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NYC ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RISING GROUND & GIRLS FOR GENDER EQUITY, LAUNCH NEW YORK CITY'S FIRST-EVER GENDER-RESPONSIVE DIVERSION PROGRAM FOR YOUNG GIRLS & GENDER NON-CONFORMING YOUTH AT RISK OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Over the Past Decade, NYC Has Dramatically Reduced the Juvenile Justice Population; New Program, Called "JustUs," Builds On That Work By Focusing on Girls Who Are Lower Risk to Their Communities

NEW YORK, NY – Today, the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), in partnership with Rising Ground and Girls for Gender Equity (GGE), announced the launch of a new diversion program called *JustUs*. The program is New York City's first-ever gender-responsive diversion program for girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual/transgender and gender non-conforming (LGB/TGNCNB) youth, ages 12-18, who are involved or at high risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. While the number of girls entering the NYC juvenile justice system is small, the goal of this program is to provide supportive services to girls so as to avoid justice involvement whenever safely possible, reducing the girls population even further.

The goal of the *JustUs* program, which is embedded within Rising Ground's anti-gender-based violence division, STEPS to End Family Violence and Girls for Gender Equity's Youth Programming Department, is to meet the youths' needs for career exploration and workforce development, and help them build skills that promote self-sufficiency, self-reliance and personal growth in an effort to reduce their involvement in the juvenile justice system. The program is also part of a larger effort at ACS to address racial disproportionality throughout the child welfare and juvenile justice pathways.

"ACS is pleased to announce this groundbreaking gender-responsive diversion demonstration project, specifically for girls and gender non-conforming youth at-risk or involved in the juvenile justice system. After consulting with national experts, the project will help girls and gender-expansive youth develop competencies and skills that promote self-sufficiency, self-reliance and personal growth, and will include civic education, workforce development and economic empowerment. We're confident that the *JustUs* project will complement the important work New York City is already doing to support youth and families, reduce juvenile justice involvement, and help girls to reach their full potential," said **ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell**.

"Girls and LGBTQ youth facing the juvenile justice system, the majority of whom are Black and Brown, experience the world differently than their cisgender, heterosexual, male counterparts; and yet, this is the first program in NYC that centers the healing process on their unique needs

and lived-experiences,” said **Helianis Quijada Salazar, LMSW, *JustUs* director, STEPS to End Family Violence, Rising Ground.**

“We at GGE know that gender-responsive programs offer the best holistic support for cis and trans girls of color, gender-expansive youth, and LGBTQIA youth involved in the juvenile legal system. GGE has developed the group-based components of the *JustUs* program, which is rooted in healing models, social justice education, positive youth development, and advocacy training. We are excited to work in collaboration with STEPS to End Family Violence,” said **Michelle Grier, LMSW, chief program officer, Girls for Gender Equity.**

“In this program, I’m learning mad stuff like how to manage money, how to apply for college, and what to expect from college. I work on my people skills in group and [learn] how to better myself in counseling... it basically prepares you for life,” said **18-year-old *JustUs* youth De’tra.**

New York City’s juvenile justice system has undergone a transformation over the past decade. Fewer young people in New York City are being arrested and fewer young people are entering the juvenile justice system than ever before. In 2012, as part of the city-wide Task Force to End Girls Incarceration, ACS collaborated with the Vera Institute of Justice, national experts in justice reform and programming, including Girls for Gender Equity Tasks Force members, to study the best ways to alleviate the impact of the justice system on girls. Through that work, it was found that girls in the juvenile justice system – who are disproportionately girls of color and/or LGB/TGNCNB – are commonly placed into custody for low-level offenses that pose no risk to public safety. Additionally programs available did not speak to their lived experiences.

The *JustUs* program, which was named by Patricia-Ann, a 16-year-old senior at Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics who participates in STEPS’ Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP), blends highly-skilled coaching and individual trauma-informed clinical interventions with opportunities for youth to engage in group-based activities that build community and relationships among participants and with adult allies. Services are designed to help girls and gender non-conforming youth develop competencies and skills that promote self-sufficiency, self-reliance and personal growth and include political education, workforce development, financial literacy and economic empowerment. The program focuses on healing-centered practices that have been shown to assist young people in taking steps forward to heal from past—and chronic—traumatic experiences. Taken together, all elements of the program aim to support youth in cultivating their own leadership and economic sustainability. The program currently serves youth in Brooklyn with the goal of expanding to other boroughs.

The launch of *JustUs* also builds upon the work happening at ACS to address racial disproportionality across the child welfare and juvenile justice pathways. In 2018, more than 60% of girls admitted to juvenile detention in New York City were Black and nearly 38% were Latina, according to the Vera Institute. Black girls are 2.7 times more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system and 1.2 times more likely to be detained than white girls nationwide, according to a 2017 report from the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality that looked at 2013 Department of Justice data.

ACS is currently implementing its Equity Action Plan, which is designed to address racial disparities across the child welfare system. The plan is being led by the ACS Office of Equity Strategies, a dedicated office that works to develop and advance practices that reduce disparities in outcomes for children and families that are the result of biased based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression and/or sexual orientation. As part of the Equity Action Plan, ACS is working to reduce overall youth involvement in the juvenile justice system by strengthening youth justice prevention programming.

About Girls for Gender Equity

Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is a Brooklyn-based intergenerational organization with national influence, working to combat the widespread gender-based and racialized violence that young people of color experience. Through direct service, advocacy, and culture change, GGE brings young people into the broader intersectional, multiracial movement by ensuring that the most vulnerable voices are heard and their solutions enacted. Since 2001, GGE has worked to create the conditions for cis and trans girls and young women of color, and gender expansive youth of color to lead strategies to solve the injustices they face. For more information, visit ggenyc.org

About Rising Ground

Rising Ground, which changed its name in 2018 from Leake & Watts to more accurately reflect its full scope of services, is a leading nonprofit human services organization, currently operating more than 55 programs at more than 50 different sites across all New York City boroughs and Westchester County, and employing a workforce of more than 1,700 people. Daily, it provides children, adults, and families with the resources and skills needed to rise above adversity and positively direct their lives. It won the prestigious New York Community Trust Nonprofit Excellence Award.

Founded as an orphanage in 1831, Rising Ground has been at the forefront of supporting evolving community needs and has become a leader in utilizing result-driven, evidence-based practices. Today, the organization's work is a positive force in the lives of more than 25,000 children, adults, and family members. In 2019, Rising Ground became the organizational home of STEPS to End Family Violence. Founded in 1986 by Sister Mary Nerney, STEPS provides direct healing supports to survivors of gender-based violence; engages in innovative work to prevent the continuation of gender-based violence; and works deliberately to dismantle the systems of dominance and oppression that sustain gender-based violence. For more information, visit RisingGround.org.

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