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DEPARTMENT OF AUDITOR-CONTROLLER**

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October 13, 2021

TO: Supervisor Hilda L. Solis, Chair
Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell
Supervisor Sheila Kuehl
Supervisor Janice Hahn
Supervisor Kathryn Barger

FROM: Arlene Barrera *Arlene Barrera*
Auditor-Controller

SUBJECT: **OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT –
JANUARY 1 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2021**

This report summarizes the Los Angeles County (County) Auditor-Controller’s Ombudsperson for Youth in STRTPs¹ (Ombudsperson) Program activities for the period of January 1 through June 30, 2021.

Summary of Activities

The Ombudsperson conducted **outreach visits to 150 youth** ranging in age from 8 to 19 years old. We visited 130 youth in person and 20 via televisits. One hundred and forty-six (146) youth were from STRTPs, and four (4) were from group homes (GHs). In total, this comprised outreach to 74 STRTP and Group Home (GH) sites/homes operated by 36 agencies, including:

- **64 sites/homes** operated by 30 STRTPs²
- **10 sites/homes** operated by 6 GHs

¹ Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs.

² Among approximately 90 sites/homes operated by 34 STRTP agencies

- We visited/televisited **4** of the 30 STRTP agencies in coordination with the Probation Department (Probation) Ombudsman.

The Ombudsperson received **69 requests for assistance** (requests) via the youth helpline (i.e., calls and e-mails), and during in-person outreach visits. Requests also included public inquiries on a variety of topics. Inquiries not within the subject matter jurisdiction or expertise of the Ombudsperson function were referred to an appropriate agency for response.

Background

In October 1998, the Board of Supervisors established the Office of the Children's Group Home Ombudsman (now known as the Ombudsperson for Youth in STRTPs) at the recommendation of the Civil Grand Jury and Commission for Children and Families, to provide advocacy and a confidential, independent, and informal process to help youth under Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) oversight, resolve issues while in GH placement. To ensure independence from DCFS as the placing agency, the Ombudsperson, since its inception, resides in the Department of Auditor-Controller.

Outreach Activities

A primary Ombudsperson responsibility is to meet with DCFS children in STRTPs and non-contracted GHs, talk to them about their personal rights, and provide them the opportunity to share concerns or unmet needs. Visits are planned so that each STRTP/GH site is visited at least every six months. Site visits are typically scheduled but may also be unannounced. We provide DCFS youth and STRTP staff with information about the Ombudsperson function as well as the Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBoR). When youth voice a concern, we work with the appropriate individuals (e.g., agency staff, DCFS Children's Social Workers [CSW]) who assist in developing solutions.

At the onset of the Safer at Home orders issued by health authorities in March 2020, the Ombudsperson shifted the way visits were conducted, which included televisits via telephone, video conference through the County's Microsoft Teams platform, through e-mail communication and, when feasible, in-person while outdoors with masks on and physically distanced.

During this reporting period the Ombudsperson conducted some televisits but returned primarily to in-person visits while adhering to public health guidelines. In-person visits included providing youth with the following materials: an informational letter and postcard about the Ombudsperson, pen with the Ombudsperson contact information, a business card, and a copy of the new FYBoR. For sites subject to quarantine orders or which otherwise limited in-person visits, or when youth were unable to meet, we still traveled to the sites and dropped off materials for the youth.

We also conducted in-person visits to DCFS youth placed in non-County contracted GHs from a list provided by DCFS. DCFS relies on these GHs for hard-to-place youth who have special needs (e.g., a disability) or when other County-contracted placement options have been exhausted. These youth tend to be non-verbal or have limited communication skills. The non-County contracted GHs are approved as service providers by the Regional Centers, which are community-based, non-profit agencies that contract with the California Department of Developmental Services to provide or coordinate services and support for individuals with developmental disabilities. For these visits, we spoke to those who could communicate, and left materials for all DCFS youth.

Requests for Assistance

The Ombudsperson receives requests through a helpline, e-mail, and in-person site visits. Upon receiving a request, the Ombudsperson interviews the requester to understand the situation and to determine an appropriate response and/or course of action.

The Ombudsperson categorizes requests based on the initial allegation as described by the youth/caller. The Ombudsperson's goal is to be accessible and to assist all callers and youth during all types of outreach visits, and accordingly, presumes all requests to be factual until proven otherwise through follow-up.

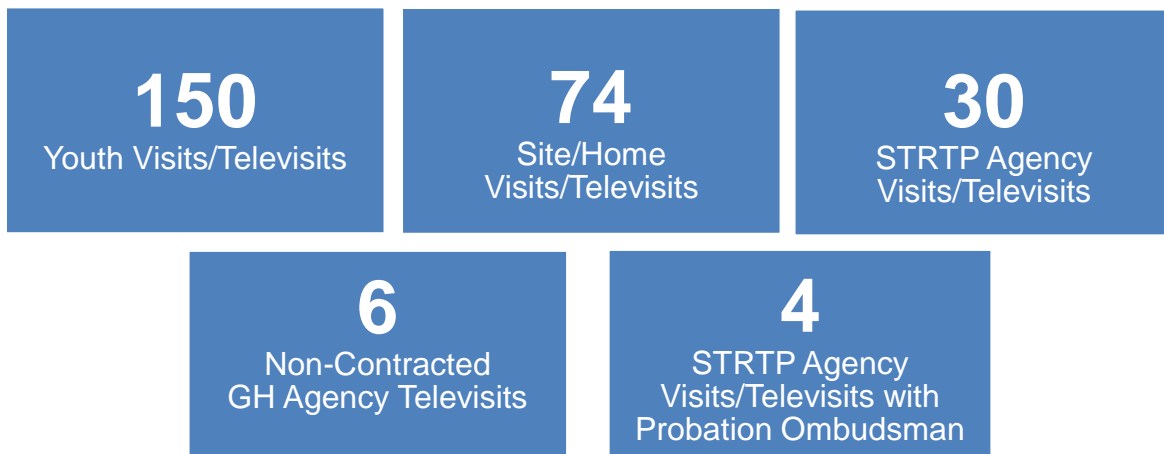
Resolution of Requests

To properly address and resolve requests within the purview of the Ombudsperson, we communicate with, and make referrals to DCFS, including but not limited to, CSWs, Supervising CSWs, Child Protection Hotline (CPH), Out-of-Home Care Management Division (OHCMD), Contracts Administration Division, Youth Development Services, and the Public Inquiry Unit. In addition, we collaborate with Probation's Ombudsman and Placement Permanency and Quality Assurance Unit to resolve issues. Lastly, we may contact attorneys, Court Appointed Special Advocates, and entities such as STRTP/GH staff and management, Community Care Licensing (CCL), the Office of Foster Care Ombudsperson, and if needed, other counties, to ensure youth's concerns are addressed. Most importantly, we follow up with the youth once we have discussed their request with the appropriate parties. Time frames for follow-up varies as the requests may be part of a larger, or more complex issue that is not wholly within the Ombudsperson's purview.

Detailed Activities

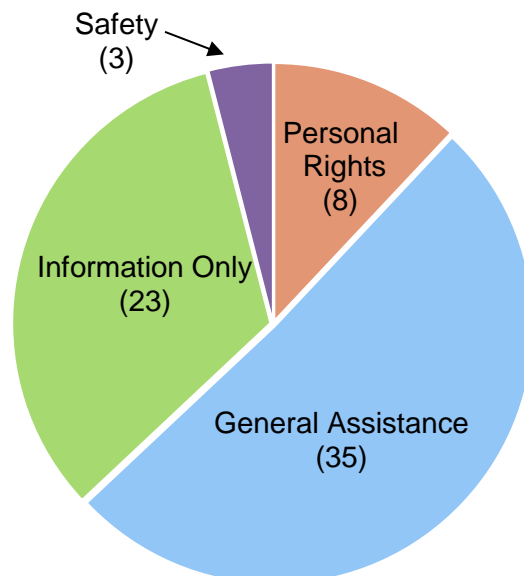
Outreach

The following is a summary of outreach visits, both in-person and televisits, for this reporting period (detailed in Attachment I).



Requests for Assistance

The Ombudsperson received a total of **69 requests for assistance**, consisting of 40 calls, 25 direct requests during in-person outreach visits, and 4 e-mails.



The following provides a summary of Requests for Assistance (detailed in Attachments II and III).

Safety

During this reporting period, there were three (4%) requests that involved safety concerns in the STRTPs.

During an outreach visit, a youth shared that at his prior placement a staff member slapped him in the back and was verbally abusive toward him. As a mandated reporter, the Ombudsperson informed the youth that this must be reported to the CPH. In addition, we contacted CCL and OHCMD and were informed this incident had already been reported and was under investigation, and the involved staff was not permitted to have any contact with youth in the home. The Ombudsperson followed up with the youth, to let him know that the incident had already been reported.

During a visit to another site, two youth expressed feeling unsafe due to physical altercations/fighting among some residents that was instigated by one youth. We addressed this concern with the agency, and learned that when fights occur, other residents are sent to their rooms while staff de-escalate the situation. The agency used trauma-informed training techniques to work directly with the youth who initiated the fights, understanding that the youth's trauma is a contributing factor to this behavior. Mediation is also used with the involved youth; however, they are not always willing to participate. In addition, Special Incident Reports are submitted to DCFS and CCL as required. While working with the youth who initiates the fights, the agency acknowledged it must assess the safety of all residents as a priority. In the next reporting period, the Ombudsperson will prioritize a follow-up outreach visit to this agency to assess the adequacy of subsequent communications by the STRTP to other residents following physical altercations.

Personal Rights

There were 8 (12%) requests relating to Personal Rights which included: Health/Medical, Dental Care, Allowance, Dietary Needs, and Family Contact. For example:

During the Safer at Home Order, a youth was referred to the Ombudsperson for assistance. He was unable to cash his allowance check that was issued 10 ½ months earlier from his prior placement and he was concerned as the check would no longer be valid after one year. His current placement staff and new CSW tried to help him; however, since he had not yet received his State-issued identification card, he had no method to cash the check at a banking institution or a check cashing location. With this information, the Ombudsperson contacted his prior placement and after much discussion, it was decided to have the youth bring his check to their finance office. They agreed to verify

his identification based on his picture taken during his intake. The Ombudsperson connected the youth and his CSW with the finance office staff, and he went in and cashed his check. Without the Ombudsperson assistance, the youth expected he would never be able to cash his check.

General Assistance

There were 35 (51%) requests for General Assistance which included: Issues with Policies/Rules, Placement Change Status, Residential Conflicts with Staff and Peers, Independent Living Transition, Personal Care/Belongings, CSW Contact or Concerns, Condition of Residence and Amenities, and School-Related Needs. For example:

While discussing the FYBoR during an outreach visit, a youth mentioned he had a job at Panda Express. With this, the Ombudsperson informed the youth he could request \$300 to assist with the purchase of work clothes if he was Independent Living Program (ILP) eligible. After further conversation with the youth, the Ombudsperson learned the youth was eligible, had not requested the funds, and the deadline to make the request for the current year was the following day. During the visit, the Ombudsperson assisted the youth to locate and complete the required forms online and called his ILP Transition Coordinator immediately to alert her about his request to meet the deadline. The Ombudsperson followed up and ensured the youth's request for funds was processed timely. During visits, discussions with youth can extend beyond personal rights and the Ombudsperson can be a linkage to other resources.

Information Only

There were 23 (33%) requests involving individuals seeking information (12 requests pertaining to the Ombudsperson and 11 requests that were non-Ombudsperson related). For all of these requests, we documented the requests, provided an answer, or directed the requester to an appropriate party to address their inquiry. We noted that non-Ombudsperson calls can be from DCFS youth who were familiar with the Ombudsperson from prior STRTP placement but who had since moved to a new placement (e.g., foster home, transitional housing, Supervised Independent Living Placement [SILP]). These youth contact the helpline for general assistance because the Ombudsperson is a known resource.

For example, a youth who formerly lived in an STRTP and utilized the assistance of the Ombudsperson in the past called for help when she was at risk of homelessness. The youth had to leave her SILP placement the next day, could not reach her CSW, and had nowhere to go. She also had an emotional support dog, which created additional difficulty in finding a placement that would allow dogs.

The Ombudsperson contacted DCFS staff and learned the youth's CSW was on leave, and the SCSW had transferred to another office. The Ombudsperson located the youth's

duty CSW and SCSW and connected the youth with them. The Ombudsperson also researched and provided the duty CSW and SCSW with housing resources and information about a Department of Animal Care and Control program that assists with housing animals of youth experiencing homelessness.

We followed up, and by the end of the next day the youth and her dog were transported to a SILP and DCFS provided her with transitional housing applications and emergency hotel vouchers in the event her SILP placement did not work out. The Ombudsperson is continuing to follow-up on the circumstances which led to this breakdown in communication and continuity of care, and will issue recommendations for improvement to DCFS under separate cover.

Index of Attachments

- Attachment I:** Agencies Visited for Outreach
Attachment II: Requests for Assistance Received by Type
Attachment III: Requests for Assistance Received by Agency

Acknowledgment

We thank management and staff from the various STRTP and GH facilities we visited in-person and via televisits, the Probation Ombudsman, DCFS, and other Child Welfare partners for their cooperation and assistance in helping us address the needs of youth served by the Ombudsperson.

If you have any questions or need additional information please call me, or your staff may contact Michelle Day, Ombudsperson, at (213) 253-0117 or via e-mail at mday@auditor.lacounty.gov.

AB:OV:PH:RGC:AMS:MD

Attachments

c: Fesia A. Davenport, Chief Executive Officer
Celia Zavala, Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
Bobby D. Cagle, Director, DCFS
Honorable Michael Nash, Executive Director, Office of Child Protection
Dr. Adolfo Gonzales, Chief Probation Officer
Alain J. Datcher, Executive Director, Youth Commission
Special Audit Committee
Children's Deputies
Commission for Children and Families
Board and Commission Relations/Public Inquiry, DCFS
Contract Administration Division, DCFS
Out-of-Home Care Management Division, DCFS
Placement Permanency and Quality Assurance, Probation
Probation Ombudsman
Countywide Communications

LOS ANGELES COUNTY OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPS
AGENCIES VISITED FOR OUTREACH¹
January 1 through June 30, 2021

Visits by Supervisorial District	NC	JO	Sites Visited
1st District			16
Eggleston Youth Center			•Baldwin Park •Pomona •West Covina
Garces Residential Care			•Claremont
Heritage			•Phillips Ranch •Valinda •West Covina
Hope House	X		•El Monte (3)
Inclusion Specialized Programs	X		•Walnut
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn			•Walnut
San Gabriel Childen's Center, Inc.		X	•Azusa (2)
St. Anne's Family Services		X	•Los Angeles
West Covina Foster Family Agency dba Homes of Hope aka Casa Esperanza Treatment Center			•Pomona
2nd District			16
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems			•Los Angeles (4)
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care			•Carson
Fred Jefferson Memorial Homes for Boys			•Compton (2) ²
Humanistic Foundation, Inc. dba New Concept			•Los Angeles
I am Safe, Inc.	X		•Los Angeles
Mindful Growth			•Los Angeles (2)
Virtuous Woman, Inc./Project Destiny Home of Hope			•Los Angeles
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services			•Los Angeles
Wayfinder Family Services	X		•Los Angeles (3)
3rd District			7
Optimist Boys Home & Ranch, Inc.			•Mission Hills
Penny Lane			•North Hills (4) •Arleta
Project Six dba The Help Group			•Van Nuys
4th District			7
Dream Home Care, Inc.			•Carson (2) •Torrance
Heritage			•Whittier
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc.			•San Pedro •Torrance
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility			•Torrance
5th District			15
Bella Vista Zook House	X		•Glendale
Bourne, Inc.			•Altadena (2) •Pasadena (2)
Five Acres			•Altadena •Pasadena ³
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care			•Lancaster (3) ³
Hathaway-Sycamores Child & Family Services dba The Sycamores			•Altadena
Haynes Family of Programs		X	•La Verne
Heritage			•La Verne
Hillsides Home for Children			•Pasadena
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home			•La Verne
Out of County			13
Childhelp			Orange; Riverside •Costa Mesa (2) •Beaumont
Eggleston Youth Center			San Bernardino •Ontario •Upland
Fields Comprehensive Youth Services			San Bernardino •Upland
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn			San Bernardino •Chino
Mary's Path		X	Orange •Santa Ana (2) ³
Shirley's Home		X	San Bernardino •Ontario
Trinity Youth Services			San Bernardino •Apple Valley •Yucaipa
West Covina Foster Family Agency dba Homes of Hope aka Casa Esperanza Treatment Center			San Bernardino •Chino
TOTAL			74

NC = Non-Contracted Group Home Agency/Regional Center Providers

JO = Joint Outreach Visit with the Probation Ombudsman

¹ Includes distribution of materials even if youth unavailable to meet

² Visits via Phone Call and In-person

³ Visits via Teams and In-Person

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPS
REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE RECEIVED***

BY TYPE

January 1 through June 30, 2021

1. Safety	3
Feeling Unsafe	2
Physical Harm	1
2. Personal Rights	8
Health/Medical, Dental Care	5
Allowance	1
Dietary Needs	1
Family Contact	1
3. General Assistance	35
Issues with Policies/Rules	11
Placement Change Status	5
Residential Conflict(s) with Staff	5
Independent Living Transition	4
Personal Care/Belongings	4
Children's Social Worker (CSW) Contact	2
Condition of Residence and Amenities	1
CSW Concerns	1
Residential Conflict(s) with Peers	1
School-Related Needs	1
4. Total - All Types	46
5. Information Only	23
Ombudsperson Related	12
Non-Ombudsperson Related	11
6. Total Requests Received by Ombudsperson	69

**Requests are categorized based on the initial allegation as described by the youth/caller.*

LOS ANGELES COUNTY OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPS
REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE RECEIVED*
BY AGENCY

January 1 through June 30, 2021

Agency Name	Supervisorial District(s) / Out of County	Number of Sites	Number of Requests	Types of Requests*
Bourne, Inc.	5th	4	1	•Independent Living Transition
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems	2nd	4	1	•Personal Care/Belongings
Deliaann-Lucile Corporation dba Delilu Achievement Home	2nd	3	2	•Health/Medical, Dental Care •Issues with Policies/Rules
Dream Home Care, Inc.	4th	3	4	•Health/Medical, Dental Care (2) •Residential Conflict(s) with Staff •School-Related Needs
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care	2nd, 4th, 5th	8	4	•Issues with Policies/Rules (2) •CSW Contact •Placement Change Status
Fred Jefferson Memorial Home for Boys	2nd	2	1	•Residential Conflict(s) with Staff
Hathaway-Sycamores Child & Family Services dba The Sycamores	5th	1	1	•Issues with Policies/Rules
Haynes Family of Programs	5th	1	2	•Issues with Policies/Rules (2)
Hillsides Home for Children	5th	2	3	•Placement Change Status (2) •Residential Conflict(s) with Staff
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home	5th	1	3	•Issues with Policies/Rules (2) •Personal Care/Belongings
Penny Lane	3rd, 5th	8	6	•CSW Contact •Dietary Needs •Health/Medical, Dental Care •Independent Living Transition •Personal Care/Belongings •Physical Harm (in prior placement)
San Gabriel Children's Center, Inc.	1st	2	3	•Residential Conflict(s) with Staff (2) •Allowance
St. Anne's Family Services	1st	1	5	•Feeling Unsafe (2) •Family Contact •Issues with Policies/Rules •Placement Change Status
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility	4	1	2	•Health/Medical, Dental Care •Placement Change Status
Victor Treatment Centers	5th	5	3	•Condition of Residence and Amenities •Issues with Policies/Rules •Personal Care/Belongings
Virtuous Woman, Inc./Project Destiny Home of Hope	2nd	2	2	•Independent Living Transition •Residential Conflict(s) with Peers
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services	2nd	2 ¹	3	•CSW Concern(s) •Independent Living Transition •Issues with Policies/Rules
Total			46²	

*Requests are categorized based on the initial allegation as described by the youth/caller.

¹ Includes Community Treatment Facility

² Does not include 23 Information Only Requests