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Testimony of the Council for Court Excellence Before the Committee on Youth Affairs Council of the District of Columbia

Performance Oversight Hearing for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services

February 2, 2026

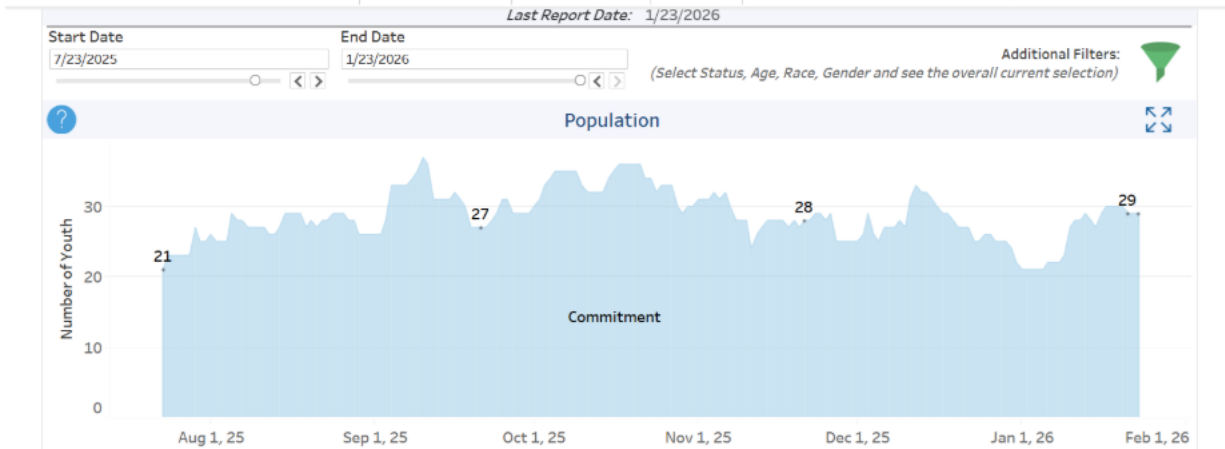
Thank you, Chairperson Parker and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to present testimony. My name is Magdalena Tsiongas, and I am the Policy Manager at the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with the mission to bring people together to conduct research, educate, and advocate to make D.C.'s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community. For nearly 40 years, CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis, convening diverse stakeholders, and creating educational resources for the public. Please note that in accordance with our policy, no judicial member of CCE participated in the formulation or approval of this testimony. This testimony does not reflect the specific views of, or endorsement by, any judicial member of CCE. My testimony focuses on the ongoing issues with the Youth Services Center, DYRS' performance in regard to family engagement, and the need to re-establish independent oversight of DYRS.

CCE continues to have concerns over the conditions at the Youth Services Center (YSC) particularly as relates to the overpopulation of the facility. As of January 26th of this year, there were 112 kids in the 98 bed facility, which means youth are sleeping in the intake unit, hallways, or classrooms. One of the issues contributing to this overcrowding is committed youth awaiting relevant and appropriate placements spending long periods of time - often months - at YSC before being placed. This is an issue we explored in our October 2025 report, *Committed Youth Awaiting Placement in the D.C. Youth Services Center*, and have presented to this Committee on already. Nevertheless, the issues raised in the Fall persist.

Of the 112 kids in the facility last week, 27 (roughly 24%) are committed youth awaiting placement. In examining the committed youth awaiting placement population at YSC over the past six months, there has been some fluctuation in the population, with the population generally being in the 20s and reaching a high of 37 in September 2025.ⁱ However, the population overall has not trended downward since either the passage of the ROAD Act or the release of our report.

Number of Committed Youth Awaiting Placement at YSC Over Time

Source: *Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight*



There have also been no significant changes in the average length of stay (LOS) for committed youth in the past six months, with the average LOS on January 26th being approximately 75 days. However, there has been a downward trend in the maximum number of days awaiting placement (141 days in July 2025 versus 55 days in December 2025) and the 75th percentile LOS (68 days in July 2025 versus 47 days in December 2025).ⁱⁱ We acknowledge this is an improvement, but still remains problematic.

Some of the issues identified in our *Awaiting Placement* report included limited available placements for youth in and around D.C., and the complications of negotiating payment for out-of-state placements. Therefore, recommendations from the working group of stakeholders engaged in the report process included increasing community based and less restrictive placement options and investing in community-based supports and services. However, D.C. has not been able to make any progress in increasing D.C.-based placements. On the contrary, in DYRS's FY 26 Performance Plan released in November, they reported the percentage of committed youth placed in out-of-state facilities has more than doubled between 2024 and 2025, from 10.46% to 26%.ⁱⁱⁱ

Being in an out-of-state placement may have a variety of negative impacts for our youth, including creating an additional burden for family members to visit them. Of the youth who participated in the report questionnaire, they reported limited access to family through phone calls or visitation while at YSC, even with it being based in D.C. Meanwhile, a youth placed out-of-state reported not seeing their family during that time at all, and that while out-of-state they picked up additional charges in a state with harsher penalties for system-involved youth, yet another concern created for our community's youth placed outside of D.C.^{iv} The Executive and D.C. Council investing in community-based supports and placements would provide more opportunities for system impacted youth to be in less restrictive environments and closer to family.

To reiterate comments in CCE's October testimony before this Committee, YSC is increasingly being used for other long-term stays as well, contributing to the overcrowding there. In particular, youth charged as adults under Title 16 of the D.C. Code had an average LOS in YSC of 131 days as of January 27, 2026. The population of youth in YSC charged as adults was as high as 27 last Fall.^v We hope, Chairperson Parker,

that you ask DYRS during their testimony what barriers still prevent the agency from moving youth charged as adults out of YSC, which is not well-suited to long placements, to New Beginnings, as has been done in the past.

Additionally, we recommend increased scrutiny of DYRS's efforts to ensure meaningful parental engagement. In our *Awaiting Placement* report, multiple recommendations developed by key system actors, youth, and advocates centered on increased parental engagement such as: include parents in placement conversations; engage with youth and family immediately on system contact to assess their needs; and replicate the CFSA Youth Family Meeting model and hold such meetings in both the pre- and post-disposition phases. While DYRS's pre-hearing responses were not available as of drafting this testimony, in previous Council hearings, they have indicated a lack of ability to track existing parental engagement, as might be required in the proposed "Promoting Parental Engagement at DYRS Amendment Act."^{vi}

Finally, without independent oversight of DYRS – which involuntarily holds D.C. youth and is responsible for their wellbeing, education and care – CCE is concerned if this Committee alone can adequately oversee DYRS' performance. For this reason, we ask that independent oversight of DYRS be reestablished, either through the reviving the Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight (OIJJFO), within another agency such as the Ombudsperson for Children, or increased staffing and resources for this Committee. As you know, OIJJFO began operations upon the District of Columbia Superior Court's termination of the *Jerry M.* lawsuit, with a sunset of three years unless the Mayor elected to continue operations. This did not happen; after a one-year extension as a function of the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA), the agency responsible for independent oversight was allowed to lapse. Testimony by OIJJFO before this Committee has brought to light numerous recent serious issues with DYRS; OIJJFO published reports – including in the past year – noting that youth in DYRS custody are receiving inadequate behavioral health services, and that facilities' fire protocols and equipment were insufficient which, in the case of a fire, could make them dangerous and deadly. We hope that, as you hear our testimony and the testimony of others on this topic, you and your Council colleagues will prioritize independent oversight of the agency responsible for youth in our juvenile facilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We appreciate this Committee's efforts to ensure DYRS is fulfilling its obligations to adequately care for youth in their custody.

ⁱ Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight. "DYRS Secure Facilities Today's Population Data." OIJJFO, 2026. <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/node/1689266#embedtabs>.

ⁱⁱ Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight. "DYRS Secure Facilities Today's Population Data." OIJJFO, 2026. <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/node/1689266#embedtabs>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services FY 2026 Performance Plan November 26, 2025 <https://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/FY26%20Plan%20-%20DYRS.pdf>.

^{iv} Council for Court Excellence. "Committed Youth Awaiting Placement in the D.C. Youth Services Center," October 2025. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659c0df344c9c8325dd821ca/68eff0152e361f5c93521d86_YouthAwaitingPlacement_for%20website.pdf.

^v Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight. "DYRS Secure Facilities Today's Population Data." OIJJFO, 2026. <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/node/1689266#embedtabs>.

^{vi} Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. "Testimony of Sam Abed Director of the District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services," November 13, 2025.

https://dyrs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dyrs/release_content/attachments/2025%20Public%20Hearing%20Testimony%20Omnibus%20Bill_DYRS%20FINAL.pdf.