

LISTENING TO YOUTH IN GROUP CARE

INTRODUCTION

What happens in our state to youths who cannot remain at home, do not have an able and willing relative with whom they may live, and cannot be successfully managed in foster care? Where do they go? They are often placed in “group care.” Group care is a residential program that cares for youth with complex behavioral and emotional issues that require a more structured and therapeutic level of care than can be provided in a relative or foster home.

In the summer of 2007, the Office of Family and Children’s Ombudsman (OFCO) undertook a study in which the Ombudsman visited 22 group homes across the state to speak directly with 120 youth about their experiences. The purpose of our visits was to elicit from youth their ideas about how to improve group care, and explain to them how to access the Ombudsman as a resource if they needed help. We believed, and still do, that the youth themselves are best positioned to inform public dialogue about what is working and what is not.¹²

We sought to identify within the current group home residential framework what elements seem to be working and which are not. The answers to these fundamental questions may be a springboard to future study of whether the current system as a whole makes good sense and should be retained or whether it should be re-worked in favor of other residential models that have been advanced by child welfare advocates.

SUMMARY

OFCO is statutorily charged with “review[ing] periodically the facilities and procedures of state institutions serving children, and state-licensed facilities or residences.”¹³ Since its inception in 1997, OFCO has visited a variety of state-licensed facilities, such as the Washington School for the Deaf, resulting in system-changing reforms. Additionally, in 2001 OFCO issued a report on what was working best in the foster care system based on input from

Youth Feedback

The best things about living in a group home.

Generally, youth appreciated receiving individualized treatment, good food, feeling safe, and having their basic needs met. They valued fair and caring staff members, opportunities to create friendships with other youth, activities and outings, privacy and independence, and visits with family and friends.

Suggestions to improve the group home experience.

Youth identified six aspects of their group home experience that they would like to see improved:

- Increased safety
- Having basic needs consistently met
- Improved staffing and management
- Increased freedom, contact with family and friends, and privacy
- Increased structure and activities
- Increased nurturing and respect

¹² Children’s Administration and the Braam Oversight Panel recently issued the results of a comprehensive foster youth survey to gather data to assess the effectiveness of and improve services for adolescents in foster care. Results of the 2008 Survey of Washington State Youth in Foster Care, August 2008, are now available at <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/YouthSurveyDataReport.pdf>

¹³ RCW 43.06A.030(4).

youth.¹⁴ We have recognized over the past few years that the voice of youth was not being heard as greatly or persistently as we would like within our office and this partly inspired our decision to undertake this report.¹⁵ Its goal is to recognize strengths and identify shortcomings within specific group homes and make recommendations for improvement based on the input we received.

There are approximately 127 group care facilities, or group homes, across Washington State. Together, they provide over 500 beds for youth with a wide range of needs. In 2007, the average monthly group care caseload was 965.¹⁶ During our visits, the Ombudsman conducted group discussions, and provided youth with a paper-based questionnaire (“survey”) that included closed and open-ended questions. One hundred twenty youth participated in the group discussions, and 106 responded to the Ombudsman’s survey. Below is a brief summary of youths’ responses, the Ombudsman’s observations and concerns and the action we took as a result of our concerns, and our recommendations to improve youths’ experiences in group care.

OMBUDSMAN CONCERNS

Nearly 30% of youth surveyed do not feel safe in their group home. The Ombudsman responded to youths’ safety concerns by reviewing licensing complaints and referrals made to Child Protective Services (CPS) about the group homes in question. OFCO requested that the Department of Licensed Resources (DLR) review facilities with ongoing problems, and ensure that appropriate corrective action was taken. As of September 2008, two facilities have been closed; one has a stop placement order in effect (i.e. the facility is to accept no further placement of children until issues of concern are resolved); one is receiving a comprehensive review at the Ombudsman’s request; and one is receiving ongoing training and corrective action to address deficiencies. OFCO has continued to monitor these homes over the past year since this survey was completed.

Youths’ basic physical, social, and emotional needs are not being met consistently: 16% reported physical needs are not met and 28% reported emotional needs are not met. The Ombudsman relayed the information to DLR and verified that the youths’ physical needs were subsequently addressed. OFCO has also continued to monitor group homes where specific licensing complaints were alleged.

Many youth are not provided with adequate information, such as how to contact their attorneys and CASAs, and have little to no choice about where they are placed (37% reported receiving no information about the group home prior to moving in) or who provides them with services (46% reported having no choice).¹⁷ The Ombudsman provided these youth with information about how to contact individuals who could help them, including their respective attorneys, CASAs, and social workers.

Almost 25% of youth reported interracial tension. The Ombudsman recommends group home programs to promote cross-cultural understanding.

¹⁴ Foster Care. What young people in the system say is working. OFCO Appreciative Interview Report. January 2001. Copies may be accessed at http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco/reports/ofco_200101.pdf

¹⁵ The Ombudsman’s full Group Care report is available online at <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco/reports/default.asp>.

¹⁶ Note that this number excludes children that are placed in Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs). The average monthly caseload for CRCs for 2007 was 136. Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2007 Washington State Data Book, Community Social Service Workload Indicators, ONLINE. Available: <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/databook/human/st03.asp>

¹⁷ Most youth were unaware of the new state law passed in 2007 that, under certain circumstances, allows legally free youth ages 12 and older to petition the court to reinstate previously terminated parental rights of a parent. Several youth believed this might apply to them.

OMBUDSMAN RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children’s Administration and other stakeholders in the child welfare system should:

- **Prioritize youths’ need for basic essentials** such as food, clothing, personal hygiene items, and basic cleanliness and maintenance of facilities.
- **Improve safety and quality of care** by reducing the minimum “social service”¹⁸ staffing ratio for group care facilities from 1:25 to 1:15, and revising the minimum qualifications for group home “child care”¹⁹ staff in alignment with the Council on Accreditation (COA) standards, and ensuring that staff (and caseworkers) receive training regarding the rights of youth in group care, such as the right to receive and make private phone calls.
- **Empower youth by engaging them** in all decision making regarding changes in their case plans and placement, in a timely manner, by distributing to them a publication²⁰ that describes their legal rights and the dependency process, and by ensuring that dependent youth have an attorney or CASA/GAL and know how to contact them.
- **Ensure that each group home is continually supervised** by an on-call, professional social service staff member available on a 24-hour basis, in alignment with the COA standard.
- **Reauthorize the “Foster Care to 21” program**, if evaluation data from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) confirms that this program is making a positive difference in preparing youth for their early adulthood and future.²¹

Individual group homes should:

- **Actively facilitate contact** between youth and their outside sources of support.
- **Develop and implement a consistent process** for providing youth with information in a format they can understand when they first arrive at a group home or enter into group care.
- **Balance youths’ needs** for independence with their need for supervision to provide the least restrictive environment for each youth where possible.
- **Ensure that the group home’s phone policy is consistent with the legal rights of youth** under Washington State law.
- **Actively solicit youth suggestions** for improvement of daily routines, rules, structure, and activities.
- **Consider introducing educational programs** for both residents and staff members to promote cross-cultural understanding.

¹⁸ “Social service” staff is defined as a clinician, program manager, case manager, consultant, or other staff person who is an employee of the agency or hired to develop and implement the child’s individual service and treatment plans.

¹⁹ “Child care” staff members provide direct care, supervision, and behavior management for children and must have a high school diploma/GED as well as experience and skills in working with children.

²⁰ The Mockingbird Society has recently issued a pamphlet designed to inform youth about their rights. Mockingbird Society is a non-profit organization based in Seattle committed to reforming public policy and law to better support foster youth and caregivers. See <http://www.mockingbirdsociety.org>.

²¹ WSIPP carries out non-partisan research as directed by the Washington State Legislature. Pursuant to HB 2687 enacted in 2008, WSIPP will issue a preliminary report to the Legislature on the success of youth transitioning out of foster care by September 1, 2008 and a final report by December 31, 2008. See <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov>.

CONCLUSION

Group care in Washington State is a study in contrasts. Our contact with youth highlighted sharp differences in the quality of group care across the state that did not appear to correlate to particular regions of the state, size of home, or even to how physically pleasing the setting was. Instead, differences were related quite simply to the ability of the group home to enhance connections with the foster youth: connection to staff; connection to friends and families; connection to other residents; connection to professionals who provide them support such as their social worker, lawyer, or CASA/GAL; and finally, connection to their future. **Without connection, youth felt marginalized and vulnerable.**

The good news is that the youth were very articulate and insightful about what encourages connection: they need to have their basic physical needs met; they need fair staff looking out for them; they need to have their privacy respected; they need opportunities to create friendships with other youth, and to engage in activities and outings; they need to have contact with their families, lawyers, CASA/GALs, and social workers. They valued structure and routine because this helped them to know what was ahead, and helped to manage their expectations. They preferred being placed within their community so that they could more easily have contact with friends and family. Youth who did not have these things communicated fear, powerlessness, and loss of self-esteem.