



**The New York City Council,
Committee on General Welfare
June 16, 2014**

“Oversight: Youth Aging Out of Foster Care”
Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children’s Services
Benita Miller, Deputy Commissioner
Division of Family Permanency

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Introduction

Good morning, Chair Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. I am Benita Miller, Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services (FPS). With me this morning is Sabine Chery, Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Youth Development, as well as Peter Nabozny from our Office of Policy, Planning and Measurement.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on the programs and services we offer to young people in foster care. As a system and as a City, we are committed to doing everything we can to ensure that young people transitioning out of our care and custody have developed the skills and connections they need to become successful adults. I am pleased to be here today to share with you the work we have been doing. We are eager to work with the Council and with the Public Advocate's Office to figure out how ACS can legally, accurately and transparently collect and present aggregated data about the young people in our care.

The New York City foster care census is at a historically low number: currently, 11,554 children are in care. While we are happy to report that this reflects a continued downward trend, the teenagers and young adults that come to our attention have particularly complex needs, including mental health and behavioral challenges. As such, connecting older foster youth with caring adults who are willing to be a long-term resource is a challenge, and a number of young adults leave foster care without a permanent resource.

The bills pending before the City Council seek information about how ACS and our foster care provider agencies help prepare young people who are not being adopted and where reunification with families is not possible, transition to independent adulthood. Namely, the bills seek to address the issues of whether these young people are educated, whether they are able to meet their financial needs through sustained employment, and whether they are able to secure stable, affordable housing. Given that the young people who come into our care are, in many cases, already at a significant disadvantage before they came to our attention, ACS is working very hard to address their needs. While we do have some legal, technical and philosophical questions about some of the specific data requests, I am pleased that we have already begun to discuss some of our challenges and some potential solutions together. I want to be very clear that ACS is committed to both improved outcomes and to transparency in our process for achieving them.

Programs and Services

ACS cannot control the circumstances that bring young people into foster care. However, we know that youth in foster care have endured some level of trauma. While they are in our care, we have an opportunity to help them address and overcome the challenges that brought them into care, and work with them to successfully transition into adulthood.

One initiative ACS has designed to assist young people in foster care successfully transition into adulthood is called Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA). PYA seeks to strengthen both our foster care providers' and our efforts to achieve positive outcomes for youth exiting foster care at ages 17, 18, 19 and 20, regardless of their permanency plans. PYA involves coordination among provider agency partners, community-based organizations, as well as other government agencies—both local and State—to take advantage of the expertise of each link so

that our youth can be connected to services and supports. PYA seeks to promote the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of young people by setting developmentally-appropriate goals designed to encourage healthy interpersonal relationships, educational and/or vocational achievement, and development of the skills they will require to meet their needs for housing, food, clothing, health and safety as they mature into adulthood.

ACS' Office of Older Youth Services & Residential Care Monitoring (OYS) is responsible for permanency planning and promoting shorter lengths of stay in residential placements for youth in foster care. OYS provides a number of programs and services designed to meet the unique needs of our older youth, including:

- **Residential Care and Monitoring** is a unit responsible for reducing the length of stay at the residential care facilities for youth who are older than 17 (17 and older?). The unit currently serves 690 young people, monitors the permanency needs and goals of those transitioning from residential care facilities and assists with referrals for employment, housing and mental health services.
- **ACS' Teen Specialist Unit (TSU)** supports pregnant and/or parenting youth in foster care. TSU partners with external experts, professionals and internal cross-divisional partners to develop and enhance parenting skills. TSU also trains our foster care and preventive providers to develop their expertise in this area and provides information about community-based resources for pregnant and parenting youth. Currently, TSU is working with 114 pregnant/parenting youth in residential mother/child blended programs.

- **TSU’s Fatherhood Initiative** offers support to expectant and parenting fathers. One such program is offered through the Claremont Neighborhood-Based Services. Through this program, young fathers develop an appreciation for their role in the lives of their children and receive support with navigating the complexities of co-parenting. ACS recently hired a Community Liaison in this unit – a former foster care youth and a young father who knows about some of the parenting challenges first hand—to provide forums for young parents to learn about child welfare practices, empower other young fathers to be engaged and facilitate conversations between young parents in foster care and members of the child welfare community. Our liaison has become an important resource in improving the outcomes for young parents in foster care.
- **The Young Parents Speakers Bureau (YPSB)** engages young parents by providing a forum for them to continue having conversations with the child welfare community about their experiences and providing guidance on becoming engaged fathers. Information learned from those forums is used to inform our practices, policies and delivery of services to young parents.
- Our **Youth Justice** group assists and monitors “crossover youth,” those who are involved in both the foster care and juvenile/criminal justice systems, to ensure that a permanency plan is in place and that our crossover youth are visited in detention, placement or incarceration.
- The **Missing Children’s Outreach Unit (MCOU)** provides guidance to staff at the residential and foster boarding agencies on conducting diligent searches for young people who leave care without permission.

- **Residential Care Reduction and IPAS-CW (Intensive Preventive Aftercare Services for Child Welfare)** provides Intensive Preventive Aftercare Services (IPAS) in all residential care facilities through the use of Functional Family Therapy, an evidence-based model that helps support youth ages 9-17 years old who have returned to their permanent adult connection on a trial discharge. Additionally, IPAS-CW monitors the permanency of all youth in residential care settings as well as lengths of stay for youth placed in residential care settings.

Collaborations

In addition to our programs and our work with providers, ACS is also working with other city agencies and external partners to improve outcomes for young people in care. In October 2013, ACS and the DOE initiated Project School Success, a collaboration designed to ensure educational stability and academic success for children in foster care. Project School Success has three major components: data sharing, training and support and development of curricula for provider agency staff with a focus of improving youth education outcomes.

Among our nonprofit partners is FEDCAP, an organization that helps people overcome barriers and work toward economic independence. FEDCAP developed a program called PrepNOW!™, a web-based curriculum and interactive learning tool designed to enhance the capacity and motivation of foster parents to prepare those in their care for college. Currently, 200 of our foster parents use PrepNOW!™, which includes interactive primers on FAFSA, SAT, personal essays, college visits and academic advocacy.

New York City Children's Cabinet

ACS and the de Blasio Administration share the City Council's goal of improving outcomes for former foster care youth. We are committed to finding ways to improve the services we provide to our young people and look forward to working with the Council and the Public Advocate's staff to develop and implement a methodology that will lead to accurate, valuable data about these outcomes. In addition, we expect that ACS' ongoing participation in the New York City's Children's Cabinet will continue to generate meaningful dialogue, foster important relationships, and cultivate vital resources that will further strengthen our mission. In particular, data-sharing among City agencies is a goal that the Cabinet is already addressing and will help inform ACS' approach to these issues.

Conclusion

I hope my testimony helps illustrate ACS' commitment and work towards providing our young people in foster care with the opportunities and skills they need to become successful adults. There is still much work to be done and we are looking forward to building on our efforts. Thank you for inviting us to discuss these important items with you today. We welcome your questions.