



Youth Ombudsman Overview and Analysis of Complaints: February-December 2013

January 31, 2014

Executive Summary

This is the first report from the CFSA Youth Ombudsman covering 55 complaints from February through December 2013. Here is what we learned:

- The Youth Ombudsman (YO) received the highest monthly call volume in February 2013, right after initial announcement of this new position at CFSA. More than half the youth who contacted the YO did so by telephone (58%). The YO made 13 site visits to congregate care facilities and received 15 youth concerns directly from this activity.
- Older youth between the ages of 18-20 are primarily voicing their concerns to the YO.
- Of the 55 complaints, Private Foster Care Agencies and Congregate Care Providers comprised 72% of the complaints.
- The majority of complaints fell into one of two categories: (1) “agency delay in providing services” (56%) or (2) “agency not taking appropriate action” (34%). In both of these broad categories, the top issue was placement, with many youth seeking to enter an Independent Living Program (ILP).
- Youth are interested in receiving support from foster parents and other adults to achieve independent living skills and further their educational endeavors.

- Youth should be provided greater clarity and communication to youth about obtaining an ILP, clothing vouchers and drivers licenses.
- Frequent checks when visiting congregate facilities should be completed to ensure the shelf date of all frozen and canned goods has not expired.



A. Mission

CFSA recognizes that youth may not always feel comfortable bringing concerns directly to their social worker. To give youth a direct line to impartial support and resolution of issues regarding their foster care experiences, CFSA established the position of the Youth Ombudsman in January of 2013. Under the Office of the Chief of Staff, the Youth Ombudsman addresses individual concerns for youth ages 15 to 21 in care. The goals are to mediate equitable solutions on a case-by-case basis and to identify systemic issues that arise.

This is the first report of aggregated findings covering 55 individual complaints the Youth Ombudsman received from February through December 2013. The report analyzes concerns by volume per month, source, and provider. It also highlights themes and recommends some systemic improvements.

B. Complaint Process and Mechanisms for Resolving Issues

Before contacting the Youth Ombudsman, youth should communicate their concerns to their social worker and/or guardian *ad litem* (GAL) and then, if necessary, up through the supervisory chain of command. After using these avenues or if a youth is not comfortable addressing their concerns with the social worker or GAL, they may seek help from the Youth Ombudsman.

The Youth Ombudsman receives complaints and concerns in several ways:

- Email: yo.bud@cfsa.dc.gov
- Telephone: Direct line at (855) 874-3273
- Website: cfsa.dc.gov, “For Youth” tab
- During site visits to congregate facilities
- Follow-up to concerns raised at CFSA’s City Council Performance Oversight Hearing

The Youth Ombudsman typically takes the following steps to resolve issues or concerns:

- Upon receiving a concern, the Youth Ombudsman contacts the youth to obtain additional information within 24 hours or the next business day.
- The Youth Ombudsman simultaneously contacts the assigned social worker and supervisory/management chain to alert them to the youth’s concerns. The Youth

Ombudsman finds out whether the social worker and/or chain of command have prior knowledge of the concern and if so, actions they have taken to address it.

- As part of the inquiry, the Youth Ombudsman researches information from FACES.NET¹ contacts, court reports, hard-copy records, placement providers, and additional sources as necessary.
- Depending on what this research reveals, the Youth Ombudsman works with the team of people involved to resolve the concern. The Youth Ombudsman may coordinate and/or participate in team meetings and other activities to bring about resolution.

C. Complaint Volume

The Youth Ombudsman began receiving youth concerns in February 2013 and received 55 complaints and eight general inquiries by the end of CY2013. Monthly average was five complaints, with peak volume of 10 in February and lowest volume of 0 in July (Table A).

<i>Month</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>	<i># of General Inquiries</i>
February	10	4
March	2	2
April	4	1
May	7	0
June	9	1
July	0	0
August	7	0
September	6	0
October	7	0
November	1	0
December	2	0
Total	55	8

D. Source of Concerns

The Youth Ombudsman collaborated with the CFSA Office of Public Information to develop a strategic communication plan to announce and promote this new form of support and advocacy for DC youth in care. In 2013, the Youth Ombudsman received concerns through different channels (Table B).

To announce, introduce, and promote this new function, the Youth Ombudsman disseminated flyers and visited all 13 congregate facilities. The YO participated in several forums with private provider managers, which encouraged them to share information with their staff. At the beginning of each complaint investigation, the Youth Ombudsman sent a “letter of introduction” to inform social workers about the Youth Ombudsman process and how the permanency team and YO could work together to address the youth’s concerns.

<i>Source</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
BUD line	32
Site Visit	15
Council Oversight Hearing, Feb. 2013	4
Email	4
Website	0
Total	55

The Youth Ombudsman also partnered with the CFSA Office of Planning, Policy & Program Support to develop a 15 question youth survey. The survey is another important tool to hear from

¹ FACES.NET is the District of Columbia’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

the youth about their placement, the services they are receiving and their overall experience with the agency. The intended purpose of the survey is to help inform recommendations for system improvement. The Youth Ombudsman administers the surveys through several channels in an attempt to receive a higher response rate. This includes sending the survey through email to foster youth, during site visits to congregate facilities, and other venues. The Youth Ombudsman completed 40 surveys. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondents resided in congregate care facilities and 21% resided in foster homes.

The survey targets youth opinions about aspects of safety, well-being, and permanency and life skills.

Highlights of the survey included:

- 60% felt somewhat or very positive about their current placement
- 90% felt safe in their current placement
- 70% felt their caregiver respects their privacy
- 82% felt their caregiver encouraged their success in school
- 74% felt their caregiver provided recreational activities according to their areas of interest
- 90% felt they have at least one positive caring adult in their life

Table C shows the ages of youth who raised concerns to the Youth Ombudsman in 2013. The most prominent concerns for each age group reveal some common themes.

- Age 16—seasonal clothing needs.
- Age 17—theft of personal belongings, seasonal clothing needs, and desired to be placed in an Independent Living Program (ILP).
- Age 18—desire to be placed in an ILP or to move to another ILP.
- Age 19—excessive deductions from personal allowance and desire to be placed in an ILP.
- Age 20—desire to be placed in an ILP, seasonal clothing needs, need for employment, and need for more effective transition planning.
- Youth who are 21 were youth who had emancipated from the system within the last 60 days and were requesting assistance to either identify more affordable housing, sustainable employment, and human services benefits.

<i>Age</i>	<i># of Concerns Raised</i>
15	0
16	3
17	5
18	12
19	17
20	15
21	3
Total	55

E. Complaints by Program

<i>Provider</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Congregate Care (Group Home/Independent Living) Providers	20
Private Foster Care Agencies	20
Office of Youth Empowerment	15
Total	55

Table D shows how many times youth expressed concerns regarding a specific type of program.

Concerns involving congregate care providers were focused on communication and in receiving timely responses from provider

staff. Youth were, however, able to elevate their concerns and did develop a good relationship with several of the provider senior managers.

Concerns involving private foster care agencies focused on the level of engagement the youth had with their social workers and their social workers’ knowledge of community resources and how to access resources to assist them. They also raised concerns about financing post-secondary education.

The most prominent complaints involving OYE echoed the issues youth raised about private foster care agencies and also centered on the college application and matriculation processes. Some youth reported not receiving timely assistance with Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) funding or assistance with tuition, room, and board. Other youth raised concerns about their placement and wanted to move to Independent Living. Other youth raised concerns about needing to identify employment opportunities and to get more substantive transition planning.

All concerns for congregate care facilities, private foster care agencies and the Office of Youth Empowerment were resolved through individual teaming processes.

F. Complaint Themes and General Inquiries

**Table E:
Prominent Themes of Concerns Youth Ombudsman Received**

<i>Theme</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>
Agency delay in providing appropriate services	31
Agency not taking appropriate action	19
General Inquiries	8
Agency failure to provide appropriate services	4
Difficult Interaction with Permanency Team Members	1

In the first year of operation for CFSA’s Youth Ombudsman, five themes emerged from the 55 concerns. (Table E). Table F breaks down the 31 concerns that CFSA or a provider delayed provision of services.

**Table F:
Detail Regarding 31 Concerns of
“Agency Delay in Providing Appropriate Services”**

<i>Concern Type</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Placement	9
Clothing Voucher	7
Delay in Receipt of Stipend or Pay Check	2
Assistance with College Application/Matriculation	2
Transportation and Funds for Personal Hygiene Products	2
Theft of Personal Items/Reimbursement	2
Teen parent in need of child care funding	1
Vocational Support	1
Summer Employment instead of Summer School	1
Ward Letter	1
Medicaid Card	1
Fine Reimbursement	1
Human Service Supports (TANF)	1

The theme “Agency Delay in Providing Appropriate Services” means CFSA or a private provider either made an attempt to address the youth’s concerns or is acting now to address the concern, but barriers are impeding final resolution. Of 31 complaints with this theme, about half (16) centered on issues regarding placement or clothing vouchers.

Nine youth alleged a delay in their request to transition to an ILP. Some youth felt they were ready for

independence and reported they would feel more comfortable in their own environment. Several

youth felt that due to their age, they would be better prepared for the transition from foster care if they learned how to maintain an independent environment while they still had the support of their clinical team.

Many youth reported feeling that their social worker and other team members did not support their desire for an ILP. They expressed frustration when they were informed that they could not transition to an ILP because they did not meet the eligibility requirements. Many social workers reported that several of the youth were not ready for an ILP due to either being unemployed, not having completed high school or received a GED, continuous curfew violations, frequent abscondences, unaddressed behavioral and psychological issues, or lack of personal responsibility.

Several youth reported not feeling safe in their group home or independent living placements. Some concerns were based on the physical location of the facility in what the youth described as “not a good neighborhood.” Other youth reported not feeling safe in their placement due to the condition of the residence—for example, worn or torn bedding, bugs or other insects on the couches or carpets, broken windows or appliances. Although not specific safety concerns, some youth reported a lack of access to cable television and the internet. When these concerns came to the Youth Ombudsman’s attention, he shared them with the private provider CEO and Program Director. Once senior managers knew about the issues, they provided prompt attention and resolution.

Seven youth reported that they did not receive their clothing vouchers timely or at all. In all these instances, the Youth Ombudsman found the complaints were valid. Several delays occurred in processing the vouchers. Between the congregate care providers and CFSA; each entity thought the other was responsible for processing the voucher. Some social workers reported delays receiving the vouchers because the distribution was dependent on a new allotment of available vouchers. In each instance, clothing vouchers were provided to the youth.

The Youth Ombudsman received 19 concerns relating to CFSA or a private provider “not taking appropriate action.” This means not providing support or making the right decision to address a need for the youth.

Once again, placement was the most prominent topic (Table G). Several youth reported that their permanency teams informed them of final decisions not to place them in an independent living placement; despite the youth’s belief that they were ready for this type of placement. They indicated that they were told “no” without further justification.

The Youth Ombudsman worked with the youth and the permanency teams in communicating the requirements for these types of placements and assisting the teams in

**Table G:
Detail Regarding 19 Most Prominent Concerns of
“Agency Not Taking Appropriate Action”**

<i>Concern Type</i>	<i># Concerns Received</i>
Placement	9
Youth Transition Planning	2
Driver’s License	1
Theft of Personal Items	1
Funding for Program	1
Fines	1
Employment Assistance	1
Unpaid Hospital Bill	1
Incomplete Complaint	1
Request for laptop computer	1

working with the youth to develop plans with short- and long-term goals for achieving independent living.

Two youth shared concerns about the quality of the transition planning provided to them. However, in the course of other issues, many reported they are not included in the process of planning for their transition from care or that adults working with them are not hearing their voices at critical points in the decision-making process. The youth reported that when they are included in the conversations, they often feel that the team working with them does not acknowledge and give full consideration to their requests or decisions. Some youth also shared that they did not think the plan sufficiently addressed their need for sustainable housing and employment, and upon emancipation, the plan quickly deteriorated leaving them without housing and with only limited finances. Specific individualized meetings were held with the youth and their permanency team to address these needs.

Several youth reported that it was difficult to get in contact with their social worker and at times felt that their social worker did not return phone calls and emails timely, thus creating a communication barrier between them. In these instances, the Youth Ombudsman alerted the social worker of the concerns and assisted the youth and social worker in building additional rapport and enhanced communication.

One youth reported concerns about completing the behind-the-wheel training requirement to obtain a driver's license. He was particularly concerned about being able to complete this task given his foster placement was in Baltimore, Maryland and it was his belief that the agency did not contract with driving schools in his area. The youth was also concerned his foster parent would not allow him to use the family vehicle to complete his behind the wheel training hours. This youth was proactive and came up with several creative solutions; however, liability continued to be an obstacle. At the same time, he needed financial assistance to compete a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program. He also needed help to organize and balance his schedule to complete both programs simultaneously.

CFSA does have a process in place to assist youth in completing the behind-the-wheel training portion of driver's education and has contracts with several providers; to include those located outside of the District of Columbia. The entire team strengthened their efforts to provide the youth with funding for his CNA classes and driver's education training. They were innovative in developing a strategy to support the youth's endeavors and provided funding for transportation, lunch, and identified a stand-by respite placement in the District of Columbia (due to the youth's placement in Maryland), if the driver's education process occurred in the District of Columbia.

Similar to prior report sections, one youth alleged theft of their belongings and in this category, the agency's refusal to reimburse them for the items. Once the team members were made aware of the youth's concern, they were generally quick to support the youth in moving through the reimbursement process. The belongings to be reimbursed also were dependent on the manner in which the items "went missing". Other youth who reported missing items were able to file police reports and follow a general reimbursement process for the items. Some items went missing as the result of roommate squabbles.

One youth reported being fined or having their allowance deducted. One pregnant youth reported that she was fined \$75.00 dollars by a provider agency for not attending a life skills training workshop. The youth reported to program staff that she would not be able to attend certain life skills trainings as her physician excused her from the sessions due to her pregnancy. There was a different understanding about the information needed in the doctor’s note than was provided but was resolved once clarified.

One concern alleged a difficult interaction with permanency team members. The youth reported difficulties in establishing and maintaining a relationship with a permanency team member in a group home. She alleged that the group home program manager was discourteous, speaks to youth in a disrespectful tone, and makes demoralizing comments toward residents of the home. The outcome of this concern is pending.

Four concerns alleged CFSA or a private provider failed to provide appropriate services (Table H). This is defined as the agency failing to take action in addressing a need or service requested by a youth.

Table H: Detail Regarding Concerns of “Failure to Provide Appropriate Services”	
<i>Type of Service</i>	<i>Frequency of Complaints</i>
Financial Aid (ETV Funds)	2
Culturally Competent Staff and Diverse Activities at Group Home	1
Incomplete Complaint	1

Two of the concerns from youth in this area alleged that the agency was not providing support in the college application process, specifically with obtaining financial assistance. One youth alleged the agency was not supportive in assisting her with waiving college application fees and in completing her college applications. Another youth reported difficulty in obtaining Education and Training Voucher (ETV)² funding. Both youth were connected to specialists with OYE, and their concerns were resolved promptly.

One youth reported concerns that the congregate placement she resided in lacked culturally competent staff and did not provide diverse activities for the residents. The youth reported that the staff were not sensitive to LGBTQ youth needs or aware of African American culture and values. She alleged that this was compounding communication barriers that were already existent within the program. This matter was brought to the attention of the congregate placement Program Director who met with the youth and program staff to resolve the concern.

Table I provides a breakdown of the eight general inquiries the Youth Ombudsman received.

Table I: Detail Regarding “General Inquiries”	
<i>Inquiry Type</i>	<i>Frequency of Inquiry</i>
Information about the Role of the Youth Ombudsman	4
Educational Assistance	1
Balance Remaining on Clothing Voucher	1
Information on “Bank on D.C.” Program	1
How to Report Alleged Abuse and Neglect Occurring in Foster Home	1

² The Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) makes awards of up to \$5,000 annually for youth to attend an accredited college, university, or vocational or technical college. ETV is a federally funded, needs-based program that can assist qualified youth for four years with education and training expenses such as tuition, books or housing.

G. Pending Concerns

The Youth Ombudsman resolved and closed 52 cases during CY2013. As of December 31, 2013, three cases were pending closure. The complaints focused on clothing vouchers, outstanding payment of medical bills and difficult interactions with group home staff.

H. Systemic Findings and Recommendations

From the 55 concerns in CY2013, the Youth Ombudsman has identified eight systemic findings or recommendations.

- **Clarify and communicate qualifications for obtaining an independent living placement.** Many CFSA staff, providers, and youth are uncertain and unclear about the process for requesting and obtaining an independent living placement. To make the process transparent, CFSA should develop a detailed eligibility checklist. If a youth is denied an independent living placement, CFSA should develop a process for the youth to appeal the decision. In working with youth, permanency teams should always share and clarify the placement options and give youth a voice when appropriate
- **Update youth about the new clothing voucher distribution process.** Effective November 1, 2013, CFSA issued a new, standardized process for youth clothing allowance and an annual back-to-school voucher. Enforcing these procedures should alleviate many of the clothing issues that youth raised in 2013.
- **Increase youth involvement in Youth Transition Meetings.** Social workers should work with youth to set the agenda before the meeting and then assist the youth in chairing the meeting. The agenda should follow CFSA policy on youth transition planning. A facilitator should conduct the meeting with supervisors observing so they can provide feedback to social workers about creative ways to support the youth toward independence.
- **Update CFSA Visitation Policy to increase communication with youth placed over 100 miles from the District.** One case in particular highlighted opportunities for the system to strengthen best practices and communication among private providers and youth in placements over 100 miles from the District. The CFSA Visitation Policy (revised June 12, 2012), Procedure C, Section 3 states “If the child is placed more than 100 miles outside of the District of Columbia, a social worker from the receiving state shall supervise the placement through the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). The child’s social worker (either CFSA or contracted placement agency) shall monitor the placement with monthly telephone calls to the social worker from the receiving state, monthly telephone calls to the child, and visits from the child face-to-face at least twice per year.” A better practice would be for social workers to

check in with youth in distant placements at least twice a month. This can be by phone or email, but direct contact with the youth in this manner will not only enhance communication but will also help the youth feel connected to the permanency team members and aware of all case planning activities and decisions.

- **Develop additional driving readiness training to supplement driver's education.** OYE is in the process of updating and finalizing an Administrative Issuance in this area. In addition, develop a life skills session for youth enrolled in driver's education to advise them of the additional responsibilities that come with driving a car such as basic car-buying tips (including typical financing options), insurance requirements, and car maintenance.
- **Support youth in obtaining important personal information.** The agency has internal staff who liaison with other agencies through a referral process to obtain social security cards, birth certificates, credit reports and other important documentation. As a means of preparing youth for independence, social workers should involve the youth in the process of obtaining personal documentation. This will provide the youth experience with how to navigate systems to obtain important documents.
- **Increase opportunities for youth and resource parents to learn together.** Design information sessions and trainings about college preparation, independent living skills, and budgeting so that both youth and their caregivers can attend together. This could serve to increase support for youth.
- **Hold congregate care facilities accountable for providing safe, nutritious meals.** Program Monitors should routinely check the shelf date of all frozen and canned foods in group homes. Due to school activities and jobs, some youth end up eating outside of the group home's regular mealtimes. In these instances, the group home should have convenient, nutritious items for the youth to prepare or leftovers to heat up.