

# BreakTHRU Program Report

Prepared by Bridget Farrell, OTR



## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Khristan Taylor, Sarah Waltz, Alyssa Bafidis, Christopher Lopez, and Alex Crosby who were instrumental in collecting and analyzing data for this report.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **BreakTHRU was developed through the collaboration of an occupational therapy student and a professional counseling student at THRU Project.**

Through a needs assessment that included a literature review and direct work with youth aging out of foster care, they identified a strong demand for mental health support among young adults with foster care backgrounds. In response, they launched psychoeducational group sessions. After earning their licensure, they were hired by THRU Project to formally establish BreakTHRU.

This program addresses the critical mental health needs of youth with foster care experience as:

- Up to 80% of youth in foster care face significant mental health challenges, compared with 20% of the general population.
- Individuals with foster care history are 5x more likely to experience PTSD.
- Youth with foster care histories are 3x more likely to die by suicide than non-foster peers.
- American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) recognized behavioral health as the largest unmet health need of youth in foster care.

BreakTHRU supports THRU Project's mission to empower youth with a history of foster care to build independent, successful futures by offering trauma-informed mental health services. The program offers tiered support, from universal prevention to intensive interventions, with referrals as needed.

Youth 14+ with foster care experience in the San Antonio area can access counseling, occupational therapy (OT), and support groups.

Program evaluation combined quantitative data from daily provider surveys and group sign-in sheets with qualitative insights from focus groups and client experience surveys. Over the past year, BreakTHRU services were accessed by 61 unique individuals, including:

- Individual OT provided to 18 youth
- Individual counseling provided to 23 youth
- Support groups provided to 36 youth

Feedback from stakeholders emphasized that BreakTHRU services are engaging and transformative, with BreakTHRU staff viewed as genuine and supportive.

During the first year of implementation, BreakTHRU faced several challenges, including difficulties with marketing, participant recruitment, and staffing changes. Barriers to youth participation included transportation, childcare, and timing of services. Additionally, staffing changes and limited experience in program evaluation impacted the scope of this report.

Despite these challenges, the program demonstrated success in its first year. Moving forward, it is recommended to seek additional funding, adjust service hours, and explore solutions for transportation and childcare to enhance program accessibility and growth.

# INTRODUCTION

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**This report covers the inaugural year for THRU Project’s BreakTHRU program. The report is developed for key stakeholders including current and future funders, program developers, THRU Project staff and board members. This program evaluation was conducted to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the BreakTHRU program to guide the next year of program implementation.**

# ABOUT THRU PROJECT

**THRU Project began as a grassroots initiative** co-founded in July of 2011 by a foster mother and a local business owner who had grown up in the foster care system. Both were intimately familiar with the challenges that exist for youth in foster care. They identified a critical need for a permanent organization to provide volunteers who could connect youth with a history of foster care to community resources to help them transition successfully into adulthood. In 2013, THRU Project gained its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. Mentoring was the first program THRU Project offered, connecting youth with histories

of foster care to caring and consistent adults who provide guidance and support. As time went on, the youth began to open up about other barriers in their lives. In response, THRU Project now offers access to cell phones, bus passes, life skills workshops, housing, and mental health support. Today, THRU Project serves more than 300 youth and young adults each year. Nearly 1,000 youth have relied on this organization through the last decade. THRU Project remains the only nonprofit in San Antonio dedicated to helping older youth, and those who have already aged out, successfully bridge the gap between foster care and adulthood.

## VISION

**THRU Project envisions a world where everyone with lived experience in foster care can achieve their fullest potential.**

## MISSION

**THRU Project empowers youth with a history of foster care to build independent, successful futures.**

## PROGRAMS



**Mentoring**



**Pass to Success**



**THRU Talks**



**Fostering Connections**



**Housing**



**BreakTHRU**



**Heart Gallery**

# PROGRAM DESCRIPTION



## History

The vision for BreakTHRU was established through the collaboration of an occupational therapy student and a professional counseling student during their capstone and internship experiences at the THRU Project. A needs assessment, which included direct work with foster youth and a review of relevant literature, revealed a significant demand for mental health support among young adults with foster care backgrounds. In response, they launched psychoeducational group sessions. After obtaining their licensure, both were hired by the THRU Project to formally develop BreakTHRU, funded by private donations from Steve O'Donnell and Denise O'Donnell.

The program officially launched on October 1, 2023. Since then, the BreakTHRU team has grown to include an intake coordinator who has lived experience in foster care and THRU Project's programs. This role has been instrumental in connecting youth to BreakTHRU services and shaping the program's processes. Though the original professional counseling associate has moved on, counseling services are now provided by a licensed clinical social worker. Over the past year, interns from social work, occupational therapy, and public health have also contributed to the program's continued growth.

**BreakTHRU is designed to provide low-barrier trauma-informed mental health support to youth and young adults at least 14 years old with a history of foster care who live in San Antonio or the surrounding area. Services are offered in-person or virtually at no cost to youth.**

### Counseling

Talk-based therapy to improve coping abilities and manage thoughts, feelings, and stress.

### Occupational Therapy

Activity-based therapy to learn skills and habits that support mental wellbeing.

### Support Groups

Group-based therapy to connect with others who have similar experiences and improve coping abilities.

# BREAKTHRU CONTRIBUTORS



Meet past and current members of the BreakTHRU team whose expertise, passion, and collaboration drove the success of the program's first year. Special thanks to THRU Project staff and interns whose support was essential.



**Alex Crosby, LPC-A**  
Counselor



**Bridget Farrell, OTR**  
Occupational Therapist



**Sarah Waltz, LCSW**  
Counselor



**Khristan Taylor**  
Intake Coordinator



# PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

## 1

### **Break down barriers to mental health care for youth with foster care experiences.**

BreakTHRU provides mental health care at no-cost to youth, regardless of insurance status. Services are provided in the community, virtually, or in-office according to the youth's needs. THRU Project is a trusted organization in the San Antonio community and in the lives of youth with a history of foster care.

## 2

### **Provide trauma-informed mental health care through tiered support.**

Tiered support is provided through (1) universal interventions to promote mental health including newsletters, staff training, and wellness events, (2) targeted interventions such as support groups and OT, and (3) intensive interventions through individual counseling or referral to treatment.

## 3

### **Observe improved wellbeing in youth receiving services.**

BreakTHRU focuses on providing high-quality, client-centered care tailored to each participant's needs. Progress toward improved wellbeing is evaluated through individual goal tracking and standardized assessments based on professional guidelines. BreakTHRU's goal is to ensure youth with foster care histories experience the mental wellbeing they are seeking.

## 4

### **Initiate wellbeing support for additional stakeholders.**

BreakTHRU aims to support staff wellness through team-building exercises, wellness activities, education, and access to resources. The program also sees an opportunity to support volunteer mentors through training and peer support groups. Additionally, BreakTHRU envisions creating community wellness supports through education and training of community partners.

*Note.* Superscripts in the evaluation summary indicate which program objectives each metric and theme represent.

# PROGRAM EVALUATION

The program evaluation was conducted to measure progress toward program objectives, inform program improvements, and demonstrate program needs for funding purposes.

## Methods and Findings

Quantitative data was collected from two primary sources: daily surveys completed by program providers and group sign-in sheets, with all data verified against electronic health records in Tebra, the documentation and scheduling software used by BreakTHRU staff. In the first year, the program tracked several metrics to assess impact and reach:

- **Service Participation**<sup>1,2</sup>: This includes the unduplicated number of young adults served, as well as the count of young adults who utilized each service by attending at least one session for counseling, occupational therapy, or support groups.
- **Dual Participation**<sup>1,2</sup>: Data captured the number of individuals who participated in both counseling and occupational therapy, as well as young adults who attended both individual and group sessions.
- **Session Counts**<sup>1,2</sup>: The total number of group and individual sessions was recorded, with further breakdown by service type.
- **Housing Program Overlap**<sup>2,3</sup>: The evaluation also tracked the number of participants who were enrolled in both BreakTHRU services and a THRU Project housing program.

Qualitative data was gathered from multiple sources: a focus group with BreakTHRU participants hosted by THRU Project leadership,

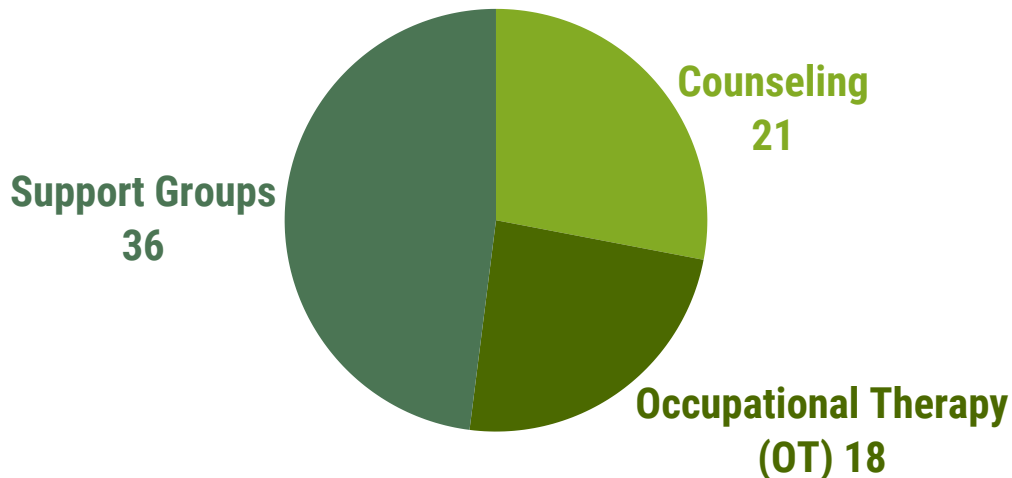
participant experience surveys distributed through Tebra, anonymous paper surveys from group sessions, unsolicited feedback from clients, provider assessment of client progress, and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis completed by THRU Project's development team, program leadership, and BreakTHRU staff. Key themes emerged related to program objectives:

- **BreakTHRU Services and Staff**<sup>1,2</sup>: Clients described the services as engaging, transformative, and safe, and highlighted staff as genuine, supportive, and trustworthy.
- **Barriers to Participation**<sup>1</sup>: Challenges such as transportation, childcare, and communication access were noted, guiding areas for potential improvement in reducing barriers.
- **Expanded Session Offerings**<sup>1,2</sup>: The need for more group and time options was identified, supporting future program adjustments
- **Celebrate Small Victories**<sup>3</sup>: BreakTHRU providers and clients recognize improved well-being in small changes, such as applying skills learned in therapy to daily life, reporting improvement or increased satisfaction during sessions, and expressing joy and hope.

Community wellness activities were informally recorded through reflection and categorized as presentations<sup>4</sup>, student partners<sup>1</sup>, and community partners<sup>1,2,4</sup>.

# BY THE NUMBERS

## PARTICIPANTS BY SERVICE



*Note.* In this graph, participants who used multiple services are counted in each relevant category.

**61**

**Total Youth Served**

**265+**

**Individual Sessions**

**10**

**Group Sessions**

A total of 61 unique individuals were served across our three services in BreakTHRU. Of these individuals, 34.4% (n=21) participate in THRU Project's housing programs. The total number of individual sessions is unknown due to some data being lost following the departure of the initial counselor. Based on the available data, 150 individual OT sessions and at least 115 individual counseling sessions occurred. Some participants utilized more than one service, including eight young adults who attended both counseling and occupational therapy, and another eight young adults who attended individual and group sessions.

Support group activities included interdisciplinary group series on stress management during the holidays, a wellness event featuring yoga, physical fitness, music therapy, and therapeutic art opportunities in the community, an educational group on money management hosted by a community partner, and an occupational therapy group series focused on mental health practices. A total of 11 individuals attended more than one group session.

# BY THE STORIES

## **Teaching a young adult to manage stress through mindfulness meditation.**

Guided meditation was introduced during therapy sessions, with the therapist typically selecting and playing the meditation from their computer. A few weeks into therapy, the young adult took the initiative to lead a meditation from an app on their personal device and reported using this app for guided meditation between sessions.

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## **Adapting the environment to improve sleep for mental health support.**

A young adult expressed difficulties with falling and staying asleep, common symptoms of mental health challenges. They worked with the occupational therapist to determine their ideal sleep environment, identifying the need for a darker, cooler bedroom, and problem-solved ways to address these needs. The young adult implemented a few of the strategies identified which led to better sleep through the night, increasing their satisfaction with sleep from a rating of 1/10 to 9/10.

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## **Teaching transportation and coping skills to a young adult with anxiety.**

New to San Antonio, a young adult's only form of transportation was walking or taking the bus, and they were unfamiliar with the local bus system. They were afraid to get lost in the city and experience anxiety being around people on the bus. The young adult worked with the occupational therapist to develop coping strategies and learn to navigate the bus system, which led the young adult to ride the bus independently outside of therapy sessions to meet up with friends.

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## **Young adult benefits from the collaborative approach of counseling and OT.**

A young adult participating in counseling and OT was seeking support for their family relationships. In counseling, the young adult processed emotions related to family relationships; in OT, they learned healthy communication and boundary-setting skills. This collaborative approach empowered the young adult to initiate difficult conversations with their family and inspired their family to attend therapy sessions.

# COMMUNITY IMPACT

**Community wellness incorporates additional program activities** including presentations by BreakTHRU providers, partnerships with student volunteers and interns, and connections with community organizations for recruitment, referrals, and group events.

## PRESENTATIONS

### Effective Tools for Your Wellness Toolbox

**PeerFest · Grapevine, TX**

An in-person conference session exploring the impact of daily activities, thoughts, sensory experiences, and environment on wellness for adults with lived experience of mental illness.

### Bridging the Gap: Foster Care to Adulthood

**UT Health School of Public Health · Houston, TX**

A virtual guest lecture for public health graduate students across Texas on issues and challenges of working with youth and young adults with foster care backgrounds.

## STUDENT PARTNERS

### Social Work Intern

In August 2024, a Licensed Master Social Worker began offering individual counseling services to young adults outside of office hours under the supervision of a BreakTHRU provider. Their services were included in the total counseling numbers previously reported.

### Occupational Therapy Students

Graduate OT students from UT Health San Antonio volunteered to support THRU Project's resource fair in October 2023. An OT student from Texas Woman's University completed their doctoral capstone experience at THRU Project under the supervision of a BreakTHRU provider from January to April 2024, creating digital tools to support youth and young adults in money management, home and pet care, and cooking and cleaning.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS



# VOICES OF IMPACT

"I'm just starting my therapy but Alex has been an absolute godsend! I appreciate her and her dedication towards her clients! I hope she sees that even one meeting can help change someone's insight. Thank you!"

**Counseling Participant**

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"Sarah and I have only had two sessions so far but from session one she made me feel comfortable and I trust her. So far out of all of my CPS therapists she is by far the best."

**Counseling Participant**

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"Bridget is amazing! She has helped me organize and better my life in ways I thought would never happen. I am so grateful for her!"

**OT Participant**

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"I always feel like no one understands me and the things I've been through, but that's not the case here."

**Group Participant**

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"Sometimes I feel like I have no friends, but then I look around here and that's not true because I have you all."

**Group Participant**

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"Your session last night was very engaging and I enjoyed it very much. Good work!"

**Group Participant**

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"Thank you again so much. You came so prepared and the curriculum was engaging. Please feel free to come back again!"

**Community Partner**

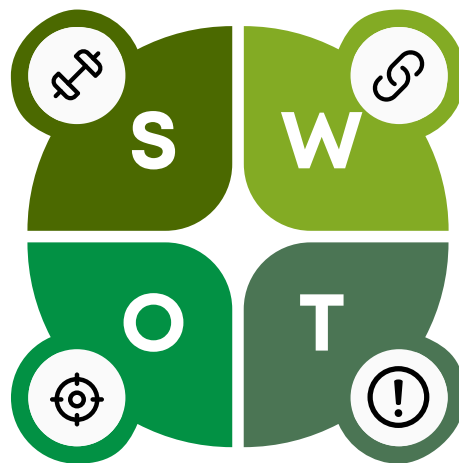
# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Strengths

- Reduced barriers to mental health support
- No pressure for no shows or cancellations
- Trauma-informed care
- Occupational therapy
- Multidisciplinary team
- Welcoming, passionate, genuine staff
- Prompt connection to resources
- Committed to continuing education
- Welcome students and interns
- Specialize in the foster care population
- Staff well-supported, low risk for burnout

## Weaknesses

- Limited hours of operation
- Transportation and childcare barriers
- Limited space for concurrent appointments
- Internet-based scheduling and communication
- Electronic health record
- Systematic data collection
- Stakeholder knowledge of BreakTHRU program and HIPAA
- Lack Spanish-speaking clinicians



## Opportunities

- Funding through grants
- Interns to expand hours of operation
- Contractors or additional staff
- Strategic partnerships with other youth-serving organizations
- Support for mentors
- Community education
- Professional development for providers
- Inclusion of providers in funding
- Marketing program
- Consistent target population for services

## Threats

- Stigma
- Staff turnover
- Funding
- Competing for available resources

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## The program evaluation indicates several key recommendations to strengthen BreakTHRU services.

The program should continue providing counseling, occupational therapy, and support groups, as these services effectively deliver trauma-informed care and participants have expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage, including additional group sessions and expanded availability outside regular business hours. Maintaining both in-person and virtual options will also support accessibility, while partnerships with students and interns can support program growth.

In the next year, several enhancements are planned:

- **Opportunities for Engagement:** Increase the number and frequency of group sessions, will require additional funding for transportation, food, and childcare to sustain participation. New OT and social work interns will increase service capacity and scheduling flexibility.
- **Wellness Events:** Host two events to promote wellness skills for THRU Project participants.
- **Electronic Health Record:** Explore EHRs that are cost-effective, user-friendly, and better suited to program needs.

Other recommendations for program development include:

- **Community Partnerships:** Partner with local organizations and colleges to provide peer support and group services.
- **Funding Initiatives:** Seek grants and fundraising to support service expansion.
- **Reduce Barriers:** Consider providing services at additional locations for better accessibility and partnering with childcare providers.
- **Staffing:** Recruit additional providers or contractors, particularly Spanish-speaking individuals.
- **Mentor Support:** Develop resources to support the well-being of volunteer mentors.

For future program evaluations, with point-of-service data collection tools and standard operating procedures now in place, reporting is expected to be more accurate and efficient. To further enhance feedback and measure impact:

- Conduct an annual focus group or post-service surveys to capture participant feedback.
- Begin tracking retention and therapy completion rates.
- Formally record community impact, including partnerships, presentations, and outreach efforts.



# CONCLUSION

## Limitations


The scope of this report is constrained by the limitations of the program evaluation process. Providers had limited experience with data collection and reporting, data was collected retrospectively, and some data was lost following the departure of the initial counselor. Additionally, qualitative feedback primarily came from returning clients, which limited our understanding of the experiences of young adults who showed interest but never attended a session or those who started attending but discontinued before completing the therapeutic process. Staff also encountered challenges in developing data collection tools and adapting to the electronic health record's (EHR) practice management features.

**In summary, this evaluation highlights BreakTHRU's effectiveness in delivering trauma-informed support to young adults with a history of foster care. Expanding group sessions, service hours, and wellness resources will boost engagement, while strengthening partnerships, securing funding, and improving data collection will drive sustainable growth. Addressing these opportunities will further enhance the program's positive impact on participants' well-being.**



## **THRU Project's BreakTHRU Program**

 <https://www.thruproject.org/breakthru/>

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 @thruproject

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