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October 20, 2023

TO: Supervisor Janice Hahn, Chair
Supervisor Hilda L. Solis
Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell
Supervisor Lindsey P. Horvath
Supervisor Kathryn Barger

FROM: Oscar Valdez
Auditor-Controller

SUBJECT: **OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT –
JANUARY 1 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2023**

This report summarizes the Los Angeles County (County) Ombudsperson for Youth in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs)¹ (Ombuds) Program activities for the period of January 1 through June 30, 2023.

Summary of Activities

The Ombuds conducted in-person outreach to **190 youth**, ages **10 to 20**, during **86 site visits** at **40 agencies** and **2 school districts**. This includes all **59 STRTP sites** that housed youth placed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and also includes Community Treatment Facilities (CTFs), non-contracted Group Homes (GHs), and schools. In addition, we were able to incorporate our first visit to **1 Transitional Shelter Care Facility (TSCF)**.

We also received and addressed **194 requests for assistance (RFA)** during in-person visits and via the helpline (i.e., calls and e-mails). We identified common occurrences within these requests which fell in the categories of Personal Rights, Preparing for Adulthood & Money Management, Education, Family & Social Connections, Health, and

¹ STRTPs are residential facilities that provide an integrated program of specialized and intensive care and supervision, services and supports, and treatment to youth and non-minor dependents.

Mental Health. We collaborated with child welfare partners to identify and apply best practices for addressing these issues in our service to the youth.

Background

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

How We Connect With Youth

A primary Ombuds responsibility is to meet with youth placed by DCFS in STRTPs (including CTFs) and non-contracted GHs, talk to them about their rights, and provide them the opportunity to share concerns or needs they may have, and to ensure they are aware of the Ombuds as a resource. Visits are planned so that each agency site is visited at least once every six months. Site visits are typically scheduled but may also be unannounced. If an agency does not have any DCFS youth at the time a visit is scheduled, we will reach out again before the end of the reporting period to see if any new youth have been placed by DCFS. We verbally provide youth and STRTP staff with information about the Ombuds function and the California (CA) Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR) (Attachment I). We also distribute age appropriate FYBOR handbooks or coloring books and highlighters (materials) with the Ombuds helpline number imprinted on them.

The Ombuds also conducts visits to youth placed in non-County contracted GHs from a list provided by DCFS. DCFS relies on these GHs to place youth who have developmental disabilities and when other County-contracted placement options have been exhausted. These youth tend to be non-verbal or have limited communication skills. Some of 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 CA Department of Developmental Services to provide or coordinate services and support for individuals with developmental disabilities. For these visits, we speak to those who can communicate, and leave materials for all DCFS youth.

How We Assist Youth With Their Concerns

The Ombuds receives RFAs from youth who are dependents of DCFS through in-person visits with them at schools, STRTPs, and other locations, as well as via a confidential helpline, in direct calls/texts to an Ombuds phone, and through County e-mail. During

this reporting period, we received most requests during in-person outreach visits. Upon receiving a request, the Ombuds interviews the youth/requester to understand the situation and to determine an appropriate response and/or course of action. The Ombuds categorizes requests based on the initial information shared by the youth/requester. The Ombuds' goal is to be accessible and to assist all requesters, and youth during outreach visits, and accordingly, presumes all requests to be factual until proven otherwise through follow-up.

To properly address and resolve requests within the purview of the Ombuds, we communicate with, and make referrals to DCFS, including but not limited to Children Social Workers (CSWs), Supervising Children's Social Workers (SCSWs), the Child Protection Hotline (CPH), Out-of-Home Care Management Division (OHCMD), Out-of-Home Care Investigations Section (OHCIS), Contracts Administration Division (CAD), Youth Development Services Independent Living Program (ILP), and the Public Inquiry Unit. In addition, we collaborate with the Probation Department Ombudsman (Probation Ombuds) and Placement Permanency and Quality Assurance Unit to resolve issues. We may contact attorneys, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and entities such as STRTP/CTF/GH staff and management, Community Care Licensing (CCL), CA Office of Foster Care Ombudsperson (OFCO), school personnel, Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), and if needed, other counties, to ensure youths' requests are addressed.

We ensure youth are informed once we have discussed their request with the appropriate parties. Time frames for follow-up vary as the requests may be part of a larger or more complex issue that is not wholly within the Ombuds' purview, but all requests regardless of the duration to resolve them, receive follow-up.

Outreach Activities

During this reporting period, the Ombuds conducted **86** in-person **outreach visits to 190 youth** in STRTPs, CTFs, non-contracted GHs, TSCFs, and schools. The youth ranged in age from **10 to 20** years old. In total, this comprised outreach to **81 sites** (five STRTP sites were visited twice), operated by 40 agencies and 2 school districts as follows:

- **59 STRTP** and **2 CTF sites** operated by 31 agencies
- **13 GH sites** operated by 9 non-contracted agencies
- **6 school sites** in two different school districts
- **1 TSCF site**

190 Youth Visited

81 STRTP, CTF, GH, TSC, and School Sites
Visited at Least Once

5 STRTPS
Visited Twice

31 STRTP & CTF
Agencies Visited

9 Non-Contracted
GH Agencies Visited

2 School Districts
Visited

We conducted in-person outreach visits to all the STRTP and group home agencies housing youth placed by DCFS.

We continued to build on our outreach to youth at school and visited six (6) schools in two (2) different school districts. We selected these schools based on the number of youth placed in STRTPs enrolled in the schools. We coordinated visits with each school's Foster Youth Liaison (FYL) who informed the youth and provided a designated private room on campus for those who wanted to meet with us. These outreach visits were scheduled during times the FYL recommended to avoid unnecessary disruption of the students' classroom instruction.

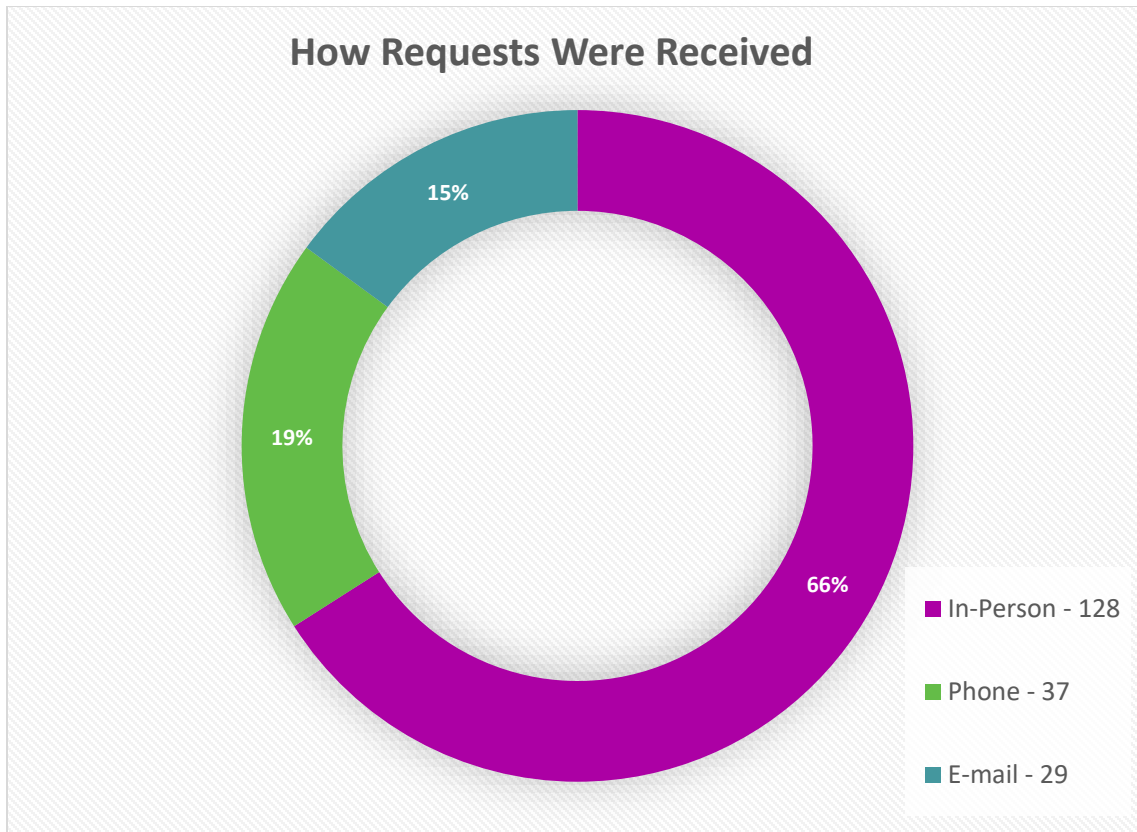
The six (6) school visits were effective and provided an additional opportunity for youth to connect with us in person in a setting outside of their residential placement. We received eleven (11) requests for assistance during these visits. We will continue to evaluate additional schools and districts that can be incorporated in our future visit schedule. Frequent and consistent interactions are essential for rapport-building with the youth, as well as to help them retain information about their rights and exercise them.

Attachment II details the summary of Outreach Visits Conducted.

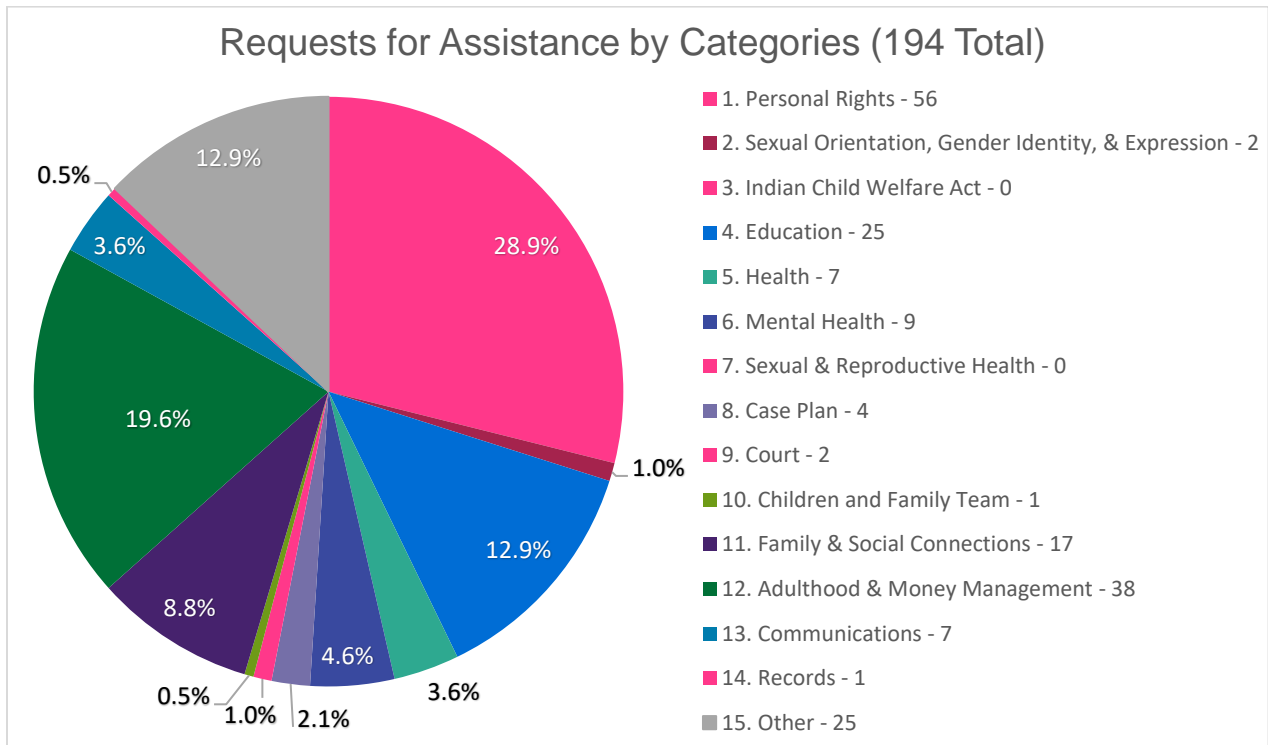
Requests for Assistance Activities

The Ombuds received a total of **194 requests for assistance** pertaining to 122 youth. In speaking with youth about their rights during our outreach visits, some requests were prompted by a new or better understanding of their rights. We received requests for assistance via the following channels:

- 128 during in-person visits (66%)
- 37 by phone (19%)
- 29 via e-mails (15%)



The chart below indicates the number of requests received in each category:



The categories associated with the FYBOR with the most requests for assistance were:



Personal Rights (28.9%)

In this category, examples of requests included:

- Receiving Allowance
- Hygiene products and hair care of choice
- Being Treated with Respect
- Having Emotional Safety
- Issues with food

Hygiene and Haircare

There were nine (9) requests pertaining to youths’ ability to pick their own hygiene or haircare products, which is a new trend that surfaced within Personal Rights. Youth shared that they were unable to select the hygiene products they wanted or were given a budget that did not meet their needs. There were times that youth were directed to spend their allowance or other funds on products or hairstyles that fell outside of the allotted budget. It also came to light that some agencies were setting specific budgets for youths’ hairstyling which was particularly low for the market cost of such hairstyles. In other

cases, youth were told they had to have their hair braided by staff of the agency who were not equipped to perform certain hairstyles the youth desired.

The FYBOR, DCFS contract with STRTP providers, and the State ILS all address youths' access to hygiene products and haircare. These documents require access to grooming and hygiene products that respect culture, ethnicity, gender identity, and expression, and the DCFS contract specifically states that youth should have a choice among brands. However, none of these specifically delineate what hygiene products are considered basic needs, nor do they establish a budget for purchasing them. While relevant laws, contract language, and policies recognize the need to individually assess and address each youth's wants and preferences, the lack of specificity also raises questions about what is a reasonable level of expenditure to meet the youths' basic needs. In working on resolutions for individual youth, we observed that interpretations vary between agencies.

We worked on solutions for each of the individual requests from youth and ultimately the issues with their hygiene products and haircare needs were resolved. However, we have continued to receive these types of RFAs from youth and with the varying perspectives on what is reasonable, we believe youth will continue to be impacted by this issue. We have discussed this topic with DCFS, CCL, and OFCO about ways to further train and discuss with providers the need to individually assess youths' needs.

Trauma-Informed Care

A second theme that has continued from prior reporting periods is concern with the way youth are treated by staff at their out-of-home placement. While agencies and staff generally provide trauma-informed care and supportive homes for the youth, there were twenty (20) reported instances of a lapse in these practices. Specifically, youth reported occasions when staff made disparaging comments to them, used profanity towards them, physically or emotionally harmed them, or implied the youths' own behavior caused them to be in foster care. The comments or actions of one staff can change the environment and affect the youths' sense of emotional safety. Youth generally expressed that they were comfortable reporting this to the Ombudsperson, but sometimes felt they would not be believed if they reported this information to other adults who were part of their care team.

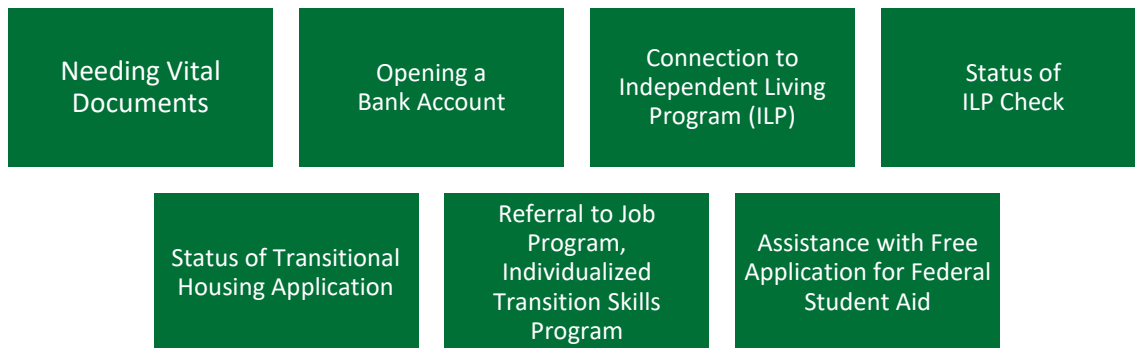
For these requests, our office reported the allegations to the CPH, CCL, and DCFS per established protocols, followed up with the respective agencies about the outcomes, and shared information with the necessary partners. We also circled back with the youth to see if the living environment improved, and most reported they had no further concerns. A few requests remained under investigation by CCL and/or CPH as of the date of this report, and we will continue to follow up with those agencies and the affected youth to ensure an appropriate resolution to their concerns.

With our continued receipt of concerns about staff mistreatment of youth, we have started eliciting feedback from stakeholders about this issue. The problem is multifaceted with several variables contributing. We are continuing to gather feedback, as well as examine the issue in order to work with partners to minimize occurrences of these incidents.



Preparing for Adulthood & Money Management (19.6%)

In this category, examples of requests included:



We received 38 requests related to Preparing for Adulthood & Money Management, 17 of which were about obtaining vital documents (e.g., birth certificates, Social Security cards, and identification cards) and opening a bank account. These requests highlight the ongoing need to ensure youth in foster care have access to vital documents to support their transition to adulthood, which is also described in the Board’s motions from August 10, 2021 and January 11, 2022.

As reported in our Semi-Annual Report issued on April 10, 2023, A-C Executive Management established an Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion goal for the Ombuds to explore options for providing youth in foster care under 18 the ability to open a bank account on their own, without an adult co-signer, as they have a right “to maintain a bank account...unless prohibited by the case plan.” Very few banking institutions allow individuals under the age of 18 to open an account without an adult co-owner, and youth in foster care may not have a constant adult in their lives who would be willing to be a co-signer on their bank account. This leaves them with limited banking options to exercise their right and deprives them of the opportunity to practice money management skills. It also makes them particularly vulnerable to predatory banking and lending practices and subject to high fees and unfavorable terms when they are able to open an account.

To address this need, the Ombuds met with multiple stakeholders including DCFS, the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs (DCBA), the Treasurer and Tax Collector, and [MyPath](#) (a national non-profit organization focused on paving economic pathways for low-income youth). We also contacted two financial institutions (one multinational bank and SCE Federal Credit Union) identified by [Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund](#) (a non-profit organization formed to improve the financial stability of low and moderate

income households) as currently offering financial products to certain youth under 17 years of age that could be modified to meet the needs of youth in foster care.

After being approached by the Ombudsperson who shared youths' accessibility issues for financial products, SCE Credit Union responded as a willing partner. SCE Credit Union developed and launched, on October 13, 2023, new sole ownership checking and savings account products for youth at least 13 years of age, and removed some of the barriers typically faced by youth in foster care by accepting alternative forms of identification, streamlining the application process, and receiving applications online. They are also providing youth with an initial \$5 deposit for their savings account. The financial product offers [BankOn recommended Financial Terms](#) used to protect both the consumer and financial institutions and will not have set-up or monthly maintenance fees. SCE Credit Union has four branches, and offers no fee access to 100's of automated teller machines (including 7-Eleven and Rite-Aid Stores) and 30+ branch offices (including affiliates) within Los Angeles County through their shared network of financial institutions. This will help provide youth with the ability to exercise their right to maintain a bank account.

In order to resolve individual requests, we continued to share information about financial institutions who allow youth 16 and over to open sole ownership accounts, as well as work with social workers and STRTP staff to obtain youths' birth certificates, Social Security cards, and government identification cards.

We noted the youth continued to face many obstacles in obtaining their vital documents, such as acquiring birth certificates from other counties, states, or countries and varying practices to initiate the process. In an effort to assist youth in addressing their continued issues obtaining their birth certificates, Social Security cards, and/or government identification cards, we reviewed the Needs and Services Plan (NSP), co-created by DCFS and Probation, that STRTP providers fill out on DCFS' Provider Management Information System (PMIS) every 30 days regarding each youth. Within these plans, there is a section entitled Life Skills/Vocational Preparation that addresses whether a youth has access to their vital documents. PMIS only prompts users for this information if a youth is 15 years of age or older.

We have suggested that DCFS require providers to collect and report this information at 13 years of age, as well as require information about any barriers the youth is encountering in obtaining their vital documents and the steps the provider is taking to assist the youth in overcoming them. There is also a subsection that addresses youths' ability to manage their own money, where we have requested that providers capture information about youths' ability, desire, and realization to open a bank account. DCFS and Probation are currently reviewing the proposed changes, and we are hopeful the dialogue leads to changes that positively impact youths' ability to obtain their vital documents.



Education (12.9%)

In this category, examples of requests included:

Attending
School of Origin
or New School

Transportation
to School

Education
Rights Holder
Information

Best Interest
Determination
Meeting

We received 25 requests relating to education, which included a variety of topics. Some youth wanted to attend their School of Origin (SOO) after their placement changed and were told there was no transportation available, or the school was too far. Some youth missed days or weeks of school when they changed placements, rather than being transported to SOO until a meeting was held to determine what school is in the best interest of the youth. In addition, there were youth who did not know who their Education Rights Holder (ERH) was and requested assistance obtaining this information. In other cases, there was not a current ERH and one needed to be appointed.

With each of these requests, the Ombuds informed youth about their education rights, their ERH, and the related processes and approvals needed to change schools. We explained the ERH's role and authority over education decisions so they could have informed conversations about their education or school placement. In addition, the Ombuds contacted youths' attorneys from Children's Law Center and/or their CSWs to discuss these concerns so that they could also follow up in court hearings or team meetings respectively, to ensure the youths' concerns are considered.

Best Interest Determinations and SOO

In order to address this on a systemic level, we partnered with DCFS Education Section to review a list of all youth placed or replaced in to an STRTP during the summer break. We called each youth, informed them about our office, and shared information about their education rights with them, including the right to attend SOO. If youth expressed wanting to attend SOO, the Ombuds then contacted the district where the SOO is located to request that they initiate a Best Interest Determination (BID) Meeting, so that the ERH could make a formal decision about where the youth would attend school when the 2023-2024 school year began.

We conducted outreach to 99 youth, 36 of whom wanted to attend SOO. There were also a number of youth without a current ERH and we worked with CSWs and youths' attorneys to ensure an ERH was appointed for youth who did not have one. We also met with DCFS Education Section to discuss how to improve practices during the school year. The DCFS Education Section implemented a new system that creates a referral to the LACOE Education Specialist the day after a youth is placed in an STRTP, as well as

alerts the CSW. The Education Specialist will follow up with school districts to ensure BIDs are occurring. It also informs the CSW that the youth should not be dis-enrolled from their SOO until the BID meeting takes place and the ERH decides whether it is in the best interest of the youth to remain in their SOO.

The Ombuds will continue to reach out to youth and inform them of their rights, especially regarding education when they have just been placed.

Transportation to SOO

While the system is improving to address school placement the day after a youth is moved, many STRTPs still cite issues with transportation in complying with BIDs that selected SOO. Youth placed in STRTPs are not eligible to be transported to SOO through the DCFS' Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Hop, Skip Drive (HSD), because the STRTP provider contract states that agencies "shall transport youth to their school of origin or utilize alternate systems for transportation put in place by DCFS...and/or school districts."

However, most STRTPs cite issues with staffing, distance, time, and cost as issues impacting their ability to transport youth to SOO. In addition, STRTPs were included in the original pilot utilizing HSD, and many STRTPs and CSWs believed youth could still receive transportation via HSD, though it has been discontinued for some time.

On April 7, 2023, DCFS Education Section presented to all of the STRTP providers to clarify their lack of eligibility for HSD. However, another funding source (AB 130 funds) outside of the HSD MOU is being utilized to provide HSD to youth in STRTPs as of July 1, 2023. This funding is limited and will only be available for one year or until it runs out. It is vital that a plan be in place for when those funds run out or the year ends, as providers continue to cite the same issues with transportation, which impacts youths' ability to exercise their rights of attending SOO, as well as being transported to SOO pending a BID.

We participated in the Office of Child Protection's monthly convening of educational partners across the county (school districts, LACOE, DCFS, non-profits) to specifically discuss SOO Transportation Issues. In these meetings, there have been suggestions about DCFS reincorporating transportation for youth placed in STRTPs into the regular HSD MOU or STRTPs contracting directly with HSD, though costs have been cited as a barrier. We will continue to work with all of the community partners and stakeholders to address these issues.



Family & Social Connections (8.8%)

In this category, examples of requests included:

Community
Passes

Visits with
family and
friends

Transportation
to Visits

Liberalization
of Visits

There were 17 requests for assistance about Family & Social Connections, many of which pertained to youths' visits with family members and/or non-relative extended family members (NREFMs). Youth reported they wanted visits with certain people, were not getting visits they were supposed to have, and/or were not being transported to visits. Maintaining social and familial connections is vital for the wellbeing and mental health of youth in out of home care. These requests highlighted various barriers including:

- Sometimes extended waits for CSW approval to visit certain people
- Agencies only providing youth with transportation to visit specific parties when the visitation plan is documented in the Child and Family Team Meeting notes, even though such documentation is not generally required
- Distance between placement and location of family members or NREFMs
- Schedule conflicts between the youth and family member or friend

Community Passes

Some requests in this category involved youth wanting community passes (typically 1-to-2-hours), but being erroneously told by placement site staff that their CSWs had to approve them. Other youth were informed they had to wait an arbitrary number of days, (e.g., 30) to obtain community passes when regulations do not proscribe a specific waiting period. Youths' treatment plans and services, including access to community passes, should be individualized to the youth and their circumstances since one plan is not right for every youth. We reviewed both the need for assessment of individual readiness for community passes, as well as the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS) with agencies and CSWs to highlight agencies' ability and authority to approve or deny community passes without DCFS approval based on their own assessment. Despite having the ability to do so, some agencies expressed they were hesitant to allow youth to have community passes without the approval of the CSW. This continues to delay access to community passes for youth where circumstances indicate that they should have access.

To provide further direction and clarity, DCFS, Probation, and the Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA) sent out "Guidelines to Support Community Independence for Youth in Residential Care" that clearly defined agencies'

ability to revoke community passes, but did not clearly define their ability to grant community passes via RPPS. We reached out to request that this information be added, and as of the writing of this report ACHSA was in the process of finalizing the update to resend to providers.

In addition, CCL hosted their statewide quarterly meeting for congregate care providers where the OFCO presented on RPPS and provided clarity about their decision-making abilities.

In addition to barriers exercising RPPS, some youth also faced difficulty being initially deemed responsible or trustworthy enough to be granted community passes. In the requests we received, youth reported waiting an extended period of time to receive initial community pass privileges upon arriving in a new placement. The agencies frequently reported the delay was necessary for youth to demonstrate responsibility, and that they can be trusted in the community and to return to the home from a pass. In those situations, we discuss with the agencies methods for expediting that assessment and trust-building process (e.g., providing incremental privileges such as 10-20 minutes to go for a walk) with the goal of ultimately issuing initial community passes more timely where appropriate.

One measurement of readiness shared with us is that youth need to not go absent from placement without permission, yet many youth become frustrated with the inability to walk to the store, spend time with friends, or have some space outside the homes to themselves and therefore leave. In other words, the artificial barriers put in place as part of the community pass process at some agencies themselves contribute to conduct which those agencies then use to deny community passes. If better processes can be put in place to allow youth to build time and location to their community passes, there may be less unauthorized absenteeism from placement. There are, of course, youth who may not be able to independently spend time in the community safely, but there are many who likely could be who are currently prevented from having that freedom.

We will continue to work with and offer training to STRTP management and DCFS staff to ensure a thorough understanding of RPPS and the STRTP's ability to authorize community passes, and we will continue to advocate for solutions that maximize youths' ability to exercise their rights.



Health & Mental Health (8.2%)

In these categories, examples of requests included:



We have combined the categories of Health (7) and Mental Health (9), as the rights within each of these are pulled from the same section of the law. For example, in the FYBORs, youth have the right “to access and receive medical, dental, vision, mental health, and substance use disorder services, and reproductive and sexual health care, with reasonable promptness that meets the needs of the child...” Many youth expressed a desire to see doctors in specific specialties like optometry, dermatology, gynecology, and orthodontia. For these youth, we reached out to STRTP staff and/or CSWs to ensure youths’ medical needs within those specialties were addressed.

Other youth expressed wanting to change their therapist. While all STRTPs have therapists on staff who are assigned to provide therapeutic services to the youth, youth 12 and older still have the right to pick their own medical providers, including therapists, as long as their insurance covers it. We empowered youth with this knowledge should they find a therapist they prefer to receive services from, rather than the therapist from the agency or if there are numerous therapists within the same agency and a youth has a preference for a specific one.

Other Requests

There were 25 (12.9%) requests made by youth that were not related to the FYBOR. Examples of these requests included:

- Assistance retrieving personal belongings from prior placement
- Status of their placement change
- Request to change their attorney, CASA, or CSW
- Issues with other residents

Attachment III lists all the Requests for Assistance Received by Type.

Requests Seeking Information Only

There were a few contacts made to our office from individuals seeking information not related to the Ombuds function. For those, we documented the requests, provided an

answer, or directed the requester to an appropriate party to address their inquiry. These requests are only noted here, and not included in the statistical data.

Youth Voice

Each youth residing in an STRTP, CTF, or GH has a unique personal experience. Their requests may be reflective of a challenge they are facing in their life, in their current placement, at school, in the child welfare system, or related to something else.

Unreasonable Searches

For instance, during an outreach visit, a youth expressed to us that she was being searched every time she returned to the home if she was out unaccompanied by STRTP staff, including routine and approved time away such as to attend school or on a community pass. This was upsetting to her, as she believed there was not a reason for the searches and the FYBOR states that youth are “to be free from unreasonable searches of personal belongings.”

We inquired with the agency about any reasonable suspicion for searching this youth, and it was shared that it is part of their general practice to search each youth upon their return when they have not been accompanied offsite by staff. They further emphasized the need for this practice, since many youth in this home were using substances and bringing them on site, including fentanyl. However, this specific youth, did not have a history of substance use, nor bringing substances into the facility. Our office explained that without reasonable suspicion these searches were contrary to the FYBOR, however the agency stated that it was in their program statement.

Our office consulted CCL and OFCO, as well as DCFS OHCMD, DCFS CAD, and Probation, and a joint meeting was held to review the ILS, which include compliance with the FYBOR. Many agencies’ program statements predate the 2020 update to the FYBOR, and some conflict with those updates. As a result of the meeting, the agency updated their program statement and implemented the practice of only searching youth if there is reasonable suspicion for a given youth and given circumstances. Our office circled back with this youth, who reported that she is no longer being searched upon return to the facility.

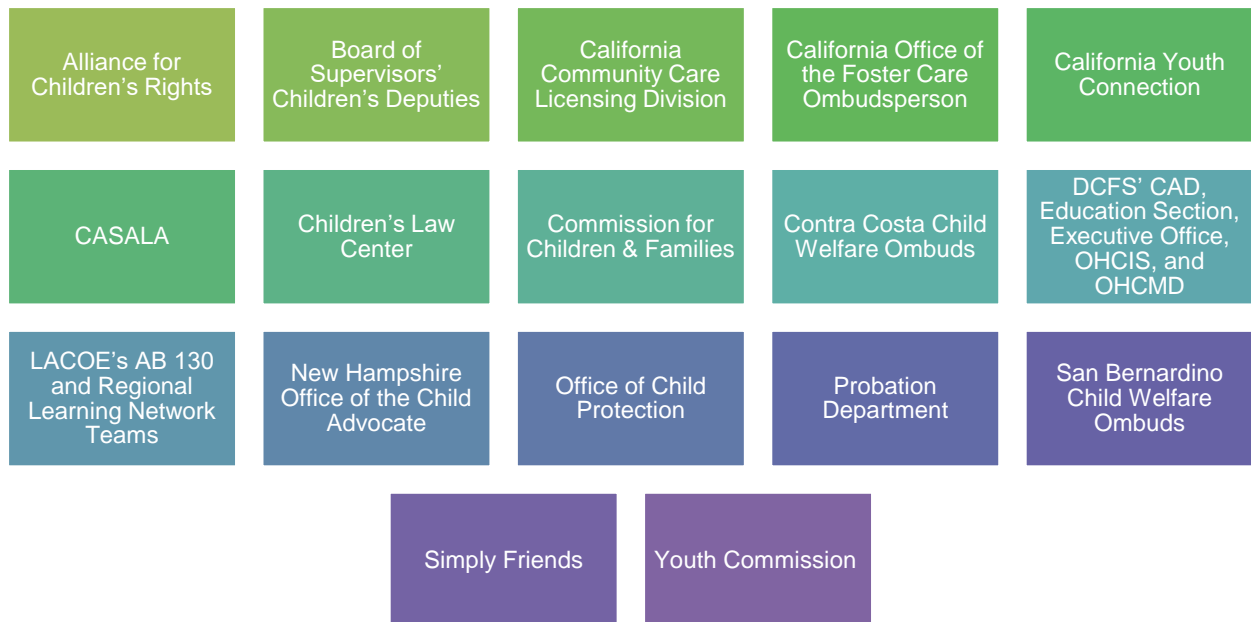
Limited Access to Personal Phone Calls

At another outreach visit, multiple youth brought to our attention a concern about only being able to make private calls for 10 minutes, twice per day. When we discussed this issue with the agency, it was shared that youth had to take turns using the phone, as well as participate in programming after school. Because of this, it left each youth with 10 minutes, twice per day.

The FYBOR protects youths’ ability to “make, send, and receive confidential telephone calls and other electronic communications... unless prohibited by a court order.” Youth who have their own cell phones tend to be able to exercise this right easily, but those that do not have cell phones make and receive calls through the residential phone at the agency. When there is only one phone line or a limited number of phones per group of youth, this poses difficulties for youths’ ability to exercise this right. The agency explained that they allow youth additional time for phone calls during the weekend, and we are still working with them to explore options for expanding youths’ phone time so they can better exercise their rights during the week as well.

Collaboration for Improved Practices

We continued to expand awareness of our Ombuds Program by reaching out to child welfare partners inside and outside the County. We met with individuals from the following agencies to learn and discuss ways to collaborate and better serve youth in STRTPs:



In addition, since Ombuds work is specialized, strengthening partnerships with those in the same field is invaluable. We continued to regularly communicate with the OFCO to address specific or overlapping requests, and discuss themes in our work. On a broader scale, we continued to participate monthly in the United States Ombudsman Association’s Children and Families Chapter Meetings. This forum provides an opportunity to learn about Ombuds work with child welfare agencies across the country, and increase knowledge about best practices, trends, tracking, and reporting etc., that may be

incorporated in our work. At the June 2023 meeting, OFCO and our office co-presented to members of the chapter.

Index of Attachments

- Attachment I:** Foster Youth Bill of Rights
Attachment II: Outreach Visits Conducted
Attachment III: Requests for Assistance Received by Type

Acknowledgment

We thank management and staff from the various STRTP, CTF, and GH agencies, schools, the Probation Ombuds, DCFS, and other child welfare partners, for their cooperation and assistance in helping us address the needs of youth served by the Ombuds.

If you have any questions or need additional information please call me, or your staff may contact Michelle Lucarelli-Beltran, Ombudsperson, at (213) 342-5755 or via e-mail at mlucarelli-beltran@auditor.lacounty.gov.

OV:RGC:GH:MLB

Attachments

- c: Fesia A. Davenport, Chief Executive Officer
Celia Zavala, Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
Brandon T. Nichols, Director, DCFS
Lisa H. Wong, Director, Department of Mental Health
David J. Carroll, Director, Department of Youth Development
Honorable Michael Nash, Executive Director, Office of Child Protection
Guillermo Viera Rosa, Chief Probation Officer
Barbara Lundqvist, Interim Executive Director, Commission for Children and Families
Tiara Summers, Executive Director, Youth Commission
Special Audit Committee
Children's Deputies
Probation Ombudsman
California Office of Foster Care Ombudsperson
Countywide Communications



Personal Rights

You have the right to live in a safe, comfortable home where you are treated with respect and to have:

- enough clothes and healthy food
- clothing, grooming, and hygiene products that respect your culture and ethnicity
- a private place to keep your things
- a phone you can use to make private calls (unless a judge says you cannot)
- a caregiver that has special training on trauma and ways to help you

You have the right to:

- go/not go to religious services and activities of your choice
- participate in cultural, racial, ethnic, personal enrichment, and social activities
- fair and equal access to all available foster care services, placements, care, and benefits

No one can:

- lock you in a room or a building (unless you are in a community treatment facility)
- make you stay in juvenile hall because they can't find you a home
- use law enforcement as a threat or retaliation
- abuse you physically, sexually, emotionally, or exploit you for any reason
- punish you by physically hurting you for any reason
- look through your things unless they have a reasonable or legal reason
- treat you unfairly because of your race, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, mental or physical disability, HIV status, or membership in a federally recognized Indian tribe



Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)

You have rights to protect your SOGIE. You have the right to:

- live in a home or STRTP based on your gender identity
- be called by your chosen name and gender pronouns
- see a doctor or counselor who is gender affirming
- have clothing, grooming, and hygiene products that respect your gender identity and expression
- have a caregiver, social worker/probation officer, and lawyer that have been trained on SOGIE and how to care for LGBTQ+ youth
- keep your SOGIE information private



Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

Are you a member, or could you be a member, of a federally recognized Indian tribe?

You have the right to:

- live in a home or STRTP that maintains the social and cultural standards of your Tribe and tribal community
- live in a home of your relatives or extended family or a home that is licensed, approved, or specified by your Tribe
- live in an Indian foster home that is licensed or approved, or a facility that is approved by your Tribe or an Indian organization that meets your needs
- live in a place that reflects and keeps you connected to the cultural and social standards of your Tribe and/or tribal community
- contact your ICWA advocate and have them attend court
- contact your Tribe, tribal members, and Indian community
- have a social worker/probation officer, and lawyer who is trained in ICWA
- participate in traditional Native American religious practices
- get help becoming a member of an Indian tribe or Alaskan village
- get all the benefits that come from being a member of an Indian tribe or Alaskan village
- be free from discrimination and be recognized for your relationship with an Indian Tribe or Alaskan village
- have protections for your tribal relationship in your case plan



Education

You have school rights. You have the right to:

- go to school every day
- get help with school
- stay at your same school if it's best for you
- enroll right away at a new school
- get partial credits for all classes you were passing if you change schools
- go to after-school activities
- have priority enrollment in pre-school and after-school programs
- have priority enrollment at California State Universities and community colleges
- access information about college and career education programs



Health

You have health rights. You have the right to:

- see a doctor, dentist, eye doctor, or talk to a counselor when you need to
- see a doctor who is gender affirming
- refuse to take any medicines, vitamins, or herbs, and no one can punish you for it
- keep your medical records private
- have the risks/benefits of treatment explained to you in a way that is easy to understand



Mental Health

You have mental health rights too. You have the right to:

- keep your mental health records private
- get gender affirming mental health treatment
- work with your doctor to safely stop taking psychotropic medication
- refuse to take psychotropic medication, and no one can punish you for it
- know about your diagnosis and understand treatment options
- get help with an alcohol or drug problem without permission
- get mental health services in a place that meets your needs
- if you are 12 years or older, choose your own doctor or counselor and make decisions about your mental health treatment



Sexual & Reproductive Health

You have sexual health rights too. You have the right to:

- get information about your sexual health in a way that you understand
- use or refuse services for birth control, condoms, other types of protection, and pregnancy care, including abortion, without telling an adult
- get healthcare services for sexual assault without telling an adult
- if you are 12 years or older, choose your own doctor or counselor and make decisions about preventing, testing, or treating STIs and HIV without permission from any adult



Case Plan

You have the right to:

- help create your case plan
- have a case plan within 60 days of being in foster care
- have your case plan updated at least every 6 months
- be told of any changes to your case plan
- get a copy of it if you are age 10 and older
- have your Tribe involved in case plan decisions

Your case plan will have:

- health and education plans
- the best place for you to live
- the services you need
- a long-term plan for where you will live
- gender-affirming healthcare plans
- plans for visitation with your parents and siblings
- transition to independent living plan (TILP), if you are 16 or older



Court

You have rights at court too. You have the right to:

- be told about court hearings in writing
- go to court and talk to the judge
- tell the judge what you want to have happen in your case
- tell the judge how you feel about your psychotropic medications
- ask the judge for visits with your siblings
- request a hearing if you feel like your lawyer is not acting in your best interest
- ask for people to be in the courtroom or ask for people to leave
- keep your court records private (unless the law says otherwise)
- tell the judge how you feel about your family, lawyer, and social worker/probation officer
- a lawyer, separate from your parents and the county

Your lawyer must:

- keep what you tell them private
- have special training on ICWA and SOGIE
- make sure you are safe and have the services and supports you need
- tell the judge what you want to have happen
- answer questions you have about court, foster care, and other laws



Children and Family Team (CFT)

You have the right to a CFT. You have the right to:

- request CFT meetings
- have support people at your CFT meeting
- talk about your needs in the CFT meeting
- a CFT meeting within 60 days of entering foster care
- a CFT meeting every 6 months
- a CFT meeting at least every 90 days if you are in an STRTP or in a therapeutic foster home
- a CFT meeting at least every 90 days if you are getting certain types of services
- a CFT meeting when any changes are going to be made to your case plan



Family and Social Connections

You have the right to:

- visit and contact your parents, siblings, and other family members in private (unless a judge says you cannot)
- contact people who are not in the foster care system (like friends, church members, teachers, and others), unless a judge says you cannot



Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management

You have the right to do some things on your own. You have the right to:

- have an allowance
- your own bank account (unless your case plan says you cannot)
- learn job skills for your age
- work (unless the law says you are too young)
- earn, save, and manage your money (unless your case plan says you cannot)
- go to Independent Living Program (if you are old enough)
- beginning at age 14, get a credit report every year from 3 major reporting agencies and have help fixing any issues



Communications

You have the right to:

- use a phone to make and get confidential (private) calls
- use a computer and the internet
- privately use email, text messages, or other electronic communication
- send and receive unopened mail

These rights can be changed if there is a safety concern. Only a judge can take these away or stop you from communicating with certain people.

You have the right to contact the following people in private, and no one can stop you or punish you for speaking with them:

- your social worker/probation officer
- your lawyer
- service providers
- foster youth advocates and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs)
- Education Rights Holder
- Tribe (if you have one)
- Office of Foster Care Ombudsperson (OFCO)
- Community Care Licensing Division (CCL)



Records

You have the right to see and get a free copy of the following until you are 26:

- medical records
- child welfare records
- juvenile court records
- educational records

LOS ANGELES COUNTY OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs
OUTREACH VISITS

January 1 through June 30, 2023

Agency Visited	NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
1st Supervisorial District				13
Bella Vista at Taylor Group Home	X			•Montebello
Eggleston Youth Center				•Baldwin Park (2)•Pomona
Garces Residential Care				•Claremont
Heritage				•West Covina (2)
Hope House	X			•El Monte (2)
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn				•Walnut
San Gabriel Childen's Center				•Azusa (2)
St. Anne's Family Services ¹				•Los Angeles
2nd Supervisorial District				22
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems				•Los Angeles (4)
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Carson (2)
Dream Home Residential	X			•Los Angeles
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Carson •Gardena •Hawthorne
Humanistic Foundation, Inc. dba New Concept ¹				•Los Angeles
I am Safe ²	X			•Los Angeles
Mindful Growth Foundation				•Los Angeles (2)
People's Care Garth	X			•Los Angeles
Virtuous Woman, Inc./Project Destiny Home of Hope				•Los Angeles (2)
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services STRTP				•Los Angeles
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services Community Treatment Facility				•Los Angeles
Wayfinder Family Services ²	X			•Los Angeles (3)
3rd Supervisorial District				3
Optimist Boys Home & Ranch, Inc.				•Mission Hills •Woodland Hills
Rancho San Antonio				•Chatsworth
4th Supervisorial District				5
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Torrance
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Long Beach
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc.				•San Pedro •Torrance
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility				•Torrance
5th Supervisorial District				23
Bourne, Inc.				•Altadena (2) •Pasadena
Chaparral High School			X	•San Dimas
Five Acres				•Altadena (2) •Pasadena
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care ¹				•Lancaster (3)
Hathaway-Sycamores Child & Family Services dba The Sycamores				•Altadena (2)
Heritage				•La Verne •San Dimas
Hillsides Home for Children				•Pasadena
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home				•San Dimas
McKinley School			X	•Pasadena
Muir High School			X	•Pasadena
Pasadena High School			X	•Pasadena
Rock of Peace	X			•Altadena
Rose City High School			X	•Pasadena
San Dimas High School			X	•San Dimas
Zoe International dba Zoe Home for Youth				•Acton

Agency Visited		NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
Out of County	County				15
Mary's Shelter dba Mary's Path ¹	Orange				•Santa Ana (2)
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc.	Orange				•Placentia
California Family Life Center	Riverside	X			•Hemet
Alpha Connection	San Bernardino	X			•Apple Valley (3)
Blissful Living	San Bernardino	X			•Upland
Boys Republic	San Bernardino				•Chino
Eggleston Youth Center	San Bernardino				•Upland
Fields Comprehensive Youth Services	San Bernardino				•Rancho Cucamonga •Upland
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn	San Bernardino				•Chino
Shirley's Home	San Bernardino	X			•Ontario
Trinity Youth Services	San Bernardino				•Apple Valley

TOTAL 81

Footnotes:

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

JO = Joint Outreach Visit with the Probation Ombuds

SCH = School Outreach Visit

¹ Visited twice

² Includes distribution of materials even if youth unavailable to meet/non-verbal

LOS ANGELES COUNTY OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs
REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE RECEIVED*
BY TYPE

January 1 through June 30, 2023

Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBoRs)



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