



Testimony of

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Should Bridges Juvenile Center Be Closed?

Before the
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Juvenile Justice Committee

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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 66-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 members of the Juvenile Justice Committee for holding this hearing today regarding the plans for the Bridges Juvenile Detention Center. 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, particularly Chairwoman Gonzalez, for also focusing on the care provided to these youth.

CCC is also grateful that the administration, and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in particular, have been working on a plan to close the Bridges Detention Center. While CCC has long-believed that children and youth should not have to spend a night in this building, we also believe that the city must first have a plan to ensure that the detention system has sufficient capacity so every young person found to need these services has a bed and that the front-end intake services provided at Bridges can be received at other facilities.

ACS's plan to close Bridges is the first testament to the benefits 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. We urge ACS to continue the process this way and to ensure that those high quality staff and services that exist at the Bridges facility be maintained as part of the future system serving these youth.

While CCC is pleased that after many years of City Council and advocate pressure on the City, ACS is indeed planning to close Bridges, there is still much work to be done to improve the city's juvenile justice system, and even more work to be done on the state level. The merger of ACS and DJJ, which should hopefully be formalized soon, and the closing of Bridges are important first steps. The City must, however, continue to be vigilant and innovative in the development of alternative to detention and alternative to incarceration programs. The city must maintain youth services, such as after school programs, during this difficult budget negotiation, so that youth need not come into contact with juvenile to detention or alternative to detention services in the first place.

In addition, CCC is aware that both the State and the City are looking at how to better serve youth found to be in need of facility care. At the State level, CCC will continue to vigorously advocate for funding for community based programs and for a more fair payment and billing system so that the city is not paying more for OCFS facilities and for private placements. As the City and the State work together to find options for how to place these young people closer to their homes in New York City, we urge elected and appointed officials to never consider Bridges as an option for these young people. Given the decisions that we are making today that Bridges is not an appropriate place for children to live for short periods of time (typically less than 10 days), it is certainly not an appropriate facility for youth to be placed for longer periods of time. Furthermore, CCC believes that it would be close to impossible to properly renovate this facility, given at a minimum the asbestos levels, and thus this option must also not be put on the table.

CCC looks forward to working closely with ACS and the City Council on ACS's plan to improve the city's services for court-involved youth.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

