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# Time to consolidate mental health services in Texas

By Kate Murphy

The ongoing immigration crisis along the border has brought nearly 57,000 unaccompanied undocumented children into the United States. So far, this has prompted a robust debate about immigration policy in Washington.

But here in Texas, where the humanitarian aspect of the crisis is most palpable, this sudden influx of children from Central America has created new public health concerns.

Unfortunately, the state agency tasked with public health, the Texas Department of State Health Services — which monitors infectious disease, prepares for disasters and provides mental health care services — is in dire need of reform.

In its recent review of the agency, the Sunset Advisory Commission staff called for major changes, citing long-standing dysfunctions, poor performance and unnecessary layers of bureaucracy. The review was conducted long before the immigration crisis on the border made headlines, but now the need to reform the agency is even more urgent.

In addition to monitoring migrant children for infectious disease, the agency is currently conducting mental health screenings at the border. Displaced migrant children are at high risk for psychiatric symptoms — particularly post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

If the agency does not stay ahead of the mental health needs of migrant children who are granted asylum, state taxpayers will have to spend more on emergency rooms, jails and other government programs. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, those diagnosed with a mental health disorder who may pose a threat to property, safety or the welfare of themselves or others are generally inadmissible. This limitation on admission exists because untreated mental health problems are linked to reduced life expectancy, lost work productivity and increased pressures on law enforcement and other government programs.

Across Texas, emergency rooms, state hospitals and jails are already overburdened by those with untreated mental illnesses. An influx of migrant children with PTSD, depression and other mental health problems will only increase the burden on a mental health care system that is failing to meet the needs of Texans.

Mental health care should be reorganized to create a truly integrated, streamlined, outcomes-focused system that will address the state's significant and costly challenges.

If mental health services were consolidated into one agency in Texas, it would be easier to evaluate gaps and overlaps in service and would lead to more efficient delivery of care. A delivery system based on innovation, collaboration and measurable results would emphasize quality and efficiency while reducing costs.

Reorganization of public health services would provide an opportunity to redefine the roles, responsibilities and goals of the state's mental health system, allowing room for evaluation and improvement as well as an opportunity to categorize available services, which would make the system easier to navigate. As a result, fewer people would fall through the cracks.

The crisis on our border and the possible influx of migrant children with serious mental health needs should prompt lawmakers to act on long-overdue reform of the state's mental health system and shift to a more efficient and effective system of care.

Murphy is the Hogg Foundation Mental Health Fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

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It's time for collectivists to get out of my rapidly-emptying pockets. It's also time for Texas to privatize all its mental health programs. Some people can't be helped, and the people in institutions wouldn't be there in the first place if they didn't have some problems. That's the fact regardless who's operating the facility.

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