

## OPINION

# Texas invests in better mental health

Legislature and universities are devoting money and resources to adolescent programs

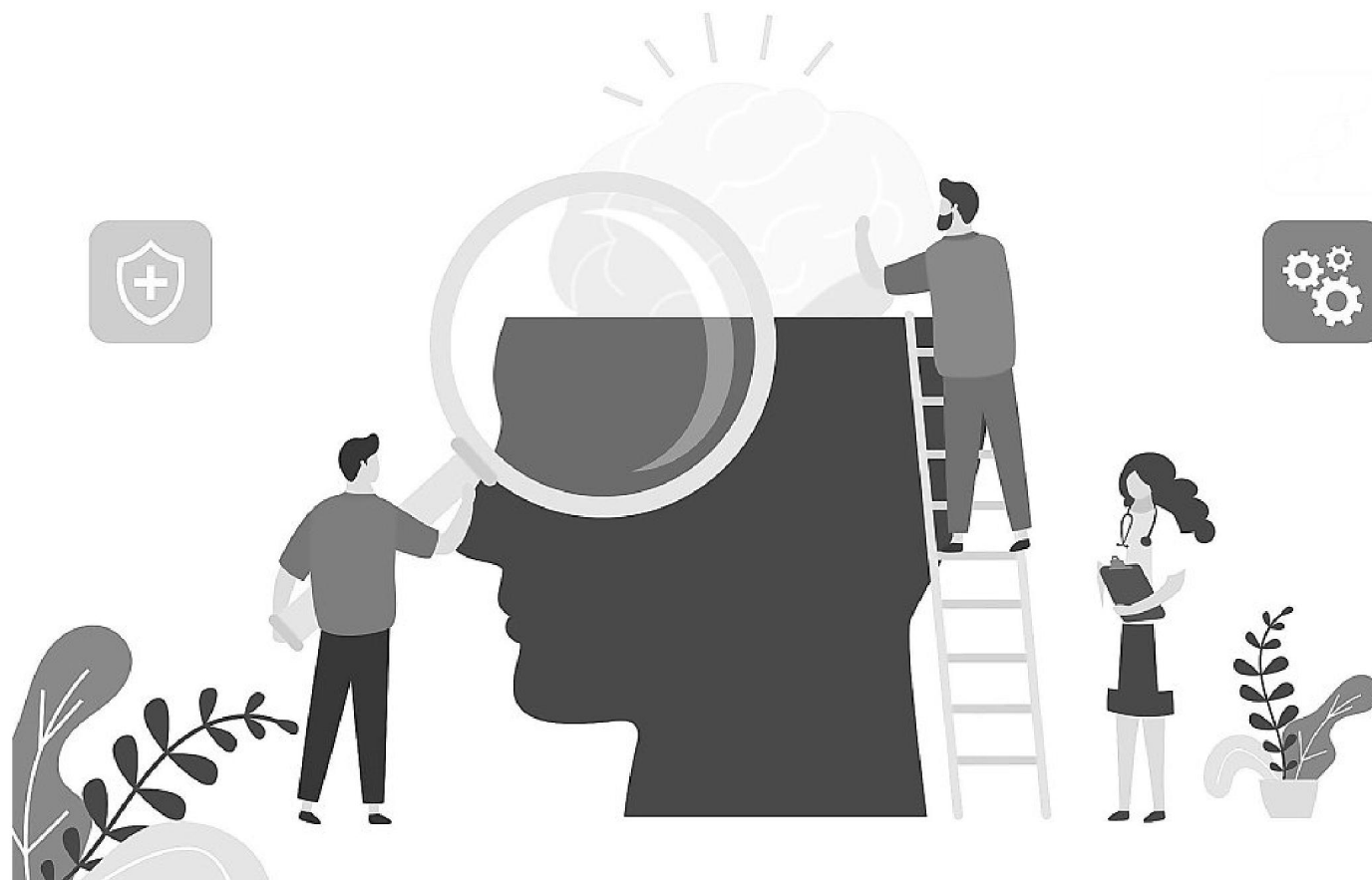
By DAVID LAKEY and JOHN ZERWAS

Mental health is Texas' foremost public health challenge today and a leading contributor to disability and death, especially among adolescent Texans. Compounded by historic underservice, Texas has faced an uphill battle when it comes to providing sufficient mental health resources to its growing population, but state leaders — including the University of Texas System — are committed to turning the tide.

Engaging young Texans is vital for enhancing the state's quality of life, with higher education playing a key role. UT institutions have long recognized the link between mental health and academic achievement. A recent study by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation revealed that 69% of American undergraduates contemplating dropping out cited emotional stress as a major factor.

Texas, among all states, is grappling with a rise in the percentage of youth who experienced a major depressive episode in the past year without treatment — a staggering 73.1%, according to Mental Health America. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth in Texas, according to the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute. UT Southwestern Medical Center recently conducted a study of 1,000 young Texans, 8 to 20 years old, who are being treated for depression and found that nearly half of them reported at least one suicide attempt during their lifetime.

Responding to this, the UT System Board of Regents has allocated \$16.5 million to tackle student mental health challenges, launching a 24/7 mental health crisis line, expanding clinical services, and introducing a free behavioral health app for students across all 14 UT institutions.



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These initiatives are important steps but only part of the broader mental health solution.

Last year, the 88th Texas Legislature approved a record \$11.68 billion in funding for behavioral health, a 30% increase from the previous session. This boost, one of the largest increases in behavioral health funding by any state legislature in history, targets key areas such as constructing new state mental health hospitals, expanding inpatient capacity, providing community grants to reduce hospital admissions, offering crisis stabilization services, establishing intensive outpatient services for youth and families, supporting research and addressing the state's shortage of behavioral health professionals through workforce development initiatives.

As part of this commitment, the Legislature increased funding for the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium. Comprising 13 health-related institutions of higher education, the consortium aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health care for children and adoles-

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cents across Texas. Administered by the UT System, in partnership with Texas A&M, Texas Tech, the University of North Texas systems, and the Baylor College of Medicine, the consortium's initiatives include fully funding the Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHAT) program at \$172.7 million for the recent biennium.

TCHAT leverages technology to ensure that virtual mental health support with a licensed counselor is available to any public K-12 school district in the state that wants it. By getting ahead of behavioral health challenges with early treatment for our youth, this program combats the many social and societal consequenc-

es of untreated mental illness such as unemployment, poor educational attainment, family instability, child abuse, substance misuse, eating disorders and domestic violence.

Institutions of higher education statewide also deploy thousands of physicians and behavioral health care professionals who provide direct clinical care to patients of all ages across Texas.

Researchers within these institutions identify opportunities to enhance the state's mental health systems of care and make breakthrough treatment discoveries. For instance, UT Southwestern operates the Center for Depression Research and Clinical Care, a national leader in advancing

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care for unipolar and bipolar depression. The center's research enhances understanding of depression causes, identifies new effective treatments and improves existing ones.

These sustained efforts, coupled with increased state resources and the collaborative work of other state agencies, have placed Texas on the brink of a momentous breakthrough in mental health. Encouragingly, state lawmakers have continued to prioritize this vision, evident in the inclusion of mental health and children's behavioral health items in both the House and Senate Interim Legislative Charges for the upcoming 89th Legislature.

Working together, we can continue to bring hope, resilience and the promise of a Texas where no one walks alone in their journey toward mental well-being.

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