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

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June 12, 2024

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

FROM: Oscar Valdez
Auditor-Controller

SUBJECT: **OMBUDSPERSON FOR YOUTH IN STRTPs SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT –
JULY 1 THROUGH DECEMBER 31, 2023**

This report summarizes the Los Angeles County (County) Ombudsperson for Youth in Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs)¹ (Ombuds) Program activities for the period of July 1 through December 31, 2023.

Summary of Activities

The Ombuds conducted in-person outreach to **224 youth**, ages **8 to 19**, during **100 site visits** at **38 agencies** and **1 school district**. This includes all **57 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. In addition, we were able to incorporate visits to **2 Transitional Shelter Care Facilities (TSCF)**. We conducted **6 (10.5%)** of the visits to STRTP and CTF sites in partnership with the Probation Department Ombudsman (Probation Ombuds).

We also addressed **267 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.

categories of Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, Education, Personal Rights, and Family and Social Connections. 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 recognize the Ombuds as a valuable resource.

Upon DCFS notifying the Ombuds of a youth placement or re-placement in congregate care, we call each youth to inform them about our office and to summarize their rights under the California Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBOR) (Attachment I). We were able to implement this new outreach step by leveraging our Career Development Intern (CDI), who has lived experience with the child welfare system and provides the Ombuds with capacity to enhance our outreach activities. 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 youths 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 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.

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 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), the California Office of 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 that the requests and concerns of youth are effectively addressed.

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 **100** in-person **outreach visits to 224 youth** in STRTPs, CTFs, non-contracted GHs, TSCFs, and schools. The youth ranged in age from **8 to 19** years old. In total, this comprised outreach to **80 sites** (19 sites were visited twice and 1 was visited three times), operated by 38 agencies and 1 school district as follows:

- **57 STRTP and 2 CTF sites** operated by 29 agencies
- **15 GH sites** operated by 9 non-contracted agencies
- **4 school sites** in one school district
- **2 TSCF sites**

We conducted **6 (10.5%)** of the visits to STRTP and CTF sites in partnership with the Probation Ombuds.

224 Youth Visited

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

20 Sites
Visited 2+ Times

29 STRTP and CTF
Agencies Visited

9 Non-Contracted
GH Agencies Visited

1 School District
Visited

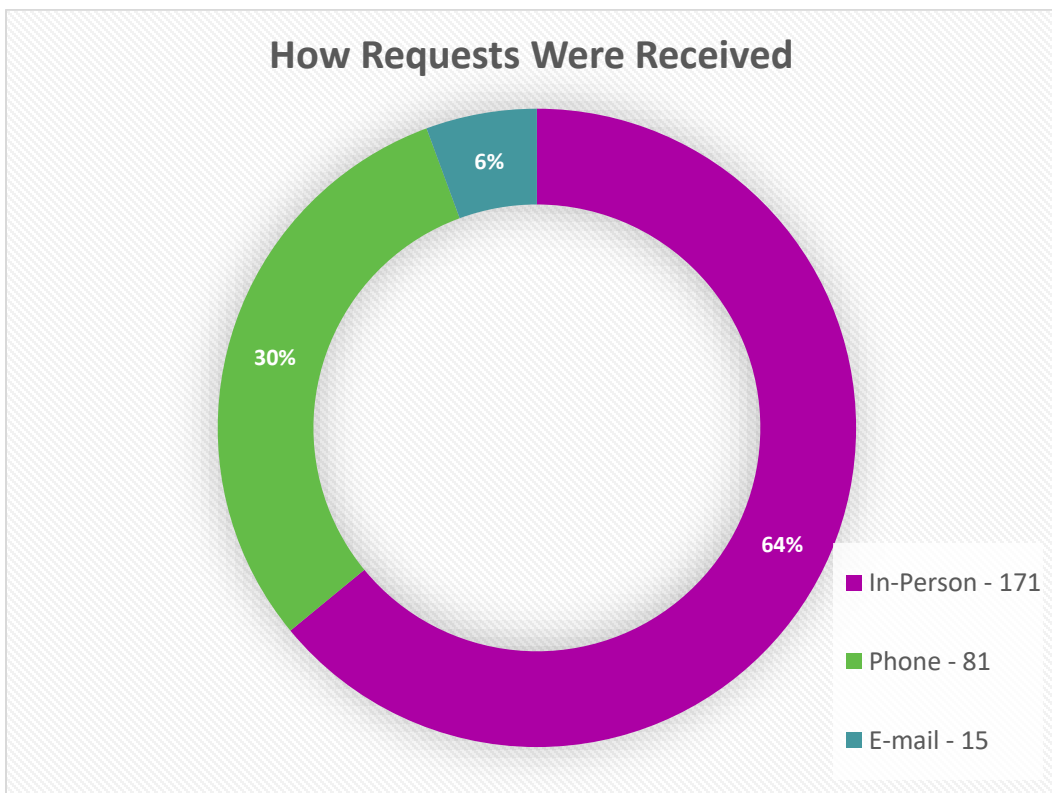
We conducted in-person outreach visits to all the STRTP, CTF, and group home agencies housing youth under the care of DCFS. We also visited with youth at certain schools that have several students placed in STRTPs. We coordinated these visits with each school's Foster Youth Liaison who informed the youth, provided a designated private room on campus for those who wanted to meet with us, and scheduled the visits during times they recommended to avoid unnecessary disruption of the students' classroom instruction. 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.

Attachment II details the summary of Outreach Visits Conducted.

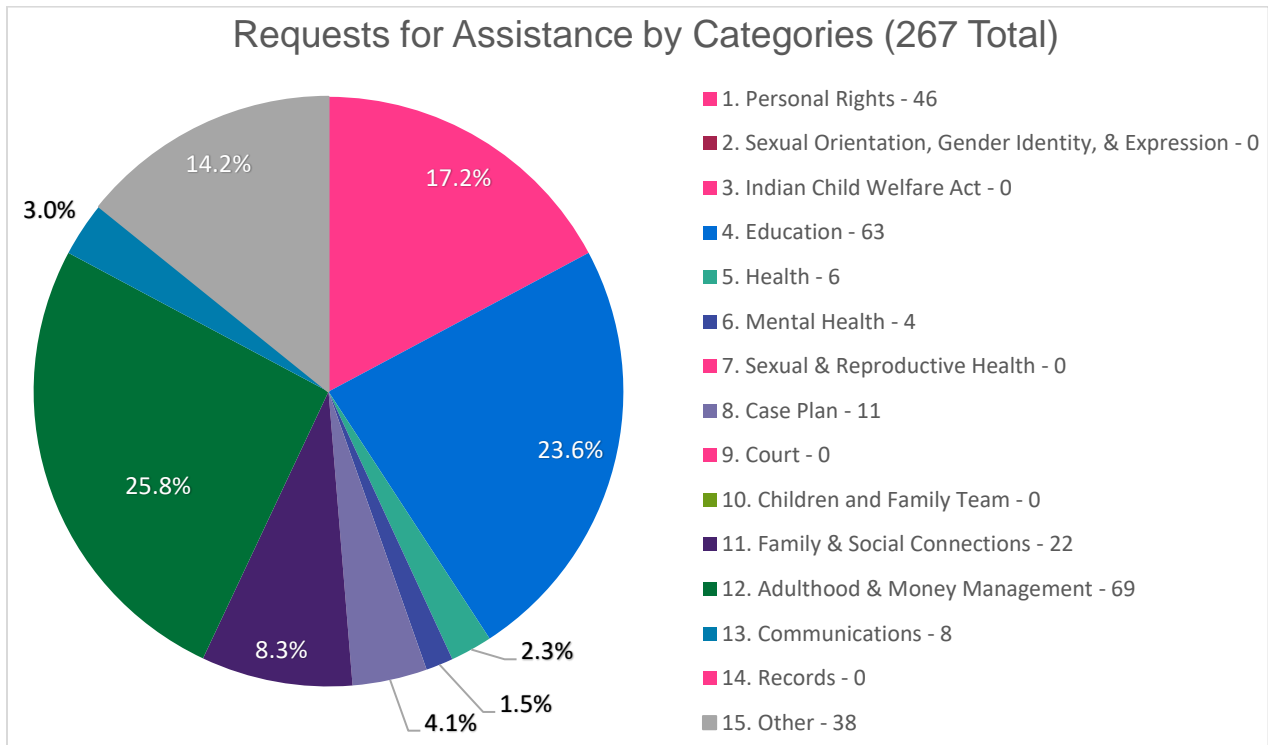
Request for Assistance Activities

The Ombuds received a total of **267 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:

- 171 during in-person visits (64%)
- 81 by phone (30%)
- 15 via e-mails (6%)



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




Knowledge of FYBOR

During our interactions with youth, it became apparent that many had either not received or did not recall receiving the FYBOR from their CSWs. Consequently, we initiated a verbal survey during our visits to ascertain whether they had received the FYBOR. Out of the 71 youth surveyed, 56 (79%) stated they had not received the FYBOR or did not remember receiving it, while 15 (21%) indicated that they had. This feedback underscores impressions from prior reporting periods, indicating that many youth were unfamiliar with their rights or had not been provided with information about them.

We discussed these findings with DCFS management and were informed that DCFS staff have not been required to complete training familiarizing them with changes to laws since the FYBOR was revised in 2020. Additionally, there was no guidance provided to staff on how to engage youth in developmentally appropriate conversations about the FYBOR. To address this issue, we met with DCFS, the Office of Child Protection (OCP), and other stakeholders to share the survey outcomes, discuss potential training on the FYBOR for staff, and brainstorm methods for better engaging youth. Our office will lead development and dissemination of curriculum addressing this gap with input and collaboration with various partners, and follow-up with DCFS about requiring this training for pertinent staff. In addition, FYBOR training directly designed for youth will also be developed in partnership with relevant organizations and youths.

Furthermore, we initiated scheduling presentations at all DCFS regional offices' general staff meetings to familiarize them with our office and discuss trends in RFAs pertaining directly to youths' rights. Our aim is to present at all general staff meetings by December 2024, and to collaborate with DCFS and other partners in developing and implementing FYBOR training for staff. Ensuring that youth are informed about their rights is crucial, as lack of knowledge may prevent them from seeking resolutions when their rights are violated, negatively impacting their experiences in care. These efforts with both youth and staff are intended to contribute towards decreasing issues related to rights concerns that youth bring to our attention.

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

 **Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management (69 requests/25.8%)**
In this category, examples of requests included:



We received a total of 69 requests regarding Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management, with 43 specifically focused on obtaining vital documents like birth certificates, Social Security cards, and identification cards, as well as assistance in opening a bank account. These requests emphasize the continual necessity of ensuring that youth in foster care have access to vital documents to facilitate their transition into adulthood, echoing sentiments expressed in Board motions dated August 10, 2021 and January 11, 2022.

Youth encountered various obstacles in obtaining their vital documents, including challenges in obtaining birth certificates from other jurisdictions and navigating diverse procedures. To address these ongoing issues, we reviewed the Needs and Services Plan (NSP) within DCFS' Provider Management Information System (PMIS), particularly the Life Skills/Vocational Preparation Section, which assesses youths' access to vital documents. However, PMIS currently prompts for this information only for youth aged 15 and above.

Recognizing the need for comprehensive support, we advocated for enhancements in the NSP, including the collection of vital document information from youths as young as 13 years of age, along with details regarding encountered barriers and provider

interventions. Additionally, we emphasized the importance of assessing youths' financial literacy and readiness to open a bank account. Although these suggestions are yet to be integrated into the NSP, we remain optimistic that their implementation will positively impact youths' ability to obtain their vital documents and manage their finances effectively.

ILP Funding

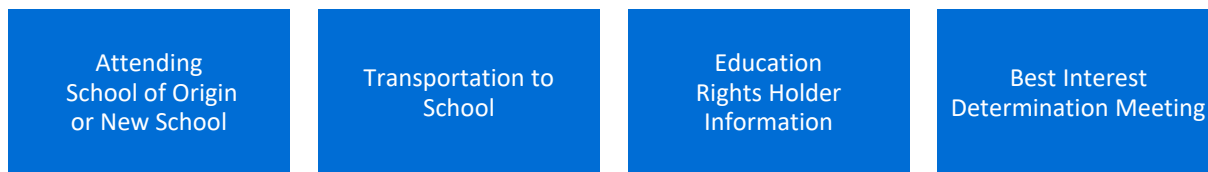
We also received requests about ILP funding for youth who are eligible for the program. For instance, one youth reported to us that they requested ILP funding, but ILP required additional documentation from the youth beyond what is listed in ILP's "Youth Information Sheet for Eligible ILP Services." The request for additional documents delayed the youth's access to the funds, and we were unable to conclude from reviewing the available documentation that the additional records requested were required by any law or policy. This situation prompted us to review similar requests made to our office, revealing 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. Our findings indicate that empowering youth and their supporters with clearer guidelines on qualifications for ILP funds and specific processes and requirements for obtaining them could enhance their ability to utilize these resources effectively.

As a result, we are currently in discussions with ILP to make the funding process more transparent. This includes considering the release of additional documents or information to the public. Currently, although ILP has an internal policy outlining how and when youth can request funds, there's a lack of similar information accessible to the broader community. Addressing this deficiency could streamline funding requests and better serve the needs of youth navigating the ILP process.



Education (63 requests/23.6%)

In this category, examples of requests included:



Youth made 63 requests relating to education, which included a variety of topics. Of these, 52 of the requests were from youth wanting to attend their School of Origin (SOO) after their placement changed. Some of these SOO requests also led to discovering that youth did not have a current or active Education Rights Holder (ERH) and we coordinated with CSWs and youths' attorneys to ensure an ERH was appointed. The increase in the

SOO related requests can, in part, be attributed to our newly implemented telephone outreach to youth shortly after they are placed or replaced into congregate care, as well as our partnership with the DCFS Education section to address the SOO trends from prior reporting periods.

Other requests from this category included missing days or weeks of school when youth changed placements, rather than being transported to SOO pending a Best Interest Determination (BID) meeting, where the ERH decides what school is in the youth's best interest to attend. Youth have both the right to immediate enrollment in school, as well as to remain in their SOO, which can sometimes conflict. One example of delays in enrollment is if the youth requests to attend a SOO that is not their most recent school of enrollment, their most recent school of enrollment is not feasible to be transported to, and a BID has yet to be held. This can cause the youth to miss school. In other instances, there was not a current ERH and one had to be identified and appointed in court.

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

BIDs and SOO

The DCFS Education Section has implemented a new system that generates a referral shortly after a youth is placed in a congregate setting to the LACOE Education Specialist, alerts the CSW about a youth's right to remain in SOO, and the need for a BID with the goal of improving timely follow-up with school districts to ensure BIDs occur. The referral also notifies the CSW that the youth should not be dis-enrolled from their SOO until the ERH decides during the BID meeting whether it is in the youth's best interest to remain in their SOO. While this process has been in place for approximately eight months, we noted that the frequency and scheduling time for BIDs still vary.

The school district is responsible for holding the BID and may not immediately initiate it. The district also must ensure the ERH is available to participate. Sometimes, the district may not know a BID needs to be held if they have not been notified by DCFS that a youth has moved. Other times, a BID may have been held, but the school district does not notify the LACOE Education Specialist. Since there are multiple parties whose roles impact if a BID is held timely, the new role of the LACOE Education Specialists helps engage and connect with all the parties necessary (CSW, ERH, district, etc.) to work toward a timely BID and address SOO, as well as document this information in a report for each youth. While some Education Specialists began work in Fall 2023, they were

not fully staffed until January 2024. Now that they are fully staffed, we are optimistic that this process will lead to positive improvements in the timelines for BIDs.

The Ombuds has continued to reach out to youth and inform them of their rights, especially regarding education when they are newly placed or re-placed. When youth express they would like to attend SOO, we relay that information to the CSW, SCSW, DCFS Education Section, and LACOE Education Specialist for follow up, as well as connect with the youth's attorney where appropriate.

Transportation to SOO

While DCFS has implemented efforts to address school placement the day after a youth is moved, many STRTPs did not transport youth to SOO pending a BID. In addition, STRTPs expressed they would encounter challenges with transportation in complying with BIDs that selected SOO, citing issues with staffing, distance, time, and cost. Although initially included in a pilot program between DCFS and school districts to transport youth in any placement type to SOO via the vendor Hop, Skip, Drive (HSD), youth placed in STRTPs were later excluded from the formalized Memorandum of Understanding because the STRTP agencies' responsibility to transport to school is in the STRTP provider contract. Specifically, it states that agencies "shall transport youth to their school of origin or utilize alternate systems for transportation put in place by DCFS...and/or school districts." Our observations indicate that STRTPs are not always complying with this contract requirement.

Previously this led to difficulties for many youth to attend SOO, and currently impacts youths' transportation to SOO pending a BID or referral to HSD, as multiple STRTPs stated they could not transport a youth to SOO if they accepted placement. To address this, a temporary solution utilizing Assembly Bill (AB) 130 funds for HSD was implemented on July 1, 2023, but is only available until June 30, 2024, or until funds are depleted. For a short period of time in April and May 2024, DCFS was no longer accepting new referrals for youth placed in STRTPs to be transported utilizing the AB 130 funds for HSD, because the funding was almost depleted. However, DCFS recently resumed referrals for youth placed in congregate care and is exploring options to sustain HSD for STRTP-placed youth, including cost-sharing with school districts or STRTPs direct contracting with HSD. Additionally, agencies may request Complex Care Funds² to cover HSD costs if they lack staffing for transportation.

The OCP organizes monthly meetings involving educational partners (school districts, LACOE, DCFS, non-profits) to address SOO transportation issues collectively. Continued collaboration with community partners is crucial to resolve transportation

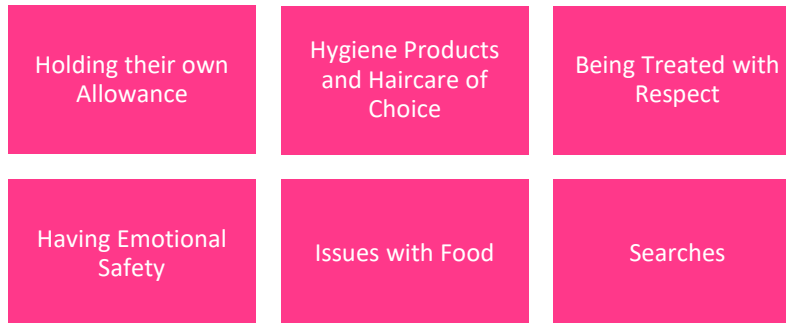
² Complex Care Funds (CCF) are available through AB 153 to implement recommendations of child-specific assessments, evaluations, enhanced care planning or ongoing technical assistance that identify exceptional needs to support individual children in foster care within California in the least restrictive setting. The funding shall not be used to supplant existing funds or fund current care, supervision or services.

challenges affecting youths' rights to attend SOO and be transported pending a BID. Plans must be immediately developed since AB 130 funds are almost depleted and transportation issues persist, hindering youths' access to SOO.



Personal Rights (46 requests/17.2%)

In this category, examples of requests included:



A recurring concern expressed by youth who requested assistance in this area is their treatment by staff/employees at their out-of-home placements. While agencies typically offer trauma-informed care, there were 20 reported instances of lapses in these practices, including one involving a DCFS CSW. Youth reported incidents where staff made disparaging comments about them, used profanity towards them, or caused physical or emotional harm. Such actions can disrupt the environment and compromise the youths' emotional safety. Although youth felt comfortable reporting to the Ombudsperson, some doubted whether other adults on their team would believe them.

Our office promptly reported allegations to the CPH, CCL, and DCFS per established protocols and followed up with agencies to track outcomes. Most youth reported improvements in their living environment after intervention. However, a few cases remained under investigation by CCL and/or the CPH. We continue to monitor these cases closely to ensure appropriate resolutions.

At least one of the investigations by DCFS led to a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) which required all staff who work directly with youth to complete enhanced training on trauma-informed practice, de-escalation, conflict resolution, and positive behavior modification.

In the instance involving a DCFS employee, the CSW was placed on administrative duties and the youth's case was reassigned to another CSW, as was the rest of the CSW's caseload.

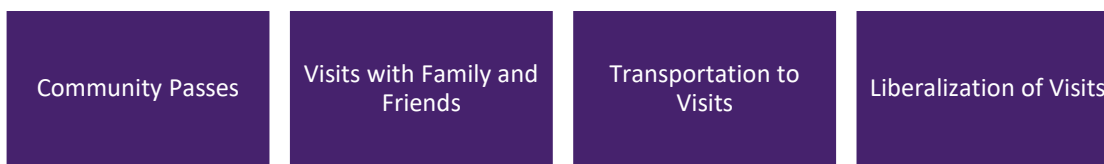
Many of the allegations against the staff were found to be inconclusive by CCL and/or DCFS, because there was not always enough evidence to prove the allegations, especially when the only evidence is the youths' statements. However, there was also no reason to doubt the youth's report that they felt they were not being treated with respect by the staff.

Additionally, OCP and DCFS initiated a monthly workgroup to enhance youth engagement in congregate care settings, involving various partners like STRTPs, Children’s Law Center (CLC), California Youth Connection, National Foster Youth Institute, and the Association of Community Human Services Agencies. While this issue is complex, this workgroup is addressing some of the factors contributing to the issue. In addition, we continue to actively solicit feedback, collaborate with partners, and explore solutions such as additional training, changes to State licensing standards, recruitment and retention of staff, to minimize occurrences of these incidents.



Family and Social Connections (22 requests/8.3%)

In this category, examples of requests included:



There were 22 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, were not getting visits they were supposed to have, and/or were not being transported to visits. Maintaining social and familial connections is vital for the wellbeing and mental health of youth in out of home care. These requests highlighted various barriers including:

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

The FYBOR sets forth that youth have the right “to visit and contact siblings, family members, and relatives privately, unless prohibited by court order”, as well as “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.” While DCFS has a policy regarding background checks and home inspections for family or friends who have been identified for potential placement, these clearances are sometimes also applied to adults with whom the youth wants to visit, when it is not legally required for visitation purposes. Requiring these adults to pass background checks or a home assessment delays youths’ ability to maintain ties with the people important to them or causes them to miss visits with family during holidays and other celebrations. Since there are inconsistencies in when staff require such clearances, we have reached out to

DCFS management to discuss the possibility of issuing written guidance to staff about youths' ability to visit with family and friends and clarity around any steps staff need to take.

Community Passes

Some requests (10) in this category involved youth seeking community passes (typically 1-to-2-hours), but they were erroneously told by placement site staff that their CSWs had to approve them. Others were informed they had to wait an arbitrary number of days (e.g., 30) to obtain community passes, despite regulations not specifying a waiting period. Treatment plans and services, including access to community passes, should be individualized to the youth and their circumstances, as one plan does not fit all. These are both recurring issues we noted in prior reporting periods.

We reviewed the need for assessing individual readiness for community passes and the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS) with agencies and CSWs. 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. However, 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. Additionally, CCL hosted their statewide quarterly meeting for congregate care providers, where OFCO presented on RPPS and provided clarity about their decision-making abilities.

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.

Other Requests

There were 38 (14.2%) requests that were not related to the FYBOR. Examples of these requests included:

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

Some requests in this category concern youth missing belongings from previous placements. This loss can be distressing for youth, as their possessions provide stability. Despite often knowing where their items are left, they may still go missing. If a youth leaves placement without permission, is hospitalized, or for other reasons is not available to pack their own belongings, agency staff or caregivers will pack their belongings for them and then give them to DCFS staff. The CSW may not become aware that any of the youth's items are missing until the youth receives the belongings and is able to go through them. Sometimes, when the prior caregiver or agency is contacted about the missing belongings, there is difficulty locating or recovering them. Our office collaborates with prior placements, CSWs, and/or the youth's attorney to address this issue. While some items may be irreplaceable, we assist youth in seeking reimbursement or replacement for missing belongings. Recognizing the significance of their possessions demonstrates to youth that what they value is also valued by those supporting them.

In some instances, youth express feeling unsupported by their CSWs and seek to change them. While our office lacks the authority to make such changes, we relay their requests and reasons they feel unsupported to DCFS Public Inquiry. This prompts a review by the management at the regional office. Depending on the case, a new CSW may be assigned, or the existing one may receive guidance and coaching to better engage with the youth. A positive relationship between youth and their CSW significantly influences their experience in care, as well as their transition out of care. With the introduction of DCFS' new Youth Engagement Section, we anticipate improved matching of youth with CSWs possessing specialized skills to enhance support levels.

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.

Visits with Family and Friends

During an outreach visit three days before the weekend of Christmas, a youth expressed that he would like to spend winter break and his birthday (which fell during the break) with his uncle. The youth showed the Ombuds messages that his uncle was willing to have him visit, and the youth provided contact information for the uncle. Ombuds staff spoke with STRTP managers while on site to ensure the youth could be transported to a visit should one get scheduled, and they confirmed they could do so.

While that staff was still at the visit, another Ombuds staff immediately contacted the youth's CSW, SCSW, and attorney. They were informed by the CSW that the uncle had to be "cleared," even though there was no court order limiting visits with the uncle. Such clearance is not legally required, and Ombuds staff provided information about the FYBORs and RPPS. The CSW maintained that she would inspect the uncle's home that Saturday, the day before Christmas Eve, in order to clear the home for the visit. The Ombuds also coordinated with the attorney who, although not required, obtained a court order to ensure the youth was able to visit with the uncle without incident.

While the Ombuds continued to point to the laws that do not require clearance for visits, such a process persisted. The CSW was also unsure who to connect with at the STRTP to ensure transportation was arranged for the youth, so the Ombuds connected STRTP management and the CSW to assist with this coordination. Thankfully, the CSW e-mailed on Saturday that the uncle's home was cleared, the STRTP confirmed they would transport, and the youth was able to spend the entire winter break with his uncle and other family members.

While this request was ultimately resolved successfully for the youth, as noted in the Family and Social Connections section above the youth and their relative they wished to visit were subjected to burdensome and time-consuming clearances that were not required by law or policy, and for which none of the involved DCFS or STRTP personnel provided an evidence based reason. This points to a larger and recurring issue we have observed where youths' rights and ability to maintain ties with people important to them is being negatively impacted by the practice of "clearing" relatives, NREFMs, and friends for visits without any basis in policy or law. Such practices impede the youth's ability to maintain ties to their communities and strengthen their support systems, which is linked to their stability when they exit care. We are discussing with DCFS the need to take prompt action to ensure that CSWs and STRTPs are not imposing arbitrary and onerous

requirements on such youth requests and possible written guidance on youths' ability to visit with family and friends.

Unreasonable Searches

During an outreach visit, we witnessed youth returning home from school and being immediately searched by STRTP staff. 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 a finding against the agency for violating the youths' rights and ILS. We also worked with CCL to review this agency's program statement and suggest updates to it, so that it is not in conflict with the FYBOR.

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 will continue to collaborate with all these partners. Our office also continues to follow up with youth and agencies to ensure youth are not searched without reasonable suspicion. We have also requested that DCFS incorporate discussion about unreasonable searches into one of their upcoming STRTP Provider meetings, which they have agreed to do.

Hygiene and Haircare

Similar to prior reporting periods, during this period a few youth informed us that they were not allowed to pick their own hygiene products or desired hairstyles. Specifically, one youth had to use her own allowance to purchase hair gel, edge control, and a brush. Another youth requested a certain hairstyle but was told that only a staff from the STRTP could do her hair. Since STRTP staff did not know how to do the hairstyle she wanted, the youth was informed she could not have her requested hair style. In both of 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, as well as reimbursed them for the prior out-of-pocket costs.

Youth 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, CCL, and OFCO 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.

Collaboration for Improved Practices

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



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

knowledge about best practices, trends, tracking, and reporting etc., that may be incorporated in our work. The California OFCO and our office co-presented to the Chapter in June 2023 on incorporating lived experience. In addition, our office started a subgroup of Child Welfare Ombuds that conduct in-person outreach to youth to exchange strategies and ideas, 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

July 1 through December 31, 2023

Agency Visited	NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
1st Supervisorial District				14
Pacific Horizon	X			•Montebello
Eggleston Youth Center ¹				•Baldwin Park (2) •Pomona (2)
Garces Residential Care				•Claremont
Heritage				•West Covina (2)
Hillsides Home for Children				•Los Angeles
Hope House ¹	X			•El Monte (2)
Luvlee's Residential Care, Inc., dba New Dawn				•Walnut
San Gabriel Childen's Center		X		•Azusa
St. Anne's Family Services ¹				•Los Angeles
2nd Supervisorial District				21
Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems				•Los Angeles (4)
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Carson (2)
Dream Home Residential	X			•Los Angeles
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Carson •Gardena •Hawthorne
Humanistic Foundation, Inc. dba New Concept ¹				•Los Angeles
I am Safe ²	X			•Los Angeles
Mindful Growth Foundation ¹		X		•Los Angeles (2)
Virtuous Woman, Inc./Project Destiny Home of Hope ¹				•Los Angeles (2)
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services STRTP				•Los Angeles
Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services Community Treatment Facility				•Los Angeles
Wayfinder Family Services ²	X			•Los Angeles (3)
3rd Supervisorial District				3
Optimist Boys Home & Ranch, Inc. (and TSC)				•Woodland Hills (2)
Rancho San Antonio				•Chatsworth
4th Supervisorial District				5
Dream Home Care, Inc.				•Torrance
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care				•Long Beach
Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Center, Inc.				•San Pedro •Torrance
Starview Adolescent Center Community Treatment Facility				•Torrance
5th Supervisorial District				19
Bourne, Inc. ¹				•Altadena (2) •Pasadena
Five Acres (and TSC)				•Altadena (3) •Pasadena
Fleming & Barnes, Inc., dba Dimondale Adolescent Care ¹				•Lancaster (3)
Hathaway-Sycamores Child & Family Services dba The Sycamores				•Altadena (2)
Hillsides Home for Children GH	X			•Pasadena
McKinley Children's Center/McKinley Boys Home				•San Dimas
McKinley School			X	•Pasadena
Octavia Butler Middle School			X	•Pasadena
Pasadena High School			X	•Pasadena
Rose City High School ¹			X	•Pasadena
Zoe International dba Zoe Home for Youth ¹				•Acton

Agency Visited		NC	JO	SCH	Site Location(s) Visited
Out of County	County				18
Mary's Shelter dba Mary's Path ¹	Orange				•Santa Ana (2)
California Family Life Center	Riverside	X			•Hemet
Alpha Connection	San Bernardino	X			•Apple Valley (4)
Blissful Living	San Bernardino	X			•Upland
Boys Republic ¹	San Bernardino		X		•Chino (2)
Eggleston Youth Center ¹	San Bernardino		X		•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
Fred Finch Youth Center	San Diego	X			•Lemon Grove

TOTAL 80

Footnotes:

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

JO = Joint Outreach Visit with the Probation Ombuds

SCH = School Outreach Visit

¹ Visited twice 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, 2023

Foster Youth Bill of Rights (FYBORs)

	1. Personal Rights	46
	2. Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)	0
	3. Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	0
	4. Education	63
	5. Health	6
	6. Mental Health	4
	7. Sexual and Reproductive Health	0
	8. Case Plan	11
	9. Court	0
	10. Children and Family Team (CFT)	0
	11. Family and Social Connections	22
	12. Preparing for Adulthood and Money Management	69
	13. Communications	8
	14. Records	0
	FYBORs Total	229
	15. Other	38
	Total Requests Received by Ombudsperson	267

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