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To: Texas Health and Human Services Commission
Dee Budgewater, Executive Commissioner for Health, Developmental, and Independence Services
Megan Bermea, Senior Advisor for HHSC HDIS
From: TexProtects
Date: July 23, 2020
Subject: Comments on the Postpartum Depression Strategic Plan Draft

TexProtects, the Texas Chapter for Prevent Child Abuse America, is dedicated to ensuring that all children are safe, nurtured, and resilient. A child's early development is dependent upon healthy attachment and responsive relationships with nurturing caregivers. As such, a healthy mom is key to healthy and safe children.

With 1 in 7 Texas mothers facing mental health challenges, it is clear that there is more we can do. Early screening and access to peer support and interventions can ensure that more families start with a strong foundation. We know that what happens in those critical early years, last a lifetime.

We applaud your work in drafting this strategic plan in a way that addresses screening, referral, treatment, and public awareness across many of the entry points where pregnant and new moms may be accessing services. We are specifically glad to see the coverage of mental health care and counseling as part of the postpartum package in Healthy Texas Women Plus as well as the incorporation of group pregnancy supports like Centering Pregnancy, better screening and referrals through the TexasAIM initiative, and better training for providers.

However, there are a number of items that have been excluded that would offer significant and feasible opportunities to increase impact in the stated goals of this strategic plan. They include the following:

1. Texas should continue strong investments in programs overseen by DFPS' Prevention and Early Intervention Division – such as Texas Home Visiting, Project HOPES, Project HIP, and Texas Nurse Family Partnership – to reach more families. These voluntary programs are proven to improve maternal and infant health, strengthen referrals and connections, and promote positive parenting.

The evidence-based home visiting models funded by those initiatives incorporate postpartum depression screenings, referral, education, and peer support into their work. However, they currently reach only a fraction of the families who could likely benefit. In order for this plan to be comprehensive and effective, it must include strategies across all the agencies that engage with young families. **The HB 253 Plan should include specific, measurable ways HHSC will work with DFPS to extend PEI programs to reach more families.**

2. Texas should increase investments in Texas Family Connects, a short-term evidence-based nurse home visit program that links nurses with moms with newborns. To encourage scale-up into more Texas regions, Texas should explore additional financing strategies, including Medicaid coverage for maternal mental health screenings, case management, and nurse visits delivered through Family Connects.

Family Connects is a short-term, voluntary nurse home visit program that starts at the hospital when a mom delivers her baby. Family Connects is available to all new mothers who deliver at the hospital participating in the program (not just women enrolled in Medicaid). During a home visit three weeks after the baby is born, a registered nurse works with a family to identify their individual needs. Through screenings, home visits, and referrals to community resources, Family Connects' goal is to identify what a family needs (such as child care, tips on safe sleep, or mental health resources) and then provide parent education or referrals to local resources.

This touchpoint with new moms and families is a significant opportunity for early detection of maternal mental health challenges and for successful referrals to mental health care or other support. Randomized controlled trials of Family Connects have shown that mothers were 30 percent less likely to experience postpartum clinical anxiety; mothers were more likely to complete their 6-week postpartum health check; community connections were increased by 15 percent; and emergency room visits and hospital overnight stays for infants were reduced by 50% in the first year of life.

Family Connects is operating in five Texas counties (Bastrop, Travis, Bexar, Tarrant, Victoria counties). Some are funded through private grants and some are partially funded through state DFPS Texas Home Visiting (THV) funding and Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support (HOPES) funding. Continued state investment in Texas DFPS' Project HOPES will help encourage scale-up of Family Connects in more Texas regions.

3. Texas should expand Help Me Grow, a referral line and centralized access point that helps parents with young kids get connected to community-based resources. DSHS Title V has recently become statewide hub for Help Me Grow, a national model that works to create a “Centralized Access Point” for *parents with young children*.

While Help Me Grow is not specific to maternal mental health, it is focused on new parents with infants and toddlers – many of whom could be facing maternal mental health challenges. Help Me Grow's Centralized Access Point and referral system can help new mothers find local resources, including home visiting or mental health providers.

Help Me Grow has initially rolled out in North Texas (housed at MHMR Tarrant County) with support from Help Me Grow National office. Texas DSHS Title V has agreed to be the statewide hub for Help Me Grow moving forward, with plans to potentially expand Help Me Grow into 6 additional communities.

Included in this work is strategic integration with statewide 2-1-1 so that families have both an effective “front door” when looking to access services and a warm handoff to regional hubs where parent navigation can ensure families get access to the right program and supports at the right time. By incorporating thoughtful screening questions and intake procedures, families are made aware of the resources urgently needed as well as additional community programs that may become needed at a later time.

Together, these three tools offer connection to resources, screenings, and referrals at critical moments and across diverse touchpoints for families. Their inclusion in the plan will increase its effectiveness and integrate strategies that can offer additional stakeholders, providers, and funding streams to expand access and improve the health of young families in Texas.

Thank you for your consideration. If we can be of assistance in your work or you have questions about these strategies, please don't hesitate to reach out. We look forward to working with you.

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