



**The New York City Council,
Committee on Juvenile Justice and Committee on Women's Issues
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"Oversight: Young Women in New York City's Juvenile Justice System"

**Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children's Services
Felipe Franco, Deputy Commissioner
Division of Youth and Family Justice**

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Good morning Chairs Cabrera and Cumbo and members of the Committees on Juvenile Justice and Women’s Issues. I am Felipe Franco, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ) at the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS). This is my first time before the Council in this capacity and I look forward to a productive partnership with you. With me is Jennifer Romelien, Executive Director of Detention Program Services within my Division. Thank you for the opportunity to share our work related to the services provided to young women in ACS’ juvenile justice programs.

Overview of Juvenile Justice Programs

The Administration for Children’s Services oversees a continuum of services and programs for youth at every stage of the juvenile justice process. Our Division of Youth and Family Justice promotes public safety and improves the lives of youth, families, and communities by providing child-centered and family-focused services, including therapeutic treatment, safe and secure custodial care, responsive health care, effective re-entry services, and promotion of educational achievement. We, and our contracted partners, provide these services to youth in the following: secure and non-secure detention facilities, non-secure placement residences, and community-based alternative programs.

Each year, the Division provides secure and non-secure detention services to juvenile delinquents and juvenile offenders whose cases are pending adjudication. While in detention, residents receive a number of services, such as education, recreation, and case management. In 2013, DYFJ served approximately 3,300 youth in our 13 non-secure and two secure detention

facilities. Of those, 767 were young women. ACS directly operates two secure detention facilities, Horizon and Crossroads, each of which is co-ed. Youth reside in individual rooms and are assigned to “halls” based on gender. Unlike the two secure detention facilities, DYFJ’s non-secure detention residences are gender-specific. At this time, three out of the 13 non-secure detention facilities operated or contracted by DYFJ are serving young women.

In September 2012, New York City began Close to Home, a juvenile justice reform initiative that allows New York City youth who are found by a Family Court judge to have committed a delinquent act to receive services in or close to the communities where they live. These young people are placed into our custody and receive services at small, resource-rich residential programs in or near the five boroughs. ACS and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), have collaborated with nine local non-profit agencies to implement Non-Secure Placement (NSP), Phase I of Close to Home. Since the initiative began, ACS has provided NSP services to more than 800 youth. Of this total, nearly 300 young people have successfully completed their court order, which ACS divides into two components: residential care and aftercare. In 2013, 392 youth were placed with the NSP program, 114 of whom were young women. Similar to our non-secure detention facilities, non-secure placement residences are also gender specific. Of the 31 NSP sites, 9 serve young women.

While out-of-home placement is a critical component of our system, it should be our last option. As part of our continuum, ACS offers two community-based alternative programs, which allow youth the opportunity to receive services while remaining at home with their families. First, our Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI) links young people and families with intensive, evidence-based therapeutic interventions aimed at diverting youth from residential placement. JJI is currently serving approximately 29 young women.

In addition, our Family Assessment Program (FAP) serves families seeking to file PINS (Person In Need of Supervision) petitions in the New York City Family Courts. PINS youth are those under the age of 18 who are charged with offenses unique to their status as juveniles, including truancy and running away from home. Through FAP, ACS works closely with youth and their families by using evidence-based interventions. In 2013, we served more than 6,700 families and are currently serving approximately 456 girls throughout the five boroughs.

Understanding the Needs of Young Women

Typically, young women who enter the juvenile justice system are between 14 and 16 years old. As it is both in the City and nationally, fewer females are juvenile offenders—youth who commit a serious felony. In fact, in 2013, only 4% of females in our care were juvenile offenders. Many of the offenses that young women commit, such as assault, appear to stem from anger, challenges within family relationships, impulse control, and trauma. While not all of these are specific only to young women, we have noticed that the young women in our care have challenges expressing emotions constructively, lack positive adult role models, have emotional problems, and have poor relationships with their caregivers.

Our staff report that many young women in our care also struggle with peer pressure and many are also involved in abusive and unhealthy relationships. Some may also be victims of sexual exploitation. ACS recognizes that the vast majority—as high as 90% of young people, regardless of gender, in the juvenile system—have experienced some sort of trauma.

To address this trauma, we strive to have a system that is both informed and responsive. ACS is proud of our partnership with Bellevue Hospital and NYU Langone Medical Center to create and implement trauma-informed screening and care in our secure detention facilities. We are one of the first secure detention systems in the country to implement trauma-informed practices and training.

Services and Programs for Young Women in Juvenile Justice Facilities

ACS, along with our providers and partners, provide an array of therapeutic services throughout our continuum which work with young women and families to address relationship issues and promote greater cohesion. In addition, ACS programs build self-esteem, positive self-expression and relationships, and promote health education, life skills, and creativity.

Within our detention facilities, we have found that young people truly enjoy and thrive when expressing themselves through the arts and humanities. We have partnered with numerous organizations such as Voices Unbroken, which provides weekly writing-based creative workshops and builds literacy skills. We also work with Healing Arts from Montefiore Medical Center to bring together artists and youth to design and paint murals and artwork. Through our partnership with High Five/Art Connection we bring young women to theater and productions as well as museums and other art programs. Our collaboration with Carnegie Hall brings professional musicians to work with youth to compose and produce music, culminating in a concert.

To build life skills and empower young women to reach their full potential, we partner with the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence, NYU, New York Cares, and Day One, to educate girls about intimate partner violence, various forms of abuse, healthy relationships, and sexual health. We also work with the Girls Scouts Council of Greater New York, which provides financial literacy, leadership development, career exploration, and college preparation workshops. The Columbia University's Literacy Advocacy Program also provides tutoring and develops problem-solving and critical reasoning skills.

Recreational activities are also a critical component of our programming for young women. In addition to a range of arts and humanities programs, we offer weekly one-hour yoga sessions through Yoga for Yoga and the Lineage Project in our detention facilities and with Row New York,

a unique summer program that introduces young women to rowing and provides academic success programming.

Like our detention facilities, our non-secure placement residences also offer supportive services and programming. In 2013, ACS and OCFS convened a monthly group with all NSP providers who work with young women. The providers share concerns, challenges, and offer recommendations and or creative ways on how to work with this population. Providers are encouraged to partner with organizations like Exalt Youth, which offers structured classes, individualized support, and paid internships within placement, and a supportive alumni network to help prevent further justice involvement. Additionally, ACS is collaborating with the Kings County District Attorney's Office in implementing the Gender-Responsive Re-entry Assistance and Support Program (GRASP) and evidence-informed, re-entry program that focuses on transitioning young women from residential placement back into the community. Through GRASP, social workers will work with young women in the facilities to provide gender responsive skill-building groups, individual team and group mentoring, educational advocacy and tutoring, job placement, readiness training, and paid internships.

Supporting Special Populations

ACS supports various special populations, including pregnant and parenting young people; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, and sexually exploited youth.

Pregnant/Parenting: Each year, ACS serves a small number of pregnant young women involved, or at risk of being involved, in the juvenile justice system. ACS provides support services to these young women on a case by case basis and refers them to programs such the Nurse Family Partnership, which connects expecting mothers and young mothers to public health nurses from pregnancy until the baby turns two years old.

LGBTQ Youth: ACS is committed to providing a safe, healthy, inclusive, affirming and discrimination-free environment, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. We make all efforts to create a safe and supportive environment—from housing to transgender-affirming healthcare. In addition to our comprehensive LGBTQ policy, all of our DYFJ staff are trained on best practices. Beginning at intake, all young people are given an informative palm card and asked optional questions regarding their sexual orientation, gender-identity, and gender expression as well as quality of life issues. This assists staff in developing affirming placement and service plans. At the end of care, case managers, as required by our policy, must seek LGBTQ supportive resources in the community as a component of re-entry planning.

Sexually Exploited Youth: New York State’s Safe Harbor law allows Family Court delinquency cases of youth under the age of 17 who are arrested for prostitution to instead be converted to a Person in Need of Supervision (PINS) petition. Conversion to a PINS petition prevents the young victim of sexual exploitation from being prosecuted for prostitution and allows that young person to receive critical support and services. In partnership with our providers and the Department of Youth and Community Development, ACS has developed a comprehensive set of services, which includes specialized juvenile justice placements, preventive services, counseling, and outreach.

ACS contracts with the Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA) whose Gateways program provides intensive trauma-informed services including assessment, therapy, counseling, and aftercare planning specifically designed for young women who are victims of sexual exploitation. For preventive services, ACS also contracts with Mt. Sinai-St. Luke’s Roosevelt’s New Beginnings program, which works with young people at-risk of or victims of sexual exploitation, and their families. Furthermore, the leading survivor-led Girls Educational & Mentoring Services (GEMS) provides weekly outreach and counseling sessions at our facilities.

Enhancing our Expertise and Capacity to Meet the Needs of Young Women

We can do more to meet the needs of young women in the juvenile justice system, beginning with seeking expertise and partnerships with communities, organizations, and within government. By addressing their needs now, we have the opportunity to make a significant impact and prevent young women from later entering the child welfare system. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Council to expand our work and make a lasting impact on young women. ACS recently met with representatives from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention National Training and Technical Assistance Center, who developed the Girls' Delinquency & Crime Initiative. The Center provides specialized training and technical assistance and we anticipate working with them in the coming months to conduct an assessment that will inform the development of a gender-responsive training module and services.

Closing

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the important work we are doing to address the needs of young people in our juvenile justice programs. We are grateful for all of the support of the Council as we continue to strive to improve services for the City's most vulnerable youth. I am happy to take any questions you may have.