



OFFICE OF THE YOUTH OMBUDSPERSON

ANNUAL REPORT 2025



PROMOTING THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF YOUTH IN RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENTS.

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MESSAGE FROM THE YOUTH OMBUDSPERSON

DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

It is with deep appreciation and pride that I share the Office of the Youth Ombudsman's (OYO) 2025 Annual Report with you. Throughout the year, our office conducted programming within 22 residential placement facilities and participated in 17 observational site visits. We met directly with more than 60 young people in placement, 34 of whom voluntarily completed surveys with our office. In the year prior, our engagement was limited largely to Philadelphia-based placements, which allowed us to reach a higher volume of youth locally, over 170. However, last year we made a strategic decision to broaden our regional reach. We recognized that many Philadelphia youth are placed far from home, often hours away, making them less visible and harder to reach. In response, we committed ourselves to meeting youth where they are no matter the distance.

Our team traveled as far as three hours from the city to visit facilities such as Pinkney's Vineyard, Child First-Lake Ariel, and Abraxas South Mountain. These visits allowed us to conduct our facility programming which includes inspecting building conditions, reviewing policies, meeting with leadership, interviewing staff, and educating youth about their rights. Most importantly, we interviewed and surveyed youth, who are too often overlooked, to directly listen and learn about their experience in placement.

Through interviews, surveys, and ongoing engagement with youth, we identified persistent systemic concerns, including barriers to language access, inadequate religious accommodations, and disruptions to educational stability. Rather than simply documenting these issues, we have worked to convene and shepherd solutions-oriented conversations with the appropriate stakeholders to address them. Recently, we released issue-focused reports that further examine these concerns and outline recommendations for change, please view the "Publications" section of our website to read the reports. Last year also marked a significant strengthening of our oversight and monitoring responsibilities. We implemented provisions of our Executive Order requiring providers to submit all youth-filed grievances to our office and to notify us of all internal investigations and evaluations. In addition, we continue to review facility policies for compliance with existing 3800 regulations and are closely monitoring how providers update their policies in preparation for the impending 3900 regulations.



We also recognize that while it is important for youth and facility staff to understand youth rights and facility obligations, so too must the parents, advocates, professionals, and community members who support youth in placement. Additionally, we observed that many of the complaints received by our office were submitted by trusted adults on behalf of young people. To expand this critical pathway for accountability, my team and I facilitated a dozen stakeholder presentations for over 200 parents and professionals who work directly with youth in placement. We engaged with the Defenders Association's Children & Youth Justice and Child Advocacy Units, CASA workers, CUA staff, Juvenile Probation Officers, Support Center for Child Advocates, and parents connected to Children's First Parent Advocacy Coalition. These presentations strengthened awareness of our office and empowered more adults to act when youth need support.

Finally, we were honored that City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier invited us to present on our work before City Council. Councilmember Gauthier subsequently introduced legislation to make the Office of the Youth Ombudsman a permanent fixture in the City Charter. The legislation passed City Council, was signed by the Mayor, and was ultimately approved by Philadelphia voters. On May 19, 2026, 192,912 Philadelphia voters, representing 87.61% of those voting on the measure, said yes to making the Office of the Youth Ombudsman permanent. We are deeply grateful to the youth, families, advocates, public officials, and Philadelphia voters who supported this effort. By making the OYO permanent, Philadelphia has reaffirmed that young people in placement deserve an independent avenue to raise concerns, seek accountability, and find meaningful resolution. Their voices, and their rights, deserve nothing less.

With gratitude and resolve,


TRACIE JOHNSON, ESQ
Youth Ombudsman

WHO WE ARE



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.



Judy Battle (she/her) is the Deputy Youth Ombudsperson for the City of Philadelphia. Judy has been the Deputy Youth Ombudsperson since 2025. As the former Director of Admissions at the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC), she streamlined the intake process, enhanced programming, and educational services for the youth in the admissions area and worked to integrated technology for admissions. Judy first worked as the Human Services Program Administrator, Court and Community Services. She received her Master of Social Work (MSW),

from Widener University in 2013. Prior to receiving her MSW, Judy worked at the Department of Human Services to provide and promote safety and wellbeing for children and youth at risk of abuse, neglect, and delinquency. She earned her bachelor's degree from Temple University.

Izhanae Williams, Administrative Assistant



Since 2024, Mabari has served as an Associate Youth Ombudsperson, following his role as a Trauma Specialist at Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine, where he led trauma-informed programs building resilience in under-resourced North Philadelphia schools. He also served as a Campaign Representative with the Sierra Club's Outdoors for All Campaign, integrating youth outdoor leadership with conflict resolution and life-skills development while advancing environmental advocacy through program design, volunteer management, and legislative engagement. At PowerCorpsPHL, Mabari was a Founding Crew Supervisor, leading crews of justice-involved adults and youth in

delivering green infrastructure and natural lands projects across Philadelphia while also providing workforce development and reentry support. Grounded in lived experience as a justice-involved youth and young adult navigating reentry, Mabari brings an authentic, peer-informed leadership style shaped by resilience and choice. Recognized nationally through My Brother's Keeper, Cities United, the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, and the Environmental Leadership Program, he continues to lead with intention, building pathways for others to grow, lead, and thrive.



Kelly Sagastume, MSW, (she/her) has been an Associate Youth Ombudsperson since 2025. Before this, she managed Nationalities Service Center's Home Study Post Release Services Program for unaccompanied children. She supervised staff, identified partnership opportunities, and conducted strategic outreach to local service providers. Prior to that role, she served as the Program Manager of Project PROTECT at Support Center for Child Advocates, where she represented child victims of human trafficking in their dependency and criminal proceedings. Kelly founded and convened Philadelphia's Youth Anti-Trafficking Coalition and Youth Survivor Advisory. Board to advocate for

systems-level changes. Kelly is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice where she received her Masters' of Social Work with a specialization in Child Welfare and Child Well-Being. Kelly received her Bachelor's in Sociology from Saint Joseph's University.

OUR HISTORY

TIMELINE

2018–
2019

YOUTH RESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE RECOMMENDED THAT THE OYO BE CREATED

JLC YOUTH ADVOCATES SHARED THEIR PLACEMENT EXPERIENCES WITH CITY COUNCIL

2020–
2021

2021–
2022

THE FORMER MAYOR SIGNED AN EXECUTIVE ORDER THAT CREATED THE OYO

TRACIE JOHNSON, YOUTH OMBUDSPERSON, WAS HIRED, AND THE OYO OFFICIALLY OPENED

April
2023

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).

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 photograph of the Philadelphia City Hall tower, showing its ornate architecture and two large clock faces. The image is used as a background for the title and the first page of text.

JURISDICTION & AUTHORITY

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.

OUR WORK

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

The concern involves a youth safety or well-being issue

The youth is placed in a congregate care facility

The youth's placement is funded by the City of Philadelphia

Our authority is limited to safety and well-being concerns affecting Philadelphia youth. However, when systemic facility issues impact Philadelphia youth, the OYO maintains jurisdiction.

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

1 **Receive a complaint. Conduct an official interview with the complainant and gather information.**

2 **Assess the complaint to determine whether it is within the OYO's scope of work.**

3 **Oversee and monitor the City agency's investigation into the complaint.**

4 **Evaluate the City agency's investigative process and the facility's compliance with any required corrective action steps.**

5 **Make recommendations to both the investigative City agency and the facility, and engage in ongoing monitoring as necessary.**

FACILITY PROGRAMMING

WALTER REED CENTER
NorthEast Treatment Centers
PROGRAM OF HOUSES



OVERVIEW

In 2025, the OYO conducted programming within 22 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. We presented to over 60 youth in placement and surveyed 34 youth on their experiences.

The OYO's facility programming includes an hour-long "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.

This year, with support from the City's Service Design Studio, we integrated our Know Your Rights training and survey into a single interactive "learn-and-share" presentation, using more accessible language and visual supports, which has increased youth engagement, improved survey completion rates, and expanded participation among nonverbal youth.

COLLECTING & ANALYZING

To fulfill its oversight mandate, the OYO maintains a comprehensive data system that draws from multiple sources to monitor conditions, identify systemic issues, and inform accountability across youth residential placements. These sources include OYO complaints, City agency referrals and updates, facility census and placement data, and youth surveys.

Information gathered through interviews, site visits, and surveys provides critical context, helping to explain patterns and elevate youth perspectives. The OYO analyzes this data to identify trends, emerging concerns, and risks that may not be visible through individual complaints alone.

This integrated approach allows the Office to assess youth safety and well-being, monitor disparities, evaluate placement stability, and identify systemic barriers. Findings inform recommendations to providers, agencies, and system partners, including corrective actions, policy reforms, and public reporting.

Key trends, systemwide observations, and aggregate findings are published annually to promote transparency and accountability. The OYO safeguards youth confidentiality by de-identifying information and adhering to all applicable privacy and safety requirements.



DATA

YOUTH RIGHTS SURVEY

In 2025, the OYO delivered “Know Your Rights” programming and administered voluntary, confidential surveys to youth in group homes and juvenile justice placements, receiving 34 responses. Because the survey is used for oversight and quality improvement and not research, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required. This section reflects survey findings from three juvenile justice facilities and 19 group homes. While we conducted observational visits at behavioral health facilities in 2025, formal programming was not implemented in those settings. Expansion is planned for the coming year.

The survey assesses youth safety, belonging, well-being, and access to services, and is grounded in the rights outlined in the Youth Rights Guide and reinforced through OYO training. Youth may decline participation and may provide additional information at their discretion. During survey administration, OYO staff offer assistance and private conversations as needed. As mandated reporters, the team files ChildLine reports when abuse or neglect is disclosed. All responses are tracked to monitor safety, identify patterns, and ensure youth are free from harm, discrimination and receiving appropriate support. The survey data report can be found under the “Publications” section of the OYO’s website.

YOUTH RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT DATA

In 2025, the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Integrated Data for Evidence and Action (IDEA) approved the OYO’s request to formally assume receipt of all youth residential placement data following the disbandment of the Youth Residential Placement Taskforce (YRPT). In October, IDEA generated and submitted comprehensive reports covering FY23, FY24, and FY25, representing the first three fiscal years since the last Taskforce report. The team redacted cell sizes under 10 redacted to protect youth privacy.

The dataset includes detailed demographic and placement indicators, such as age, race, gender, geographic placement, length of stay, and related measures, significantly strengthening the OYO’s capacity to track trends, identify disparities, and fulfill its mandate to monitor equity and outcomes for youth in residential care. The YRPT data report can be found under the “Publications” section of the OYO’s website.



KNOWLEDGE
IS
POWER

CASE

ISSUES

LANGUAGE ACCESS

In June 2025, we received a complaint against Pinkney's Vineyard, a mother-baby group home, stating that Limited English Proficient (LEP) youth were not receiving adequate language access support. After assessing the complaint in conjunction with DHS' Performance Management & Technology team, we learned that bilingual staff are not available for every shift and that the facility relies on Google Translate in lieu of certified interpreters. We also learned that youth sign important documents that are relevant to their care in English. Read our issue report to learn more about how we are addressing this.

SYSTEMIC RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

In March 2025, a concerned parent filed a complaint with our Office regarding her child at Abraxas and how he was not receiving adequate medical care, was being unfairly punished due to outdated and overly strict policies, and more. Through our oversight process, we learned that youth were subject to restraints for failure to follow an order which does not meet the 3800 regulation threshold, that Muslim youth experience barriers to religious practice, Black youth experience discriminatory treatment, and youth are unable to report anonymous grievances. Read our issue report to learn more about how these issues are being addressed.

Stakeholder Presentations

In 2025, we presented to over 200 parents and direct support professionals who support youth in placement. Our team tailored presentations to each audience, educating trusted adults on youth's right in place and facilitating scenario-based exercises to identify issues and welcome participants to file complaints with our office. We conducted presentations for the Defenders' Association, Juvenile Probation, Community Umbrella Agencies, Court Appointed Special Advocates, the Support Center for Child Advocates, and the parent advocacy group within Children First, and more.

City Agency Collaboration

In 2025, we worked with the Service Design Studio to revamp our accessible facility programming. We worked with the Office of the Chief Administrator to design case-management system customized for the OYO. We worked with the Office of Immigrant Affairs to finalize our internal language access plan. We worked with the Office of Muslim Engagement to connect Muslim youth in placement with essential religious materials, resources, and connections. We attend quarterly meetings with Juvenile Assessment Center, to address current issues and trends regarding youth detention. We met regularly with PMT and CBH to address service and quality of care concerns. We worked with IDEA on a data transfer request for youth residential placement data.

Connecting with Youth Partners & Advocates

Alumni advocates with Juvenile Law Center's Advocates for Youth Justice program created an impact video detailing the history of abuses that have occurred in facilities, sharing their personal experiences, and advocating for permanent oversight at the local and state level.



OYO COMPLAINT ACTIVITY

This year the OYO accepted complaints by email, phone, our [online complaint form](#), and during in-person presentations. When the OYO receives a complaint, the team reviews the complaint to ensure that it is within the scope of the office. 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 this year include: poor educational services and support, cultural and religious discrimination, improper use of restraints, inadequate language access support, and inadequate health and medical care. 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 grows. 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
2025	37	14	51
Inception-to-Date (ITD)*	78	35	113

LOOKING FORWARD

TARGETED FACILITY PROGRAMMING

In the year ahead, we will deepen our presence where it matters most. We will launch accessible, rights-based programming inside behavioral health facilities, designed specifically for youth with cognitive disabilities and developmental delays, ensuring every young person understands their rights and how to reach us. We will also expand visits to Pennsylvania's Youth Development Centers, where more than 190 youth are currently housed. No child placed in a setting funded by City of Philadelphia dollars should be beyond independent oversight.

BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY

To continue to meet our ever-large mandate, we strengthened our team by hiring a new Associate Youth Ombudsman to expand facility programming, case management, and community outreach. We also look forward to onboarding a social work intern to support data analysis and strategic communications. Increased capacity means faster responses, stronger investigations, and more systemic reform driven by what youth tell us.

MAKING THE OYO PERMANENT!

In December 2025, Councilmember Jamie Gauthier introduced legislation to amend the City Charter and make the Office of the Youth Ombudsman permanent. The bill passed the Philadelphia City Council, and was signed by Cherelle Parker on March 5, 2026. On May 19th, 192,912 Philadelphia voters said yes to making the OYO permanent. We look forward to enabling legislation being passed to codify duties for the OYO, city agencies, and providers.

This moment is bigger than one office. It is a declaration that children in congregate care deserve independent oversight that lasts.

GOT A

COMPLAINT?

REACH OUT.

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!**

*We shouldn't
let our past define us.
Nor should we
shut the door on it.
Our experience
is what will allow us
to be helpful.*



It is our testimony

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