

October 2, 2024

Attn: Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS); Texas Legislative Budget Board (LBB)

**2026-2027 Legislative Appropriations Request Recommendations
for the Texas Department of State Health Services
October 2, 2024**

On behalf of the **Texas Women's Healthcare Coalition (TWHC)**, thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of State Health Services' Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) for the 89th Session.

TWHC is a group of 77 healthcare, faith, and community-based member organizations - dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Texas women, babies, and families by ensuring access to preventive healthcare for all Texas women. Access to preventive and preconception care – including health screenings and contraception – means healthy, planned pregnancies and the early detection of cancers and other treatable conditions.

Texas is currently facing significant challenges with maternal health and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention and treatment. The state has experienced higher-than-average rates of maternal mortality and pregnancy-related health complications. Additionally, many areas in Texas lack sufficient access to maternal healthcare providers, and the cost of healthcare is increasing.^{1,2} At the same time, Texas is experiencing a rapid surge in syphilis cases, with treatments and prevention systems in short supply.³ TWHC works tirelessly to combat these epidemics through advocacy and education. In alignment with these priorities, we respectfully ask you to consider the following for DSHS' LAR:

1. Improve maternal health and safety at Texas hospitals by strengthening and increasing funds for the TexasAIM Program.

The TexasAIM Program is a collaborative project run by the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM). It provides Texas birthing hospitals with technical assistance and learning opportunities to prevent common maternal health complications. TexasAIM assists hospitals in implementing sets of medical best practices, called "Patient Safety Bundles", that address specific conditions in pregnant and postpartum people. As of 2024, TexasAIM has

¹ 2023 March of Dimes Report Card for Texas, March of Dimes, 2023, www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/texas/report-card.

² Where You Live Matters: Maternity Care in Texas, March of Dimes, 2023, www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/texas/maternity-care-deserts.

³ Harper, Karen Brooks. "An Epidemic': Syphilis Rages through Texas, Causing Newborn Cases to Climb amid Treatment Shortage." The Texas Tribune, The Texas Tribune, 13 Sept. 2023, www.texastribune.org/2023/09/13/texas-syphilis-newborns-treatment/.

implemented the Obstetric Hemorrhage (OBH) Bundle, and the Severe Hypertension in Pregnancy (HTN) Bundle - and is working on the Obstetric Care for Women with Opioid Use Disorder (OSUD) Bundle.⁴

TWHC strongly recommends that additional funding be allocated to the Maternal And Child Health strategy, for TexasAIM support, implementation and ongoing evaluation. TWHC also recommends that not all components of Budget Rider #21 be eliminated. While some pieces may have been accomplished, implementing maternal and child health initiatives, especially successful ones, is not something that should have an expiration date.

The program has made significant progress in combating the challenges of maternal healthcare complications and mortality statewide. 91% of all hospitals offering childbirth services in Texas are enrolled in TexasAIM. And within these AIM-enrolled hospitals, severe maternal mortality rates have decreased. Among obstetric hemorrhage cases in these hospitals specifically, the severe maternal mortality rate has decreased by 8.6%.⁵

2. TWHC strongly encourages the adoption of DSHS' "Congenital Syphilis" and "Regional and Local Public Health Service" exceptional items #4 and #5

Texas is experiencing an alarming surge in syphilis rates among infants and adult women. In 2020, Texas reported 21,476 cases of syphilis - twice the number of cases reported in 2018. Yet this rate increased again by 22% in 2022, with 25,991 reported cases of syphilis statewide. The data for cases of congenital syphilis specifically is even more serious. In 2021, Texas reported 685 cases of congenital syphilis among newborns - and this rate increased another 39% to at least 950 cases in 2022.⁶

Congenital syphilis can cause serious health problems for a baby - including miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, or birth defects. It is preventable and treatable with penicillin, when caught early enough.⁷ However infants in Texas should not be dying or experiencing suffering due to this preventable, curable illness.

This would support and bolster cross-agency efforts to address screening, diagnosis, and treatment of syphilis for pregnant women and babies across Texas, saving lives.

⁴ TexasAIM, Texas Department of State Health Services, www.dshs.texas.gov/maternal-child-health/programs-activities-maternal-child-health/texasaim.

⁵ Maternal Health and Safety Initiatives Biennial Report 2022, Texas Department of State Health Services, Dec. 2022.

⁶ Harper, Karen Brooks. "An Epidemic': Syphilis Rages through Texas, Causing Newborn Cases to Climb amid Treatment Shortage." The Texas Tribune, The Texas Tribune, 13 Sept. 2023, www.texastribune.org/2023/09/13/texas-syphilis-newborns-treatment/.

⁷ "Congenital Syphilis." Congenital Syphilis | Texas DSHS, www.dshs.texas.gov/congenital-syphilis. Accessed 1 Oct. 2024.

3. Restore funding to Human Papillomavirus (HPV) prevention efforts by ensuring sufficient funds are available in the Adult Safety Net program.

Unfortunately, the Adult Safety Net (ASN) program's access to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine was discontinued in 2023 due to funding constraints. TWHC recognizes the challenges this has placed on DSHS staff, and **we strongly encourage that sufficient funding for HPV prevention efforts be restored to ensure continued access to the vaccine.**

Preventing the spread of HPV across Texas, particularly for young women, is incredibly important as it also helps prevent the spread of cancer. HPV is thought to be responsible for more than 90% of anal and cervical cancers, about 70% of vaginal and vulvar cancers, and 60% of penile cancers.⁸ This is alarming, as data shows that about 3,650 new cases of HPV-associated cancers occur in Texas each year (2,120 in women and 1,530 in men), and 459 Texas women are expected to die from cervical cancer in 2024.^{9,10}

By restoring support to HPV prevention efforts for as many programs as possible, including the ASN, lives can be protected and saved across the state.

Thank you again to DSHS and LBB staff for their strong partnership and support. We appreciate your time and attention on these matters and are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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Evelyn Delgado
Chair
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⁸ "Basic Information about HPV and Cancer." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/cancer/hpv/basic-information.html#:~:text=About%2010%25%20of%20women%20with,cause%20cell%20changes%20called%20precancers. Accessed 1 Oct. 2024.

⁹ HPV-Associated Cancers in Texas, Texas Department of State Health Services, [www.dshs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/tcr/data/modifiable/HPV Associated Cancers Data Brief 2023.pdf](https://www.dshs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/tcr/data/modifiable/HPV%20Associated%20Cancers%20Data%20Brief%202023.pdf). Accessed 1 Oct. 2024.

¹⁰ Cervical Cancer in Texas, Texas Department of State Health Services, Aug. 2024, www.dshs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/tcr/data/screening/Cervical-Cancer-in-Texas.pdf.