



Testimony of Nina Aledort

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Oversight: Core Services for Remanded Youth
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Good afternoon Chair Gonzalez and members of the Juvenile Justice Committee. I am Nina Aledort, Assistant Commissioner for Program Services at the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Joining me today are Sarah Bass, Director of Health and Mental Health Services, and Russell Steinberg, Deputy General Counsel at the Department. Tim Lisante, Deputy Superintendent, Alternative Schools and Programs at the Department of Education (DOE) is also joining us. Thank you for an opportunity to provide you with an update on the City's juvenile detention system.

Today we will discuss the range of services available to youth in detention in New York City. The Department provides all of the services mandated by the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) as well as several beyond these mandates. As you have heard from us in previous hearings, youth entering detention in New York City have serious health, mental health and educational challenges. The Department has spent the past several years building a robust infrastructure that aims to support all these needs. In addition, the Department has launched several successful initiatives to prepare youth for their return home, and to help connect them to the community infrastructure. The Collaborative Family Initiative (CFI) has helped to support youth with mental health issues and their families by providing them with direct services for these needs when they return home. The Learning Independence For Empowerment (LIFE) Transitions Initiative known as LIFE

Transitions, which was funded by the Mayor's Center for Economic Opportunity, addresses youth attachment to school and helps them explore a range of possible career and life trajectories. In addition, the Department has continued to engage community stakeholders and families through several forums and events throughout the year.

The Department is committed to providing services beyond its mandates because the needs of today's court-involved youth are so great. Not only is this the right thing to do, but DJJ firmly believes that helping youth with reentry and reintegration into their communities is a fundamental part of delinquency prevention. This work is done with limited funding, but the results are too great to scale back even in the face of precarious economic times. The Department's ultimate goal is to be a partner with communities and families in preventing juvenile delinquency. By continuing to support the needs of youth, and partnering with families and community stakeholders, DJJ is moving closer to this goal.

Admissions Overview

The Department of Juvenile Justice is mandated to care for youth ordered to secure and non-secure detention by the Family, Criminal and Supreme Courts in New York City. The three secure facilities: Bridges, Crossroads and Horizon Juvenile Facility, are operated directly by the Department. DJJ also operates two non-secure detention group homes directly,

and has contracts with several organizations to operate the other 14 non-secure group homes in the City.

In Fiscal Year 2008, there were 5,490 admissions to detention. Youth admitted to DJJ came from throughout the five boroughs, and a larger number of youth came to detention from Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan. 85 percent of youth that entered detention in 2008 were juvenile delinquents and seven percent were juvenile offenders. 80 percent of residents were boys and 20 percent were girls, with an average age of 15.

OCFS Mandates

The Department's mandates are outlined in The Office of Children and Family Services regulations. These include:

Educational Services

The Department must provide educational programming and instruction in accordance with New York State Education Laws, at a minimum of three hours each weekday. Instructors are required to be teachers qualified by or eligible for certification by the New York State Education Department.

Medical and Mental Health Services

The Department is required to provide adequate and appropriate health services to ensure that both public and individual healthcare needs of children are met. This healthcare is also mandated to be of good quality, efficient and accessible and continuous. Regulations also require that there is a 24 hours a

day, seven day a week medical presence at each of the secure facilities. Mental Health and Psychiatry services are required to be accessible to youth in detention.

Religious Services

Regulations require that the religious faiths of youth are preserved and protected.

Recreation

Regulations require that youth in detention receive indoor or outdoor recreational activity each day.

Case Management

OCFS requires that casework service is made available to all children in detention soon after admission. Case managers must be supervised by a master's level social worker.

Program Services

The Department is in compliance with all the above-mentioned OCFS mandates, but goes beyond these mandates to meet the needs of the youth as they present. For example, each secure facility has a chapel, and the agency employs a chaplain who provides services agency-wide, and will work with individual youth who may be grieving over the loss of a family member or struggling with their detention. The Chaplain also maintains multi-denominational voluntary religious services for all youth that want to attend.

Through allocations from this Committee, the Department has been able to expand programmatic services in detention that are pro-social and have a community presence. In Fiscal Year 2008, the Department partnered with more than a dozen community service providers, including Urban Dove, which brought a Leadership through Sports program to youth in detention. DJJ was also able to strengthen educational and expressive arts programming to include a well-received literacy program, and an arts program based in Court detention rooms—a place of high stress and uncertainty for detained youth.

In 2007, the Department received a grant from the Mayor's Center for Economic Opportunity to launch the LIFE Transitions initiative. This program seeks to decrease the likelihood of negative economic futures by increasing youth attachment to school, and by encouraging them to aspire to a range of career possibilities. The program begins in detention with workshops conducted by one of two contracted community-based organizations—Good Shepherd Services in the Bronx, and The Center for Community Alternatives in Brooklyn. Once youth are released from detention, the CBOs reach out to youth and families, to engage them in ongoing community-based services, assistance with school enrollment and attendance, and to connect them to ongoing positive activities.

DJJ's case management division has also been strengthened. In August 2008, the Department hired a new Director of Case Management to increase the level of oversight and supervision of case managers.

Education

The Department of Education operates Passages Academy, which has multiple sites in secure and non-secure detention. Passages Academy operates on the same schedule as any other New York City Public school, including summers. The school's philosophy is to provide small group learning geared towards literacy and numeracy.

After admission to DJJ, youth are given a comprehensive assessment of their educational skills. Students are assessed using the STAR program, which is a computerized test of each student's reading and math skills. These scores are used to place youth in classes that will best meet their academic needs and learning styles.

The curriculum is tailored to fit the functional level of students. A significant number of youth in detention have learning challenges and read at or below the fourth grade level. Residents who have a reading level lower than the fourth grade are placed in literacy classes, where the focus is on development of basic reading and writing skills.

Health Services

Upon entering the custody of DJJ, the health provider completes a medical history and youth are assessed for any needs that should be addressed. Parents and guardians are encouraged to share relevant medical and mental health information with staff to assist with continuity of care. Staff reach out to parents and guardians for consent for treatment on the first day of a youth's admission.

Within three days of admission, a comprehensive physical examination is completed. Treatment plans are developed as needed. Residents are treated on site by clinical staff, or through local hospitals and clinics. In Fiscal Year 2008, there were 1,262 visits to hospital-based specialty clinics. Health staff are available to educate youth about chronic or acute illnesses, and health promotion.

Overall, like most adolescents, youth in detention are healthy, although we do see youth with serious medical conditions periodically.

In 2008, The Floating Hospital took over the provision of medical services to youth in detention from the Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC). HHC provided these services to DJJ on an interim basis until the Department's RFP process for medical services was completed. The Floating Hospital has a 100 year history of providing quality medical services to New York City's most needy residents. The transition has progressed smoothly.

Mental Health Services

As discussed in previous testimony, youth that enter New York City's juvenile detention system have significant mental health needs. A large number of youth in detention receive mental health services. In Fiscal Year 2008, there were 10,571 individual Mental Health counseling sessions provided to residents.

The Department contracts with two providers to meet the mental health needs of detained youth: Forensic Health Services is the mental health provider and Charles Jin Medical Services provides the psychiatry services. All residents are assessed to determine their mental health needs upon admission using a nationally validated tool called the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument or the MAYSI. Residents can refer themselves for treatment and/or can be referred by DJJ staff. Group and individual mental health services are available, as well as psychiatric evaluations and medication management. The Department operates under the philosophy that there should be no barriers to Mental Health Services.

The Collaborative Family Initiative

Historically, the options for youth with mental health needs transitioning back to the community have been limited. The wait time for an initial appointment for psychiatric services in the community is typically between

three and six months, for any youth. This lag in services brought many of these youth back to detention.

To address these barriers, the Department partnered with John Jay College to form CFI using funds allocated by this Committee. CFI is a discharge planning and reentry initiative that provides immediate mental health treatment, psychiatry, and family-focused supports and resources to youth with mental health needs returning to their communities from secure and non-secure detention.

CFI was created with an understanding that best-practice reentry planning begins while youth are in custody, and that families are the primary support and access point for youth to receive services in their communities. Today, 112 youth have been released to the community with services through CFI.

Conclusion

The Department of Juvenile Justice has worked diligently to ensure that its services and programs meet the many needs of youth admitted to detention. While the OCFS mandates lay out specific criterion for the care of detained youth, these mandates are focused on care for youth inside detention. The Department's current infrastructure is geared toward supporting both inside care and reentry because supports and connections in the community can ultimately affect whether youth return to detention, or remain home. Our

partners in this work include this Committee, our sister agencies, community-based organizations and parents. In the next Fiscal Year, DJJ will continue to strengthen its collaborations with our partners. We thank the Juvenile Justice Committee for its continued support.