



2019

SAYC Policy Recommendations on Education, Gun Violence, Teen Mental Health and Transportation

San Antonio Youth Commission
DHS, COSA
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A Letter from the Commission Chair:

Twenty eight years ago, the City of San Antonio came together to create an outlet for youth to voice their concerns and engage young people from across the city. This outlet was called the San Antonio Youth Commission (SAYC). Since its creation, SAYC has been through many transformations, but the mission to serve youth remains at its core.

San Antonio is an exciting city to live in as a young person with a vibrant art and culture scene, beautiful park systems, and a strong commitment to growth and development. However, our city is not without fault.

We recognize that a young person on the Southside of San Antonio will not have access to the same social capital and education as a young person on the Northside. We recognize that there is limited access to alternate transit, which leads to dangerous pedestrian and bike mobility. We recognize that the resources dedicated to mental health and safety for youth and their families can be improved and expanded upon. But most importantly, we recognize that, as young people of San Antonio, we have a unique and critical role when it comes to addressing these issues. This is what drives the Youth Commission.

As Youth Commission members, we have the privilege of representing City Council, but also the youth of our area. We are 22 youth in total, with two representatives for each council member and two for the Mayor. For the 2018-2019 term, we set goals to host the first annual youth summit, which we accomplished in 2018, and create a youth- informed public policy agenda, which is to follow this letter. We have been working very hard to bring this to you because we recognize that perfection isn't attainable, but progress is, and the input from San Antonio youth is vital to that progress.

So on behalf of the 2018-19 San Antonio Youth Commission, it is my honor to present to you our policy priorities. We extend our gratitude to Mayor Ron Nirenberg and all members of San Antonio City Council for your dedication towards improving the life of youth and their families. We would also like to thank those at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), UP Partnership (formally P16 Plus), and the City of San Antonio for your guidance throughout this process. And of course, thank you to the youth of San Antonio who continually inspire us and prove that the future of our city is bright.

It has been my greatest honor to serve as your Mayoral Representative and Chair of the San Antonio Youth Commission.

Respectfully,

Audrey M. Herrera

San Antonio Youth Commission

106 S. St. Mary's Street, 7th Floor

San Antonio, TX 78205

210-207-8221

San Antonio Youth Commission Members

Audrey M. Herrera, Chair
Mayoral Representative

Jorge Ramirez
Council District 6

Roberto Rodriguez, Secretary
District 8 Representative

Regina Torres
Council District 6

Alejandro Gomez
Council District 1

Savannah Gonzalez
Council District 7

Devyn Moore
Council District 1

Liliana Orozco
Council District 7

Zion Minor
Council District 2

Sophia Littwitz
Council District 8

Elizabeth De La Rosa
Council District 3

Maya Mackey
Council District 10

Victoria Davis
Council District 3

Danniella Ongmanchi
Council District 10

Melivia Mujica
Council District 4

Tatum Spriester
Mayoral Appointee

Jada Rodgers
Council District 4

Staff

Genesis Ruiz
Council District 5

Rebecca Flores, SA2020 Commission
Liason

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Introduction

In preparation for the May 2018 Youth Summit, the San Antonio Youth Commission (SAYC) surveyed young people all over the city to determine what topics they were most concerned with. Online and in-person surveys of over 100 area high school students yielded the following focus points: Gun Violence, Teen Health and Inequity in Education. After presenting to council in the summer of 2018, the commission decided to research and discuss these focuses, as well as other topics over the course of the year. Commission members invited youth who were not members of SAYC to address the commission about topics and challenges they consider and face daily. With the help of student researchers from the University of Texas at San Antonio, a study was conducted to identify four subjects of importance to San Antonio youth. Those subjects are Education, Gun Violence, Teen Mental Health and Transportation. This policy paper seeks to outline the issues surrounding the subjects, their relevance in the San Antonio community, and present recommendations that will begin to address identified issues.

Education

Overview

San Antonio houses 19 separate independent school districts within its Metropolitan Area. Although each district hosts a different community, one problem is seen in all districts: students feel that they are underrepresented in their schools and communities. Students are not consulted on policy decisions by school administrators and school boards. Due to this, many students feel like their voices do not matter, resulting in a lack of participation within policy and issue discussions within their communities. For example, School board meetings are not readily accessible for students to attend. When students are allowed to attend these meetings, they may only participate as an audience member and can only comment on the policy-making without fully participating in it. The commission feels that youth should have the ability to participate in discussions on policy and issues within the school that will directly affect them. Once they are brought to the table on these discussions, community involvement will ultimately increase.

The commission also recognizes an inequity in education that runs contrary to San Antonio's guiding principles and values of equity within the city. San Antonio has more independent school districts than most cities of its size, and there are vast disparities in per pupil spending, facilities and access to resources. Schools reflect the wealth or poverty of the communities around them based on property values. Teachers vary broadly across schools and districts, but most importantly access to robotics and technology curriculum isn't equal. Every San Antonio high school student deserves and should have access to a 21st century education. The commission believes that if the inequity continues to exist within San Antonio school districts, students will have opportunity disparities that will impact their lives as they continue to grow.

Recommendations for the City of San Antonio:

- Continue to support policy advocacy and leadership development as central components of the San Antonio Youth Commission.
- The Mayor and Council members should host Town Hall meetings in schools in their council districts during school hours and collaborate with students and teachers on solutions to issues identified by students.
- Create a Youth Summer Institute or Youth Summit to develop students into civic leaders through connection with policy experts, advocates and elected officials.
- Create a “Mayor’s Challenge on Voter Registration” in which local high schools would compete to have the highest percentage of their senior class registered to vote.
- Explore the possibility of per pupil spending across school districts.

Next Steps

Improving education overall within the city can and must be the goal. The commission encourages city council to make education a policy priority and move toward equity within education across the city. Currently, City-wide goals to improve outcomes within the field of education have not been met. According to the SA2020.org report on education, the only initiative that was accomplished was an increase in high school graduation rates. Even the 85% high school graduation rate San Antonio maintains varies from school district to school district. Mayor and council need to address this issue. An investment in education for San Antonio students is an investment in our future as a city.

Gun Violence

Overview

Gun violence is a complex and urgent issue, and requires multifaceted solutions. SAYC is aware the commission cannot single-handedly solve the ongoing issue of gun violence for the nation. However the commission’s focus is to voice the opinions of the youth of San Antonio and discuss ideas on how to become involved with gun control policies and procedures in their schools and communities. This can be accomplished by involving young people in local efforts to prevent gun violence.

According to the nonprofit organization, Texas Gun Sense:

- 3,513 gun-related deaths in TX in 2017.
- 352 of those were children and teenagers under 19 years old. (CDC WISQARS Database).
- 609 Texas children are killed or injured by guns each year.
- The FBI reports that Texas leads the nation in the number of firearms lost or stolen each year, with 18,000 reported in 2012 alone.

There have been four people killed and another 17 injured this year in and around high schools and universities across the country¹.

In May of 2018, Governor Greg Abbott developed and released an action plan for school and firearm safety. In it his recommendations including making schools safer by increasing the law enforcement presence in schools, providing active shooter and emergency response training, prioritizing increased federal spending toward immediate school safety improvements and strengthening existing campus security programs.

San Antonio Gun Control Policies

Cities in Texas have limited authority to pass gun control measures; however, the City of San Antonio's Public Safety Committee is considering changes to the Unified Development Code that would change the zoning designation for gun dealers. They are currently categorized under "sporting goods". This change would allow for a notification process for neighbors when a gun dealer seeks to open a business in their neighborhood. The city is also considering 1,000 foot gun free zones around schools.

Recommendations for the City of San Antonio:

1. Convene stakeholders in a community conversation about gun violence prevention and school safety.
2. Consider and support task force recommendations regarding changes to the Unified Development Code regarding gun sales, including measures such as creating buffer zones around schools.
3. Support and expand existing SAPD and Metro Health programs to prevent gun violence.

¹ "Here's the List of School Shootings So Far in 2019" by Julie Bosman, The New York Times.

Next Steps

Safety within San Antonio's schools and neighborhoods from gun violence is essential to our lives and well-being. Making our city safer to live, work and play must be of the utmost priority for city government and every resident. The commission strongly urges city council to avoid politicizing the issue of gun violence and seek to pass laws and find resolutions that will protect our city and preserve the peace and security every human being needs to thrive.

Teen Mental Health

Overview

The growing epidemic of mental health issues among youth is a critical issue and a primary concern not only of the San Antonio Youth Commission, but also of youth in the community. One in five youth between the ages of 13 and 18 suffer from a severe mental disorder at some point in their life, yet only half of youth aged 8 to 15 receive treatment. Despite widespread concern over the status of youth mental health, the issue remains stigmatized and many young people are barred access to the resources and the help that they need. Little to no mental health programs are implemented in San Antonio schools and school counselors are not being utilized to their full potential to benefit students. Poverty and ignorance of existing resources are also barriers to accessing proper mental health care.

Analysis and Findings

In 2017, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, depression symptoms among high school students in Texas, grades 9-12:

- 34% of teens have reported they felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some usual activities.
- 18% of high school students reported they seriously considered attempting suicide.
- 12% of high school students reported they attempted suicide 1 or more times.
- 5% of high school students who report they attempted suicide resulting in an injury, poisoning, or overdose that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “The percentage of young adults aged 18-25 years with [any mental illness] who received mental health services (38.4%) was lower than adults with [any mental illness] aged 26-49 years (43.3%) and aged 50 and older (44.2%)” (2017)

In addition, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness:

- “Approximately 1 in 5 youth aged 13–18 (21.4%) experiences a severe mental disorder at some point during their life. For children aged 8–15, the estimate is 13%.” (2015)

- “Over one-third (37%) of students with a mental health condition aged 14–21 and older who are served by special education drop out—the highest dropout rate of any disability group.” (2014)
- “Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., and the 2nd leading cause of death for people aged 10–34.” (2018)
- “Just over half (50.6%) of children with a mental health condition aged 8-15 received mental health services in [2014].” (2015)

Local Districts

After researching three different school districts in San Antonio it was discovered that there are major differences between their respective schools. When looking into Edgewood ISD it was found that the only resource listed was Communities in Schools (CIS) of San Antonio, which is only offered to high school students. The small groups help students cope with their feelings so they aren't distracted when learning. In research with the SAISD schools the research staff found no resources within the schools. District/school websites only provided external resources that may not be covered by Medicaid or CHIP insurance. Depending on what school a student goes to, the school's website will provide local resources available. Students do not receive sufficient information about mental health resources from their schools that would empower them to ask for help, even considering the substantial differences between how different school districts handle mental health. In contrast Northside ISD offers direct and indirect services to students, families, and staff of all ages. NISD nursing services must help to improve the physical and mental health of each student in accordance with his/her own personal needs. Students complete small group counseling that includes self-esteem, anger management, grief, military deployment, and incarcerated parents. The sessions are 30-45 minutes each and last 6-8 weeks.

Communities in Schools of San Antonio (CISSA)

The mission of CISSA is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school as a route to success later in life. They offer a variety of support services; the Subcommittee would like to bring special attention to the behavioral interventions and counseling offered. Serving 11 school districts encompassing 83 Campuses, CISSA operates in Bexar, Atascosa and Frio Counties, offering case management for over 8,000 students.

Other Texas Cities

Austin

School Mental Health Centers (SMHCs) operate at 41 campuses in Austin Independent School District. Each campus is staffed by full time licensed clinical therapists. SMHC therapists work collaboratively with other school-based programs. Students can be referred for SMHC services

through the child study team, by a parent/guardian, or by a community referral, and no family will be turned away due to the inability to pay.

Houston

Resources offered in Houston include counseling, student support, and crisis intervention, and the city provides districtwide trainings including topics such as suicide prevention, early warning signs of mental health issues, and risky behaviors. The Crisis Intervention Department is staffed by a manager, licensed doctoral psychologists, and post-doctoral fellows in psychology.

Dallas

Dallas ISD provides mental health services through its Youth and Family Centers (YFC), located inside 11 different middle and high schools. The staff of Youth and Family Centers include licensed psychologists, therapists, and psychiatrists who provide psychiatric consultation as well as group, individual and family counseling. Students can be referred by a student support team, by a campus liaison, by Parkland Physical Health Services, or if a family member contacts their neighborhood center directly.

Recommendations for the City of San Antonio:

1. Provide parent education on local mental health resources through city administered programs as well as distributing city-endorsed informational materials and parent action plans.
2. Councilmembers should cooperate with the San Antonio Youth Commission to spearhead public awareness efforts to destigmatize mental health services and empower city youth to access existing local resources for mental health.
3. Increase investment in programs such as Communities in Schools that provide case management to at-risk students in school.
4. The councilmember for each respective city district ought to assist the San Antonio Youth Commission Mental Health Subcommittee in implementing a monthly rotating mental health night, occurring in a different district each month.
5. Expand the San Antonio Police Mental Health Unit in terms of number of officers, funding, or awareness according to their needs in order to be able to reach more people struggling with self-harm, suicide, etc. and provide them with adequate treatment.

Next Steps

These recommendations aim to target mental health at both a city and a school district level using a variety of policy and community based solutions. We encourage collaboration with local non-profit organizations that have existing programs that assist with mental health. We are also in support of more community outreach through the City of San Antonio and San Antonio school

districts. The San Antonio City Council can forge a stronger connection between the city's youth and San Antonio school districts on this critical issue by bringing the student/counselor ratio within the range that is recommended by the American School Counselor Association. A full list of the sub-committee's recommendations are included in this paper, and it is the fervent hope of all members of the Commission that the City Council takes into account these recommendations when forging solutions to pressing city issues.

The San Antonio Youth Commission Subcommittee for Mental Health will continue in its unequivocal commitment to illuminating the issue of youth mental health in San Antonio through its work with the San Antonio City Council as well as San Antonio school districts. It is our hope that the City Council assists the Subcommittee in taking next steps by committing to raising awareness of mental health, spearheading efforts to increase the public's knowledge of mental health resources and investing in programs that are making strides on this issue. We entreat individual Councilmembers to assist the San Antonio Youth Commission in implementing a rotating mental health night, and we request further sponsorship of the SAPD Mental Health Task Force. Mental health is an issue that will continue to grow and evolve as progress is made and new developments arise; the question is how San Antonio will further its role as a pioneer of mental healthcare and represent the voice of its youth on this important and surmountable challenge.

Transportation

Overview

More than a million new residents are expected to reside in San Antonio by 2040. Approximately 100 people are added each day to San Antonio's population, along with their vehicle. However, building more roads does not mean less traffic. The city has to look toward smart initiatives, adaptive traffic signals that provide pedestrian protection, and respond to real time traffic. The city has to consider options such as MOD service, universal payment, electric vehicle charging stations, real time parking info, and last mile options with rideshare in order to improve traffic flow. However, construction gets more and more expensive with some estimates putting the potential cost at an additional \$1.4 billion to the city's budget.

Walking and bike infrastructure have key implications in managing traffic and air quality, especially as we face so much growth. However, according to an article from the Rivard Report, San Antonio is becoming more dangerous for pedestrians. In 2017 the city was 28th on a list of 104 worst metro areas. When it's not safe to walk it causes major health implications for pedestrians. There are also economic, environmental and social benefits to walking that San Antonio can't take advantage of. There are less than 4 miles of complete streets in San Antonio. "Complete streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including

pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities, make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work.” (Smart Growth America).

Recommendations for the City of San Antonio:

The commission supports ConnectSA’s recommendations for improving San Antonio’s roadways, accommodations for pedestrians and expansion of public transportation in order to keep up with the growth the city is and will continue to experience. These include:

- Construct up to 40 miles of dedicated, protected micromobility lanes with right-of-way for bike/scooter/other modes
- Create new sidewalks networks throughout the community
- Construct up to 200 miles of sidewalks that eliminate gaps between existing networks
- Construct high-priority segments of the City of San Antonio’s major thoroughfare plan
- Extend roadway network in unincorporated areas of Bexar County from the County Arterial Plan
- Install pedestrian detection systems at key intersections
- Construct multimodal mobility hubs to integrate trip modes and destinations
- Create seamless first/last-mile services for easy multimodal trips

Next Steps

The city of San Antonio is growing, but how it grows to accommodate more than 1 million new residents by 2040 can be a conscientious effort which serves to ease the city’s growing pains. Rather than complaining about the traffic, we can be celebrated for finding effective ways to decrease it even as more people are added to our ranks as residents.