

MOTION BY SUPERVISORS HILDA L. SOLIS

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AND JANICE HAHN

Setting Youth Up for Success: Adulthood, Money Management, Personal Rights, and Education

On June 12, 2024, the Los Angeles County (County) Ombudsperson for Youth (Ombuds)¹ in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs) provided a report to the Board of Supervisors (Board) on their outreach to youth during the period of July 1 through December 31, 2023.

In the report’s summary, the Ombuds engaged with 224 youth, ages 8 to 19, during 100 separate visits to 31 agencies and 1 school district in the County, which included visits to all 57 STRTP sites. Additionally, the Ombuds received over 250 requests for assistance (RFAs) with the top three RFAs were for adulthood and money management, education, and personal rights.

The highest number of requests for assistance from the youth related to

¹ The LA County Board of Supervisors established the Office in 1998 to serve as an advocate and problem solver for youth placed in group homes, as well as to track and report trends.

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preparing them for adulthood, which includes money management. The report stated that “youth encountered various obstacles in obtaining their vital documents, including challenges in obtaining birth certificates from other jurisdictions and navigating diverse procedures.”² The Board is aware of existing initiatives to provide youth opportunities to be financially literate, including partnering with SCE Credit Union³ to allow youth as young as 13 to open their own without an adult guardian or parent. This allows and empowers the young person to not only have access to a checking account, but to also learn how to be financially independent in cases when they don’t have a consistent or reliable adult in their life to assist with budgeting and finances. Other financial barriers also included Independent Living Program (ILP) funding requiring additional documentation beyond what is requested, which delays the youth’s access to the funds. The Ombuds finding “reveal[ed] a gap in publicly available information regarding the types of funds youth can request, how often youth can request certain funding (i.e., per fiscal year, calendar year, semester), and eligibility criteria for youth to access specific ILP funding line items.”⁴

Studies after studies have demonstrated the importance of education and higher education in ensuring the success and independence of youth, especially systems-involved youth. For this report and time period, almost a quarter of the RFAs was related to education such as youth wanting to stay at their School of Origin (SOO), not having a current or active Education Rights Holder (ERH), youth missing days or weeks

² https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/bc/1162436_2024-06-12OmbudspersonforYouthinSTRTPSSemi-AnnualReport.pdf

³ <https://lacounty.gov/2024/04/19/youth-access-banking-program-available-in-la-county/>

⁴ https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/bc/1162436_2024-06-12OmbudspersonforYouthinSTRTPSSemi-AnnualReport.pdf

of school when youth changed placements, and the issue of transportation to the youth's SOO.

The report noted that the vast majority – 79% of the youth who were interviewed told the Ombuds that they did not receive or not remember receiving the Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR). Per the 2020 legislation passed by Assemblymember Gipson, Assembly Bill (AB) 175, “requires children and their representatives to be informed of their rights in an age-appropriate manner.”⁵ The bill, which expanded the law also included protections for LGBTQ+ youth. Unfortunately, the response from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was that staff “have not been required to complete training familiarizing them with the changes to laws...[and] there was no guidance provided to staff on how to engage youth in developmentally appropriate conversations about the FYBORS.”⁶ This is disheartening to learn because the Board of Supervisors has prioritized the FYBOR and Services since 2017⁷ and worked closely with the Commission for Children and Families, lived experts, and other County leadership to ensure that foster youth and staff could properly communicate the young people’s rights⁸.

The report captured youth’s accounts of staff making “disparaging comments about them, us[ing] profanity towards them, or caus[ing] physical or emotional harm.”⁹ The Ombuds notes that though “many of the allegations against staff were found to be

⁵ <https://mynewsla.com/crime/2020/11/17/l-a-county-launches-website-explaining-foster-youth-rights/>

⁶ https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/bc/1162436_2024-06-12OmbudspersonforYouthinSTRTPSSemi-AnnualReport.pdf

⁷ <https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/115366.pdf>

⁸ <https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/c1941e7c-af0d-4b1d-9828-6140b8018710/2018-03-12FYBoRSReportBack.pdf>

⁹ Id.

inconclusive by CCL [Community Care Licensing] and/or DCFS, because there was not always enough evidence to prove the allegations...[h]owever, there was also no reason to doubt the youth's report that they felt they were not being treated with respect by staff."¹⁰

The report continues to cover other RFAs heard from the youth such as Family and Social Connections and barriers to visits, as well as others such as: “[a]ssistance retrieving personal belongings from prior placement, [s]tatus of their placement change, [r]equest to change their CSW [Children’s Social Workers], [i]ssues with other residents”;¹¹ in addition to requests for information, unreasonable searches, hygiene and haircare.

The role of the Ombuds is three-fold, which is to inform the Board of updates, issues, and recommendations; inform DCFS of findings and make recommendations; and serve as an advocate for the youth to feel safe and secure in sharing concerns and issues knowing that these issues will be uplifted and resolved. With the issuance of this report and its unfortunate findings, the Board must take action to ensure our youth utilize the platform available to share issues of concern and to hold DCFS transparent and accountable as they address and resolve the findings.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Department of Children and Family Services and the Los Angeles County (County) Ombudsperson for Youth in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs), in collaboration with the Youth

¹⁰https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/bc/1162436_2024-06-12OmbudspersonforYouthinSTRTPSSemi-AnnualReport.pdf

¹¹ Id.

Commission, LGBTQ+ Commission, Department of Youth Development, community-based youth providers, and youth with lived experience, where appropriate, to:

a. Review and create an implementation plan to address and resolve the findings and areas of concerns listed in the July 1 through December 31, 2023 Semi-Annual Report, focusing at minimum:

i. As it relates to the Personal Rights:

1. Train DCFS staff on changes to the Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR);
2. Provide DCFS guidance and training on how to engage youth in developmentally appropriate conversations about FYBOR;
3. Provide all foster youth a copy of the FYBOR, multiple times a year, including reviewing and ensuring the FYBORS is available in the threshold languages; and
4. Engage with impacted youth, former STRTP youth, Youth Commission, Department of Youth Development, and other relevant groups to create a better process in which grievances about staff and living conditions can be reported, documented, and investigated, with no retaliation or harassment, as well as including an early warning system for staff who have multiple misconduct allegations and discipline for staff who engage in

retaliation or harassment of youth for using grievance process.

ii. As it relates to Adulthood and Money Management:

1. Partner with SCE Union and other financial institutions, expand to ensure that all youth have the information and ability to open their own bank accounts without the need for an adult, as well as provide information and education on financial literacy; and
2. Work with the Independent Living Program, to ensure funding process is accessible, transparent, and free of unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles and hurdles that delay or restrict a youth's access to ILP fundings and information is accessible and available to the public.

iii. As it relates to Education:

1. Ensure processes and protocols are in place to make sure:
 - a. Youth can attend their School of Origin (SOO), especially during the Best Interest Determination (BID) process and that the youth is informed throughout the process;
 - b. To have the Office of Child Protection's Education Coordinating Council to continue working with the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the

impacted schools to ensure they are consulted in a timely and frequent manner to create a timeline, plan, and process for the youth to be able to attend their SOO; and

c. Youth are aware and informed of their education rights throughout the process, including in an age-appropriate and language inclusive manner.

2. Ensure that all youth have a current and active Education Rights Holder (ERH) in collaboration with the youth's Children's Social Worker (CSW) and attorney; and

3. In collaboration with the Office of Child Protection, create a transportation plan, including accessing available transportation programs, such as Metro's GoPass program, Assembly Bill 130 funds, and other relevant and appropriate funding sources.

iv. As it relates to Family and Social Connections:

1. In discussions related to Directive (1) (iii) (3), ensure transportation accessibility for visits, including with family and others; and

2. Address barriers to visitation plans including distance between placement and location of family members or non-relative extended family members; schedule conflicts between the youth and family member or friend; and

extended waits for CSWs approval for the youth to visit certain people.

3. Ensure that Child and Family Team meetings are taking place consistently and with correct supports.

v. As it relates to Other Requests:

1. Address requests for assistance retrieving personal belongings from prior placements; status of their placement change; request to change their CSW, issues with other residents, among others.

WE, FURTHER, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

2. Direct the Department of Children and Families, with support from the Ombudsperson for Youth in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs), to:

- a. Report back to the Board, in writing, in 120 days, in response to Directive 1 and provide quarterly updates to the Board until completion or further notice and
- b. To the extent that there have been attempts to resolve the Ombudsperson's findings listed in Directive 1 and in the June 12, 2024 Semi-Annual Report, include in the report back, the ways in which they are being addressed and identify the gaps that led to the findings by the Ombudsperson.

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