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April 16, 2026

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FROM: Oscar Valdez
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Robert G. Campbell
Assistant Auditor-Controller / Chief Audit Executive

SUBJECT: **OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT –
JULY 1 THROUGH DECEMBER 31, 2025**

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 July 1 through December 31, 2025.

Summary of Activities

The Ombuds conducted in-person outreach to **277 youth**, ages **9 to 20**, during **105 site visits** at **35 agencies** and **1 school district**. This includes **47 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), Transitional Shelter Care Facilities (TSCF) and schools. In addition, we were able to incorporate a visit to **1 Probation camp and 2 Transitional Housing Placement Program – Non-Minor Dependent sites (THPP-NMD)**.

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.

On November 18, 2025, the Board of Supervisors (Board) moved to expand our oversight to include youth placed in THPP-NMD. While we are still in the process of fully operationalizing this expansion and continue working with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Chief Executive Office to secure funding and hiring authority for the positions the Board directed be resourced, we began immediate outreach to agencies that also operate STRTPs to better understand their THPP-NMD programs. Our team has been scheduling visits to these sites to learn more about the services they provide, how they support youth in their care, and to gather feedback on the most effective ways for our office to connect with and support the youth placed in their programs.

We addressed **133 requests for assistance (RFAs or requests)** received through our outreach (i.e., in-person and over the phone) and via our helpline (i.e., phone calls, web submissions, and e-mails). We identified common occurrences within these requests which fell in the categories of Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, Personal Rights, Family and Social Connections, and Education. 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 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.

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, 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.

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 the California Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR) (Attachment I). 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 STRTPs. DCFS utilizes some of these non-County contracted GHs to place youth who have developmental disabilities. Many of these youth are 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 California 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 visit 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 also conduct outreach via 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 with another avenue to connect with youth and their supporters about their rights and to share about our office as a resource.

In addition, we have a social media account on Instagram to provide an additional and more contemporary channel to share information with youth about our office, the FYBOR, and other resources. This is part of our strategy to address the needs of youth who might be reluctant to interact with an unknown adult they perceive as being part of the dependency system. Publishing content on Instagram provides a one-way channel for youth to receive information without having to interact with County staff if that is their preference. They can access our information and resources on their own time and terms, when they may be more emotionally and/or mentally receptive, in a medium with which they are intimately familiar. Our hope is that this leads to greater engagement and better retention of the information. In addition, the videos and posts may help build rapport with youth, who could then decide to contact our office if they have specific needs or requests.

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 Contract Compliance Division (CCD), 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/THPP-NMD and their management, Community Care Licensing (CCL), the California Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson (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.

Ombuds Independence and Challenges Accessing Information

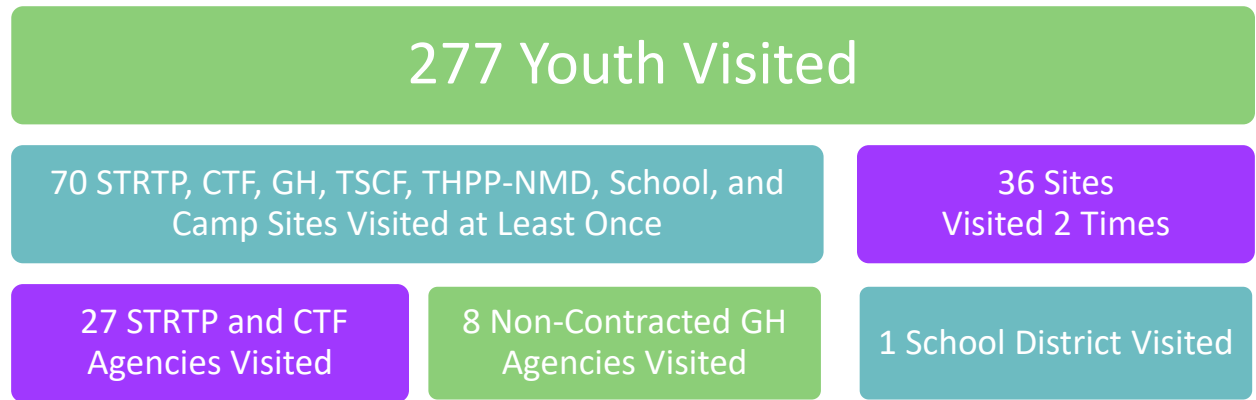
To be effective, the Ombuds must remain independent as we work to resolve requests for assistance, and this includes having direct access to information about the youth within our purview. We have encountered ongoing challenges in obtaining access to DCFS systems which contain information necessary to independently fulfill our mandate. This includes direct access to basic records and data such as a list of clients within the Ombuds purview who are entitled to receive our services, and case information and notes for that cohort of youth, as well as details of services related to specific programs for which we routinely receive requests for assistance. Without this access, our ability to identify and verify that we are serving the entire population of youth within our purview, and to assess and address the root causes of issues raised by youth is limited. This in turn constrains efforts to address matters that may negatively impact youth and increases their risk of adverse outcomes.

We have formally requested the necessary access, and continue working collaboratively with both DCFS leadership and County Counsel to secure access to the information required. However, at present, we do not have all the access needed to independently carry out our duties in accordance with professional standards for ombuds offices in the United States. We are also consulting with County Counsel regarding other potential avenues to secure such access, which may include Board action, and will report back to the Special Audit Committee with recommendations in the next reporting period.

Outreach Activities

During this reporting period, the Ombuds conducted **105** in-person **outreach visits to 277 youth** in STRTPs, CTFs, non-contracted GHs, schools, TSCFs, and one Probation camp. The youth ranged in age from **9 to 20** years old. In total, this comprised outreach to **70 sites** (36 sites were visited twice), operated by 35 agencies and 1 school district as follows:

- **47 STRTP and 2 CTF sites** operated by 27 agencies
- **14 GH sites** operated by 8 non-contracted agencies
- **2 school sites** in one school district
- **2 TSCF sites**
- **2 THPP-NMD sites** operated by 2 agencies
- **1 Probation Camp**



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

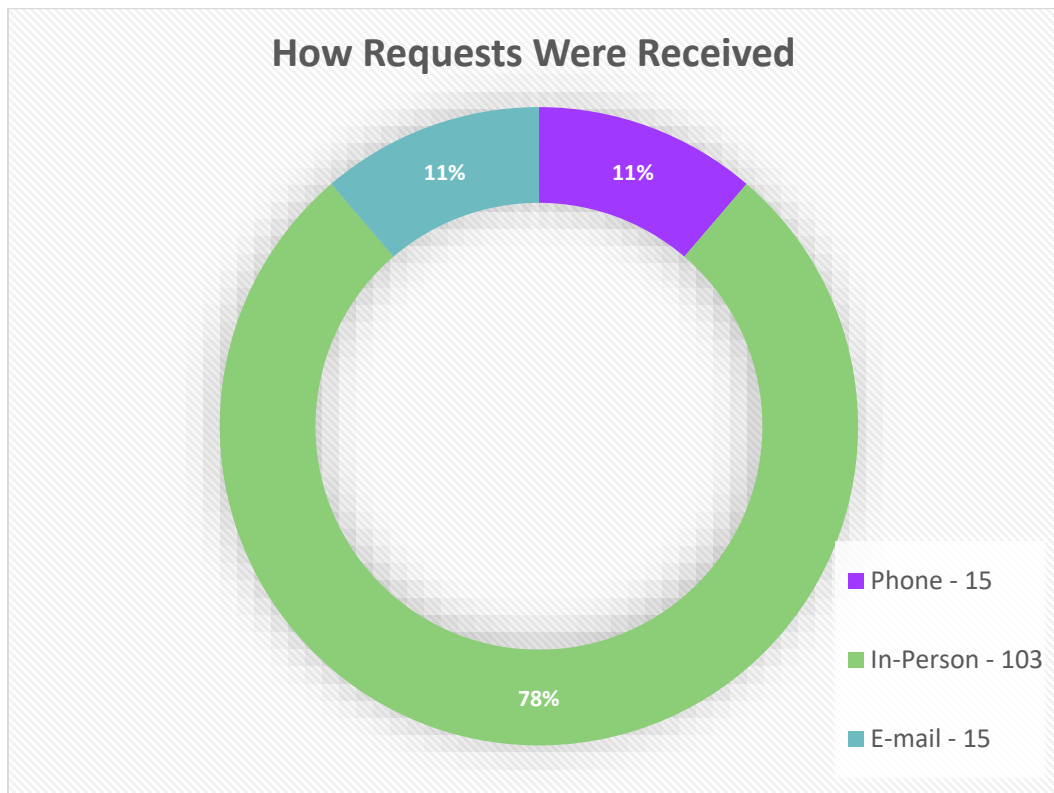
placed in a non-contracted STRTP outside of Southern California (Lompoc), and we conducted outreach to them via phone.

Attachment II details the summary of Outreach Visits Conducted.

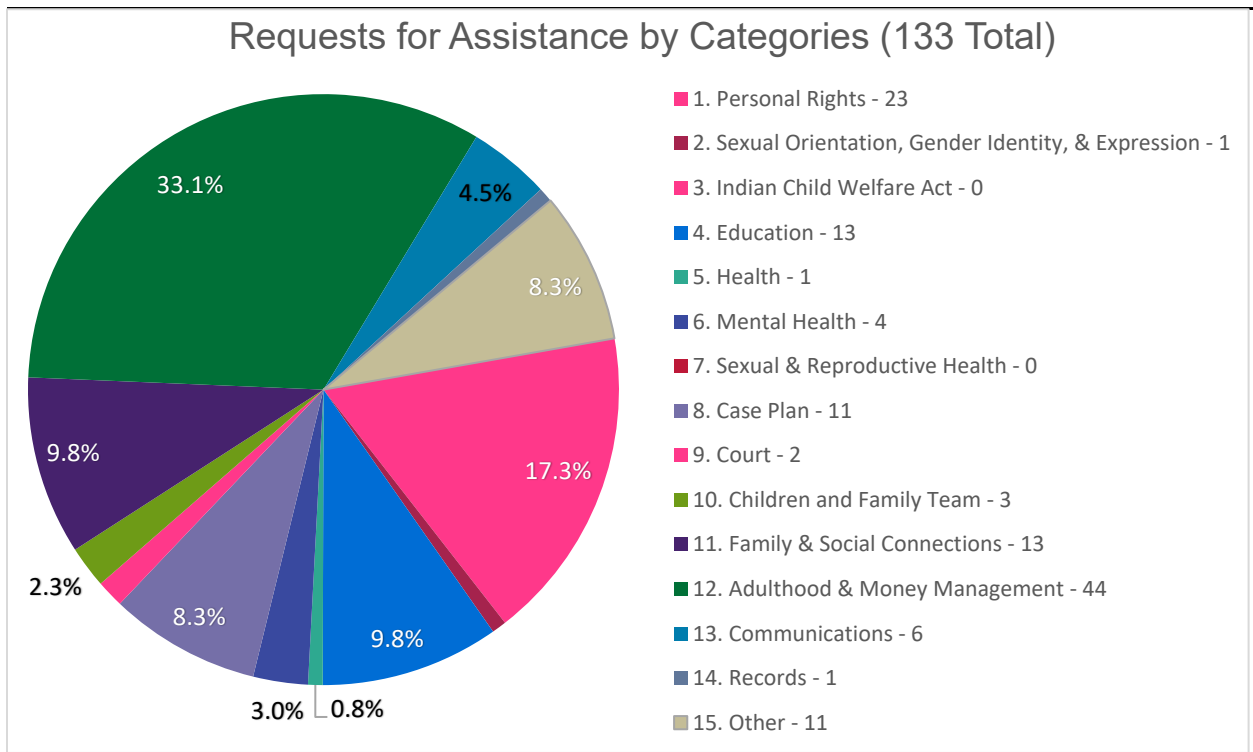
Request for Assistance Activities

The Ombuds received a total of **133 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:

- 103 via in-person outreach (78%)
- 15 by phone (11%)
- 15 via e-mails (11%)



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



For all requests submitted by youth regarding their rights, our office works diligently to provide **individual resolutions** that address each youth’s specific needs and ensure their rights are upheld. Simultaneously, we pursue **systemic solutions** to identify and address underlying policy, practice, and procedural gaps, with the goal of preventing similar barriers for future youth. This dual approach ensures that while immediate concerns are resolved, long-term improvements are implemented so that subsequent youth experience consistent and timely access to all rights afforded under the FYBOR.

The categories associated with the FYBOR with the most RFAs were:



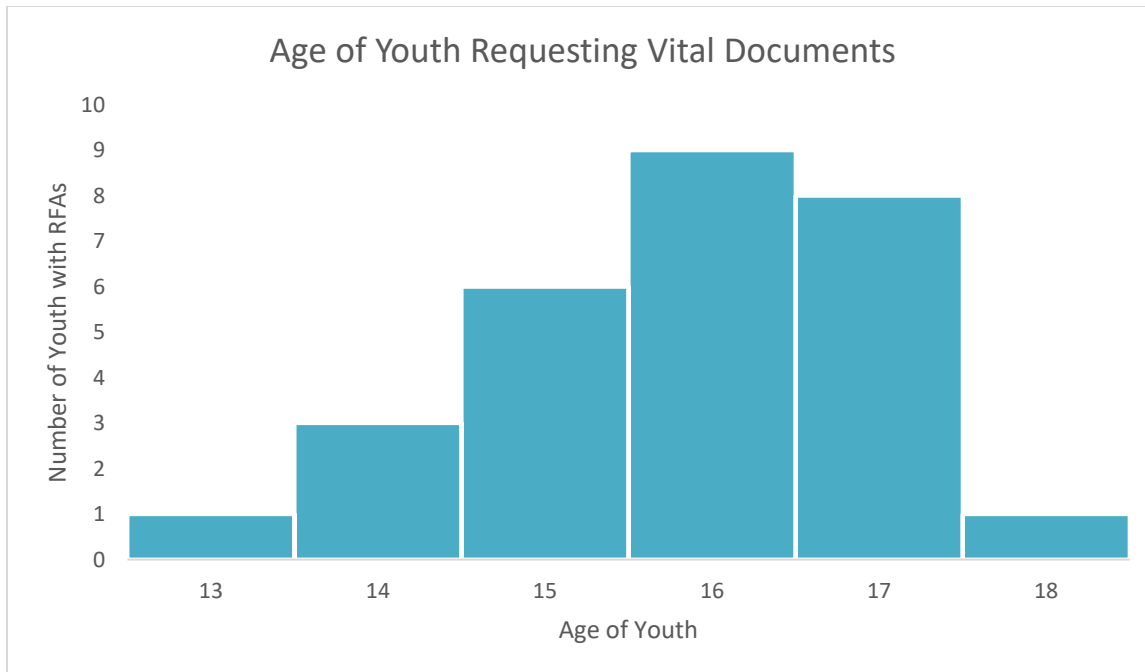
Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management - 44 (33.1%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:

Needing Vital Documents	Opening a Bank Account	Referral to a Job Program
ILP Funding	Status of Transitional Housing Application	Connection with ILP

We received **44 requests** related to Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, including **28 requests focused on obtaining vital documents** such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, and identification (ID) cards. This trend is consistent with prior reporting periods and highlights ongoing barriers youth face in accessing essential documents needed for employment. Without these documents, youth cannot fully exercise their right under the FYBOR to “work and develop job skills at an age-appropriate level.” While DCFS has issued an updated *For Your Information* (FYI) to staff and updated its contracts with providers to begin assisting youth in obtaining vital documents at age 13, many youth still do not have all of their required documents.

This reporting period also marks the first time we examined the **age distribution of youth making requests for vital documents**. The data shows that a majority of youth who lacked one or more vital documents were **15 and older**, reflecting that even though provider contracts previously required youth 15 and above to have their documents and prior DCFS guidance advised staff that youth needed their documents starting at age 16, the practice is still not consistent. Notably, **64% of requests came from youth aged 16 and above**, indicating ongoing gaps in practice by DCFS staff and provider agencies in ensuring youth receive their documents in a timely manner. To address this, **we recommend that DCFS globally track whether youth in out-of-home care have their vital documents to generate reports on missing documents and initiate follow-up support**. We believe this should be proactive rather than demand-based.



Personal Rights - 23 (17.3%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:

Hygiene Products
and Haircare of
Choice

Allowances

Being Treated with
Respect

Issues with Food

Wanting to attend
religious services

A recurring concern raised by youth requesting assistance involved their treatment by placement staff. Although agencies are expected to provide trauma-informed care, eight (8) reported incidents reflected lapses in these practices. Youth described staff making disparaging comments, using profanity toward them, or engaging in conduct that caused emotional distress or physical harm. Such behavior is inconsistent with trauma-informed care principles and can undermine the emotional safety and stability that placements are intended to provide.

Consistent with established protocols, our office reported these allegations to CPH, CCL, and DCFS, and monitored the status of the investigations. Our office does not have the authority to conduct formal investigations or impose enforcement actions such as citations, fines, placement holds, or corrective training. Instead, we function as a problem-solver and advocate, and therefore rely on the agencies with statutory authority to investigate complaints and hold providers accountable. We follow up with the youth

and the aforementioned agencies to promote timely actions and resolution that prioritize youth safety and well-being in these instances.

DCFS internal policy currently limits the circumstances under which the OHCIS will initiate an investigation. OHCIS conducts investigations only when the CPH categorizes a report as a referral for child abuse or neglect. When a report is classified as “Information to CSW,” OHCIS does not investigate, even when the allegation involves concerning conduct by STRTP staff. This policy may limit DCFS’s ability to review and address certain complaints involving staff conduct in congregate care placements, despite DCFS having authority to require a Corrective Action Plan (CAP), impose placement holds, or restrict staff contact with youth during investigations.

We recommend that DCFS consider amending its internal policy to allow OHCIS discretion to investigate complaints involving STRTP staff conduct, even when the CPH does not categorize the report as a referral for abuse or neglect.

Of the eight (8) youth requests referenced above, one OHCIS investigation resulted in a CAP requiring all facility staff to complete additional training with an external provider on trauma-informed care and youth engagement. In three cases, the staff involved were no longer employed at the facilities, and in two additional cases, staff were mandated to complete training. During our review of DCFS records related to these incidents, we also identified **four (4) additional incidents** of alleged physical abuse and inappropriate or excessive use of force that had not been reported to our office but which were investigated by DCFS and CCL. In each of those cases, the allegations were substantiated and the staff involved were terminated.

Taken together, these incidents highlight the importance of ensuring that concerns regarding staff conduct are consistently reviewed and addressed through established investigative mechanisms. Allowing greater discretion for review of such complaints may help strengthen oversight, promote accountability, and reinforce trauma-informed practices within congregate care settings.

Hygiene and Haircare (4 requests)

Multiple youth raised concerns regarding **access to culturally appropriate hair care and hygiene products**, indicating inconsistent practices across providers and potential barriers to exercising their personal rights. Several youth reported that the products provided by their facilities did not meet their individual or cultural needs. In some instances, youth stated they were required to use standard products provided by the facility unless they obtained a **medical prescription** for alternatives, while others reported being told they must purchase preferred products themselves with their personal allowance. We reviewed with the agency that the FYBOR, DCFS contract with STRTP providers, and the State Interim Licensing Standards (ILS) all 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. After review, the agency reimbursed the youth for the products she purchased with her allowance and committed to providing the needed hygiene products moving forward.

Youth also reported **limitations on funding or scheduling for hair care**, including facility-imposed timelines or monthly spending limits that did not adequately account for the higher cost of products and services needed for textured hair. One youth requested assistance advocating for hair services sooner than the facility would allow, as they informed her she had to wait three months before she could get her hair done again, while others described needing to wait multiple months to afford wigs or other necessary items. Some youth also reported issues with reimbursement for products they purchased. While youth were ultimately reimbursed, the reimbursements sometimes took extended periods of time. These concerns suggest that current practices may not consistently account for the **cultural and practical needs associated with hair and hygiene care** which is not consistent with the FYBOR, ILS, and the DCFS contract, potentially requiring youth to cover costs themselves or navigate administrative barriers to obtain appropriate products and services.

The FYBOR, DCFS contract with STRTP providers, and the state ILS all address youths' access to hygiene products and haircare. However, none of these specifically delineate which hygiene products are considered basic needs, nor the amount to be spent to obtain them. While it is essential to individually assess and address the needs of each youth, which is why the laws, contract, and policy are written broadly, it also opens the door to differing opinions on what constitutes a reasonable and basic necessity.

The FYBOR states that youth should have access to “grooming and hygiene products that respect the culture, ethnicity, gender identity, and expression.”

The DCFS STRTP Contract Statement of Work 17.6.2 states that contractors shall supply each youth with new personal hygiene and personal care items, which includes their own toothbrush, toothpaste, comb and other hair-care items, shampoo, soap, deodorant, sanitary napkins, etc. Contractors are to also offer each youth a choice among brands as long as the cost is reasonable, and provide each youth specific brands necessary for health reasons. In addition, contractors shall ensure that personal care and hygiene items and appropriate grooming, including hair care, shall be provided and individualized according to the youths' culture, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and ethnicity, which may include taking the youth to the salon, barber, purchasing special hair care products, etc.

The California Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing, Interim Licensing Standards for STRTPs, state that youth are “to be provided with and allowed to possess and use adequate personal items, consistent with WIC 16001.9(a), which includes their own toiletries, grooming, and personal hygiene products...the licensee shall provide and make readily available to each child the following supplies necessary

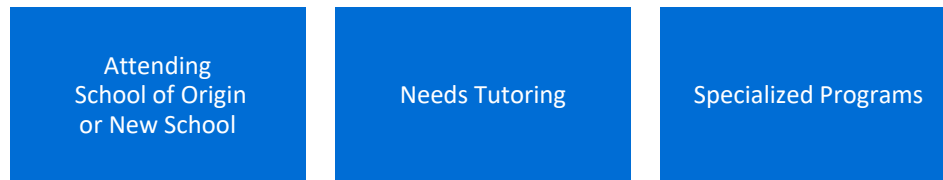
for personal care and maintenance of personal hygiene: items used to maintain basic personal hygiene practices, including but not limited to shampoo, feminine napkins and tampons, nonmedicated soap, toilet paper, toothbrush, toothpaste, and comb.”

Since discrepancies persist regarding what constitutes a “basic need,” **we recommend that DCFS update its policies, practices, and any relevant contracts to ensure that a youth’s hygiene and haircare needs are documented at the outset of placement based on the youth’s input and stated preferences.** These needs should be reviewed regularly and updated as necessary. The documented needs should then be provided to caregivers as the youth’s individualized basic needs, with a clear understanding that these needs may be modified or updated at any time based on the youth’s input.



Education - 13 (9.8%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:



Youth submitted 13 requests related to education, covering a variety of topics. Of these, 6 requests were from youth wanting to attend their School of Origin (SOO) after their placement changed. A few youth remained in SOO, while the rest enrolled in new schools due to an Education Rights Holder (ERH) decision or a change in the youth’s desire to attend SOO. Other requests in this category included attending a specific school that was not an SOO, needing tutoring, and needing an updated ERH.

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. When necessary, 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 were considered. Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) are required by the Education Code but are not occurring consistently. The school district is responsible for holding BIDs but cannot do so unless it has been notified by DCFS that a placement change has occurred. An ERH also needs to be willing and available to participate in the BID, as they are the legal decision makers who determine what is in the youth’s best interest. Because there are so many parties with different responsibilities that affect the ability to hold BIDs on time, the overall rate of BIDs remains inconsistent.

One youth's request to attend their SOO provides a clear example of effective and youth-centered practice. A youth placed 43 miles from their SOO requested to remain enrolled following a placement change. A two-part BID process was conducted to ensure meaningful youth participation and full stakeholder input. At the first meeting, the youth expressed a clear desire to remain at the SOO, and the ERH, who was present, requested that the caregiver participate before a final decision was made. A second meeting was convened with the youth, ERH, caregiver, and a LACOE Education Specialist in attendance. The team collaboratively agreed to allow the youth to remain at the SOO with enhanced supports and a structured 30-day improvement period, after which enrollment in the School of Residence (SOR) would be considered if sufficient progress was not demonstrated. This approach reflects best practice by prioritizing school stability, centering youth voice, ensuring multidisciplinary engagement, and implementing a transparent, data-informed review process.

School Stability Data Review Following Placement Changes

We remain concerned about the number of school days youth miss when they change placements. We established a workgroup with OCP, LACOE, and DCFS to identify common reasons for enrollment gaps and delays to address systemic barriers contributing to school disruption. The workgroup is seeking additional data to better understand the specific circumstances that lead to gaps in enrollment or interruptions in continued attendance at a youth's SOO. Once this expanded analysis is complete, the workgroup will reconvene to review the findings and identify targeted strategies to strengthen school stability and promote prompt, seamless enrollment for youth placed in STRTPs. Findings from this analysis and identified strategies to address them will be shared in subsequent Ombuds semi-annual reports.

Stakeholders—including providers, school districts, LACOE, and DCFS—have consistently reported that youth placed in STRTPs are frequently disenrolled from their SOO before a BID can occur and subsequently experience delays in beginning attendance at their SOR or in returning to their SOO. In response to these concerns, our office partnered with LACOE in Fall 2024 to review data for youth who contacted our office requesting to remain at their SOO. That review revealed that youth experienced significant instructional loss between school exit and re-enrollment, reinforcing concerns that placement changes often result in substantial educational disruption in the absence of coordinated intervention. This led to a greater review of all youth who were initially placed or replaced in congregate care in October 2024, which had similar findings.

In order to have the most current data possible, and as a follow up to the prior data, our office, in partnership with OCP, LACOE, and DCFS, conducted an updated data analysis for youth placed or replaced into congregate care in October 2025 to identify trends related to school disruption following placement changes. Specifically, the review examined how many days of school youth miss when they change placements and

subsequently change schools. A companion analysis is underway to assess school attendance outcomes for youth who remain in their SOO following a placement change.

A total of 27 youth with placement start dates in October were included in this review. Of these youth:

- 15 (55.6%) exited their school (6 on or after the placement start date and 9 prior to placement),
- 9 (33.3%) remained at their school, and
- 3 (11.1%) had not been enrolled during the current school year.

Of the 15 youth who exited their schools, 13 (86.7%) enrolled in a new school following placement, while two (13%) did not enroll elsewhere. Three (3) of the 13 youth who enrolled in a new school returned to a previously attended school that may qualify as a SOO. Two (2) youth who had not been enrolled prior to placement remained truant following placement change, while two (2) youth enrolled in school for the first time this school year after placement.

For purposes of analyzing missed instructional time, only the 13 youth who were enrolled during the current school year and subsequently enrolled in a new school post-placement were included. Two additional data points were excluded due to uncertainty regarding truancy reporting dates. The day of school exit was counted as a missed instructional day, and weekends were excluded from calculations.

Among the 13-youth analyzed, **the average number of school days missed was 21 days**. Missed days ranged from 5 to 54 days, with seven youth (53.8%) missing more than ten estimated school days.

This preliminary review highlights the significant instructional disruption that can occur when placement changes result in school changes and underscores the importance of continued monitoring of school stability practices.

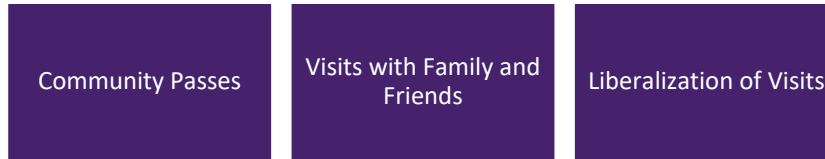
We recommend that DCFS analyze the reason for these missed school days in these cases and collaborate with the partners to identify any trends. Once trends are identified, partners should look for opportunities to address recurring/systemic issues that lead to missed school days and develop a plan to minimize the number of missed school days upon a placement change.

We are aware that some situations may be unique in terms of the cause of missed days of school, but other information may point to common experiences.



Family and Social Connections 13 (9.8%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:



There were 13 RFAs about Family and Social Connections, nine (9) of which pertained to youth wanting visits and/or greater frequency and length of visits with family members and/or non-relative extended family members (NREFMs).

There was continued lack of clarity and discrepancy around youth’s right to visit with family in private.

Under the FYBOR, youth have the right *“to visit and contact siblings, family members, and relatives privately, unless prohibited by court order, and to ask the court for visitation with the child’s siblings.”* However, current interpretations and practices by some DCFS staff have created confusion regarding who can participate in private visits. Some staff have assumed that extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins, must undergo background checks or obtain social worker approval before visiting privately, which is not required by law and the imposition of such restrictions may infringe upon youth rights. Visits with family are not addressed under the California Code, Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) Section (§) 362.05, Reasonable Prudent Parent Standard, and there is currently no guidance on handling short-turnaround requests, such as a Friday request for a Saturday visit. These gaps contribute to missed opportunities for youth to maintain important family connections, including holidays and special occasions.

As a result of our prior request, DCFS issued an updated version of their Quality of Life in Out-of-Home Care policy on July 30, 2025. These updates clarify the youth’s ability to visit with family and friends in private unless prohibited by a court order, and state that *“the law does not require CSWs to conduct an assessment/background check on (social contacts with people outside of the foster care system).”* It further advises that *“if the CSW has safety concerns regarding the potential visitor, (they should) consult with the SCSW and bring these concerns to the attention of the Child and Family Team or the court.”*

However, this updated language implies that it only applies to social contacts rather than family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. It also conflicts with DCFS’ Clearances policy, which states, *“CSWs must check Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS) if they are ‘recommending unmonitored visits for any adult.’”* This implies that any DCFS staff recommendation, formal or not with any adult would require a CWS/CMS search, which it does not, as there is nothing in WIC that designates such a requirement. We requested DCFS update this policy to properly align

with the statute in October 2025. On March 25, 2026, DCFS sent the policy out for stakeholder review and updates to the policy are currently in progress.

In addition, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) issued an [All County Information Notice \(ACIN No. I-02-26\)](#) concerning family time. While the ACIN appropriately emphasizes the importance of family time—including sibling visits and contact with extended family—it does not clearly distinguish between court-ordered visitation with parents and a youth’s independent statutory right to visit siblings, relatives, and family members in private under WIC § 16001.9. In particular, the ACIN is silent on how this right should be exercised in practice and does not clarify that visits with extended family members are not contingent on social worker approval unless a court order restricts contact.

Over many years, our office has received recurring requests for assistance indicating that social workers routinely require extended family visits to be formally approved and, in some instances, require home “checks,” even when the visit is not related to potential placement. These practices appear inconsistent with WIC § 16001.9 and create barriers to youth exercising their rights. Given this history and the guidance opportunity presented by ACIN I-02-26, we requested that CDSS either:

1. **Amend ACIN I-02-26** to provide explicit guidance regarding extended family visitation rights under WIC § 16001.9, including clarification of what is and is not required for such visits; or
2. **Issue a supplemental ACIN** specifically addressing extended family visitation and the implementation of youth rights in this area.

While the ACIN correctly underscores the critical importance of the length and quality of time children spend with parents, siblings, and important family members, it leaves key implementation questions unanswered regarding visits with extended family. Clear statewide guidance would help ensure consistency across counties and prevent continued practices that unnecessarily restrict youth rights.

To ensure youth can fully exercise their rights under WIC § 16001.9, we recommend DCFS:

- **Update local policies and provider agreements to clarify that visits with siblings, relatives, and extended family do not require social worker approval or background checks unless restricted by court order.**
- **Provide targeted training for staff and providers on these statutory rights, including procedures for short-turnaround or urgent visit requests.**
- **Provide accessible information to youth about how to request visits and support.**

Creating additional barriers for youth in maintaining ties with family and friends compounds over time and erodes youths' ability to develop and maintain strong support systems, which is imperative to their success when they age out of foster care.



Case Plan - 11 (8.3%) Requests

In this category, examples of requests included:



The requests in this category mostly concerned youths' need for 6-month and/or 90-day transition conferences, which are required to maximize the use of the time while a dependent of the court and under the supervision of DCFS 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 noted in following up on requests for assistance 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 11 (8.3%) requests that were not related to the FYBOR, which included requests from youth about changing their CSW.

Attachment III lists all the RFAs Received by Type.

Requests Seeking Information Only

There were also contacts made with our office from individuals seeking information, requesting training, or requesting assistance that fell outside the scope of our office. For those, we documented the requests, provided an answer, or connected and/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.

One youth shared with us that he had been prevented from attending a weekday evening church service due to ongoing concerns about his school attendance. When our office reached out to the STRTP about the issue, they indicated that attendance at church would be restricted until the youth demonstrated improved participation in school. This restriction interfered with the youth's right per the FYBOR to attend religious services and activities of their choice.

When our staff raised this concern with the STRTP, the program reported that they had received a written directive from the youth's CSW instructing them to restrict the youth's church attendance as a consequence of his school attendance issues. Our office counseled both STRTP staff and the CSW regarding the protections afforded to youth under the FYBOR and clarified that participation in religious services cannot be withheld as a disciplinary measure. We emphasized the importance of identifying alternative, appropriate strategies to address the youth's concerns about school attendance while ensuring that his rights are upheld. The STRTP and CSW acknowledged the concern, and the youth was subsequently able to attend church services.

Separately, there were four requests from youth wanting a cell phone through a program administered by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which has now been made permanent under CPUC's LifeLine Program, administered through Maximus.

In our work on these requests, we noted that DCFS does not have a policy or procedure in place requiring CSWs to assess the appropriateness of a cell phone for youth 13 and older who are eligible for the free cell phone program. Lack of a formal policy creates an inconsistent linkage for youth under 18 whose ability to access the program is dependent on their CSW. CSWs should assess all age-eligible youth for this program and consistently refer all eligible and suitable youth in out-of-home care to the free cell phone program, document if the youth already has a cell phone, or if they determine such a referral is not appropriate, document in detail their assessment and the basis of their determination why the youth should not have access to this communication tool.

Regular referral is vital as access to a cell phone enhances youth's ability to maintain critical communication and connection with friends and family, as well as provides them with a confidential means to report any issues or concerns they may have about their placements.

We recommend that CSWs refer youth ages 13 and older in out-of-home care to the free cell phone program, document if the youth already has a cell phone, or document their assessment explaining why a phone may not be appropriate at that time.

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 to increase knowledge of best practices, trends, tracking, and reporting, etc., to inform our program design and work.

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

Our Ombudsperson was also re-elected to the USOA Board of Directors and will serve on the Board through the end of the term in 2027.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on feedback from the Special Audit Committee and in an effort to maximize the impact of the Ombuds' work, we have introduced a new section, "Summary of Recommendations," beginning with this report. This section consolidates all recommendations identified during our outreach and response to requests for assistance, with the goal of streamlining follow-up, facilitating timely corrective actions, and enhancing transparency. It is intended to improve visibility for the Special Audit Committee and other oversight bodies, while supporting more effective tracking and accountability across all identified issues.

1. Vital Documents Tracking:

We recommend that DCFS globally track whether youth in out-of-home care possess their vital documents in order to generate reports identifying missing documents and initiate timely follow-up support.

2. OHCIS Investigative Discretion:

We recommend that DCFS consider amending its internal policy to allow OHCIS discretion to investigate complaints involving congregate care staff conduct, even when the CPH does not categorize the report as a referral for abuse or neglect.

3. Individualized Hygiene and Haircare Needs:

We recommend that DCFS update its policies, practices, and any relevant contracts to ensure that a youth's hygiene and haircare needs are documented at the outset of placement based on the youth's input and stated preferences. These needs should be reviewed regularly, updated as necessary, and shared with caregivers as the youth's individualized basic needs, with the understanding that these needs may change at any time.

4. School Attendance Following Placement Changes:

We recommend that DCFS analyze the reasons for missed school days when youth experience placement changes and collaborate with system partners to identify trends. Once trends are identified, partners should develop strategies to minimize school days missed during placement transitions, recognizing that some circumstances may be unique while others may reflect common system challenges.

5. Clarifying Youth Rights to Family and Sibling Visits:

We recommend that DCFS:

- Update local policies and provider agreements to clarify that visits with siblings, relatives, and extended family do not require social worker approval or background checks unless restricted by court order.

- Provide targeted training for staff and providers on these statutory rights, including procedures for short-turnaround or urgent visit requests.
- Ensure youth receive accessible information on how to request visits and obtain support.

6. Cell Phone Access for Youth in Care:

We recommend that CSWs refer youth ages 13 and older in out-of-home care to the free cell phone program, document if the youth already has a cell phone, or document their assessment explaining why a phone may not be appropriate at that time.

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, GH, and THPP-NMD 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 us, 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:MLB

Attachments (3)

- c: Joseph M. Nicchitta, Acting 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
Alaina Moonves-Leb, Interim Executive Director, Office of Child Protection
Guillermo Viera Rosa, Chief Probation Officer, Probation Department
Shalesha Johnson, 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.
Molly Snow, Interim Chief Executive Officer, CASA of Los Angeles
Special Audit Committee
Children's Deputies
Probation Ombudsman
California Office of Foster Care Ombudsperson
Countywide Communications

FOSTER YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS



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
July 1 through December 31, 2025

Agency Visited	NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
1st Supervisorial District				9
Pacific Horizon ²	X			•Montebello
Garces Residential Care				•Claremont
Hillsides STRTP ¹				•Los Angeles
Hope House	X			•El Monte (2)
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn ¹				•Walnut
San Gabriel Children's Center				•Azusa
St. Anne's Family Services ¹ STRTP				•Los Angeles
St. Anne's Family Services THPP-NMD				•Los Angeles
2nd Supervisorial District				23
Abounding Rivers ¹				•Los Angeles
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems ¹				•Los Angeles (4)
Dream Home Care, Inc. ¹				•Carson (2)
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care ¹				•Carson •Gardena •Hawthorne
Humanistic Foundation, Inc. dba New Concept ¹				•Los Angeles
I am Safe ²	X			•Los Angeles
Mindful Growth Foundation ¹				•Los Angeles (4)
One Care	X			•Compton
Promise Transitional Homes dba Promise STRTP				•Los Angeles
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services STRTP ¹				•Los Angeles
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services Community Treatment Facility ¹				•Los Angeles
Wayfinder Family Services ²	X			•Los Angeles (3)
3rd Supervisorial District				5
Behavior Neuroscience Institute Treatment Centers	X			•Agoura Hills •Calabasas
Optimist Boys Home & Ranch, Inc. STRTP ¹				•Woodland Hills
Rancho San Antonio ¹				•Chatsworth (2)
4th Supervisorial District				6
Dorothy Kirby Center				•Commerce
Dream Home Care, Inc. ¹				•Torrance
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care ¹				•Long Beach
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc. ¹				•San Pedro •Torrance
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility ¹				•Torrance
5th Supervisorial District				17
7 Alpha Foundation for Community Wellness			X	•Palmdale
Blair Middle School			X	•Pasadena
Bourne, Inc. ¹				•Pasadena
Five Acres STRTP ¹				•Altadena (2) •Pasadena
Five Acres TSC				•Altadena (2)
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care ¹				•Lancaster (3)
Hathaway-Sycamores Child & Family Services dba The Sycamores ¹				•Altadena
Hillsides Group Home ²	X			•Pasadena
Hillsides THPP-NMD				•Pasadena
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home				•San Dimas
McKinley Middle 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				10
Mary's Shelter dba Mary's Path ¹	Orange				•Santa Ana (2)
Alpha Connection	San Bernardino	X			•Apple Valley (2)
Boys Republic	San Bernardino				•Chino
Eggleston	San Bernardino				•Upland
Fields Comprehensive Youth Services	San Bernardino				•Rancho Cucamonga •Upland
Rite of Passage	Orange				•Costa Mesa
Shirley's Home ²	San Bernardino	X			•Ontario
TOTAL					70

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

July 1 through December 31, 2025

Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR)

	1. Personal Rights	23
	2. Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)	1
	3. Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	0
	4. Education	13
	5. Health	1
	6. Mental Health	4
	7. Sexual & Reproductive Health	0
	8. Case Plan	11
	9. Court	2
	10. Children and Family Team (CFT)	3
	11. Family and Social Connections	13
	12. Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management	44
	13. Communications	6
	14. Records	1
	FYBORs Total	122
	15. Other	11
	Total Requests Received by Ombudsperson	133

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