The Texas Foster Youth Health Initiative (TFYHI) builds relationships across child welfare and adolescent health systems to promote optimal health for child welfare-involved youth. This report describes our work and progress of this Initiative from July 2020 to July 2021.

**OUR GOAL:**
Youth in foster care feel connected, safe, and empowered and make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships.

**WE:**
Are designed by youth for youth.
Our Young Adult Consultants will be leading the design of our youth engagement strategies that aim to empower, inform, and support youth in care.

Value individuals and their experiences.
Through continuous collaboration and engagement of stakeholders and participants, we are building experiences for youth and their caregivers that inform, support, and strengthen skills.

Recognize no one lives in a bubble.
We take into account that thoughts and behaviors are shaped by relationships and the environment. Addressing the biases and barriers youth face will happen every step of the way.

Are the first statewide learning community of our kind in Texas.
We’re not just delivering a sex ed class to youth or a training for caregivers. We are bringing together child welfare professionals and adolescent health leaders to develop sustainable interventions and improve systems.

Include & support caregivers.
We recognize the critical part adults play in a young person’s life. Our Caregiver Consultants will help us develop tools and resources for adults so they feel comfortable with ongoing conversations about sex and relationships and can support the youth in their care.
We’re collaborating & learning together:

The Texas Innovation Network includes child welfare and adolescent health partners committed to improving health outcomes for youth in foster care. Young adults with lived experience and foster caregivers contribute to intervention design and testing.

Over the past year, our network has grown to include community stakeholder groups in San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and the Rio Grande Valley. Monthly meetings bring together child-placing agencies and residential treatment centers, mentors, health and mental health providers, sexual health educators, and the Texas Department of Child and Protective Services to identify community needs and provide guidance and feedback on intervention development. Through Community Stakeholder Groups and other outreach, we have engaged 126 members who ensure our interventions are relevant and create sustained and systemic impact.

Our Texas Innovation Network is growing:

TFYHI network partners participate in shared learning and innovative collaboration. Partners across the state joined a series of 13 trainings from January to June 2021, covering topics including: Trauma-informed and inclusive sexuality education; Child welfare policy; Experiences of youth in care; and Interventions such as Brave Conversations and Power Through Choices. Both network members and external experts led trainings, allowing partners to learn together and from each other’s existing expertise. Collectively, trainings laid the groundwork for collaborative intervention development.

We’re designing innovative interventions:

Our innovative trainings and workshops for youth, caregivers, and professionals bring an empowering and trauma-informed approach to sexuality and relationship education. TFYHI teams across the state have collected input from caregivers, youth, and community stakeholders and crafted an interactive and engaging curriculum to meet the specific needs of those caring for kids in foster care. In Brave Conversations, a 4-hour training, caring adults practice age-appropriate and inclusive strategies for leading conversations about sexual and reproductive health and relationships. Participants explore the ins and outs of sex, gender, and sexuality and identify resources to share with youth. Our teams throughout the state are now piloting and testing the training for foster caregivers. Feedback from training participants will be used to further refine and improve the curriculum. You can request an in-person or virtual Brave Conversations training today.
We’re incorporating lived experience from consultants:

Our work to help youth in foster care make safe, healthy choices starts with better understanding their needs. Every step of the way, we’re asking young adults and caregivers with lived experience to give feedback that guides our intervention design.

Starting in January 2021, we engaged eight young adults (ages 18-25) from across Texas with lived experience in foster care. Our Young Adult Consultants met monthly and guided intervention design and communications development for the initiative in several ways. They identified challenges faced by youth in care, developed content and delivery strategies, and gave input and feedback on curriculum outlines and other written content for both youth and caregivers. Young Adult Consultants also worked in pairs to create role-plays of successful and unsuccessful conversations about sexual health. These role-plays will be incorporated in trainings and resources for caregivers and professionals, and provide a first-hand look at what young people want and need from supportive adults. In addition, one of our Young Adult Consultants represented TFYHI on the UT RGV Community Connections podcast, helping spread the word about our work and the needs of youth in care.

We engaged nine foster and adoptive parents from across Texas to serve as Caregiver Consultants. Over the past six months, Caregiver Consultants identified needs and challenges for caregivers and youth in care, brainstormed strategies to reach and support caregivers, and provided feedback on Brave Conversations pilot sessions. Our Caregiver Consultants input has shaped the content and strategies we are developing to support both youth and caregivers. Over the summer, one Caregiver Consultant collaborated with TFYHI staff to create a conference presentation for the Family Focused Treatment Association conference, in which we shared lessons from the first year of the initiative with foster parents and professionals from across the country.

We’re inviting child-placing agencies to join our network:

As we enter a new phase of our initiative, we’re recruiting child-placing agencies to provide targeted guidance on the development and testing of our interventions. Our newly released Request for Proposals seeks four child-placing agencies representing each of our participating communities as new partners. Once agencies are selected, we’ll work intensively with our new partners to understand organizational policies and test whether coordinated implementation of our interventions improves health outcomes for youth.
Our next steps:

Ensure continuous improvement through Brave Conversations testing.
Provide expert advice to youth in foster care through the OkaySo app.
Collaborate with UN|HUSHED to bring the critical lessons in our sexuality education handbook to a wider audience through in-person trainings.
Help teens in care make informed decisions about their sexual health with Power Through Choices trainings.

If you have any questions about TFYHI, please contact TFYHI Project Manager, Sharon Hoefer at sharon.hoefer@austin.utexas.edu.

TFYHI BY THE NUMBERS

From July 2020 - July 2021:

5 organizations formed The Texas Innovation Network.

20 professionals participated in 57.5 hours of training.

126 stakeholders were engaged throughout the state.