



OCTOBER 2025

Committed Youth Awaiting Placement in the D.C. Youth Services Center

ABOUT CCE

The Council for Court Excellence—CCE—is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded over 40 years ago whose mission is to bring people together to conduct research, educate, and advocate to make D.C.’s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community.

We envision a D.C. where individuals, organizations, and government work together to build safe and thriving communities with a trusted legal system that meets the needs of its people, protects their rights, and promotes dignity and justice for all.



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Introduction

While considerable attention has been focused recently on illegal behavior by young people in D.C., little is known about the circumstances of the subset of those youth who are held in the custody of the government following their arrest and court hearing. In D.C., a person under the age of 18 is generally defined to be a “child” and, except as noted below, if charged with a criminal offense will have their case heard in the Family Division of the Superior Court. The youth who are adjudicated delinquent in D.C. Superior Court and subsequently committed to the custody of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) can be placed in a variety of settings away from home, such as a group home or a secure facility.

While waiting to be assigned by DYRS to one of these placements, youth are housed at the Youth Service Center (YSC), which is intended to be a short-term facility for youth held pre-adjudication (that is similar to “pretrial” in the adult system). Data from the past several years showed wait times for some placements that were several months long; and unlike D.C.’s other secure facility for committed youth, New Beginnings, YSC is not designed to meet the comprehensive rehabilitative and youth development needs of its residents.¹

To better understand the issue of youth awaiting placement at YSC, in 2024 the D.C. Juvenile Justice Advisory Group (JJAG) – the state administering agency of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act which provides active consultation to the Mayor and government agencies – identified the issue of youth waiting too long for proper placements as a priority to be understood and addressed. At JJAG’s prompting, the Council for Court Excellence (CCE), a nonpartisan nonprofit focused on making D.C.’s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community, began a short-term information collection and evaluation project to provide a synthesis of this topic to the JJAG, policymakers, and other community partners. CCE spent several months, beginning in fall 2024, collecting information on significant barriers to swiftly and appropriately



placing youth, as well as compiling pragmatic solutions and/or practice improvements that could decrease the length of time and the number of committed youth held at YSC. This report summarizes the findings.

The information for this report was gathered in two distinct ways. First, CCE facilitated two meetings with agencies and members of JJAG. The first meeting was held during the regular JJAG monthly meeting on October 1, 2024. The second was a 4-hour workgroup session held in person on October 23, 2024, where the following agencies and entities were represented:

- Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children DC (CASA)
- Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC)
- Department of Behavioral Health (DBH)
- Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Family Court Social Services Division (CSSD)
- Juvenile Justice Advisory Group (JJAG)
- Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)
- Office of the Attorney General (OAG)
- Office of the City Administrator
- Open City Advocates (OCA)
- Parent Watch
- Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (PDS)
- Youth Leaders in Action (YLA)

DYRS was invited and encouraged to participate but declined.

Second, to capture the perspectives of youth both currently and previously awaiting placement at YSC, CCE conducted a limited questionnaire in partnership with attorneys who currently or previously represented these youth. The questionnaire was completed by 23 individuals who had recently spent time at YSC awaiting placement, as well as by 16 committed youth (out of 25) housed at YSC in January 2025. A methodology is included in the Appendix.

This report is divided into three sections: a) “Issue at a Glance” which gives a brief overview of the youth justice system and the scope of the youth awaiting placement issue; b) “Barriers to Placement” which explores issues contributing to and potential solutions to the wait times for youth awaiting placement that were raised by members of the JJAG; and c) “Youth Experiences” which shares responses from youth who were or are held at the YSC about their experiences.

This report is not intended to be a complete primer on the D.C. criminal or youth legal systems, all of the terminology used in those systems, or the many other challenges or disparities faced in those systems. Rather, this report is designed to improve the understanding of D.C. officials, advocates, and the public regarding the scope of the particular issue of youth awaiting placement, potential solutions, and grounding the importance of addressing the issue in the experience of impacted youth.

A. Issue at a Glance

The Youth Services Center (YSC) is a facility in Northeast D.C. designed for the short-term, pre-adjudication detention of youth. Once youth are adjudicated delinquent in D.C. Superior Court, they can either be put on probation under the supervision of CSSD or committed to the custody of DYRS. Whether a youth is committed – as opposed to being diverted to services or placed on probation – is determined by the judges, with recommendations from CSSD and OAG. If committed, youth can be placed in a variety of placements, including psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs), which are generally for youth with the highest level of mental health needs, group homes, foster care, and secure residential facilities, such as DYRS' New Beginnings Youth Development Center (NB), where the “general population” of committed youth are held.

It is DYRS's responsibility to meet the rehabilitative needs of these youth, in the least restrictive setting necessary.² However, YSC does not have the structure and programmatic offerings to meet the youth development and rehabilitative needs of youth. While waiting to be assigned to one of these placements by DYRS, youth continue to be housed at YSC; data from the past several years show that sometimes this can be for months.³

Figure 1: Flowchart of the D.C. Juvenile Justice System

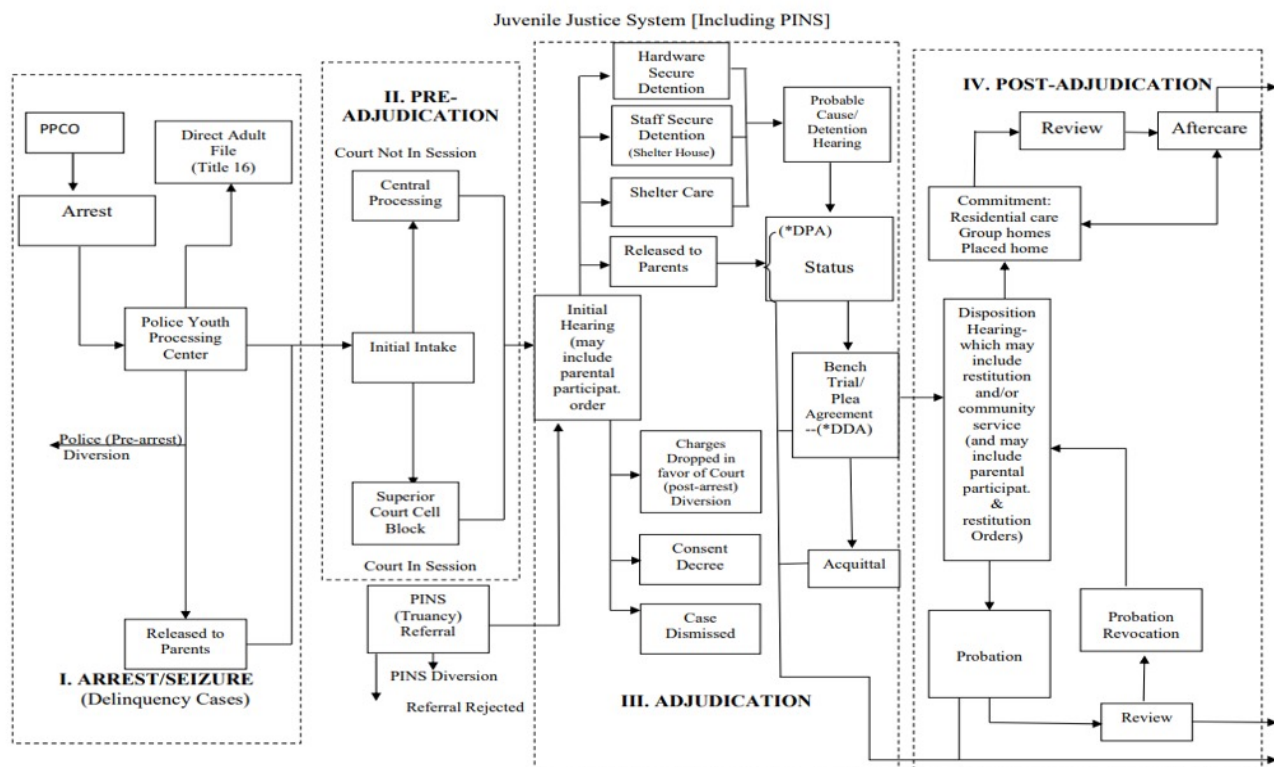


Figure 1 source: The Office of the D.C. Attorney General. Youth who are awaiting placement are in the post-adjudication stage (IV), after disposition but prior to being physically committed to a placement in residential case, a group home, placed home etc.).

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

Racial disparities persist in the population of youth under supervision in D.C. in general, and the subset of committed youth specifically, with Black males making up the vast majority of committed youth. In 2023, Black males made up 86% of the committed.⁴ As of May 21, 2025, all committed youth held at YSC were Black.⁵ For context, Black youth comprise 52% of all youth in D.C.⁶

Recent testimony and other published information has raised concerns about the conditions of youth awaiting placement at YSC.⁷ This has included lengthy wait times for placement in a facility with limited programming and out-of-cell time. An October 2024 lawsuit filed by PDS alleges that DYRS has failed its legal obligation to meet the needs of youth in the least restrictive environment, resulting in multiple youth awaiting placement at YSC.⁸ The Public Defender Service (PDS) noted in recent testimony before the D.C. Council that some programming, such as life skills and behavioral health instruction, is usually delivered through worksheets rather than in-person instruction. Additionally, it was reported that all youth at YSC who need regular mental health services, such as talk therapy, cannot access them. This is of particular concern given high rates of mental health disorders among incarcerated youth, and that having a mental illness is associated with a variety of negative outcomes for these young people, including high rates of rearrest, adjudications and convictions; decreased chance of graduation high school; and lasting health impacts.⁹

The District has had a history of poor conditions in youth facilities, including the decades-long Jerry M. case which detailed overcrowding, exposure to violence and a lack of programming, which resulted in a settlement and establishment of a court monitor; when the case was closed, the District replaced the court monitor with its successor, the Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight (OIJJFO).¹⁰ As of September 2025, permanent oversight of DYRS was created in the Recidivism Reduction at DYRS Amendment Act of 2024, but that oversight has not been funded and the OIJJFO has ceased to operate.¹¹

Recent litigation and reports suggest that despite the Jerry M. case being closed, these issues have not been resolved. A lawsuit detailed a 2024 incident in which a 14-year-old youth's jaw was broken in multiple places after being punched in the face by staff at DYRS while at YSC at 14 years old.¹² A 2025 report by Disability Rights DC found that YSC utilizes prohibited seclusion practices and use of restraints, as well as other dangerous practices.¹³

Critical incident and assault rates from YSC provide further insight into the conditions youth face at YSC. In general, critical incident rates at YSC are higher than at NB. There has been an increase year over year, with 20 or more youth-on-youth assaults at YSC every month for the past year (August 2024 – August 2025), with the highest number of assaults – 45 – occurring in May 2025.¹⁴

Figure 2: Average Number of Youth-on-Youth assaults per month at YSC, 2023–2025

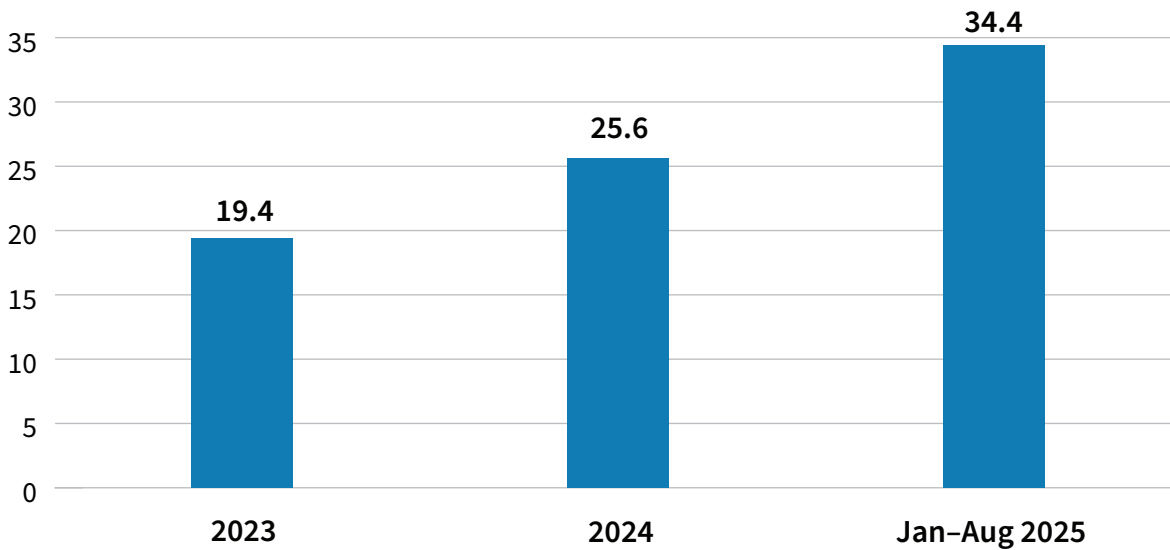


Figure 2 source: CCE Analysis of DYRS and Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight data, dysr.dc.gov/page/data-1.

POPULATION DATA

The population of committed youth awaiting placement at YSC has fluctuated from about 20 to up to 40 youth over 2024 and mid 2025; see Table 1.¹⁵ This generally has equated to about 25% of the total YSC population, which has ballooned to 117 (in a facility with 98 beds) as of June 6, 2025.

Table 1: Number of Committed Youth at Youth Services Center

Date	# of Youth Awaiting Placement
1/1/2024	21
2/13/2024	41
7/29/2024	36
8/9/2024	30
10/26/24	22
1/27/25	27
6/4/25	32
10/9/25	35

Table 1 source: Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight, DYRS.

A more in-depth analysis of the trends of both the number of committed youth over time and their average length of stay (from January 1, 2023 to May 15, 2025) was provided by OIJFO from data accessed from the FAMCare dashboard, where some D.C. government agencies such as DYRS track case management related data. During that time, the number of youth fluctuated from below 15 to as many as 41 at a time held at YSC.

In looking at length of stay for committed youth in 2025 specifically, on January 1, 2025, the median length of stay was 30 days. While there were some small dips and rises as youth were admitted or released, there was a general upward trend in the median length of stay in the first quarter of 2025, through with the median length of stay (LOS) on March 28 being 56 days. (See Table 2); on that date, one in four committed youth had been in YSC 104 days or longer. Near the end of March, DYRS began housing some youth awaiting placement to New Beginnings due to YSC being significantly over capacity.

Table 2: Length of Stay in Days of Committed Youth at YSC, 1/1/25–3/28/25

	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	Maximum
1/1/2025	20	30	63	127
2/1/2025	10	33	53	121
3/1/2025	33	50	83	149
3/28/2025	16	56	104	169

Table 2 source: Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight based on FAMCare Data.

As Figure 3 below shows, DYRS online data shows that among youth admitted from June 2021 - April 2025, there were eight months in which one or more youth were in YSC over 200 days, and 20 months where youth were held 100–200 days.

Figure 3: Longest Length of Stay of Any Committed Youth, by Month of Admission

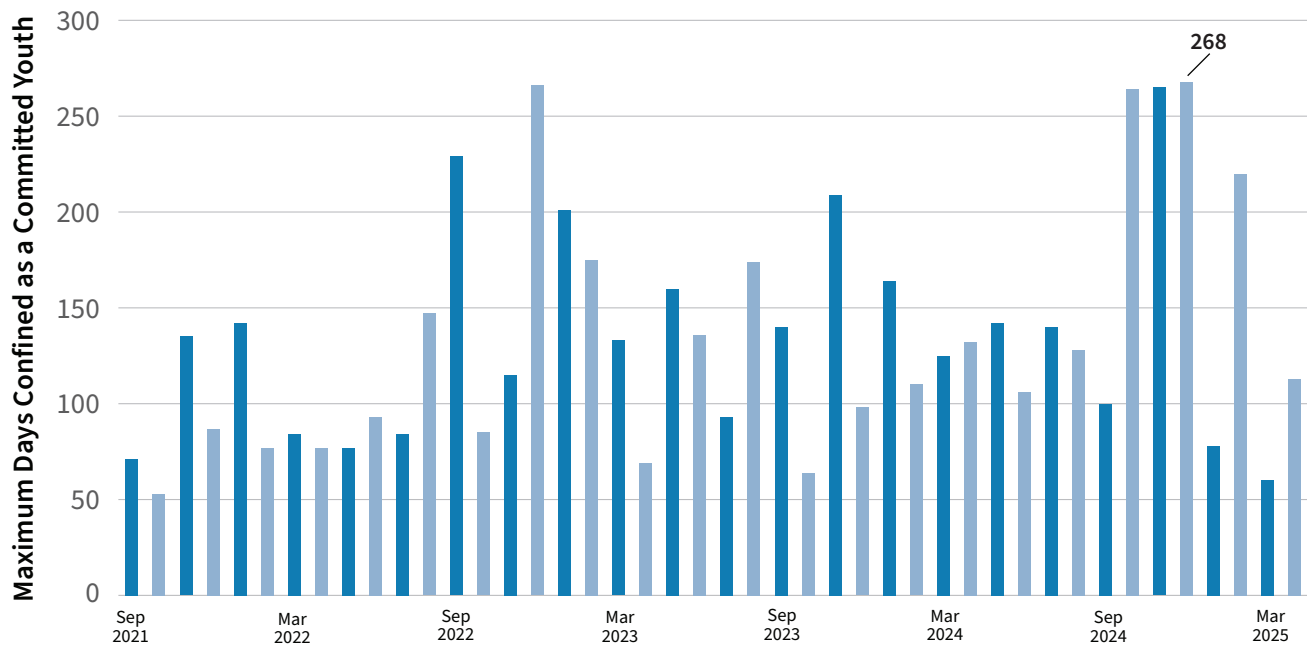


Figure 3 source: D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, <https://dyrs.dc.gov/page/data-1>.

In a March 2025 D.C. Council hearing, DYRS reported the average length of stay data for committed youth awaiting placement in FY24 was 72 days, and for Quarter 1 of FY2025 it was 71 days. In its March 6, 2025, Performance Oversight Hearing responses to the D.C. Council, DYRS shared an overview of both the number of youth and types of placements they were waiting for in the previous month:

“As of February 14, 2025, there are 27 youth awaiting placement at YSC. Of those 27 youth, 7 are awaiting for admission to a residential treatment facility (RTC) or psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF), 1 awaiting placement in an inpatient drug treatment program, 1 awaiting placement in a Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) placement, 5 pending admission to New Beginnings Youth Development Center (NB), and 13 have not been accepted to a placement.”¹⁶

B. Barriers to Placement

A plethora of issues were identified as contributing to the long lengths of stay in YSC for youth awaiting placement. The following areas were raised and discussed during the interagency and community workgroup meetings with the JJAG. The description of the issues and the proposed solutions are based on the experiences of and feedback from the agency or nonprofit staff in those discussions (hereinafter “participants”) but were not an endorsement of any specific solution from a particular agency or JJAG.

LIMITED AVAILABLE PLACEMENTS

Agency staff shared that there are limited numbers of placements available for D.C. youth. Therefore, youth may be made to wait while an appropriate placement site is located for them. Many times, placements may be “out of state” given the limited options located in D.C. For example, there is no PRTF in D.C.

Participants also reported that out-of-state facilities may not have space for, or want to admit, D.C. youth. Some agency staff reported that these facilities find administering D.C. youth placements to be too cumbersome, with delays in the District making payments. D.C.’s reimbursement rates also may not be competitive; reportedly some states won’t accept the low rate the D.C. Department of Healthcare Finance (DHCF) offers, or the facility may limit the number of D.C. youth they will accept.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Create a detailed provider list to assess all available options for youth.
- Enact monthly data sharing between agencies (including DYRS, CSSD, DHCF) about placement options.
- Analyze and compare rates for placements to assess whether D.C.’s are competitive.
- Analyze appropriateness of placements to ensure youth are receiving appropriate levels of services and treatment.
- Build capacity to create a larger provider pool.
- Invest in community-based supports and services.
- Include parents in placement conversations.

MEDICAID AND OTHER PAYMENTS

Historically, youth who are in a correctional facility, such as YSC is considered under the law, are not eligible for Medicaid; in D.C., it is suspended and then reactivated when they leave incarceration. (With the full federal implementation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, youth would have increased access to Medicaid while incarcerated.¹⁷) However, PRTFs are not considered incarceration, and therefore Medicaid can be used to pay for these placements. While D.C. could pay 100% of the cost for PRTFs directly, using Medicaid allows D.C. to pay only 20% of the total costs; as a result, the District is holding youth in YSC until their Medicaid can be reactivated.

Additionally, a federal requirement that families reapply to Medicaid annually has resulted in lapses in coverage for some youth; they are also being held in YSC until recertification is complete, which many reported is done to save the District money. Given that Medicaid-funded facilities are considered healthcare, participants in CCE's meetings questioned whether, if psychiatric care is indicated for youth, it is appropriate for D.C. to delay healthcare by holding youth at YSC while awaiting insurance coverage.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Create a partnership with DBH, DHS and CSSD to lead an in-service training on Medicaid.
- Provide system navigators to demystify Medicaid process for families.
- Incorporate the following questions into CSSD's intake with youth:
1) Do you have Medicaid? 2) Is it active? 3) What is your Medicaid ID number?
- Provide assistance to youth or families from either DHCF or DYRS in Medicaid recertification process.
- Provide CSS staff with training on how to support families in understanding Medicaid eligibility.

Given that there are significant changes currently proposed to Medicaid coverage in the District and nationally, it will be important moving forward to ensure that both agencies and families are aware of how this might affect eligibility for committed youth.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS

Multiple types of DYRS placements require specific psychological evaluations to be completed prior to placement. These include group homes, residential treatment facilities, therapeutic foster care and PRTFs. There also are other types of evaluations that may be required: psychiatric evaluation, psychological evaluation, and psychoeducational evaluation. The process to obtain these evaluations does not start until youth is adjudicated and can take weeks or months to be completed. While the recently-passed Recidivism Reduction at DYRS Amendment Act of 2024 may lead to some evaluations and assessments being conducted earlier, DYRS has indicated that it would need additional staff to implement these provisions. Additionally, it was reported that some youth may be assessed and evaluated multiple times by different entities, but due to information-sharing restrictions and/or gaps, this clinical information is not being utilized in the most efficient or effective ways.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Improve interagency collaboration and information sharing between DYRS, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) to ensure evaluations are only being done when needed. For example, schools likely already have done evaluations for students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
- Create a standard best practice for when an evaluation or assessment occurs to prevent duplication.
- Include in the best practices clarity on when/whether a full evaluation is needed or just an update to an existing one.
- Ensure there is actually a need for new evaluations, as best practice is to only do them once a year.

BASIC IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS

Certain legal documents are required for youth to be placed, including their birth certificate and Social Security card. Securing these can take time and effort, depending on the individual youth or family situation. The costs to obtain these are also an additional burden and a barrier for families, and some youth do not have familial support for either navigating the bureaucratic process or the cost.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Implement document assistance from CSSD after intake.
- Enact interagency collaboration with schools to access documents.
- Facilitate priority access for juvenile justice agencies to necessary records.
- Create vouchers for families to access these documents. (For example, it was reported that the D.C. homelessness system has developed a system to provide vouchers through the Department of Motor Vehicles.)

DISPOSITION PROCESS

Some participants suggested that commitments for some youth may be due to their need for treatment and services, rather than because they pose a risk that would indicate a need for incarceration. Additionally, those familiar with court processes said there is insufficient case planning time built in to thoroughly investigate and determine the best option for a specific youth; this can lead judges to commit a youth prior to CSSD making a recommendation, meaning all alternatives have not been explored. Participants felt that in some cases, judges may use the Notice of Intent to Recommend Commitment (NOITRC) in order to better explore what commitment would look like for a specific young person, as compared to probation. Once the NOITRC is filed by CSSD, the pre-commitment phase begins where DYRS Care Planning and Coordination Team works to determine the most appropriate plan, including possible placements, for a youth.¹⁸ Participants suggested that commitment options be explored prior to the intent to commit, in order to keep less-restrictive options open longer.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Engage with youth and family immediately on system contact to assess their needs.
- Begin identification of needs, collaboration and communications across agencies earlier.
- Standardize the process for the NOITC.
- Prepare required placement recommendation predisposition and include it with NOITC.
- Begin handoff of youth's case from CSSD to DYRS earlier.
- Complete individualized pre-commitment plans with DYRS, youth, and family earlier.
- Increase community based and less restrictive placement options.
- Engage with preventive systems to be proactive in addressing potential future engagement in system.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

Navigating involvement in the juvenile justice system is a confusing prospect for both youth and families, that often lacks transparency. Not understanding what is happening with a case can lead to youth lashing out and potentially even getting infractions in YSC. Further contributing to the lack of transparency is that the work is often siloed by different agencies.

Proposed Solutions and Related Improvements:

- Increase family engagement and system transparency prior to a youth coming in contact with the system. For example, implementing a public information campaign about the system.
- Replicate the CFSA Youth Family meeting model and hold such meetings in both the pre and post disposition phase. Currently, these family engagement meetings are siloed between agencies, and reportedly lack the needed in depth, meaningful family engagement. CSSD coordinates Family Group Conference (FGC) with family and support organizations during the trial or adjudication phase specific to create an action plan specific to a youth's needs.¹⁹ DYRS holds Youth Family Team Meetings (YFTMs) specific to placement and service plans for youth once committed.²⁰
- Begin CSSD and DYRS partnering upstream, in preparation for a youth being committed.
- Ensure the relationship between agencies and families is foundational, starting early and continuing throughout system engagement.

C. Youth Experiences While Awaiting Placement

In addition, CCE sought to understand the first-hand experiences of youth who were previously or were currently held (in January 2025) at the Youth Services Center (YSC) post-commitment while awaiting placement. The feedback shared below is based on the experiences of and responses from directly-impacted youth via an anonymous and attorney-facilitated survey (hereinafter “respondents”).

LENGTH OF STAY & PLACEMENT ISSUES

To assess the average length of stay for youth awaiting placement at YSC, respondents were asked to report the number of months they have been, or had previously been, held at the facility. This information allowed CCE to quantify the “dead time”—the period during which youth are held at YSC without that time counting toward their sentence—accrued while awaiting placement. The data also served to substantiate the persistent delays in the placement process.

The tables below show the number of months respondents committed to YSC were held, both for those currently in YSC as of January 2025 and for those previously held in recent years. Notably, seven of the 16 respondents who completed the questionnaire who were held in January reported being at YSC for seven months or longer.

Figure 4: Number of Months Youth Held at YSC During January 2025 Had Been Held Awaiting Placement at Time of Questionnaire

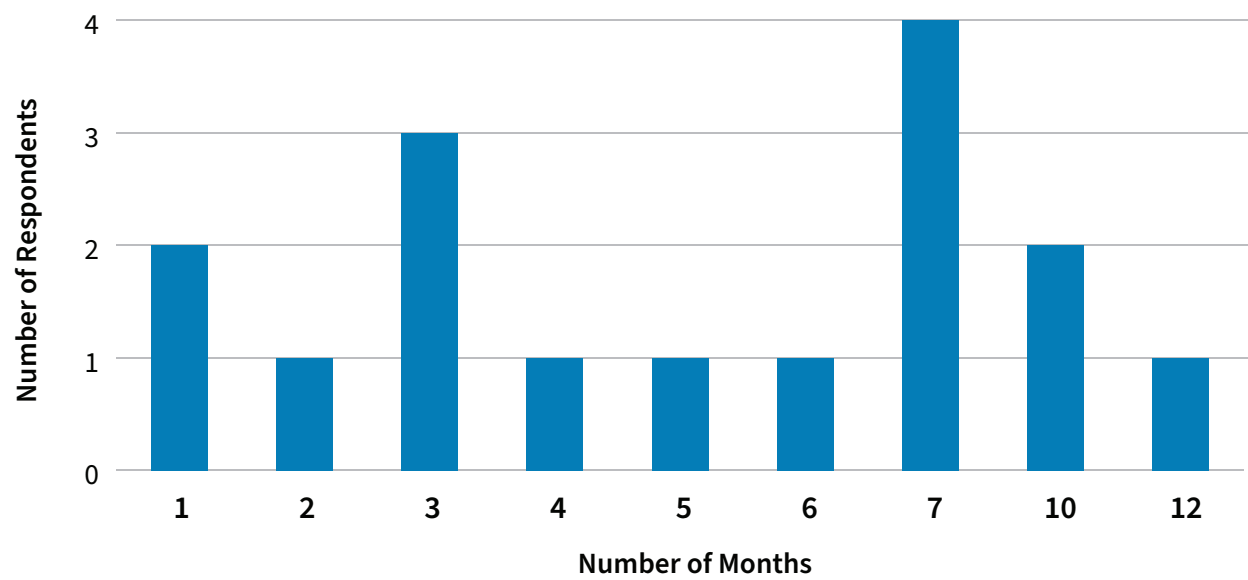


Figure 4 source: CCE analysis of questionnaire responses of youth awaiting placement in YSC, January 2025.

**Figure 5: Number of Months Youth Held at YSC Prior to January 2025
Were Held Awaiting Placement**

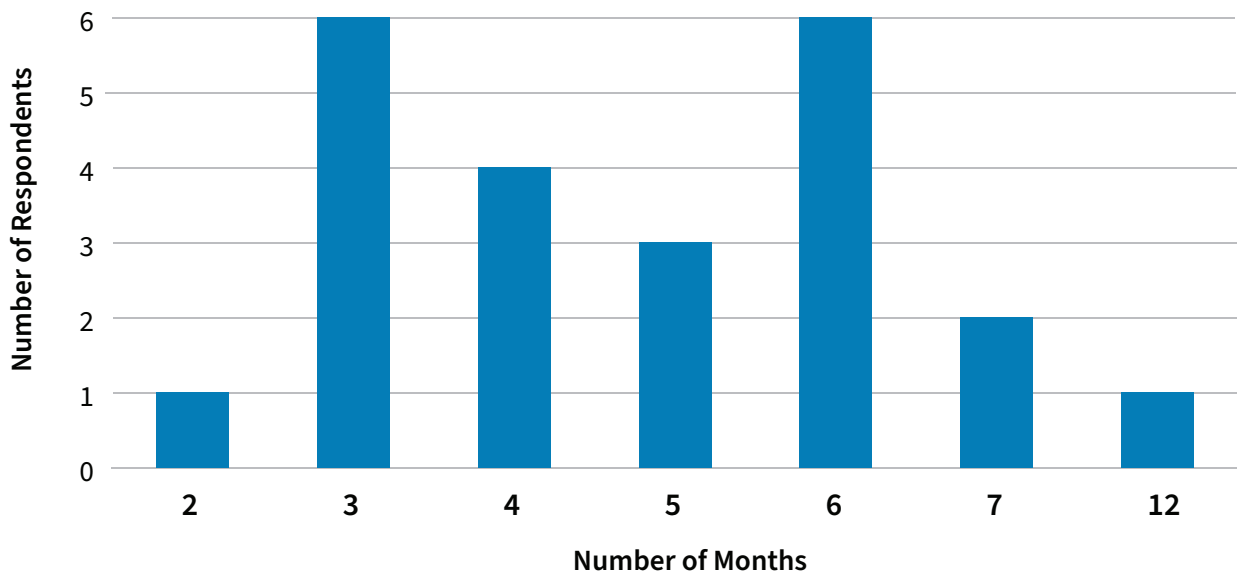


Figure 5 source: CCE analysis of questionnaire responses of youth held while awaiting placement, prior to January 2025.

YOUTH UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR STATUS

The questionnaire revealed that many youth do not have a clear understanding of why they continue to be held at YSC after their commitment. Among those who had previously awaited placement at YSC, 58% reported that they did not know why they were still at YSC, while just over a quarter stated that they understood they were being held while waiting for placement but were not aware of the specific reason for the delay. Only 21% of respondents knew the exact cause of their prolonged stay, citing factors such as payment issues, assessment requirements, abscondence concerns, and complications related to interstate compact agreements.

For youth who were still awaiting placement at the time of the questionnaire, all respondents indicated that they understood they were awaiting placement, but only 25% (four of 16) reported knowing the specific reason for their delay. This greater awareness of being held while awaiting placement in youth currently at YSC could be due to some improvements in awareness among youth currently held at YSC, or that they completed the questionnaire with their attorneys present. A lack of understanding of the specific reason why they were being held indicates that a communication gap persists. The lack of transparency regarding placement timelines and delays creates uncertainty and frustration for youth who have already been committed and are awaiting transfer to a more appropriate setting.

These responses underscore the need for clearer communication and more structured case management to ensure that youth and their legal representatives are fully informed about the factors influencing placement delays. Greater transparency in this process is essential to reduce confusion and ensure that youth are not left in prolonged detention due to administrative inefficiencies or systemic barriers. One approach to create this communication would be Family Court consistently appointing specialized attorneys from the Post-Commitment Panel are appointed to assist committed youth with navigating the juvenile justice system.

LEGAL ACCESS & CASE COMMUNICATION

Some respondents indicated issues with accessing legal representation and communication about their cases while held at YSC. Among 23 youth who were previously held at YSC, three reported that a DYRS staff member had told them they could not speak with their lawyer. While more specific details about those claims are not known, several youth reported this raises concerns about the consistency of protection of legal rights and due process for justice-involved youth.

In addition to legal access, the questionnaire sought to understand whom these youth believed they could turn to for information about their case. Respondents were allowed to select multiple sources. Among the 21 youth who had previously been held at YSC and responded to this question, most (15) identified their lawyer or PDS as their primary source of case-related information. However, three youth named a specific DYRS employee, one listed the Juvenile Justice Institutional Counselor (JJIC), and three reported that they believed “nobody” could answer their questions.

Among the 16 youth who were still at YSC at the time of the questionnaire, a similar pattern emerged. Twelve indicated that their lawyer or PDS was their primary source of information, while five named a specific DYRS employee. Additionally, one youth reported relying on their social worker, two mentioned their case worker, two identified the JJIC, and two stated that they had no one to turn to for case-related inquiries. This all suggests that, while many youths recognize their legal representatives as their primary advocates, a concerning number remain uncertain about who can provide them with accurate and timely information about their case.

FAMILY CONTACT & VISITATION

Maintaining communication with family members is critical for the well-being and rehabilitation of justice-involved youth. The questionnaire responses highlight varying levels of access to family contact among committed youth at YSC. Among the 22 respondents who were previously held at YSC, 12 reported speaking with their family a few times a week, while only five had unrestricted phone access. Similarly, among the 12 youth who were still at YSC at the time of the questionnaire, ten indicated that they spoke with their family multiple times a week, yet only one had unrestricted phone access. These findings suggest that while most youth have some opportunity to maintain family connections, phone access remains limited for many.

In terms of in-person visitation, responses varied. Among the 21 youth who were previously at YSC, ten reported seeing their family members a few times a month, while six stated that they only had the opportunity to visit with family once or twice. Among the 15 respondents who were still at YSC at the time of the questionnaire, nine reported seeing their families a few times a week, yet one youth reported never receiving visits. These results underscore the importance of consistent and meaningful family contact—not only because strong support networks contribute to successful reentry and long-term outcomes, but also because family engagement can help expedite placement by facilitating the resolution of administrative barriers, such as obtaining vital documents or addressing gaps in records. If youth do not have family who are able to visit, DYRS should consider other ways to ensure they have positive interactions with caring adults outside of staff; this could include Credible Messengers or other mentors.

EDUCATION & PROGRAMMING

In its initial identification of this persistent and important issue, JJAG members expressed interest in better understanding the daily conditions for committed youth held at YSC. To that end, the questionnaire asked youth about what programs they had access to and how frequently they were able to participate. Nearly all youth who completed the questionnaire – 21 out of 23 of youth who spent time awaiting placement at YSC before January 2025 and all 16 at YSC in January 2025 – reported attending school daily. However, alternative programming opportunities were severely lacking. Among those previously held at YSC, 81% reported no participation in any activities beyond school. This percentage improved among those in YSC in January 2025; however, half (8 of 16) reported not participating in additional programming.

Additionally, for the percentage of youth who did report participating in non-school activities, the frequency of program attendance or offerings was limited and/or sporadic. Among the 21 youth who were previously held at YSC, only one participated in additional programming every day, while another participated a few times a month. Two others engaged in programming only once or twice. Participation by youth currently at YSC was also inconsistent. Among 16 respondents, five reported participating in programming every day, two engaged a few times a week, and one participated a few times a month.

Figure 6: Responses on Programming from Youth Previously Awaiting Placement at YSC

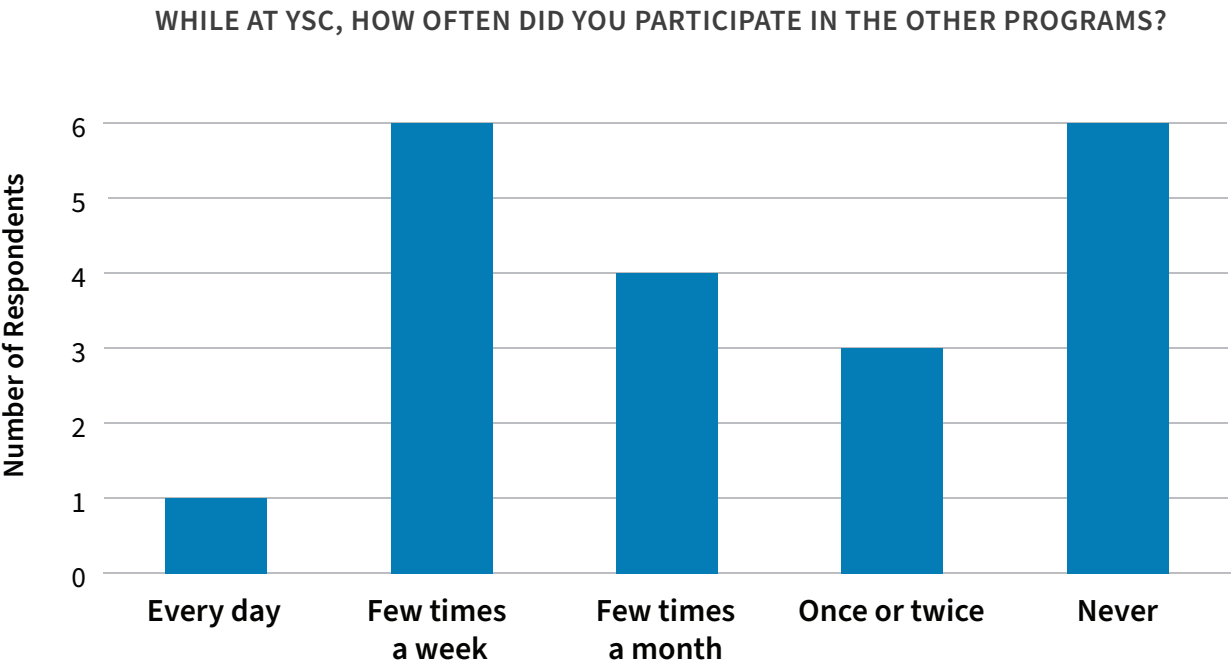


Figure 6 source: CCE Analysis of questionnaire responses of youth previously awaiting placement in YSC, prior to January 2025.

Additionally, some respondents who did report participating in programming counted essential mental health services or brief daily group sessions as their only form of engagement. While these resources are essential, they do not replace robust, developmentally appropriate programming that fosters skill-building and personal growth. The lack of structured activities exacerbates the negative effects of prolonged detention, underscoring the urgent need for expanded and consistent programming options for youth awaiting placement.

Figure 7: Responses on Programming from Youth Awaiting Placement at YSC in January 2025

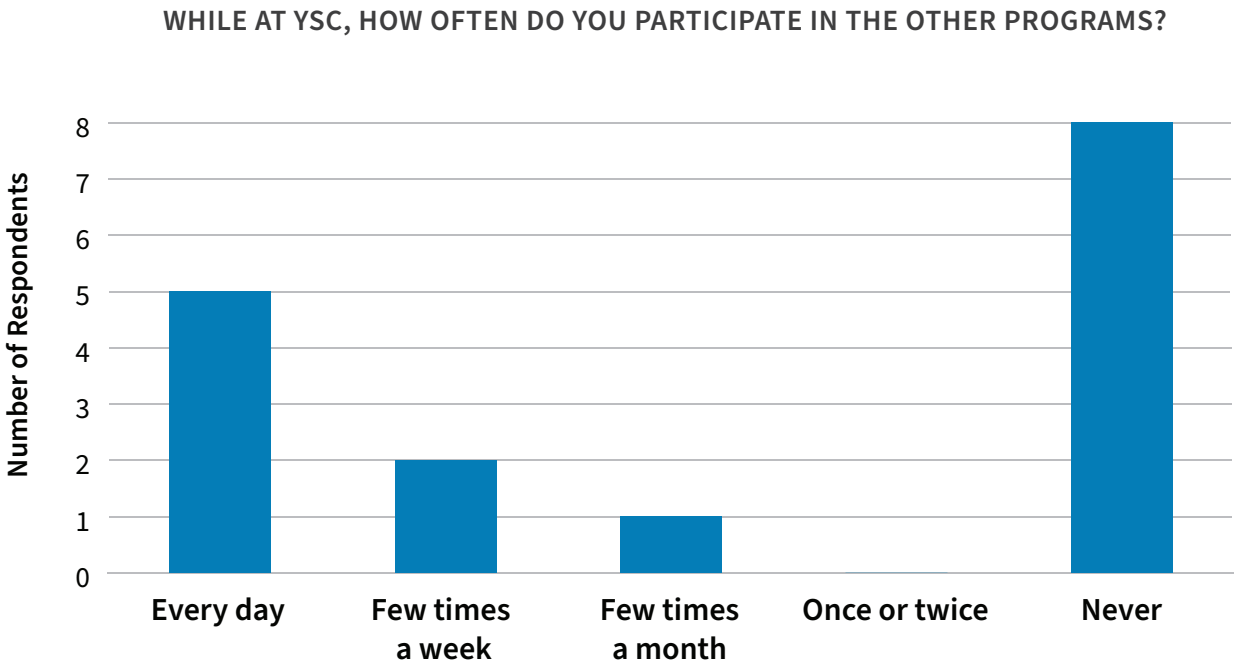


Figure 7 source: CCE analysis of questionnaire responses of youth awaiting placement in YSC, January 2025.

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Youth awaiting placement at YSC reported varying levels of perceived safety. Among 23 respondents who were previously held at YSC, only three stated that they always or almost always felt safe, while another three rated their safety as low (1 or 2 on a scale of 5). Among youth currently at YSC, a greater share (seven of 16) felt always or almost always safe, whereas three gave low safety ratings. These responses illuminate the differences in perceived security within the facility, with some youth feeling protected while others experience a persistent sense of vulnerability. Attorneys facilitating the questionnaire shared they believed youth reporting feeling unsafe would be higher if the attorney was not facilitating the questionnaire. Ongoing safety concerns in the facility include the aforementioned incident rates, but also the continued overcrowding of the Youth Services Center, which as of October 3, 2025 had 113 youth housed in the 88 bed facility.²¹

Figure 8: Questionnaire Responses on Safety from Youth Previously Awaiting Placement at YSC

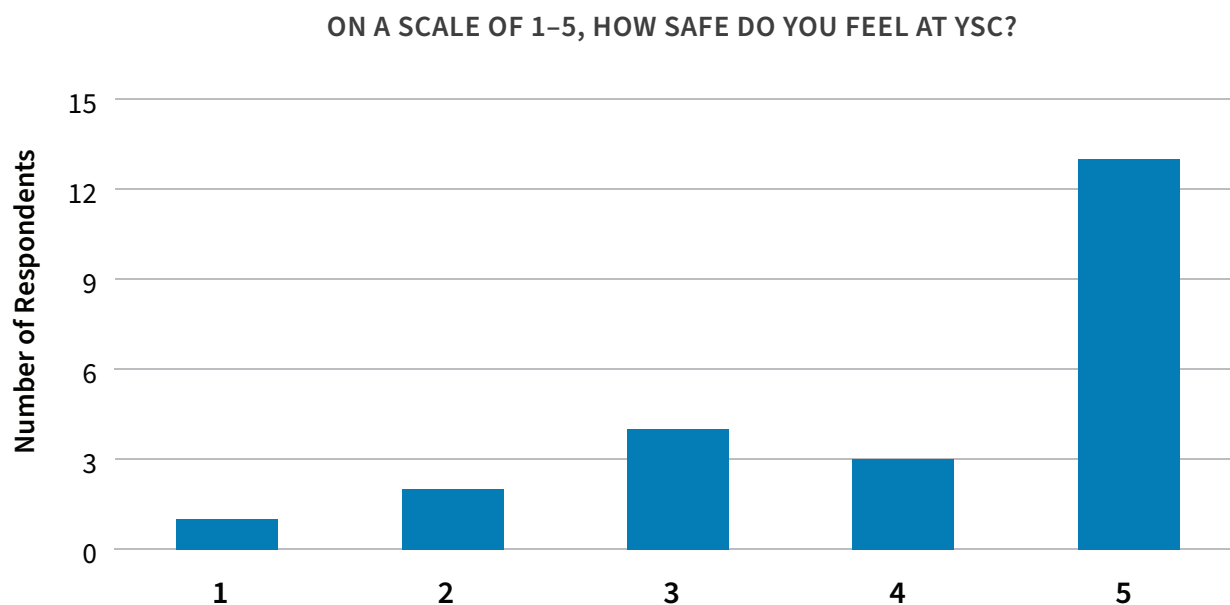


Figure 8 source: CCE analysis of questionnaire responses of youth awaiting placement in YSC, January 2025.

Figure 9: Questionnaire Responses on Safety from Youth Awaiting Placement at YSC in January 2025

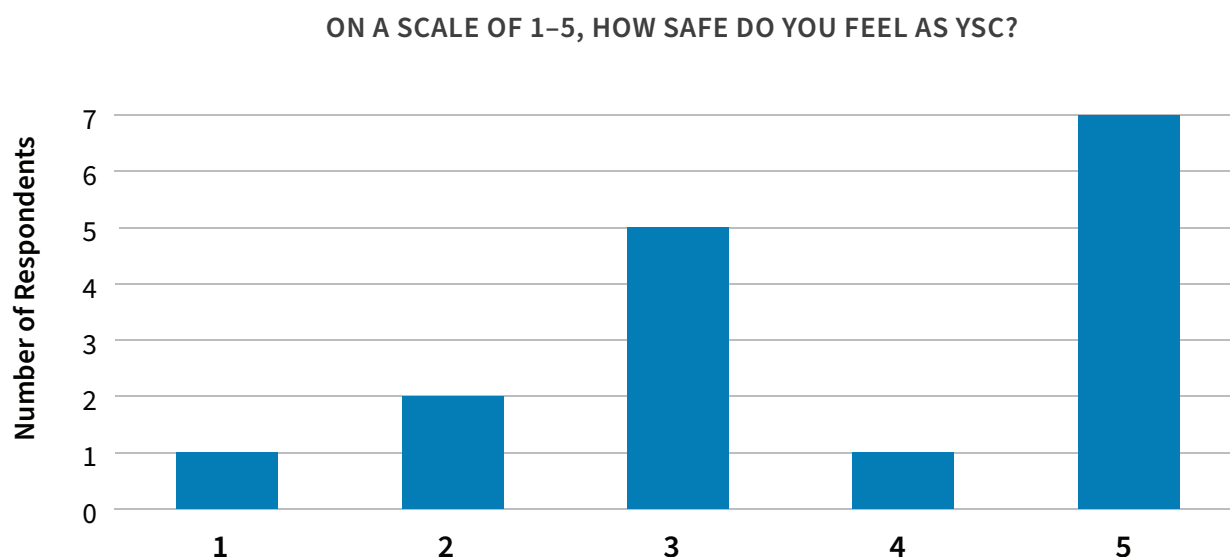


Figure 9 source: CCE analysis of questionnaire of youth held while awaiting placement, prior to January 2025.

BASIC NEEDS & LIVING CONDITIONS

Compounding these placement challenges, many respondents at YSC awaiting placement reported concerns about their living conditions. While respondents previously at YSC primarily identified delays in placement as their greatest frustration, those at YSC in January 2025 described a range of issues related to their basic needs and daily experiences. Among 14 youth in YSC in January awaiting placement, 64% cited poor living conditions as a major challenge, compared to just 5% of those previously held. Key concerns included inadequate food (three respondents), ill-fitting or unclean clothing (two respondents), and understaffing (one respondent).

Additionally, while only one respondent in YSC before January 2025 cited lack of medical access as a concern, this issue, along with other basic needs deficiencies, was more frequently reported among youth currently at YSC. In other words, beyond the legal and procedural delays affecting placement, conditions within the facility are contributing to heightened distress among youth who remain in limbo.

TIME SPENT IN CONFINEMENT & PROGRAM ACCESS

For many youth, prolonged confinement at YSC exacerbates their frustration, particularly due to limited access to programs and activities. Youth in YSC prior to January 2025 primarily expressed concerns about uncertainty surrounding their placement rather than the facility's conditions. However, those held at YSC in January 2025 pointed to issues such as excessive time spent in their rooms or cells (four respondents), inadequate phone access (five respondents), and limited program availability (one respondent).

In total, of the 25 responses from the 14 youth in YSC in January 2025, 16 (64%) cited concerns related to living conditions. By contrast, of the 21 responses from youth who were in YSC earlier, only one (5%) referenced living conditions as a major challenge. This contrast reveals the pressing need to address both placement delays and facility conditions, as both have significant implications for the well-being of youth awaiting placement.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS & GOALS FOR THE FUTURE OF YOUTH JUSTICE

The stakeholders convened in the 2024 workgroups emphasized the need for long-term reforms to not only address youth awaiting placement, but to improve the systems interacting with youth overall.

Long-term Recommendations:

- Assess appropriateness of placements for each child, not just availability.
- Routinely track and share data across agencies.
- Improve DYRS data collection.
- Improve agency collaboration throughout the process to increase positive outcomes for kids.
- Require accountability for decision making from adults and agencies, not just youth, to provide better outcomes for kids.
- Create meaningful programming at YSC which contributes to a youth's rehabilitation.

At the end of the October 2024 workgroup, participants were asked to identify their hopes for the future of youth justice. The following hopes to lead to a more perfect system rose to the top:

- There is support for kids on the front end with a focus on prevention.
- The community has the resources they need to support kids.
- There is increased funding for and development of local placements.
- Families and youth are centered in every process.

CONCLUSION

In addition to outlining long-term goals, the 2024 workgroup conversations initiated a vital dialogue on actionable, short-term strategies to reduce long periods of time at YSC for committed youth awaiting placement. At the heart of these discussions were recurring calls for improved interagency coordination, enhanced communication, and stronger family engagement. The voices of youth—who courageously shared their experiences—made clear that this is not just a logistical issue, but a deeply human one. Each day spent at YSC represents lost time, spent separated from their families, and delayed access to critical rehabilitative services. Based on this report’s findings, addressing placement delays is not only necessary—it is an urgent matter of protecting the rights, safety, and well-being of youth.

Endnotes

- 1 D.C. Department of Youth and Rehabilitative Services. “Fiscal Year 2024 Performance Oversight Question Responses”, March 6, 2025.
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Appendix A

ABOUT THE YOUTH INFORMATION GATHERING PROCESS

Questionnaire.

In collaboration with attorneys from the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (PDS) and Open City Advocates (OCA), CCE developed both the Consent to Participate and the two questionnaires (one for youth previously awaiting placement and one for youth awaiting placement at the time of the questionnaire (See Appendix B). The consent detailed both the confidential and voluntary nature of the questionnaire. Each question was optional, other than consenting to participate. No question asked for a participant to identify their name or details about their charges. Questions included multiple choice, short answer and scale questions and were written at an 8th grade reading level. The intent of the questions was to gain understanding of youth experience while awaiting placement including:

- 1) Youth understanding of why they were awaiting placement*
- 2) Youth access to family and attorneys while awaiting placement*
- 3) Youth access to programming while awaiting placement*

The questionnaire was made available online through Survey Monkey online survey builder, with only CCE staff having access to the questionnaire responses. Youth completed the questionnaires in the presence of an attorney either from PDS or OCA over the month of January. Data from the questionnaires was accessible only by CCE staff through the Survey Monkey portal and did not contain identifying information about the youth's name or case details. Following completion of the questionnaire, attorneys for each youth were sent a \$25 gift card to distribute to youth who completed the questionnaire.

In developing the questionnaires and the questionnaire process, the following items were assessed:

Risks associated with responding to the questionnaire.

No physical risks were expected to participants in the questionnaire. Psychological harms in the form of guilt or embarrassment may result from the personal nature of some questions but were deemed to be likely temporary and minimal. No psychological, social, or economic harms were anticipated relative to invasion of privacy and confidentiality of records. Given the questionnaires were conducted by the attorneys, this was deemed likely to mitigate potential negative impacts youth in detention while completing the questionnaire might face.

Anticipated benefits.

Only by including the experience of youth who have awaited placement at YSC in this report can the full scope of the awaiting placement issue be explained and assessed. While understanding of the issue from an agency and advocacy organization perspective is valuable, the very real human consequences of awaiting placement for youth are best understood by hearing from impacted youth directly. By fully understanding the experiences of youth awaiting placement, solutions to this issue can better be tailored to meet their needs. The experience

of awaiting placement can often be frustrating for youth, and the intentional engagement of youth to elevate their experiences and make them aware that adults are working on addressing the awaiting placement issue may have benefits to their confidence and well-being.

Disclosure of risks and benefits.

Youth participants received an explanation of the purpose of the questionnaire by their attorneys. Each youth also reviewed and had to agree to the “Consent to Participate” prior to completing the questionnaire which detailed the voluntary and confidential nature of the questionnaire. Furthermore, CCE staff contact information was provided for attorneys to follow-up with any questions or concerns.

Privacy and confidentiality.

The online questionnaires were conducted anonymously by youth, while in the presence of attorneys from PDS or OCA. The anonymous questionnaire responses were accessible to CCE staff on an online portal. A one-time payment through a \$25 gift card was issued to the attorneys for each participant, to then distribute to their clients. Providing a small gift such as this is considered a best practice, as it recognizes the value of the time and expertise of the person being interviewed and does not undermine consent.²²

Intervals of periodic review.

Given the one-time nature of the questionnaire, and short length of project as a whole, no reevaluation of the questionnaire process was implemented.

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRES USED WITH YOUTH AWAITING PLACEMENT

Questionnaire Text for Youth Previously at YSC

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: QUESTIONNAIRE ON YOUTH AWAITING PLACEMENT

CCE is a nonprofit organization working to enhance justice in the District of Columbia. CCE is working with other justice system organizations and community members to better understand why youth at YSC are waiting for many months to be placed. We will be writing a brief report on the issue and challenges for youth. The report will include information from multiple sources and will be widely shared with D.C. public officials, justice system stakeholders, and the community at large. The report could include recommendations for legislative, policy, procedural, and/or programmatic changes.

A set list of questions will be used for all questionnaires, and some follow up questions will be asked based on what you share.

We understand that your description of your experiences, particularly while incarcerated, may be traumatic. Participation in the questionnaire process is completely voluntary. You are welcome to skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering. You can end the questionnaire at any time as well.

Please note that while the information you provide may be used in our report, your name and any identifying details will remain confidential and will not be included.

A final report from CCE about Youth Awaiting Placement is expected by early 2025. Should the report become public, we can share a copy of the report with you if you would like.

Participants will receive a \$25 gift card, which will be mailed to your attorney. Your attorney will then get the gift card to you.

For any questions about the consent to participate please contact:

Magdalena Tsiongas | Policy Manager

Pronouns: she/her/hers

Council for Court Excellence

202.785.5917 x 108 (work)

magdalena.tsiongas@courtexcellence.org

- 1. Do you agree to share in this survey honestly about your experience in or with DYRS commitment?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- 2. Do you understand that this process is voluntary and you can skip any question you do not want to answer?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

3. What is your attorney's name and mailing address so your gift card can be sent to them?

Name

Law Firm

Address

Address 2

City/Town

State

Zip Code

4. What year(s) were you at YSC? (optional to answer)

If you were held at YSC more than once, talk about the time when you were awaiting placement.

5. Approximately how long were you held at YSC? If you were held at YSC more than once, talk about the time when you were awaiting placement.

6. What was your status while being housed there? Please check all that apply.

☐ **Detained youth:** Youth who have been ordered by a court to be securely confined pending the outcome of trial.

☐ **Committed youth:** Youth who have been adjudicated by a court and found to have been involved in delinquent behavior.

☐ **Title 16 youth:** Youth under the age of 18 who have been charged as adults.

☐ **Overnighters:** Youth arrested and securely detained pending presentation at court.

☐ **Interstate Compact for Juveniles:** Youth from jurisdictions other than the District of Columbia confined by DYRS under the Interstate Compact for Juveniles.

☐ **Other** (please specify)

7. From what you know, why were you held at YSC after you'd been committed to DYRS? How did you find this out?

8. Did a DYRS staff person/YDR ever tell you that you couldn't meet or speak with your lawyer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other (please specify)

9. How often were you able to speak to your family?

☐ Never

☐ A Few Times a MONTH

☐ A Few Times a WEEK

☐ Every Day for Limited Hours

☐ Any Time

☐ Other (please specify)

10. How often were you able to visit with your family?

- ☐ Every Day
- ☐ A Few Times a WEEK
- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

11. If you had a question about what was going on with your case, who would be able to answer it for you?

12. While at YSC, how often did you attend school?

- ☐ Every Day
- ☐ A Few Times a WEEK
- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

13. While at YSC, what other programs did you participate in?

14. While at YSC, how often did you participate in the other programs?

- ☐ Every Day
- ☐ A Few Times a WEEK
- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

15. On a scale of 1-5, how safe did you feel at YSC?

- ☐ 1 (never or almost never felt safe)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (always or almost always felt safe)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

16. Did you face any particular issues or challenges while at YSC awaiting placement?

17. After being at YSC, where did you go?

- ☐ New Beginnings
- ☐ Psychiatric Residential Treatment Center (a live-in facility providing mental health care, therapy, and support for individuals with severe psychiatric or behavioral challenges)
- ☐ Interstate Foster Care Placement (refers to the placement of children across state lines in foster care, adoptive homes, or residential treatment facilities, including placements with parents, relatives, or caregivers)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

QUESTIONNAIRE TEXT: YOUTH AT YSC AWAITING PLACEMENT

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: QUESTIONNAIRE ON YOUTH AWAITING PLACEMENT

CCE is a nonprofit organization working to enhance justice in the District of Columbia. CCE is working with other justice system organizations and community members to better understand why youth at YSC are waiting for many months to be placed. We will be writing a brief report on the issue and challenges for youth. The report will include information from multiple sources and will be widely shared with D.C. public officials, justice system stakeholders, and the community at large. The report could include recommendations for legislative, policy, procedural, and/or programmatic changes.

We understand that your description of your experiences, particularly while incarcerated, may be traumatic. Participation in the questionnaire process is completely voluntary. You are welcome to skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering. You can end the questionnaire at any time as well.

Please note that while the information you provide may be used in our report, your name and any identifying details will remain confidential and will not be included.

A final report from CCE about Youth Awaiting Placement is expected by early 2025.

Participants will receive a \$25 gift card, which will be mailed to your attorney. Your attorney will then get the gift card to you upon your release.

For any questions about the consent to participate please contact:

Magdalena Tsiongas | Policy Manager

Pronouns: she/her/hers

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- 1. Do you agree to share in this survey honestly about your experience in or with DYRS commitment?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- 2. Do you understand that this process is voluntary and you can skip any question you do not want to answer?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- 3. What is your attorney's name and mailing address so your gift card can be sent to them?**
 - Name
 - Law Firm
 - Address
 - Address 2
 - City/Town
 - State
 - Zip Code
- 4. What year(s) were/have you been at YSC? (optional to answer) If you were held at YSC more than once, talk about the time when you were awaiting placement.**
- 5. Approximately how long have you been held at YSC? If you were held at YSC more than once, talk about the time when you were awaiting placement.**
- 6. What is your current status at YSC? Please check all that apply.**
 - ☐ Detained youth: Youth who have been ordered by a court to be securely confined pending the outcome of trial.
 - ☐ Committed youth: Youth who have been adjudicated by a court and found to have been involved in delinquent behavior.
 - ☐ Title 16 youth: Youth under the age of 18 who have been charged as adults.
 - ☐ Overnights: Youth arrested and securely detained pending presentation at court.
 - ☐ Interstate Compact for Juveniles: Youth from jurisdictions other than the District of Columbia confined by DYRS under the Interstate Compact for Juveniles.
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- 7. From what you know, why are you still being held at YSC after you'd been committed to DYRS? How do you this?**
- 8. Did a DYRS staff person/YDR ever tell you that you couldn't meet or speak with your lawyer?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Other (please specify)

9. How often are you able to speak to your family?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
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- ☐ Every Day for Limited Hours
- ☐ Any Time
- ☐ Other (please specify)

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- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

11. If you have a question about what was going on with your case, who is able to help you answer it?

12. While at YSC, how often do you attend school?

- ☐ Every Day
- ☐ A Few Times a WEEK
- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

13. While at YSC, what other programs do you participate in?

14. While at YSC, how often do you participate in the other programs?

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- ☐ A Few Times a MONTH
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other (please specify)

15. On a scale of 1-5, how safe do you feel at YSC?

- ☐ 1 (never or almost never felt safe)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (always or almost always felt safe)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

16. Any other particular issues or challenges you face while at YSC awaiting placement?

17. After being at YSC, where will you be placed (if you know)?

- ☐ New Beginnings
- ☐ Psychiatric Residential Treatment Center (a live-in facility providing mental health care, therapy, and support for individuals with severe psychiatric or behavioral challenges)
- ☐ Interstate Foster Care Placement (refers to the placement of children across state lines in foster care, adoptive homes, or residential treatment facilities, including placements with parents, relatives, or caregivers)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Acknowledgements

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CCE wishes to thank the many system-involved youth, who shared their experiences awaiting placement for this report. Thank you to the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group members, including agency staff, non-profit organization staff and community members for raising the issue of committed youth awaiting placement, and lending their expertise to fully understand the scope of the issue.

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