HEART GALLERIES OF TEXAS

HGTX.org

Permanency Starts with Family: *Texas Leads the Way*

Every day, nearly **5,000** children in Texas are waiting to be adopted from the foster care system. Of these, approximately **1,500** require targeted advocacy beyond traditional recruitment, often teens, sibling groups, or children with complex medical needs. Sharing portraits and stories, heart galleries utilize photo exhibits to spark connection and engage communities.

Heart Galleries of Texas (HGTX) was championed by the Texas Legislature in 2023 to address the pressing need for all youth to have a family while ensuring **transparency and accountability.** HGTX is recognized as a national leader – we are proud of our work to put youth voice, choice, and safety at the forefront.

WHAT WE ARE DOING:

- Advancing child protection
- Centering youth voice
- Ensuring best practices, quality, and consistency
- Establishing the gold-standard consent model
- Providing post-adoptive support and services

HOW DOES HGTX WORK?

HGTX contracts with 11 regionally well-positioned nonprofit partners to run regional heart galleries. HGTX provides training, support, and access to resources to build and strengthen local heart galleries and their communities.

The work doesn't end there...

Building a family can sometimes take unexpected turns, and we know support matters long after adoption is finalized. HGTX supports post-adoptive services to help keep families together, healthy, and stable.

The work of heart galleries is critical. Youth aging out of care face exponentially higher risks of homelessness, exploitation, incarceration, and early mortality when they lack permanent connections.

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MYTH V. FACT:

Myths	Facts
Youth are placed in heart galleries, even if they don't want to be there.	**Texas' robust youth consent model was developed in partnership with people with lived experience and is a recognized guide by other states.** The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), local community-based care organizations, and caseworkers all work together to identify youth who may want to be involved with their local heart gallery. But the decision to engage in a heart gallery is entirely up to the youth. The model requires that youth be given the opportunity to participate in narrative development, choose images, review bios, and withdraw at any time.
Youth are too developmentally immature to make informed decisions about participating in heart galleries.	**HGTX operates from a trauma-informed approach that emphasizes youth voice and choice.** Rapid neurobiological growth during adolescence offers an opportunity to scaffold conversations about consent, enabling youth to make informed choices about their futures. Youth growth should be supported and encouraged, not used as a reason to deny opportunities.
Youth featured in heart galleries are at higher risk for exploitation.	**There is no evidence to suggest that youth featured in a HGTX program are at a higher risk of trafficking, but we do know this risk is higher for the 800 youth that age out of foster care each year in Texas without permanent connections.** Heart galleries preventatively fight trafficking by connecting youth to permanent supports that guard against youth falling prey to exploitive adults. Texas has invested significant resources in recent years to address exploitation of youth, leading to gold-standard trainings, improved practices and standards, and better resources, making Texas a leader in breaking this cycle. Our team works closely with specialists from DFPS, the Office of the Governor, and the Texas Center of Child and Family Studies to ensure we are protecting these youth.
Youth in heart galleries are at higher risk of exploitation via AI "deep fakes."	**There is no evidence that photolistings pose any systemic harm to youth; however, we take digital safety seriously.** HGTX is working closely with DFPS and cybersecurity experts to evaluate and strengthen industry best practices while staying ahead of emerging threats. This includes exploring tools such as, scraping technology and bot protections to limit AI crawlers and automated activity, as well as enhanced image safeguards to reduce the ability to copy or download files. Data shows that the single best way to reduce risk of exploitation is through permanent, loving family connections, which is something HGTX is committed to facilitating.
Heart galleries lack oversight and are representing children inconsistently across the state.	**Heart galleries of Texas was established to standardize and strengthen best practices across local heart galleries.** Part of that standardization is a continuous examination of and development of best practices. Before HGTX, the absence of a statewide network made consistent monitoring, support, and best-practice implementation nearly impossible. HGTX now contracts with 11 experienced regional nonprofits to support their heart galleries. This foresight of the Legislature has advanced consistency and quality across the state.

Together, Texas has created the most forward-thinking and protective heart gallery model in the nation. Most importantly, last year, **324 youth** were removed from heart galleries when they found adoptive homes.