

Lege, expand access to health care for children

By Stacy E. Wilson

As the Texas Legislature begins its 88th session, the Children's Hospital Association of Texas, or CHAT, is focused on ensuring that health care for children is a top priority.

Lawmakers can protect the future of our state by ensuring Medicaid payments are appropriate for children's hospitals and by investing in mental health care for children and adolescents. Children in Texas deserve to grow up as healthy as possible, and CHAT urges the Legislature to support children's hospitals.

Nearly half of the 8 million children living in Texas are enrolled in Medicaid. Significantly more than half, and for some hospitals as many as 80 percent, of the days that children spend in a children's hospital are covered by Medicaid. Unlike hospitals that treat adults, children's hospitals do not receive significant Medicare payments and therefore have fewer payers to help cover

the cost of caring for children and adolescents.

When your child needs medical services, a free-standing children's hospital — one that focuses solely on children from its leadership through its own independent medical staff — provides the highest quality of care. Children's hospitals treat the most severe conditions and provide the most complex medical care.

Due to the number of children enrolled in Medicaid, children's hospitals need stability and predictability in their Medicaid reimbursement rates to ensure they can continue to provide this complex care.

Another complex condition we must address is mental health. Children's mental health has reached a crisis point in the United States. Legislative investment in children's hospitals to expand their capacity to provide additional access to these services in the near term is imperative.

The state has spent millions of dollars on community-based services; however, the picture is incomplete, as higher levels of care remain scarce. Texas has fewer than 1,500 staffed pediatric inpatient beds for children. With almost 8 million children in Texas, the math doesn't add up.

Additionally, there are not enough services to help a child transition from lower to higher levels of care and vice versa. Today, when a child's anxiety or depression becomes debilitating, parents have few options for help other than an emergency room. Access to different levels of care such as partial hospitalization and intensive outpatient services would give families more options at a lower cost.

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To create this capacity more quickly, children's hospitals need one-time funding from the Legislature. This funding will help alleviate the most urgent needs for mental health care in our state and build on the mental health accomplishments from prior sessions.

While Texas has a statewide behavioral health strategic plan, it mentions children only in passing. The state needs two things to create a long-term strategy to address children's mental health: a statewide pediatric behavioral health strategic plan, and a needs assessment to determine what resources are required and where they should

be located. The Legislature has the opportunity to direct the creation of such a plan and needs assessment.

Protecting children's hospitals ensures every child in Texas has access to physical and mental health care when they need it.

Stacy E. Wilson is president of the Children's Hospital Association of Texas.