



## Youth Ombudsman **Overview and Analysis of Complaints: January-December 2014** January 30, 2015

### **Executive Summary**

This is the second annual report from the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) Youth Ombudsman covering 31 complaints from January through December, 2014. Here are the highlights:

- Of the 31 complaints, 81% came from youth ages 18, 19, or 20.
- In broad terms, the majority of complaints fell into two categories: “agency delay in providing services” (48%) or “agency not taking appropriate action” (39%). In both categories, the top issues were food, transportation funding, and clothing vouchers.
- The Youth Ombudsman received the highest monthly call volume in April, 2014. More than half of the youth (61%) contacted the Youth Ombudsman by telephone.
- The Youth Ombudsman made 15 site visits to congregate care facilities and received two complaints directly from this activity.



### **A. Mission**

CFSA recognizes that youth ages 15 to 21 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 Youth Ombudsman in January, 2013. This position began under the Office of the Chief of Staff but later transitioned to the Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) as most of the complaints

received are from older youth. In this function, 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 repeatedly.

This is the second annual report of aggregated findings covering 31 concerns that the Youth Ombudsman received from January through December, 2014. It analyzes concerns by volume per month, source, and provider. It also highlights themes and recommends systemic improvements.

## **B. Complaint Process and Mechanisms for Resolving Issues**

Before contacting the Youth Ombudsman, we encourage youth to communicate their concerns to their social worker, guardian *ad litem* (GAL), or both, and then, if necessary, up through the supervisory chain of command. After using these avenues or when youth are 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 five different ways:

- Email: Yo.Bud@dc.gov
- Telephone: Direct hotline at (855) 874-3273
- Website: cfsa.dc.gov, For Youth tab
- Direct contact: Site visit or youth visits the Youth Ombudsman at the Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE)
- Other: Agency cell phone, desk phone, or email

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 or their chain of command has 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.NET<sup>1</sup> contacts, court reports, hard-copy records, placement providers, and additional sources as necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> FACES.NET is the District of Columbia's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

- 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 participate in team meetings and other activities to bring about resolution.

### C. Complaint Volume

The Youth Ombudsman received 31 complaints and two general inquiries by the end of CY2014. The monthly average was three complaints, with peak volume of 7 in April and lowest volume of 0 in November and December (Table A).

<i>Month</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>	<i># of General Inquiries</i>
January	3	0
February	4	0
March	3	0
April	7	0
May	2	1
June	3	0
July	6	0
August	1	0
September	1	0
October	1	1
November	0	0
December	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>2</b>

### D. Source of Concerns

In 2014, the Youth Ombudsman received concerns through five different channels (Table B).

Last year, the agency invested significant effort in executing communication strategies in order to inform youth of the Youth Ombudsman’s support and services. The Youth Ombudsman conducted multiple site visits to group homes in order to meet youth, share information about the Youth Ombudsman’s role, and hear concerns firsthand. It is not surprising that the majority of youth who reported a complaint (61%) utilized the YO BUD hotline. The agency and the Youth Ombudsman are currently making communication efforts to ensure that youth and the community are aware that this function is now housed at OYE.

<i>Source</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
YO BUD Email	8
YO BUD Hotline	19
Council Oversight Hearing, April, 2014	1
Site Visit	2
Other (Agency Cell, Desk, Email)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

Table C shows the ages of youth who raised concerns to the Youth Ombudsman in 2014. The most prominent concerns for each age group reveal some common themes.

- Age 16—school placement and seasonal clothing needs.
- Age 17—request to be placed with relatives, strained relationship with social worker, request to transfer to a new job via the District’s Summer Youth Employment Program.
- Age 18—request to change placement, request for increased financial support.
- Age 19—excessive deductions from personal allowance.
- Age 20—excessive deductions from personal allowance, inadequate food and transportation resources, clothing needs, insufficient resources being provided to residents of a group home, and need for more effective transition planning.

<i>Age</i>	<i># of Concerns Raised</i>
15	0
16	2
17	4
18	4
19	4
20	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

## E. Complaints by Program

Table D shows how many times youth expressed concerns regarding specific providers.

Although youth with cases managed by OYE and placed in group care placements received the highest number of concerns, the topics varied widely. The most prominent centered on the college application and matriculation processes. Some youth reported not receiving timely assistance with the 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 or about needing to identify employment opportunities and to get more substantive transition planning.

<i>Provider</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Elizabeth Ministries	4
Echelon Community Services	4
Caitlin's Place	4
Lutheran Social Services	3
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington DC, Inc.	3
PSI Family Services	2
Ionia Whipper	2
God's Anointed New Generation (G.A.N.G.)	2
Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)	2
KidsPeace	3
Foundations For Home And Community	1
CFSA Star Home	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

Concerns involving foster home providers echo the issues youth raised about OYE. In addition, several youth raised concerns about the level of engagement they had with their social workers and their social workers' knowledge of community resources and how to access resources to assist them.

Several youth also noted concerns with congregate care providers which 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. Once they raised concerns to the private provider management teams, they received immediate action to address and resolve the concerns.

## F. Complaint Themes and General Inquiries

<i>Theme</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>
Agency delay in providing appropriate services	15
Agency not taking appropriate action	12
General Inquiries	2
Agency failure to provide appropriate services	0
Difficult Interaction with Permanency Team Members	4

In the second year of operation of the Youth Ombudsman Office, the five themes that emerged (Table E) echoed those of 2013. Table F breaks down the 15 concerns regarding CFSA or a provider delay in providing services.

**Table F:  
Detail Regarding 15 Concerns of  
“Agency Delay in Providing Appropriate Services”**

<i>Concern Type</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Delay in Receipt of Food/Transportation Stipend	5
Clothing Voucher	4
Placement	2
Theft of Personal Items/Reimbursement	1
Teen parent in need of child care	1
Summer Employment	1
High school graduation/prom expenses	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 the 15 complaints with this theme, over half (11) centered on issues of placement, clothing vouchers, or personal stipends for food and transportation.

Five youth alleged a delay in receipt of their food, transportation stipend, or both. In addition, they alleged the stipend amount they received, or were to receive, was a reduced amount. Through investigation, the Youth Ombudsman identified that many youth were not aware of the time frames associated with disbursement. He also identified that many programs tied the stipend to youth behaviors and incrementally reduced stipend amounts for infractions. Such infractions included abscondences, not returning within the time frames from weekend or evening passes, not completing chores, and not participating in life skills sessions. All programs reported offering the youth opportunities to earn the fines back, and if they were not successful in doing so, the program held the money in an account to be paid to them at the time they either successfully completed the program or left care.

Each congregate program had clear rules and program policies. However, when interviewed, several youth acknowledged having knowledge of possible fine consequences for infractions but no clear understanding of the exact amounts. Through the Youth Ombudsman’s interventions, three youth were successful in developing a better relationship with the staff of the congregate program where they resided and were able to have input into the process of amending some of the program rules and policies. For example, several youth were consistently violating the weekend pass policy as they were not obtaining passes within the required time frame. They acknowledged that they understood the purpose of obtaining weekend passes, but shared that the day of the week to request (by Wednesday of the week being requested) was too far in advance and the youth generally did not solidify their plans for the weekend until Thursday or Friday. The managers of the program were initially unaware of this and were able to change the time frame for when passes were to be requested to Thursday evening. In some instances, they were willing to work to change the procedures and give youth until noon on a Friday to obtain pass approval. It was also noted that the programs were responsible for verifying the itinerary and adult supervision associated with a weekend stay, and it was reasonable for the program to require knowing the youths’ plans in time to make the necessary verifications.

As a result of feeling their voice was heard, and the modeling behavior the Youth Ombudsman provided with regard to positive advocacy, the youth and program decided they would be able to address their concerns without further Youth Ombudsman intervention. It is also positive to note that the Youth Ombudsman did not receive further concerns from these same youth throughout the remainder of this reporting period.

The second most important issue raised by youth in this category was with regard to the clothing voucher. The Youth Ombudsman was able to identify that despite the release of a new policy, several youth and providers were not aware of the time frames for which the voucher was to be allocated. In addition, social workers were not completing frequent clothing inventories to have a record of seasonal clothing items in the youths' possession. Therefore, youth did not have documentation in cases where items were lost, stolen, or lacking. It was also found to be an important opportunity to increase communication between the youth and their social workers to discuss purchasing seasonal and appropriate clothing for work or school.

There were two concerns about placement. One youth reported she would be transitioning to college in three months and desired to be placed in an independent living program (ILP) instead of remaining in the foster home. Although she wanted to experience independent living in preparation for college, the team believed that it was clinically better to remain in the foster home to receive transition support into college.

As a compromise, it was suggested that the permanency team reach out to the school and inquire as to whether the school had opportunities for incoming freshman to spend a weekend on campus with a current student via a mentoring program. The school offered a structured program for incoming students before the official start of the school year, and the youth's team made arrangements for her participation in the program.

Four individual concerns included graduation and prom expenses, securing day care for a teen mother, reimbursement for theft of belongings, and selection of a specific employer as part of the District's Summer Youth Employment Program. In each instance, the Youth Ombudsman did not identify a significant delay on behalf of the agency or a provider but did note that not all front-line staff was aware of the resources available or existing processes in the early identification of resources to resolve the concern. For example, the agency allots a generous financial package to youth graduating from high school and also has the "Project Prom Boutique" through the agency volunteer services, Partners for Kids in Care.

The Youth Ombudsman received 12 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.

Strained relationships between youth and their permanency team members was the most prominent concern in this category (Table G). Several youth reported instances where they felt either their social worker was not listening to them, did not respond to calls timely, or the youth disagreed with the identified resources in after-care plans.

Another youth reported not feeling that her concerns were heard and that the group home

<b>Table G: Detail Regarding 12 Most Prominent Concerns of "Agency Not Taking Appropriate Action"</b>	
<b>Concern Type</b>	<b># Concerns Received</b>
Strained relationship of youth and team	3
Food/Transportation Stipend	2
Placement	1
Identification of mental health provider	1
Desired full room and board check	1
Support for vocational interest	1
Luggage fee reimbursement	1
Unsanitary conditions of apartment	1
Clothing voucher	1

program manager said disrespectful remarks to provoke the youth into threatening a staff member. The Youth Ombudsman investigated this complaint and found that the youth desired to move to an independent living placement. The program manager discussed the youth's behaviors and employment status as being prerequisites for such a placement, and the youth became upset and threatened to slash the employees' car tires and break the windows, causing the group home to call the police. The youth indicated that the staff member provoked her into making such threats.

Although the youth's reaction to the manager's decision was not appropriate, the Youth Ombudsman spoke with other youth at the program who reported having similar disputes with the manager and feeling disrespected. The Youth Ombudsman raised the concern to the group home executives and the program monitors who reported they would address the concerns of the manager's professionalism and provide additional training if necessary. The CFSA Contract Monitoring Unit provided additional follow-up with the executive staff and confirmed appropriate personnel action was taken.

Two youth reported not receiving their food and transportation stipend. The Youth Ombudsman confirmed this report but also found that when the group home program disbursed the stipend to residents, these two youth were in abscondence. As soon as the youth returned to the placement, provisions were made to provide the stipend to them.

Other concerns received in this category varied. In all instances, efforts were already being made to address the youths' concern but were taking time. One issue in particular was from a teen mother who traveled to visit a relative out of state. The agency provided appropriate luggage for the mom and infant to ensure they stayed within the airline requirements. However, the youth incurred a baggage fee due to using a different type of luggage.

She presented her receipts to the agency for reimbursement and was initially met with resistance from her team members as they had spent a lot of time carefully planning her luggage in order to avoid this situation. The Youth Ombudsman worked with the team to assist them in understanding the circumstances the youth presented as the reason for deviating from the plan, and the team and youth came to an agreement to reimburse the youth for half of the luggage fees. The youth also had a clear understanding moving forward that the team made plans for her luggage as a means of teaching her about effective decision making.

Table H provides a breakdown of the two general inquiries the Youth Ombudsman received. The first

<b>Table H: Detail Regarding "General Inquiries"</b>	
<i>Inquiry Type</i>	<i>Frequency of Inquiry</i>
Information about services available to youth emancipating from care	1
Clarification on amounts of personal allowance and clothing allowance	1

inquiry was from a younger sibling of a youth emancipating from care. The youth contacted the Youth Ombudsman to obtain information about available services to her brother who she reported would be aging out of care within two weeks. The youth also said she was advocating on behalf of her brother as he did not have a strong relationship with his social worker. The Youth Ombudsman was able to connect the youth's brother to OYE for transition support and address his questions. The second inquiry was from a youth who wanted clarification on the

amounts he should receive for personal and clothing allowance. The Youth Ombudsman reviewed the related CFSA policies (Youth Clothing Allowance and Youth Personal Allowance) and was able to ensure the youth had a clear understanding. The Youth Ombudsman also ensured that the youth was aware of the difference between the clothing allowance and the personal allowance and the purposes of both.

## G. Pending Concerns

The Youth Ombudsman resolved and closed 31 cases during CY2014. As of December 31, 2014, there were no cases pending.

## H. Systemic Findings and Recommendations

From the 31 concerns in CY2014, the Youth Ombudsman identified four systemic findings or recommendations.

- **Develop fine structure to be more in alignment with infractions.** Many youth reported being unnecessarily fined (allowance reduced). CFSA and providers should hold a forum with youth and solicit their input regarding aligning the fine structure with infractions. Therefore, youth will have an idea in advance of the behaviors that will result in fine consequences, and there will be consistency amongst all congregate programs as to fine allocation.
- **House rules in congregate facilities (group homes, teen parent and independent living programs) should be reviewed with youth on a consistent basis.** Group homes and ILPs should continue to provide written house rules to youth and their GALs upon initial placement—but should also review the rules with youth regularly. These reminders should ensure that youth remain abreast of what is expected of them. In addition, these discussions should include information about how to elevate complaints and concerns to managers within the residence. Contact information to include that of the Youth Ombudsman needs to be visible.
- **Increase youth awareness of the clothing voucher and personal allowance processes.** Increase opportunities for youth to be made more aware of the clothing voucher and personal allowance processes to include the financial amounts of the voucher and allowance, disbursement periods, and budgeting. For example, in regard to the clothing voucher specifically, youth should be made familiar with the types of clothing to consider purchasing. Social workers also should be actively conducting periodic clothing inventories to ensure clothing vouchers are providing the most benefit to the youth. Furthermore, youth should be made aware of the distinction between the clothing voucher and personal allowance and the purposes for both.

- **Youth traveling outside of the District should be in possession of detailed travel arrangements with all appropriate financial supports and needs having been addressed and approved prior to travel.** When a youth travels outside of the District, a plan for travel support should be employed to include detailed travel arrangements with all financial needs identified prior to the youth's travel. Youth also need to be cognizant that they hold the responsibility if they make decisions contrary to the plan. ■