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Los Angeles County
Ombudsman
for Youth in STRTPs
KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

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January 6, 2025

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

FROM: Oscar Valdez
Auditor-Controller

SUBJECT: **OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT –
JANUARY 1 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2024**

This report summarizes the Los Angeles County (County) Ombudsman for Youth in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs)¹ (Ombuds) Program activities for the period of January 1 through June 30, 2024.

Summary of Activities

The Ombuds conducted in-person outreach to **197 youth**, ages **8 to 19**, during **77 site visits** at **36 agencies** and **2 school districts**. This includes all **56 STRTP sites** that housed youth placed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), as well as Community Treatment Facilities (CTFs), non-contracted Group Homes (GHs), and schools. We conducted **4 (5%)** of the visits to STRTP and CTF sites in partnership with the California (CA) Office of the Foster Care Ombudsman (OFCO).

We also addressed **186 requests for assistance (RFAs or requests)** received during our outreach (i.e., in-person and over the phone) and via our helpline (i.e., phone calls and e-mails). We identified common occurrences within these requests which fell in the

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. STRTPs must adhere to federal Qualified Residential Treatment Program (also known as “QRTP”) requirements.

categories of Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, Personal Rights, Education, Family and Social Connections, Case Plan, and Communications. 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

One of the primary responsibilities of the Ombuds is to engage with youth under the care of DCFS, whether placed in STRTPs, including CTFs, or non-contracted GHs. This engagement involves discussing their rights, providing a platform for them to express any concerns or needs they may have, and ensuring they are aware of the Ombuds as a resource to support them.

Upon DCFS notifying the Ombuds of a youth placement or re-placement in congregate care, our Career Development Intern (CDI), who has lived experience with the child welfare system, calls each youth to inform them about our office and to summarize their rights under the CA Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR) (Attachment I). We also ask the youth if they need help with anything else, or if they have any questions or concerns. This outreach leads to some immediate RFAs, and increases their awareness and understanding of the Ombuds as a resource. When we conduct in-person outreach visits, many youth have commented that they remember the phone call with our office when they were first placed, and this helps us build rapport with placed youth.

We plan site visits, which we typically schedule but may be unannounced, at each agency site at least once every six months. In cases where an agency does not have any DCFS youth at the time of a scheduled visit, proactive measures are taken to reconnect before the end of the reporting period concludes, ensuring comprehensive coverage. We verbally provide youth and STRTP staff with information about the Ombuds function and FYBOR. We also distribute age-appropriate materials (i.e., FYBOR handbooks, coloring books, and/or highlighters) complete with the Ombuds helpline contact details and a Quick Response (QR) code linking directly to our webpage for assistance requests.

The Ombuds also conducts visits to youth placed by DCFS in non-County contracted GHs, and we rely on a list provided by DCFS to identify such placements. DCFS utilizes some of these non-County contracted GHs to place youth who have developmental disabilities. These youth tend to be non-verbal or have limited communication skills. Some 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 youth under DCFS supervision. Other times, DCFS utilizes non-County contracted GHs when other County-contracted placement options have been exhausted or to place youth in substance use treatment programs.

We also visited youth at certain schools that have several students placed in STRTPs. We continue to evaluate additional schools and districts that can be incorporated into 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.

We expanded our outreach to include resource tables at community events for youth, such as the Youth Commission's Youth Listening Sessions. Being present at such events for youth provides us another time and place to connect with youth and their supporters about their rights and our office as a resource.

How We Assist Youth With Their Concerns

Upon receiving an RFA, the Ombuds interviews the youth/requester to understand the situation and to determine an appropriate response and/or course of action. The Ombuds categorizes RFAs based on the initial information shared by the youth/requester. The Ombuds' goal is to be accessible and to assist all youth and other requestors, and accordingly, presumes all requests to be factual until proven otherwise through follow-up.

To effectively handle and resolve requests under the jurisdiction of the Ombuds, we coordinate with key personnel in various functional areas within DCFS. This includes but is not limited to collaborating with Children's Social Workers (CSWs) and Supervising Children's Social Workers (SCSWs), and utilizing resources such as the Child Protection Hotline (CPH), Out-of-Home Care Management Division (OHCMD), and Out-of-Home Care Investigations Section (OHCIS). We also interact with the Contracts Administration Division (CAD), Education Section, Youth Development Services Independent Living Program (ILP), and the Public Inquiry Unit as necessary. In addition, we work closely with the Probation Department (Probation) Ombuds and the Placement Permanency and Quality Assurance Unit to address and resolve issues that arise.

Our efforts may also involve reaching out to legal representatives, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and personnel from facilities such as STRTP/CTF/GH and their management, Community Care Licensing (CCL), OFCO, school staff, and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE). When required, we extend our collaboration to include other counties to ensure we effectively address the requests and concerns of youth in these facilities.

We inform youth 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 **77** in-person **outreach visits to 197 youth** in STRTPs, CTFs, non-contracted GHs, and schools. The youth ranged in age from **8 to 19** years old. In total, this comprised outreach to **72 sites** (5 sites were visited twice), operated by 36 agencies and 2 school districts as follows:

- **56 STRTP and 2 CTF sites** operated by 29 agencies
- **11 GH sites** operated by 7 non-contracted agencies
- **3 school sites** in two school districts

We conducted **4 (5%)** of the visits to STRTP and CTF sites in partnership with the OFCO.



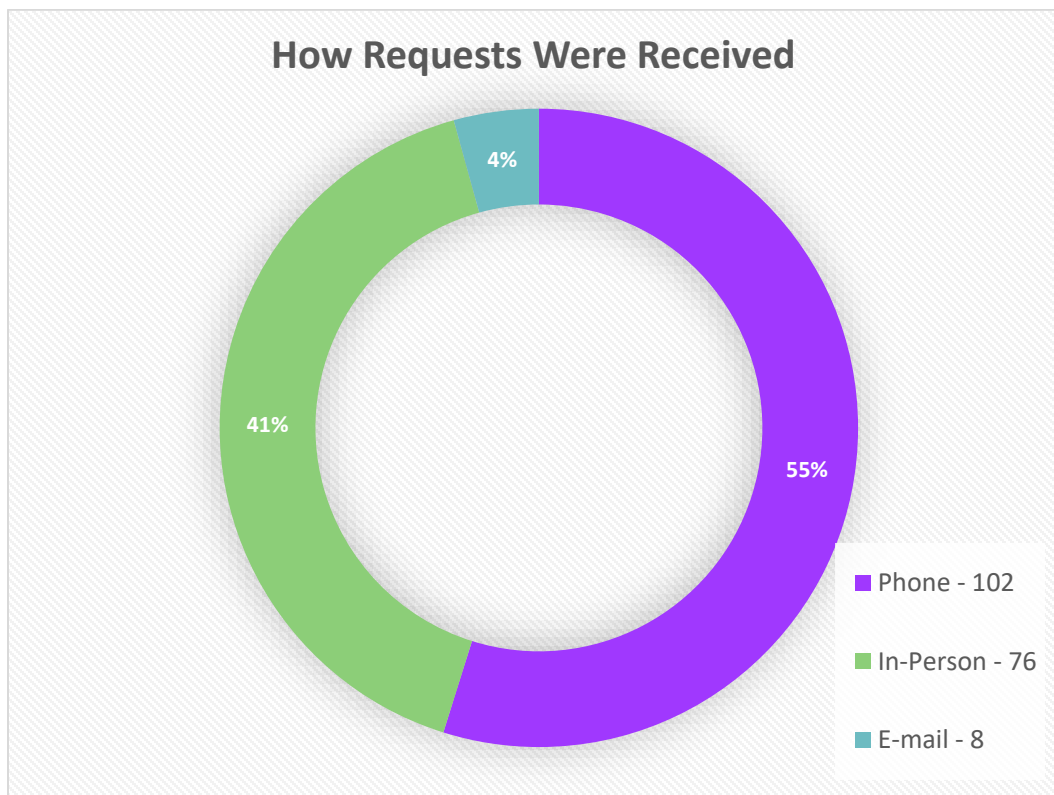
We conducted in-person outreach visits to all the STRTP, CTF, and group home agencies housing youth under the care of DCFS.

Attachment II details the summary of Outreach Visits Conducted.

Request for Assistance Activities

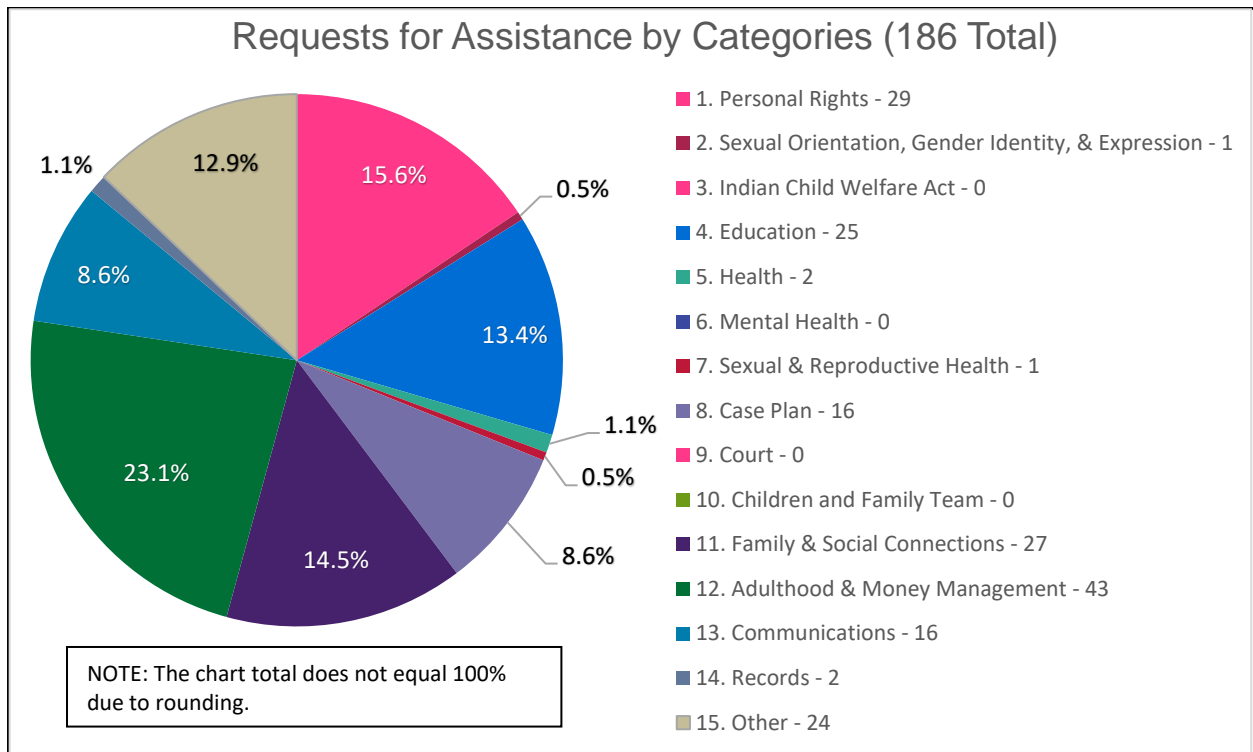
The Ombuds received a total of **186 RFAs**. In speaking with youth about their rights during our outreach phone calls and visits, some requests were prompted by a new or better understanding of their rights. We received RFAs via the following channels:

- 102 by phone (55%)
- 76 during in-person visits (41%)
- 8 via e-mails (4%)



There was an increase in the number of requests received by phone, which are directly correlated to our telephone outreach shortly after youth are placed in congregate care. Of the 102 RFAs that were received by phone, 90 were from outreach calls, while 12 were from incoming calls. This continues to demonstrate the importance of both connecting with youth in person and via outreach calls when they are first placed about their rights and the support our office provides.

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




Knowledge of FYBOR

Following up on our previous finding that 56 (79%) of the 71 youth we surveyed in STRTPs had either not received the FYBOR or did not recall receiving it, we began collaborating with multiple partners to develop targeted training for CSWs and other DCFS staff. This training focuses on how to engage children and youth in developmentally appropriate conversations about their rights.

To address this issue, we convened meetings with DCFS, the Office of Child Protection (OCP), and other stakeholders to present the survey findings, discuss potential training for staff, and brainstorm effective strategies for better engaging youth. Our office is leading the development and dissemination of a curriculum to fill this knowledge gap, incorporating input from various partners—including youth themselves—and following up with DCFS on the potential for making this training mandatory for relevant staff.

Additionally, we have conducted 16 presentations at DCFS regional office staff meetings to re-introduce our office’s role and discuss trends in RFAs related to youth rights. We are scheduled to complete the final three regional offices in January 2025 at which time we will have presented at all 19 regional offices.

These efforts aim to reduce rights-related concerns raised by youth, ensuring DCFS staff are informed of youth rights and can support and advocate for them within the system. The categories associated with the FYBOR with the most RFAs were:

 **Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management - 43 (23.1%) Requests**
In this category, examples of requests included:



We received 43 requests related to Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, with 22 focused on obtaining vital documents such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, and identification (ID) cards. Many youth need these documents to secure employment, but without them, they cannot exercise their right to “work and develop job skills at an age-appropriate level,” as outlined in the FYBOR.

Our work with RFAs shows that DCFS and STRTP staff often do not initiate the process of obtaining these vital documents until a youth is 16 or about to turn 18. This delay prevents youth from accessing their rights. Additionally, requests for records from other counties, States, or countries can take longer, further delaying the process.

To address this, we reviewed the electronic Needs and Services Plan in DCFS’ Provider Management Information System, which currently collects vital document information for youth aged 15 and up. We recommended expanding this to include youth as young as 13, along with data on barriers, and interventions. Additionally, we emphasized the importance of including an assessment of youths’ interest and ability to open a bank account. However, due to resource constraints, these changes have not yet been implemented.

Starting September 4, 2024, DCFS revised the memorandum of understanding with STRTP providers to begin obtaining CA ID cards and Real IDs for youth at age 13. Providers have been notified of this change. Additionally, DCFS ILP held monthly Real ID events at the Torrance Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) location to expedite ID issuance, though youth must first have birth certificates and Social Security cards. These events were recently expanded to include other DMV locations in El Monte, West Covina, Pomona, and Antelope Valley.

A July 1, 2024, DCFS “For Your Information” document outlines how staff should assist youth in obtaining vital documents but advises starting this process at age 16. We have requested that this guidance be updated to reflect the legal right of youth to begin working and developing job skills at age 14, as stated in CA Welfare and Institutions Code 16001.9(a), and that the process begin at age 13.

ILP Funding

We received requests related to ILP funding where youth were frustrated that their ILP request was unnecessarily delayed. One example involved a hard-working youth who was set to graduate a year early, and although their counselor verified the graduation timeline on ILP’s required form, ILP delayed processing the request until the school transcript was updated to reflect the student was at the 12th-grade level rather than 11th-grade.

We also received requests from youth who were unaware of ILP’s appeal process. ILP confirmed that when they deny a request they do not provide the appeal form or instructions directly to youth because the form is available on their website. We requested that ILP incorporate the appeal process into their policy, inform youth of it, and provide the form whenever a funding request is denied. ILP management agreed to implement this practice. We also discussed concerns that came to our attention about tracking requests submitted in person or via e-mail that are received, verbally denied, and never logged.

This highlights a recurring issue that clearer guidelines and processes for accessing ILP funds could help youth navigate the system more efficiently. DCFS is working to release ILP’s internal policies to the public, which will provide clearer information on eligibility to request specific funding line items and the application process.

A public-facing submission portal could help track requests, providing time stamps and improving transparency about the status of requests. This would also help with processing delays, like the case of a youth whose request was delayed for three months until our office intervened. The cause of the delay was unclear, but it underscores the need for better tracking systems to ensure requests are processed promptly and youth are informed about their status.

To address the above, we have discussed these possible solutions with DCFS:

- **Release ILP policies to the public** to clarify the eligibility and funding process.
- **Add the appeal process to ILP’s policy** and provide the appeal form upon denial of a funding request.
- **Track in-person or e-mail requests** to prevent unlogged denials and ensure timely processing.

- **Implement a public-facing submission portal** to timestamp and track requests, improving transparency and accountability.
- **Address delays in processing** by improving communication and clarity on the cause of delays.

The suggestions above will help address the Board’s August 6, 2024 motion, *Setting Youth Up for Success: Adulthood, Money Management, Personal Rights, and Education*, which directs DCFS and the Ombuds to develop an implementation plan ensuring ILP funding information is publicly accessible and that the process is transparent, user-friendly, and free of barriers that delay or limit youth access to funds. We will continue to work with DCFS to improve youth access to ILP funds.



Personal Rights - 29 (15.6%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:

Hygiene Products and Haircare of Choice	Searches	Clothing Allowance
Being Treated with Respect	Issues with Food	Outings and Extracurriculars

Unreasonable Searches

During multiple outreach visits at sites of different agencies, we witnessed youth returning home and being immediately searched by STRTP staff. We also observed signs that made statements that youth must consent to have their belongings searched in order to enter the home. When we asked staff and youth about the reason for the searches, staff stated and youth confirmed that all youth are searched every time they return to the home, even from school and approved community passes. Youth are not given a reason for the searches, but rather are searched as a standard practice.

The FYBOR states that youth are “to be free from unreasonable searches of personal belongings,” and agencies cannot have blanket search policies for youth. There must be reasonable suspicion for any search that is individualized to the youth and the instance. Our office explained to staff that without reasonable suspicion these searches were contrary to the FYBOR. We also immediately reported this rights violation to CCL, who subsequently substantiated findings against at least seven sites for violating the youths’ rights and the Interim Licensing Standards (ILS).

The issue of unreasonable searches is recurrent across semi-annual reporting periods and at multiple STRTPs. Our office previously met with CCL, OFCO, DCFS OHCMD, DCFS CAD, and Probation Ombuds, when this issue came to our attention, and we continue to collaborate with all these partners. DCFS briefly addressed searches with agencies at their July 12, 2024 provider meeting. The topic was also discussed at the STRTP provider meeting hosted by Probation on August 13, 2024, where a manager from CCL clarified the laws and standards regarding searches to providers in an effort to address the large number of violations.

The topic of searches was addressed again at the provider meeting hosted by Probation on November 12, 2024. In addition, our office also continues to follow up with youth and agencies to ensure youth are not searched without reasonable suspicion.

Hygiene and Haircare

Similar to prior reporting periods, nine youth informed us about issues with accessing hygiene products or haircare. Specifically, one youth was given a set budget for braids that was below the market cost to get her hair done, as well as reported that getting her hair done was treated as an incentive versus a right. Other youth reported issues that the soap provided by the agency was causing skin irritation and requested different brands of soap. In these instances, we reviewed with agency personnel that youth may access reasonable hygiene products and haircare, that they are allowed to choose among personal care brands, and that such choices must respect culture, ethnicity, gender identity, and expression. Subsequently, the agencies followed up to get the youth the requested haircare and hygiene products.

Youth sometimes encounter challenges due to a lack of specificity in the FYBOR, DCFS contract with STRTP providers, and the State ILS regarding basic hygiene products and budget allocation. While individualized needs are emphasized, the absence of clear guidelines about what hygiene products are considered basic can make it difficult for youth requiring additional products to obtain them. It also raises questions about determining a reasonable level of expenditure to fulfill youths' basic needs.

While resolving issues for individual youth, we noted variations in interpretations of what is considered reasonable among agencies. This inconsistency will continue to negatively impact youth as it remains open to interpretation. We have engaged in discussions with DCFS to explore further training and dialogue with providers on the importance of individually assessing youths' needs and continue to advocate for clearer and more consistent standards in this area.

DCFS shared that they continue to explore funding options to provide training specific to hygiene and haircare for STRTP providers. Until more formalized training is acquired, we suggested additional review of the ILS and DCFS contract during the monthly provider meeting they host to provide further clarity.



Family and Social Connections - 27 (14.5%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:

Community Passes

Visits with Family and
Friends

Transportation to
Visits

Liberalization of Visits

There were 27 RFAs about Family and 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, greater frequency and/or length of visits, and/or transportation to visits.

Maintaining social and familial connections is vital for the well-being and mental health of youth in out-of-home care. These requests highlighted various barriers including:

- Agencies only providing youth with transportation to visit specific parties when the visitation plan is documented in the Child and Family Team (CFT) meeting notes, even though such documentation is not generally required for a youth to have such visits
- Distance between placement and location of family members or NREFMs
- Lack of contact information or response from the person the youth wants to visit with
- Other party's desire to participate in the visit
- CSWs requiring various levels of assessment and/or approval to visit certain people

The FYBOR affirms that youth have the right "to visit and contact siblings, family members, and relatives privately, unless prohibited by court order", as well as "to have social contacts with people outside of the foster care system, including, but not limited to, teachers, coaches, religious or spiritual community members, mentors, and friends." As previously reported, DCFS has a policy requiring background checks and home inspections for family members or friends identified for potential placement. These clearances are sometimes also applied to adults with whom the youth wants to visit. However, such clearances are not legally required for visitation purposes. Requiring these adults to undergo background checks or home assessments delays the youth's ability to maintain important relationships or results in missed visits with family during holidays and other significant occasions.

Due to inconsistencies in when staff apply these clearances, we have requested that DCFS update their Family Time policy to provide clearer guidance on youths' right to visit

with family and friends, as well as clarity around the steps staff need to take. The update to the policy is still pending.

Community Passes

Some requests (ten) in this category involved youth seeking community passes, which is a theme continued from prior periods. Some youth continue to be erroneously told by the placement site or DCFS staff that their CSWs have to approve community passes.

We reviewed the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS) with agencies and CSWs, including during our presentations at the DCFS Regional Offices' general staff meetings. We emphasized agencies' ability and authority to approve or deny community passes based on their own assessment without DCFS approval, though the law encourages consultation with the CSW. Some agencies expressed hesitation to allow youth to have community passes without CSW approval, further delaying access for youth who should have it based on their circumstances.

As in prior reporting periods, some youth facing barriers in exercising RPPS also encounter challenges in initially gaining community pass privileges due to concerns about responsibility and trustworthiness. Requests for passes often result in extended waiting periods in new placements, as agencies require time for youth to demonstrate responsibility and trustworthiness or want to wait for approval from DCFS, which is not legally required.

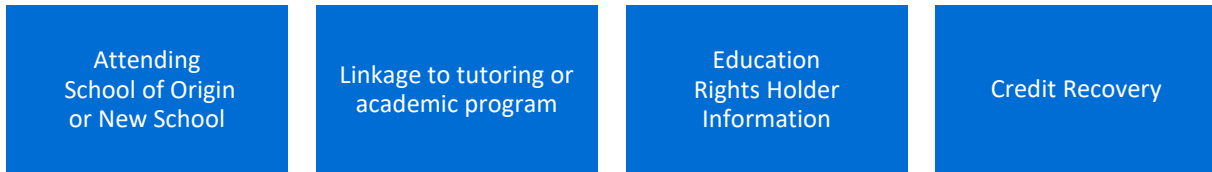
Our discussions with agencies focused on expediting this assessment process through consultation with the youth's team and building incremental privileges, aiming to issue passes more promptly. One readiness criterion involves youth not leaving placement without permission, but frustration with the inability to engage in activities like going to the store or spending time with friends often leads to unauthorized absences, reinforcing the denial of passes. Implementing processes allowing gradual build-up of community pass privileges for both time and location could reduce unauthorized absenteeism, benefiting many youth.

We will continue to collaborate with STRTP management and DCFS staff, offering training to ensure a comprehensive understanding of RPPS and the authority to grant community passes. During our advocacy efforts, we will continue to search for solutions that maximize youths' ability to exercise their rights.



Education - 25 (13.4%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:



Youth made 25 requests relating to education, which included a variety of topics. Of these, 16 of the requests were from youth wanting to attend their School of Origin (SOO) after their placement changed.

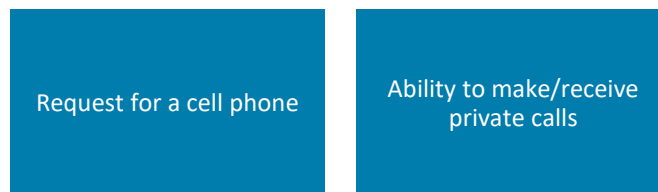
Other requests from this category included wanting to attend a specific school that was not a SOO, needing a credit recovery program, wanting to be linked to tutoring and/or other academic programs, and needing to know who their Education Rights Holder (ERH) is.

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 or remain in SOO. 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.



Communications - 16 (8.6%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:



There were 16 requests for assistance pertaining to Communications, 13 of which were about wanting a cell phone through a program with iFoster or needing a replacement phone from that program.

In November 2019, iFoster launched a pilot program providing a free smartphone with unlimited voice, text, high-speed data, and hotspot capability to current and former youth in foster care residing in CA. This pilot was part of a larger federal program administered

by the CA Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and has now been made a permanent program under CPUC's LifeLine, administered through Maximus.

At the beginning of 2024, there was a long waitlist for new cell phone requests due to the transition from pilot to permanent program, as well as the change in administration from iFoster to Maximus. In addition, the old cell phones from the pilot have to be swapped out for new cell phones and this transition took place from July 1 to October 31, 2024. Once this process is completed, new cell phone requests from the waitlist will begin to be processed. Because of these delays and the high interest from youth in obtaining a cell phone for this program, our office received several requests.

In our work on these requests, we came to realize that DCFS does not have a current policy or procedure in place that requires CSWs to assess the appropriateness of a cell phone for youth 13 and older who are eligible for this program. Lack of a formal policy creates an inconsistent linkage for youth under 18 whose ability to access the program is dependent of their CSW. CSWs should refer youth who are 13 and over in out-of-home care to the cell phone program, document that the youth already have a cell phone, or document their assessment of why a cell phone is not appropriate for the youth at that time. We shared this recommendation with DCFS who is assessing how to incorporate referrals for cell phones into policy.

Regular referral is vital as access to a cell phone would allow youth to maintain communication and connection with friends and family, as well as provide them a confidential means to report any issues or concerns they may have about their placements.

These requests also relate to the other three requests in this category, which pertained to youths' ability to make private phone calls to whomever the youth wanted. 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 who not have cell phones make and receive calls through the residential phone at the agency. This makes the abovementioned RFAs about youth requesting cell phones even more pertinent to their ability to exercise their rights.



Case Plan - 16 (8.6%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:

Transition Conferences

The requests in this category were all regarding youths' need for 6-month and/or 90-day transition conferences, which are required to maximize the use of the time prior to youth exiting care. The purpose of these conferences is to help enable youth to utilize resources, strengthen discharge planning, and experience positive outcomes that support long-term self-sufficiency and prevent homelessness. The conferences are attended by, at a minimum, the youth and the CSW, but we found in the requests that we worked on that CSWs were not always aware of this requirement or did not initiate the process timely. We worked with CSWs and other DCFS staff to ensure the transition conferences subsequently occurred for all youth who expressed a need for them.

Other Requests

There were 24 (12.9%) requests that were not related to the FYBOR. Examples of these requests included:

- Wanting to move to a lower level of care
- Assistance retrieving personal belongings from prior placement
- Inquiries about the name and contact information for their assigned or covering CSW
- Request to change their CSW

Some (eight) requests pertained to youth wanting to transition to a lower level of care. While certain youth expressed a general desire to transition out of a STRTP, others had specific homes they wanted to move to such as former resource parents or relatives. In a few of these, we attended the youths' CFT meeting at their request to discuss the youth's preferred transition with their team. In other requests, we followed up with members of the youths' teams such as their CSWs and attorneys to ensure youth received information about their transition plans.

Transitional Housing Placement Program for Non-Minor Dependents (THPP-NMD)

Occasionally, we received requests from youth in THPP-NMD². This program was established after the formation of our office in 1999, and our jurisdiction to assist youth in THPP-NMD is not explicitly stated in the documents that created our office. However, many of the youth in this program were previously placed in congregate care settings, which fall within our jurisdiction. Additionally, we have been approached by youth and stakeholders to assist with concerns related to THPP-NMD placements. As a result, when we receive requests from youth in this program, we make every effort to address their concerns as advocates and problem-solvers.

² THPP-NMD is a transitional housing placement program for court Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs) age 18 up to 21. The program provides a safe living arrangement and supportive services, so NMDs can practice the skills needed to live independently upon exiting foster care.

During this reporting period, three youth in THPP-NMD contacted our office with specific concerns about the physical conditions of their apartments and/or issues with case management and staff from the agency contracted to provide THPP-NMD services. Our office worked with DCFS and the contracted agencies to resolve these issues and ensure the youths' concerns were addressed.

Attachment III lists all the RFAs 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.

During a few different visits, youth brought up a desire to have more outings and/or specific types of outings. One specific youth expressed a desire to attend outings during both the week and weekend because they feel bored sitting inside all week.

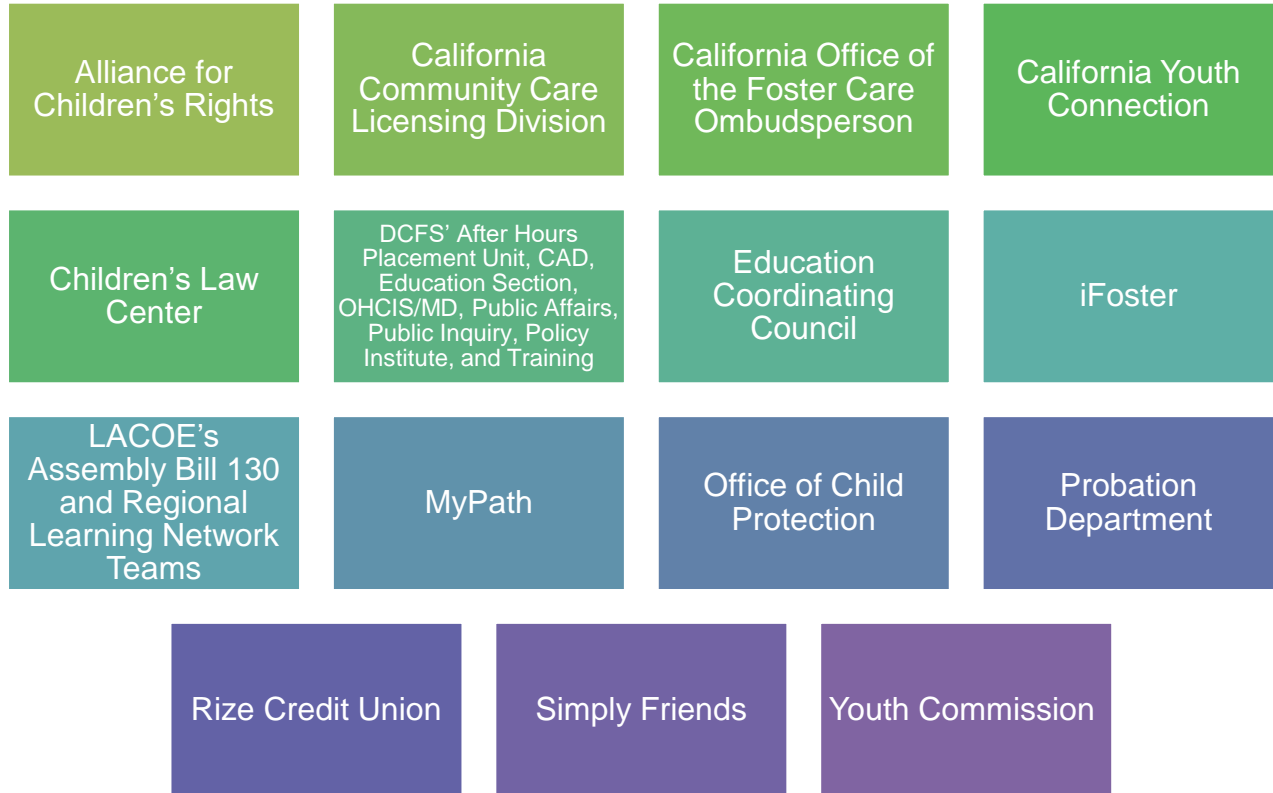
We reviewed agency practices, the ILS, and the DCFS contract. While STRTP agencies are encouraged to provide a multitude of experiences for youth and various outings into the community, they are only contractually required to take youth on paid outings twice per month, even during school breaks. Some agencies provide additional outings above and beyond this requirement, but youth sometimes expressed frustrations that not enough activities and/or outings were offered to them. Other times, the outings offered were not of interest to the youth, which still left them feeling unsatisfied.

In these instances, we discussed the youth's requests both for more outings and/or specific types of outings with STRTP administrators, as well as ensured youth had copies of the home's activity calendar.

Collaboration for Improved Practices

Since Ombuds work is specialized, strengthening partnerships with those in the same field is invaluable. 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:



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 also continued to participate monthly in the United States Ombudsman Association's (USOA) 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 we consider incorporating into our work.

Our office also continued to facilitate a subgroup of child welfare ombuds from the USOA that conduct in-person outreach to youth, since not all the child welfare ombuds offices conduct outreach visits to youth. This forum allows us to exchange strategies and ideas with other ombuds offices who conduct such outreach, as well as talk through issues we encounter.

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, OFCO, DCFS, LACOE, CLC, 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:CY:RGC:GH:MLB

Attachments (3)

- c: Fesia A. Davenport, Chief Executive Officer
Edward Yen, Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
Brandon T. Nichols, Director, Department of Children and Family Services
Lisa H. Wong, Psy.D., 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, Probation Department
Armand Montiel, Interim Executive Director, Commission for Children and Families
Tiara Summers, Executive Director, Youth Commission
Akemi Arakaki, Supervising Judge, Juvenile Division, Los Angeles Superior Court
Luciana Svidler, Director of Policy and Training, Children's Law Center of California
Dawyn R. Harrison, County Counsel
Dennis Smeal, Executive Director, Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers, Inc.
Charity Chandler-Cole, Ed.D., Executive Director, CASA of Los Angeles
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, 2024

Agency Visited	NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
1st Supervisorial District				14
Pacific Horizon	X			•Montebello
Eggleston Youth Center ¹		X		•Baldwin Park (2)•Pomona (2)
Garces Residential Care				•Claremont
Heritage				•West Covina (2)
Hillsides Home for Children				•Los Angeles
Hope House	X			•El Monte (2)
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn				•Walnut
San Gabriel Childen's Center				•Azusa
St. Anne's Family Services				•Los Angeles
2nd Supervisorial District				20
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems				•Los Angeles (4)
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Carson (2)
Fleming and 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)
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				2
Optimist Boys Home and Ranch, Inc.				•Woodland Hills
Rancho San Antonio				•Chatsworth
4th Supervisorial District				5
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Torrance
Fleming and Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Long Beach
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc.				•San Pedro •Torrance
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility		X		•Torrance
5th Supervisorial District				17
Blair High School			X	•Pasadena
Bourne, Inc.				•Altadena •Pasadena
Boys Republic				•Monrovia
Five Acres		X		•Altadena (2) •Pasadena
Fleming and Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Lancaster (3)
Hathaway-Sycamores Child and Family Services dba The Sycamores ¹		X		•Altadena (2)
Hillsides Home for Children GH	X			•Pasadena
Lone Hill Middle School			X	•San Dimas
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home				•San Dimas
McKinley School			X	•Pasadena
Zoe International dba Zoe Home for Youth ¹				•Acton

Agency Visited		NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
Out of County	County				14
Mary's Shelter dba Mary's Path ¹	Orange				•Santa Ana (2)
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 •Yucaipa
TOTAL					72

Footnotes:

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

JO = Joint Outreach Visit with the California Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson

SCH = School Outreach Visit

¹ Visited twice or more

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, 2024

Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR)

	1. Personal Rights	29
	2. Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)	1
	3. Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	0
	4. Education	25
	5. Health	2
	6. Mental Health	0
	7. Sexual and Reproductive Health	1
	8. Case Plan	16
	9. Court	0
	10. Children and Family Team (CFT)	0
	11. Family and Social Connections	27
	12. Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management	43
	13. Communications	16
	14. Records	2
	FYBoRs Total	162
	15. Other	24
	Total Requests Received by Ombudsperson	186

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