



**The New York City Council,
Committee on Youth Services and Committee on General Welfare
April 25, 2014**

“Oversight – Data Collection on Runaway and Homeless Youth”

**Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children's Services
Susan Morley, Senior Advisor for Investigations**

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Good morning Chairs Eugene and Levin and members of the Committees on Youth Services and General Welfare. I am Susan Morley, the Administration for Children’s Services’ Senior Advisor for Investigations and I’m testifying today on behalf of Commissioner Carrión. With me from ACS is Sara Hemmeter, Associate Commissioner for Family and Youth Justice Programs. Also seated next to me from the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) is Susan Haskell, Deputy Commissioner of Youth Services and Deborah Harper, Assistant Commissioner for Vulnerable and Special Needs Youth. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work with sexually exploited youth and our efforts to collect data on this population pursuant to Local Law 23.

Overview of Our Programs and Services for Sexually Exploited Youth

Both ACS and DYCD are committed to meeting the needs of young victims of commercial sexual exploitation, commonly referred to as “C-SEC youth.” Over the last several years, we and our provider partners have implemented a continuum of care that includes outreach and support services, placement options, and programs. In 2013, New York City received \$622,220 in funding from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to enhance our capacity to serve this population. With input from providers, ACS and DYCD developed and implemented a plan to expand our capacity to assist young people who are at risk of and victims of sexual exploitation.

DYCD Programs and Services

DYCD provides core services through its Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) program that address the needs of C-SEC youth. DYCD offers emergency services via crisis shelters, which provide emergency shelter and support services, while helping young people to identify a safe place to live. In addition, DYCD contracts with providers who offer services at seven drop-in centers—three in Manhattan and one each in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx—each of which offer food, clothing, and access to counseling, support, and referrals for education, employment and housing.

DYCD also contracts with Safe Horizon's Streetwork Project to conduct street outreach for young people. Streetwork staff offer food, clothing, and information about services, while developing relationships with young people in order to help make appropriate referrals. They can transport youth to safe locations, including their home, a friend or relative, crisis shelters and other safe locations. Through state Safe Harbor funding, Streetwork was able to hire additional staff and to purchase an additional van with a special focus on connecting with at-risk youth who may be absent without leave (AWOL) from ACS foster care placements.

In addition, DYCD contracts with community-based organizations to provide Transitional Independent Living (TIL) homes, including specialized services for young men and women, parenting youth, and LGBTQ youth. Girls and young women who are identified as sexually exploited can be referred to the nationally recognized Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) eight bed Transitional Independent Living Program. Young people in this program receive counseling to address issues associated with exploitation.

Outside of the Runaway and Homeless Youth program, DYCD also manages the City's Summer Youth Employment Program, or SYEP. Young people often have difficulty finding

employment and may become susceptible to the commercial sex industry as a means of survival and economic security. To assist with career development, state funds were allocated to place ACS' at-risk and sexually exploited youth into jobs through SYEP. Youth were engaged in the six week employment program which also focused on educational activities that integrated life-long learning and career planning.

ACS Programs and Services

Since the passage of the Safe Harbor Act in 2008, ACS has worked cross-divisionally to identify C-SEC youth. These efforts include bolstering our investigative work to identify cases of commercial sexual exploitation and training frontline staff. In addition, Children's Services has incorporated the expertise of specialists in our facilities and expanded our specialized foster care, juvenile justice placements, and preventive services.

Identifying suspected cases of sexual exploitation is a fundamental priority for ACS. Prior to my assignment at ACS over eight years ago, I served 21 years at the NYPD—the majority of which was spent investigating sex crimes and child abuse and after rising through the ranks was appointed the first Commanding Officer of the Special Victim's Division. At ACS, I oversee the Investigative Consultant Unit, a team of over 100 retired law enforcement professionals, who assist Child Protective Services (CPS) staff with fact gathering, interviewing and locating at-risk children. CPS involves Investigative Consultants in any potential C-SEC cases. The ICs use investigative databases, social media sites and other resources to assist CPS staff in the investigation. ICs also refer appropriate cases to the NYPD and the FBI.

ACS has also provided our Child Protective Services staff with guidance, training and support to identify C-SEC youth and help them access specialized services. In June 2012, ACS released a comprehensive policy on how to identify, engage and support victims of sexual exploitation and hosted a multi-disciplinary conference at our Children's Center. Since 2010, ACS

staff have participated in several C-SEC trainings. In particular, from November 2012- January 2013, ACS' training academy partnered with Safe Horizon to present nine separate three-hour training sessions to DCP staff, focused on our policy. This past December, through OCFS' Child Right Project, over two hundred ACS and provider agencies staff participated in another training to create "program champions" – knowledgeable resources within their division on this issue.

In partnership with DYCD, ACS incorporated specialized expertise into our facilities by locating youth counselors with experience working with sexually exploited youth at ACS' Children's Center and detention facilities. A dedicated M.S.W. counselor from Safe Horizon was placed at the ACS Nicholas Scoppetta Children's Center facility to meet with suspected victims of sexual exploitation and provide necessary support, referrals, and case management. This counselor also facilitates group sessions, consults on individual cases, and trains Children's Center staff. In addition to the work provided by Safe Horizon, GEMS also provides weekly support groups and outreach at both the ACS Children's Center and two juvenile justice facilities that serve girls.

To meet the needs of at-risk and sexually exploited youth in our foster care and juvenile justice placements, ACS contracts with the Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA) whose Gateways program provides intensive trauma-informed services including assessment, therapy, and counseling. ACS also contracts with Mt. Sinai-St. Luke's Roosevelt's New Beginnings Program, a unique preventive program which works with 12-17 year olds atrisk of or victims of sexual exploitation, and their families, with the goal of keeping the youth safely in their homes.

ACS and DYCD recognize that at-risk LGBTQ youth are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. ACS allocated state Safe Harbor funding to three youth providers that have LGBTQ specific expertise and services. First, the Ali Forney Center developed a four-week internship program and began running a weekly psycho-educational group which supports young people who have exchanged sex for money or other resources. Second, the Hetrick-Martin Institute created two

support groups, including one specifically for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, outreach materials describing available support services, and developed a model staff training curriculum focused on identifying and working with sexually exploited LGBTQ youth. The ACS Office of LGBTQ Policy and Practice plans to work with the agency's training academy to implement this training curriculum more broadly. Finally, The Door, created a support group for transgender and gender non-conforming youth and a job development group, which assisted youth with resume writing, job searches, as well as setting goals and developing plans toward their career goals.

Developing a Coordinated Agency-Wide Strategic Vision

In addition to expanding supportive services, we recognize the challenges of coordinating services, resources, and care for this vulnerable population. With Safe Harbor funds, ACS commissioned Lynne Echenberg, an attorney and expert in the fields of child welfare and juvenile justice, to provide technical assistance to Safe Harbor grantees. Ms. Echenberg was also tasked with developing an agency-wide strategic plan to address child commercial sexual exploitation in New York City. Her work consisted of meeting with diverse stakeholders including several ACS divisions, provider partners, and youth to survey existing resources, identify gaps, and prioritize future funding and resource allocation. Her comprehensive report identifies ACS' C-SEC efforts as well as areas for further development, such as adopting a validated screening tool; investing in and piloting data collection tools, as well as creating a training plan tailored to frontline workers, clinical staff, and supervisors.

Challenges with Identifying Sexually Exploited Youth

Given the often hidden and coercive nature of sexual exploitation, agency staff and providers face enormous challenges to identifying commercially sexually exploited children. Often times, we encounter young people who are traumatized and fearful and many are understandably reluctant to disclose sexual exploitation. Others feel ashamed. Practice and research also shows that many sexually exploited children do not view themselves as “victims” and will not identify with terms like “sexual exploitation” or “sex trafficking.” Many children do not trust either law enforcement or child welfare systems. Identifying sexual exploitation requires much more than posing a list of questions or “checking a box” off a form.

To that end, ACS, DYCD, and our providers focus on building rapport over time with at-risk youth and suspected victims of sexual exploitation. Young people are highly unlikely to disclose commercial sexual exploitation during an initial intake session and it is critical to allow youth to speak openly and comfortably about their experiences in a sensitive manner while recognizing the realities that youth face. Since sexually exploited youth come through ACS’ and DYCD’s systems through multiple avenues—juvenile justice, child welfare, and homeless services, among others—they may be in contact with multiple caseworkers, providers, and facilities which makes it difficult to develop this rapport. In addition, many of these young people may be transient and/or unable to continuously engage in services. We are continuously striving to better engage youth, which is why we have expanded training, located specialized services within our facilities, and further developed outreach efforts.

Collecting Data for Sexually Exploited Youth

Collecting data is a critical component of our work—it assists in our efforts to evaluate our programs, identify gaps in services, and determine how to allocate scarce resources. Both ACS and DYCD collect data pertaining to sexually exploited youth by gathering regular reports from our

contracted providers which include the number of youth served, the type of services offered; the age and gender of youth, and identification of possible sexual exploitation. ACS obtained demographic data, as provided in our report and appendix, of young people served by Safe Harbor-funded programs from providers, ACS databases, as well as reports from Lynne Echenberg. As discussed in our Local Law 23 report, obtaining all the figures required by the law from vulnerable youth was not always feasible. For example, some providers conduct time-limited outreach with many youth at one time (e.g. Streetwork) and may not be able to obtain complete information from their participants (e.g. the young person's contact with ACS and/or DYCD). In addition, since providers often collect demographic information without identifying information, they may not know whether a young person has been counted previously.

ACS is working to improve the ways that we collect data about the thousands of youth that we serve. ACS divisions work with several distinct case management systems, each of which serves different purposes, some of which are controlled by the state Office of Children and Family Services and others are controlled by ACS. We use state databases to collect and track child welfare and juvenile placement information and we use city databases to collect and track information about our preventive and juvenile detention cases. We are currently evaluating options to collect C-SEC-specific data among these various systems. Improving the state-operated CONNECTIONS system is the most promising option for capturing this data. Currently, caseworkers do not have the ability to electronically "check a box" denoting a child's risk of or involvement in commercial sexual exploitation. Instead, any of this information must be recorded in progress notes. ACS is in the process of evaluating ways to streamline our documentation and reporting systems so that data can be collected and shared more easily.

In addition, ACS is pursuing additional training for staff and implementing best practices screening tools. To that end, ACS and OCFS are planning an additional large-scale training for

later this year. ACS is also currently participating in the testing of a screening tool developed for the child welfare and juvenile justice systems in collaboration with OCFS, IOFA's Child Right Project and Loyola University's Center for the Human Rights of Children. Once the testing is completed, this screening tool will be the first validated instrument in the country developed specifically for young minor victims of trafficking.

Closing

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the important work we are doing to address the needs of sexually exploited children and document the number of youth in this population. We are grateful for all of the support of the Council as we continue to work to improve services for the City's most vulnerable young people. We are happy to take any questions you may have.