

The New York City Administration for Children's Services
Report on the Abduction of Foster Children from Forestdale, Inc.
November 8, 2011

The New York City Administration for Children's Service (ACS) conducted an investigation to determine how a birth mother, whose eight children were in foster care, could have absconded with the children during a supervised family visit at a foster care agency, Forestdale, Inc (Forestdale). As the public agency responsible for oversight of Forestdale, ACS immediately launched an inquiry into this incident. The following is a summary of key findings and recommendations. ACS remains committed to working with Forestdale and all foster care agencies to ensure that proper visitation between children/youth and their family members occurs in a safe environment. These visits are crucial to supporting the child's well-being and maintaining strong, family relationships.

Incident Summary

On the afternoon of September 19, 2011, the birth mother attended a planned family visit with her eight children in foster care at the Forestdale campus in Forest Hills, Queens. ACS discovered through its investigation that the visit occurred without adequate supervision by the assigned case planner at Forestdale. As a result, the mother was able to exit the agency grounds with her children and escort them to a nearby vehicle where the children's father was waiting for them.

On September 26, 2011, the eight children were located with their birth parents in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania by members of the NYPD Fugitive Task Force. The birth parents were arrested, and the children were returned to New York City where they were medically examined, seen by their respective therapists, and returned safely to foster care as per prior court order. The parents pleaded guilty to custodial interference and will be sentenced on November 10, 2011.

Security Assessment and Corrective Measures

ACS performed an on-site assessment of Forestdale's Security practices in an effort to determine how the birth mother was able to abscond with the children from the agency grounds and to offer recommendations to improve the agency's ability to provide a safe and secure environment for children and families during visits. The following are security measures that have been implemented or will be implemented before November 30, 2011:

- Tightening security along the periphery of the campus adjacent to public roads
- Installing alarmed locks on side doors to prevent unauthorized access to and egress from the campus
- Installing strategically-placed cameras on the property to monitor points of access to the campus
- Hiring part-time visiting coaches to assist in supervising visits during peak hours of visitation
- Ensuring that all security personnel are readily accessible at all times via portable communication devices and are on-site from 9:00 am to 8:00 pm

Forestdale is currently undergoing an internal review of their visiting protocols and will take actions to address weaknesses. Forestdale visitors will be guided to the main administrative building's front desk where they will be logged in, receive a visitor's pass and be directly linked with the Forestdale staff member who is expecting them, before leaving the reception area. Outside consultants will perform mandatory training for all Forestdale staff with a particular emphasis on visitation. A visitation schedule will be produced weekly to include the staff member responsible for supervising each visit. This schedule will be available at the front desk, to security personnel and to supervisory staff.

ACS Monitoring

The ACS Office of Agency Program Assistance (APA) will conduct on-site reviews every two weeks over the course of the next two months to monitor completion of the expected corrective actions and to ensure that those already implemented are effectively in place. After this initial period, APA will make visits as needed, but will be present at least monthly on the campus, with unannounced visits always remaining an option.

ACS Visitation Protocol

ACS has reviewed our policy issued in 2006 pertaining to visitation policies and practices and will re-issue a revised version of the 2006 Memorandum outlining best practices in visiting for children in foster care. The revised policy is expected to be distributed to all provider agencies for review and comment by November 30, 2011.

Family visits for children in foster care improve their well being, their relationships with their family, and their overall sense of stability. It is critical that we remain dedicated to providing opportunities for youth in care to see their family while also ensuring that visits are held in a safe and secure environment. ACS is committed to working with all of our partnering agencies to ensure that they have proper security measures in place. We will continue to monitor Forestdale's progress in implementing and maintaining the corrective measures outlined in this report that are scheduled to be completed by November 30, 2011.