



ANNUAL REPORT 2024

OFFICE OF
THE YOUTH
OMBUDSPERSON



City of
Philadelphia



ANNUAL

REPORT



2024





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MESSAGE FROM THE YOUTH OMBUDSPERSON

DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

It is an honor to present our annual report, reflecting on another year of advocacy, oversight, and collaboration on behalf of youth in residential placement facilities. As you may know, our agency is now two years old. We spent our first year of operation addressing complaints, building our team, creating internal protocols and policies, developing facility programming and community outreach materials, establishing our online presence, and building relationships with city leaders and youth advocates alike.

This past year, we continued to serve as a direct access point for youth in placement. The Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO) team worked on over a dozen high-level cases related to education deprivation, lack of supervision, inadequate health and medical care, unsanitary living conditions, and seclusion. We also expanded our reach by visiting and inspecting the quality of services at nine residential placement facilities. Meeting with over 200 youth at these facilities to hear their experiences firsthand was the hallmark of our year and has reinforced our commitment to their well-being and success.

As a result of our direct engagement and surveying efforts, we identified key trends and worked with City agencies to address our findings and drive meaningful change. We consulted with experts on accessibility needs for youth with developmental delays and language barriers to continue enhancing and strengthening our current protocols.

Honoring our commitment to transparency and public dialogue, we hosted our first-ever public town hall meeting for over 60 attendees, bringing together youth with lived experiences, advocates, and experts from the Juvenile Law Center's Advocates for Youth

THE PERSON



Justice, Children First, and the Educational Law Center to discuss the state of youth in congregate care.

Our report on seclusion practices within the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) garnered media attention and led to updated policy changes at the facility. The Philadelphia Department of Human Services' (DHS) Performance Management Team (PMT) continues to actively investigate these concerns. As an oversight agency responsible for ensuring accountability and improving conditions for youth in placement, collaboration with facility leadership and community partners has been an essential aspect of this effort. I look forward to further cultivating trust with DHS and facility leadership through synergistic collaboration.

In the coming year, we look forward to expanding our impact. We aim to raise our budget, conduct more facility visits, and increase our case volume by enhancing our monitoring protocols, adding staff, and deepening our community outreach efforts. Most importantly, we remain steadfast in our mission to listen to youth, amplify their voices, and uplift them and their families to create a system that prioritizes safety, dignity, and opportunity. Together, as #OnePhilly, we can ensure a brighter future for all youth in placement.

Tracie L. Johnson Sincerely,
TRACIE JOHNSON, ESQ
Youth Ombudsperson



Tracie Johnson (she/her) is the Youth Ombudsperson for the City of Philadelphia. She has been the Youth Ombudsperson since 2023, previously serving as a Staff Attorney on the Youth Justice Project sponsored by the Hive at Community Legal Services. She first worked with CLS as a certified legal intern on the Youth Justice Project and later as an Equal Justice Works Fellow, where she worked to create career pathways for women and girls of color who face barriers to employment and higher education because of their juvenile and adult criminal records. Prior to law school, Johnson worked as a Communications Associate at Philadelphia VIP

through the Philly Fellows Program. She then volunteered in the legal intake department of the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania. She also worked as a Community Outreach Coordinator at a communications and design firm, Social Impact Studios.



Gabi Haeuber (she/her) has been an Associate Youth Ombudsperson at the OYO since September 2023. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice with a Master of Social Work (MSW), specializing in social policy and child welfare. During her MSW program, Gabi interned at a Community Umbrella Agency, the Youth Justice Project at Community Legal Services, and with the Systems Change team at the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Gabi was also a fellow and co-development director of the University of Pennsylvania's Youth Advocacy Project, an interdisciplinary

fellowship providing mitigation and reentry supports for young people prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system in Philadelphia. Prior to receiving her MSW, Gabi worked as a legal assistant at Covington & Burling, LLP. She received her B.A. from the University of Maryland, College Park in 2018.



Mabari Byrd is a leader in youth advocacy, reentry, and workforce development, bringing over a decade of hands-on experience and systems-level insight. As a Trauma Specialist at Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine, he designed trauma-informed programs that transformed under-resourced schools in North Philadelphia. His work with the Sierra Club's Outdoors For All Campaign expanded youth environmental advocacy through organizing youth outings, managing volunteers, and helping to pass federal legislation, while his leadership at PowerCorpsPHL as a Founding Crew Supervisor equipped returning citizens

and opportunity youth with job training and essential life skills. His expertise spans educational and institutional settings within the child welfare and criminal justice systems. With the ability to think through both systemic and on-the-ground lenses, Mabari develops innovative, high-impact strategies that create lasting change. Recognized through initiatives like the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, Cities United, and My Brother's Keeper, his leadership in designing transformative programs and fostering collaboration has established him as a thought leader in youth empowerment.

2025 HIRING UPDATE

The OYO hired two new employees in March 2025. Judy Andrews-Battle (she/her) was the former Director of Admissions at the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) and is now the Deputy Youth Ombudsperson. Kelly Sagastume (she/her) is an Associate Youth Ombudsperson, coming from the Nationalities Service Center and the Support Center for Child Advocates. We're excited to welcome them to the team!

OYO SUPPORT STAFF

The OYO support staff includes Izhanæ Williams (she/her), the OYO Administrative Assistant.





The OYO was established by Executive Order 5-22 on November 30th, 2022, in response to a long history of youth facing harm and rights violations in Philadelphia residential placement facilities. Residential placement facilities encompass foster care group homes, juvenile detention facilities, and Residential Treatment Facilities (RTFs). Once established, the OYO was embedded within the Philadelphia Office of the Inspector General (OIG).

We encourage readers to take a look at our [2023 Year in Review](#) for more information about the history of the office. The report provides details on the Youth Residential Task Force report and recommendations, the City Council members involved in the office's creation, and the youth advocates from Juvenile Law Center who testified about the harm that they and their peers experienced in residential placements.

TIMELINE

History of Philadelphia youth facing harm and rights violations while in placement.

2018-2019



2020-2021



2021-2022



APRIL 2023

Youth Residential Task Force recommended that the OYO be created

JLC Youth Advocates shared their placement experiences with City Council

The former Mayor signed an executive order that created the OYO

Tracie Johnson, Youth Ombudsperson, was hired, and the OYO officially opened



HEAR

OUR

YOUTH



"I had gotten body slammed for yelling at a staff person and was put into a room for about a day but because I had refused to go into the room, they didn't let me eat. I had eaten breakfast before 9:00 am, and I wasn't given any food until after 3:30 pm.

I also felt that even if the staff didn't like you, they could do what they wanted. Staff fought girls, and male staff restrained female youth, which didn't feel right to me."

– Broken Promises: Futures Denied

"I experienced physical abuse by a male staff and I saw other people get abused as well. I couldn't talk to nobody about what was going on because I was being watched. I know I could file a grievance but was scared to file one because I didn't know how the staff was going to react."

– Bree (JLC Youth Advocate)

"I was antagonized by white staff members. They would act that way to all of the Black youth in the facility. He would call me a n****r. This staff and some other white staff members would restrain the Black youth in the facility more, too."

– Broken Promises: Futures Denied

"I had multiple barriers related to my education while I was in group homes. My credits would disappear after I completed work, and nobody was sure what grade I was in. I was also going to multiple different schools. Fights broke out in on-grounds schools and teachers would let everybody fight. There really wasn't much learning being done because there was so much drama. The teachers couldn't control their classrooms."

– Keema (JLC Youth Advocate)





MISSION STATEMENT

The OYO is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of Philadelphia's youth in child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health residential placement facilities. The OYO does this through impartial oversight, effective evaluation of systems and protocols, authentic partnerships with youth with lived experience and expertise, and meaningful collaboration with city agencies, youth advocacy groups, and community leaders.

VISION STATEMENT

The OYO envisions a city where youth are free to live, learn, and grow; where youth have access to habitable housing, sustainable wages for their families, a free and appropriate education, and continued resources, stability, and social safety nets needed for them to thrive. The OYO envisions a transformative world in which the systemic social issues that often lead to child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health involvement no longer exist.

RACE EQUITY STATEMENT

The OYO envisions a city that meets the unique needs of youth and their families, reduces the use of youth residential placement facilities, and eradicates the underlying systemic reasons that Black and Latinx youth are disproportionately sent into placement. The OYO promotes the health, safety, and well-being of youth in placement, and addresses embedded and intersectional biases and stereotypes that put Black and Latinx youth at increased risk of experiencing rights violations while in placement.

Through strategic partnership with youth, advocates, and city leaders, the OYO will implement evidence-based solutions that allow youth to be both safe and successful in their communities. This collective action will ensure that the City of Philadelphia is a place where all youth, regardless of their backgrounds or life experiences, have access to the rights, opportunities, and advantages that every Philadelphian deserves.

A low-angle photograph of Philadelphia City Hall, showing its iconic clock tower and ornate architecture against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The building is partially obscured by the large yellow text overlay.

AUTHORITY & JURISDICTION

The OYO responds to complaints regarding the safety and well-being of Philadelphia youth in residential placement facilities in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems. The OYO's jurisdiction is limited to residential placement facilities that are licensed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and are operated by, contracted with, or operated under the regulatory authority of the City via the Office of Children and Families (OCF), the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS), and/or Community Behavioral Health (CBH).

The OYO looks to ensure compliance with Chapter 3800 of the Pennsylvania Legal Code. These regulations govern youth rights and protections of child residential day and treatment facilities. The OYO's public [Case Practices and Operating Procedures Manual](#) further outlines other local, state, and federal laws and regulations that apply to youth in residential placements.

SCOPE OF AN INVESTIGATION

To be within the OYO's scope of work, a complaint must meet all of the following criteria:

1. There must be a youth safety or well-being issue or concern;
2. The youth must be placed in a congregate care facility; and
3. The youth's care must be funded by the City of Philadelphia.

While the OYO's scope is limited to safety and well-being concerns involving Philadelphia youth, if a facility has systemic issues that impact Philadelphia youth, the OYO has jurisdiction.

STAGES OF AN INVESTIGATION

STEP ONE: Receive a complaint. Conduct an official interview with the complainant and gather information.

STEP TWO: Assess the complaint to determine whether it is within the OYO's scope of work.

STEP THREE: Oversee and monitor the City agency's investigation into the complaint.

STEP FOUR: Evaluate the City agency's investigative process and the facility's compliance with any required corrective action steps.

STEP FIVE: Make recommendations to both the investigative City agency and the facility, and engage in ongoing monitoring as necessary.

OUR WORK

C.R.E.A.T.E

Collaboration – The OYO will develop and maintain interdepartmental relationships with city agencies and partner with other stakeholders involved in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems.

Respect – The OYO will uplift youth and community voices, and incorporate their needs, experiences, and expertise into our work.

Equity – The OYO will recognize, analyze, and work to address the demographic disparities within systems that adversely impact Black and Latinx youth in Philadelphia.

Access – The OYO will serve as a direct and independent access point for youth and the public to file grievances.

Transparency – The OYO will be transparent with families and communities about our work and the safety and well-being of Philadelphia Youth in placement.

Engagement – The OYO will engage with and educate youth, community members, and stakeholders through Know Your Rights trainings, stakeholder presentations, and community events.

OUR PRIN



GUIDING PRINCIPLES



FACILITY PROGRAM





WINNING

OVERVIEW

In May 2024, the OYO began to conduct programming at residential placement facilities. In the following months, the OYO visited nine (9) provider locations out of over 70 providers that contract with DHS and/or DBHIDS to provide residential placement services to Philadelphia youth in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems. These providers are primarily located across Pennsylvania.

Part of the OYO's work includes ensuring youth and families are aware of their rights inside residential placement facilities so they are empowered to advocate for themselves and identify allies to whom they can report rights violations. Youth have the greatest insight into what is happening inside residential placement facilities each day, so it is essential that the OYO conduct this programming to ensure that youth know their rights and can recognize when their rights are being violated.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS PRESENTATION

The OYO's facility programming includes a 30- to 45-minute "Know Your Rights" presentation for youth. During the presentation, the OYO team highlights the rights, outlined in the Youth and Family Rights Guides published by the City of Philadelphia in 2020, that should be upheld for youth in residential placement facilities.

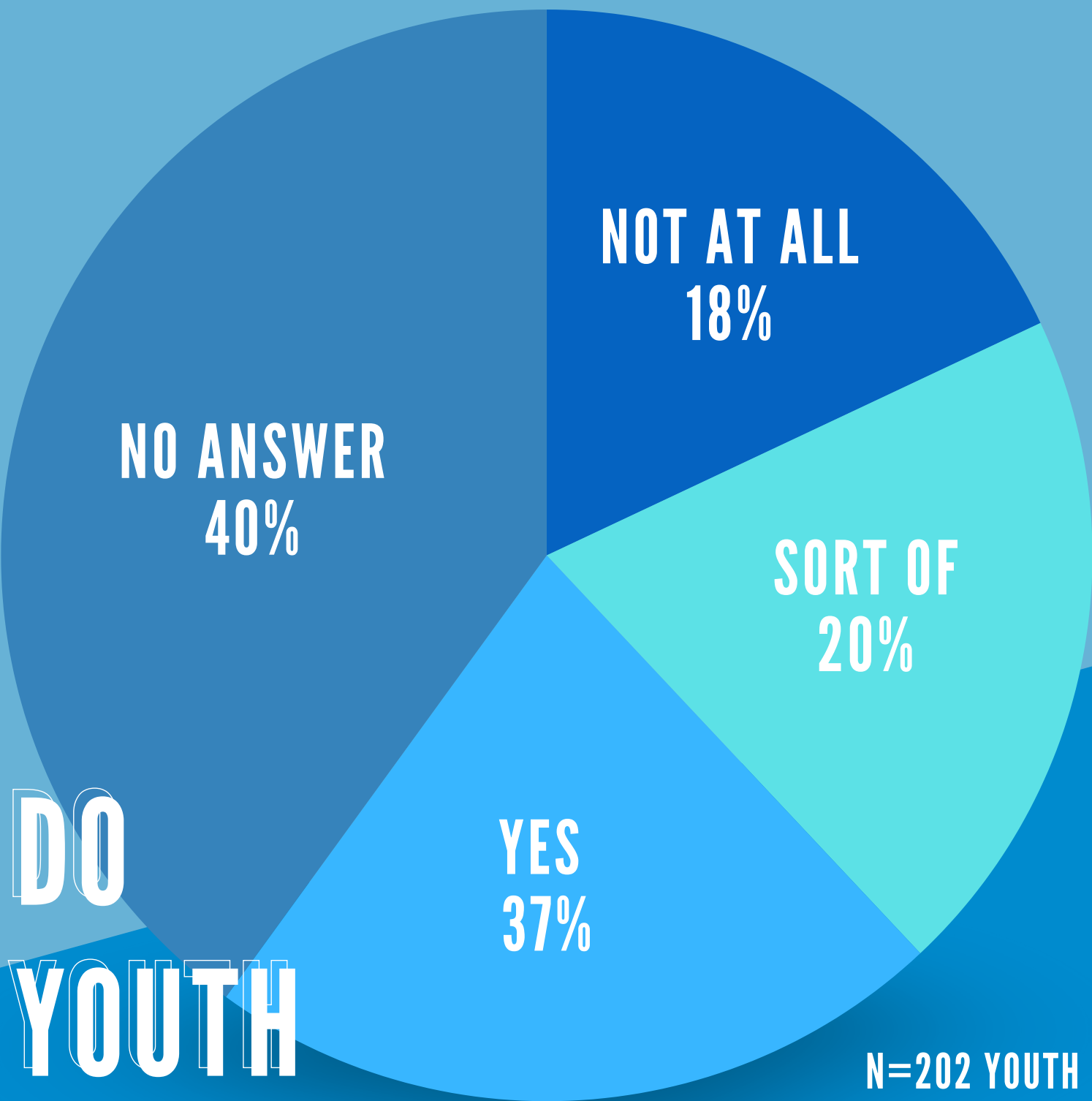
These rights include the right to: (1) be informed; (2) make a complaint; (3) be treated fairly and respectfully; (4) have a plan; (5) go to school; (6) stay connected and have privacy; (7) receive health

services; (8) keep money and things safe; (9) have personal needs met; and (10) be safe in crisis.

During our programming, we ask youth whether they know their rights at their current residential placement. Their responses are captured in the chart below.

Copies of the OYO's current "Know Your Rights" presentations can be found on the OYO's website [here](#).





YOUTH RIGHTS SURVEY

Following the presentation, youth can choose to take part in an optional and confidential survey about their rights in placement. This survey assesses whether youth are safe, free from harm and discrimination, and receiving the support that they need. The survey questions closely follow the OYO's "Know Your Rights" presentation, asking about each of the rights outlined in the Youth Rights Guide. It also includes opportunities for youth to provide further information about any of their answers.

The OYO team is available to assist youth while they are taking the survey

and to speak privately with youth about issues that they wish to raise. As mandated reporters, the OYO team makes any necessary ChildLine reports when informed of abuse or neglect through youth survey responses or interviews.

The OYO tracks all survey responses to assess whether youth are safe, free from harm and discrimination, and receiving the support that they need. More information about the OYO's interpretation and analysis of these survey responses has been shared in the Data section of this report.



**“KNOWLEDGE
IS POWER**

ACCESSIBILITY

The OYO is committed to ensuring that our Know Your Rights programming within facilities is accessible to youth with a wide range of needs. Youth with developmental delays and other accessibility needs may be especially vulnerable to rights violations and harms while in residential placement. As such, the OYO is working with external stakeholders to create a more accessible version of the standard presentation and survey in order to gather information about their experiences in placement. This modified programming takes best practices into consideration so that youth are able to process OYO's information and provide informed consent.

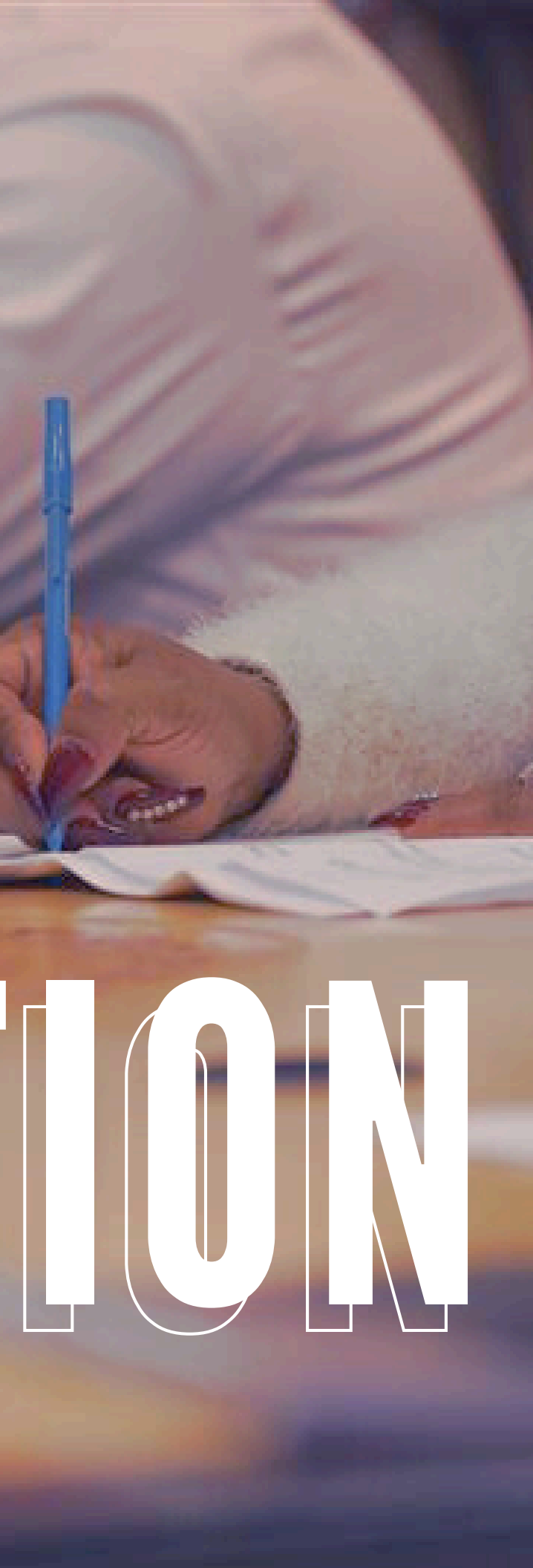
More information about this modified programming will be shared once it is finalized!

Additionally, the OYO has formalized a language access plan to ensure that our team will be best prepared to assist any youth we connect with. We are fully committed to providing support to our youth in the most accessible way possible, which includes being able to properly communicate with them in their native language(s). Once an OYO staff member meets with a youth who requires language assistance, we have a system in place that allows us to immediately get in contact with vetted translators for many languages.





DATA COLLECT



OVERVIEW

The OYO collects and tracks data from multiple sources, including:

1. Reports made directly to the OYO
2. Reports made to the OYO by other city agencies
3. Population census counts
4. OYO survey results

The OYO collects and tracks data from multiple sources in order to:

Identify prevalent disparities and other trending issues in youth serving systems.

Recommend improvements to youth residential placements.

Keep the public informed about our work so that we remain accountable to and can best serve Philadelphia youth and families.

The OYO releases data findings and trends in our annual report, to the greatest extent possible while ensuring youth deidentification under all applicable health and safety mandates.

OYO COMPLAINT ACTIVITY

In early 2023, the OYO began to receive complaints by email, phone, and our [online complaint form](#). When the OYO receives a complaint, the team reviews the complaint to ensure that it is within the scope of the office (See the “Jurisdiction, Scope, and Stages of an OYO Investigation” section of this report).

If the complaint is outside of the office’s scope, an OYO team member informs the complainant of the office’s decision not to take the case and provides resources, when available and as appropriate. Complaints that are within the office’s scope are taken on as cases that the OYO will monitor and evaluate. Some of the most common issues found in the cases that we’ve worked on to

date include: poor educational services and support, lack of supervision, inadequate health and medical care, unsanitary living conditions, and seclusion.

Our team is working to increase public awareness of the office through stakeholder trainings and facility programming. We expect the number of complaints and cases that the OYO receives to increase as public knowledge of the office increases.

Additionally, the cases that we have worked on thus far have generally been high impact cases looking into larger systemic issues which take longer to close out.

Year	Screened out complaints	OYO cases	Total complaints
2023 (Starting in April)	15	8	23
2024	26	13	39

GOT A COMPLAINT? WE'RE HERE FOR YOU.

Have you experienced a violation of your rights while in a residential placement facility? You can file a complaint with the OYO by filling out our online complaint form [here](#). Scan the QR code to access the form, or find other ways to get in touch with the OYO.



SCAN HERE
TO MAKE A
COMPLAINT!



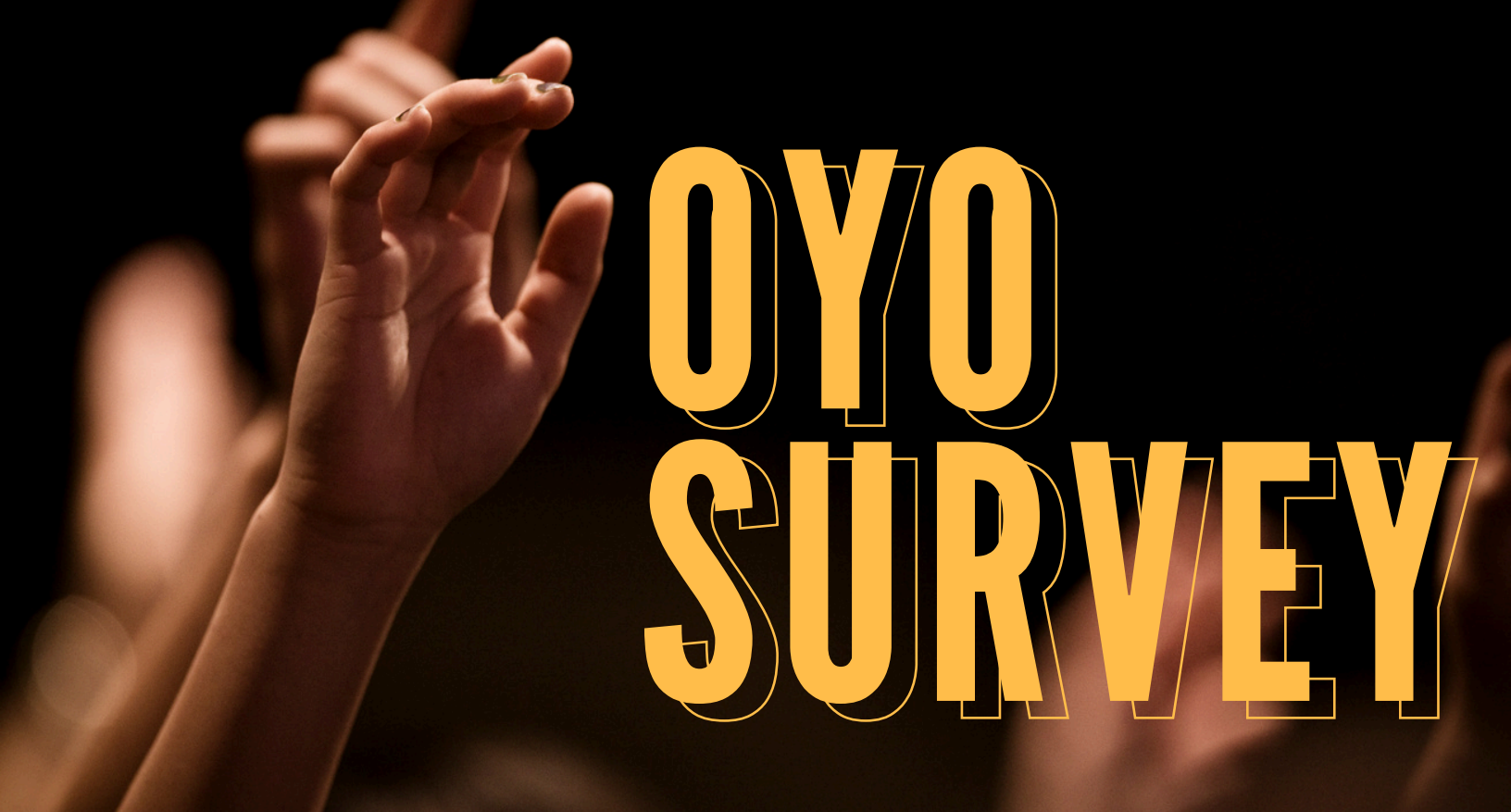
601 Walnut St.,
Suite 300E
Philadelphia, PA
19106



215-686-1178



OYO@phila.gov



OYO SURVEY

The OYO began to visit youth residential placement facilities in May 2024 to conduct “Know Your Rights” programming. DHS and DBHIDS contract with over 70 residential placement facilities. The OYO has visited nine (9) of these provider locations so far. Of these nine (9) facilities, six (6) were child welfare placements, two (2) were juvenile justice facilities, and one (1) was a behavioral health facility. Across all of these facilities, the OYO provided our “Know Your Rights” programming to 202 youth and received a total of 133 survey responses. This data was not obtained for research purposes and therefore an Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not necessary for the survey.

The following discusses survey results collected from one (1) juvenile justice facility, the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center, and the six (6) group homes that the OYO visited in 2024.

We are unable to report out on the survey data gathered from the second juvenile justice facility and the one (1) behavioral health facility that the OYO team visited. Due to the small number of youth placed at both facilities, we would not be able to share survey data and still maintain youth confidentiality. However, we plan to increase our site visits to these facilities in the coming year so that we can capture a larger sample size and share observed trends.

The Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) is Philadelphia’s DHS-operated secure youth detention facility with a maximum licensed capacity of 184 youth. Of the 91 youth at the PJJSC who chose to take the survey, 21 youth took what was considered to be the “pilot” version of the survey, and their responses were therefore excluded from the discussion of survey response trends.

2024 Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) Visits

Table 1

Total Number of Visits	Total Number of Youth	Total Number of Survey Responses (WITH PILOT)	Total Number of Survey Responses (WITHOUT PILOT)
16	130	91	70

2024 Child Welfare (CW) Facilities

Table 2

Total Number of Facilities Visited	Total Number of Youth	Total Number of Survey Responses
6	58	39

DEMOGRAPHICS


On our survey, youth were asked to identify their age, race, ethnicity, primary language, religion, pronouns, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Youth were able to select multiple identifiers for some demographic questions, including race, ethnicity, and gender. Our surveys ask for demographic information to ensure that we respect each youth's identity and provide culturally competent support. The OYO has a duty to make sure that youth in care are not experiencing discrimination due to their identities. As we collect demographic data from the surveys, we expect to be able to make recommendations to ensure that youth receive fair and equitable treatment and support while in placement.

A large majority of our survey respondents identify as Black, male youth, which appears to mirror city data collected by a taskforce on youth residential placement facilities that indicates that 91% of youth in Philadelphia residential placements are Black (non-Hispanic) or Hispanic. This is despite state figures from the 2021 Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force report that show that Black youth make up just 10.5% of the general youth population in Pennsylvania. Additionally, recent

city data suggests that more boys enter placement than girls, which tracks with our preliminary survey results. However, national data suggest that girls are a growing population in youth residential placements. This is an important trend to monitor as advocacy for gender-responsive treatment for system-involved girls has increased.

Several other data points from our preliminary survey data appear to be noteworthy, including that 71% of our respondents are between the ages of 15 to 17 years old, 60% of our respondents are Muslim, and 82% of our respondents identified as straight/heterosexual. However, not

“RESPECT IDENTITY INCLUS

The background of the page features a mural. On the left, several hands of different skin tones are shown clasped together in a supportive grip. To the right, a sign is visible with the text "Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God" and "MATTHEW 5:9" below it. The overall scene is set outdoors with green foliage visible in the upper right corner.

only is our sample size limited, but also data on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) and religious affiliation is not tracked for youth in placement at either the city or state level. Consequently, we are unable to draw conclusions about these data points at this time. Additionally, we cannot yet conduct a more intersectional analysis of how a youth's identity relates to their experience in placement, due to missing data and the complexity surrounding the multiple demographic factors we considered.

We are still working to establish a comprehensive demographic profile of all youth in placement that we can then compare to our survey responses. We have shared all of the preliminary demographic data in Appendix A (Preliminary OYO Survey Results). Despite the limited conclusions that can be drawn from the data at this time, it remains important to us that we share it because it underscores the diversity of youth in placement and the need to consider how factors like race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion impact their care.

ECTING TY LEADS TO IVE CARE”



SURVEY

Below is an overview of some of the data collected from the survey, separated by facility type and structured in the order that each section appears on the survey. The decision about which survey data to share with the public was based on the overall participant response rate and the significance of the findings. Also included in this overview are open response comments from youth surveys and our own observations of youth while conducting our facility programming. Preliminary survey data is included in Appendix A (Preliminary OYO Survey Results).

SECTION 1: RIGHT TO BE TREATED IN A FAIR & RESPECTFUL WAY

Youth in residential placements must be treated in a fair and respectful way. This means that no one can treat them differently because of their identities. In addition, facility staff cannot discipline them in any way that causes physical, emotional, or mental harm, and cannot physically, sexually, or emotionally abuse them. Children's Rights and the Education Law Center's [2018 report](#) revealed the

following safety concerns about youth residential placements: (1) children in Pennsylvania congregate care facilities were physically maltreated 156 times between May 2010 and May 2018; (2) children in residential facilities were exposed to inappropriate sexual contact 73 times by staff and other children; and (3) children in residential facilities were inappropriately restrained 92 times.



Given these documented safety concerns, our survey asks a number of questions related to the general safety of youth at their current residential placement, including questions about experiencing and/or witnessing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by staff and/or by peers, experiencing improper restraints, experiencing isolation for more than four (4) hours outside of bedtime, and losing privileges as a punishment. The OYO reminds youth that if they are feeling unsafe or are experiencing/witnessing abuse and/or neglect, our team must make a mandated report to the state ChildLine.

A significant majority of youth at both the PJJSC and the group homes that we visited reported feeling safe at their respective placements (71% at the PJJSC and 92% at the group homes). Most youth reported that they were not subject to improper or excessive restrictive procedures such as seclusion and restraints, and that they did not experience

or witness high levels of abuse by staff. However, a smaller number of youth reported feeling unsafe at their placement for a variety of reasons, such as verbal abuse by staff or experiences of restraints and/or seclusion beyond 4 hours. The issue of seclusion was much more prevalent at the PJJSC, where 16 youth reported that they “sometimes” or “often” experienced seclusion. This is detailed further in the Issue Highlight section of this report.

When describing their treatment in placement, some youth at the PJJSC said that staff sometimes call them names or slurs, made negative or inappropriate comments about their appearances and/or body parts, and fought with youth. Several youth placed at the group homes shared similar concerns about their treatment, noting that staff would occasionally barge into their bedrooms, yell at them, and male staff would come onto the female floors unannounced.

SECTION 2: RIGHT TO HAVE A PLAN

Youth in residential placements have the right to be provided with information, resources, and support to plan for their future and success upon returning to their home and communities. This should start at the beginning of their time in placement and continue until they leave.

Youth at both the PJJSC and the group homes we visited indicated that they could use additional support with making plans for their return to the community. At the PJJSC, youth reported that they could use assistance with housing and reconnecting with family. At the group homes, youth named housing and employment as the two supports needed most. Both groups of youth also reported needing additional support with their education.

As shared in the OYO's issue brief on aftercare, youth exiting care are at a greater risk of experiencing adverse life events, such as homelessness, unemployment, family instability, and mental health crises if they are not provided effective aftercare services and supports. As such, early and comprehensive transition planning that includes youth and their families is essential to establishing social safety nets to help youth avoid pitfalls.



SECTION 3: RIGHT TO ACCESS A HIGH-QUALITY & APPROPRIATE EDUCATION

Youth in residential placements are entitled to a high-quality, free, and appropriate public education. Youth have the right to grade appropriate instruction and students with disabilities are entitled to special education services or accommodations in school.

A 2018 report by Children's Rights and the Education Law Center revealed that: (1) less than half of children earn high school credits while in a residential placement facility; (2) fewer than 25% of youth with learning disabilities receive special education services while in placement; and (3) only 9% of youth in placement earn a GED or high school diploma, with only 2% enrolling in post-secondary education. Additionally, the Juvenile Law Center reports that youth in group homes are likely to experience disruptions to their education due to transportation issues, placement changes, and delayed transfers of educational records.

Keeping these and other identified barriers to education in mind, our survey asks youth a series of questions about the type and quality of their education, including where they attend school, the length of their school day, the method of instruction at their school, the difficulty of their classes, their credit and graduation status.

During our review of the PJJSC survey data, we identified instances where youth did not accurately report their current school setting. All residents of the PJJSC attend the on-grounds school, as it is a secure detention facility. Despite this fact, some youth reported that they attended a

different type of school (such as the school they attended before placement). This misidentification could have been the result of a number of factors, such as unclear survey questions, or uncertainty due to youth length of stay. Newly admitted youth, in particular, may have been unsure of how to respond. Due to these inconsistencies, we have decided not to report out on the PJJSC education data at this time. However, there were some notable trends that could indicate that youth at the PJJSC may not be learning on grade level or receiving the supports that they need to succeed in school.

School District of Philadelphia data from 2024-2025 shows that almost half (49%) of PJJSC students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Additionally, the School District of Philadelphia conducts an annual Philly School Experience Survey for all schools within the district, including the PJJSC. The survey asks

questions about the school climate, instructional environment, school-family relationships, and more. Students were asked to respond to each question with “never,” “rarely,” “occasionally,” and “most or all of the time.” For example, in the Instructional Environment survey section, students were asked to respond to the question, “My teachers explain information in a way I understand.” Only 39.2% of youth responded “most or all of the time.” Students were also asked to respond to the question, “My teachers have high expectations for me in school.” 51% of youth responded “most or all of the time.” Keeping these survey results in mind, the OYO team is working with PJJSC leadership to further assess and address educational needs within the facility.

We did not have the same concerns for the education data collected from the group homes we visited, so we are able to share some of the highlights. The majority of group home survey respondents stated that they were enrolled in school (74%) and attended consistently (72%). Of the youth enrolled in school, almost half reported that they attended their school of origin. The remaining youth reported that they attended either a new neighborhood public school (33%) or another schooling option, such as private or virtual school (27%). Youth generally reported that they did not need support with school and that they were aware of their credit and graduation status. However, this was not universal – a smaller number of youth enrolled in school reported needing assistance with their academics, credits, and/or graduation status.

**“A QUALITY
EDUCATION
FOR EVERY
YOUTH”**

SECTION 4: RIGHT TO STAY CONNECTED & HAVE PRIVACY

Youth in residential placements have the right to stay connected to their family and home community and to speak with their lawyer/social worker freely and in private. Youth with consistent, nurturing adult connections have more secure attachments and positive social and emotional skills compared to youth with limited adult support. Despite this, youth in congregate care often face barriers to maintaining connections with their community, which can have long-term negative consequences. Additionally, dependent-involved youth may not be as familiar with communicating with their lawyer in between court hearings as delinquent-involved youth may be. For this reason, we asked youth survey questions regarding the frequency and method of contact with family, attorneys,

and social workers. A significant majority of youth surveyed at both the PJJSC and the group homes we visited indicated that they were allowed to talk to and visit with their parents/guardians at least 2 times a week, fulfilling the requirements of the 3800 regulations. Almost three-fourths of youth surveyed at the PJJSC (70%) responded when asked about their ability to speak to their lawyer freely and privately, compared to only 59% of youth surveyed at the group homes. While more than half of the youth surveyed at the PJJSC (65%) stated this was always the case, more than a quarter of youth (35%) indicated they were not able to speak with their lawyer freely and privately on at least one or more occasions. In contrast, the vast majority of responding youth placed at the group homes were always able to do so.



SECTION 5: RIGHT TO ACCESS HEALTH SERVICES

System-involved youth are known to have greater health needs. In fact, youth with significant physical and behavioral health concerns are often placed in congregate care settings to better address their treatment needs. Youth in residential placements have the right to make informed decisions for themselves as it relates to medical care and treatment. Youth are only required to complete intensive services, programming, therapy, and counseling that is necessary and appropriate for their healing. Despite this, youth in congregate care facilities often experience barriers to accessing appropriate treatment (See this [2019 study](#) to learn more). For this reason, our survey asks youth questions regarding the appropriateness and frequency of medical care and treatment.

Almost three-quarters of survey respondents at the PJJSC felt that their medical treatment and medication was appropriate, correct, and timely. A number of the remaining youth expressed that they had certain issues with their medical treatment, including that it was potentially excessive, incorrect, or difficult to access. Additionally, more than half of PJJSC survey respondents reported that they had received a health assessment upon entry to the PJJSC in order to determine their individual medical needs. At the group homes, youth overwhelmingly reported that their medical treatment and medication was appropriate, correct, and timely, and more than half of youth respondents noted that they received a health assessment upon entering their placement.

**“YOUTH RIGHTS
MEANS DIGNITY
& RESPECT”**

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a coin, likely a quarter, over a light-colored container. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and green. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

SECTION 6: RIGHT TO KEEP MONEY & PERSONAL ITEMS SAFE

Youth in certain types of residential placements have the right to keep their money and personal items safe, and they should be given the opportunity to access them or know where they are stored. This is particularly relevant as system-involved youth experience quite a bit of placement instability and may lose important items (i.e. wallet, birth certificate, social security card, etc.) with each placement change. Survey questions sought to understand youth's experiences in placements with access to personal belongings.

Given that the PJJSC is a secure detention center, youth are not allowed to keep personal items with them on their person. When youth enter the facility, their items are collected and securely stored. Youth sign a ledger itemizing all of their belongings to ensure that the listed items can be retrieved upon the youth's release from the facility. During our facility visits, youth were allowed to keep small, non-dangerous items in their rooms and on their person.

Group home rules vary, but generally youth are able to possess personal items as long as they are not considered unsafe. During facility visits and tours of group homes, OYO staff commonly observed youth keeping prohibited items in their rooms, such as alcohol-based hygiene products, over the counter medication, and more. Staff often have to remind youth that such items cannot be held in their rooms. Instead, these items must be securely stored by staff and dispersed to youth in appropriate quantities upon request. Additionally, the OYO has fielded complaints about loss of money and personal items due to theft by peers. Almost all youth surveyed at the six OYO group home visits reported having access to all of their money and personal belongings.

SECTION SEVEN: RIGHT TO HAVE PERSONAL NEEDS MET

Youth in residential placements have the right to live in safe, secure, and sanitary living conditions and have their personal needs (such as those related to food, clothing, religious practices, and personal/hygiene products) met. However, facilities differ in the way that they meet these personal needs, as their methods depend on the rules governing the type of residential placement facility youth are placed at. Given this, our survey questions aimed to capture the range of possible conditions at different types of residential placement facilities.

The PJJSC receives grant funding from former First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move initiative that limits the amount of calories youth can consume a day. As such, youth are allowed to ask for more food if they are hungry as per their right under the 3800 regulations, but the PJJSC is limited in the amount of food they can offer youth.



Almost all survey respondents at the PJJSC reported receiving three meals and at least one snack a day. During programming visits, many youth reported receiving several snacks most days. However in contrast, other youth shared that they sometimes remain hungry after meals and that the food is not always fresh. Other youth reported that when they are away at court during mealtimes, they may either miss meals or only receive a bologna sandwich (which does not always meet religious dietary restrictions). Further, almost a quarter of youth at the PJJSC reported that their meals/snacks do not consistently abide by their medical, religious, and/or dietary restrictions. Importantly, 91% of youth reported being able to freely practice the religion or faith of their choosing.

Youth's views surrounding the PJJSC's building conditions seem to be split, with a little over half (53%) reporting sanitary conditions all the time and a little under half (47%) reporting unsanitary conditions some or all of the time. Youth commonly reported mold in the showers and the presence of insects throughout the building. Additionally, OYO staff often observed that youth would put their arms inside their T-shirts to keep warm during programming visits.



Youth reported that they were only allowed to wear sweaters in the winter. Further discussions with PJJSC leadership clarified that youth are allowed to request warm clothing from staff, which would then be distributed in the subsequent clothing delivery. Finally, youth also indicated a need for items that worked better for their skin or hair, such as sensitive soap or face wash.

Unlike youth placed at the PJJSC, youth in group homes are allowed to cook their own meals and wash their own clothes. Additionally, they are usually assigned chores such as cleaning their rooms and common areas. Building conditions and rules governing personal needs differ across group homes. However, most survey respondents at the group homes reported that their food met medical, religious, and dietary restrictions. The remaining 20% of youth expressed issues with their food that limited their food consumption in placement. Additionally, three-quarters of group home survey respondents stated that their placement conditions were sanitary. Youth who reported unsanitary conditions complained of rodents in their rooms/common areas and limited hours of kitchen use, which led to them feeling hungry at times.

A photograph of a woman with short dark hair and glasses, smiling and raising her right hand. She is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a classroom or meeting setting. Overlaid on the image is large, bold, blue text with a white outline, reading "CASE HIGH- LIGHT" in three lines.

CASE HIGH- LIGHT

ENSURING CONTINUITY OF CARE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ADVOCACY

The Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO) received a complaint from a child advocate regarding a youth recently discharged from inpatient care and placed in a DHS-contracted residential facility. The advocate expressed concerns about the youth's immediate psychiatric care, specifically the continuity of their psychotropic medication. The youth, discharged with a 30-day supply of their medication, faced the risk of a medication lapse due to the facility's inability to secure a timely appointment for prescription renewal.

The advocate reached out to the facility's house parent and leaders. The facility reported appointment delays of three to five months. Staff did not offer alternatives to address the youth's urgent needs. With time running out, the advocate escalated the issue to OYO. They sought oversight to ensure that the youth's critical care needs could be met.

OYO immediately initiated a multi-agency response. The OYO team reached out to DHS and the facility to fix care coordination gaps and emphasize adherence to 55 Pa. Code Chapter 3800, which mandates the prompt provision of behavioral health services to youth in residential placements.

Additionally, the OYO team requested the facility's health and safety plans, internal policies, and any documentation of efforts to secure timely medical care for the youth.

OYO collaborated with Community Behavioral Health (CBH) to confirm that the youth's health insurance fell under CBH's eligibility criteria. CBH's involvement was crucial in managing the crisis, helping to coordinate an emergency telehealth appointment at WES Health Center. This enabled the youth to receive a temporary prescription, preventing a lapse in medication. CBH also facilitated follow-up care, including a renewed prescription and a follow-up appointment to ensure treatment continuity.

This case highlights the importance of interagency collaboration in addressing systemic barriers in residential care. The combined efforts of OYO, DHS, CBH, child advocate and case management teams prioritized the youth's safety and well-being, while also prompting a review of facility practices to prevent future disruptions.

By leveraging its oversight role and fostering partnerships, the OYO demonstrated its commitment to improving the safety and quality of care for youth in residential placements. This case exemplifies how advocacy, expertise, and collaboration can drive meaningful change for vulnerable youth.

COMMUNICATIONS

BLOG POSTS & ISSUE BRIEFS

The OYO periodically publishes blog posts and issue briefs on topics relevant to our work with youth in residential placement facilities. Here is some of the content that our office has posted over the last year:

MAY 2024: The OYO is in the process of releasing a three-part issue brief series to address three immediate recommendations (the first two of which were made by the Youth Residential Task Force in their [2022 Annual Report](#)). These issue briefs are on: (1) Reducing the use of placements; (2) Improving the safety, quality, and education of placements; and (3) Implementing effective aftercare. The OYO released the first part of this issue brief series in December 2023, called [Aftercare for Youth Across Systems](#). The second part of the issue brief series, called [Improving the Safety and Quality of Youth Residential Placements](#), was published in May 2024.

MAY BLOG POST: May is National Foster Care Month, and May 15th, 2024, was the 57th anniversary of the *In re Gault* decision. This decision guaranteed due process

rights to juvenile defendants in 1967. With this in mind, the OYO wrote a blog post called, “In re Gault 57 Years Later: The State of Counsel for Kids Today.” This blog post reflected on the continued relevance of the in re Gault decision today and joined the call of the National Association of Counsel for Children to provide #Counsel4Kids.

NOVEMBER BLOG POST: In celebration of Native American Heritage Month, OYO Associate Youth Ombudsperson Mabari Byrd reflected on the stories of struggle, resilience, and survival that honor the Native people who occupied and stewarded the land we live on today. The blog post, “Honoring Truth, Legacy, and Resilience; Reflections on Indigenous History and Youth,” is written as both a personal reflection of Mabari’s own multicultural identity and an account of the history of Federal Indian Boarding Schools.

You can keep up to date with all of our upcoming blog posts and issue briefs on our [website!](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

The OYO has had an active year on social media! We use our social media to highlight relevant events and resources from other organizations and offices, inform the public of blog posts and issue briefs that we publish, and generate our own informational content. Over the last year, we have celebrated and supported youth involved in the juvenile justice, child welfare, and behavioral health systems through our Black History Month series, Pride Month series, and Hispanic Heritage Month series, among others.

  **FOLLOW US ONLINE!**
@PHLYouthOmbuds

ANNUAL EVENT – APRIL 2023

On April 3rd, 2024, the OYO was joined by advocates from Children First, Juvenile Law Center, and Education Law Center to host a virtual panel discussion about youth in residential placement facilities. Tracie Johnson served as a panelist. We had approximately 70 people join us for the lunch and learn discussion, which occurred on the 1-year anniversary of the OYO.

The OYO will be holding another public event in April 2025. Keep an eye out for this exciting opportunity!



COMMUNITY COLLABORATION



Over the past year, the OYO has remained steadfast in its mission to uplift youth in placement, advocate for their successful transitions, and champion pathways to success post-placement. Central to our approach is the belief that sustainable change is driven by collaboration with directly impacted youth, youth advocates, and community organizations dedicated to positive youth development. Our commitment to youth extends beyond discussions. We have actively participated in local events and collaborative training opportunities, positioning the OYO as a dedicated partner in creating sustainable solutions for youth in transition. This reflects our ongoing efforts to support young people not only during their placement but as they reenter their communities, ensuring they have pathways to success. The OYO is proud of the progress we've made and the opportunities on the horizon. Through continued collaboration, active listening, and advocacy, we remain committed to a future where every youth has the support, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive.

The OYO offers stakeholder trainings for anyone who works or interacts with youth in residential placement facilities. Learn more about our office, youth rights in residential placements, and how to better advocate for yourself and others by filling out our [form](#) to request a training.



**SCAN HERE TO
REQUEST A
STAKEHOLDER
TRAINING!**

CONNECTING WITH YOUTH PARTNERS AND ADVOCATES

A central focus this year has been forging intentional partnerships with organizations and city agencies committed to transformational services for youth and families. From workforce development initiatives to aftercare support, we have prioritized building relationships with groups that share our mission of reducing reliance on congregate care and empowering young people. Through meaningful discussions and strategic meetings with organizations like the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP), the Education Law Center, and YEAH Philly, along with city offices such as the Mayor's Office of Safe Neighborhoods, Office of Youth Engagement, and the Office of Black Male Engagement, we have sought to understand one another's work, explore shared goals, and identify collaborative opportunities that align with our collective vision for a better future.

Looking forward, we plan to expand our network of partnerships with organizations such as PowerCorpsPHL, the Institute for the Development of African American Youth (IDAAY), and various Mayor's Offices focused on Faith-Based, Latino, and Muslim Engagement. These partnerships are key to our ongoing efforts to support youth and families as they navigate challenges and build brighter futures.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

In April 2024, Tracie Johnson and members of the OYO team tabled at the Parent and Youth Resource Fair hosted by the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS).

Between May and October 2024, Tracie Johnson served as a panelist on a number of webinars and conferences, including an American Bar Association webinar titled Resolution 605, SICAA and Beyond: Impactful Legislative Changes and the Disparate Impact on LGBTQ Youth, a Kids at Court Conference held by the Support Center for Child Advocates (SCCA), a public interest law panel at the Temple James E. Beasley School, and a panel held during Youth Justice Action Month (YJAM) by the National Bar Association, Philadelphia Chapter Women's Law Division. During these panels, Tracie educated participants on employing trauma-informed practices when working with child witnesses in civil and criminal litigation,



the importance of cultural competency when providing legal assistance to low-income communities of color, and the unique needs and realities of youth of color involved with the juvenile justice system.

CONNECTING WITH CITY AGENCIES

The OYO has standing meetings with Philadelphia's Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services (DBHIDS) to discuss agency protocols, complaint and grievance activity, ongoing investigations, and more. The OYO also consults with the Office of Integrated Data for Evidence and Action (IDEA) for assistance with performing interdisciplinary, cross-departmental data analysis.

In May 2024, the Office of Talent and Employee Success facilitated a team building workshop for the OYO. The OYO also worked with the City of Philadelphia's Innovation Lab to develop a strategic plan and guiding principles. Additionally, the OYO team attends standing meetings with a variety of juvenile justice stakeholders, including those from the PJJSC, the courts, and probation. The OYO team collaborates with the Office of Criminal Justice on their continuum of care work for youth in the juvenile justice system.

CONNECTING WITH YOUTH OMBUDS OFFICES

Tracie Johnson remains a member of the Children and Families Chapter of the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA), where she meets with other youth ombudspersons from across the country.



The background of the page is a photograph of the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Center. The building is a multi-story structure with a brick facade and large glass windows. A sign on the building reads "PHILADELPHIA JUVENILE JUSTICE CENTER". A flag is visible on the left side of the building.

SECLUSION AT THE PJJ

CASE EXAMPLE

In May 2024, the OYO was conducting programming at the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) when a youth asked to speak to an OYO staff member. The youth reported that he and other youth were often held in seclusion in their rooms following altercations, and that seclusion was used at least monthly on his unit. He reported that he had personally experienced this once, for a 24-hour period. He stated that other youth involved in the same altercation were held in seclusion for three (3) days, but he was held for less time due to his lesser role in the altercation. He explained that during his period of seclusion, he was permitted to leave his room to shower, but he did not attend school, and he ate his meals in his room. This was the third complaint that the OYO received about the use of seclusion at the PJJSC within a period of four months.



SECLUSION

Seclusion: Defined in 55 Pa. Code Chapter 3800.206 as placing a child in a locked room.

The PJJSC is Philadelphia's DHS-operated secure youth detention facility. As a secure detention facility, the PJJSC can use seclusion in very specific situations and under strict rules. Most other residential facilities prohibit the practice.

The OYO has found that youth seclusion at the PJJSC has been overly employed. It is also clear that the practice has not been in strict compliance with applicable laws meant to ensure the safety and well-being of youth in detention.

The OYO has based its conclusions on substantial evidence, including:

1. Notable OYO complaint activity;
2. Direct OYO observations;
3. OYO interviews with youth;
4. PJJSC departmental policy flaws; and
5. Questionable practice and documentation by the PJJSC.

The highlighted case example is just one of several complaints received and resolved by the OYO over the course of this inquiry. In response to these concerns, the OYO released a systemic issue report on the topic.



Read the Report: Use of Seclusion at the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center



THE REPORT DOES THE FOLLOWING:

- Outlines the requirements and legal limitations surrounding the practice of seclusion at secure detention facilities.
- Details the OYO's complaint activity and direct observations related to seclusion at the PJJSC within a period of six months.
- Discusses the identified flaws with the PJJSC's then-current policy manual as it related to the PJJSC's use of seclusion.
- Summarizes certain inconsistencies and documentation issues found within the logs that the PJJSC uses to document incidents of seclusion.
- Recounts changes DHS and PJJSC leadership made to existing seclusion policies and practices.
- Explores additional areas of growth and improvement and raises some systemic and operational concerns for stakeholders to consider moving forward.

The OYO presented this report and its findings to DHS and PJJSC leadership on November 18th, 2024. DHS provided a written response on December 19th, 2024, acknowledging some need for reform, but largely disputing the OYO's assertion that the use of seclusion is overly employed at the PJJSC. The OYO stands by the original findings outlined in the report and



maintains that some aspects of DHS' response are based on flawed documentation and data. For example, the bulk of DHS' analysis in their response is based on seclusion logs, some of which we have already deemed to be inconsistent and unreliable. The remainder of their analysis cites interviews with youth, but in the interviews that OYO staff attended, DHS did not ask youth clear and specific questions about seclusion without OYO prompting.

Additionally, the OYO and PJJSC have different interpretations of the running of the seclusion clock, which affects the PJJSC's determination of whether or not youth are held for more than 8 hours in a 48-hour period. For example, it is the

PJJSC's view that if youth are placed in seclusion and happen to fall asleep during awake hours, the seclusion clock should stop. However, the OYO believes that the clock should continue to run, which would more accurately calculate the total number of hours youth spend in seclusion. We look forward to continued collaboration with DHS and the PJJSC to address any outstanding issues of legal interpretation and explore opportunities for further growth.

But ultimately, we emphasize the importance of empowering young people to voice their concerns, providing them with opportunities to do so, and valuing their insights through meaningful action.

LOOKING FORWARD

Moving forward, we remain committed to the safety and well-being of youth in placement. Our mission focuses on enhancing oversight and monitoring to safeguard youth rights and protections. We strive to elevate youth voices and ensure that their concerns are resolved. Expanding community partnerships will strengthen the OYO's vital support network. To make these aspirations a reality, we hope to increase our budget and enhance our staff capacity. Together, we can create a truly healing environment for our most vulnerable young people.

IMMEDIATE GOALS FOR THE OFFICE

As we embark on this new year, our mission is clear: bolster our oversight and monitoring efforts. We aim to increase our case volume by fine-tuning our existing monitoring protocols. Our objective is to transform inquiries that we receive from DHS and DBHIDS into legitimate OYO complaints. We also aim to better enforce the section of Executive Order 5-22 that requires provider agencies to directly inform the OYO of all youth internal grievances and complaints.



Additionally, we plan to increase our visits to evaluate facilities and connect with youth to learn firsthand about conditions within their placements. Our conversations with leadership staff will help us gather essential insights.

Moreover, we are committed to refining our data collection methods. This ensures that we track quality of care concerns more effectively, creating a refined system centered on accountability and responsiveness.

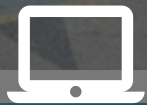
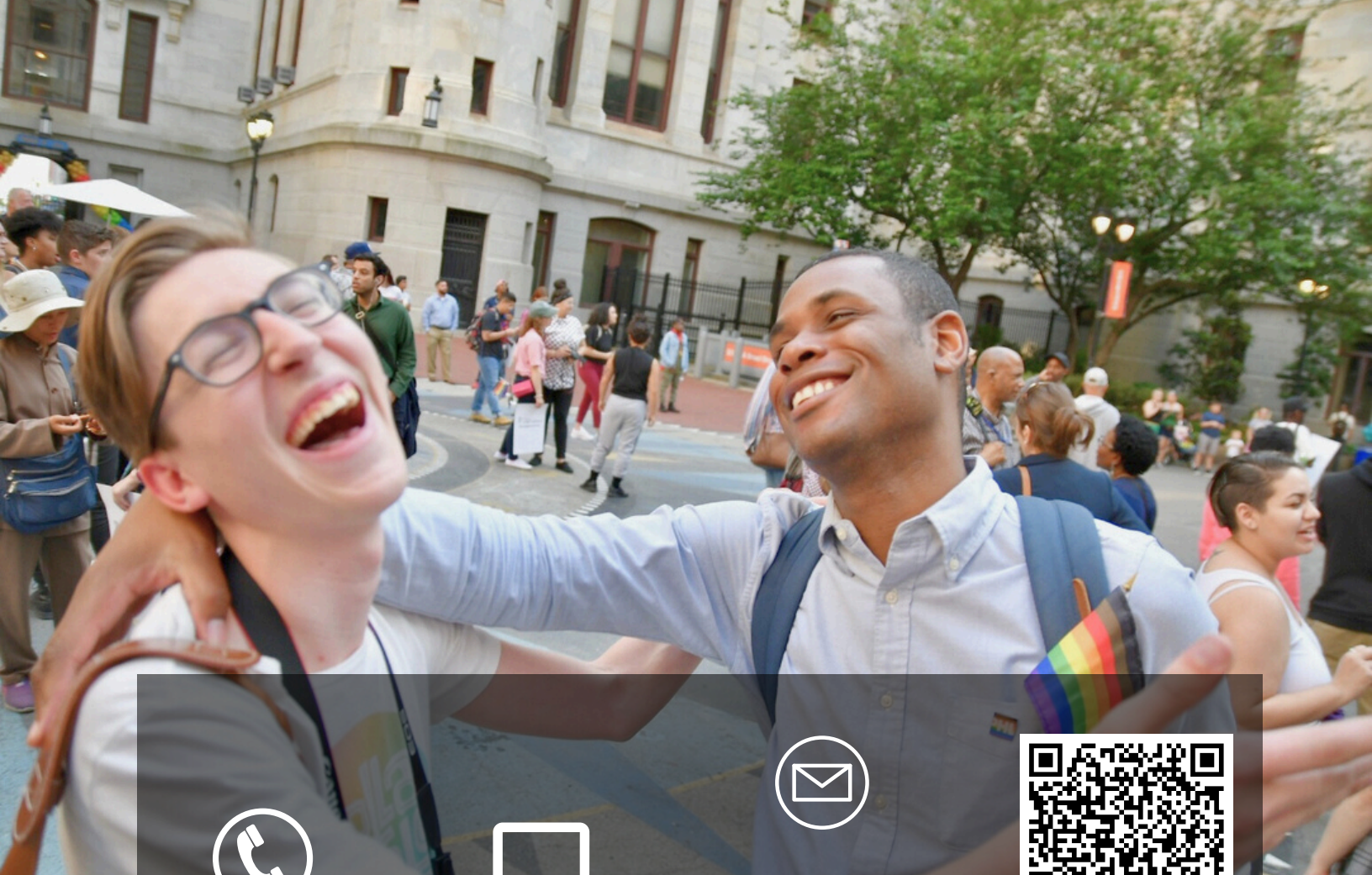
We look forward to expanding our staff capacity by offering volunteer, fellowship, and internship opportunities. We plan to connect to interns, volunteers, and fellows through the City College for Municipal Employment (CCME) Civic Entrepreneurs Internship Program, Serve Philadelphia VISTA Corps, and various law and social work programs.

Over the course of the last two years, our relationships with community partners who serve youth have helped us stay informed about the issues and concerns of young people in care. We're excited to facilitate more stakeholder presentations and table at community events to raise awareness about our work.

FUTURE PLANS FOR GROWTH

As part of our longer-term plan for the office, we hope to center the voices of young people with lived experiences in placement by eventually establishing a Youth Advisory Council.

Additionally, to ensure lasting protection for youth in congregate care, the Office of the Youth Ombudsperson must become a permanent city agency. We look forward to working with City Council members to push for legislation that the public can vote on, cementing the Office of the Youth Ombudsperson into the City Charter.



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OYO Complaint
Form



PHILADELPHIA OFFICE OF THE
YOUTH OMBUDSPERSON

