



NEWS

*New York State
Public Employees Federation
AFL-CIO*

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PEF responds to DOJ report on youth facilities

Albany - The New York State Public Employees Federation (PEF), which represents counselors, teachers, social workers and health care professionals at youth facilities operated by the state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), welcomes the long overdue report by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ).

Much of the report echoes what PEF has been bringing to the attention of legislative leaders and OCFS Commissioner Gladys Carrion for years; the current policies and procedures at youth residential centers aren't working. Not only are they endangering the welfare of the youths detained in these facilities, they have caused sometimes irreparable harm to the employees who provide services to our troubled youth.

Many of the Justice Department's findings, including extreme deficiencies in mental health care, have been consistently reported by our members. Staffing shortages in critical care areas directly affecting rehabilitative treatment have aggravated the already unsafe conditions in the Lansing, Louis Gossett, Jr. and Tryon Residential Centers and all other OCFS facilities statewide. We agree with the DOJ findings that increased training for staff and an overhaul of the mental health care program is desperately needed. We also agree on the confusion over policies regarding the use of restraint and that it has been an underlying problem at the centers. Real reforms, however, require real resources. It is this lack of resources that has created the environment which led to many of the issues cited in the report.

While the DOJ investigative report had a narrow focus on youths' civil rights; there are many more areas of concern, including increased youth-on-youth violence and violence against workers at the facilities. Our members have often been the victims of assaults by youths; this has led to an increased number of employees out of work due to injuries, adding more strain to an already strained workforce.

We agree reform is needed in the state's juvenile justice system and that state facilities are an essential component. However, in the commissioner's zeal to transform the state's system, move youth into communities, and to close state facilities, the effort to address the critical needs of youths has been grossly inadequate, particularly in the areas of mental health and rehabilitative services, staffing and training at those facilities, exacerbating the very conditions she sought to correct. This has led not only to a deterioration of service levels at the facilities, but to everyone's worst fear, the brutal murder of a young group home employee by a youth inappropriately placed in a community setting in Lockport, NY. This follows the January shooting of a Rochester police officer by a youth placed in a community residence by OCFS and the recent riot and frequent AWOLs from Randolph Children's Home in Cattaraugus County.

Our troubled youth need and deserve our help and guidance to turn their lives around. Reform as mandated by the Justice Department is the first step in the right direction. We look forward to working with OCFS to ensure these positive changes take place.

PEF is the state's second-largest, state employee union, representing 59,000 professional, scientific and technical employees.