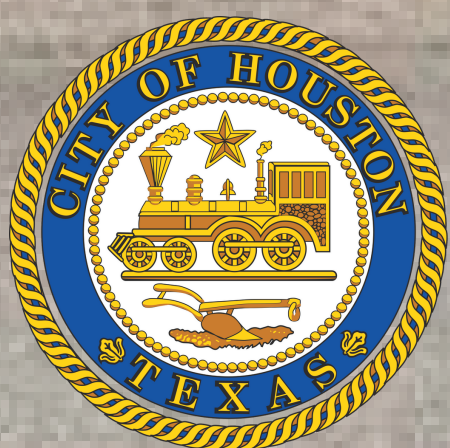


UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative

HOUSTON ACTION PLAN

July 2022

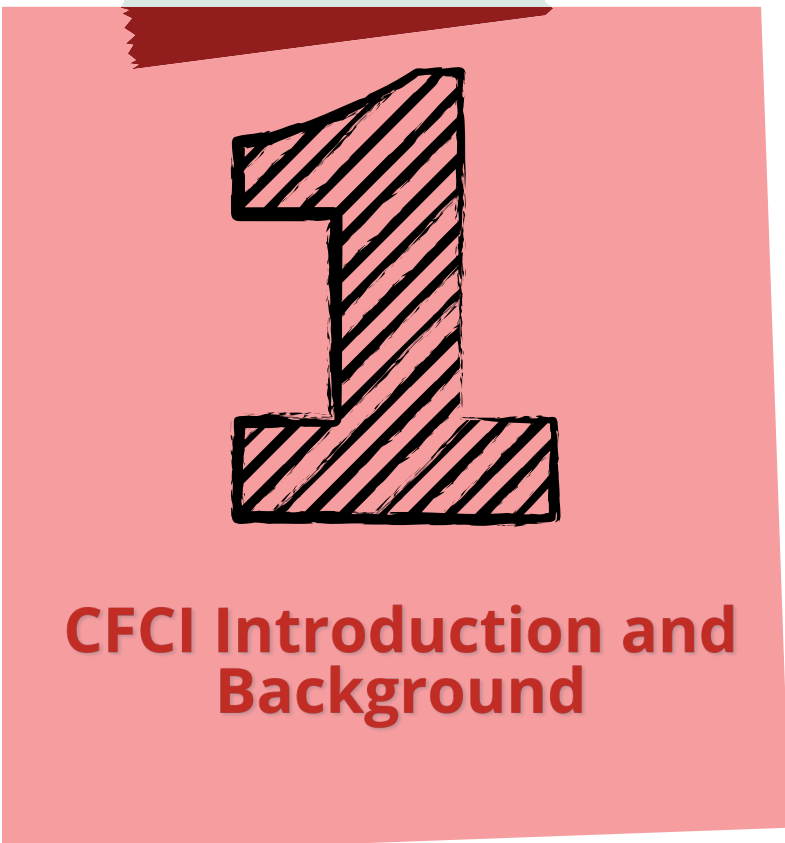
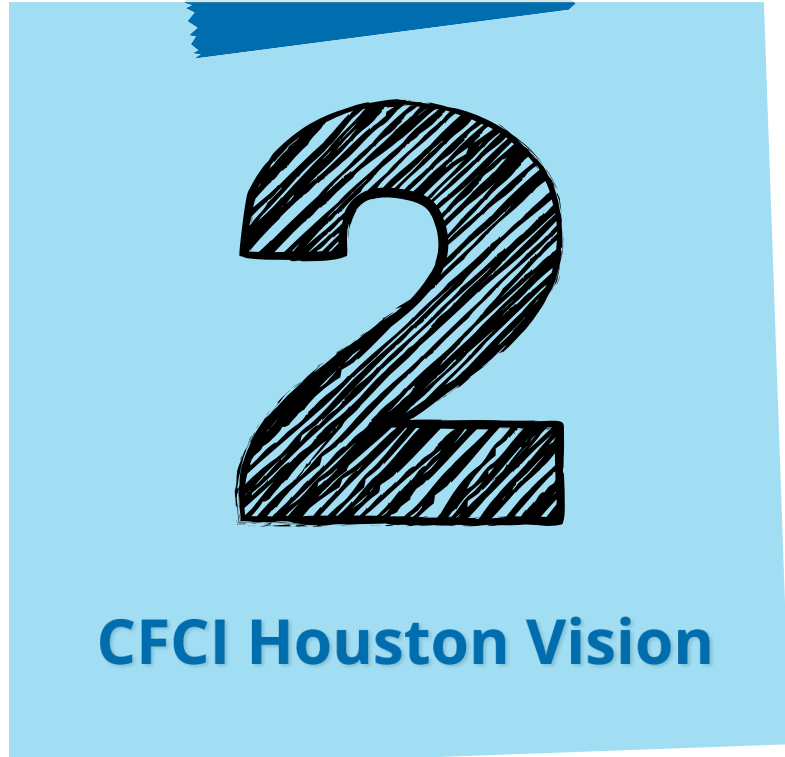

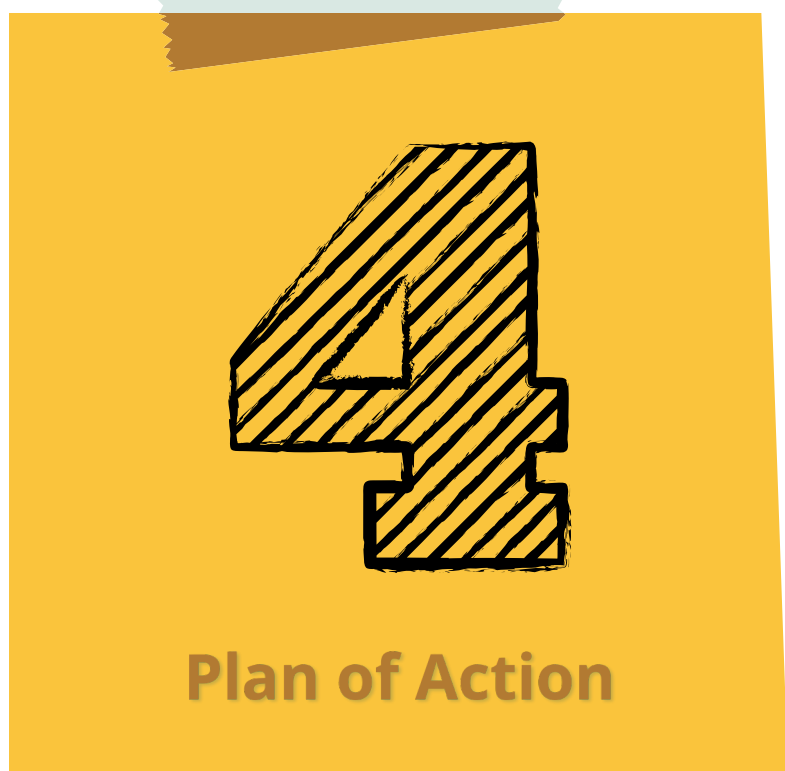


Mayor's Office of Education
and Youth Engagement



unicef 
for every child

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Foreword

We're born and this city holds us
rocks us in its arms
so we name it, like we name all the things we love
H-town, Space City, Capital of the Sun Belt

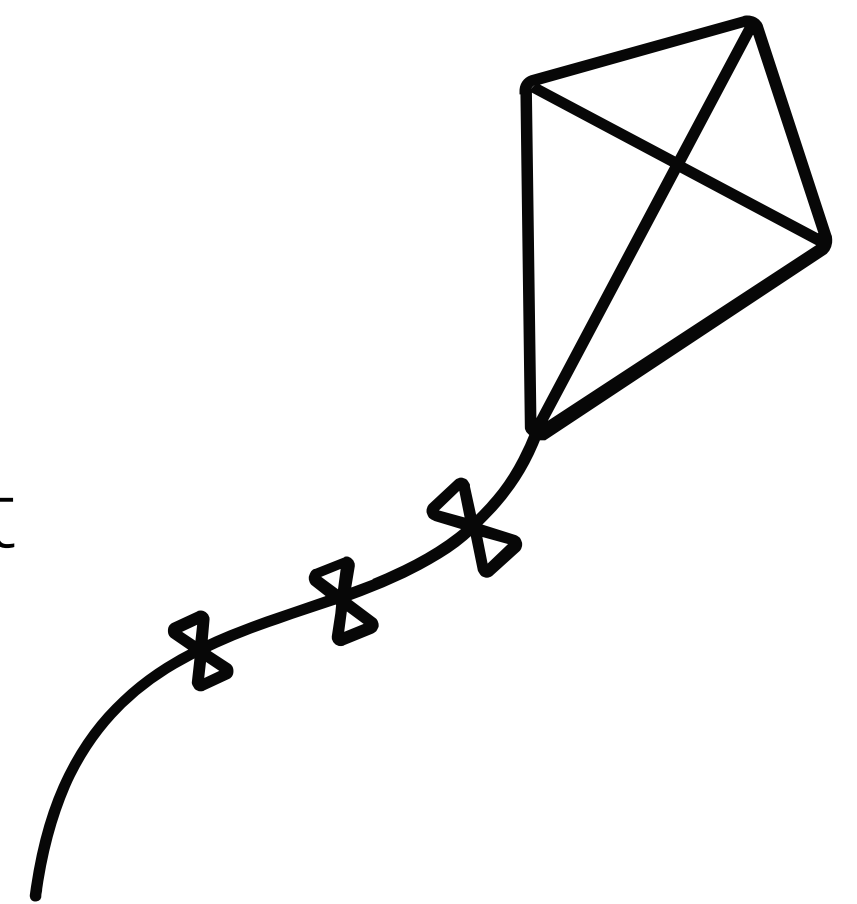
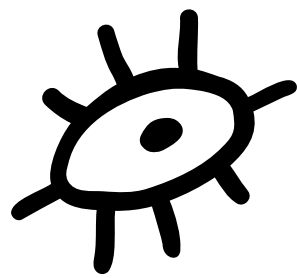
Till our named city watches
in a wide-eyed wonder
as we, the youth, grow in the belly of the bayou
watching the citizens of our city help one another:
rebuild houses after a hurricane
package cans for the food bank
care for others so we can get through the pandemic

How these joined efforts make our city's beating heart
thump
thump
thump
until we recognize the power in this music
the way positive action can bring a rhythm to our streets

So make our own symphony of voices
bring some new melodies

Have people know what we care about
echo the importance of less looked at places
working alongside the young and old
to create the differences we want to see

Let it be known that our city, Houston
is on the wind of change
all we have to do
is breathe in
exhale



"Our City" by Kechi Mbah

2021 National Student Poet of the Southwest,
Senior at Carnegie Vanguard High



Letter from the Mayor



In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic left the nation reeling not only from the virus but from social inequities that were illuminated as we tried to combat it. Issues concerning access to health, housing, education, and other social services afflicted multitudes of Americans, including many Houstonians who have been historically underserved. The pandemic exacerbated the need for mental health professionals, educators, and other essential service providers.

Youth quietly suffered as they encountered the challenges of social isolation, losing loved ones, and transitioning to online learning. In light of this, we strengthened our commitment to youth by being the first city in the United States to be a candidate for the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI).

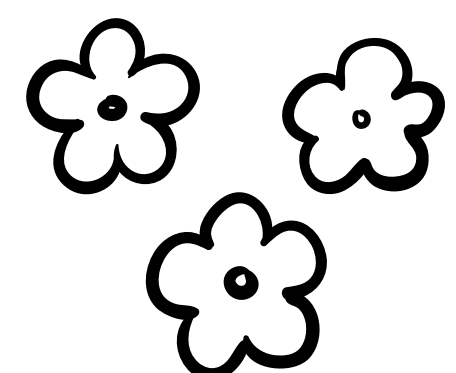
In the fall of 2019, I became the first United States mayor to sign UNICEF's Global Child Friendly Cities Initiative Manifesto. As the first candidate for the UNICEF CFCI, Houston is building upon a proud legacy of protecting children's rights advocated by city and community leaders. Youth are among our most vulnerable Houstonians, and the Child Friendly Cities Initiative aims to ensure that every child feels supported, has their voice championed, and has their social safety net expanded through the coordination of services to respond to their needs.

I believe that it is through collaboration and participation that we can build a healthy, strong, and inclusive community—a feat more important now than ever as we continue to confront the challenges created by the pandemic.

I thank all the stakeholders, providers, adults, and youth who were a part of bringing this initiative to fruition. Your teamwork exemplifies the synergy that Houston can and should utilize to create and inform great change within and outside the government arena. The Child Friendly Cities Initiative is one step toward a resilient and more equitable Houston. I am excited to announce the CFCI Action Plan, and I hope it will help champion the diversity of Houston while supporting all community members, including its youth, in whom the city finds its vitality and strength.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sylvester Turner".

Mayor Sylvester Turner



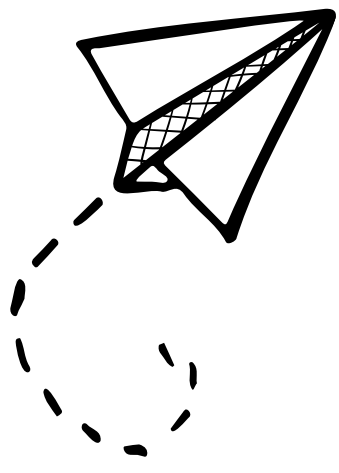


PART 1

CFCI Introduction and Background



A Child Friendly City

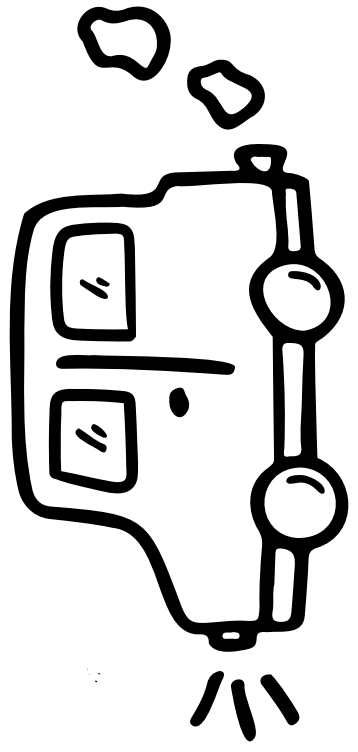


Houston is proud to champion children’s rights as a pilot city for UNICEF’s Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). The CFCI aims to strengthen the social safety net for all children by designing **a permanent system to make children an active, essential part of all the City’s policies, plans, and programs.**

The CFCI was launched in 1996 by UNICEF to respond to the challenge of realizing the rights of a child and now it operates in more than 3,000 cities and municipalities across the world. The CFCI supports municipal governments in realizing the rights of children at the local level as stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In November 2019, the City of Houston led the nation in establishing the CFCI when Mayor Sylvester Turner became the first mayor in the United States to sign UNICEF’s Global Child Friendly Cities Initiative Manifesto. Since then, cities including San Francisco and Minneapolis have joined Houston as members of the first cohort of cities to implement the process toward recognition as a UNICEF Child Friendly City.

The City of Houston is committed to planning and implementing mobility, housing, education, health, and safety policies and programs for residents of different ages and at-risk populations. As they encounter economic, climate, and health challenges, it is essential to align systems of support and provide efficient and effective services.



CFCI Process

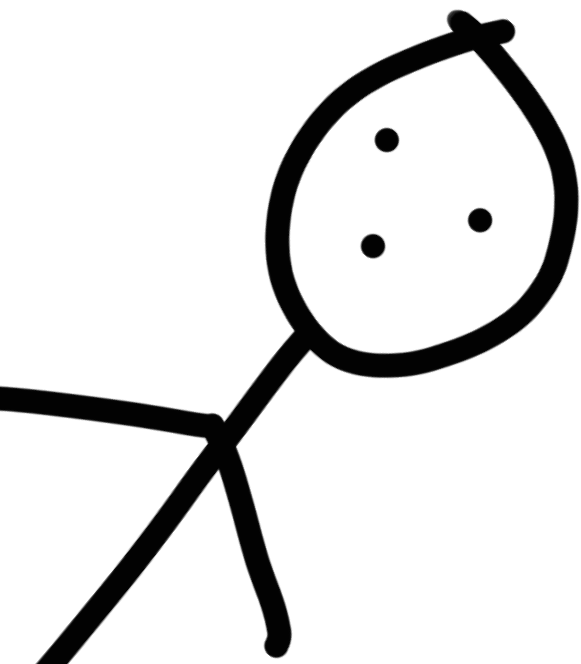
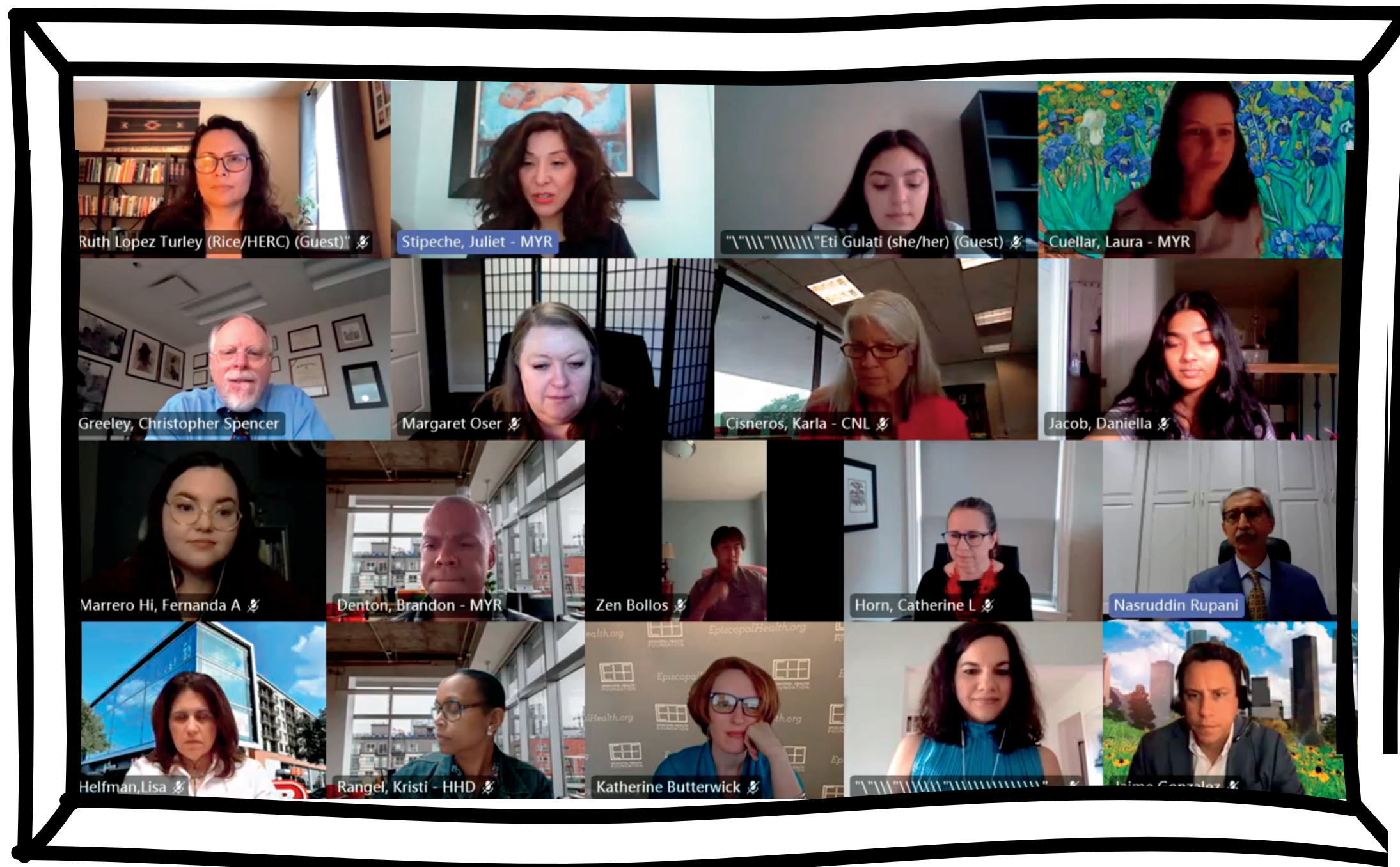
- 1 Assessments**
Conduct community and government assessments to assess the state of children's rights
- 2 Situational Analysis**
Compile and analyze data from assessments to identify issue areas
- 3 Intergenerational Workshops**
Rank and examine issue areas and co-create solutions with youth and service providers
- 4 Local Action Plan**
Compose and implement plan with strategies, activities, and metrics to measure results
- 5 Evaluation**
Measure success of activities, and commitments presented in the CFCI Action Plan

The CFCI Action Plan provides a vision and framework that advocates for the safety, well-being, and success of children and their families. It is a one-year roadmap that will help city leaders and community members visualize how CFCI will be implemented and how the initiative will address some of the challenges facing children and youth in Houston. The plan will include city-level theories of change that highlight child-friendly governance and city-wide strategies for improving the well-being of all children and young people.

The Action Plan is based on the results of the local situational analysis. It provides a summary of the state of children's wellness in the city according to the CFCI Goal Areas and lists the priority issues identified through the community and governmental assessments. In addition, the plan delineates the activities/benchmarks, partners, and resources needed to implement CFCI and to begin to develop a system of collaboration to strengthen children's rights in Houston.

The City of Houston is committed to strengthening support networks for children by supporting innovative ideas and leveraging the expertise and skill sets of community partners. The Mayor's Office of Education (MOE) leads CFCI in the City of Houston and has worked collaboratively with city leaders, government agencies, and most importantly, youth and families, to develop the CFCI Action Plan.

CFCI Core Team



The MOE established and coordinated a CFCI Core Team to help with the compilation of the situational analysis data, execution of the intergenerational workshops, and development of the CFCI Action Plan. **The team is composed of 60+ city and nonprofit leaders, service providers, caring citizens, and youth council members.** In addition, there are 40+ community partners dedicated to making Houston a child-friendly city.

Community partners play pivotal roles in our efforts to make policy a reality by interweaving suggested policy changes into the culture of Houston-area businesses, schools, social programs, and children’s everyday life. We are continuously thankful to the individuals, organizations, and city/county departments working in a variety of capacities to bring our vision of a child-friendly city to fruition. *A complete list of our community partners can be found in the Appendix section.*

CFCI Leadership Team

- Municipal departments engaged in children’s rights efforts.
- Coordinates CFCI activities through collection of data for the Situational Analysis, communication and community outreach efforts, and implementation of Action Plan activities within relevant city agencies.

CFCI Taskforce

- Government and research institutions, and community organizations in academia, early childhood, K-12 education, nonprofit, environment, and business sectors.
- Advices and supports CFCI data analysis, public engagement and setting up evaluation procedures.

Youth Councils

- The CFCI Youth Council amplifies and incorporates youth and community perspectives to evaluate programs and policies to achieve positive outcomes for Houston youth.
- The Mayor’s Youth Council includes youth leaders from across various council districts and is the direct youth voice to the Mayor.

CFCI Intergenerational Committee

- Designed and facilitated Youth Voice workshops and served as thought partners in local action planning process.
- During the workshops, they helped select the CFCI Priorities, identified potential solutions, and brainstormed partnerships and activities for the CFCI Action Plan.

Method for Developing the Action Plan

As a UNICEF Child Friendly pilot city, Houston conducted community and governmental assessments and completed a situational analysis to assess the state of children's rights in the city. The results of the situational analysis served to identify the priority issues for the CFCI Local Action Plan.

The community assessments helped gauge Houstonians' opinions and perspectives on the current needs, opportunities, and circumstances that children and youth face in Houston. The community assessments included workshops and surveys disseminated to approximately 600 youth (ages 13-18), parents, service providers, and other community members. The governmental assessment evaluated large data sets from U.S. Census data, the American Community Survey, Understanding Houston, and other government or research publications that publish data regarding children's well-being. The assessments examined key variables such as the child population composition, socioeconomic status of various Houston neighborhoods, and challenges affecting children. To view the findings in more detail please see the CFCI Situational Analysis report.

The Mayor's Office of Education (MOE), along with higher education partners from the University of Houston College of Education and Growing Up in Cities at Texas A&M, analyzed the findings from the situational analysis and identified the following **key issue areas affecting youth in Houston:**

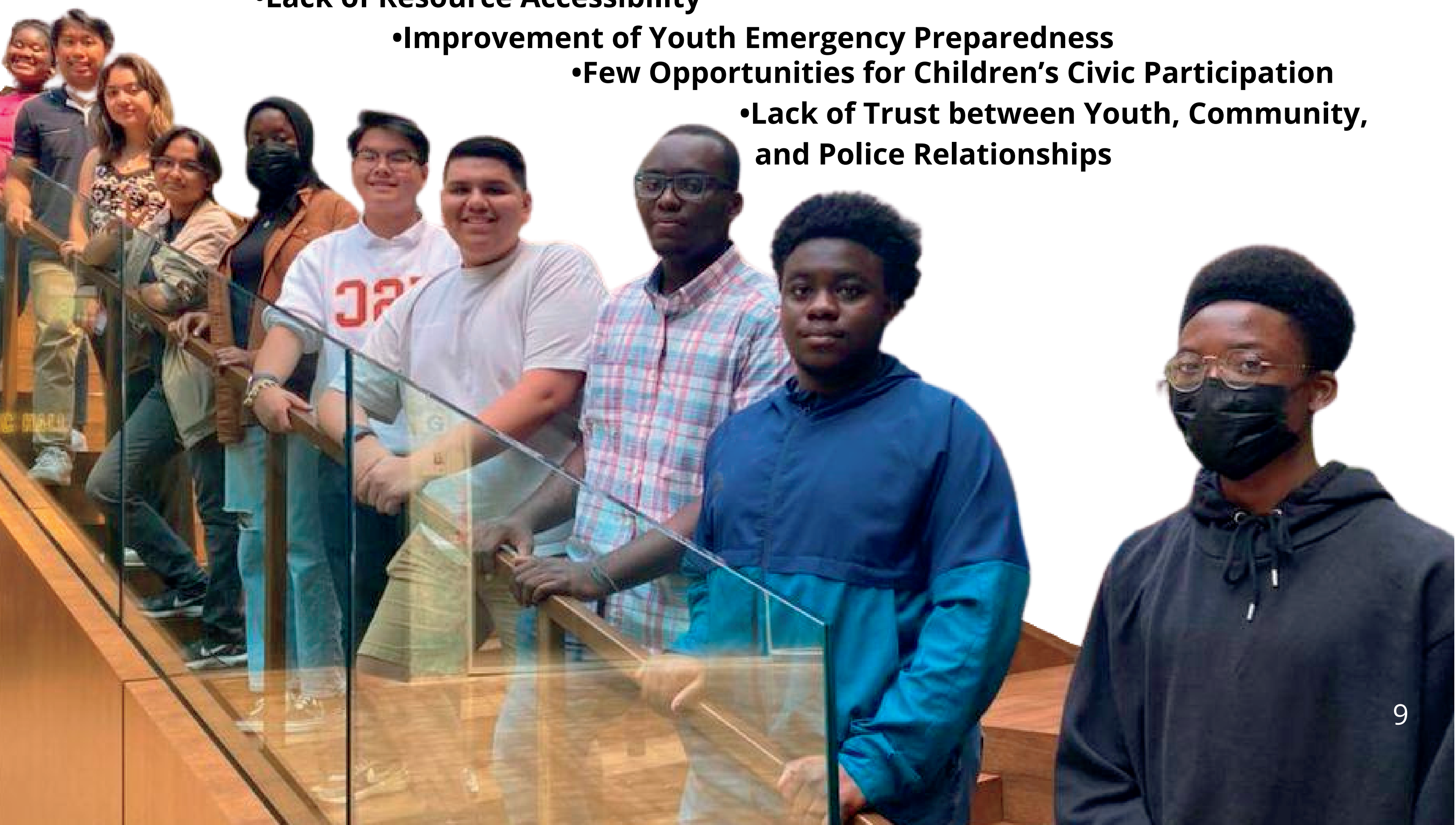
- **Need for Mental Health Support**

- **Lack of Resource Accessibility**

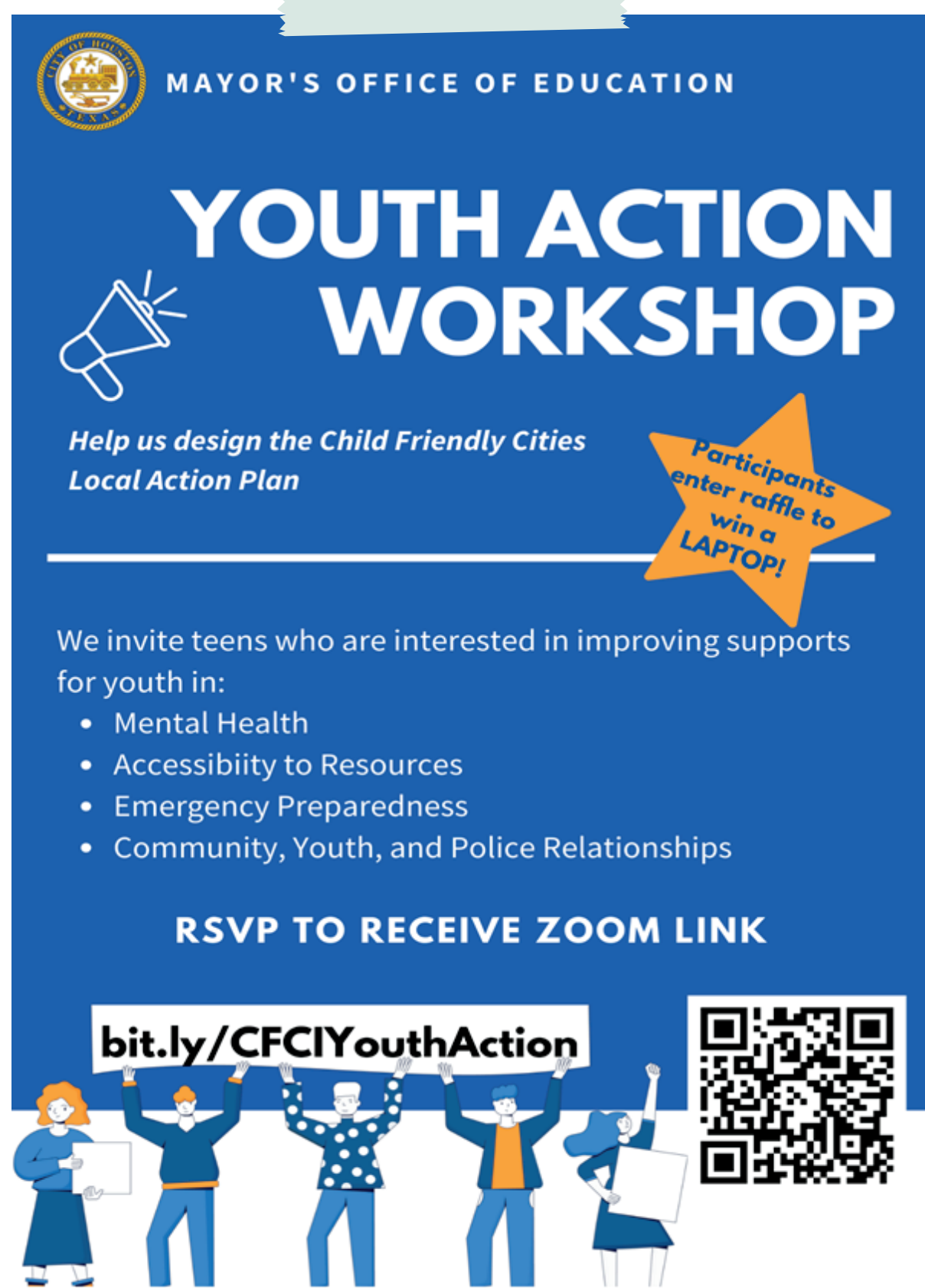
- **Improvement of Youth Emergency Preparedness**

- **Few Opportunities for Children's Civic Participation**

- **Lack of Trust between Youth, Community, and Police Relationships**



Method for Developing the Action Plan



The flyer is for a Youth Action Workshop organized by the Mayor's Office of Education. It features a blue background with white and yellow text. At the top left is the City of Houston logo. The main title is 'YOUTH ACTION WORKSHOP' in large white letters. Below it, a megaphone icon is next to the text 'Help us design the Child Friendly Cities Local Action Plan'. A yellow starburst graphic says 'Participants enter raffle to win a LAPTOP!'. A list of topics includes Mental Health, Accessibiity to Resources, Emergency Preparedness, and Community, Youth, and Police Relationships. A QR code and the URL 'bit.ly/CFCIYouthAction' are at the bottom, with an illustration of five diverse people holding up a banner.

MAYOR'S OFFICE OF EDUCATION

YOUTH ACTION WORKSHOP

Help us design the Child Friendly Cities Local Action Plan

Participants enter raffle to win a LAPTOP!

We invite teens who are interested in improving supports for youth in:

- Mental Health
- Accessibiity to Resources
- Emergency Preparedness
- Community, Youth, and Police Relationships

RSVP TO RECEIVE ZOOM LINK

bit.ly/CFCIYouthAction

The MOE then assembled a committee of community partners to develop and facilitate the intergenerational workshops.

The committee was composed of 20 youth and children's rights advocates, ages 15-65, from education, mental health, faith-based, and nonprofit sectors. They constructed workshop structures, created focus group questions, and facilitated group discussions during workshops to further understand the root causes of the issue areas.

Three intergenerational workshops, called "Youth Action Workshops," were conducted virtually in the fall of 2021. **During the workshops, youth, service providers, city leaders, and other community members were invited to discuss the issue areas identified in the CFCI Situational Analysis and co-construct solutions to address current challenges facing youth in Houston.**



CREATING SOLUTIONS

At the last Youth Action Workshop, youth discussed various issues affecting youth in Houston and ranked **resource accessibility during an emergency as a priority issue.**

The next workshop city leaders, and service providers will join youth to develop solutions around the following issues:

- Improving youth access to resources including food, emotional support, mental health, clothing, shelter.
- Communication strategies to disseminate important information to youth
- Available vs. needed resources to prepare youth for emergencies.

Youth who participate will be entered in a raffle to win a FREE laptop or a bluetooth speaker.

For more information, contact us at MOEdu@houstontx.gov or visit www.houstontx.gov/education/child-friendly-cities.html

Participants shared their opinions through online polling and breakout rooms. They began by learning about the issue areas and ranking them in order of importance. They then brainstormed recommendations on how to best address these issues. Their solutions and strategies served as a basis for developing the activities and partnerships listed in the CFCI Action Plan.

Target Groups Involved

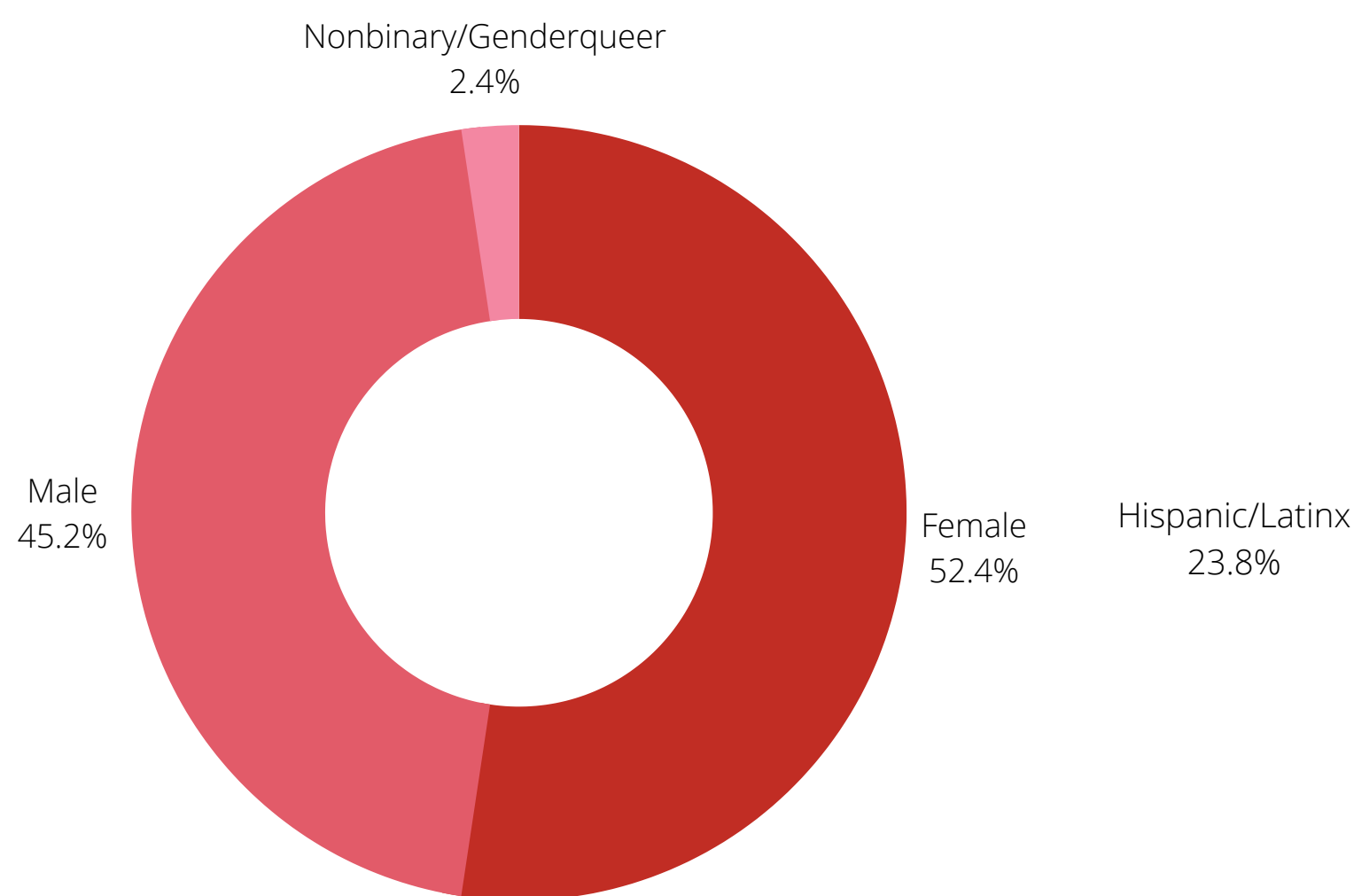
The Youth Action Workshops were intergenerational and included approximately 40 youth (ages 13 -18) and 20 adults. The MOE, the Intergenerational Committee, the CFCI Taskforce and Leadership Team publicized the workshops via email and social media to superintendents, high school principals and other school staff, city and county departments, nonprofit organizations, and youth programs.

Adult Participants

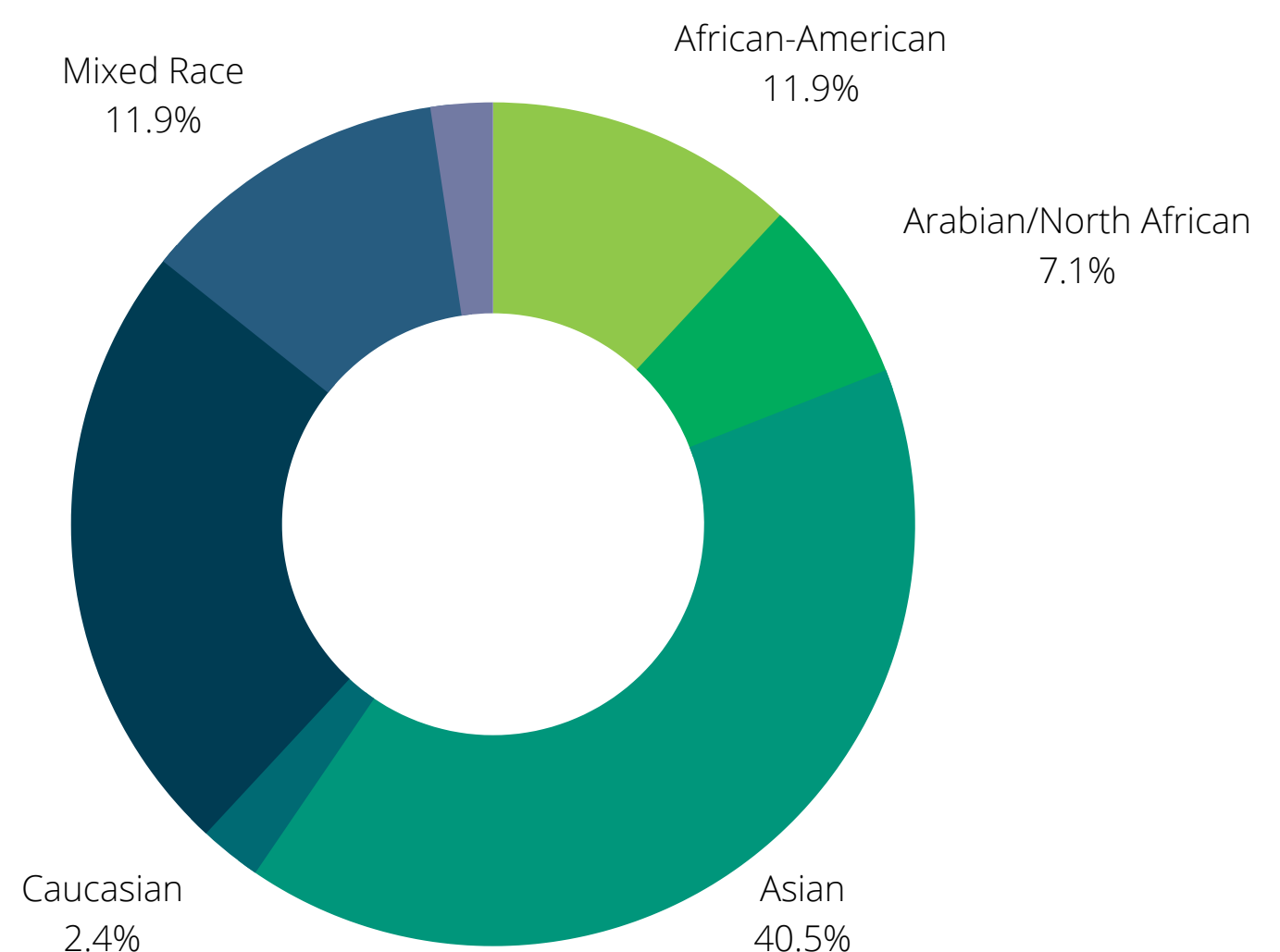
The adult participants were ages 19 – 65. Most adult participants were service providers from nonprofits, community organizing groups, youth programs, and K-12 education from the Greater Houston area. Other adult attendees included parents, educators, city and county officials, college students, and clergy members. Some of the organizations represented included Mental Health America of Greater Houston, the Houston Food Bank, Houston Public Library, the Harris Center, Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, and the AIR Project.

Youth Participants

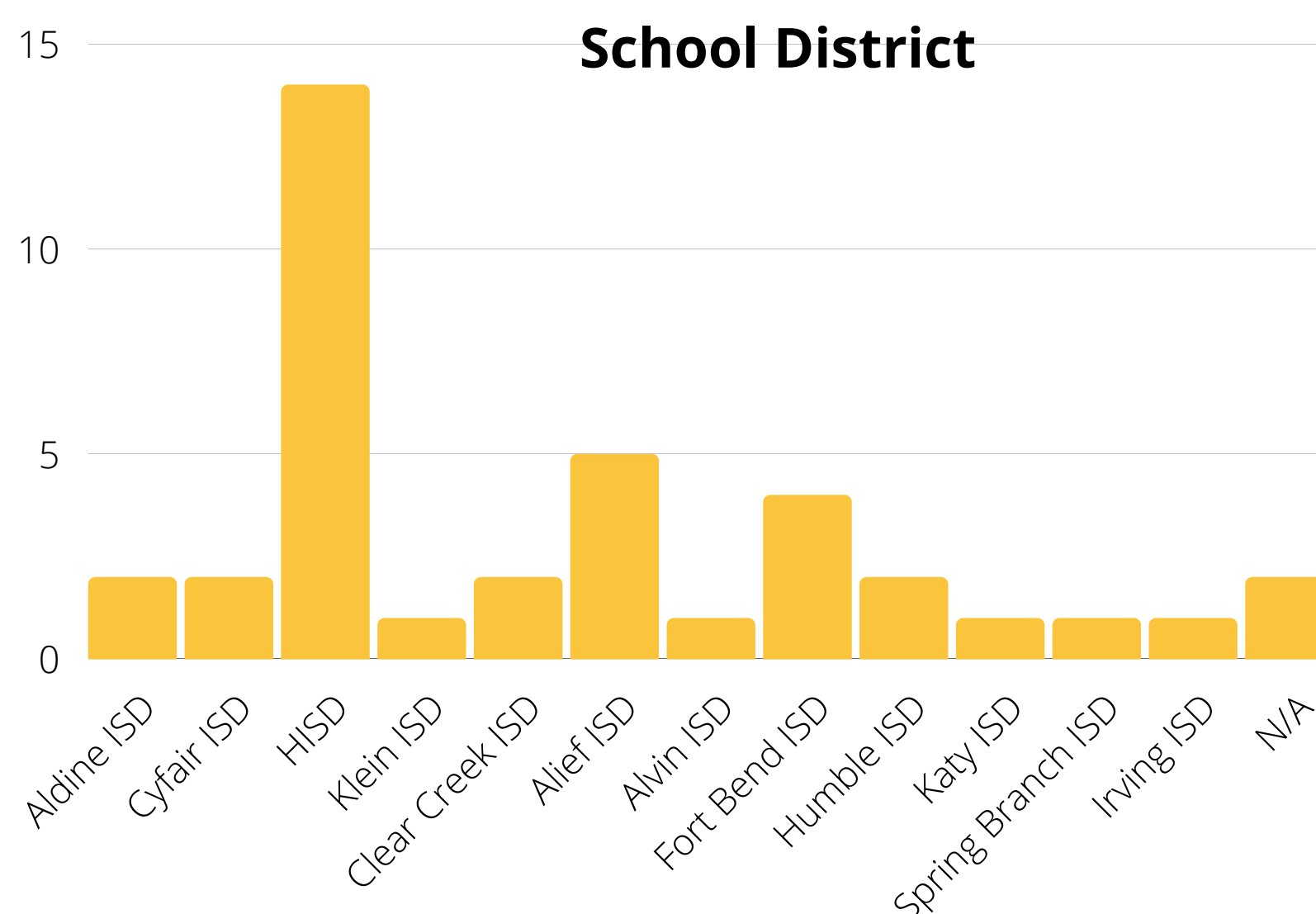
Gender



Race/Ethnicity



School District





PART 2

CFCI Houston Vision



Our Vision for a Child Friendly Houston

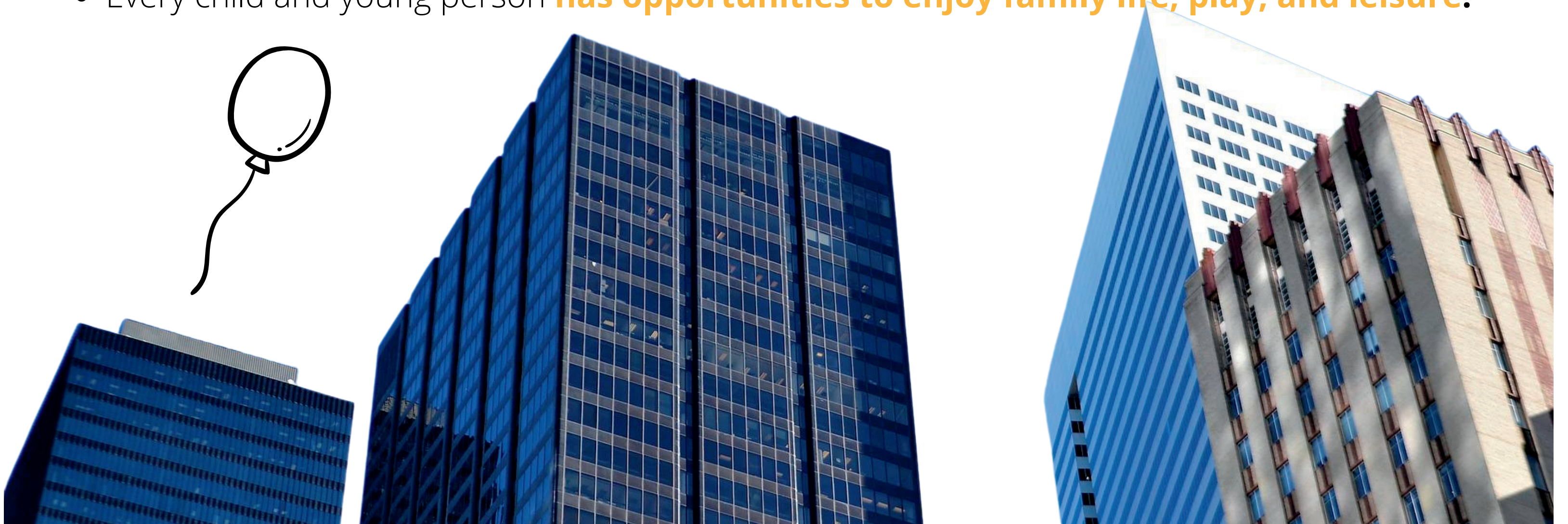
Houston is proud to be an inclusive and equitable city focused on strengthening community resilience for our youngest, our oldest, those with disabilities, and historically underinvested communities. **Children, ages 0-18, comprise 25% of Houston's total population and are some of our most vulnerable residents.** Children and their experiences reflect the vibrancy of the city and at the same time highlight the inefficiencies and inequities in its systems.

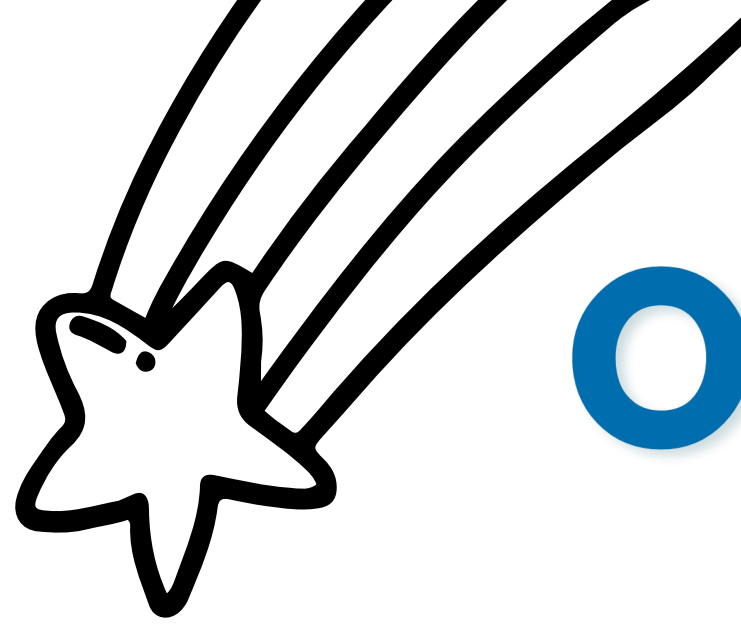
Our vision for a Child Friendly Houston is one where our city always places the needs of children first, listens to youth's challenges and recommendations, and advocates for and protects child rights. The City of Houston shares UNICEF's belief that only when the rights and voices of children and young people are integrated into public policies and programs will communities become truly "child-friendly."

We seek to address the lack of coordination and systemic and structural inequity currently preventing youth and families in Houston from flourishing. The success of these efforts will require strong grassroots and community involvement. City leaders must work alongside youth, parents/families, service providers, and stakeholders to ensure that children and youth are valued, respected, and included in creating a stronger, more resilient Houston.

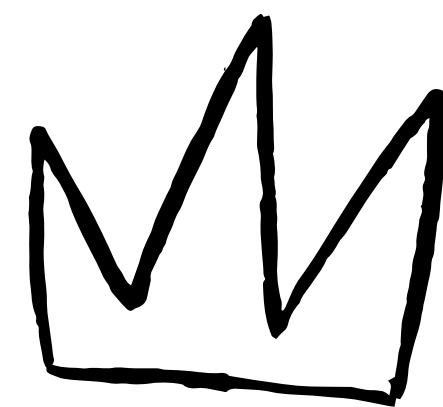
To that end, the City of Houston commits to prioritizing and supporting the needs of children by implementing the following goals of the Child Friendly Cities Initiative:

- Every child **is valued, respected, and treated fairly** within their communities and by local authorities.
- Every child and young person **has their voice, needs and priorities heard and taken into account** in public laws, policies, budgets, programs, and decisions that affect them.
- Every child and young person **has access to quality essential social services**, including health care, education, nutritional support, early childhood development, and justice and family support.
- Every child and young person **lives in a safe, secure, and clean environment.**
- Every child and young person **has opportunities to enjoy family life, play, and leisure.**





Our Vision for a Child Friendly Houston



Our vision also incorporates the voices of youth who tell us to:

- Create safer communities where children feel respected by the adults in their communities and have supportive environments to learn, play, and grow.
- Provide a legitimate seat at the table for youth voices where their ideas can serve to influence decisions and policy within the city.



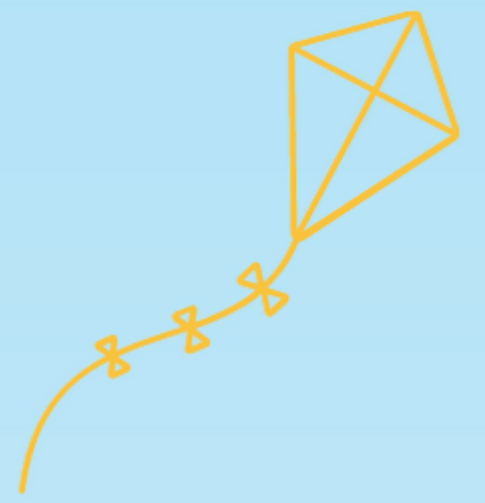
- Promote inclusivity and advocate for policies that prevent discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, and income levels.
- Improve access to quality education, fun enrichment activities, and career opportunities regardless of zip code, race, income, or immigration status.
- Provide easily accessible mental health resources.
- Collaborate with youth to create community-based solutions to the challenges facing youth and families.

The Child Friendly Cities Action Plan is a first step in the process to better align and coordinate systems of support to provide efficient and effective services that are essential for children. The plan also lays the foundation and provides recommendations for a permanent, lasting eco-system where children play active, essential parts in the creation of all city policies, plans, and programs.

We hope to strengthen the social safety net for Houston children by building relationships among youth and service providers and facilitating community dialogues between both groups around youth issues. **A successful Action Plan will design future interventions to improve children's wellness, and establish systems of communication where service providers and youth can collaborate to improve resource accessibility, emergency preparedness, and mental health services.**

As children encounter life's challenges including emergencies, disasters, and pandemics, they should not suffer quietly. They need to have access to caring adults and accessible support systems. When these are not available, it is our responsibility to empower youth to advocate for themselves and support them as they fight for their rights.

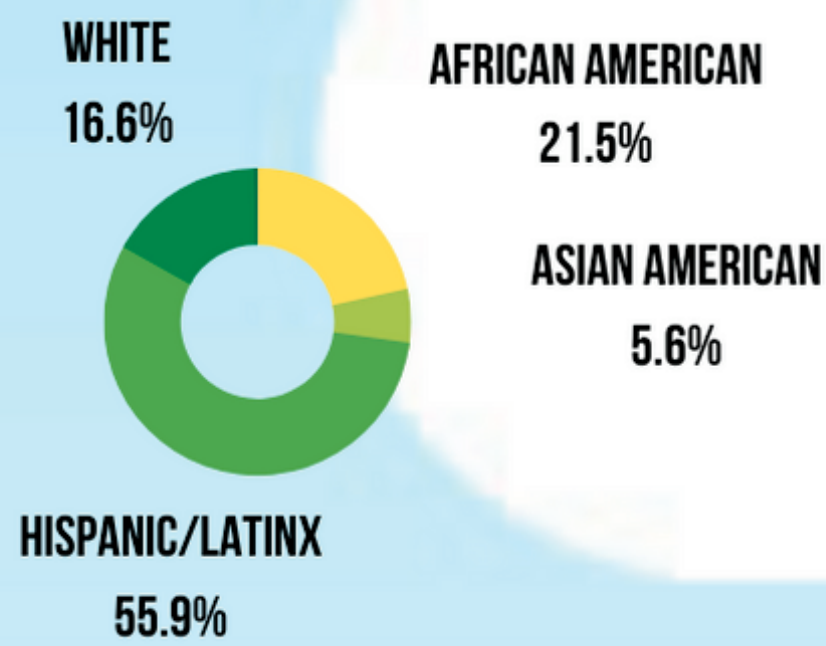
CITY OF HOUSTON CHILD EQUITY PROFILE



**TOTAL CHILDREN
POPULATION:
575,114**

0 - 4 YEARS OLD

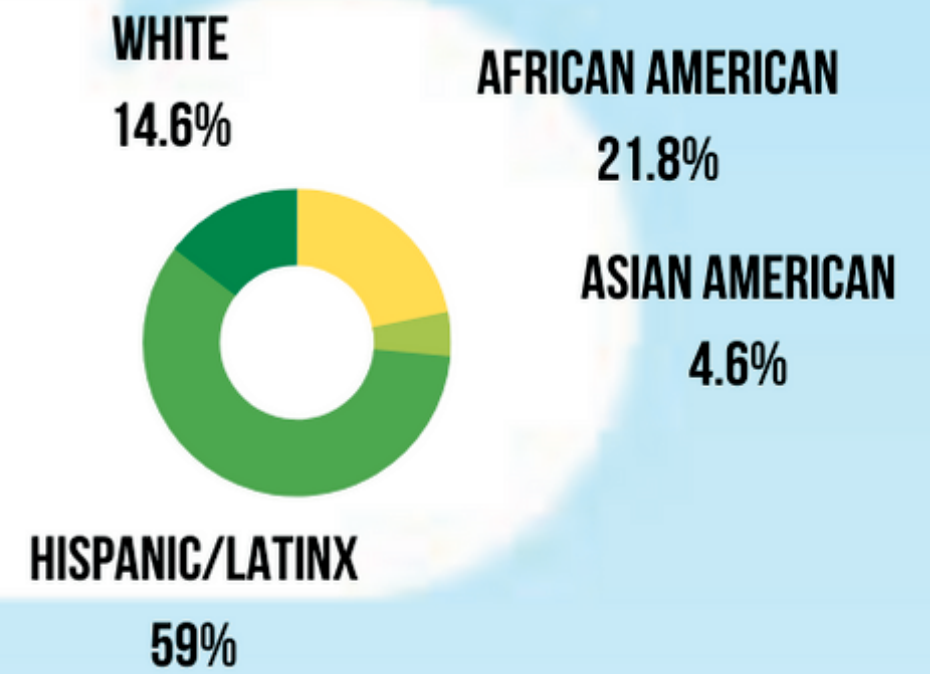
5 - 17 YEARS OLD



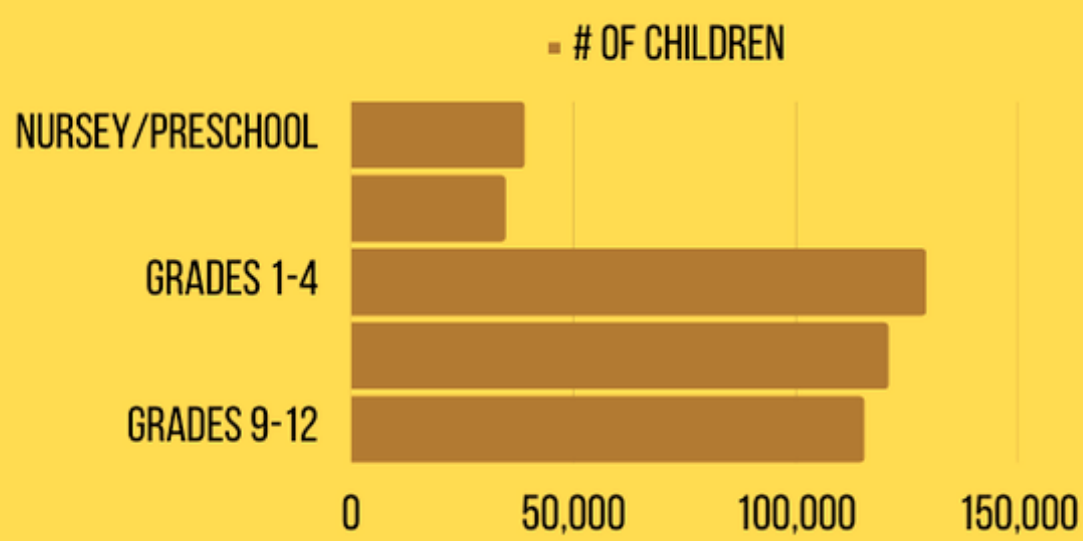
♀
49.3%



♂
50.7%



SCHOOL ENROLLMENT



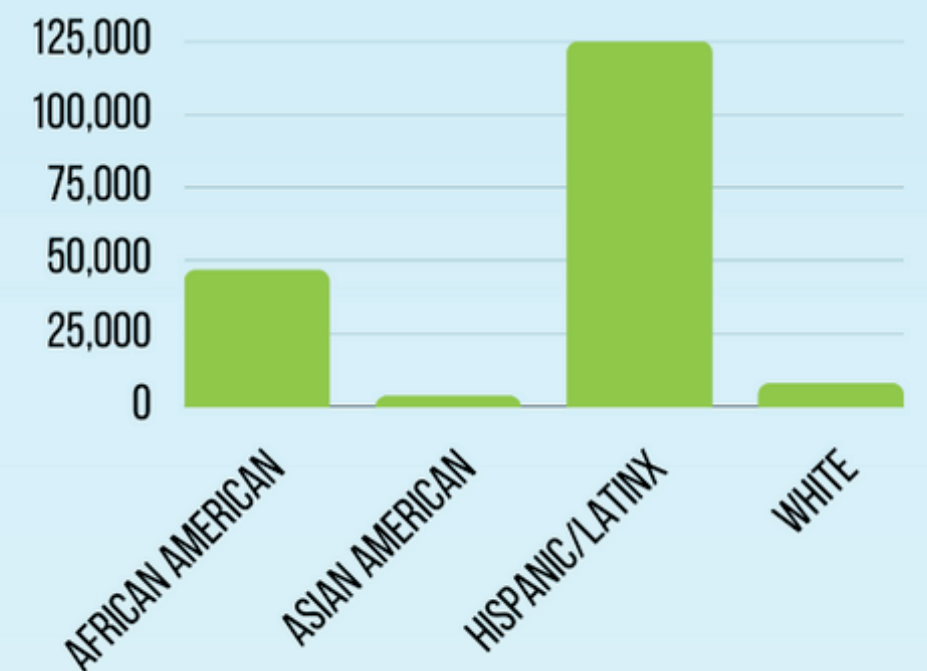
**CHILDREN WITH
DISABILITIES
IN HISD**
TOTAL: 15,469



CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

1/3
children in Houston live
below the poverty line

184,661
children aged 0-18 living in
poverty



43%

**CHILDREN IN
COH
LIVING WITH
SINGLE
PARENT**

TOTAL: 245,106

MIGRATION



53%

**CHILDREN WHO
SPEAK A
NON ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AT
HOME**

TOTAL: 210,000

52%

**CHILDREN
LIVING WITH
FOREIGN BORN
PARENTS**

TOTAL: 296,714

11%

**MIGRANT
CHILDREN**

TOTAL: 60,132

26%

**CHILDREN IN
IMMIGRANT
FAMILIES**

TOTAL: 57,000

CFCI Goal Areas

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) outlines children's rights and lists the principles and norms children need to thrive. The CFCI Goal Areas reflect the 54 articles of the CRC and provide a framework of action for the Child Friendly Cities Initiative.



Goal Area 1 describes **the right of a child to safety and inclusion**, and it calls for every child to be valued, respected, and treated equally within their communities and schools as well as by local governments, parents, and fellow young people. Additionally, it states it is the responsibility of governments to do all they can to ensure children are protected from all forms of violence, sexual and physical abuse, trafficking, neglect, and bad treatment. This goal area pledges to protect children with disabilities and their rights to play active community roles and live full lives.



Goal Area 2 articulates **the right of a child to civic participation** by stating that every child has the right to have their opinions and suggestions taken seriously by the government, school boards, parents, and civil society. This goal area is integral to all other goal areas as it pledges to include youth participation in decision-making on policies, programs, and matters concerning them in their communities. This goal area advises creating structures in local governments and civil society that promote young people's inclusion and meaningful participation.



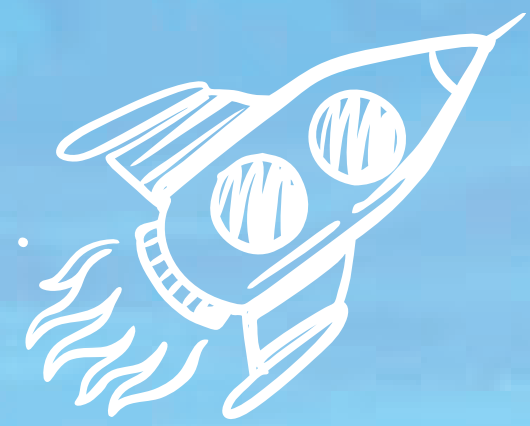
Goal Area 3 depicts **the right of a child to equitable social services**. In the United States, access to quality essential services heavily depends on the geographical area and the socioeconomic status in which the child or family lives. However, every child has a right to a standard of living that is adequate to meet their physical, social, and mental needs. This goal area commits to ensuring every young person has access to quality essential services including healthcare, healthy foods and nutrition, safe spaces for youth mental health, and quality education.



Goal Area 4 articulates **the right of a child to access safe living environments**. Access to affordable and secure housing is a major problem for many families. Additionally, natural disasters and environmental hazards have reached an all-time high due to climate change and urban planning practices. This goal area commits to ensuring every child has access to affordable and secure housing and a clean, safe, and sustainable environment for healthy development.



Goal Area 5 describes a **child's access to play and leisure opportunities**. It commits to ensuring every child has access to quality, public spaces for leisure and cultural activities in their community, as well as the ability to safely walk, ride a bicycle, and use public transport to visit places in the city. Young people should have numerous opportunities to participate in informal and organized sports and recreation activities through city-sponsored programs, and through community-based clubs. Additionally, this goal area safeguards the right for children with disabilities to live full lives and supports more accessibility to public parks and play areas.



PART 3

Priorities for Youth

minim *acurim*

Community Assessment Scorecard Results

The scorecards below represent the findings from the CFCI Community Assessments, where **219 youth, ages 13 to 18 years, from the City of Houston (COH) assessed their community conditions to determine the status of children’s rights.** The scorecards range from a low of 1 to a high of 10 and summarize the results across the five CFCI goal areas. Some of the lowest scorecards were determined to be priorities for change. Review CFCI Situational Analysis to learn more about the status of children’s rights in the COH.



CFCI Priority: Children's Participation

Goal Area 2 of the CFCI framework establishes every child's right to civic participation. UNICEF considers this goal area to be the foundation for which all other goal areas are realized, as children should be an inextricable part of the decision-making that informs local action towards the achievement of each CFCI goal area. This goal area reflects numerous articles set forth in the Convention Rights of the Child (CRC), including:



- Every child has the right to have a say in all matters affecting them and to have their opinions and suggestions taken seriously by the government, school boards, parents, and civil society.
- Every child must be free to say what they think and to seek and receive all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law.
- Every child has the right to meet with other children and to join organizations, as long as this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights.

“As important as it is to discuss youth participation with adults, it is equally important to talk about it with kids. We need to know that it is okay for us to share our concerns.”

- HS student at CFCI Youth Action Workshops

The CFCI process identified this goal area as the area in need of the most improvement in the City of Houston, especially with regards to bolstering youth involvement in decision-making on policies, programs, and matters concerning them in their communities. The CFCI Action Plan aims to address this issue area by increasing youth opportunities for civic engagement, raising awareness of the rights of children, and advocating for a children's budget and a permanent position for a children's advocate in the City of Houston.

Historically, the United States has struggled to acknowledge and support youth rights and youth activism. Youth have been a major force in the country's largest social movements, including Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 1960's, anti-war protests for the Vietnam War in the 1970's, and most recently the March for Our Lives, Black Lives Matter, and climate change movements. Yet, despite their active and significant role in driving meaningful change, youth still feel isolated from the decision-making in their communities and have faced resistance when voicing concerns.

CFCI Priority: Children's Participation

A notable example includes *Tinker v. Des Moines*, in which students were suspended from school for wearing black armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. The question of whether youth are even granted their first amendment right to freedom of speech is still one of great contention. The *B.L. v. Mahanoy Area School District* Supreme Court case in 2021 highlighted this issue when a student at Mahanoy Area High School in Pennsylvania was suspended for a social media post she made after failing to make the school's varsity cheerleading squad.



As part of the CFCI community assessments, 50% of survey respondents reported that “children’s ideas and concerns in the city and school decisions that affect them” are rarely or never heard. When asked about opportunities for involvement in city decision-making, youth articulated that they did not have many opportunities to impact city or community decision-making and expressed frustration about not being included. Based on sentiments shared in community assessments and the strong participation of Houston youth in CFCI and other organizations, it is evident that Houston has a large pool of engaged youth, yearning to become more involved and contribute to making Houston an ideal place to live.

“I’ve viewed many school board meetings and have noticed that it is mainly always adults and parents speaking on behalf of children rather than letting students speak.”

- High school student at CFCI Youth Action Workshops

CFCI Priority: Children's Participation

The CFCI government assessment also found several data points that emphasized the need for more civic participation and community engagement opportunities. Data from Understanding Houston reports that **across Harris, Montgomery, and Fort Bend counties, there are 3.2 social and civic organizations for more than 100,000 residents.** Additionally, some communities are less likely to vote. **Hispanic citizens were 13 and 22 percentage points less likely to be registered to vote than white or Black residents, respectively.**

Social and civic organizations can help create a strong sense of community and increase government and social trust. **This is very important in Houston as Black and Hispanic residents report much lower levels of social trust, 29% and 33.2%, respectfully, between neighbors and communities. This is in stark comparison to White residents who reported a 59.1% level of trust.** Although the Understanding Houston report did not include information on youth civic engagement, youth who participated in the community assessments echo its findings, as they expressed distrust in police and adults around them, as well as a need for more opportunities for civic involvement.

After-school and academic enrichment programs can aid children in increasing their self-confidence, finding their voice, and developing stronger community bonds. The City of Houston has worked with many organizations, such as Out 2 Learn, the YMCA of Greater Houston, Mayor's Youth Council, and March for Our Lives, which are interested in helping elevate the voices of youth. To improve children's overall well-being, it is imperative to highlight and support organizations such as these. When youth live in communities that seek to listen, and engage them in decisions that affect them, youth will develop trust with those around them, ask for help when they need it, and feel safe and welcomed in their communities.



CFCI Priority: Mental Health



Goal Area 3 of the CFCI framework states that “every child and young person has access to quality essential social services.” UNICEF considers children’s mental health services as essential for ensuring children’s survival and their ability to thrive and learn. This goal area reflects numerous articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that articulate children’s access to equitable social services, including:

- Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must work to provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment so that children can stay healthy. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this.
- Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical, social, and mental needs. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this.

The CFCI process identified these rights as priority areas in need for improvement in the City of Houston, specifically regarding improving youth’s access to mental health care. The CFCI Action Plan aims to address this issue area by connecting youth to the emotional support and mental health care they need.

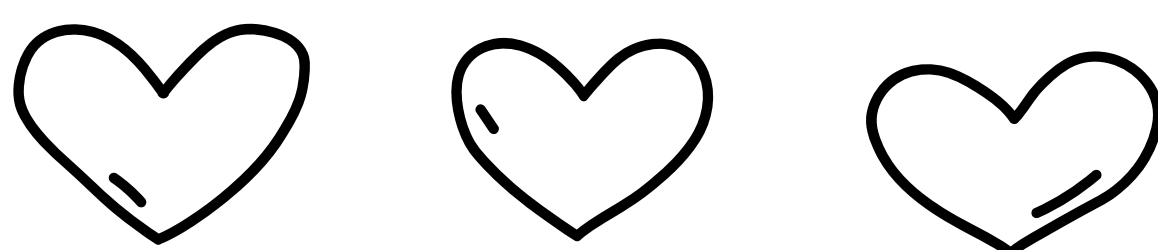
Mental health is one of the biggest challenges affecting youth in the United States and it is also one of the most neglected areas of public health. In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children’s Hospital Association (CHA) declared a national state of emergency in children’s mental health.

According to a Mental Health America report, youth are struggling the most with mental health, with youth ages 11 to 17 “more likely than any other age group to score for moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression.”

Additionally, this age group also has the highest rates of suicidal ideation of any age group. Rates are even higher for minority youth and those in the LGBTQ+ community.

“Our first priority should be to educate the public about mental health issues in children.”

-High school student at CFCI Youth Action Workshops



CFCI Priority: Mental Health

As demonstrated in the CFCI community assessments, youth mental health challenges are not only reflected in national statistics but are also a top issue affecting youth in Houston. The CFCI Youth and Family survey respondents mentioned more youth are increasingly struggling with mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a variety of other stressors including bullying, domestic abuse, academic pressures, poverty, and virtual learning. During the CFCI community workshops, many youth ranked “awareness of mental health care” low and mentioned having difficulties figuring out how and who to talk to about their mental health challenges.

The CFCI government assessment found several data points that emphasized the need for better mental health support locally. According to a national analysis, Texas ranks last out of 50 states for mental health access due to its residents having the least access to mental health care compared to the rest of the country. The Understanding Houston report found **there is only one mental health provider for every 731 residents in Harris County compared to the national average of one for every 350 residents.**

Challenges to youth’s mental health were further discussed at the CFCI Youth Action Workshops where participants discussed how social media, schoolwork, family issues, abuse, and quarantine negatively affected their mental health. They also listed various obstacles when trying to access mental health care, including:

- Cannot identify caring adults/school staff
- Unsupportive adult interactions
- Mental health stigma
- Lack of access to mental health care
- High costs of mental health support

Houston by the Numbers:

1 mental health
provider for every
731 residents in
Harris County

Source: Understanding Houston



CFCI Priority: Mental Health

During the workshops, many youth and service providers advocated for more school-based and community-based mental health services that are easily accessible and available for teens. Youth mentioned adults in school can offer better support for youth by providing them guidance or resources that could be beneficial for their mental health.

Youth also heavily emphasized the importance of addressing mental health stigmatization by making students feel safer about reaching out for help. **Ideas on how to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health were shared and included:**

- Hire and retain counselors in schools who demonstrate strong interest in children's mental health and can provide emotional support
- Train educators and school counselors on how to support youth and facilitate conversations on mental health
- Create campus cultures that normalize seeking mental health support
- Develop safe spaces in schools and in communities where youth can find mental health resources and discuss their personal challenges
- Educate and empower youth to identify trustworthy adults in school or their communities

Additional suggestions from youth and service providers during the intergenerational workshops included:

- Schools should have two kinds of counselors - one for academics and the other for mental health
- Provide mental health classes/curriculums for youth
- Youth should be screened more frequently for mental health needs
- Surveys that check-in on youth wellness should be conducted in schools on a monthly basis
- Provide accessible and up to date mental health resource lists
- Raising mental health awareness on social media outlets used by teens

Mental health support should probably come from a school setting because that is where students spend the most time and get most of their stress from."

- HS student at CFCI Youth Action Workshops

Throughout the CFCI workshops, **youth, and service providers emphasized the severe consequences of not addressing youth mental health challenges, since symptoms can worsen and negatively impact youths' ability to perform well in school, establish good relationships with others, and combat substance abuse.** Workshop participants also identified Mental Health First Aid and Mental Health America's Emotional Backpack Project, as programs that can provide resources and help youth, parents, service providers, and educators understand and respond to signs of mental health challenges. To improve children's overall well-being, as well academic outcomes, it is imperative that these trainings and programs are made more accessible to the community, and that youth connect to the mental health care they need.

CFCI Priority: Resource Accessibility and Emergency Preparedness



“We’ve had a turbulent history—floods! hurricanes!—and some students don’t understand what to do, it’s scary. A lot of students need to care for family, especially in underserved areas, and we need to know what they need in order to do that.”

- Service Provider at CFCI
Community Assessment
Workshops

Goal Area 4 of the CFCI Framework states, “every child and young person lives in a safe, secure and clean environment.” This Goal Area reflects various articles from the CRC that articulate children’s access to safe living environments, including:

- Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical, social, and mental needs. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this.
- Every child has the right to life. Governments must do all they can to make sure that children survive and develop to their full potential.

The CFCI process identified these rights as areas in need of improvement in the City of Houston, especially during times of emergencies and natural disasters. The CFCI Action Plan aims to address this issue area by improving access to basic needs resources, and emergency preparation information for youth ages 13-18.

Hurricane Harvey in 2017, the devastating winter storm Uri in February 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic have left behind a legacy of devastation for many Houstonians. As adults try to find stability in uncertain times, children’s lives are turned upside down and harmed by stress. The CFCI situational analysis depicted children’s increased vulnerability in the face of emergencies as it provided evidence of how added stressors impact youth’s academic, mental, and emotional well-being. Additionally, the CFCI Youth Action workshops shed light on the need for a child-centered emergency response and improved resource accessibility before, during, and after emergencies.

CFCI Priority: Resource Accessibility and Emergency Preparedness

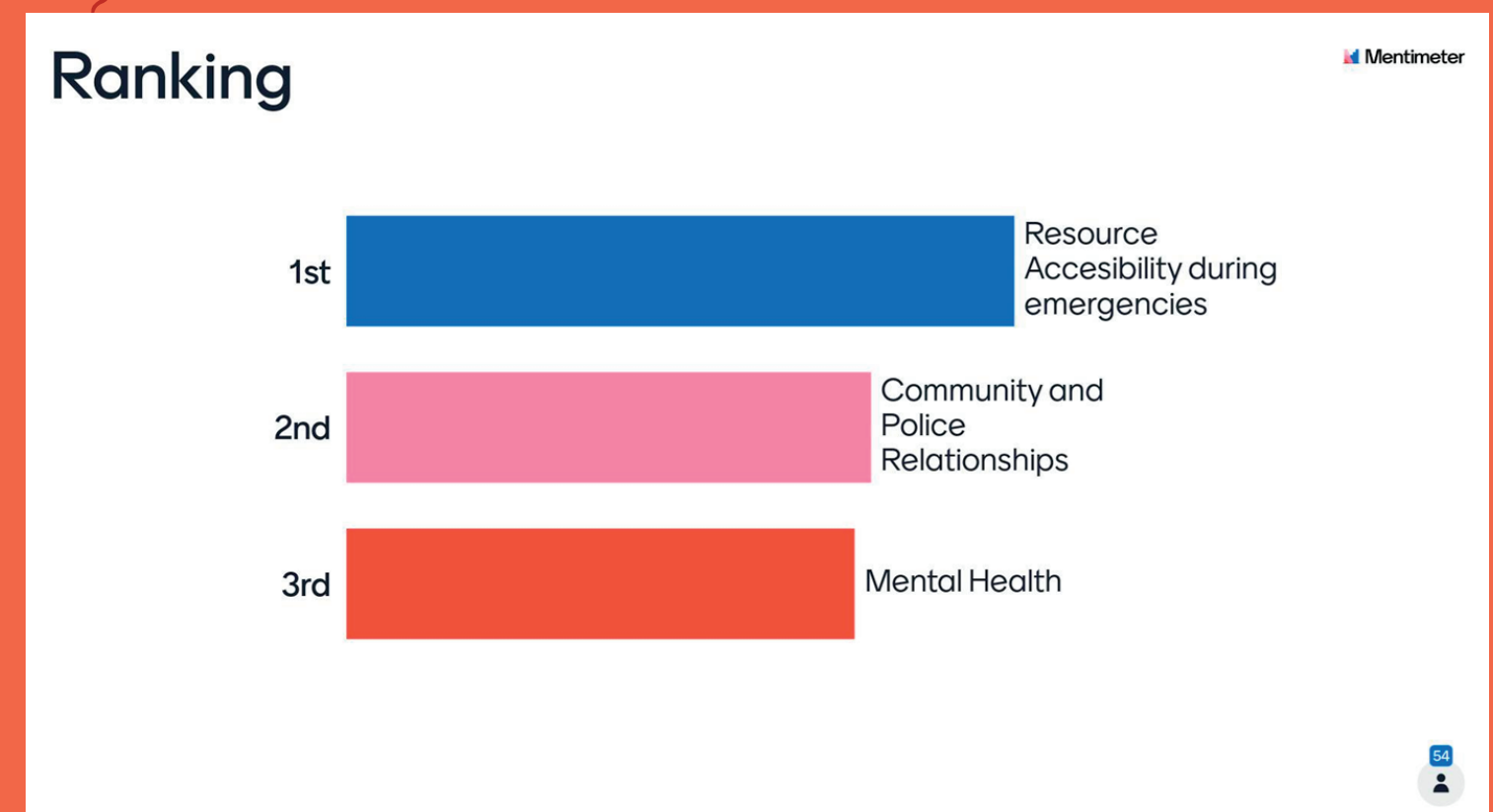
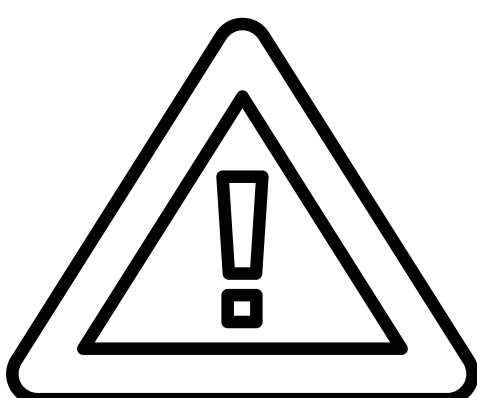
The CFCI government assessment highlights how Greater Houston residents are very likely to endure hardships during and after emergencies. **According to the Understanding Houston report, 58% of Greater Houston residents live in a census tract with medium-high vulnerability to the negative effects of disasters.** The report also mentions three reasons why emergency preparedness is important in the Greater Houston area:

- Houston has a high flood risk.
- Population is vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters.
- Ability to recover is uneven.

The lack of access to resources was also evident in the CFCI community assessments where survey respondents described how during emergencies, Houston children are left without academic enrichment opportunities, avenues for social interaction, and access to and delivery of basic needs and services, including food, water, clothing, shelter, Wi-Fi, and communication devices. During the COVID-19 pandemic for example, parents in the Houston area expressed concerns over not having the proper technology, space, and finances needed to support virtual learning in their homes. Computers and Wi-Fi became basic needs overnight and parents' concerns showed need for proper allocation of technology resources to combat the struggles during virtual learning.

During the CFCI Youth Action Workshops, youth expressed that running out of resources/necessities during an emergency is a big concern, especially when they lose access to Wi-Fi, electricity, or cellular service. The major challenges that youth face in terms of resource accessibility include:

- Youth feel that they do not have access to emergency preparation information and do not know how to cope with an ongoing emergency.
- Youth are unaware of where to locate resources in an emergency.
- Youth don't know who to contact when seeking resources and information.
- Youth are concerned with the stigma associated with accessing certain resources publicly and seek ways to have anonymity when reaching out for needed services.



Source: CFCI Youth Action Workshop in Fall 2021

CFCI Priority: Resource Accessibility and Emergency Preparedness

Some other key takeaways from the youth and service provider discussions include:

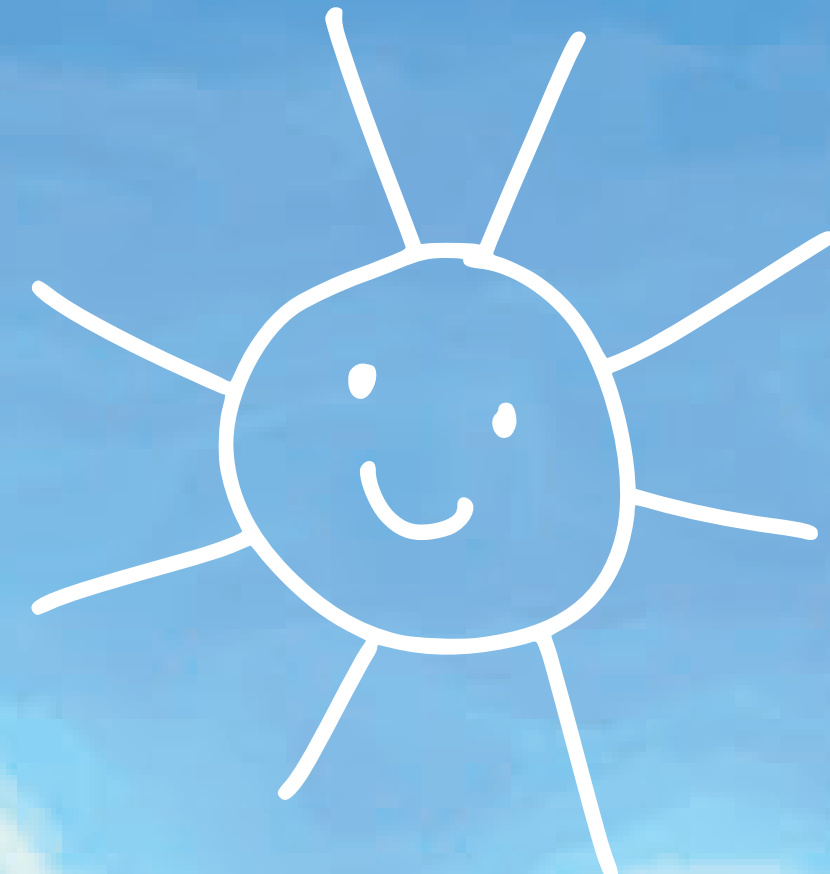
- Youth believe the community will assist them in the event of an emergency, but are concerned that without the right connections or timing, this isn't always possible.
- Youth normally get information about emergencies and resources from school, but they believe this has not always been an effective approach.
- Conversations between youth and service providers are informative for both parties and help bridge the resource accessibility gap.
- Neighborhood task forces could be effective in preparing communities for emergencies, offering a sense of connectedness and security, and representing community needs.
- In an emergency, hard-copy flyers around a community can direct people to help without depending on technology.
- Youth want youth-driven and youth-led responses to the challenges they are facing.

Based on the challenges, recommendations, and overall takeaways from the CFCI situational analysis and intergenerational workshops, the following goals should be prioritized:

- Focus on preparing and distributing information and resources thoroughly and before emergencies happen.
- Improve communications about emergency preparation and resource availability for youth including: who to contact, what actions to take, how to prepare, and where to find basic needs and resources, etc.
- Leverage tools like social media, TV commercials, flyers, and community discussions to connect and outreach directly with youth, specifically ages 13-18.

Due to the changing nature of emergencies, the city must create adaptable and flexible systems that can be modified and respond quickly to emerging youth needs and the diversity of disasters. Additionally, emergency preparedness and resource accessibility efforts must address the persistent inequities in Houston. Populations that are more vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters are Black, Hispanic, and low-income families. A successful child emergency plan must incorporate supports for marginalized communities to ensure equitable opportunities and improve resilience outcomes for all children.





PART 4

Plan of Action





CFCI Goal Area 2: Children’s Participation

Every child has their voice, needs and priorities heard and taken into account in public laws, policies, budgets, programs, and decisions that affect them.

Objective: Young people are involved in planning or decision making for their communities.

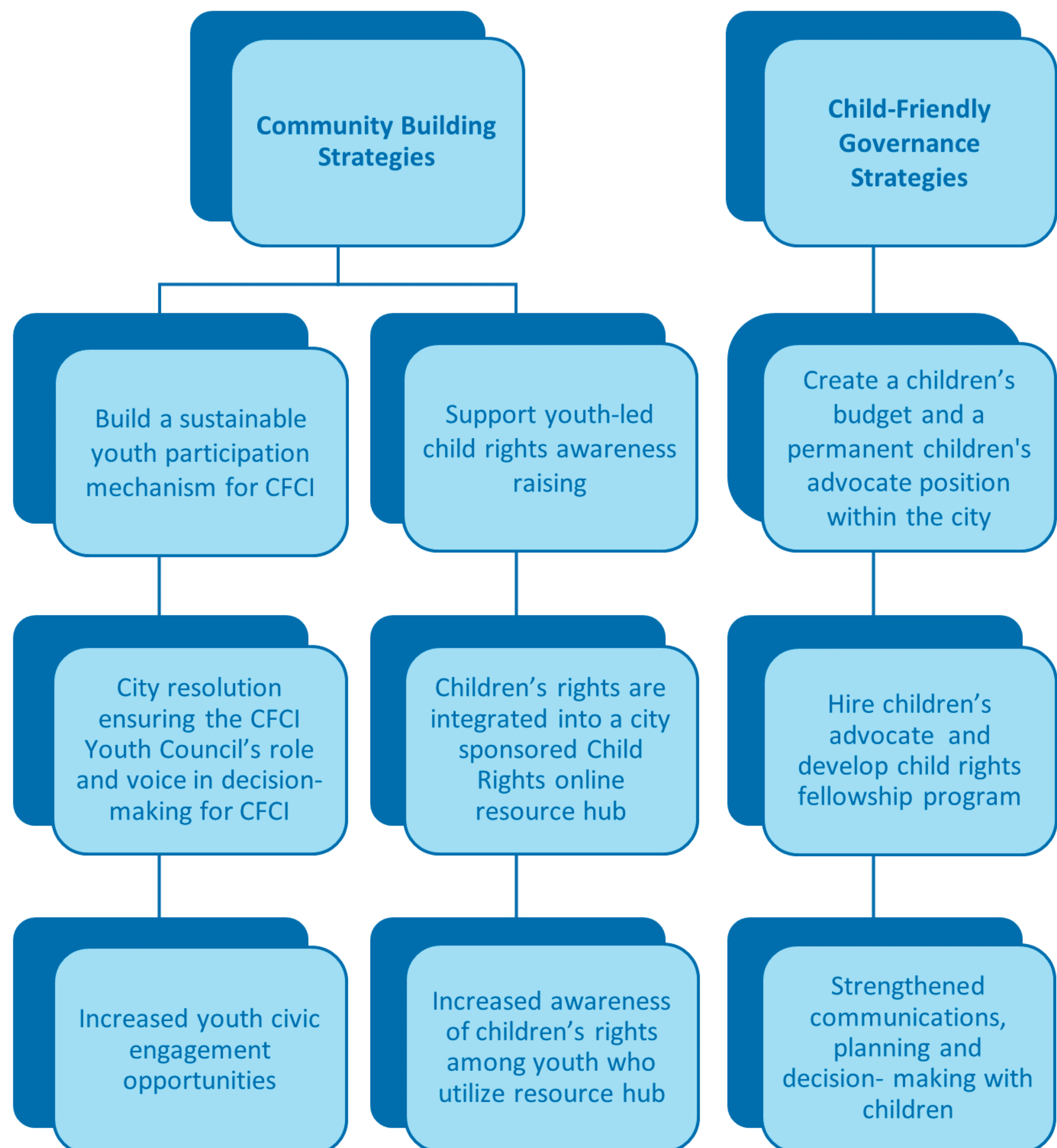
Target Group/Audience: Youth (ages 13-18 years)



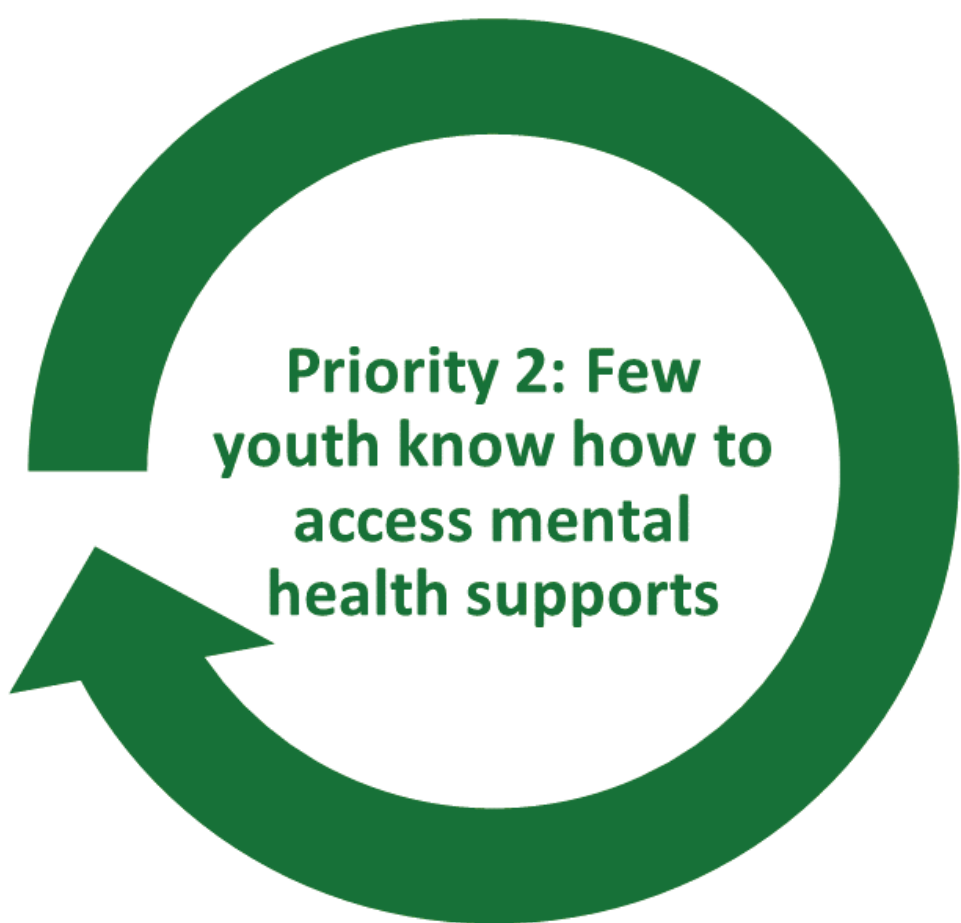
If we take action on these strategies...

We will see these results for children...

And we will impact children’s lives through...



Which strategies will we take action on?	What activities need to happen to realize this strategy?	Who is responsible for these activities?	What resources are needed?
<i>List strategies</i>	<i>List activities for one year and benchmarks for success</i>	<i>Identify which individuals, groups, or organizations should implement these activities</i>	<i>Identify human, financial, or other resources needed to implement the activities</i>
Build a sustainable youth participation mechanism for CFCI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Create the Houston CFCI Youth Council ✓ Formalize the partnership with Mayor’s Youth Council ✓ Establish partnerships with other youth leadership organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mayor’s Youth Council ✓ CFCI Youth Council ✓ CFCI Program Manager ✓ Other youth organizations who participate in CFCI community assessments (i.e., YMCA, Girls Inc., March for Our Lives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stipends and in-kind donations to incentivize youth engagement and participation in workshops, surveys, and focus groups • Full-time CFCI Program Manager and Youth Advisor to help organize CFCI Youth Council and engage other youth leadership organizations
Support youth-led child rights awareness raising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth present research findings of CFCI Situational Analysis • Launch Social Media Child Rights Campaign • CFCI Youth Council and service provider webinars and panels addressing CFCI Priorities • Establish partnerships that can advise and promote social media campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Volunteers and MOE Interns • CFCI Youth Council and Ambassadors • Mayor’s Youth Council • City and community partners including Mayor’s Office of Communications, HISD, Alief ISD, Aldine ISD, and youth programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stipend for youth, interns, and staff working on the CFCI website development • Funding for marketing and outreach materials • Branding and marketing consultant and intern
Create a children’s budget and a permanent advocate position within the city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find sustainable funding source for a permanent children’s advocate position • Develop fellowship program to assist and support CFCI projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor’s Office of Education • CFCI Leadership Team and Taskforce • Hire Houston Youth • UNICEF USA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part-time grant writer • Five-year budget to fund a full-time children’s advocate position and fellowship program stipends



CFCI Goal Area 3: Equitable Social Services

Every child has access to quality essential social services.

Objective: Service providers know how to better support youth and young people know how to get mental health care services (such as counseling).

Target Group/Audience: Youth (ages 13-18 years) and Youth Service Provider



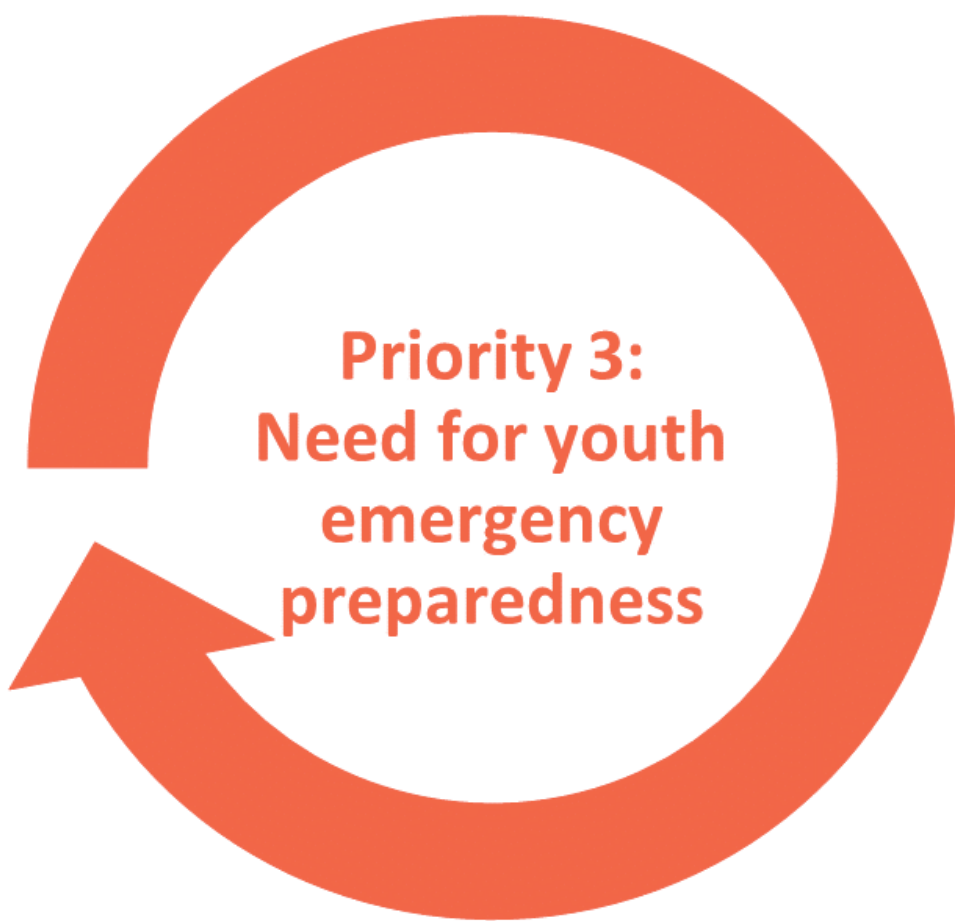
If we take action on these strategies...

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Which strategies will we take action on?	What activities need to happen to realize this strategy?	Who is responsible for these activities?	What resources are needed?
<i>List strategies</i>	<i>List activities for one year and benchmarks for success</i>	<i>Identify which individuals, groups, or organizations should implement these activities</i>	<i>Identify human, financial, or other resources needed to implement the activities</i>
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Host eight Youth Mental Health First Aid Trainings • Host three “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Supporting Children from Traumatic Background” trainings • Host two Mindfulness and Self-Care workshops for youth service providers • Present School Mental Health Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CFCI Program Manager ✓ The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD ✓ Texas Children’s Hospital ✓ Serenity Place, LLC ✓ Center for School Behavioral Health Conference ✓ Mental Health America of Greater Houston ✓ Region 4 ✓ Parks and Recreation Department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partnerships with mental health providers who can facilitate mental health trainings • Paid interns who can support CFCI Program Manager in hosting and evaluating trainings
Youth Civic Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth-led panels focused on topics to improve emotional support and access to mental health resources • Youth-led outreach campaign for emotional support line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CFCI and Mayor’s Youth Council ✓ CFCI Program Manager ✓ MOE Mental Health partners (i.e. the Harris Center, Mental Health America, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gift cards as incentives for participation in workshop and trainings • Stipends for youth facilitators
Community-based Partnerships for Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create CFCI Youth Mental Health Guide • Develop art and cultural projects to promote CFCI Youth Mental Health Guide • Integrate information of youth mental health into city emergency response and recovery • Develop Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ GAC Resource Identification Subcommittee • Be Well Be Connected • The Bureau of Youth and Adolescent Health via the COH Health Department • Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) • Arts Connect Houston • Mayor’s Office of Cultural Affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration time from city staff and key partners and stakeholders • Coordination of virtual gatherings • Artist and organization grants for Youth Mental Health Guide



CFCI Goal Area 4: Safe Living Environments

Every child lives in a safe, secure and clean environment.

Objective: If there is an emergency or hazard in the community, young people know what to do and where to find the resources they need.

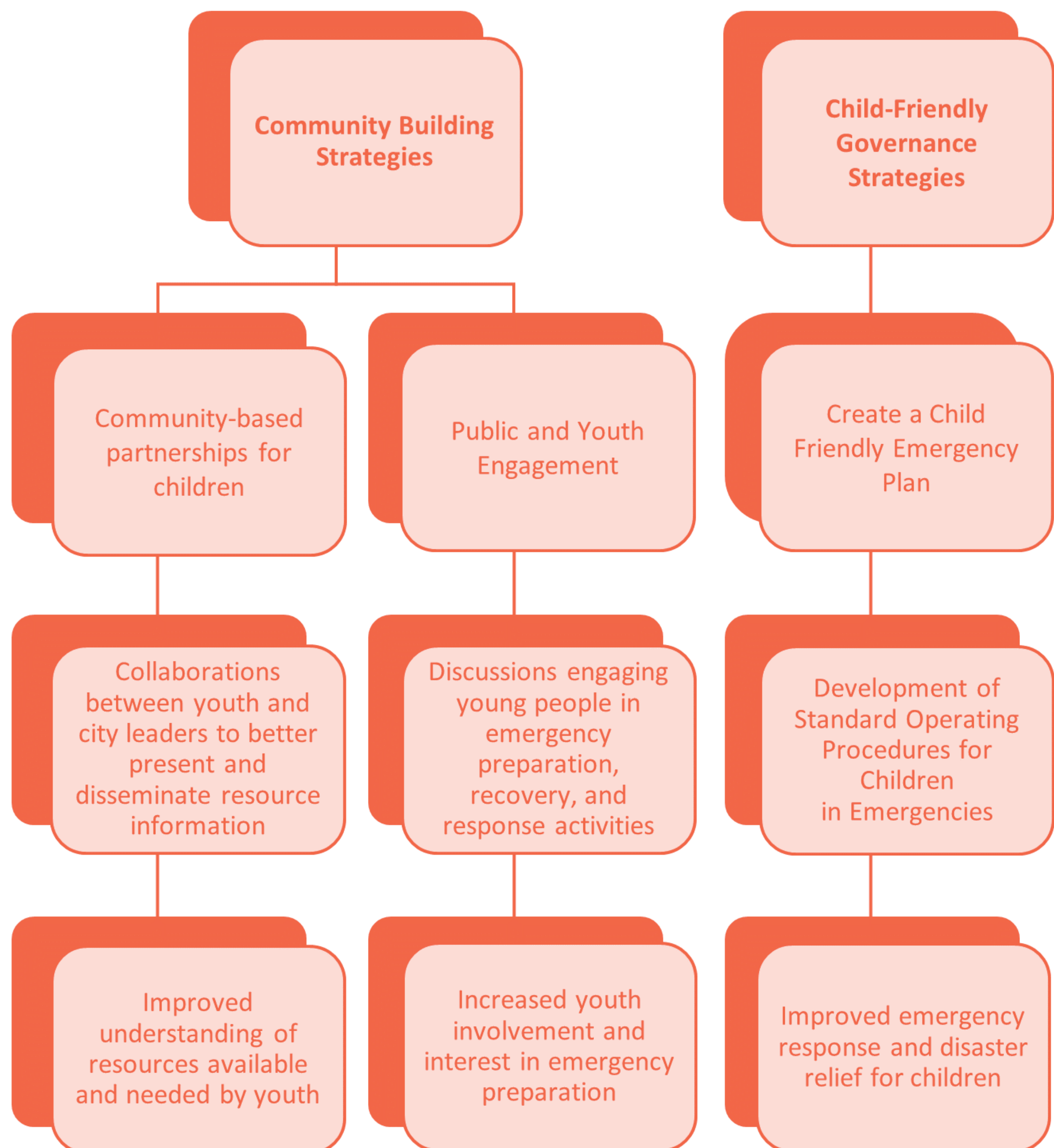
Target Group/Audience: Youth (ages 13-18 years) and Youth Service Providers



If we take action on these strategies...

We will see these results for children...

And we will impact children's lives through...



Which strategies will we take action on?	What activities need to happen to realize this strategy?	Who is responsible for these activities?	What resources are needed?
<i>List strategies</i>	<i>List activities for one year and benchmarks for success</i>	<i>Identify which individuals, groups, or organizations should implement these activities</i>	<i>Identify human, financial, or other resources needed to implement the activities</i>
Child Friendly Governance Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative meetings to develop Children’s Emergency Plan with Key Stakeholders • Create report and presentation regarding findings of the CFCI Emergency Preparedness Teen Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CFCI Program Manager ✓ COH Office of Emergency Management ✓ Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management ✓ Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response ✓ United Way ✓ UNICEF USA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration time from county, city staff, and key stakeholders • Part-time Emergency Prep Associate
Community-based Partnerships for Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Out 2 Learn Outreach Project • Update resource page in MOE website • Promote youth guide for navigating mental health care systems • Promote Hire Houston Youth job board and resource page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mayor’s Office of Education ✓ Hire Houston Youth ✓ Governance Advisory Council (GAC) Resource Identification Subcommittee ✓ United Way ✓ Out 2 Learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration time from county, city staff, and key stakeholders • Funding to promote the CFCI Youth Mental Health Guide widely
Civic Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct CFCI Emergency Preparedness Teen Survey • Youth research for Out 2 Learn Outreach Project • Youth meetings to evaluate resource-sharing tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CFCI Youth Council ✓ Mayor’s Youth Council • Youth Programs (i.e. Girls, Inc., YMCA) • Out 2 Learn • ProUnitas Inc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration time from county, city staff, and key stakeholders • Stipends or in-kind donations for youth participating civic engagements listed • Funding for promotional activities of the CFCI Youth Mental Health Guide



Appendix

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Houston Community Action Council

Houston Food Bank

Houston ISD Librarians

Interact Club, DeBakey High School

March for Our Lives Houston

Mayor's Office of Public Safety & Homeland Security

Mayor's Youth Council

Mental Health America of Greater Houston

My Brothers Keeper Initiative

The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD

Peace Club, Milby High School

Promoting Education Across the

Country (PEAC), University of Houston

YMCA Greater Houston

