



Child and Family Services Agency Youth Ombudsman Annual Status Report 2015



Overview and Analysis of Referrals: January-December 2015

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Introduction

This is the second annual report prepared by the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) reflecting the status of referrals from youth in foster care received by CFSA's Youth Ombudsman. This report fulfills an annual reporting requirement under the District's *Foster Youth Statement of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2012*. The law requires the submission of this annual report, which must include concerns reported by youth and outcomes of the investigations.

Report highlights:

- In 2015, a total of 42 complaints and 32 general inquiries were received.
- In 2014, the Youth Ombudsman (YO) received 31 complaints, which reflected a 36% increase from the previous year.
- In 2015, the office received 42 complaints, which reflected a 36% increase from 2014.
- In 2015 the office received 32 general inquiries, which reflected a significant increase from 2014 when only two inquiries were received.
- The highest monthly call volume occurred in April and May 2015 when a total of 17 calls (41%) were received.
- Of the 42 complaints received, 20 (76%) were from youth aged 18-20.
- The YO made direct contact with several youth at CFSA's Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE)¹, during site visits, and through Peer Plug². The YO received the highest number of complaints at 20 complaints (49%) directly from these interactions.

The majority of complaints fell into one of two categories: "Engagement Concerns with the Permanency Team/Resource Provider" (67%); and "Agency Delay in Providing Services" (23%).

A total of 1% of the complaints fell into the category "Agency not Taking Appropriate Action" while all others fell into "Other." In all categories, the predominant issues were more effective transition planning, discontent with placement, and inconsistencies with receipt of personal allowance.



1 CFSA's Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE), located at 3700 10th Street NW, Washington, DC 20010, offers a host of services and growth experiences for District teens and young adults in foster care.

2 Peer Plug is a youth network initiative that began in August of 2015. It is overseen by OYE staff and serves as a vehicle for peer-to-peer mentorship as well as a platform for youths' voices to be heard throughout the Agency and in the greater community.

A. Mission

Recognizing that youth might not feel comfortable addressing concerns directly to social workers, or that they did not know where to go if they had questions or encountered bigger problems about their foster caregiver, and in compliance with the District of Columbia's *Foster Youth Statement of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2012*, CFSA established the Office of the Youth Ombudsman in January 2013. The Youth Ombudsman addresses individual concerns and also brings systemic issues to the attention to the larger system for resolution.

In 2015, CFSA continued to invest significant effort in communication strategies regarding the existence and purpose of the Office of the Youth Ombudsman. These strategies included outreach to group homes to meet youth, and share information about the Youth Ombudsman's role and upcoming activities and events. For example, we recruited youth to attend Councilmember David Grosso's public oversight roundtable of the Committee on Education on Youth Issues encouraging youth to participate. We were also able to recruit youth to participate in "Peer Plug", the Agency's newly formed youth network that serves as a vehicle for peer-to-peer mentorship as well as a platform for youths' voices to be heard throughout the Agency and in the larger community. The Youth Ombudsman also participated in training for newly hired social worker staff to share information on this role within the agency.

These outreach efforts are, we believe, in large part responsible for the significant increase in contact with the office from 2014 to 2015.

B. Referral Process and Process for Resolution

Youth are encouraged to communicate their concerns to their social worker or guardian *ad litem* (GAL), or through the social worker supervisory chain of command to resolve issues. If this does not resolve the issue, or 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
- YO BUD hotline: (855) 874-3273
- Website: cfsa.dc.gov, For Youth tab
- Direct contact or visit with the youth at OYE
- Other: Agency cell phone, desk phone, or other email

Issue Resolution Process:

- 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 YO 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.NET³ contacts, court reports, hard-copy records, placement providers, and additional sources as necessary.
- Having gathered information, the Youth Ombudsman moves to work with the team supporting the young person to resolve the issue.

C. Referral Volume

The Youth Ombudsman received 42 complaints and 32 general inquiries as of December 31, 2015. The monthly average volume was just over three complaints, with a peak of seven complaints in April and May and the lowest number of zero in July (Table A).

<i>Month</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>	<i># of General Inquiries</i>
January	2	3
February	1	2
March	6	1
April	7	1
May	7	1
June	3	3
July	0	2
August	6	6
September	1	5
October	2	1
November	4	4
December	3	3
Total	42	32

D. Referral Sources

Table B shows the four different methods youth used to reach the Youth Ombudsman. Direct contact was used the most followed by the YO-Bud Hotline.

<i>Source</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Direct Contact / Site Visit	20
YO Bud Hotline	17
YO Bud Email	4
Other (text message)	1
Total	42

Table C shows the ages of youth who made referrals; and below are the themes grouped by age.

<i>Age</i>	<i># of Concerns Raised</i>
15	1
16	2
17	7
18	7
19	11
20	14
Total	42

- Age 15—strained relationship with resource parent
- Age 16—current placement
- Age 17—inconsistencies with receipt of personal allowance and stolen property
- Age 18—strained relationship with resource parent and uncomfortable home environment
- Age 19— inadequate food and transportation resources, uncomfortable home environment, and inconsistencies with receipt of personal allowance/clothing allowance
- Age 20—allowance, placement, and need for more effective transition planning

³ FACES.NET is the District of Columbia’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

E. Referrals by Program

The majority of referrals, as indicated below, came from CFSA. This is an area we need to explore further, however, we do believe that part of this comes from proximity. More time was spent with youth at CFSA/OYE than with youth in other parts of the system; and the Youth Ombudsman was physically located at the OYE work site. It will be important for us in 2016 to ensure youth across the child welfare system have access to the Youth Ombudsman.

<i>Provider</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
CFSA/OYE	22
National Center for Children and Families	7
Seraaj Family Homes	4
Family Matters	4
Lutheran Social Services	3
Boys Town	1
PSI Family Services	1
Total	42

Many of the concerns involved rules in the homes and the resultant intervention was either a change in the interaction in the home or a change in placement. Other concerns focused on the regular issuance of allowances and

transportation. In one instance, physical abuse occurred, which of course resulted in a referral to the Child Protective Services Hotline. In each case, the Youth Ombudsman worked with the teen to resolve the issue, facilitated good communication between the parties and ensured that every teen knew there was someone they could turn to help them resolve any problem they might be experiencing.

F. General Themes

<i>Theme</i>	<i># of Complaints</i>
Engagement Concerns with Permanency Team/Resource Provider	28
Agency Delay in Providing Appropriate Services	10
Agency Not Taking Appropriate Action	2
Other	2
Total Complaints	42
Total General Inquiries	32

Table E should be noted that these are the same themes raised in 2014 the first year of operation of this program.

<i>Concern Type</i>	<i># of Concerns</i>
Placement	10
Transition Planning	6
Alleged Abuse	3
Allowance	2
Relationship w/ Social Worker	2
Stolen Property	1
Transportation	1
MMG (Making Money Grow) ⁴	1
Clothing	1
Support w/ Self-Advocacy	1

The theme “Engagement Concerns with Permanency Team/Resource Provider” in Table F refers to the fact that there are challenges in communication between the youth and the team

⁴ MMG (Making Money Grow), formerly ESCROW, is CFSA’s financial literacy program offered through OYE.

(either the clinical team or the resource parent) that is causing a problem.

This ranged from one youth who needed a social security form to submit an application to Job Corps to another youth who was experiencing challenges with transportation due to communication issues with a social worker. In both cases, the Youth Ombudsman guided the young person through the system, explained where they were able to access resources and where they needed assistance from staff and how to ensure they received that assistance.

The theme “Agency Delay in Providing Appropriate Services” means CFSA or a private provider made an attempt to address the youth’s concerns, but barriers delayed final resolution. Of the 10 referrals with this theme, almost half (4) were about placement. Placement impacts all of the youth in care with CFSA, and is an area where we experience challenges in ensuring that there is good communication and that the needs of both the youth and the care providers are respected. It can be an area of conflict. The Office of the Youth Ombudsman working in conjunction with CFSA’s Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support (OPPPS) and its Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) conducted a youth survey regarding placement to inform the 2015 Needs Assessment Report, which the agency will use to align and secure appropriate placement resources for youth.

Often the Youth Ombudsman takes on the role of mediator between the young person and the foster parent/social worker. While the young person may not feel comfortable broaching the issue on their own, they are able to do so to the Youth Ombudsman. They are then able to participate in the meeting knowing that they have someone who understands their position. We cannot underestimate how powerful this is and the modeling that is demonstrated here is useful in many other situations for the young person.

The Youth Ombudsman also assisted in advocating for youth to participate in programs, assisted in completing program applications involving educational and employment interests.

Strained relationships between youth and their permanency team members or their resource parents were prominent in this category, leading to placement issues, specifically in regard to transportation and allowance funds. These cases were resolved as the Youth Ombudsman and the team revisited the Youth Personal Allowance Policy, the Youth Clothing Allowance Policy, and the Older Youth Services Policy. In addition, the Youth Ombudsman reiterated the importance of consistently following proper protocol and maintaining accurate and signed records for distribution and receipt of funds.

Table G provides a breakdown of the 32 general inquiries received. As you can see, the office receives a wide variety of questions. One inquiry came from a 21-year-old youth who had recently transitioned out of care. She wanted to know about services that might still be available to her. She had been connected to Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for youth aftercare services. However, due to severe mental health

<i>Inquiry Type</i>	<i>Frequency of Inquiry</i>
Peer Plug	13
Transition Planning	9
Financial Management	3
Clothing	2
Exploring permanency options	1
Post-care services	1
Assistance with accountability	1
Support with self-advocacy	1
Driving school, daycare voucher	1

issues and a lack of contact with the CASA worker, her case with CASA was closed. We provided the youth with the appropriate contact information to connect with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative.

Several youth inquired about vocational and educational assistance, seeking help in areas that ranged from resume writing, preparing for the SAT, and creating professional emails. One youth needed transportation funds to get to and from school, expressed interest in obtaining her GED, and was in need of clothing to attend job interviews. The Youth Ombudsman ensured that she received Metro fare cards and was made aware of the process for monthly distribution. We helped her locate a GED program and connected her with an OYE Career Pathways specialist who provided her youth access to the OYE clothing closet for professional attire.

Three youth inquired about Making Money Grow (MMG), the Agency's youth financial literacy program offered through OYE. The Youth Ombudsman connected them to the appropriate OYE staff member who provided them with support.

Peer Plug was successful in fostering a sense of belonging for several of the older teens. We conducted three group sessions from August to December. There was a high level of youth participation and feedback during the sessions. A Peer Plug participant was invited to speak on Capitol Hill. The Youth Ombudsman assisted the youth in obtaining professional attire, worked with him in creating a speech, and provided transportation to the event, National Foster Youth's Institute's Toy Drive for Foster Youth and Families. At the event, the youth spoke alongside Congresswoman Karen Bass (CA) and others. The youth served not only as an advocate for Peer Plug, but also for all youth in foster care.

In 2016, the Youth Ombudsman plans to work to increase participation in the Peer Plug group since it seems to be very effective in supporting and encouraging older youth. Additional focus will continue with the Direct Connect program which is the CFSA Director's outreach initiative that provides an open forum for older youth group discussions. Direct Connect held its first session in August. At the session, youth had the opportunity to engage the CFSA Director in their ideas for enhancing programs and services for youth.

G. Pending Concerns

As of December 31, 2015, all referrals have been successfully resolved.

H. Systemic Findings and Recommendations

1. Finding: Protocols for provision of services to youth are not universally known or implemented.

- The current Stipend and Allowance Policy should be revisited, updated and promulgated across the system;
- There should be a standard system for documentation and distribution of funds on a monthly basis;

- Youth should receive clear information regarding financial expectations/arrangements within 24 hours of entering a placement.
- 2. Finding: Protocols for obtaining services available to youth post transition from care.**
 - Create a resource sheet/list for emancipating youth that is given at the final Youth Transition Planning meeting;
 - Ensure that stakeholders are well educated on the benefits still available to youth after achieving permanence (post care).
 - 3. Finding: Youth need their own space in a place where they are able to openly discuss and engage with one another outside of CFSA.**
 - Continue Direct Connect youth group program and establish a foster youth alumni board.
 - 4. Finding: Youth are unaware of current employment opportunities available to them.**
 - Encourage OYE's Career Pathways Unit to create an online portal for youth that posts leads for jobs, internships, apprenticeships, etc. This would complement the Unit's current information sharing efforts.
 - 5. Finding: Many youth, likely as a result of coming into care, have attachment issues and thus experience a sense of loss when there is a placement change or a change in social worker. This loss can create a further sense of instability and inconsistency, which may exacerbate youths' already fragile states.**
 - The Agency should continue to explore effective ways of improving retention among committed social workers and ensure that we are fostering healthy relationships between social workers and youth.
 - The Agency's Placement Administration, resource parents, congregate care providers, and social workers should ensure that we are exhausting all options prior to a placement disrupting.
 - 6. Finding: Many youth lack a sense of accountability and may transition from care with a false sense of reality.**
 - The Agency should empower youth to lead the decision-making process and allow them to make mistakes and learn from them similar to youth growing up in traditional families in order to ensure that youth are effectively prepared for post care.