



**The New York City Council,
Committees on Juvenile Justice and General Welfare
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“Oversight: Implementation of Close to Home for Non-Secure Placement”

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Good morning Chairs Gonzalez and Palma and to all of the members of the Juvenile Justice and General Welfare Committees. I am honored to be here to testify regarding New York City's implementation of the first phase of Close to Home, an extraordinary juvenile justice reform unique in the City and State's history. This morning, I will share with you our accomplishments over the past year, as well as some of the lessons that we have learned during the first year of Close to Home.

Close to Home Overview

One of the goals of Close to Home is to keep young people who are placed by the New York City Family Court near their families and home communities. Previously, young people who had been adjudicated as juvenile delinquents were placed in facilities hundreds of miles away, where it was difficult for them to visit with their families, remain connected to their communities, or earn school credits. New York City is committed to providing these young people with a comprehensive rehabilitative program, while remaining attentive and committed to maintaining public safety. Under Close to Home, young people are placed in or near the five boroughs, and close to resources that can support their treatment and safe re-integration into their local communities.

New York City is implementing Close to Home in two phases. In Phase I, ACS assumed responsibility for non-secure placement residences and in Phase II, ACS will assume responsibility for limited-secure placement residences. The focus of my testimony this morning will be on Phase I, but I will provide a brief overview of our progress related to Limited Secure Placement as well.

Non-Secure Placement

For the past year, ACS has been collaborating with nine local non-profit agencies – many of which are represented here today – to implement Non-Secure Placement. Since September 2012, ACS and our partner agencies have provided NSP services at thirty small residential sites, to over 560 young people. Close to 200 youth have successfully completed their dispositional order, meaning that they have complied with the Family Court Judge's requirements regarding

residential rehabilitation and aftercare services. Those remaining in the program are in residential care or are receiving aftercare services and supervision.

The vast majority of Close to Home youth have met or exceeded program expectations – building insights, learning new skills, and striving toward individualized treatment goals. They have accomplished all this while respecting the rules of their NSP residences, participating in recreational, cultural, and group activities, and attending school.

We are proud to report the following educational achievements:

- 98% of eligible young people in NSP are earning New York City Department of Education (DOE) credits;
- 91% of the young people who have completed Close to Home have transitioned into DOE schools, which they are attending more regularly now than they did prior to being placed by the Family Court; and
- Half of the eligible Close to Home youth in high school earned at least one semester's worth of credits during the 2012-2013 school year.

Given the multiple challenges that these young people face, we consider these educational achievements especially noteworthy.

One of the cornerstones of Close to Home is that each youth in placement is assigned to an ACS Permanency and Placement Specialist (PPS), whose job includes working with the youth throughout their time in residential placement to identify all of their needs and concerns, working closely with family to ensure a smooth transition home, and building a comprehensive after care plan. One of the unexpected benefits we have seen this past year is that agencies have been hiring staff members from local communities where the youth are from. Youth feel a connection to the staff and are able to open up and work with staff members.

Aftercare

For young people who are placed in non-secure placement, planning for their return to their community begins shortly after they are placed with us. Integration planning into the community is overseen by an ACS case coordinator – the Placement and Permanency Specialist (“PPS”) – who collaborates extensively with the provider, family members, and community

supports to develop a comprehensive integration plan for every youth. ACS Community Support Specialists (“CSS”), who assume primary responsibility when young people return to the community, start working with young people and their families approximately two months prior to discharge from residential care.

ACS has contracted with five non-profit agencies to provide general and specialized aftercare services in every borough for young people being discharged from non-secure placement. These agencies include Boys Town, Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services, Children’s Aid Society, New Alternatives for Children, and Children’s Village. The aftercare system has the capacity to serve 142 youth at any given time, or 426 youth annually. The length of service in all programs is approximately 3-5 months. While the providers use individual approaches, all focus on family engagement and are home-based, meaning that a majority of services take place in a family’s home. Caseworkers make frequent contacts with the families and carry small caseloads between 4 – 10 families per worker.

ACS takes our responsibility to promote public safety through ongoing monitoring of youth in the community very seriously. Youth who present higher risk of re-offending are more closely supervised than youth who present lower risks. Closer supervision means more frequent face-to-face check-ins and telephone contacts. Youth who consistently violate conditions of release risk having aftercare status revoked and being returned to residential care.

Juvenile Justice Oversight Board

I would also like to update you on the ways that we are safeguarding the rights and monitoring the quality of life for young people in placement. As we testified in January, before Close to Home, ACS convened a Resident Advocacy Program Committee (RAP-C), which worked with Ombudspersons in our detention facilities, as well as Executive Directors and ACS staff to advocate for the rights of detained youth, enhance accountability, and strengthen services. With the advent of Close to Home, ACS launched the Juvenile Justice Oversight Board or JJOB – to oversee both our juvenile detention and placement systems.

The JJOB is an independent Board comprised of individuals from a range of backgrounds who are knowledgeable about juvenile justice, and are committed to improved outcomes for young people, families, and communities. After conducting broad outreach to recruit diverse and highly qualified individuals, 14 members have been appointed to the Board. Board members are

knowledgeable about youth in the juvenile justice system, residential care, and the issues they face, with individual expertise in the education, mental health, and/or juvenile justice operations fields. Board representation includes an individual from the Legal Aid Society, former juvenile justice-involved youth, and the parent of a child who has been in the juvenile justice system. Additionally, three of the current Board members served on the Resident Advocacy Program Committee (RAP-C). Board members will have access to these sites to assess the quality and adequacy of services, monitor operational issues of concern, receive analysis of system indicators, and meet with agency officials to discuss findings, recommendations, and resolutions.

The JJOB kickoff meeting was held on September 23rd and it was a success –with the diverse group of board members sharing insightful thoughts and ideas with ACS staff. Moving forward, Board members will meet on a quarterly basis.

Decrease in AWOL Rates

A small subset of Close to Home youth have had difficulty complying with their NSP program requirements and have left their residences without permission. ACS has been working closely with provider agencies, the Office of Court Administration, as well as with our other City and State partners, to address this issue. Our redoubled efforts – including establishing AWOL notification process which has led to significant progress and collaborating in a working group with NYPD to discuss additional efforts to locate young people who have left the facility. During the past six months, the number of young people leaving placement for more than 24 hours without permission has declined significantly. In May, the rate of young people leaving was 27% and by September, it had dropped to 10%, representing a 57% decrease in just three months.

Juvenile Arrests

Even as New York City implements unprecedented juvenile justice reforms, arrests of young people continue to decline. In the first six months of 2013, the number of juvenile arrests in the City dropped 30% compared with the same period in 2012. Between 2006 and 2012, juvenile arrests for major felonies decreased by 27%, showing a significant downward trend over an extended period of time.

Phase II, Limited-Secure Placement

Planning for Limited Secure Placement (LSP), which is Phase II of Close to Home, is underway. Key aspects of LSP include providing youth a full range of supports to include education, health and mental health services. Most services, including school, will be provided on site and all limited secure providers will also be required to utilize structured, evidence-informed program models that promote therapeutic rehabilitation. LSP residences will have more restrictive features to ensure the safety of residents, program staff, and local communities, given the higher-level of offenses committed by these young people.

We anticipate that there will be up to nine LSP residential sites citywide, with each site serving twelve to twenty-four youth, for a total projected census of approximately 140 young people. These residences will be operated by non-profit providers, each of whom have prior juvenile justice experience. ACS is leasing three sites from the State Office of Children and Family Services – one in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island and each of which were used by state to provide juvenile placement services. New York City expects to begin accepting youth into limited-secure placement in early 2014.

Throughout the implementation of Non-Secure placement New York City Council Juvenile Justice Committee Chair Sara M. Gonzalez and General Welfare Committee Chair Annabel Palma, as well as other Councilmembers have offered their support, guidance, and constructive feedback. Both chairs were recently able to tour an NSP site in their home boroughs and we were thrilled to show you some of the excellent work that our agencies are doing. We are grateful for your leadership and commitment and look forward to continuing to work closely with both Committees to further advance our juvenile justice reform efforts. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.