

**The New York City Administration for Children's Services
Laurence Busching, Executive Deputy Commissioner of the
Division of Youth and Family Justice
Testimony to the New York City Council
Juvenile Justice Committee
April 24, 2012**

“Oversight - Family Engagement in the Juvenile Justice System”

Good afternoon Chair Gonzalez and members of the Committee on Juvenile Justice. My name is Laurence Busching and I am the Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Division Youth and Family Justice at the Administration for Children's Services. Thank you for the opportunity to update you on the work that Children's Services is doing to engage families of youth in our juvenile justice programs. Joining me today is Associate Commissioner Sara Hemmeter, who oversees our alternative to placement and PINS diversion programs and Jennifer Romelien, Executive Director of Program Services in our detention facilities. We are also joined by Tim Lisante who is Superintendent of District 79 Alternative Schools and staff from Passages Academy who will testify about ACS' coordination with the DOE to engage family members of juvenile justice involved youth.

This is a particularly exciting moment for ACS to testify about family engagement with respect to the juvenile justice system. As the Council knows, Governor Cuomo recently signed legislation which will transfer all but the most serious juvenile offenders from state to city custody, impacting several hundred youth and their families. Underpinning this legislation, aptly named “Close to Home,” is the key theme of this hearing – family participation in the rehabilitation process dramatically affects a young person's success in transitioning from the juvenile justice system back into the community. The Close to Home program initiative is based largely on the premise that youth are better served, and communities are safer, if they are near their families and communities. Close to Home could not have happened without the strong support of Speaker Quinn, Chair Gonzalez, and the entire Council and we look forward to keeping you informed about our progress as we proceed towards implementation.

In the meantime, we have a number of other juvenile justice programs and initiatives currently in place that we are pleased to discuss this afternoon. ACS' Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ) runs programs that involve youth at every stage of the juvenile justice process. If there are signs of trouble, we work with youth to address their issues and, hopefully, prevent them from entering the system. Once youth are arrested, we work with them in alternative to detention programs, in our detention facilities, in upstate residential facilities and in transitioning back into the community. At every single stage in the process, we seek to involve and engage family members.

Our Family Assessment Program (FAP) provides evidence-based, intensive in-home therapeutic services to families of youth who have not been arrested but have exhibited problematic behaviors in order to improve family functioning and prevent involvement in the PINS system. These therapies work with parents to teach them skills to support their children, setting and enforcing limits, and steering them towards positive activities and opportunities.

For youth who are arrested, and remanded by judges, we directly operate two secure detention centers, Horizon and Crossroads which, in 2011, served approximately 2,925 youth. Children's Services also directly operates two non-secure detention facilities and oversees thirteen non-secure detention group homes that are run by non-profit providers. Our great partners in providing non-secure detention services include Episcopal Social Services, Boys Town New York, Good Shepherd Services, Queens Outreach, Abbott House, St. John's, and Lutheran Social Services. They operate safe, effective group-home style facilities in communities throughout the City. In 2011, we served approximately 939 youth in non-secure detention facilities. ACS also oversees alternative to detention programs at the Boys Town's Dean Street facility in Brooklyn and the Richmond Hill facility in Queens, and through the Positive Alternatives Toward Home (or PATH) program for accused juvenile offenders.

In addition to running and overseeing detention facilities, the Division of Youth and Family Justice also runs the City's largest alternative to placement program, the Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI) as well as IPAS - Intensive Preventive Aftercare Services - a collaboration among multiple agencies which provides permanency, transition and re-entry planning for delinquent youth in placement. Both programs use evidence-based in-home therapies, including family functional therapy, and others to help families support the rehabilitation and development of their children. By engaging families in this way, we aim not only to help them support the youth that are already involved in the system but also to prevent their siblings from engaging in problem behaviors.

Of course, we also need to support our "crossover youth" – young people who are involved in both the juvenile justice and the child welfare systems. For many of these youth, we must make extra efforts to ensure family support in whatever form their family may take. DYFJ staff in our "Confirm" program review the names of all newly detained youth to identify those who have on-going child welfare cases. Once a crossover youth has been identified, detention services staff ensure that foster care agencies are visiting the youth, maintaining a relationship and actively working on permanency plans, so that youth is returned to his or her own family, or a strong foster family, as quickly as possible.

Strategies for Early Family Engagement

Each of the juvenile justice programs run or overseen by Children's Services focuses on engaging the family for the duration – from intake, to the time the youth spends in detention and/or placement, and during transitions back to the community. Engaging families at intake is critical for ensuring involvement throughout the entire process. We make sure that children in detention – and the staff who work with them – remain accessible to families for the length of detention. Each of our programs and providers have developed brochures, handbooks, manuals and informational sheets that we give to parents, caregivers, and relatives of youth who enter our facilities or begin juvenile justice related services so that the family members understand the juvenile justice process

and how they can best help their child. As part of the intake process for all DYFJ programs, our staff meets with parents and other family members to obtain as much information as possible about their child, such as the child's daily routines, likes and dislikes, school experiences, and as well as the parents' assessment of the child's strengths and areas of need. This information provided by the parents is invaluable to staff in their efforts to work with each youth.

Engaging Parents of Detained Youth

When youth enter our secure juvenile detention centers, we provide their parents with a Parent Orientation Manual. The Manual describes in great detail all aspects of the program including staff roles, the daily routine, visitation and phone privileges, safety, and staff of expectations of the youth. At the time the youth enters a program, staff sit down with families to review the manual, as well as other informational materials.

In our non-secure detention facilities, as soon as the young person enters care, case management staff meet with parents to explain the educational expectations and resources at the facility, how court appearances are coordinated, what kinds of group activities and trips are organized for youth, as well as information about religious services, and physical and mental health services. Naturally, families are concerned about how frequently they will be able to call and visit children in care. We describe the visiting policy in detail to the parent, and provide every parent a letter describing the visitations rules and parameters. We also seek to address parents' questions and concerns regarding their child's continuing education while in placement.

Engaging Families of Youth Participating in Our Alternative Programs

For our Juvenile Justice Initiative programs in which we provide intensive in home services to family members, our staff have written guidance on all of the areas that are important to discuss with parents when they first meet with them in the home. JJI staff explain the basics of our programs, including the fact that treatment sessions will involve

youth as well as caregivers, and that some sessions will involve only the caregiver. The worker also discusses the youth's strengths and the areas of the caregiver's concerns, as well as formal and informal supports that the youth may have, interventions that may meet the caregiver's concerns and youth's needs, and JJI's expectations for the family. JJI employs an evidenced-based model of delinquency prevention, meaning that these methodologies have been scientifically tested and proven effective. The family treatment interventions offered by JJI are only effective if the parent, caregiver, and/or other family members are engaged and directly involved in the treatment sessions and the first stage of the intervention focuses intensively on engaging the family and gaining their support in changing their young person's behavior.

Strategies for Keeping Families Engaged

Our efforts to engage family members do not stop at intake. We continue to ensure that family members are involved as young people move toward returning home. All of our facilities offer visiting hours four days a week, or more, and we encourage family members – parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters over 18 – to visit frequently. We also arrange visits for other family members such as younger siblings and aunts and uncles and make special arrangements for young people in care who have children of their own. Youth in detention are able to call their families weekly. The length of the phone calls is determined by the youth's level in the ASPIRE behavior modification program. Youth are also able to write and receive letters to and from their families.

Each facility hosts a "Family Day" with food and structured activities for families, as well as "Special Visit Day" where younger siblings of residents are able to visit and participate in events, such as barbeques, card games and other activities. One of our most exciting efforts at encouraging family engagement has been through some of our cultural and arts program offered at our detention facilities. To briefly highlight one: we are collaborating with Carnegie Hall to pair up young people in detention with professionally trained musicians. At the completion of the program, the youth give a performance for their family members and we have received some astonishing feedback, with one parent

remarking that they “saw their child in a new light” after the performance. Not only does the “Musical Connections” program allow young people to work with top notch musicians to develop and express their talents, but it can also encourage a new and positive connection between parents and youth. Detention services staff are actively planning additional cultural programs with a number of organizations such as Ballet Hispanico, Evolve Dance and Project Rhythm. Similar to the Carnegie Hall program, youth will work with professional dancers and musicians and perform a recital performance for their families.

Another exciting program we are developing around family engagement called “Common Sense Parenting” is being piloted in conjunction with our partners at Boys Town. Facilitators offer classes for parents to learn about and discuss new techniques for communication, discipline, decision-making, self control and school success. The classes aim to help parents of youth in detention to build and foster family relationships so that when the youth is back home, families can work together to address behavioral problems and prevent further offending.

In addition, ACS has been partnering with the Department of Education, Department of Youth and Community Development, and the Department of Probation to hold Community Resource Fairs at which parents and youth residents can obtain information from community agencies, schools, and colleges throughout the City. Tim Lisante will tell you a bit more about these fairs but we have been very pleased with the turnouts at each of the events that we have held this year.

Ultimately, the success of a young person’s transition from the juvenile justice system back home and into the community, particularly in preventing recidivism, often rests on the strength of the connection between the youth and his or her family. One of the programs we have developed to facilitate this connection is called IPAS, and it involves an innovative partnership between Children’s Services and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) that provides permanency, transition and reentry planning for delinquent youth placed within state care at a private facility. A team of

ACS and OCFS staff working together with the private agencies and the Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau -- the post-residential services provider -- visit each family within the first month of a youth's placement to make an initial assessment of the family's ability to plan for the youth's return. After addressing barriers to the youth's return home, Catholic Guardian provides intensive, in-home Functional Family Therapy (FFT) that focuses on both the youth and his or her family. These services help strengthen the family's ability to support their youth in their education and development, and help to link them to positive opportunities in the community.

Conclusion

Children's Services is committed to keeping families continuously engaged with juvenile justice involved young people. In addition to the programs that we have described, we are looking forward to implementing Close to Home, which will provide families the opportunity to remain much more integrated in their children's care and engaged than they are able to be now when their children are placed upstate.

After my colleagues at the Department of Education testify in more detail about the educational supports and services we provide to young people in detention, my colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions.