



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

August 20, 2018

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**ACS ANNOUNCES TATTOO REMOVAL PILOT PROGRAM FOR TRAFFICKED,
GANG-BRANDED & OTHER AT-RISK YOUTH IN NYC**

Trafficked and Gang Involved Youth Are Often Branded With Exploiter or Gang Markings Which Can Hinder Their Ability to Heal From Trauma and Move On With Positive Changes In Their Lives

NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Project Brings Together Child Welfare and Medical Professionals to Provide Free Tattoo Removal Services to NYC Youth Who Need Help

New York, NY – Today, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) announced the launch of a new pilot program that will provide free tattoo removal services to trafficked and gang involved New York City youth who have been engaged in the child welfare system. Traffickers or gang leaders sometimes tattoo young people – for example, with dollar signs on their faces, pimps' names on their chests or backs, or gang names on their hands or bodies – and young people don't have the resources to remove them once they escape traffickers or gangs. ACS is partnering with medical providers who will offer pro-bono services to youth affiliated with ACS whose brandings have hindered their ability to positively move on with their lives.

According to a 2017 report conducted by the NYC Safe Harbour Program, 2,996 New York City youth have been identified as either trafficked or at-risk for trafficking, a 21 percent increase from the program's 2016 data. ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell explained that this increase shows the increasing need to develop and provide services for this very vulnerable population.

The NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Project and Network is comprised of leaders within the ACS Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy (OCTPP), the ACS Agency Medical Director and its Office of Older Youth, along with medical professionals with prior experience in tattoo removal. The network was first developed when ACS learned of a vulnerable teen whose pimp's initials had been tattooed onto her forehead. Seeking a solution that would provide physical and emotional support to the teen and to others in similar situations, ACS professionals sought the expertise and contributions of medical professionals with prior experience in tattoo removal. The providers who expressed interest in contributing their time and expertise joined the newly formed Network.

ACS developed a protocol for identifying youth in need of tattoo removal and connecting them with medical professionals. Several youth have already expressed interest in

having their tattoos removed to eradicate signs of exploiter ownership or gang membership, and to move on with their lives positively, through employment and other opportunities.

The NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Network will be operated by ACS' Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy (OCTPP), with several goals in mind. First, to ensure that all ACS involved youth have the opportunity to safely remove exploiter or gang brandings. Second, to reduce trauma by connecting medical providers with case planners and youth to provide an opportunity for shared discussion of situational understanding and to provide tattoo removal in a trauma informed, and physically and emotionally safe environment. Third, to provide training to medical providers on trafficking and gang dynamics to enhance their knowledge of, and empathy for branded youth.

"No young person should be forced to go through life with a permanent mark of exploitation and abuse on their body," said **ACS Commissioner David Hansell**. "We are thankful to the committed medical professionals who have offered pro-bono services to help some of the most vulnerable children in New York City. The NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Network will be a completely confidential program designed to limit the trauma inflicted on these children by abusers and gangs."

"It's a privilege for Fresh Start to do what we can to help our city's at-risk youth and NYC survivors of human trafficking," said **David J. Ores, MD, founder and director of Fresh Start Tattoo Removal**, a non-profit that refers clients for pro-bono tattoo removal (www.freshstarttattooremoval.org). "Removing unwanted tattoos from a former life can make a big difference in job seeking, employment and emotional recovery. Other laser and tattoo professionals have already joined Fresh Start in this important work."

Selina Higgins, Executive Director of ACS' Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy (OCTPP) explained the concept behind the project, stating: "This is not just about tattoo removal. It's really about giving youth a safe and trauma informed opportunity to eradicate the physical signs of ownership, build self-esteem and positively move on with their lives. We call the project "Movin' On", because that's what ACS provides: An opportunity to move on towards a more optimistic future."

"As dermatologists, we often see tattoo removal's ability to enhance self-esteem, self-worth, and enable new beginnings," said **Marie Leger, MD, Metro Dermatology in Elmhurst, Flushing, and the Bronx**. "This is even more the case with vulnerable youth. We are so excited to be able to assist the ACS with this valuable project!"

"For many, a tattoo can be a constant reminder of a period in life that a person would much rather leave behind," said **New York State Senator Diane Savino**. "In some cases they can also inhibit employment opportunities. This program is a way to help people move forward with their lives and separate themselves either from an abusive past or the indiscretions of their youth. I commend ACS for starting this initiative and look forward to seeing it grow."

"Sex trafficking victims and reformed gang members should be able to move forward with their lives, and not be constantly reminded of past traumas," **said City Council Member Rory I. Lancman**. "Empowering these individuals to have old tattoos removed, at no cost, will help them reclaim their identity and build a brighter future. I commend the Administration for Children's Service, Fresh Start and Dr. David Ores for collaborating on this innovative program that will help so many New Yorkers."

"We have come so far in New York State law to recognize the victims of human trafficking as exactly that — victims who will need support and services to reclaim their lives," **said New York State Assembly Member Amy Paulin**, who has authored many of the state's anti-human trafficking laws. "This pilot program to remove the 'brand' that pimps and traffickers utilize to turn people into property is yet another step on the road to recovery. I appreciate and approve of this effort, and hope it helps many New Yorkers recovering from this unthinkable ordeal."

For the initial launch, since pro-bono services are limited, each request will be assessed for imminency of need. As more providers volunteer their services, ACS will be able to match requests with availability. If you are a medical professional who has the ability and equipment to remove tattoos and would like to join the NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Network, please email ACS at Child.tattoo.removal@acs.nyc.gov

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