



Texas: Using CYVYC's Youth Ambassador Model to Promote Access to Health Care

Background

A central part of the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice (CYVYC) is its Youth Ambassador program. State Teams recruit youth ages 14–26 with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD), who are then trained and supported to be leaders for change in promoting alternatives to guardianship across their states. Over five years, CYVYC has supported 41 Youth Ambassadors from 11 states. The program is grounded in the belief that the most meaningful and effective advocacy comes directly from youth with disabilities themselves.

[The Texas State Team](#) joined CYVYC's third cohort in 2023 and [supported four Youth Ambassadors](#) in advancing alternatives to guardianship through its state action plan. A key component of the plan focused on medical self-determination for youth with IDD. Youth Ambassadors provided feedback on existing youth training about medical and healthcare transition in partnership with a state managed care company.

Building on lessons from CYVYC, the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (TCDD), which co-leads the State Team, sought to expand its work in advancing medical self-determination. TCDD partnered with Wellpoint, a health insurance provider, to develop a project on medical decision-making that would promote self-determination and improve access to health care for youth with disabilities using the Youth Ambassador program model. This collaboration grew from a connection made when a Wellpoint leader, who is also a CYVYC [advisory board](#) member and parent of a child with a disability, met TCDD and Youth Ambassadors presenting on their CYVYC work at a national disability rights conference.

Implementation

TCDD launched the second phase of its medical decision-making project in August 2024. Like its CYVYC work, the project began by selecting Youth Ambassadors. TCDD posted an application, interviewed finalists, and ultimately selected five new Youth Ambassadors.

Wellpoint funding allowed TCDD to hire a youth engagement coordinator, a dedicated support person to guide Youth Ambassadors. Based on its CYVYC experience, TCDD found this role essential for providing technical assistance as youth developed their projects.

The first three weeks focused on orientation: introducing project platforms (Google Drive, Zoom), defining common terms, and preparing “elevator pitches.” These short, self-introductions allowed the Youth Ambassadors to share who they are, their backgrounds, and what they believe is most important in promoting access to health care for youth with disabilities.

Next, weekly meetings with TCDD, the youth engagement coordinator, and Youth Ambassadors combined skill-building with project planning. Wellpoint and TCDD suggested potential project topics but encouraged Youth Ambassadors to propose their own too. As one exercise, Ambassadors researched their own



health insurance plans and reported back on the accessibility of the information. The activity revealed significant barriers: difficulty identifying insurance providers, unclear coverage details, and lack of information on mental health or LGBTQIA+ services. Youth also found that insurance information was rarely in plain language or available on youth-friendly platforms like Instagram.

Youth Ambassadors also learned about patient rights and role-played doctor visits. TCDD invited two doctors to serve as subject matter experts. These physicians shared their experiences caring for people with disabilities, while youth shared challenges they faced accessing care. The exchange benefited both groups: Ambassadors learned about how doctors approached care, and doctors gained insight into barriers youth with disabilities experience.

Each Youth Ambassador then selected a topic for further study, resulting in:

- » a checklist for booking a first doctor's appointment
- » a video (with English and Spanish captions) on using an insurance card
- » a social media kit for Wellpoint to launch an Instagram page for youth
- » a plain-language brochure on the Patient Bill of Rights

As the project advanced, meetings shifted from weekly, 1-hour sessions to shorter Youth Ambassador check-ins with the youth engagement coordinator and doctors. Ambassadors refined their projects, shared drafts with peers for feedback, and then presented them internally to TCDD, Wellpoint, and the subject matter experts. Public showcases took place on March 21, 2025. The project concluded with a celebration and reflection session.

Impact

The project showed how CYVYC's Youth Ambassador model can be adapted for new initiatives that advance self-determination. It produced accessible, youth-driven resources to help young people navigate health insurance and care, materials that remain valuable to Wellpoint.

Equally important, the project gave Wellpoint staff and doctors new perspectives on how to better support youth with disabilities. Ambassadors themselves deepened their understanding of health insurance, strengthened advocacy skills, and grew as leaders.

Youth Ambassador Carolina Hamilton reflected:

"The Youth Ambassador program is important, because it empowers youth with disabilities to become leaders and advocates for more accessible health care. It also helps participants gain independence by learning how to navigate the healthcare system and make informed decisions about their own care."

Since the project, TCDD has been invited to replicate the Youth Ambassador model in education, promoting decision-making and self-determination in schools.

Suggestions for Replication

- » **Hire a youth ambassador coordinator.** A dedicated support person ensures consistent technical assistance and support. Splitting responsibilities among existing staff can dilute effectiveness.
- » **Allow sufficient time to support youth.** This project was completed in four months, but a longer timeline would enable Youth Ambassadors to deepen learning, refine projects, and produce more polished resources.
- » **Develop a sustainability plan.** Build a strategy early to harness Youth Ambassadors' energy, momentum, and expertise beyond the project's end. A clear strategy ensures Youth Ambassadors' efforts to promote access to health care for youth with disabilities are sustained, shared, and widely disseminated.
- » **Explore replication opportunities.** The Youth Ambassador model is flexible, innovative, and engages youth with disabilities to lead projects that create accessible resources and services. Consider expanding its application to address systemic issues across health care, education, and beyond.

For more information, please contact:

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What is the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice?

At the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice, we work with youth with IDD, families, and supporters. We share information about alternatives to guardianship. Youth with IDD lead projects about alternatives to guardianship. We believe that you have the right to make your own decisions about your life!

[Visit the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice website](#) to learn more about *alternatives to guardianship* and what these words mean.

[Visit the Center for Public Representation's website](#) to learn more about *supported decision-making*.

Do you have more questions about this fact sheet and guardianship?

Please email the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice team at youthvoice@umb.edu