

# New institute for brain, mental health research advances in Texas House

Modeled on the cancer institute, it also would launch with a \$3 billion endowment.



Dr. Madhukar Trivedi, director of the Center for Depression Research and Clinical Care at UT Southwestern Medical Center, is the sort of mental health researcher who would be attracted to Texas if a new state research institute for mental health and brain diseases is approved by the Legislature, advocates say. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)

AUSTIN — Texas would launch a new research institute for mental health and brain diseases, seeding it with \$3 billion from the state’s huge surplus, under legislation that cleared the House on Tuesday.

In November, voters would get a chance to approve a [constitutional amendment](#) to create the Mental Health and Brain Research Institute of Texas.

Voters also would be asked to approve transferring \$3 billion of state discretionary money into a new fund, modeled after one 16 years ago that kickstarted the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas.

“We’re just trying to get out in front and make Texas the center of this kind of research,” Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, said. “Wouldn’t you like to find a cure for dementia?”

Thompson, author of the proposed constitutional amendment and an [enabling bill](#) that won approval, said 74% of the population will develop a brain abnormality of some kind during their lives.

Former Speaker Tom Craddick, a Midland Republican who is a coauthor of the package, told a House committee last month that mental health “is one of the major crises of this state.”

Many areas of Texas don't have enough mental health care providers, and mental illness still carries unjustified stigma, Craddick said.

"It's distance of care, and it's the care of getting people to come," he said.

Nearly half of all young people in their teens and 20s are struggling with mental health conditions, said Andy Keller, president and chief executive of Dallas-based Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute.

Making Texas a center of mental health research, to compete with the coasts, is a worthy goal, Keller told the Higher Education Committee.

The state is home to a few [top-flight academic outposts, such as the](#) Center for Depression Research and Clinical Care at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, led by Dr. Madhukar Trivedi, Keller said. But it lacks "critical mass" of mental health researchers, he said.

"We don't have the equipment and the stuff at that lab that they do at Stanford," Keller said. "Not because Dr. Trivedi isn't among the best in the world but because we don't have multiple people bringing in grants at the same level."

The institute would be governed by a nine-member oversight committee. Three members each would be appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the House. Members would have to represent the geographic and cultural diversity of the state.

The House passed the enabling bill and sent it to the Senate. The vote was 116-29. House Joint Resolution 135 was approved on Monday, 118-18. In both instances, all the no votes were cast by Republicans.

Rep. Stephanie Klick, R-Fort Worth, said she voted nay because the bill didn't have enough restrictions on ethically fraught procedures, such as electroshock treatments and the use of prisoners in clinical trials. Klick said she'd like to see such matters "kept in a box."

Thompson said withdrawal and informed consent measures for potential treatments will be in place to ensure the safety and liberty of vulnerable patients.

Thompson said she's optimistic about the legislation's chances in the Senate.