



**The New York City Council,
Committee on Juvenile Justice
February 12, 2019**

“Oversight – Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) and the Juvenile Justice System”

**Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children's Services**

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Good afternoon Chair King and Chair Rose, and members of the Committee on Juvenile Justice and the Committee on Youth Services. I am Felipe Franco, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ) within the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). With me today is Sara Hemmeter, Associate Commissioner for Community Based Alternatives and Close to Home, and Randy Scott, Assistant Commissioner for the Vulnerable & Special Need Youth Division within the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the interventions that DYFJ, our sister City agency, and our non-profit partners provide to help strengthen families and support youth in the community.

Youth who have challenging relationships with their families are vulnerable, leaving them at risk of foster care, homelessness, sexual exploitation or in some cases juvenile justice involvement. Much of ACS's work across all of our program areas focuses on efforts to strengthen family relationships and communication whenever it is safe to do so. We know that for most young people the best way to promote positive youth outcomes is to support the whole family unit, and we have invested heavily in providing intensive family supports to families and youth to prevent delinquency, truancy, chronic running away and homelessness.

Because we know that supporting families is so important and effective, we are extremely disappointed and concerned that the State Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2019-2020 proposes to eliminate the ability to keep youth safe by eliminating the capacity to place them in foster care—increasing their risk of homelessness and/or juvenile justice system involvement. In addition, the State's proposed budget would eliminate all State reimbursement for ACS's Community Based Alternatives that help divert these same youth from foster care by helping these families stay together.

This is on the heels of last year's State Budget which eliminated all state support for Close to Home and failed to fund Raise the Age implementation in New York City. We again need the City Council's advocacy at the State on behalf of New York City's youth and families.

In the ACS Division of Youth and Family Justice we have a continuum of services, including Community Based Alternatives for youth and their families, detention services for youth who are arrested and awaiting court resolution, and residential services through Close to Home for youth who are adjudicated by the Family Court. An important part of this continuum is specifically targeted at strengthening family relationships in families where parents are seeking help for their youth who are engaged in status offenses—meaning activities that are not crimes, such as truancy, running away and missing curfew. If not addressed, these youth are at risk of homelessness or justice system involvement. ACS's Family Assessment Program (FAP) works with these families through what is statutorily referred to as Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS), providing the families with diversion services and foster care for the youth when necessary.

As we all remember, adolescence can be a complicated, and oftentimes challenging, time for young people and their families. These challenges can be compounded when substance abuse, mental illness or other complicating factors are present. Our experience with court-involved adolescents in the juvenile justice system, PINS, and child welfare systems has taught us that many of the issues that contribute to difficult youth behavior, as well as more serious criminal behavior, either arise or are compounded when family relationships are strained, and parents feel that they cannot cope. Many of the interventions that ACS and DYCD offer provide youth and their parents with the tools they need to work through their challenges and build their relationships.

Community Based Alternatives

Overall admissions to juvenile detention and placement, as well as foster care placements, have decreased significantly year over year because of the intensive prevention services that New York City has made available. ACS has intentionally invested in programs and services that are specifically aimed at working with youth, but that also engage the whole family unit to improve family functioning rather than merely looking at youth behavior.

Family Assessment Program

DYFJ's Family Assessment Program (FAP) is available to families with youth up to age 18 to help avoid involvement in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. FAP prioritizes therapeutic preventive services that help families address difficult teenage behaviors—like truancy, using drugs, running away from home, and/or struggles with mental illness—as the best way to improve family dynamics and outcomes for youth, and prevent running away and homelessness.

To obtain assistance with a challenging adolescent, parents often go to Family Court to file a PINS petition. Parents and guardians are looking desperately for support through court supervision, placement of their child in foster care, respite, or quick access to services. Parents who seek a PINS petition in Family Court are required, by statute, to participate in diversion services before a PINS petition can be filed. Prior to a petition being filed, FAP MSWs meet with families and conduct an assessment of the caregivers and youth and determine which of the 3 levels of services in our continuum meet their needs.

- **Level I: Family Stabilization:** An intensive crisis team visits the family's home, conducts an assessment and then helps to identify community-based supportive services. Over a period of no longer than 90 days, the worker will support the family members in supporting the connection to community services.

- Level II: Functional Family Therapy (FFT): FFT consists of a small team of highly trained therapists, with a maximum caseload of 10, who provide therapy in the home over an intensive 4-month period including 30 one-hour therapeutic sessions.
- Level IIA: Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT): MDFT is a family-based treatment approach for adolescents with substance abuse and associated mental health and behavioral problems. A small team of trained therapists delivers MDFT, either at home, in school, or in clinic sessions over the course of two to five months.
- Level III: Multi-Systemic Therapy and Adaptations (MST): MST is a therapeutic intervention where trained therapists carry a maximum of six cases. The team provides therapy to an entire family over a period of four months. Therapists visit the home multiple times a week and are available by phone 24 hours a day. We also have an adaptation of this model specifically for families where there is substance use/abuse by the youth.
- Juvenile Justice Respite Program: ACS also provides a 21-day non-mandated respite program for youth most at risk of foster care placement or detention. Respite allows for the family and youth to work at de-escalating conflicts and improving family functioning while the youth is temporarily residing in a respite placement.

FAP serves over 5,000 families annually throughout the 5 boroughs and is able to prevent over 90% of parents from filing a PINS petition in court against their child. Currently, there are only 104 New York City youth in foster care on PINS petition, which demonstrates the effectiveness of our diversion programs.

Again, as I mentioned in my opening, all of these services are at risk in the State's proposed FY2019-2020 budget. ACS respectfully asks the City Council to join us in our effort to prevent these budget actions from proceeding, both so that the foster care system can still serve youth who

are a danger to themselves or others, and so that the state maintains its \$13 million of support for PINS diversion services.

Juvenile Justice Initiative

DYFJ also runs the Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI) in partnership with the Department of Probation. JJI serves youth who have been adjudicated in Family Court and provides intensive home-based interventions to keep young people who do not need to be confined safely in the community with necessary services and supports. JJI has played a key role in reducing the City's use of residential placements in juvenile delinquency cases, without compromising public safety.

With Raise the Age, we have expanded our array of preventive programs to meet the needs of older youth, and we have invested in new evidence-based programs, including MultiSystemic Therapy (MST)-EA, which will work with emerging adults who are homeless or on their own and need help to achieve independence. Among other goals, MST-EA will target housing and independent living skills, as well as education and career goals for participating adolescents.

Crossover Youth

The vast majority of young people in the juvenile justice system—as high as 90%, regardless of gender—have experienced some sort of trauma. We know that there is a close correlation between child maltreatment and future delinquency, and so we have partnered with multiple stakeholders to support children who have experienced abuse and neglect with the goal of preventing their entry into the justice system.

The term “crossover youth” describes a young person who enters the justice system while involved in the child welfare system. ACS is committed to investing in work that focuses specifically on dually-involved youth, such as the Crossover Youth Practice Model. The Crossover Youth Practice Model, developed by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, is a multi-agency, cross-systems approach that seeks to improve outcomes for young

people who are involved in both systems. Many of these youth are at serious risk of homelessness: they tend to be adolescents who have either a long history of child neglect, and/or PINS-type behavior. The Crossover Youth Practice Model has brought together numerous City agencies working with the youth¹ to share information², collaborate on solutions, and involve the youth and their family in order to prevent further involvement in either system.

Close to Home

If a Family Court judge finds that a young person committed an offense and at Disposition finds that the youth needs rehabilitative services, the judge may order the youth to be placed in a residential placement program for a period of time, generally 12 or 18 months. Before Close to Home these youth were placed in large institutions two or more hours away from their families, leading to family disengagement. Before 2011 and the enactment of Close to Home many youth lingered in the system for years because of lack of permanency. Now with Close to Home, youth are placed in small group home-style residences throughout the City where they receive intensive and therapeutic residential programming, followed by aftercare support for the remainder of their placement period. Close to Home providers encourage family visits and, if needed, transport families to the residences for visitation, meetings and other activities.

The ACS Permanency and Placement Specialist (PPS) assigned to each youth and the Close to Home provider work together to ensure that the youth's needs are being addressed through appropriate services, both in residential placement and in the community on aftercare, creating a tighter network of supervision. The goal of Close to Home aftercare is to build on the skills of youth and the family, and to develop a network of support that will allow them to succeed in the community.

¹ ACS, the Department of Probation, the NYC Law Department, among others

² With the consent of the youth and their parent/guardian

Other Supports for Youth & Families

As a City it is imperative that we all work to ensure that every youth has the tools and the supports they need to become successful adults, and DYFJ is committed to supporting youth, families and communities to achieve this goal.

LGBTQ Youth

When we talk about runaway and homeless youth and the connection to the juvenile justice system, we must acknowledge that some youth are without family support because they are not accepted for who they are and are either put out of their homes or cannot tolerate living with emotionally or physically abusive parents. Some of these youth also identify as LGBTQ. ACS has long made affirming and supporting our youth a priority. The evidence-based services available throughout DYFJ's continuum can often be a catalyst for family acceptance and reunification for LGBTQ youth, and we have served many of these families through FAP and JJI. We also commend our sister agency, DYCD, for dedicating significant resources and programming to meet the unique needs of these youth.

For the last two years we have been working with Vera Institute of Justice to develop a gender-responsive program that is inclusive and sensitive to the needs of our LGBTQ girls. The program will serve girls who are at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system, as an alternative to placement or an aftercare program. Services will be tailored to meet the individual needs of each girl and we are working with providers that have expertise in meeting the unique needs of our LGBTQ youth.

CSEC Survivors

Commercial sexual exploitation of children, or CSEC, is a form of child abuse experienced by many justice-involved youth. ACS has made supporting this population a priority and at DYFJ we have partnered with Girls Educational Mentoring Services (GEMS), a

nationally recognized organization that works with sexually exploited young women and girls. GEMS utilizes survivor leadership and transformational relationships to work with young women in our secure detention and Close to Home facilities to educate young people about CSEC and encourage survivors to seek help.

In August 2018 Commissioner Hansell announced the launch of the NYC Child Tattoo Eradication Project, a new pilot program at ACS that provides free tattoo removal services to trafficked, gang-affiliated and other at risk-youth in New York City. Trafficked and gang-involved youth are often branded with exploiter or gang symbols. ACS has partnered with medical providers who offer pro-bono tattoo removal services to youth affiliated with ACS whose brandings have hindered their ability to positively move on with their lives. We are thankful to the medical professionals who have offered pro-bono services to help some of the most vulnerable children in New York City.

Family Support Center

In June of 2017 ACS opened a Family Support Center in the South Bronx, which provides a multi-service, one-stop space for youth and their families. I would like to thank Chair King and members of the Juvenile Justice Committee for visiting the Center last summer and learning about the array of programs and services we offer there. As we discussed during the Committee's visit, the Bronx Family Support Center houses FAP, JJI and Close to Home staff and enables families with justice system involvement to have many of their service needs met in one centralized location. However, services offered at the Bronx Family Support Center are not limited to families with justice system involvement and are open to anyone in the community. DYFJ partners with Community Connections for Youth to provide workforce development, parenting groups, housing assistance, and education workshops. The space is designed to be shared with the whole community, welcoming everyone—including those whose children aren't at risk or court-involved.

The Bronx location is presently the only Family Support Center in the City, and we are planning to open a Queens Center in 2020.

Closing

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the supports that ACS and our partners provide to support youth and families in the community. New York City's multiagency focus on strengthening families and building competencies and supports for youth is commendable and often emulated by other cities and jurisdictions across the state and the nation. Now more than ever we need the City Council's support in advocating on behalf of New York City's youth to ensure that Albany does not cut our services to youth and families. We are happy to take your questions.