areas. As a State Rep. I will work to fund and create programs and incentives to develop, train and recruit new mental health providers. We must do better to address this problem.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

As a State Rep. I will push to bring more awareness to mental health as well as work on legislation to achieve parity in care. Also making sure that implementing the strategic plan is archived via legislation or rule changes.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Unfortunately our jails have been dealing with this issue for a long time. We need to create more jail diversion programs in our courts as well as work with law enforcement to identify individuals suffering with mental health issues. Providing funding and training is necessary to address the problem. As State Rep. I will support legislation to address these issues.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I have been involved with local nonprofits that specifically help the un-housed community. But more needs to be done. We need to work with the state to find more funding as well as work with local entities to help address this issue. Providing services like cognitive, social skill training and relationship building would help.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We need to educate parents and schools to see the signs of mental health issues. Implementing a school based resilience curriculum is important. We also need to be more open and talk about mental health. In south Texas with larger Hispanic communities many times this issue is not talked about. With more openness we can make improvements.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We must ensure adequate funding of the Children's Health Insurance Programs and Medicaid expansion.

House District 45

Erin Zweiner (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

The state needs to better support and incentivize mental health providers to locate in rural and underserved areas. Past state programs have provided incentives for medical professionals who promise to serve low-income and underserved populations, typically through the Medicaid program. Similar programs should be enacted for mental health and recovery care providers who locate in underserved areas. The state also needs to continue to expand the number of available in-patient beds at mental health facilities like state hospitals, and in community based settings.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

More certainly can and should be done to expand the availability of services and providers across Texas and I will continue to advocate for that expansion at the Legislature through both budgetary increases and policy changes. I'm interested in learning more about where and when there are specific situations in which Texans aren't receiving the required equal coverage so I can work with my fellow legislators on crafting legislative fixes to ensure equal access for mental health treatment and services.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I will push for the state to provide more in patient beds for both competency restoration so individuals don't languish in jail before they are even convicted, and also to help divert individuals with mental illness away from the criminal justice system in the first place. Local governments need more authorization in state statute to create and implement jail diversion programs for individuals with mental illness, and they also need the resources to help stand up those programs. Harris County has seen success with their uniquely authorized program, and more counties need that state support to enact their own programs.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Providing more access to affordable, comprehensive mental and behavioral health resources statewide is a critical step in helping people with mental illness get off of the streets and into housing. The state also needs to provide more financial support and statutory ability for local governments to require affordable housing availability in their communities. Other than through some tax incentive programs, local governments cannot currently require developers to include any certain amount of affordable housing in new developments.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Our public schools need more behavioral health resources to better support students in their growth to adulthood, which will also have the benefit of identifying youth with mental health needs earlier and help to better connect them with early interventions to set them up for better success as adults.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I will continue to push for Medicaid expansion, which is one of the most impactful (and frankly, easiest) policy changes that could be made at the state level to reduce our high uninsured rate and expand access to healthcare.

House District 47

Vikki Goodwin (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

As the report states, Texas created the Consortium, Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium, to address problems of lack of access in many parts of the state. We must continue to build on efforts that have been made. As a legislator, I commit to reading and using the annual reports to understand where and how we should be directing funding to improve the mental health care system. We need to expand the number of providers and access to mental health therapies that suit the situation. I am familiar with TCHAT which is one of the programs implemented by the Consortium, and which after the shooting in Uvalde was mentioned as needing to be increased to more school districts. In speaking with the Superintendents in the ISDs in my area, they prefer to have people on campus as opposed to telehealth, if they have to choose. If resources weren't an issue, they would be happy to have both. They serve different needs. Unfortunately, resources are an issue, and we must learn from the reports which recommendations will give us the best results.

The report shows that only 83 of our 254 counties have psychiatrists. In the past two sessions, I have filed a bill to allow psychologists the ability to prescribe specific medications in specific situations. These "prescribing psychologists" would need additional education and training, and several states have granted this access. While I understand the concern of psychiatrists that psychologists have not gone through the same extensive education as they have, I also see there is a gap in providers and this is a potential solution. However, special interests have kept us from gaining any momentum on this proposal.

Since I began my service in the legislature, mental health has been one of my priorities, and it will continue to be a top priority for me. I was able to pass into law expansion of one mental health therapy, 5NP or Acudetox, which has been used by the military for PTSD. It was also used by the LPCs after the shooting in Uvalde to provide some relief to the victims' families. The new law allows this procedure to be used without needing a diagnoses of chemical dependency, as was previously required. It also expands the licensees who are able to become trained and certified to provide the treatment.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

To comprehensively address the challenges related to mental health care access and coverage in Texas, my strategy encompasses a broad range of targeted policy initiatives. These policies are designed to ensure mental health parity, enhance enforcement of existing laws, expand in-network coverage, and specifically address the urgent needs of our youngest Texans. Here's a consolidated approach:

- Enhance the enforcement mechanisms for existing mental health parity laws, ensuring stringent adherence by insurance companies.
- Mandate broader in-network coverage for all mental health services, with a special emphasis on pediatric mental health care.
- Require insurers to regularly report their compliance with parity laws, including detailed analyses of coverage denials, in-network vs. out-of-network utilization rates, disparities of services, and areas for improvement.
- Increase public awareness about the importance of mental health care for children and the coverage options available, ensuring families are informed and empowered to seek the care their children need. Inform Texans about their rights under mental health parity laws.
- Offer incentives such as higher reimbursement rates and student loan forgiveness for mental health professionals.
- Propose legislative amendments to tighten provisions around mental health parity, including specific measures to expand pediatric mental health services within insurance networks.
- Establish state-funded programs to offer financial assistance for families seeking pediatric mental health services, covering or subsidizing out-of-network care costs.
- Implement regulatory measures to prevent high out-of-network costs, including limits on co-payments and out-of-pocket maximums for pediatric mental health care.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Working with people earlier, preventing them from getting into crisis, is the ideal. We have not put the needed resources into prevention and early intervention, and now we find ourselves with many people reaching crisis and ending up in jails which are not equipped to help. Instead, we should:

- Increase Crisis Intervention Teams with state funding. These teams, comprised of law enforcement officers trained in mental health crisis intervention, can help safely de-escalate situations and divert individuals to mental health services rather than incarceration.
- Establish more Mental Health Courts which provide judicial supervision of treatment plans for non-violent offenders with mental illness, focusing on rehabilitation and recovery to prevent recidivism, rather than punitive measures.

- Fund Pre-Trial Diversion and Treatment Programs which offer alternatives to incarceration, such as treatment and community service, for individuals with mental health conditions who commit minor offenses.
- Invest in Community-Based Mental Health Services which includes outpatient treatment programs, supportive housing, and crisis stabilization units to ensure individuals have access to the care they need before reaching a crisis point.
- Implement Training Programs for Criminal Justice Personnel including law enforcement, judiciary, and corrections personnel on mental health awareness, de-escalation techniques, and the importance of diversion programs. This will help ensure that individuals with mental health conditions are treated with compassion and directed towards appropriate services.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

In addition to making sure people are aware of services available to help with their mental health needs, I have a proposal to address the issue of housing costs. My Fair Rent Incentive Act, which I will file in the 89th Legislative Session, is designed to put downward pressure on rent prices. This act is designed to help renters, particularly those with modest incomes and including individuals with mental illness, by incentivizing landlords to keep rent affordable and prevent sharp increases year over year.

The Fair Rent Incentive Act aims to make housing more accessible and affordable for all Texans, including college students, young professionals, working-class individuals, and families who are currently struggling to afford rent. Similar to a homestead exemption, the law would implement a cap of a 10% maximum increase on assessment values on properties where landlords charge fair market rent or below. Fair market rent is determined by HUD by zip code, incomes in that zip code, and number of bedrooms. The idea is that no one should have to spend more than 40% of their income on rent and utilities. This measure would prevent sudden rent spikes that can disproportionately impact individuals with mental illnesses, who often face additional financial burdens due to healthcare costs.

Implementation of this act involves a straightforward application process for landlords, mirroring the homestead exemption application, with enforcement mechanisms that include tenant complaints and random audits to ensure compliance. By capping assessment values, we aim to stabilize property taxes for landlords, enabling them to maintain fair market rents and contribute to the broader goal of preventing homelessness among vulnerable populations.

This legislation, alongside expanding access to supportive housing and mental health services, enhancing coordination between mental health and housing agencies, and advocating for policies that support individuals with mental health conditions, represents a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of homelessness. It underscores my dedication to creating a more inclusive, supportive, and effective system that meets the critical needs of Texans struggling with mental illness and housing instability.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

To enhance early intervention for mental health conditions, my approach will focus on bolstering support and services within our schools, while also extending education and resources to families and communities at large. This comprehensive strategy includes:

Expanding School-Based Mental Health Services: I will research and support legislation to increase funding for the integration of more psychologists, social workers, and trained mental health specialists in schools across Texas. This initiative aims to ensure direct access to mental health support for students, facilitating early detection and intervention.

Professional Development for School Staff: To complement the increase in specialists, I propose significant investment and funding for training our teachers and school staff. This training will empower them to recognize early signs of mental health issues and provide the necessary initial support, creating a supportive school environment attuned to mental health needs.

Education for Families: Recognizing the crucial role families play in early intervention, I have supported and will continue to support educational programs for parents and guardians. These programs will focus on identifying signs of mental health conditions, navigating the mental health system, and supporting their children's mental health, thereby extending the circle of support beyond the school environment.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Advocate for Medicaid Expansion: Expanding Medicaid in Texas is a critical step towards increasing healthcare access for low-income families and individuals. Expansion would provide health insurance to millions of Texans who currently fall into the coverage gap, significantly reducing the state's uninsured rate.

Increase Funding for Community Health Centers: Community health centers play a vital role in providing care to uninsured and underinsured populations, especially in rural and underserved areas. I propose increasing state funding for these centers, enabling them to expand services, extend operating hours, and hire additional healthcare professionals to meet the needs of their communities.

Support Telehealth Initiatives: The expansion of telehealth has been a silver lining in improving access to healthcare, particularly in remote areas. I will continue to advocate for policies and funding that support telehealth infrastructure. I supported broadband expansion in the last session, which will help ensure that all Texans can access medical consultations and mental health services from their homes.

Strengthen State Health Insurance Programs: I plan to work and support improving and promoting state health insurance programs designed for low-income individuals, children, and families. This includes ensuring that CHIP and the Texas Women's Health Program are adequately funded and accessible to those in need, alongside exploring new state-funded insurance options for those not covered by existing programs.

Increase access to Healthcare Professionals in Underserved Areas: To address the shortage of healthcare providers in rural and underserved regions, I recently submitted an interim charge to the Committee on Agricultural Affairs to research and study rural hospitals. The hope is that by getting data on rural hospitals, we can create legislation in the 89th session to increase access to healthcare for everyone across the state of Texas.

House District 48

Donna Howard (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

There are several reasons why Texans can't get the care they need for mental health and additional treatment. However, as a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I've used my position to focus the state budget on the need to improve mental health services across the state. I have also been a longtime supporter of expanding Medicaid and have worked to expand access to affordable healthcare services by increasing funding for Federally Qualified Health Centers. This last session, I supported legislation that authorized grants to healthcare providers and nonprofit groups that offer mental health treatment, especially those that work with children and their family members. The goal of Senate Bill 26 is to improve access to mental health and behavioral health professionals in underserved areas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

In order to improve coverage for mental health care we must hold the government accountable to their promises for mental health parity. I would work with NAMI and others to ensure these requirements are being enforced, by providing resources for appeals if your health coverage has been violated, making sure mental health services are covered equal to other illnesses regardless of diagnosis, severity, or cause, and expanding parity laws to include health plans of those who elect to self insure. I will also support efforts to ensure health plans in Texas cover a wide range of mental and behavioral health services and treatments. We know that every individual's needs are unique; no one should have to forgo treatment because their health plan does not cover the service.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I have supported state investments into pre-trial diversion programs for adults and juveniles in Texas, both in the House Appropriations Committee and on the House floor, and will continue to do so. These programs primarily exist to divert non-violent offenders from the criminal justice system -- including those with mental health conditions. Unfortunately, at the direction of the state, these have been identified by state agencies for budget reductions. If I am fortunate enough to serve on the Appropriations Committee again, I will advocate for these programs to be restored. Furthermore, last session, I filed legislation that would have required the Texas Juvenile Justice Department to work with the Health and Human Services Commission to ensure every person eligible to receive services through the state's healthcare programs leaves TJJD's care already enrolled in the program and with information of where, and how, to access services.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I procured funding to add \$8 million to Community Mental Health Collaboratives to award grants to local governments, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations to provide services to individuals experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, or mental illness. Additionally, I have continued to defend the ability of local communities to address the needs of folks experiencing homelessness in their communities.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

For the last two years, the United States Surgeon General has declared a mental health crisis amongst youth. During that time, we have seen a steady increase in the number of youth experiencing complex mental and behavioral health issues in Texas. To address this crisis, we have to take an "all of the above approach." This means taking a serious look at what can be done through the school system, through community outreach programs, the healthcare system, and the criminal justice system. To that end, I have supported efforts across these industries to improve access to early intervention services. In the public education space, I have been an active champion for boosting the number of qualified counselors in our schools. Last session I filed legislation that would have ensured justice-involved youth won't slip through the cracks in our healthcare system by connecting them to services

and programs they are eligible for while they are incarcerated. And, of course, we need to expand Medicaid to cover more of our low-income population who often have no options for services while also finding ways to connect those who are not eligible for Medicaid to insurance programs through the Marketplace. Finally, as a member of the budget committee focused on health services I was proud to support funding for children's behavioral health initiatives, including \$337 million to fully fund the Texas Child Mental Health Consortium, ensuring Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHAT) is available to every school district in the state, \$14 million for Youth Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams, and more than \$32 million to maintain and increase the number of Multisystemic Therapy teams for at-risk youth.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Expanding Medicaid would allow the most vulnerable to access healthcare services, however, more must be done to address the high number of uninsured Texans. For those who still cannot afford insurance, we must continue to increase funding for Federally Qualified Health Centers, so they can continue to expand their clinics and serve more Texans. Beyond this, we must find ways to connect Texans who are eligible for subsidies to the Marketplace during Open Enrollment. I have advocated for continued access to affordable insurance for retired teachers and state employees and their spouses. Moreover, we need to implement better reimbursement rates at the state and federal levels, both through Federal Medical Assistance Percentages and Medicaid, so healthcare providers are not forced to incur debt to serve these clients.

House District 52

Jennie Birkholz (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

My extensive experience in community behavioral health spanning over two decades provides valuable insights into the challenges faced in this field. The Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report outlines various strategies to combat the persistent workforce shortage in Texas, including initiatives to bolster the provider pipeline, promote integrated care, and enact reimbursement reforms.

In my work within rural health settings, I have identified several immediate and impactful solutions, notably the expansion of the workforce to encompass roles such as peer support specialists, interns, the utilization of telehealth, and integrated care approaches. However, the successful implementation of these solutions has been hindered by challenges related to reimbursement rates, technology infrastructure, and provider credentialing.

Overcoming these hurdles will require concerted efforts, including advocating for policy changes to improve reimbursement rates for non-traditional providers, investing in technology infrastructure to support telehealth services, and streamlining the credentialing process to facilitate the entry of qualified professionals into the workforce.

By addressing these barriers and implementing effective strategies, we can make significant strides in addressing the behavioral health workforce shortage in Texas, thereby enhancing access to vital services for individuals across the state.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Addressing the prevalence of out-of-network behavioral health care providers is pivotal for advancing mental health parity. This trend is influenced by both workforce shortages and obstacles imposed by health plans. By simultaneously addressing workforce shortages and health plan barriers, significant progress can be made toward achieving mental health parity. This ensures that individuals have equitable access to essential behavioral health care services within their network, at a reasonable cost.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I support and have implemented various programs aimed at diverting individuals with mental health needs from the criminal justice system are commendable. Initiatives such as jail diversion programs, mental health dockets, competency restoration programs, and pre-arrest diversion play a critical role in providing appropriate care while alleviating pressure on the criminal justice system.

Educating law enforcement officers about mental health issues and integrating mental health professionals into 911 call centers are pivotal steps in accurately identifying and addressing behavioral health crises. This collaborative approach ensures prompt and effective interventions for individuals in crisis, leading to improved outcomes for both individuals and communities.

By championing these initiatives and fostering partnerships among law enforcement agencies, mental health professionals, and community stakeholders, we can enhance our response to behavioral health crises, reduce unnecessary incarceration, and ensure that individuals receive the support they need to lead healthier lives.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Addressing the complex crisis of homelessness and housing instability with persons experiencing mental health challenges requires a multifaceted approach, recognizing that there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Prevention is key, and one crucial step involves intervening early to support individuals at

risk of losing their housing. This can be achieved through proactive measures and wraparound support services.

For individuals already experiencing homelessness or transitioning from facilities like jails or hospitals without stable housing, providing a range of options is essential. Transitional housing, housing assistance programs, and specialized community-based housing initiatives offer safer and more stable alternatives.

However, housing alone is often not enough. Pairing housing solutions with wraparound support services is vital for long-term success. This includes access to peer support services, outpatient clinics for mental health and medical care, case management for coordinating services, and employment support to help individuals maintain stability and independence.

By combining housing options with comprehensive wraparound supports, individuals facing homelessness or housing instability can be better equipped to maintain housing stability and improve their overall well-being. This multifaceted approach addresses the diverse needs of individuals experiencing homelessness, ultimately fostering sustainable solutions and pathways to long-term stability.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Early intervention begins with the early identification of mental health issues, especially among youth. To achieve this, it's essential to provide training on youth mental health to various community stakeholders, including schools, caregivers, churches, and others. Utilizing evidence-based programs like Youth Mental Health First Aid can equip these individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to recognize and address mental health challenges effectively.

Schools play a pivotal role as hubs for early intervention. By collaborating with behavioral health providers, schools can offer a range of mental health services to students, including counseling and therapy. Integrating these services into the school environment ensures accessibility and familiarity for students in need.

Additionally, schools can implement universal screening programs to proactively identify students who may be struggling with mental health issues. These screenings enable early detection and intervention, allowing students to receive timely support and resources.

By engaging community stakeholders and leveraging the resources available within schools, we can enhance the early identification of mental health concerns among youth and provide them with the necessary support to thrive. This proactive approach holds the potential to improve mental health outcomes and overall well-being for young individuals.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Texas's high uninsured rate can be tackled by increasing access to Medicaid and enrolling those already eligible for Medicaid. Updating the Medicaid infrastructure to facilitate swift and efficient processing of eligibility applications is imperative. Streamlining administrative procedures and bolstering technological capabilities can expedite this process, ensuring that eligible individuals promptly receive the coverage they need.

Simultaneously, accepting federal funding to expand Medicaid coverage is crucial for mitigating the state's high uninsured rate. By broadening eligibility criteria, more individuals will gain access to essential healthcare services, resulting in improved health outcomes and reduced financial strain on both individuals and families.

However, merely expanding coverage does not guarantee access to care. Significant hurdles persist, including workforce shortages and inadequate Medicaid reimbursement rates. Implementing incentives to draw students to the behavioral health workforce and attracting healthcare providers to underserved areas can help us make progress words address the workforce shortage. Additionally, increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates to levels that adequately cover the cost of care can incentivize more providers to participate in the Medicaid program, thereby expanding access to healthcare services for Medicaid beneficiaries.

By concurrently addressing infrastructure deficiencies and systemic barriers, Texas can make substantial progress in enhancing access to healthcare for its residents, ensuring that Medicaid beneficiaries receive timely and comprehensive care when needed.

House District 57

Darren Hamilton (L)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

As a Libertarian, I generally advocate for minimal government involvement. Even so, there are several avenues that can be considered to enhance access to mental health treatment and services. Simplifying and streamlining the licensing and credentialing process for mental health professionals reduces bureaucratic hurdles and can help increase the availability of practitioners and make it easier for new providers to enter the market. Also, leveraging the existing technology is also possible by supporting the development and expansion of digital mental health tools and telehealth services. These can provide accessible and scalable solutions for mental health support, especially in rural and underserved areas. Last (for this topic) but certainly not least, we can support community-based solutions by encouraging and even participating in community-driven initiatives such as peer support networks, local mental health awareness campaigns, and/or educational programs. These grassroots efforts can help bridge gaps in access and provide valuable support at the local level.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

As a Libertarian who believes in limiting government involvement, this is a challenging concept but is not outside the realm of possibility. Working within the political system, I would advocate for policies that reduce barriers to mental health care, such as reducing mandates on insurance coverage that may drive up costs, or creating more flexible funding options for mental health services. I would encourage employers and insurance companies to offer mental health benefits as part of their various plans. This can be done by highlighting the long-term cost saving associated with improved mental health and productivity. But as a Libertarian, I would also encourage the development of innovative and cost-effective solutions by reducing regulatory barriers that could support telehealth services, which, in turn, can provide more accessible and affordable care.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

As a Libertarian, this would involve fostering alternatives to incarceration and encouraging solutions that respect individual liberties and promote personal responsibility. One of these alternatives would be to support and promote diversion programs that redirect individuals with mental illness away from the criminal justice system and into appropriate mental health care programs run by private organizations or community groups. I would also support the establishment of specialized mental health courts that focus on treatment rather than punishment. These courts can provide individuals with mental illness access to mental health services and support, thus reducing the likelihood of incarceration. These courts could also encourage the development of alternative sentencing options that include mental health treatment as part of the sentencing process allowing individuals to receive the care that they need while avoiding standard incarceration. But mostly, as a Libertarian, I would advocate for decriminalization of behaviors that are often linked to untreated mental illness, such as certain low-level offenses. This can help reduce the number of individuals with mental health issues who are incarcerated.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

As a Libertarian, my approach to helping people with mental illness who are struggling with housing or homelessness would likely emphasize personal responsibility, voluntary support, and (again) minimal government intervention. I would advocate for more community-based approaches to mental health and housing by encouraging the creation of networks of support where individuals and organizations collaborate to offer resources and services. As a member of the legislature, I would also support efforts to reduce regulatory barriers that might prevent innovative solutions to homelessness and mental health issues. For example, easing zoning laws that might allow for more affordable housing solutions. But community-based approaches would be impossible without encouraging the development of peer support groups and self-help resources. Many people find that connecting with others who have (or have had) similar experiences can be incredibly helpful.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

As a Libertarian, this would likely involve leveraging voluntary, market-based solutions rather than relying on government mandates. This could include promoting education and awareness by funding (and participating in) campaigns to educate the public about mental health issues, symptoms, and the importance of early intervention. Awareness campaigns in other contexts have helped individuals recognize signs (in this case, of mental illness) sooner and seek help earlier. I would also support training programs for teachers, employers, and community leaders to recognize the early signs of mental illness because these individuals can be instrumental in guiding those who need help toward appropriate resources. But, again, none of this really works without fostering (and participating in) peer support groups and community networks. Peer support can play a crucial role in early intervention by providing individuals with resources, encouragement, and guidance from those who have experienced (or are experiencing) similar challenges.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

As a Libertarian, this can also be challenging but achievable. Models exist where patients pay directly for services rather than through insurance. Direct Primary Care (DPC) practices and mental health professionals who offer cash-based services can often provide care at a lower cost and may be more accessible, but pushing for greater transparency in healthcare pricing and quality allows consumers to make more informed choices, and the competition resulting from this transparency can lead to lower costs. Additionally, as stated earlier, reducing licensing and regulatory barriers that may prevent mental health professionals from practicing or offering their services. Streamlining these regulations can increase the supply of providers and potentially lower costs. And, again, I would support initiatives that promote early mental health awareness and preventive care. Educating the public about mental health and early intervention can reduce the long-term need for more intensive and expensive treatments later.

House District 61

Keresa Richardson (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

"More than 80 percent of Texas counties are designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage areas, which are defined as more than 30,000 residents per clinician,; according to the Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan. Causes include a workforce shortage due to retirement of existing workforce, licensing and internship requirements, dwindling supply of providers willing to train graduates seeking licenses and low pay. Some incentives for increasing the workforce are loan repayment assistance to mental health providers and allowing a licensed master social worker to fill open positions for a non-physician mental health professional. A strategy to increase recruiting and seek individuals who are willing to serve in rural communities is needed.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

State and federal policymakers must improve access to quality, affordable mental health care for all Americans by enforcing federal and state parity laws and requiring mental health parity in all types of insurance. Standardized language and terms, use of templates, and consistency in language facilitates better coordination between carriers and agencies.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Often, convicted criminals have a substance abuse history in addition to mental health condition. Providing secure treatment facilities to treat substance abuse for non-violent criminals could divert some people out of our prisons. We should strive to prevent the criminalization of people with mental illness by fostering a treatment system that is accessible, comprehensive, and effective. By ensuring that these individuals receive proper care and necessary treatment for their mental illness, as well as providing training in a productive skill or trade, we could equip people with the skills necessary to avoid becoming part of the criminal justice system.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Once again, substance abuse and mental health play a big role in contributing to homelessness. Treatment programs for the homeless should address both substance abuse and mental health conditions, as well as provide temporary housing. Teaching vocational skills to the homeless can assist in their rehabilitation, as well as addressing their substance abuse and mental health conditions.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Early intervention is crucial in recognizing the warning signs of a mental health or substance abuse challenge and acting before it gets worse. Increasing the required training of counselors and teachers is needed to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of a mental health challenge in students at an early age. Promoting multidisciplinary collaborations between different professionals can facilitate the diagnosis and prevent it from progressing.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

The 2023-2028 Texas State Health Plan outlines the need to increase enrollment in Medicaid among those that are eligible and to study the varied causes that limit access to care for Texans. I agree that Texas should support new, innovative ways to bring health care providers to rural areas and provide additional methods for hospital financing. I also support efforts to increase health teleservices to rural communities. I support efforts to increase access to mental health services for students. I support the expansion of the Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals. Texas should also encourage health carriers to promote teleservice benefits.

House District 61

Tony Adams (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Texas ranks 48th in funding for mental health services. Here in Collin County, the wealthiest county in Texas, the County Commissioners give a whole \$2Million dollars to fund mental health services through LifePath. That's \$1 for every Collin County resident. Now, last time I checked, mental health services cost a lot more than that! Now, credit goes to the Commissioners for finally recognizing the need for a bigger facility, but it's about 10 years too late. Yes, the number of beds will double with the new building. In reality that means the entire county will now have access to 28 beds instead of 14 for all 2 million Collin residents plus neighboring county residents that seek services here.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Enforcement of Existing Laws: Ensure strict enforcement of existing state and federal laws that mandate mental health parity. This could involve regular audits and assessments of insurance plans to ensure they comply with the established regulations.

Education and Awareness Campaigns: Conduct public awareness campaigns to educate both the general public and insurance providers about mental health parity laws. This can help reduce stigma surrounding mental health and increase understanding of the importance of equal treatment for mental health conditions.

Collaboration with Stakeholders: Engage with mental health advocacy groups, healthcare professionals, insurance companies, and other stakeholders to collaborate on strategies for improving mental health coverage. This could include regular meetings, forums, and workshops to address concerns and find common ground.

Monitoring and Reporting Systems: Establish a robust monitoring and reporting system to track and analyze mental health parity compliance among insurance providers. This system can help identify trends, areas of improvement, and instances of non-compliance, allowing for timely interventions.

Policy Revisions: Periodically review and update mental health parity laws to address any gaps or loopholes that may exist. Policy revisions should be informed by ongoing feedback from stakeholders and changes in the healthcare landscape.

Incentives for Compliance: Consider implementing incentives for insurance providers that demonstrate consistent compliance with mental health parity laws. This could include recognition, reduced regulatory burdens, or other positive measures to encourage adherence to the regulations.

Consumer Advocacy Programs: Establish programs that empower consumers to advocate for their mental health rights. This could involve providing resources, hotlines, or support networks for individuals facing challenges with unequal mental health coverage.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT):

Expand Crisis Intervention Team programs, which involve training law enforcement officers to recognize and appropriately respond to individuals in crisis due to mental illness. These teams can help de-escalate situations and divert individuals away from the criminal justice system. **Pre-Arrest Diversion Programs:**

Implement pre-arrest diversion programs that allow law enforcement to divert individuals with mental illness away from the criminal justice system and toward appropriate mental health services. Develop and expand community-based crisis response teams that can provide immediate support to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis.

Specialized Mental Health Courts:

Establish and support specialized mental health courts that focus on diversion, treatment, and rehabilitation rather than punishment. These courts can provide tailored interventions and support for individuals with mental illness.

Training for Criminal Justice Personnel:

Provide ongoing training for all criminal justice personnel, including law enforcement officers, judges, and corrections staff, to enhance their understanding of mental health issues and improve their

ability to interact with individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals:

Foster collaboration between the criminal justice system and mental health professionals to ensure that individuals receive appropriate assessments, treatment, and support throughout their involvement with the justice system.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Improve data collection and analysis to better understand the prevalence and needs of individuals with mental illness in the criminal justice system. This information can guide targeted interventions and policy adjustments.

Community-Based Support Services:

Strengthen community-based mental health services, including crisis stabilization units, outpatient treatment programs, and supportive housing, to address the root causes of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Legislation and Policy Advocacy:

Advocate for legislative and policy changes that prioritize mental health treatment over incarceration for non-violent offenses, ensuring that individuals receive appropriate care rather than being unnecessarily detained.

Early Intervention Programs:

Implement early intervention programs to identify and address mental health issues in individuals before their involvement with the criminal justice system becomes more severe.

Education and Outreach:

Conduct public education and outreach campaigns to reduce stigma around mental illness, increase awareness of available mental health resources, and encourage community members to support diversion efforts.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Increase Access to Mental Health Services:

Expand mental health services, especially outreach programs, crisis intervention teams, and community mental health centers, to reach individuals experiencing homelessness. Develop partnerships between mental health agencies and homeless shelters to provide on-site mental health support and counseling.

Housing First Approach:

Implement a Housing First approach, prioritizing providing stable housing as the first step. This approach recognizes that addressing housing instability is crucial for individuals with mental illness to achieve mental well-being.

Support programs that offer immediate, low-barrier access to housing without preconditions, allowing individuals to stabilize and then address mental health issues.

Supportive Housing Programs:

Invest in supportive housing programs that combine affordable housing with access to mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and other supportive services. Promote the development of permanent supportive housing, which combines housing with wraparound services to address the complex needs of individuals with severe mental illnesses.

Community Integration Programs:

Develop community integration programs that provide opportunities for individuals with mental illnesses to participate in social activities, vocational training, and employment, promoting a sense of belonging and stability.

Crisis Intervention and Diversion Programs:

Implement crisis intervention and diversion programs to prevent individuals with mental illness from entering the criminal justice system or emergency shelters. Train law enforcement and emergency responders in crisis intervention techniques to de-escalate situations involving individuals with mental illness.

Coordination of Services:

Facilitate better coordination between mental health services, housing agencies, and other social services to ensure a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing the needs of individuals with mental illness who are experiencing homelessness.

Prevention Programs:

Invest in prevention programs that address the root causes of mental illness and homelessness, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, and systemic inequalities.

Education and Awareness Campaigns:

Conduct public education campaigns to reduce stigma surrounding mental illness and homelessness, fostering community understanding and support.

Data Collection and Research:

Invest in data collection and research to better understand the specific needs of individuals with mental illness experiencing homelessness, informing targeted interventions and policy adjustments.

Legislation and Policy Advocacy:

Advocate for policies at the local, state, and federal levels that prioritize mental health services, affordable housing, and support programs for individuals experiencing homelessness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

School-Based Mental Health Programs:

Implement and expand mental health education programs in schools that focus on early detection, de-stigmatization, and coping skills. This can help create a supportive environment and identify mental health concerns in students at an early stage.

Mental Health Screenings:

Incorporate routine mental health screenings in school settings, primary care offices, and community health centers to identify potential issues early on. This could include screenings for common mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

Teacher and Staff Training:

Provide training for educators and school staff to recognize signs of mental health challenges in students. This training should also include information on how to support students and connect them with appropriate resources.

Youth Outreach Programs:

Develop outreach programs specifically targeted at youth to raise awareness about mental health, reduce stigma, and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Utilize social media, school assemblies, and community events to reach young people.

Access to School Counselors:

Increase access to school counselors who can provide support and guidance for students dealing with mental health issues. This may involve adjusting counselor-to-student ratios and ensuring that counselors receive training in mental health support.

Community-Based Mental Health Services:

Expand access to community-based mental health services for young people, including counseling, therapy, and support groups. These services should be affordable and easily accessible for both individuals and their families.

Telehealth Services:

Utilize telehealth services to improve access to mental health care, especially in rural or underserved areas where in-person services may be limited. Telehealth can facilitate early intervention by reducing barriers to seeking help.

Parental and Caregiver Education:

Provide education programs for parents and caregivers to help them recognize signs of mental health issues in their children. This can empower families to seek help early and create a supportive home environment.

Youth Peer Support Programs:

Establish peer support programs where young individuals who have experienced mental health challenges can provide support and guidance to their peers. Peer support can be a powerful tool in early intervention.

Integration of Mental Health into Primary Care:

Integrate mental health services into primary care settings to ensure that routine medical check-ups include assessments for mental health. This approach can help identify and address mental health concerns alongside physical health.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

Conduct public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and promote understanding of mental health issues, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and seeking help.

Legislation and Policy Changes:

Advocate for policies that support funding and resources for early intervention programs and mental health services for youth.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Medicaid Expansion:

Advocate for the expansion of Medicaid to cover low-income adults. Expanding Medicaid eligibility can provide access to affordable healthcare for a significant portion of the currently uninsured population.

Community Health Centers:

Invest in and expand community health centers, particularly in underserved areas. These centers often provide comprehensive primary care services on a sliding fee scale, making healthcare more accessible for individuals with limited financial means.

Telehealth Services:

Expand and promote the use of telehealth services to increase access to medical consultations, especially in rural or remote areas where healthcare facilities may be scarce. This can also improve access for individuals who face transportation barriers.

Addressing Rural Health Disparities:

Implement targeted initiatives to address healthcare disparities in rural areas. This may include incentives for healthcare professionals to practice in underserved regions and support for the development of rural health clinics.

School-Based Health Centers:

Establish and expand school-based health centers to provide healthcare services for children and adolescents. These centers can address health needs early on, preventing more significant health issues in the future.

Prescription Drug Affordability:

Address the affordability of prescription drugs by exploring options such as bulk purchasing, importation, and negotiating lower prices. High prescription costs can be a significant barrier to accessing necessary healthcare.

Health Insurance Marketplaces:

Strengthen and promote health insurance marketplaces to make it easier for individuals to find and enroll in affordable health insurance plans. Public awareness campaigns can help educate the public about available options.

Culturally Competent Care:

Promote culturally competent care to address the unique healthcare needs of diverse communities. This includes recruiting a diverse healthcare workforce and ensuring that healthcare services are tailored to the cultural preferences of the population.

Workforce Development:

Invest in healthcare workforce development programs to address shortages in certain healthcare professions. This could involve expanding medical education programs and providing financial incentives for healthcare professionals to practice in underserved areas.

Health Education and Prevention:

Implement health education programs to promote preventive care and healthy lifestyles. By focusing on prevention, the healthcare system can reduce the burden of chronic diseases and the associated costs.

Public-Private Partnerships:

Encourage public-private partnerships to leverage resources and expertise from both sectors. Collaboration between government, non-profit organizations, and private entities can enhance the effectiveness of healthcare initiatives.

Policy Advocacy:

Advocate for policies at the state and federal levels that support healthcare access and address the unique challenges faced by the uninsured population in Texas.

House District 63

Michelle Beckley (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

Currently Texas ranks last in mental health access and funding. We need to improve these stats by supporting organizations that provide mental health services and pushing for more government funding. The Texas legislature must prioritize mental health issues and allocate more resources towards improving access to treatment. We must fund more mental health and recovery care providers especially in rural and underserved areas. This will ensure that all communities, regardless of location or income, have access to the care they need. In addition to funding, we must also raise awareness and reduce stigma surrounding mental health. Many individuals still feel ashamed or embarrassed to seek help for their mental health concerns. By promoting education and open conversations about mental health, we can create a more understanding and accepting society. It is also crucial that we invest in early intervention and prevention programs. By identifying and addressing mental health issues early on, we can prevent them from developing into more serious conditions. This includes providing support for children in schools who may be struggling with mental health challenges. Furthermore, we need to improve our crisis response systems. Too often, individuals in a state of crisis are met with limited resources and long wait times for treatment. By investing in crisis response teams, we can provide immediate support for those in need and help prevent tragedies. In addition to these measures, we must also address the issue of access to mental healthcare. Many individuals do not have access to affordable or adequate mental health services, leading them to suffer in silence or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. We need to work towards making mental healthcare more accessible and affordable for all individuals. But beyond policy changes and investments, each of us can play a role in promoting positive attitudes towards mental health. This can be as simple as listening with empathy when someone shares their struggles, educating ourselves on common mental health disorders, and using inclusive language that avoids stigmatizing terms.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Texas needs to prioritize enhancing healthcare access for its citizens. The first crucial step towards achieving this is by adopting the Medicaid expansion. By focusing on allocating resources effectively, we can also address the important matter of mental health coverage. In addition, implementing telemedicine practices is another key strategy that can greatly improve healthcare accessibility. Texas currently has one of the highest uninsured rates in the country, with over 4 million people lacking health insurance. This means that a significant portion of the population does not have access to essential healthcare services, leading to preventable illnesses and consequences such as financial strain and decreased quality of life. One solution that has been proven to be effective in reducing uninsured rates is the Medicaid expansion. This option allows states to expand their Medicaid program to cover individuals earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level. By doing so, more low-income individuals and families can gain access to affordable healthcare coverage.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

It is of utmost importance to expand the budget for social services in Texas and enhance the provision of mental health support. By addressing these issues proactively, we can prevent their escalation to criminal levels.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Affordable housing challenges in Texas are escalating, posing a growing concern each day. It is imperative to recognize the importance of including those in need of mental health care within affordable housing initiatives.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Increasing the allocation of school funding for mental health support would significantly benefit our youth by addressing their needs before they escalate.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

It is imperative for Texas to embrace and implement the Medicaid expansion, as it would greatly benefit the state and its residents.

House District 65

Detrick DeBurr (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

As Medicaid is the single largest payer for mental health services in the United States. I believe that expanding Medicaid is key to providing better access to mental health treatment and services.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Medicaid expansion is the easiest and fastest solution to providing equal coverage.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I will work to expand the power and numbers of social service providers who can perform early warning screenings and referrals to persons with a mental illness. I will work to empower the social service providers that people interact with before they come in contact with the criminal justice system.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I will propose and support policy that coordinates state-wide efforts to address the unhoused. It will provide resources to connect local entities across the state. This allows them to collaborate where possible on addressing the unhoused population in their cities.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We must increase funding for public schools to the degree that they have the resources to be a first line of defense for mental illness detection.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I support Medicaid expansion 100%.

House District 70

Mihaela Plesa (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I believe we need to expand Medicaid to cover more mental health services and increase the Medicaid reimbursement rate to attract and sustain more providers. During the last session I was proud to carry HB 4713 with NAMI Texas to expand insurance coverage for coordinated specialty care (CSC). If we can increase coverage for more mental health services that will have a positive impact for both patients and providers and encourage more people to seek mental healthcare. I also support funding for mental health professionals on every school and college campus so that young people and students have access to mental health, and so there's someone in our schools that can keep an eye out for any of our kids who might need some help. I was proud to pass an amendment to the final budget that included an additional \$6 million for Early Childhood Intervention services so that more of our babies and toddlers can get the services they need as early as possible.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I was proud to be the author of HB 4713, the number one priority bill for NAMI Texas. This bill was an insurance mandate to make the health plans cover coordinated specialty care and create a bundled billing model so that no providers were left out of reimbursements. I will continue to champion this bill and other bills that increase coverage for mental healthcare. We can not just take care of our bodies from the neck down, what happens in the head is just as important.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I support diversion programs for people with mental illness and policies that take us away from mass incarceration. I have supported and authored legislation that would require training for jailers, prosecutors, and judges on mental illness when dealing with justice-involved populations.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I have worked closely with nonprofits and community organizations in my district to connect aid with those in need to stand in the gap between policy and reality. I believe we need to address the root causes of homelessness: a lack of access to mental healthcare or healthcare generally, a lack of education or opportunities, and people who were living paycheck to paycheck and lost their jobs or got hit with medical bills, or for whatever reason could no longer work. I don't believe that it is right for us to ignore Texans who are in the highest need. We must do more to get people off the streets and into housing, rehabilitation, training and job placement so they can get back on track and live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I support adding a mental health professional on every school and college campus to help us identify and intervene as early as possible. We know that the sooner intervention is received, the better long term outcomes are for the person experiencing mental illness.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I support expanding Medicaid to immediately insure thousands to millions of Texans. There is no justification for us not to do this. I believe we need to increase our investment in our state and county hospitals so that people can have more local options for healthcare access that are affordable. We must open at least one state hospital and mental health treatment center in every single county for us to provide real and accessible options for all Texans.

House District 73

Carrie Isaac (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I support removing barriers to entering the mental health field, such as streamlining license recognition for out-of-state and military providers and expanding student loan repayment incentives for mental health professionals who commit to practicing in rural communities. I also support ensuring integrating mental health into traditional health care settings.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We need accountability. I will work with the agencies and the AG to implement what the laws in place already require. If there needs to be improvements I look forward to working with you on them.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

In Texas, drug courts have proven a successful strategy to fight substance abuse, reducing recidivism, and helping offenders on a path to a drug-free life. I would be open to expanding the use of mental health courts to adjudicate nonviolent offenses while also helping Texans with mental illnesses receive the care they need.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

In the vast majority of cases, homelessness is the symptom, not disease. Most people experiencing homelessness are on the streets not by choice, but because of severe substance abuse or mental illness. The “housing first” approach used by the federal government and many urban cities doesn’t truly solve the underlying problem. I believe Texas homelessness policy should focus on treating the root causes of homelessness. This is one area of many where I believe charities, churches, and communities can solve problems much more efficiently and effectively than government, and Texas should support and embrace the role of nonprofit organizations in fighting homelessness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Many schools in Texas have dedicated counselors on staff to help identify and address mental health issues. My understanding is there is some need for improvements and fine tuning in this area and I look forward to working with you on this issue.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

First, it’s important to note that coverage does not equal care and there are many avenues Texas can take to improve quality, affordability, and transparency in health care. However, there are some areas Texas can improve coverage, such as streamlining the Medicaid process for low-income and vulnerable children and additional coverage past the age of 18 to help these young adults get on their feet.

House District 73

Sally Duval (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I support Texas accepting federal dollars to expand Medicaid. As a state, we must prioritize mental health for all Texans, including children and within schools. Mental health services need to be provided in all health clinics. An investment in mental health facilities would benefit our communities.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We must treat mental health like our physical health as one affects the other. I would support signing onto and/or authorizing a bill to address the need of more mental health treatment.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Having more accessibility within all communities to mental health services will help to alleviate some of this. I would like to learn more about diversions but in the meantime we can certainly address mental health needs within the system as well as concentrating on prevention. The mental health training of law enforcement would be extremely beneficial. I would also support the funding of more mental health social workers to accompany law enforcement.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Such complicated issue. We've done a poor job of working with the homeless. Addressing both issues on an individual basis is needed which means funding. Houston is having some good luck in their community.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Training of our teachers, pediatricians and parents.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We must expand medicaid and address the effectiveness of insurance providers.

House District 74

Eddie Morales, Jr. (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Representing 10 rural counties in West and South Texas, this issue is especially important. I was proud to work with Rep. Craddick to establish a 100 bed, in person facility in the Permian Basin to provide more access to mental health treatments. However, there is still more work to be done in expanding healthcare coverage, tuition reimbursement for rural professionals, and expanding telehealth programs.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We need to address out-of-network coverage, especially for our rural Texans, ensure any state-supported plans close any gaps in mental health coverage, and ensure our agencies are efficient and holding insurance providers accountable.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

As a member of the House Criminal Justice Reform Caucus, there is a pressing need to evaluate the root causes of incarceration and work toward policies that alleviate the burden of TDCJ and offer mental health services for cases.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I would support legislation establishing funding/a program to address homeless mental health services.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

In order to detect these conditions, we must improve access and opportunity for families across Texas to receive these services. This goes back to previous question on expanding access and community outreach.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Above all, Texas must expand Medicaid to ensure we do not lead the nation in uninsured residents.

House District 76

Dr. Suleman Lalani (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Texas cannot fill its unmet need for mental health professionals without drastic improvements in methods of recruitment and loan repayment for mental health professionals. I authored the house version and passed into law S.B. 532 which will reduce from five years to three years the number of years required for a person to participate in the state's Mental Health Professional Loan Repayment Program and see the program through to completion. Currently, mental health professionals have deemed the five year completion horizon detrimental to the overall success of the program. It is believed that decreasing the time period required for the program from five years to three will increase participation in the program, and incentivize more students to pursue mental health professions, knowing that a relatively simple pathway exists for them to pay off their student loans through service in high-need areas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

There are certain pieces of legislation we can pass to mandate coverage for specific care. I will work to address this in the next session.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

We must increase investment in programs that help individuals recover from substance abuse and mental health problems and re-enter society upon release from incarceration.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I believe that mental illness among the unhoused is one of the great challenges of our time. I think the most important thing we can do is provide more funding for services that provide housing and counseling/intervention to the uninsured. Medicaid expansion can also help more individuals of lower incomes access care and help intervene early.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I believe that early intervention is important in a young person's life. That's why on SB 532, as a member of the higher education committee, I authored an amendment mandating that institutions of higher education provide all incoming students information on what mental health and suicide prevention services the institution offers, early warning signs for these illnesses, a map of where to access them, and a guided tour that stops at the office where the services are offered so that when crisis strikes the student is already familiar with their options. I am hopeful that among our young adults these interventions will help save lives. We must do more for our children and teens as well.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I have long been a champion of Medicaid expansion. When I was elected I joint authored a bill to introduce a "Texas Way" to ensure health benefit plan coverage to certain low-income individuals through the private marketplace. Unfortunately, continues to remain politically challenging in our state but I will continue pushing and working across the aisle.

House District 76

Lea Simmons (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I will work with communities, local churches and charities, local government and doctors, so that affordable mental health treatment, services, and care will be provided to those who need help.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

All doctors in all medical fields need to work together to ensure that they are able to provide care for all patients who need help with medical care and mental care because they are the ones that provide prescriptions. Healthcare and mental care are two basic needs to ensure that patients are able to afford medical care and treatment plus be treated with proper medical assistance when taking medication.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Back ground checks and tests before being given such a huge responsibility needs also proper attention before working in any judicial system and office. It is an important step before getting into criminal justice.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Basic classes in survival and recovery are something to consider when dealing with homelessness. Being able to deal with social situations and living in a community is something that can be helped by having a supportive environment or a supportive church family.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Signs that include loneliness and lack of self acceptance are common among people with depression. A small percentage of people can relate to this feeling of isolation because we as a society have to have love and support. As far as mental health goes, loss of loved ones or rejection is a challenge when not accepting life's challenges but helping others cope is a sign of strength and patience. A sponsor or friend can be tremendous help to those that need support.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Minority groups and people who live in poverty have large families. I will be developing a plan to help people learn caregiver skills in local communities and churches. Local community leaders also need this basic knowledge when a community needs assistance in a weather emergency crisis or other related issues. Income and proper living conditions are essential to survival and health care is a must. Basic medical care and nonprofit organizations need to be more accessible.

House District 84

Noah Lopez (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

First, we need to invest to see results, we should look at what San Antonio has done and train emergency responders in mental health and management. We should also look at creating programs to encourage local citizens to go to school for mental health and ask them to stay in these rural areas for a certain time.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will push for legislation that penalizes insurances that are not giving equal treatment with fines and compensation.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

We need a system that is not a revolving door. We need a program that helps people with severe mental illnesses get the care they need and the medication they need.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Local and State should work together to build housing units to house the homeless and ensure they have a safe place to be at night, and during bad weather conditions. We can create programs for mental health providers to help and treat those that need it.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We should encourage insurance companies to cover the cost of young people to get tested. We should also have programs that help cover the cost of medicine and treatments.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We need to hold insurance companies accountable. That means no price gouging and providing adequate health care and that includes mental health care.

House District 87

Timothy Gassaway (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Write legislation that will ensure people in rural and underserved areas have access to transportation to seek treatment.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will work with groups like NAMI to work toward improving coverage and compliance.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Author or co-author legislation and funding that offers early detection and help for people with mental illness. The program should provide people with skill to understand their mental illness and how to safely seek help.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Provide opportunities to live in group housing with access to mental health professionals.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Provide people access to counselors who can best detect mental illness and refer them to medical professionals.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Pass legislation that expands Medicaid in the state of Texas and work with the federal government to continue improving access to healthcare.

House District 89

Darrel Evans (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

To address the shortage of mental health providers, I will expand workforce training programs, increase telehealth services in rural areas, and integrate mental health care into primary care settings. Additionally, I support Medicaid expansion to increase access and funding for mental health services, ensuring underserved Texans can get the care they need.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

To improve mental health coverage in Texas, I will work to strengthen enforcement of existing parity laws, ensuring insurance companies provide equal coverage for mental health and substance use disorders. Additionally, I will advocate for increased transparency and oversight, requiring insurers to demonstrate compliance with mental health parity laws. Finally, I will support legislation that simplifies access to mental health services, ensuring all Texans receive the care they deserve without barriers or delays.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

To divert individuals with mental illness from the criminal justice system, I will advocate for expanding mental health crisis intervention programs, such as Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs) and mental health

courts, which prioritize treatment over incarceration. I will also push for increased funding for community-based mental health services to provide early intervention and ongoing support. Additionally, I will support policies that train law enforcement on mental health de-escalation techniques and connect individuals with appropriate care instead of jail.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

To help individuals with mental illness who are struggling with housing, I will advocate for increased investment in supportive housing programs that provide both housing and mental health services. I will push for expanding Medicaid to cover housing-related services, and support Housing First initiatives, which prioritize stable housing as a foundation for recovery. Additionally, I will work to increase funding for mental health services in homeless shelters and advocate for permanent supportive housing solutions to ensure those experiencing homelessness get the care and stability they need.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

To promote earlier intervention for mental health issues, I will advocate for increased mental health screenings in schools, ensuring early detection of mental health conditions. I will also push for expanding access to school counselors and mental health professionals in educational settings. Additionally, I will support public awareness campaigns that reduce stigma and encourage young people and families to seek help early. By investing in community-based mental health programs and integrating mental health services into primary care, we can catch and treat mental health conditions before they reach a crisis point.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

To improve access to healthcare and reduce Texas' high uninsured rate, I will advocate for Medicaid expansion, which will provide coverage to millions of uninsured Texans. I will also support increasing funding for community health centers in underserved areas and expanding telehealth services to ensure that rural communities have access to care. Additionally, I will work to lower healthcare costs by pushing for statewide insurance reforms and ensuring more Texans can afford and access the care they need.

House District 93

Perla Bojorquez (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

To reduce barriers and improve access to mental health treatment and services we need to start by increasing awareness and tying services to our primary health care services. Community health services and peers should be focused on prevention and early detection. We need to reduce treatment gaps and establish networks of professionals to teach coping mechanisms or offer alternatives. Community advocates can volunteer to educate or share information that explains available resources and programs in their area.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We should have more mental health professionals on site with other medical providers. Sometimes, just the fact that someone has to go to a mental health agency or clinic stops them from getting help. If people could enter a space where they feel safe and not judged, they would seek help sooner. It should not take months to get an appointment with a counselor or mental health specialists, we need walk-in locations for non emergency situations.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Our justice system needs better training, resources, and solutions on how to interact with individuals with mental illness. To divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system, we need to

create a hotline dedicated 24/7 with mental health specialists or trainees. Together they can immediately assess the situation and deter them being detained, and instead evaluated and referred to a nearby crisis team. We should not have to wait until someone is a danger to themselves or others, the hotline could get these individuals into a safe environment, treatment, or provide coping mechanisms.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Instead of shaming individuals experiencing homelessness, we should determine their root illness, network of family or friends, and organizations nearby. Sometimes, the lack of any stability in their lives can exasperate the problem. Creating a network of employers and organizations can help them maintain a job and live with dignity regardless of their mental illness. Safety is so important, and we should be providing environments where everyone can thrive instead of seeing them as cast aways.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Reducing the stigma around mental health care would help promote earlier intervention. Some people do not want to be judged or have their family misunderstand them because they have a condition. The younger someone is, the better they can get at determining the skills that help them cope or what does not work for them. Families can also strengthen their crisis response and have resources readily available if they are educated and understand the signs or triggers.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We need to stop tying healthcare to employers. This immediately creates a difference in the quality of healthcare someone can receive. Healthcare should be seen as a human right, instead of a choice with tiered levels of coverage. If a doctor recommends a treatment, insurance companies should not have the audacity to say it is not necessary. Clinics and hospitals having to resubmit claims for pre-approvals all of the time. This is wasting money and time for patients who need access to medical care immediately. We should also have unified fees across the nation. Why should healthcare cost more in the United States than it does in Mexico. Americans are referred to MEDICAL REFUGEES and that is embarrassing coming from a nation who prides itself on being the best in the world.

House District 94

Denise Wilkerson (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I would propose initiatives like increasing funding for mental health programs, offering incentives for providers to work in underserved areas, and expanding telehealth services. Expanding Medicaid would strengthen the state's ability to provide affordable healthcare.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will work towards enforcing existing mental health parity laws, advocate for stricter regulations, and allocate resources to ensure oversight. Additionally, I could propose legislation to address loopholes in coverage, raise awareness about mental health parity, and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to create comprehensive policies promoting equal treatment for mental health conditions in insurance plans.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I fully support initiatives like increasing funding for mental health courts, crisis intervention training for law enforcement, and community-based mental health services. Investing in mental health diversion programs, promoting early intervention, and addressing root causes of mental health issues can help redirect individuals away from the criminal justice system towards more appropriate care and support systems.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I support Housing First policies: By offering unconditional housing with embedded services, we not only reduce chronic homelessness but also address associated challenges like incarceration. This approach significantly improves the quality of life, especially for individuals grappling with both substance use disorder and/or mental illness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I will advocate for mental health education in schools, certified counseling in schools (not chaplains), increase funding for youth mental health services, and support programs that facilitate early detection and intervention. Implementing policies to reduce stigma, ensuring mental health screenings are part of routine healthcare, and providing resources for community outreach can contribute to identifying and addressing mental health issues at an earlier stage.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

One of my priorities is to work towards expanding Medicaid to cover more low-income individuals, reducing technical barriers to keeping coverage, supporting community health clinics, and incentivizing healthcare providers to practice in underserved areas. Additionally, I will encourage policies that address the root causes of the high uninsured rate, such as economic disparities and accessibility issues.

House District 98

Scott White (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

The shortage of mental health and recovery care providers in Texas is part of a larger trend of declining healthcare services in rural areas. To address this, we should work on expanding access to telehealth services by improving broadband infrastructure and ensuring insurance reimbursement for virtual care. Additionally, we need to focus on training more providers and securing additional funding for mental health facilities at the county level. It's also important to encourage partnerships between local providers and mental health organizations to improve service delivery and access.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will work to advocate for Texas insurance policy standards to include coverage for mental health conditions. In addition, I will strive to expand public awareness campaigns to inform Texans of their rights under parity laws. I will also collaborate with mental health advocacy groups to identify and address gaps in coverage.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

In order to keep individuals with mental illness out of the criminal justice system, I will advocate for more investment in community-based mental health services. This will include crisis stabilization units and housing support to offer early intervention and prevent people with mental health conditions from ending up in jail. I will also back increased funding for training law enforcement

officers in mental health crisis de-escalation and the use of co-responder models, where mental health professionals can accompany officers on relevant calls. These measures will ensure that mental health is treated as a healthcare issue rather than a criminal one.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I will prioritize a "Housing First" approach, which focuses on providing stable housing for individuals with mental illness without preconditions. At the same time, we will offer comprehensive mental health services. By ensuring that those dealing with mental illness have access to stable housing and comprehensive care, we can address both homelessness and mental health issues simultaneously.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I am committed to advocating for the expansion of mental health screenings in schools and pediatric settings in order to identify issues early. I also advocate to increase funding for school-based mental health services. Additionally, I will work to integrate mental health education into school curricula to reduce stigma and empower students to seek help sooner. I am also in support of expanding access to youth-focused mental health services, including telehealth options, and collaborating with community organizations to create awareness campaigns that encourage parents and young adults to prioritize mental health before it reaches a crisis point.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I would prioritize expanding Medicaid in Texas, which would immediately provide coverage to over a million low-income Texans and working families. Expanding Medicaid is a proven way to reduce the uninsured rate and improve access to critical health services, especially for rural communities.

House District 106

Hava Johnston (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

First we need to expand medicare and include mental health resources such as addiction treatment, counseling, mental health screenings, behavioral therapy and more. We need increase incentives for mental healthcare workers in rural areas and provide funding for the creation of mental health care centers throughout the state. Utilizing more virtual technology to reach these rural areas. Establishing hubs for local reach out centers within existing establishments like pubic libraries, churches, and fire departments. Creating a statewide public outreach and education campaign to normalize and destigmatize mental health and substance addiction.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I would work alongside this committee and local mental health professionals to establish oversight and regulations of such disparities.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

The criminal justice system in Texas needs overall reforms, starting with how our law enforcement interact with those showing signs of mental health, substance abuse issues, or any other unknown disability. This starts with hiring more qualified social workers and counselors to dispatched on such interactions. This would allow for those individuals to receive the care they need versus a criminal

record. I also believe that legalization and decriminalization of marijuana would make a great impact on keeping these individuals out of the criminal justice system. But for those who are already incarcerated we should create reforms that would allow for their cases to be reviewed and and possibly diverted to mental health care programs.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

To address those who maybe losing their homes I would introduce legislation to allow for funding for qualified mental health patients who are facing a housing crisis and to expedite existing applications for assistance programs. The backlog for programs already in place needs to be addressed and resolved. Additionally, legislation restricting landlords from disapproving applicants based on their mental health status or use of such funding would help to keep more individuals in their homes. For those who are currently facing homelessness I would work in increase public outreach centers and partner with existing organizations to help provide these Texans with assistance.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Public awareness and outreach. Normalizing the topic of mental health and destaminizing those who seek help. Introduce mental health education as part of our elementary education curriculum. Hire more qualified school counselors and offer private and group sessions to students, faculty and staff.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Expand Medicare.

House District 108

Elizabeth Ginsberg (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Medicaid expansion and decreasing the number of uninsured Texans is the first step. In the short term, I believe we must implement telehealth programs to make access to mental health treatment and service more accessible. In the long term we need to incentivize providers and insurers to practice in rural Texas, including education funding, student loan forgiveness and stipends for maintaining a rural practice or a practice in a high need area.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

The Texas Department of Insurance must enforce parity by auditing coverage availability, denial rates and grounds for denial, and whether there is a robust network of providers. The legislature could also consider appropriate penalties for non-compliance.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I am proud to have been endorsed by our district attorney, John Cruzot, who was an early adopter of diversion programs. Court is Dallas view this a a foundation of our judicial system. It is cost effective and the right thing to do, but only works if there is adequate mental healthcare. Decreasing the number of uninsured Texans is the top priority, but unfortunately, those with the greatest need may

be the hardest to get covered. There is an influx of opioid money coming to our state that is earmarked for mental health service for addicts, and those funds would be well spent facilitating diversion programs. I am open to suggestion about how diversion programs can be made more successful, and would hope to meet with your organization to discuss these options.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I am a housing first proponent to addressing the homeless crisis in persons with mental illness. To the extent that the mental illness is associated with addiction, I believe some of the opioid funds could be used to assist in housing and treatment. Local governments are crafting solutions – some with more success than others. We need to continue sharing ideas across the state to assure we are finding the most effective solutions.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I am seeing some progress on this issue. Schools across the state are partnering with the University of Texas System to offer Texas Child Health Access through Telemedicine (“TCHAT”). There is still not enough staffing, but I believe that this type of program may be effective in getting early diagnoses in children before there is a crisis.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

In order to decrease Texas’ uninsured rate we must expand Medicaid, dedicate state resources to facilitating reenrollment after the Covid era drop off, consider a Texas exchange that rather than relying on the federal exchange so more robust offers are available at lower costs, and when children are no longer CHIP or Medicaid eligible, steer them to the exchange to select low or no cost policies.

House District 113

Stephen Stanley (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

The legislature could build in some incentives to entice the medical community to provide more mental health services, but it would only be a short-term solution. We must have more students seeking out a profession in the mental health field. Today there is a great disparity between those in need of assistance and those qualified to step in to assist.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Currently there are not enough providers in Texas to properly assist all those in need no matter what age bracket they may be in. I would be open to increase the funding for all in need but even supplemental help for families that have insurance but the gap between services that is covered and actual cost to individuals/families to get services. We seek alternative funding sources for those in need.

This can come from unrestricted Federal Funding, additional State funding and seeking local partners throughout the State of Texas.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

With the current numbers seeking or needing care, there just aren't enough professional services available nor monies to support the volume of care needed today. Another problem compounding

this issue is many times those who suffer mental health issues end up committing crimes and then they get caught up into the justice system who is even less equipped to everyone in need. What options could be available to divert those needing services and/or long-term care instead of jails are out there. I would love to be part of a task force to investigate this.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

This has been a dilemma for many decades. Government can't be the end all to be all for every segment of society. We need to look at the barriers to using telehealth services with providers perhaps outside of an individual's state. What Government can do is become a better partner with the private sector to bring in the professionals online to be able to assist more in need. Having Government take the lead is only a short-term solution. Government needs to work with community partners to step up and lead in this area and when possible, step back and let the private sector do what it does best, lead.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

This is something that needs to start within our public schools. Why has NAMI not become a TEA/State resource to go into schools with maybe their 'Ending the Silence' campaign? Instead during ESSER funding programs millions went to privatized startup entities to concierge mental health. We as a country must come together to work to de-stigmatize mental Health illnesses. Early detection of our kids of ADHD with a staggering statistic of 'About 3 in 10 people with dyslexia also have ADHD. And if you have ADHD, you're six times more likely than most people to have a mental illness or a learning disorder'. With the building blocks of learning starting from Kindergarten thru about the 2nd grade we must catch these issues sooner, so we help prepare them for success and teach them how to live with their issues and still be a productive member of society. This early detection would be key to lessening the destruction to self esteem and feelings of despair that leads to the substance abuse and poor life choices that ultimately pathway to our jails.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

The legislature needs to increase the allocation to the Chips program and to better protect those within the system to better guarantee a road to success. If we could receive Federal Funds without all their strings, I would be open to look for additional funding there.

House District 115

Cassandra Hernandez (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

While the legislature has appropriated some additional new funding for mental health, including the construction of the HHSC/UTSW psychiatric hospital in Dallas, it is still not enough. I will prioritize diverting our precious state dollars away from divisive culture war boondoggles and towards increased state services and facilities. Texas ranks 44 th for adults with mental health issues not receiving treatment, and 33% of Texans have a mental health or substance use disorder. Clearly, more funding is necessary, and the current status quo is not working. I also want to work with our mental health and recovery care providers in determining how we can broaden access to rural and underserved communities through a combination of technology, internships, and student debt forgiveness programs to fill the need we see in those areas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Work to enact legislation that strengthens and safeguards current surprise billing consumer protections, remove prior authorizations, remove treatment limitations for substance use disorder from Medicaid, and ensure that carriers are accurately providing to customers what providers are in-network and not.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I have supported criminal justice reform legislation in the past and will continue to do so if elected. Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot has shown that there are viable alternatives to mass

incarceration that maintain public safety while also stopping the prison pipeline. Treating substance abuse as a public health crisis, having mental health professionals be available on all DART trains and buses, and expanding options beyond incarceration for judges are all tools that have been utilized to success in Dallas County. I also know that programs like RIGHT Care Team are needed throughout Texas when someone is experiencing a mental crisis so that we keep them and others safe as well as get them the care they need. I would like to see these same policies expanded statewide.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I believe that we can help people experiencing homelessness and severe mental illness by first supporting nonprofit organizations like our own Metrocrest Services that help individuals experiencing homelessness by addressing the root cause(s) – including getting them the mental health resources they need and then making sure there is enough housing for placement. I will support policies that streamline and accelerate the construction of new housing facilities. For example, Carrollton, Addison, and Farmers Branch are all building new, mixed-use housing in House District 115. I am heartened by this, and want to see more new, long-term housing beyond the traditional single-family zoned housing built. Also the continuation of supporting these nonprofits while newly housed individuals are acclimating to their new lifestyle is critical to make sure it is permanent.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I will support legislation that supports public school counselors (instead of seeking to replace them with chaplains). The best way to stop this before a crisis emerges is for early intervention when someone is still in public school – which means increased funding, and legislation that extends public service loan forgiveness for new counselors who choose to serve underprivileged communities/rural communities. I also believe in educating our teachers, staff, and parents on the signs so they can work together in detecting and treating our children.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We must expand Medicaid. We know the benefits, and that Texas is the state with the highest rate of uninsured people. Apart from that, I'll support legislation that directs HHSC to seek collaboration with the healthcare.gov insurance exchange, raising public awareness about open enrollment periods, and finding ways to cut red tape and barriers to healthcare access, like prior authorizations and other unnecessary administrative steps that only drain Texans' pocketbooks. As I stated before, I also want to work with our mental health and recovery care providers in determining how we can broaden access to rural and underserved communities through a combination of technology, internships, and student debt forgiveness programs to fill the need we see in those areas.

House District 121

Laurel Swift (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I am willing to author, co-author and vote for any and all legislation that increases funding for mental health in Texas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

See answer above. I honestly don't know where to even start. I have a lifetime of personal experience caring for family members with severe mental illness. The mental healthcare system has been decimated. I will need NAMI's help

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Anything I can. My brother is schizophrenic, and would likely be in jail if he didn't live with me, and have me to maintain his disability status, get his monthly labwork, and obtain his meds.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

It is one of the main reasons I am running for office.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We must expand Medicaid in Texas, increase reimbursement for psychiatric care, and increase the number of counselors in schools to screen for mental illness in young people.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Expanding Medicaid is the easy, first step. And educating the public on the concept of Medicare for all is a long term goal for me. The health insurance industry needs to be phased out, and health insurance should be run as a non profit, public utility.

House District 121

Marc LaHood (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

We must ensure that government regulation is not creating barriers to service and that adequate funding is provided for indigent services.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

If state and federal law requires parity and the law is not being followed, then the issue is enforcement. We need to understand why there is no enforcement and proceed from there. For example, the legislature may need to appropriate funds for enforcement or to ensure that the appropriate enforcement authorities are doing their jobs.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

This is a major problem, and the cost of addressing mental health issues early prevents much higher costs to the individual and society later. As I said in question 1, we must ensure that government regulation is not creating barriers to service and that adequate funding is provided for indigent services.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

There are two components here, the first is that there are indigent people with severe mental health issues in need of care. The second is that they have no home. Again, we must ensure that government regulation is not creating barriers to service and that adequate funding is provided for indigent services. Housing prices and rent are high and will continue to increase over time if the issue of supply is not met. We also need policy in place that reforms zoning and other regulations to remove barriers to increasing the housing supply.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Having an appropriate ratio of qualified mental health professionals employed by ISDs, charter schools, etc would go a long way towards identifying these currently undetected mental health conditions in our youth so that they can be treated at an early age.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

We must ensure that government regulation is not creating barriers to service in underserved areas. Additionally, reimbursement rates for TCM are much too low. The legislature had a bill to increase the reimbursement significantly, but when the legislation came out of conference the reimbursement rates dropped below what both the House and the Senate had initially passed out of their chambers. That would seriously help in attracting people to work in underserved areas.

House District 122

Kevin Geary (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Any plan to address the lack of services in rural and underserved areas must start with providing more options for treatment. The \$2.26 billion investment in 2023 from the state in building new hospitals, especially in rural areas, will help- but we need to do more. There need to have more mental health providers work in rural and underserved areas; we can achieve that by giving incentives to providers to work in these communities; writing off a portion of their student loans, provide housing, a pay bonus for each year worked in a rural area, etc. We also need to increase the availability of telehealth services for rural residents who cannot make it to a hospital (though to do this, we must also increase broadband internet coverage to many of these rural communities.) Another thing we can do is expand the state's Medicaid coverage, which would provide 1.4 million Texans with health care coverage and would specifically help poor Texans in rural and underserved areas.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

The report cited indicates that 44% of those with serious mental health did not receive mental health treatment. This is troubling. To address this, we should do three things: mandate that health plans provide mental health coverage that is on par with that provided for physical ailments. We also increase our regulatory oversight of health care, requiring health care insurers to report regularly on denials of coverage and the reasons for those denials, annual reviews of coverage decisions by regulators, and requirements that insurers provide mental health coverage while they make a coverage determination, rather than requiring an insured to wait months for treatment while a decision is made.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

There are far too many people with mental illness in the criminal justice system; a recent article noted that county jails in the United States have three times more inmates with serious mental illness than would be expected. There are several things we can do to get these people the treatment they need. First, we should follow the example of cities like Portland, Maine, which has mental health professionals, not police officers, respond to 911 calls where there are no imminent safety concerns. These professionals get those they meet the services they need, instead of placing them in jail. We also need to ensure Texas can fully staff its state psychiatric hospitals; currently, almost a third of the beds in these hospitals go unused because of short staffing, which means that those who need treatment often remain in jail. Finally, mental health professionals should be involved with prosecutors and police officers in determining whether someone, if they appear to have a mental illness, would be better served by being sent to a treatment facility rather than a jail.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Homelessness presents a significant challenge to those with mental illness, as the stress and trauma a homeless person faces can negatively impact a person's mental health. To address this, we need to have a coordinated approach that involves both affordable housing and treatment options when addressing this issue. This approach must involve increased options for affordable housing, along with housing subsidies for our homeless citizens while they get back on their feet. We also need to increase the outreach to our homeless populations, making sure they are connected with resources that can help them, while also making sure there are sufficient resources available (which is a problem across our state.)`

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I know the importance of having access to a mental health care professional at an early age; I was diagnosed with depression at the age of 16 and the treatment I receive helped address my condition, something I continue to treat for to this day. The first thing we can do is increase the resources that are available to parents, as many of them do not recognize that the "phase" their child is going through is actually the sign of a mental illness that requires treatment. We also need to ensure every school district in the state has an adequate amount of mental health professionals. The National

Association of School Psychologists recommends 20 school psychologists for every 10,000 students; in Texas, there are less than 4 for every 10,000. Access to telemedicine for mental health, such as that provided in the TCHAT program, is a good start, but we need to do more and provide additional funding to help with earlier intervention.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

There is a simple solution that would, if enacted, expand healthcare to more than a third of Texas' uninsured citizens: Governor Abbott could expand the state's Medicaid coverage, which would provide coverage to nearly 1.4 million of our citizens with the federal government paying 90 percent of the cost. If I am fortunate enough to be elected, I will sponsor legislation that would force the Governor to move forward with this expansion. We also need to address the fact that more and more health care providers are leaving rural parts of our state. In many cases, people need to drive up to 50 miles to see a doctor. We can do this by providing financial incentives to medical providers willing to work in underserved areas; examples of this would be forgiving a percentage of their student loans each year they work in an underserved part of the state, providing them free housing, a financial stipend for each year they serve in an underserved community, etc.

House District 124

Sylvia Soto (R)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I would recommend offering better Student Loan Forgiveness plans to encourage more providers to service rural or underserved areas. I also think that there should be more funding allocated to have more Mental Health Programs for Veterans. In addition there should be an overlook of the current programs and focus on their actual outcome and consolidate programs that may be providing the same services and use the funding in other areas more effectively.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

It is important to educate the public on mental health benefits in their insurance plans because mental health is very important. The insurance companies that provide mental health coverage should also be in compliance with all of the necessary services they should provide. In addition, if there are companies that have had several complaints due to not keeping their services as stated to the customer the investigations should be completed timely when filed by patients.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

There should be more education programs that educate individuals regarding jobs, trades or getting their education. There should also be programs more that provide counseling and the medical treatment needed to help people with a mental illness in order to help them not enter the criminal justice system. These programs will also help in decreasing spending because if individuals end up in the criminal justice system this will cause a high cost.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

There should be additional funding due to the current inflation for both mental illness and housing services for people who are struggling with housing issues.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

The public should be educated on these facts and parents should also be informed about this information so that they can provide the necessary attention and guidance to their families. In addition, clinics, medical facilities and community centers should inform the public in order to provide and assist their patients in regards to these services. Educating the public is the best way to guide people to seek testing and detect mental illness early in order to promote intervention.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

There should be more public community centers that offer free or reduced healthcare services to people who do not have health insurance. In addition, there should be more advertisement and outreach efforts to educate and inform the public about these services.

House District 126

Sarah Smith (I)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

1. Incentivizing Healthcare Professionals: Implement programs offering incentives such as student loan forgiveness, competitive salaries, and housing benefits for mental health professionals who choose to work in underserved areas. 2. Expanding Telehealth Services: Invest in and expand telehealth infrastructure to provide remote access to mental health services. This will be particularly beneficial in rural areas where in-person services are limited. 3. Training and Education Programs: Support and fund training programs for mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and social workers, to increase the workforce in this field. 4. Community-Based Outreach: Develop community-based programs and outreach initiatives to connect with individuals in need of mental health services. This includes mobile mental health clinics and partnerships with local organizations. 5. Integrating Mental Health into Primary Care: Encourage and support the integration of mental health services into primary care settings, making it easier for individuals to access mental health care. 6. Improving Public Transportation: Enhance public transportation options to make it easier for individuals in rural and underserved areas to travel to mental health care facilities. 7. Advocating for Increased Funding: Work to secure more state and federal funding specifically earmarked for expanding mental health services in underserved areas. 8. Strengthening Collaboration with Educational Institutions: Partner with universities and colleges to create pipelines for students in the mental health field to work in underserved communities. 9. Policy Reforms for Better Insurance Coverage: Advocate for policy reforms that ensure insurance companies provide adequate coverage for mental health services, making these services more affordable and accessible. 10. Regular Assessment and Adaptation: Continuously assess the effectiveness of these strategies and adapt them as necessary to ensure that they meet the evolving needs of the communities.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Here's my action plan: 1. Strengthen Enforcement of Parity Laws: Work with state regulatory bodies to strictly enforce existing mental health parity laws. This involves conducting thorough audits of insurance companies to ensure compliance and imposing penalties for non-compliance. 2. Legislation for Better Transparency: Introduce legislation requiring insurance companies to provide clear, accessible information about mental health benefits and appeal processes. This transparency is crucial for consumers to understand and access their entitled benefits. 3. Consumer Education and Support: Launch statewide initiatives to educate consumers about their rights under mental health parity laws. This includes setting up hotlines or help centers where individuals can receive assistance in navigating insurance issues related to mental health and substance use disorder coverage. 4. Collaboration with Mental Health Advocates and Professionals: Work closely with mental health advocates, healthcare providers, and legal experts to identify gaps in coverage and propose solutions. Their insights are vital in shaping effective policies. 5. Expanding Coverage in State-Run Health Programs: Advocate for the expansion of mental health services in state-run health programs like Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), ensuring they offer comprehensive mental health and substance use disorder coverage. 6. Promoting Integrated Care Models: Encourage the adoption of integrated care models that combine physical and mental health services, fostering an environment where mental health is treated on par with physical health. 7. Regular Review and Adaptation of Policies: Commit to regularly reviewing and updating policies to adapt to the evolving needs in mental health care, ensuring that laws and regulations stay effective and relevant. 8. Public-Private Partnerships: Foster partnerships between the public sector, private insurance companies, and non-profits to develop innovative solutions for comprehensive mental health coverage. 9. Advocacy at the Federal Level: Collaborate with federal representatives to advocate for stronger national mental health parity laws and increased federal funding for mental health services. 10. Community-Based Programs: Support and fund community-based programs that provide mental health services, especially in underserved areas, as a complement to formal healthcare systems. My goal is to create a system where mental health is given equal importance as physical health in every aspect, including insurance coverage, to ensure that all Texans have the mental health support they need.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

1. Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs): Expand the use of CITs, which are specially trained police units that respond to incidents involving mental health crises. These teams can de-escalate situations and redirect individuals to mental health services instead of jail. 2. Mental Health Courts: Establish and support mental health courts across Texas. These specialized courts focus on treatment and rehabilitation for offenders with mental illnesses, rather than incarceration. 3. Pre-Arrest Diversion Programs: Implement pre-arrest diversion strategies that allow law enforcement to refer individuals with mental health issues directly to treatment providers instead of processing them through the criminal justice system. 4. Training for Law Enforcement: Provide comprehensive training for law enforcement officers on how to recognize and appropriately respond to mental health crises, including de-escalation techniques and awareness of community resources. 5. Increase Access to Mental Health Services: Invest in mental health services statewide, particularly in underserved areas, to ensure that individuals have access to the care they need before they encounter the criminal justice system. 6. Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals: Foster collaboration between the criminal justice system and mental health professionals to develop effective intervention strategies. 7. Community-Based Treatment: Support and fund community-based treatment options as alternatives to incarceration for individuals with mental illnesses. 8. Reentry Programs: Develop reentry programs that provide mental health support to individuals leaving the criminal justice system, reducing the likelihood of recidivism. 9. Policy Reform: Advocate for policy reforms that prioritize treatment over incarceration for non-violent offenders with mental health conditions. 10. Data-Driven Approach: Utilize data to identify trends, assess the effectiveness of diversion programs, and continuously adapt strategies to meet the needs of individuals with mental illnesses in the criminal justice system. My commitment is to a justice system that recognizes and adequately addresses the mental health needs of individuals, ensuring that those with mental illnesses receive proper care and support instead of unnecessary incarceration.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Addressing the intersection of mental illness and homelessness is a critical aspect of my platform. My approach to assist individuals with mental illness who are struggling with housing involves a comprehensive strategy: 1. Integrated Supportive Housing: Implement and expand supportive housing programs that integrate affordable housing with comprehensive mental health services. This model has been shown to be effective in helping individuals with mental health challenges maintain stable housing. 2. Expand Access to Mental Health Services: Increase funding and accessibility for mental health services, especially targeting homeless populations. This includes mobile mental health units and community health workers who can reach people where they are. 3. Collaboration with Healthcare Providers and Social Services: Foster collaboration between healthcare providers, mental

health professionals, and social service agencies to provide a coordinated response to the needs of homeless individuals with mental illness. 4. Job Training and Employment Programs: Develop job training and employment programs specifically for individuals with mental illness, aiding them in gaining financial stability which is crucial for maintaining housing. 5. Preventive Measures and Early Intervention: Invest in preventive measures and early intervention programs to address mental health issues before they lead to homelessness. This includes providing resources and support for at-risk individuals and families. 6. Policy Advocacy for Affordable Housing: Advocate for policies that increase the availability of affordable housing and protect the rights of those with mental illness in the housing market. 7. Targeted Assistance for Special Populations: Provide specialized services and housing options for subpopulations among the homeless, such as veterans, youth, and those with chronic mental illnesses, acknowledging that different groups have unique needs. 8. Strengthen Community Partnerships: Build strong partnerships with local organizations, faith-based groups, and businesses to create a community network of support for individuals experiencing homelessness and mental illness. 9. Data-Driven Approaches: Use data to identify trends, measure the effectiveness of programs, and continuously adapt strategies to meet the changing needs of this population. 10. Education and Public Awareness: Promote public education campaigns to reduce stigma around mental illness and homelessness, encouraging community support and understanding.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

1. School-Based Mental Health Programs: Implement comprehensive mental health programs in schools, starting from elementary through high school. This includes training teachers and staff to recognize early signs of mental health issues and providing on-site counselors and psychologists. 2. Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch state-wide public awareness campaigns to educate the community about the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions. This will help in early identification and de-stigmatize seeking help. 3. Integrating Mental Health into Primary Care: Advocate for the integration of mental health screenings into routine primary care visits, especially for children and adolescents. Early detection during regular health check-ups can lead to timely intervention. 4. Accessible Youth Mental Health Services: Increase funding and support for youth-centric mental health services, including drop-in centers and online resources, which are tailored to be more accessible and appealing to younger individuals. 5. Parental and Caregiver Education: Provide resources and training for parents and caregivers to identify and appropriately respond to mental health issues in children and adolescents. 6. Strengthening Community Mental Health Services: Invest in community mental health services, making them more accessible to young people. This includes expanding services in schools, colleges, and community centers. 7. Collaboration with Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems: Work closely with child welfare and juvenile justice systems to ensure that young people in these systems receive proper mental health evaluations and treatments. 8. Research and Continuous Improvement: Support research in early mental health intervention and continuously adapt our approaches based on the latest findings. 9. Training for Healthcare Professionals: Enhance training for healthcare professionals in early detection and intervention of mental health issues, focusing on the unique needs of younger populations.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

To address Texas' challenges with its high uninsured rate and access to healthcare, especially in underserved areas, I would create a comprehensive plan to involve several key strategies:

1. **Expanding Medicaid:** I will advocate for the expansion of Medicaid in Texas. This is a crucial step to reduce the number of uninsured individuals, as it would provide access to healthcare for many low-income Texans who currently fall into the coverage gap.
2. **State-Funded Insurance Programs:** Develop and implement state-funded health insurance programs for those who do not qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private insurance. This will help to bridge the gap for many working families.
3. **Incentivize Healthcare Providers:** Introduce incentives for healthcare professionals to practice in underserved areas. This could include tax breaks, student loan forgiveness, and competitive grants for setting up practices in rural or low-income urban areas.
4. **Strengthening Telehealth Services:** Expand telehealth services statewide, which is essential for increasing access in remote or rural areas. This would involve investing in the necessary infrastructure and ensuring reimbursement rates for telehealth services are on par with in-person visits.
5. **Promoting Preventive Care and Wellness Programs:** Increase funding for preventive care and wellness programs. Educating the public on preventive care can reduce long-term healthcare costs and improve overall health outcomes.
6. **Streamlining Healthcare Enrollment:** Simplify the process of enrolling in health insurance programs, including Medicaid and CHIP, to ensure that more eligible individuals can access these services with ease.
7. **Collaboration with Federal Government:** Work closely with federal agencies to secure more funding and resources for Texas' healthcare needs. This includes leveraging federal grants and programs aimed at reducing the uninsured rate.
8. **Addressing Social Determinants of Health:** Recognize and address social determinants of health like housing, education, and employment, which significantly impact health outcomes and access to care.
9. **Regular Policy Review and Community Feedback:** Regularly review healthcare policies to ensure they meet the evolving needs of Texans and incorporate feedback from communities to make necessary adjustments.

My commitment is to work tirelessly to ensure that every Texan has access to affordable, quality healthcare, regardless of their income level or where they live. It's not just a healthcare issue; it's a fundamental right for all.

House District 127

John Lehr (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Promoting telehealth options, incentivizing healthcare providers, fostering partnerships with healthcare and educational institutions, increasing funding for mental health programs, and deploying innovative programs like mobile clinics, individuals in rural and underserved areas can have access to mental healthcare regardless of location or economic status.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Raising public awareness, improving adequate coverage parity, enforcing mandatory reporting, providing improved out-of-network coverage, and supporting providers, can help improve mental health care coverage and enable mental health parity under health insurance coverage across the state of Texas.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Creating Crisis Intervention Teams, establishing Mental Health Treatment Courts, increasing funding for mental health services, and decriminalizing non-violent offences committed by individuals with mental illness are crucial approaches that could successfully divert people experiencing a mental health crisis from the criminal justice system.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

By prioritizing initiatives like the Housing First Initiative, providing increased access to mental health care and community-based programs, developing peer mentoring programs, it will ensure that individuals experiencing homelessness and severe mental illness receive the care and support they need.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

As someone who cares deeply about the mental health of individuals, I agree that it is crucial to promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness. I believe that by raising public awareness about mental health, investing in research and education, increasing accessibility to mental health services, and promoting community-based programs, we can create a society that is equipped and knowledgeable to handle and prevent mental health conditions. This kind of approach aims to support individuals, families, and communities to be proactive about identifying possible signs of mental health conditions to make a difference in people's lives.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I am committed to improving access to healthcare and reducing the high uninsured rate in Texas. However, before offering any specific remedial measures, I would like to seek clarity on the following points.

- What factors are responsible for the high uninsured rate in Texas?
- What steps have been taken thus far to mitigate the situation, and what was the outcome?
- What are the key challenges that have impeded access to healthcare in underserved areas?

Once I have a comprehensive understanding of these issues, I will engage with experts and stakeholders to develop tailored and targeted solutions. My goal is to create initiatives that address the root causes of the problem while being fiscally responsible. My commitment is to ensure that every Texan has equitable access to quality healthcare, regardless of their financial status or geography.

House District 128

Chuck Crews (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

Healthy Texans are Happy Texans.

I pledge to support increasing funding for Healthcare in all forms in Texas, including mental health treatment and services.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I support single-payer healthcare reform, which would immediately eliminate disparity between healthcare plans.

Single-payer healthcare reform would also greatly simplify data collection on and analysis of services provided to Texans, to ensure parity of mental healthcare with physical healthcare.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

I live in Baytown. In 2019, Pamela Turner was killed by Baytown police officer Juan Delacruz while suffering from what would be the last in a long string of mishandled mental health episodes, which were caused by mistreated mental illness.

Pamela Turner, like far too many Texans, was killed by law enforcement rather than treated by mental health services.

I support significant expansion of mental health services, in order to greatly minimize mental health crises which all too often are addressed by law enforcement after a crisis has spiraled out of control.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

As another saying goes "The measure of society is how it treats the weakest members."

I support expansion of mental health services, including earmarks to expand programs to secure housing for those suffering from homelessness.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Texas public schools are grossly underfunded, resulting in many deficient school services, including physical and mental healthcare. Texas public school teachers are overloaded because classroom maximum sizes are too high.

Currently, Kindergarten through 4th grade have a maximum class size of 22 students, while the requirement for 5th-12th grade classes is merely an *average* of no more than 20 students per class across the district.

I support increasing state contributions to Texas public schools so that the 22 student maximum may be expanded to cover Kindergarten through 12th grade on a per classroom basis, rather than a district average.

I support incrementally reducing maximum class size with a long-term goal of reducing the maximum class size to 15 students.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I support immediate expansion of Medicaid with a long-term goal of Medicare for All.

House District 129

Doug Peterson (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

Texas has had access to Medicaid expansion since 2012. But it has refused to expand Medicaid, leaving approximately 5.4 billion federal dollars a year behind. It is estimated that by accepting Medicaid expansion, approximately 940,000 -1.2 million low-income Texans could access healthcare. Since Medicaid is the largest payer for mental health services in the United States it would enable counties and cities to significantly increase their mental health treatment and services, help rural clinics and hospitals stay open, and provide the desperately needed mental health and recovery services available. The next challenge will be to ensure that the increased number of providers will be available. All the major universities in Texas have training programs for mental health and recovery care. I will bring together a coalition of university professors to identify how to expand their programs. Addressing provider shortages will require a step-by-step process and will not be solved overnight. However, as I have learned in my experience as a community activist, every problem solved starts with the first step.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

In 1979, Texas had a vast network of mental illness services and substance abuse use treatment facilities/programs. They included, half-way houses, medication management programs, work programs, community transition programs, emergency psychiatric services, and mental health deputies (police who were had specialty training to interact and assist mentally ill patients in the community who were causing disturbances). Yet, those safety nets have been systematically dismantled since the Reagan era and as a result, the number of mental health services and providers, have not kept up with the need. However, in 1982, the Coalition for The Homeless (CFTH) created a network of city/county services to assist the homeless. This effort has grown significantly over the years and created solutions where political will failed to do so. My approach for mental health parity

will be three-sided. I will simultaneously work toward expanding Medicaid, expanding the number of health care professionals capable of providing treatment, and supporting CFTH's access to providers, funding, and services locally, then statewide.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Individuals with mental illness wind up in the justice system because communities have no crisis services and police, who are usually the first to be called to the scene of the disturbance, have little understanding and knowledge of how to intervene in the crisis, in a way that helps, rather than hurts. The strategy for diverting mentally ill from the criminal justice system is to train first responders to recognize mental health or substance abuse crisis, teach them strategies for defusing the crisis, and have hospital-based crisis units who can assess, treat, and release for community follow up. Expanding Medicaid will allow these services to be established. Collaborations with policing agencies will be needed as well as public information on alternatives available when loved-ones or community members are needing emergency assistance.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

TX 129 resides in S. E. Houston, near NASA. It is easy to forget homelessness is a big problem, as we don't see the homeless on every corner. And many in this community see any solution as an invitation for the homeless to congregate. So, the problem must be addressed in two ways. The community needs a better understanding of how mental illness contributes to homelessness and the community needs information that helps erase the stigma attached to mental illness and substance abuse so that they can be addressed compassionately.

But we already have a very successful program in Houston. The Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County (CFTH) has been steadfast and effective in building a network of more than 100 partners in helping homelessness become a rare, brief, and non-recurring event in the lives of the mentally ill. Since 2011, CFTH and its partners have reduced homelessness in Houston and surrounding counties by more than 60%. It is a very effective program.

As a representative for TX129, I will work to help the mentally ill by supporting CFTH and help it grow through Medicaid expansion. Likewise, I will set efforts in motion to expand community understanding of the issue.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Addressing mental illness early and providing care will require a shift in how the public views mental illness and in existing public policy. This will require strategies to address social attitudes that lead to parental, familial, and societal denial.

I believe the place to start is in intermediate schools. If mental illness could be identified in school-age children, and school districts and parents commit to identification and treatment, care and intervention could reduce bullying and support children in growing into productive and joyful lives. And ultimately, adult homelessness and the use of addictive substances would decrease significantly.

Thus, I will pursue legislation that gives school districts funding for either training existing school counselors to identify mental illness and to help parents pursue evaluations from licensed professionals or for hiring school psychologists with expertise in adolescent mental illness. I would also add language to the bill requiring school districts to provide parents with information on adolescent mental illness and contact numbers, if they have concerns.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I will fight to expand Medicaid. With expanded Medicaid, as many as 1.2 million Texans will gain access to healthcare while simultaneously keeping rural hospitals and clinics open. With our current Governor, Lieutenant Governor and legislative body, this will be a challenge as it seems our current Texas lawmakers lack compassion for the healthcare challenges that Texans face. However, as stated above, I have learned as a community activist, that all problems are solved by beginning with the first step, then the next step, until the multitude of steps are completed to solve the problem.

House District 132

Chase West (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Behavioral Health Workforce Workgroup Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2020/behavioral-health-workforce-workgroup-report-dec-2020.pdf>)

I believe that school counselors and nurses should have some type of certification in mental health and I would urge the House and Senate to pass a bill that would create healthcare facilities within 50 miles of every city with over 10,000 inhabitants, like Legacy Community Health, which offers all non-emergency care for patients. They also accept regular insurance, MCD/MCR, and offer a sliding scale based on income. I would also try to pass legislation offering pay incentives, for police officers who take certain Mental Health training classes.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

In most circumstances like this, there is a loophole that allows certain parts not to be followed or managed properly. I would search for those loopholes and ask for an amendment on the floor to address this.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

It would depend on the crime. For instance; if a person is disturbing the peace and has become an issue in a certain area, I believe that is the perfect candidate for mental health rehabilitation rather than jail, but if there is premeditation or violent tendencies, I would suggest that the be placed in a separate ward of the prison for the mentally ill so that the general population is not at risk and the prisoner is not at risk of prejudice. In these mental ward facilities, I would expect there to be a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, and Trustee present at all times.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

I volunteer with an organization that works towards feeding, clothing, and protecting the homeless. In fact, Tuesday morning I have a 4 hour shift from 2am-4pm because we are opening our doors to the homeless so they can stay warm during the freeze we are about to experience. We try to get them all mental health screenings if requested, but it's not always easy. I actually have an easier time getting them help through my Lions Club membership and through my membership to the Katy VFW Auxiliary.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

In this world full of screens, a lot of teens dissociate and/or don't have proper supervision to even recognize a problem. I believe that my concept of having school nurses and counselors with a mental health certification could be very essential in stopping an issue before it goes too far.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I am a strong proponent for Universal Healthcare. I believe that it is a basic human right and will keep pushing against those who oppose it.

House District 137

Gene Wu (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

More money

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

Provide more money for mental health care

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

Stop jailing people for mental health or IDD reasons, implement preventative solutions

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

MONEY!!! & stop criminalizing homelessness

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I added \$50M in grants to deal with this

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

expand ACA

House District 137

Lee Sharp (L)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

The problems in rural and under-served areas go far beyond mental health workers. It includes doctors, nurses, labs... One thing that can help is remove the law requiring proof of need to open medical care centers in rural and unincorporated areas. That can make opening a clinic more attractive.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

We have laws for this. But they are often unenforced. The best help for this may be the bully pulpit in forcing state agencies to do their job or lose funding.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

The sad thing is that jail is by far the most expensive and least effective way to treat mental illness. Giving judges to legal authority to confine some criminals to mental health facilities can save money and lives.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Private community programs are the best answer here. I have been promoting this for a long time now. <https://mlf.org/community-first/> And this works best by removing government restrictions that make projects like this difficult.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

We need to remove the fear of stigma. People fear embarrassment and lose of rights, so avoid care. We need to make sure people actively seeking treatment do not need to fear discovery or loss of rights.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

Insurance has become too expensive and coverage is now almost nothing. It has become economically better for many people to simply self pay. Including myself. One solution is making catastrophic coverage available again. I would buy that.

House District 146

Lauren Ashley Simmons (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I will fight to use Texas' budget surplus to make transformational investments in access to mental health services. Our state must also accept Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. Nearly 1.7 million Texans lost Medicaid insurance when pandemic-era subsidies expired last year. I support efforts to expand our state's behavioral health workforce.

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I support efforts to hold insurance companies accountable to their legal mandate to provide mental health parity. I look forward to working on the recommendations in the strategic plan. I am also committed to addressing how our state has let down the millions of Texans who do not have any health insurance. In my job as a union organizer, I fight every day to help people who must choose between paying for medical treatment or paying the rent.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

My district is in Harris County – and the Harris County Jail is the largest provider of mental health services in the state. That's not the way any thoughtful person would design a mental health service delivery system. I support reforms to minimize the number of people who get trapped in our criminal justice system, including relaxing mandatory minimum sentences, increasing diversion programs, increasing access to mental health services and emphasizing treatment over incarceration.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

Homelessness is another area in which we need to separate people who need mental health treatment from people who are committing serious crimes. I support Houston's Housing First policy, which has worked to reduce homelessness in greater numbers than other major cities. I know Harris County is piloting a program where 911 calls for people experiencing a nonviolent mental health crisis are diverted to mental health professionals instead of police. Another program in the Harris County Sheriff's department includes the use of iPads where mental health professionals can be on the scene virtually and help deputies determine if a person needs treatment vs. arrest and incarceration. I support those programs and will work to put them in place statewide.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

Again, Texas must accept Medicaid expansion, which would dramatically increase the number of Texans with access to treatment. We must also comply with the state's constitutional mandate to fully fund public education – and restore school nurses and mental health counselors to school campuses to promote early intervention.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

There is a theme to my answers, and that is pushing the state to accept Medicaid expansion. That is the single quickest way to insure millions of Texans. Beyond that, in my work as a union organizer, I organize workers to get health care benefits from their employers. Our state should increase the minimum wage to living wage so all Texans can afford health insurance.

House District 150

Marisela “MJ” Jimenez (D)



1. Texas is experiencing a shortage of mental health and recovery care providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. How will you make sure more people have access to mental health treatment and services? (Reference: HHSC Texas Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan Progress Report: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/texas-statewide-behavioral-health-strategic-plan-progress-report-dec-2023.pdf>)

I will immediately partner with local high school students to immerse them in career pathways 2 years prior to graduation and ensure a consistent talent management pool of candidates committed to achieving

2. State and federal law requires mental health parity, or the equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders, compared to physical health conditions, in insurance plans. However, individuals in Texas still often receive unequal coverage for mental health treatment and services. What will you do to improve coverage for mental health care? (Reference: HHSC Texas Mental Health Condition and Substance Use Disorder Parity Strategic Plan: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/laws-regulations/reports-presentations/2021/mhcsud-parity-strategic-plan-august-2021.pdf>)

I will promptly collaborate with school districts to develop immersive learning experiences for students, beginning in their freshman year. Additionally, I will create comprehensive awareness about career opportunities in mental health services, preparing students to pursue diverse career paths with transferable skills and experiences. By cultivating a pool of talented professionals, we can address the shortage in critical mental health careers.

3. At least 30% of individuals in local Texas jails have a severe mental illness, and more than half of justice involved individuals nationwide have at least one mental health condition. What will you do to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system?

I will ensure that trained professionals are readily available to assess the mental health condition of individuals before they enter the Texas jail system. Judges will receive ongoing training in mental health to help them make informed decisions. Once an individual is assessed and identified with a mental health condition, a professional will be assigned to manage their well-being in collaboration with Texas jail personnel. To fund these services, we will collaborate with healthcare organizations, colleges, universities, and non-profits to participate in the solution process and prevent mental health disparities.

4. Almost a quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and mental illness has been identified as the third leading cause of homelessness nationwide. How will you help people with mental illness who are struggling with housing?

It is crucial to identify the root cause of the problem. After conducting a comprehensive analysis and evaluating the results, I will ensure that individuals experiencing mental health issues receive treatment and are provided with a supportive network well before they face the risk of becoming unhoused.

5. Half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 and 75% begin by the age of 24, but these issues often go undetected and untreated until they reach a crisis point. How will you promote earlier intervention for people experiencing mental illness?

I will utilize current data to develop proactive solutions that engage parents, schools, community colleges, and universities in collective action to recognize, intervene, and disrupt patterns of mental health crises. Additionally, I will work to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health and create safe, inclusive spaces—both private and public—where individuals can openly discuss their mental health and receive the necessary support.

6. Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country and has faced serious challenges in ensuring individuals in underserved areas have access to health care. What will you do to improve access to healthcare and reduce our high uninsured rate?

I will collaborate with my colleagues at the local, state, and federal levels to assess the social and economic impacts of individuals without health insurance. Together, we will address the broken healthcare system, insurance monopolies, and incentivize employers' benefits packages to attract a diverse talent pool from often overlooked communities.