

**The New York City Administration for Children's Services
Testimony to the New York City Council
Committees on General Welfare and Women's Issues
June 27, 2011**

“Combating Sexual Exploitation in NYC: Examining Available Social Services”

Good afternoon. I am Jan Flory, Deputy Commissioner for Child Protection at the New York City Administration for Children's Services. I am joined by my colleagues, Susan Morley, Senior Advisor for Investigations to Commissioner John B. Mattingly, and Sara Hemmeter, Executive Director for Children's Services' Family Assessment Program (FAP). We are grateful to the chairs and members of the Women's Issues and General Welfare Committees for holding this hearing and for giving us the opportunity to testify. Commissioner Mattingly shares the concerns of the Council on this important topic, and we are pleased to discuss with you today our experiences working with sexually exploited youth who come into contact with the City's child welfare system.

Since 2004, we have worked on a number of fronts to address the intersection between sexually exploited youth and child welfare. As a reminder to the Council, we serve children, adolescents and families through our child protective, preventive, foster care, juvenile justice and child care programs. In our Division of Child Protection alone, we annually investigate approximately 60,000 family reports of alleged child abuse and neglect that the city receives from the New York State Central Register. It is not common for sexual exploitation cases to be identified as such when they first come to our attention. This is a hidden, deep-seated and complex problem that often only reveals itself after a youth enters our system for other reasons. To illustrate this, I'd like to start off our discussion today by sharing a few of the cases of sexually exploited youth that we have encountered.

Some of the central themes that emerge when we review cases of sexual exploitation such as these include the serious and complex nature of these cases, requiring attention from the highest levels of our agency; the importance of information sharing and collaboration

across systems; and the disinclination of youth to disclose or identify as sexually exploited, which makes tracking, data collection, and in some cases, providing specialized services, a challenge.

Our Division of Child Protection, which I lead, is the front door of the City's child welfare system. While we rarely receive direct reports that a youth is being sexually exploited, there are times that a Child Protective Specialist is called to investigate neglect or abuse, and in the course of the investigation, uncovers potential sexual exploitation. For example, our staff may respond to an allegation of educational neglect or inadequate guardianship for a teenager in the home, and in the course of interviewing the family, the parents may disclose behavior on the part of the teen that causes our worker to become suspicious of sexual exploitation. Some of these behaviors include spending money without having an apparent source of income, dressing provocatively, disappearing for lengths of time and returning in different clothing, and exhibiting signs of physical and emotional abuse from a romantic partner. In cases where a worker suspects sexual exploitation, she will immediately involve her supervisor and other senior leadership, and a team approach is utilized to determine the best course of action.

In recent years, Children's Services has invested in strengthening both our investigative capacity and our clinical expertise, and both of these investments have proved critical in dealing with sexually exploited youth. In 2006, Children's Services hired its first team of Investigative Consultants, who are retired law enforcement investigators led by Susan Morley, Former Commanding Officer of the NYPD Special Victims Division. We now have 54 staff with extensive law enforcement experience who are deployed to our borough offices to work alongside our front line child protective workers and consult in complex cases. Any case involving suspected sexual exploitation would trigger an immediate alert to our Investigative Consultants. In addition, each of our borough offices has a team of clinical social work staff who consult on difficult cases involving domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse. These clinical consultants have expertise in the issues of violence and trauma that we see in cases involving sexually exploited youth.

Child Protective Staff and our Investigative Consultants work with our partners at the Police Department and the District Attorney's office to investigate any adults who may be perpetuating sexual exploitation of youth. We closely coordinate with law enforcement on these cases, while focusing on our primary mission of protecting the youth's safety and providing appropriate services.

In regards to services, we are pleased that we have begun to develop and expand a continuum of service options for sexually exploited youth, including residential and family foster care programs operated by Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA) that are tailored specifically to this population. JCCA's residential program, Gateways, is an intensive, specialized residential program for girls ages 12 to 16 who have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking. Gateways uses a strengths-based youth development model to assist young women in gaining the skills needed to return to the community as productive, independent young adults. Children's Services also is launching a contract with JCCA for a Specialized Family Foster Care program that will place sexually exploited youth with specially trained foster parents who can offer a therapeutic home environment to youth while the youth receives a full range of medical, emotional and psychological services to address their needs. We are currently working with JCCA to get this program up and running so that we can begin to refer youth.

Finally, the Council has been a strong partner in encouraging our use of Preventive Services to keep families safely together whenever possible. We are pleased to share with you that one of our new Preventive programs is specifically targeted to preventing foster care placements of sexually exploited youth. The New Beginnings program at St. Luke's – Roosevelt Hospital Center / Community Services for Children & Families is an intensive clinical program for families with a youth ages 12 to 17 who has been sexually exploited and commercially trafficked. This program is open to female, male and transgender youth ages 12 to 17. The purpose of this program is to keep sexually exploited youth safely maintained in their homes by providing intensive therapy to the youth and her or his family. The program is designed to help the youth heal from their trauma and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation in the future.

In addition to our partnerships with Jewish Child Care Association and St. Luke's / Roosevelt, we have also developed an important relationship with Girls Educational and Mentoring Service, better known as GEMS. GEMS has been nationally recognized for its expertise in working with sexually exploited youth, and the organization has been especially helpful to us in providing services to youth at our Children's Center. The Children's Center is our 24-hour facility located in Manhattan that provides temporary care and shelter for children who are awaiting a foster care placement. In the past few years, we have had opportunities to work in partnership with GEMS to secure the safety of sexually exploited youth who have come to our attention at the Children's Center.

There are a number of factors that arguably make the Children's Center – and the foster care placement services centered there – the locus of our work with sexually exploited youth and our partnership with GEMS. Generally, youth come to our Children's Center after an investigation concludes that they must be removed from their family, and when a placement into foster care cannot be made directly out of one of our borough offices. However, under some circumstances, youth are brought directly to the Children's Center by the Police Department or after their parents file a Person in Need of Supervision (PINS) petition, asking for their teenager to be voluntarily placed into foster care. All of these youth are extremely vulnerable. They present some of the highest risk factors for sexual exploitation, and the volume of these teenagers that we encounter may be higher than in other jurisdictions because of the transient nature of New York City and the existence of hubs like Port Authority.

For all of these reasons, we have taken particular care to focus on the issue of sexually exploited youth at our Children's Center. GEMS has been an invaluable partner in this endeavor, providing services to us on an emergency basis and at no cost for many years. We are pleased that we are now able to formally contract with them to provide a weekly prevention and outreach group for girls at the Children's Center.

During this group, GEMS staff meets privately with girls to raise awareness about the realities of the commercial sex industry and to provide our youth with a chance to discuss their own experiences in a safe and supportive peer to peer environment. Our experiences with youth in the Children's Center has highlighted one of the complexities of this issue, which is that most of the sexually exploited youth that we encounter do not disclose this fact or identify as such. There are many reasons why girls do not want to disclose this aspect of their lives, ranging from safety concerns to feeling cared for by the adult or adults who are in reality exploiting them. Our child care staff at the Children's Center have had success in some cases in getting youth to open up to them about sexual exploitation, and in other cases, have become suspicious about behavior they have witnessed and have had to confront the youth. Our work with GEMS and our own experiences have taught us that for many youth in the commercial sex industry, it takes many interventions before the youth is ready to admit the depth of this issue and accept treatment and support. For that reason, an area that we think needs more attention is how to provide services to youth and families that are flexible enough to meet them where they are, keep them safe, and support them, even before they are ready to disclose their involvement in the commercial sex industry.

The issue of flexible services for sexually exploited youth has also been raised by our contracted preventive and foster care providers. It is important to point out here that while most of our discussion thus far has been about sexually exploited youth coming to our attention as they enter the front door of the child welfare system, many youth are already in foster care or receiving preventive services when they either become involved in the commercial sex industry or when they are finally ready to disclose their situation to a caring adult. Often, other complex issues, such as domestic violence or other history of abuse, substance abuse or mental health, mask sexual exploitation, and it is not until the youth is dealing with the more visible issues in a therapeutic environment that the hidden sexual exploitation comes to light. We are working to increase awareness of our new preventive program within the community of provider agencies so that they will be able to make referrals to this specialized service as necessary.

Recently, the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) convened a joint workgroup with Children's Services and a group of provider agencies who were concerned about the issue of sexually exploited youth and wanted to come together to share experiences and strategies. This group is co-chaired by Dianne Heggie, Associate Executive Director of COFCCA, and Ronni Fuchs, Children's Services' Director of Youth Advocacy and Support Services. The work of this group involves analyzing the prevalence and demographics of sexually exploited youth in New York, considering options for a screening tool to assess youth's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, and sharing resources and best practices. The group is considering holding a symposium on this topic sometime in the future. Children's Services will continue to be an active co-leader of this group and we are enthusiastic about the connections and collaborations that will surely come out of it.

One of the clearest lessons we have learned so far as we develop our competency in this area is the critical importance of systems sharing information and collaborating. Our collaborations with law enforcement, other city agencies, and service providers on specific cases have been essential to effectively and safely reaching sexually exploited youth. Beyond specific cases, the trainings, interagency workgroups, conferences and symposiums on this topic that Children's Services has led or participated in with our partners in the Mayor's Office, at the Division of Youth and Community Development, the District Attorney's Office, the Police Department, the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence, community groups and service providers such as GEMS, Safe Horizons, SAVI (Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program) and others, have been extremely fruitful as we continue to develop our ability to confront the sexual exploitation of youth. We are currently working to integrate the material that we received from a train-the-training course led by GEMS into a revised core training on sex abuse for our child protective workers.

Our collaborations will deepen, especially as we continue to implement the Safe Harbor legislation, which was passed in 2008 and went into effect in 2010. One of the key components of this law is to allow for child victims of sexual exploitation to have their

cases converted to a PINS case and offered support and services. Our Family Assessment Program, led by my colleague Sara Hemmeter, handles this area of the Safe Harbor Law and can speak to it further following this testimony should the Council have questions. As I mentioned earlier, many of the cases we see in the Children's Center that involve sexual exploitation are PINS cases. We are making great strides at Children's Services to offer intensive preventive services to families at risk of PINS through the Family Assessment Program. This program's goal is to strengthen families and promote stability for adolescents in an effort to divert them from the court's PINS system. We serve approximately 6,000 to 7,000 families annually who come to us with concerns about school absences, chronic running away, involvement with gangs or substance abuse, and sometimes, direct concerns about commercial sexual exploitation. In the past year, we have developed an assessment instrument that allows FAP staff to match youth's and family's risks and needs with appropriate evidence-based interventions and therapies, and are referring youth to these new programs.

We look forward to continuing this important dialogue with Council and we thank you again on behalf of Commissioner Mattingly and all other colleagues for this chance to testify. For another perspective on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation, I will now turn the lectern over to my colleagues from the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence.