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ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES UNVEILS NEW WEB PORTAL FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE, FOSTER PARENTS, FAMILIES & MORE; "ACS CONNECTME" IS NYC'S NEW ONE-STOP-SHOP ALLOWING USERS TO QUICKLY ACCESS INFO RELATED TO EDUCATIONAL SERVICES, PARENTING SUPPORT, PUBLIC ASSISTANCE & OTHER RESOURCES

"ACS ConnectME" is Brainchild of Former Foster Youth Who Pitched the Idea at the NYC Foster Care Hackathon

New York, NY – Today, Administration for Children Services (ACS) Commissioner David A. Hansell unveiled a new web portal, "ACS ConnectME," for youth in foster care, foster parents, adoptive parents, families and child welfare professionals. The one-stop-shop now provides users with greater access to information about services and resources across ACS, other government agencies and more. Users can search for the services that are right for them (education, housing, parenting support, etc.) in the location in which they reside. "ACS ConnectMe" is the brainchild of a former foster youth who pitched the idea at a NYC Foster Care Technology & Policy Hackathon sponsored by ACS, after explaining the need to more easily access resources about education, housing and more all in one place.

"The City is committed to finding innovative ways to better serve New Yorkers in this 21st century, technology driven world," said **Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, Dr. Herminia Palacio**. "The "ACS ConnectME" portal allows families easy, convenient access to the resources they need to successfully navigate the child welfare system. I am blown away by the bright, young mind behind this portal, Shyanne Hope-Cross, who took her experiences and created something that will make a meaningful impact on families citywide."

"Technology has the power to transform lives, and that's why we're harnessing that power at ACS in a way that will help make the child welfare system work better for young people in foster care, foster parents, families and child welfare professionals," said **Commissioner David A. Hansell**. "The NYC Foster Care Hackathon allowed us the opportunity to take a look at the child welfare system's challenges and come up with creative solutions to address those challenges. I'm thrilled that, as a result of that convening, ACS set the wheels in motion to develop "ACS ConnectME," a new one-stop-shop for all those involved in the child welfare system. I want to thank all those who helped get this idea off the ground and, in particular, I'd like to thank Shyanne Hope-Cross, the brilliant young woman who first pitched this idea at the Hackathon."

"ACS ConnectME" is an innovative new tool that will streamline access to critical ACS resources to all those involved in the child welfare system and I commend Shyanne Hope-Cross for pitching this web portal and ACS for making it a reality," said **Commissioner of the**

Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) and Citywide Chief Information Officer Samir Saini.

“Several years ago, while in foster care, I had the opportunity to intern at ACS and that’s when I realized how many different programs and opportunities there are for youth in foster care that I wasn’t initially aware of. At the Hackathon, I said that there should be a way for kids in foster care to have access to this information—especially because, given the trauma that we often face, it can be hard to focus and understand exactly how to go about finding the things we need to succeed. I’m so excited that ACS liked my idea of housing all of this information on one website. Now, with “ACS ConnectME,” obtaining information will be easier for all individuals navigating their way through the child welfare system without having to rely on others,” **said Shyanne Hope-Cross, who pitched the idea of “ACS ConnectME” at the 2016 NYC Foster Care Hackathon.**

“Having participated in the NYC Foster Care Technology and Policy Hackathon, I’m thrilled to see one of the ideas presented now come to fruition. Whether online and offline, connection is key to success for families and young people. Thank you to ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell, Deputy Commissioner Julie Farber, and all those involved in the Hackathon, for supporting the development of innovative technology solutions that provide kids and families access to the opportunity they need and deserve,” **said Jess Dannhauser, President & CEO of Graham Windham.**

“From the moment I joined the New York State Legislature, I have advocated for foster youth, and I will continue to do so unremittingly,” **said Senator Roxanne J. Persaud, Chair of the Social Services Committee.** “This informational hub of resources for families, youth and child welfare professionals is a modern, indispensable tool that will help these children get better access to the services they need and rely on. I commend the ACS for launching “ACS ConnectME” and working towards improving the foster care system and ultimately the lives of New York's affected youth.”

“The implementation of “ACS ConnectME” will make it easier for foster youth and parents to navigate an often complicated system of government agencies and available resources,” **said Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi, Chair of the Standing Committee on Social Services.** “ACS ConnectME” may be especially helpful in this regard, as it was developed by a youth with firsthand experience in our foster care system. Thank you to ACS, and Commissioner Hansell, for the continued leadership on behalf of all New York youth, and for listening to those with direct insight as to how we may improve our current practices.”

“Technology can be such a force for good, especially when used in a way that brings information into more hands,” **said Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer.** “ACSConnectMe” brings all of the details that anyone involved in the foster care system could need right to their fingertips. Many thanks to ACS and Shyanne Hope-Cross for coming together to think of this creative solution and put it into action.”

ACS held its first ever hackathon—the NYC Foster Care Technology & Policy Hackathon—to bring together the foster care community, including youth in foster care, together with technology experts to think “outside the box” about how to use technology to make the foster care experience better for young people, foster parents, families and those who support them. One of the key priorities identified at the Hackathon was the creation of a user-friendly central

repository of information and resources for families, youth, foster and adoptive parents, and child welfare professionals.

The mobile-friendly website was designed in a way to serve all of the youth and families served by ACS: youth and families receiving prevention services, youth in the juvenile justice system, and more. The site may also be utilized by professionals all across the child welfare system. The search bar allows users to type in the category of resources they are searching for and the zip code in which they need access to those services. For instance, users can search for resources related to:

- Parenting support
- Public assistance
- Education
- Employment
- Health
- Legal services
- Mental health
- Recreation

Once a user types in the services into the search bar, a drop-down menu will appear so that the user can narrow down the search by age and/or language. A list of available services will appear for the user to click and learn more. The portal also includes a calendar of training, courses and workshops available to foster parents and child welfare professionals offered by the ACS Workforce Institute, as well as information about upcoming events.

Prior to the public launch, ACS conducted focus groups & user testing with youth in foster care, foster parents as well as child welfare professionals. All were invited to provide feedback and offer suggestions to enhance the site. To visit the site, click here: <https://acsconnectme.nyc.gov>.

In 2016, New York City established the Interagency Foster Care Task Force, which has since made sixteen recommendations to improve services and outcomes for youth in and aging out of foster care. One of those recommendations includes the need to “provide integrated, accessible information on housing resources for youth leaving foster care.” Commissioner Hansell today explained that the “ACS ConnectMe” site will be an essential resource to older youth who are preparing for adulthood – and others-- who are seeking housing resources, among many other resources.

The launch of “ACS ConnectMe” comes on the heels of releasing the results of the second annual Foster Care Youth Experience Survey. The survey was distributed to all youth in foster care, age 13 and older, in an effort to better understand the experiences of youth while in foster care. The survey included questions about each youth’s daily experiences in foster care pertaining to education, employment, health care, connections to family and friends and permanency planning. Many who completed the survey noted their need to access certain services such as: tutoring, test preparation, job placement assistance, dental care and more. Commissioner Hansell today explained that this new site will provide youth in care with greater access to those services they need.

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