



Testimony of

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Oversight: The DJJ/ACS Integration and its effect on in-detention services

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Good afternoon. I am Stephanie Gendell, the Associate Executive Director for Policy and Public Affairs at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC). CCC is a 67-year old independent child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York City child is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would like to thank Chairwoman Gonzalez and Chairwoman Palma and the members of the Juvenile Justice and General Welfare Committees for holding this hearing today regarding the integration of DJJ and ACS and its impact on in-detention services. The health, care, and well-being of the City's youth who come into the detention system are of the utmost importance to CCC and we appreciate the City Council's continued interest in these young people.

CCC is optimistic that the vision and commitment articulated by Commissioner Mattingly, Executive Deputy Commissioner Busching and ACS to keep youth with their families and in their communities whenever it is safe and feasible, has the potential to positively transform the juvenile justice system in New York City. We also appreciate the City's commitment to ensuring the safety of communities and any youth who has to be in the detention system.

CCC continues to believe the merger of the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and Administration for Children's Services (ACS), particularly in light of the fact that so many of the youth served by the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are the same youth entering different systems by chance, will improve the outcomes for court-involved youth. Notably, we believe that ACS's history and experience working with youth and their families, through community based programs, family team conferences and out of home placements when necessary, will continue to help improve the service array for these youth, both in the community and in detention. Notably, by making the Administration for Children's Services the agency responsible for detention services, we are hopeful that these youth will be viewed and treated as CHILDREN by the systems and service providers touching their lives. We urge the City Council to expeditiously pass the bill that formally merges and integrates DJJ and ACS.

CCC believes that ACS's Detention Reform Plan, *Building on Success: Next Steps in New York City Detention Reform*, is a critical component to improving in-detention services. ACS's plan seeks to better target detention and expand alternatives to detention so that fewer children are detained, those who are detained have shorter lengths of stay in the least restrictive environment, and reduce the use of detention so that Bridges can be closed. The plan's goals and priorities reflect the benefit of merging the Department of Juvenile Justice with the Administration for Children's Services. Not only has ACS determined that Bridges is not an appropriate place to detain youth, but their plan to close the facility is thoughtful and deliberate.

While CCC supports the closure of Bridges, we also agree with ACS that there must be a plan that ensures the detention system has the capacity it needs so that every young person found to need these services has a bed and that the front-end intake services now provided at Bridges are received elsewhere.

ACS's Detention Reform Plan addresses the need to reduce the use of both secure and non-secure detention. Notably, to close Bridges, the daily census can be no more than 248 youth and there have been several weeks, particularly in the winter, when the census was higher (the highest in the past 12 months being 307 youth.) Thus ACS's plan seeks to reduce the average daily population in detention by 50 to 60 youth. CCC feels that many of the initiatives ACS is embarking on will enable the City to reach this goal and we are eager to work with the agency, the City Council and other advocates to ensure that this plan is a success. Similarly, as ACS moves to reduce the use of secure detention, we must also monitor non-secure detention, as it is

best for young people to remain in their homes and communities whenever this is safe and possible.

The merger of ACS and DJJ (which we hope will be formalized soon) and the closing of Bridges are important steps to improving in-detention services. CCC believes that attention must be paid to all the services these youth need—such as their education, health, mental health, youth development and employment training needs. Youth in care must also feel safe in their ability to share their concerns about their time in detention with the Ombudspeople assigned to their facility. And lastly, the time a youth spends in detention needs to not only keep the community safe and prevent the youth from failing to appear in court, but must also prepare the youth for a successful transition back to the community.

The City must continue to be vigilant and innovative in the development of alternative to detention and alternative to incarceration programs. Even in these times of budget shortfalls, the city must also do everything in its power to maintain community based youth services, such as after school programs, so that youth need not come into contact with juvenile detention or alternative to detention services in the first place. In addition, CCC strongly believes that given the work ACS does to keep children safe, ACS should not be held to the same budget cutting standards as other agencies when the November budget modifications are implemented.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.