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**IN RECOGNITION OF JANUARY AS 'HUMAN TRAFFICKING PREVENTION MONTH,' NYC ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES LAUNCHES NEW THERAPEUTIC DRAMA PROGRAM FOR YOUTH AT-RISK FOR TRAFFICKING**

*In Partnership With 'Foster Care Unplugged' & New Yorkers For Children, ACS' New Program Will Focus on Trauma Mitigation and Mental Health Support Through Theater Arts*

**New York, NY** – Today, as part of National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, the NYC Administration for Children Services (ACS), in partnership with 'Foster Care Unplugged' and New Yorkers For Children, announced the pilot of a new therapeutic groupwork model for youth at-risk for trafficking. The model, *Mitigating Trauma through Drama: Developing Positive Pathways for Lives Through Expressive Arts*, focuses on trafficking awareness, trauma mitigation and mental health support through therapeutic expressive arts group work for trafficked and at-risk girls and young women within the child welfare system. The pilot is being funded through grant support from the New York Community Trust and the NYS Office of Family and Children Services' Safe Harbour Program.

"Recognizing and preventing child sex trafficking are critical, and to accomplish that, we must increase awareness of supportive programs to help at-risk youth protect themselves and help survivors find a permanent way out," said **ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell**. "ACS is committed to helping stop victimization by sex traffickers. The goals of this new model are mitigating trauma and providing mental health support through therapeutic expressive options. This innovative initiative, in conjunction with the numerous services offered by ACS, will better ensure that our young people, particularly those in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems, are not at-risk for exploitation."

**Selina Higgins, executive director of ACS' Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy (OCTPP) and co-author of the *Mitigating Trauma through Drama* curriculum** explained the concept behind the project, stating: "This is not just trauma mitigation through the creative arts. It's really about giving youth a safe arena in which they can recognize exploitation and unhealthy relationships, work through interpersonal misperceptions and residual trauma using psychodrama exercises, build self-esteem and move onto more positive life pathways."

"Spontaneous dramatization is an innovative approach at the core of our curriculum, as we understand that people learn through their actions and interactions with one another. Adopted by J.L Moreno, psychodrama has been integrated with human trafficking prevention to ensure we remain culturally responsive to the needs of youth within the urban, out of home community. The programming has birthed a new community for young women to process their thoughts,

feelings, and emotions in a real-time active way,” said **Melody J. Centeno, LMSW founder of Foster Care Unplugged (FCUP), and co-author of Mitigating Trauma through Drama curriculum.**

“Many thanks to New York Community Trust for supporting this effective work. Drama Therapy can provide transformational and meaningful experiences to young people who have been victimized by abuse and/or diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). New Yorkers For Children is grateful to be a partner on this groundbreaking work led by ACS and Melody Centeno of Foster Care Unplugged,” said **Saroya Friedman-Gonzalez, executive director, New Yorkers For Children.**

“Unfortunately, there is a growing need for programs and services that are tailored to the specific needs of young people who have been sexually exploited,” said **Leigh Ross, New York Community Trust program officer for girls and young women.** “We are proud to help launch this innovative pilot, which we hope will help these young people today and serve as a model for other programs in the near future.”

Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, selling or buying of people for various forms of exploitation, including labor and sexual exploitation. Young people in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, as well as homeless and runaway, immigrant, LGBT and other marginalized youth are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In 2019, the most recent year for which data is available, the NYC Safe Harbour Program (as administrated by the ACS Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy) identified a total of 2,057 children and young adults in New York City as sexually exploited or at-risk of exploitation. Of these, 580 were identified as under the age of 19.

ACS has been steadily building its capacity to identify and prevent sex trafficking through a range of supports and services. In 2020, ACS’ Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy trained 3,300 individuals across New York City on a variety of trafficking awareness and prevention related topics. 2,375 of the 3,300 received training virtually, due to COVID-19 safety precautions. Trainees included youth, parents, teachers, clinicians, nonprofit service providers, and city agency staff. Additionally, Child Protective Specialists receive training on how to identify and intervene in cases where there is suspected trafficking. Frontline workers are then able to monitor at-risk and trafficked youth and provide supportive services through partner agencies. Children’s Counselors and Youth Development Specialists also receive training. Moreover, the Office of Child Trafficking Prevention and Policy develops policies, procedures, trainings and events; aggregates data; provides groupwork services to youth; and works with provider agencies to deliver guidance in assessing trafficking indicators, suggesting resources towards development of appropriate service plans, and liaising with key stakeholders.

As part of ACS’ ongoing work to prevent child trafficking, the *Mitigating Trauma Through Drama* groupwork model will serve girls and young women within the child welfare system who have experienced or are at-risk for sex trafficking. This includes specific populations that are associated with trafficking, such as girls and young women of color, indigenous and immigrant girls and young women, cisgender and transgender girls and young women, and young adult mothers at residential facilities with high trafficking populations.

Psychodrama, also known as Drama Therapy, is a useful technique for helping children who have been victimized by abuse and/or diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is an active, experiential approach that facilitates a participant’s ability to explore personal life stories, recognize and solve problems and express feelings to strengthen the ability to perform life roles.

**About New Yorkers For Children**

As the nonprofit partner to the Administration for Children's Services for over 23 years, New Yorkers For Children protects, ensures, and promotes the safety and well-being of NYC's children and families, with an emphasis on youth in foster care. NYFC provides direct services and scholarship support to about 1,000 youth a year in addition to overseeing 32 unique projects, including 20 grants from foundations and corporations to support education programs and pilot initiatives on behalf of ACS. The overarching goal of NYFC's direct services and grant management strategy is to increase the educational attainment, life skills, and career readiness of youth in care and to support the NYC child welfare system by launching informative pilot programs that help inform the work of ACS.

**About Foster Care Unplugged**

Foster Care Unplugged (FCUP), is a 501(c)(3) agency founded in 2016 by Melody Centeno, LMSW. Ms. Centeno, a motivational speaker, public advocate, and former foster care recipient, founded FCUP to focus on enriching the lives of youth in foster care and at risk of being placed in the child welfare system by promoting positive spiritual, emotional and physical outcomes for disadvantaged individuals. The organization's mission is to identify foster care youth, meet them where they are in their life journey, and help develop their emotional-social skills as they build resiliency into adulthood.

**About New York Community Trust**

A public charity, The Trust is a grantmaking foundation dedicated to improving the lives of residents of New York City and its suburbs. The Trust brings together individuals, families, foundations, and businesses to build a better community and support nonprofits that make a difference. The Trust applies knowledge, creativity, and resources to the most challenging issues in an effort to ensure meaningful opportunities and a better quality of life for all New Yorkers, today and tomorrow.

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