



Addressing the Complex Needs of Youth: A Call to Action

March 19, 2025

Addressing the Complex Needs of Youth

Goals of the Survey

- ❖ Understanding the Scope of Complex Needs
- ❖ Highlighting Key Barriers
- ❖ Sharing Innovations and Best Practices
- ❖ Informing Policy Advocacy and Systems Change
- ❖ Strengthening Cross-System Collaboration



Key Topics Explored

- ◆ **Definitions of complex or high-acuity needs**
- ◆ **Population demographics and specific challenges**
- ◆ **Service delivery issues and placement difficulties**
- ◆ **Staffing and financial constraints**
- ◆ **Innovations and solutions currently in use**
- ◆ **Cross-system collaboration efforts**
- ◆ **Barriers to expanding capacity and improving services**

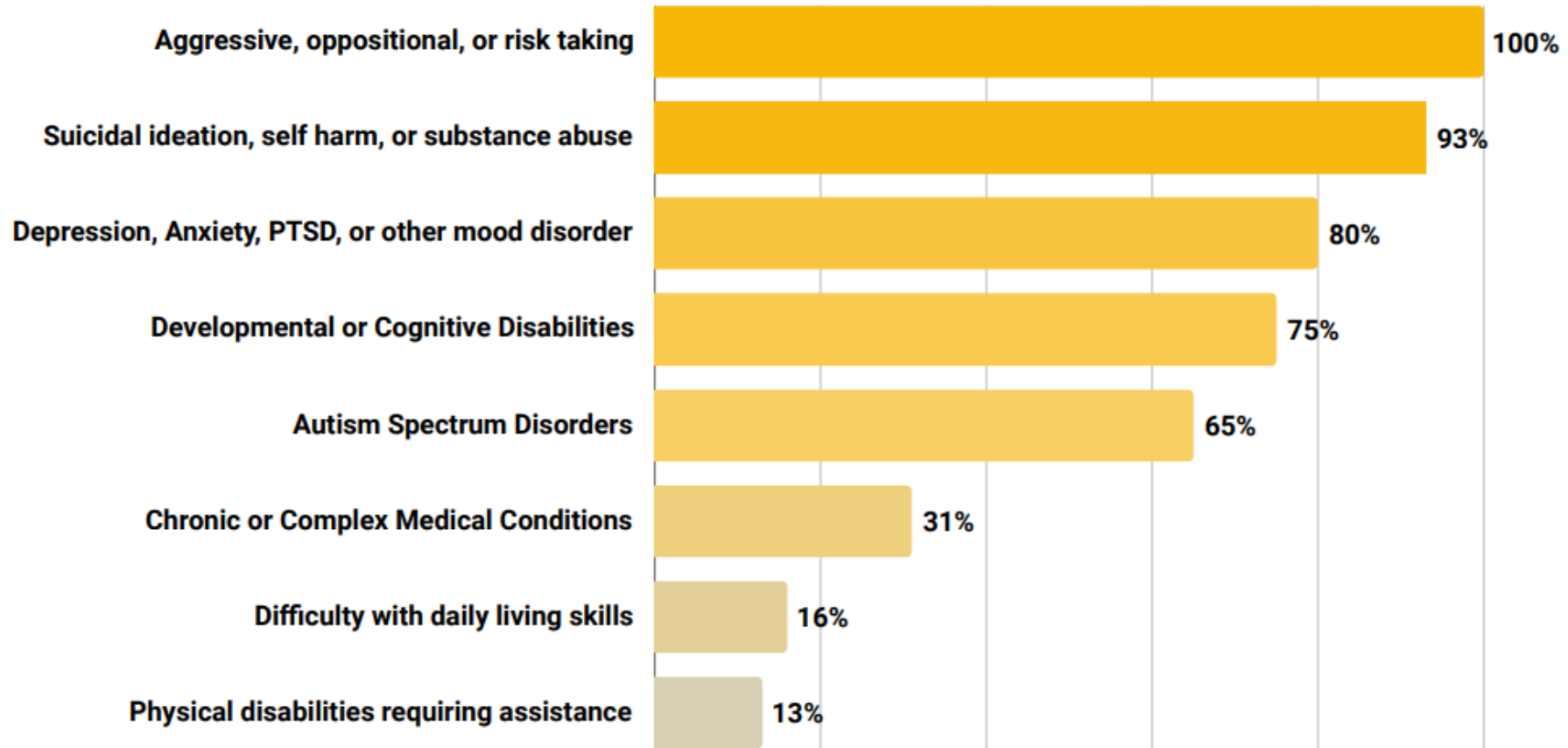
Youth with Complex Needs

Understanding Needs and Challenges

Defining Complex or High-Acuity Needs

- ⚙️ **Multi-System Involvement:** 79% of surveyed agencies report youth are involved with multiple agencies including mental health and juvenile justice.
- ⚙️ **Severe Mental Health Conditions:** Over 75% of agencies cite depression, PTSD, anxiety, and substance abuse as defining issues.
- ⚙️ **Co-occurring Disorders:** Many youths exhibit co-occurring conditions such as mental health issues combined with developmental delays or intellectual disabilities

Fig. 2: Percentage of agencies that reported the most prevalent needs/behaviors among youth with complex or high acuity needs (137 unique responses).



See **Appendix A** for additional common characteristics of youth with complex needs.

Top 5 Hardest-to-Place Needs or Behaviors

among youth with complex or high acuity needs, grouped by theme. (131 unique responses)

- ◆ **Aggression/Violence**
- ◆ **Sexual Behavior Issues**
- ◆ **Special Needs**
- ◆ **Criminal/Delinquent**
- ◆ **Mental Health**

Youth with Complex Needs

Demographics, Populations, and Pathways

- ⚙️ **Ages:** Predominantly adolescents (13-18 years), with an increasing number of pre-teens showing complex needs.

Average Number of Youths Served:

County/City
Agencies

~28

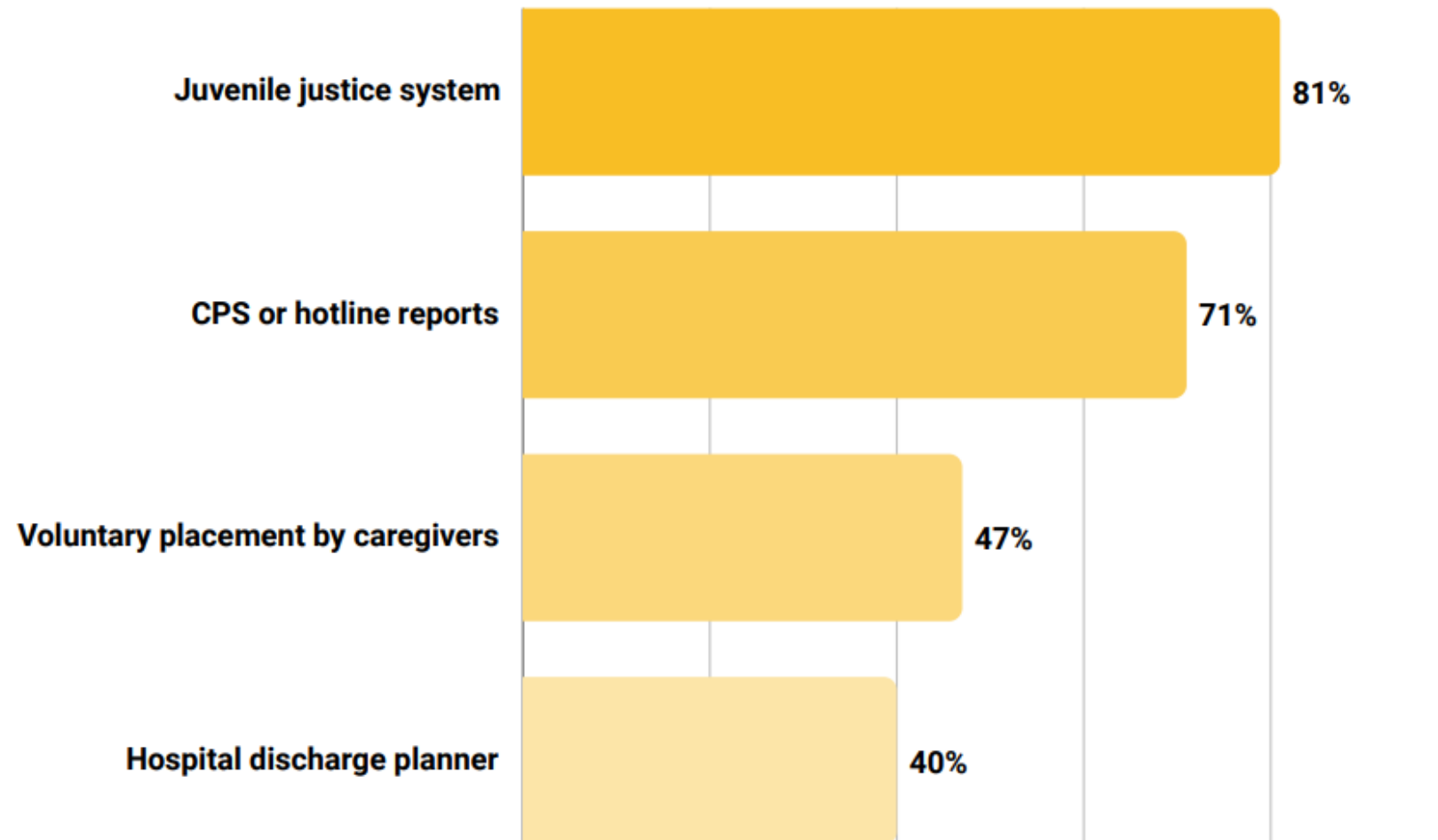
*Highest reported # of youths
served is 300.*

State
Agencies

~171

*Highest reported # of youths
served is 1500*

Figure 3: Percentage of most common pathways through which youth with complex needs come to the attention of agencies (129 unique responses).



Youth with Complex Needs

Challenges in Placement

- ❖ **Placement Instability:** Survey data showed that placement instability is a persistent problem, with agencies struggling to find stable, long-term solutions.
- ❖ **Aggressive and Oppositional Behaviors:** One of the most cited challenges is finding placements for youth who exhibit aggressive or oppositional behaviors. Agencies reported that these youth are frequently rejected from foster homes or residential settings due to the intensity of their needs and the safety risks they may pose.
- ❖ **Co-occurring Mental Health and Developmental Delays:** Youth who present a combination of mental health issues and developmental disabilities, such as autism or intellectual disabilities, are particularly difficult to place.
- ❖ **High Medical Needs:** Youth with complex medical conditions, such as insulin-dependent diabetes or other chronic illnesses, in addition to behavioral challenges, present another layer of difficulty for agencies seeking appropriate placements

Youth with Complex Needs

Staffing and Financial Strains

- ❖ **Staff Burnout and Morale:** Many agencies reported that supervising youth in emergency placements, places immense pressure on staff. The need for constant supervision, often in challenging and non-therapeutic environments, has led to high rates of burnout and stress. Smaller agencies, in particular, struggle to maintain staff morale under these conditions
- ❖ **High Financial Costs:** Agencies reported that placing youth in emergency or temporary facilities can cost upwards of \$30,000 per month, with some agencies reporting annual expenditures exceeding \$7 million on emergency solutions
- ❖ **Use of Contract Workers:** Some agencies have resorted to hiring contract workers to fill gaps in supervision for high-acuity youth, further driving up costs.

Agencies Reporting Active Partnership with Medicaid

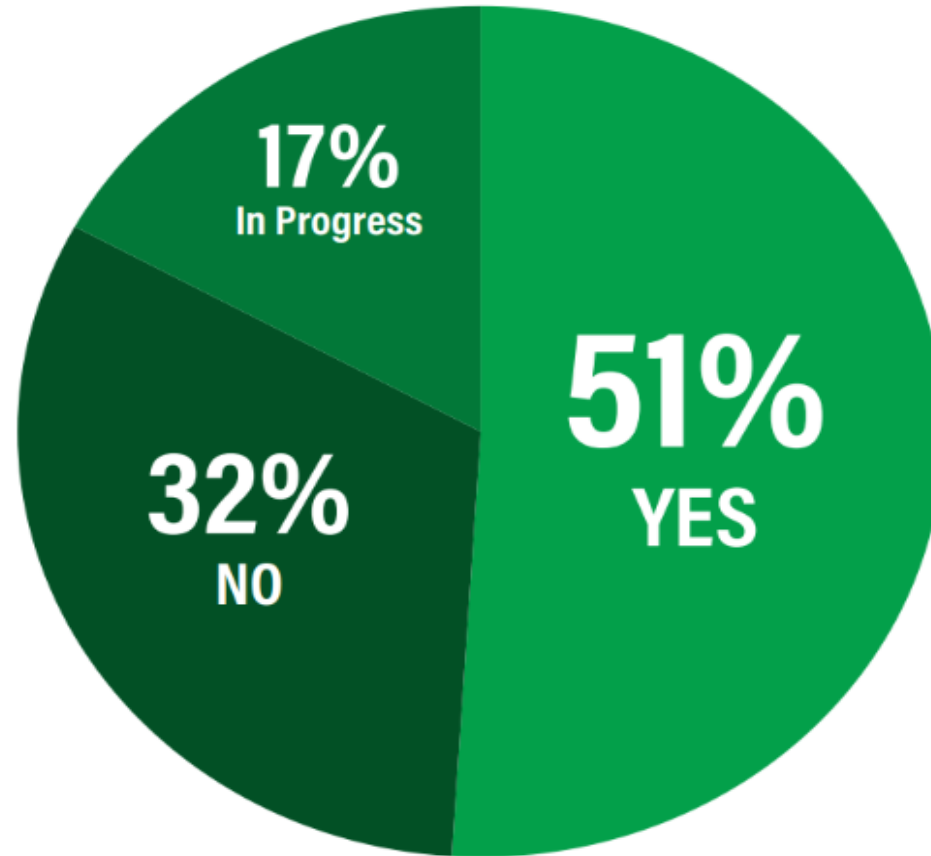




Figure 3: Percentage of Agencies reporting active partnership with the Medicaid agency in their jurisdiction to collaborate on solutions to better serve youth with complex needs (125 unique responses).

Youth with Complex Needs

The Call to Action and Recommendations for Activating a National Response Strategy

Recommendations to Accelerate a National Response Strategy:

1. Establish a Joint National Commission on Complex Youth Needs
2. Increase Federal Guidance and Funding Opportunities
3. Address Gaps in Services for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
4. Create a National Matrix of Approved 1115 Waivers
5. Expand Philanthropic Investments and Peer Learning Communities
6. Develop New Models of Care Outside of Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems
7. Empower Cross-System Collaboration



Courageous Imperatives: 2025 Presidential Transition Recommendations



Integrate Systems to Foster Continuity of Care

Key Issues:

- Youth with complex needs often experience fragmented services due to disconnected policies and siloed funding streams across federal agencies. These challenges are exacerbated by limited coordination between agencies and a lack of data sharing that could help create more integrated, person-centered solutions. This results in inefficient service delivery, missed opportunities for collaboration, and limited long-term outcomes for youth who require multifaceted support.

Key Opportunities:

- **Establish Cross-Agency Councils:** Create a federal interagency task force on youth with complex needs, bringing together leadership from HHS, HUD, ED, DOJ, and DOL to align policies and funding streams.
- **Promote and Support State Innovation:** Offer competitive grants to support and incentivize states to design and implement innovations in service delivery and integration that engages multiple federal programs, funding sources, and coordinated technical assistance.
- **Develop Data-Sharing Protocols:** Develop federal guidelines for secure, cross-system data sharing that ensures privacy while enabling coordinated service delivery across child welfare, juvenile justice, and education systems.



Expand Access to High-Quality, Specialized Behavioral Health Services

Key Issues:

- Youth with complex needs, particularly those in rural and underserved areas, face significant barriers to accessing necessary services due to a shortage of behavioral health professionals and the lack of comprehensive, community-based care options. Existing federal funding structures often limit the flexibility and scalability of community-based models, such as wraparound services and mobile crisis units, which are essential for delivering personalized care. Moreover, the fragmentation of services and a reliance on state-specific waivers to access Medicaid reimbursement further complicates service delivery.

Key Opportunities:

- **Incentivize Workforce Development:** Fund training and recruitment programs to address shortages of behavioral health professionals, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- **Support Community-Based Models:** Streamline and expand access to federal funding for community-based care alternatives, such as wraparound services, intensive in-home therapy, and mobile crisis units, through enhanced Medicaid reimbursement without the need for additional state-by-state waivers.
- **Expand Evidence-Based Programs:** Establish a federal clearinghouse of evidence-based practices for youth with complex needs and provide grants to states and localities for program implementation.



Strengthen Workforce Capacity Nationwide

Key Issues:

- The ability to provide effective care for youth with complex needs is hindered by a lack of standardized, trauma-informed, and culturally competent training across child-serving systems. Caregivers, including foster parents, kinship caregivers, and family members, often face challenges in addressing the behavioral health needs of the youth in their care due to insufficient support and training. The absence of federally endorsed training protocols and resources results in inconsistent care and missed opportunities to equip caregivers with the skills necessary to support these youth. A unified approach to training and caregiver support is essential to ensure that these youth receive the care and stability needed to thrive.

Key Opportunities:

- **Develop National Training Standards:** Develop federally endorsed training protocols for trauma-informed, culturally competent care to be used across all child-serving systems.
- **Enhance Caregiver Supports:** Provide federal grants to train foster parents, kinship caregivers, and family members in managing the behavioral health needs of youth in their care.



Prioritize Youth Voice and Choice in Federal Policy

Key Issues:

- Youth with lived experience are often excluded from the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives, leading to policies and programs that may not fully address their unique needs. The lack of structured platforms for youth voices, such as youth advisory boards, limits the ability of policymakers and agencies to understand and respond to the real challenges faced by these youth. Additionally, the absence of national initiatives that actively engage individuals with lived experience in co-designing programs and resources further exacerbates the disconnect between policy and the lived realities of youth. Empowering youth to shape the policies and programs that impact them is critical for ensuring that their perspectives are central to the development of effective solutions.

Key Opportunities:

- **Fund Youth Advisory Boards:** Allocate federal resources to establish state and national youth advisory boards, ensuring youth with lived experience inform policies and programs.
- **Create National Youth Leadership Initiatives:** Partner with organizations led by individuals with lived experience to co-design federal initiatives and resource guides.



Bridge Youth and Adult Systems

Key Issues:

- **Youth with complex needs, especially those transitioning from foster or kinship care, face significant barriers in accessing essential services such as Medicaid, housing supports, and foster care services due to restrictive eligibility criteria.** This is further compounded by a lack of youth-specific housing models, such as host homes and transitional living programs, which are vital for providing stable housing during their transition to adulthood. Additionally, many youth aging out of care do not receive comprehensive transition plans that address critical areas like employment, housing, and health services, leaving them vulnerable to instability. To ensure these youth have the necessary resources and support to succeed in adulthood, a coordinated federal effort is needed to expand eligibility for services, prioritize youth-specific housing, and strengthen transition planning.

Key Opportunities:

- **Expand Eligibility for Services:** Expand eligibility for Medicaid, housing supports, and foster care services for youth who have complex needs or are transitioning from foster or kinship care.
- **Support Transitional Housing Programs:** Reprioritize federal funding and outreach tools through HUD for youth-specific housing models, including host homes and transitional living programs, for all HUD programs like Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) and Family Reunification Vouchers (FUP).
- **Support Transition Planning:** Encourage federally funded child welfare programs to develop comprehensive transition plans for youth aging out of care, covering employment, housing, and health services.