

Group Care.

**What youth say
about living in a group home.**

Office of the
Family & Children's
Ombudsman

2007 Outreach and Survey Results
Full Report

The Ombudsman sincerely thanks each youth who participated in this project, and would like to acknowledge the contributions made by the Mockingbird Society and Chelsea Spector, OFCO legal intern during the summer of 2007.

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Acronyms used in this report

ACLA	Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment and Learning Plan
BRS	Behavioral Rehabilitation Services
CA	Children’s Administration
CASA	Court Appointed Special Advocate
COA	Council on Accreditation
CPS	Child Protective Services
CRC	Crisis Residential Center
DCFS	Department of Child and Family Services
DLR	Department of Licensed Resources
DSHS	Department of Social and Health Services
GAL	Guardian ad litem
IL/ILP	Independent Living/Independent Living Program
OFCO	Office of the Family and Children’s Ombudsman
RCW	Revised Code of Washington
WAC	Washington Administrative Code

Group Care.

120 Youth. 22 Group Homes. Ideas worth listening to.

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 houses 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.

The Office of Family and Children’s Ombudsman (OFCO) is statutorily charged with “review[ing] periodically the facilities and procedures of state institutions serving children, and state-licensed facilities or residences.”¹ 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.² 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.

In the summer of 2007, OFCO 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

Group Care is a residential program that houses 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.

¹ RCW 43.06A.030 (emphasis added.)

² 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

improve group care, explain to them how to access the Ombudsman as a resource if they needed help, and to identify strengths and weaknesses within the current group home residential framework. Based on our assessment of the situation and input from youth, we have developed recommendations for improvement of the group home system.

We believed, and still do, that the youth themselves are best positioned to inform public dialogue about what is working and what is not.³ The answers to these fundamental questions may be a springboard to future study of whether the 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.

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 965.⁴

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.

This report sets forth a description of the project, detailed youth feedback, and the Ombudsman's concerns and recommendations to improve group care.

Project Purpose

OFCO has a duty to periodically review state-licensed facilities serving children."⁵ Our decision to initiate a project where we could hear first-hand from youth living in group homes was inspired by our statutory mandate and by the life stories we have had the opportunity to hear over the past several years. These stories have come to us through advocacy groups such as the Mockingbird Society⁶, and in testimony by youth to the Braam oversight panel.⁷ These factors coupled with the realization that OFCO receives few phone calls directly from youth (since 1997, the number of complaints received from youth has slowly

³ 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>

⁴ 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>.

⁵ RCW 43.06A.030

⁶ The 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/>

⁷ This is the panel established to oversee implementation of the settlement agreement which arose from *Braam v. State of Washington*, 150 Wn.2d 689, 712, 81 P.3d 851 (2003) (class action suit brought by current and former foster children who sought damages for harm suffered as a result of multiple placements while in the custody of DCFS).

increased, but by 2006 totaled just two percent of all complaints in any given year⁸), made the group home project a compelling choice.

OFCO had two primary objectives for this project:

1. Outreach to youth residing in group care about OFCO's services and how to access these; and
2. Learn from these youth about their experiences in group care, to inform stakeholders in the group care system about what seems to be working, and what needs improvement.

Group Care in Washington State

Group Homes in the Continuum of Care

Washington State requires that children needing out-of-home care be placed in the least restrictive setting, most family-like, and most appropriate placement option necessary for their safety and well-being.⁹ Levels of restrictiveness, from least to most restrictive, are defined as follows:¹⁰

1. Child's own home.
2. Relatives or child's tribe.
3. Responsible Adult Placement (suitable adult who has a pre-existing relationship with child or family).
4. Family foster home.
5. Group home.
6. Psychiatric facility.
7. Other institutions accessed only through court commitment.

Within Washington State's current system of out-of-home care, group homes are considered fairly restrictive. However, group homes are often the only remaining option within the current system for children and adolescents with complex behavioral and emotional problems, who are not able to be safely managed in foster or relative care. In recent years, alternative models of care, particularly for adolescents, have been developed and are showing tremendous promise, such as the Mockingbird Society's Hub Model.¹¹

The goal for children placed in group homes, if they cannot be returned home, is to transition them to a less restrictive placement as soon as the youth can successfully function in a less structured environment.

⁸ i.e. approximately nine complaints in the highest year.

⁹ RCW 74.14A.020

¹⁰ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Children's Administration. Practices and Procedures Guide, Section 4261. 2008. ONLINE. Available: http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/pubs/mnl_pnpg/chapter4.asp [3 Aug. 2008]

¹¹ The Hub Model is premised on the concept that "six to ten foster/kinship families (Satellite Families) that live in close proximity to a central, licensed foster family (HUB Home) . . . provide support [similar to the traditional role that "Grandma's house" might serve.]" <http://www.mockingbirdsociety.org/docs/Additional%20Links/family%20model.pdf>

As a percentage of all children placed in out-of-home care, comparatively few children live in group homes – during Fiscal Year 2007, the monthly average number of children in relative care was 3,561; in foster care, 6,737; and in group care, 965.¹² This group care number totals 1101 if we include children placed in Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs).

Types of Group Care Programs¹³

The Washington Administrative Code (WAC) defines the types of group care programs that can be licensed by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)' Division of Licensed Resources (DLR) to provide care to children, including:¹⁴

- Residential care programs, with or without rehabilitative treatment. Those providing specialized treatment do so through the Behavioral Rehabilitative Services (BRS) program, which provides intensive support and treatment for children with behavioral and/or emotional disturbances, developmental disabilities, or medical fragility. Children may receive BRS in their own homes, in foster care, or in group care.
- Responsible Living Skills programs (RLS) providing residential and transitional living services for dependent youth ages 14 and older;
- Maternity services for pregnant/parenting teens;
- Services to severely developmentally disabled and medically fragile children; and
- Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs) for youth requiring brief out-of-home care and crisis intervention (including secure and semi-secure facilities).
- Day treatment programs are considered "group care programs" although they are not 24-hour residential programs.

Basic Elements of a Group Care Program¹⁵

Group care programs are required to provide a safe and healthy group living environment that meets the developmental needs of the children in care¹⁶, including;

- A clean, homelike environment;
- Basic necessities such as adequate food, appropriate clothing and recreational activities;
- Safety;

¹² Cheryl Stephani, Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration, "DSHS Children's Administration Report Card," memo, June 30, 2006.

¹³ Also called "group homes" throughout this report and elsewhere in state law.

¹⁴ WAC 388-148-0670. Day treatment and Independent Living Skills programs are also listed in the WAC defining group care programs; however, they do not provide 24-hour services.

¹⁵ WAC 388-148-0680

¹⁶ WAC 388-148-0680

- An age-appropriate environment with necessary structure, routine, and rules to provide for a healthy life, growth and development.

Group care programs must have a written statement of their mission, goals, and services. They must provide the specialized services needed by the group being served, either through the program itself or via another community resource.¹⁷

Staffing Requirements

Group homes must be staffed with employees who are competent to provide for the safety and needs of the children in their care. Staffing ratios specified in the Washington Administrative Code are somewhat complex and distinguish between “child care” and “social service” staff.

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.¹⁸ For regular group homes, there must be one child care staff member on site for every eight children; however, “to keep the proper ratio of staff to children, the executive director, health care staff, manager, support staff and maintenance staff may serve temporarily as child care staff if they meet all other child care staff qualifications and training.”¹⁹ For staffed residential facilities, there must be one child care staff member to six children.²⁰ While, BRS staffing ratios are negotiated per region, within DSHS/CA standards, CA reports that there is usually one staff for every three youth with high service needs in BRS programs. For youth with lower service needs, there is usually one staff for every four or five youth.

“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.²¹ The minimum social service staffing ratio for regular group homes is one full-time “social service staff” to 25 children, while at the other end of the spectrum, for CRCs it is 1:5.²² At least one social service staff member must have a master’s degree in social work or related field; others must have bachelor’s degrees and be closely supervised by the master’s-level staff.²³ The social service staffing ratio for regular homes is very high, given the special needs of most children placed in group care.

Range of Group Care Facilities

A “group-care facility” is an agency, other than a foster family home, which is maintained and operated for the care of a group of children on a twenty-four hour-a-day basis.²⁴ Group care facilities differ widely

¹⁷ WAC 388-148-0690

¹⁸ WAC 388-148-0720

¹⁹ WAC 388-148-0725

²⁰ WAC 399-148-1045

²¹ WAC 388-148-0010

²² WAC 388-148-0610

²³ WAC 388-148-0585

²⁴ RCW 74.13.031

throughout the state; some operate like mid-to-large foster homes, while others are large residential treatment facilities, caring for up to fifty youths. The number of licensed facilities varies somewhat from year to year, hovering around 127 (48 large facilities, 64 smaller group homes with rotating staff, and 15 CRCs).²⁵ Beds in group care facilities are allotted by program. For example, some facilities might have a mix of CRC and BRS beds.

Youth Served in Group Care²⁶

Group care programs can serve children who are six years of age or older, who meet at least one of the following conditions:

- Cannot be safely or effectively managed in foster care;
- Need temporary placement while a permanent placement is sought;
- Need emergency placement if there is a disruption in their current placement.
- Have emotional, physical, or mental disabilities;
- Need a transitional living setting and independent living services; or
- Need respite care from a licensed provider.

Because children in Washington State are generally served through programs (such as BRS, RLS, etc.) rather than placement type (e.g. foster vs. group care), the number of children in group care at any point in time varies. However, in 2005 there were approximately 517 group care beds available throughout the state, which were accessed as follows:

- Approximately 400 of the 1000 youth served by the BRS program reside in group homes;
- Approximately 33 youth served by the Responsible Living Skills Program reside in group homes;
- Approximately 68 beds are available in Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs) for short-term placements of up to five days; and 16 beds, co-located within CRCs, serve youth through the HOPE program, which provides temporary residential placement and assessment for street youth under age 18.²⁷

Project Design

OFCO visited a cross-section of state-licensed group homes, presented information about OFCO and its services, and spoke with youth about their experiences in group care. At the end of the visit, youth were asked to complete an optional, confidential written survey about their experiences.

²⁵ Cheryl Stephani, Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration, "DSSH Children's Administration Report Card," memo, June 30, 2006.

²⁶ WAC 388-148-0685

²⁷ Data provided to OFCO by Children's Administration, 2007-08.

Youth Surveyed

Twenty-two group homes were selected across the State's six regions.²⁸ Homes of a variety of sizes, locations (urban vs. rural), and service populations were chosen, to represent a broad range of youth ages twelve and older. To decrease some of the variability expected from including very different types of group care settings, certain types of facilities were excluded. Our goal was to target primarily dependent youth in long term placements. Crisis Residential Centers, for example, were excluded by virtue of the very brief placements they provide (generally up to five days).²⁹ Although a small number of youth with mild to moderate developmental delays were included in our survey, group homes serving youth with severe developmental delays were excluded.

Survey Design

In developing the written survey, OFCO sought consultation from the Mockingbird Society.³⁰ We met with several Mockingbird staff members, some of whom had previously lived in group care. They provided invaluable input into what questions to include in our survey to elicit the information we were seeking, as well as how to frame the questions to make them accessible and understandable to youth.

The resulting survey included closed and open-ended questions related to safety, freedom from racial/ethnic discrimination, youths' knowledge of their legal rights and whether these were being protected, formal and informal sources of support, and contact with these supports.³¹ Youth were asked whether they had received any information about their group home before moving there, if they were given any choice in their placement, and if they had any plans or knowledge of future placements. Open-ended questions inquired into daily life in the group home, and their suggestions for improvements and change.

Assent to Participate

A youth assent form³² was sent to each group home prior to our scheduled visit, to allow group home staff to prepare residents for the visit and explain the purpose of the project. A signed assent form was obtained from each youth participating in the survey.

Visit Procedure

One to three OFCO staff conducted each visit. We allowed each group home to determine whether group home staff would remain present during the discussion and survey. Some homes asked the youth what they preferred and followed that preference. Thirteen group homes chose to have staff present, while nine allowed a private discussion between OFCO staff and youth. While there were no clear signs that the presence of staff affected the candidness of youths' input, it is unknown whether this variable significantly impacted youths' verbal and written responses.

²⁸ See Appendix A for a description of types of facilities visited, facility capacity, facility location and DSHS region.

²⁹ The sample did include a small number of youth in CRC beds located within standard group homes.

³⁰ See footnote 6.

³¹ See the questionnaire in Appendix B.

³² See the assent form in Appendix C.

Each visit started with a short presentation about OFCO's role and services, including possible reasons why youth might contact us, and ways in which we may be able to help with their individual situations. Next, OFCO staff facilitated an informal discussion about what it was like to live in the group home (both positive and negative aspects) and how it compared to other group homes youth had lived in. We asked about daily routines, rules, outings, who youth visit or talk with regularly, and their sources of support.

Following this discussion, our legal intern discussed the assent form, informing that participation in the survey was optional and responses were confidential (unless maltreatment or harm to self or others was reported). We described the final product -- this report -- in which their individual comments and suggestions might be anonymously included. After signing the assent form, youth requiring assistance in reading and interpreting the questions were individually assisted by OFCO staff.

At the end of the visit, we invited youth to meet with us individually if they had any issues or concerns they wanted to discuss privately. If the issues involved actions by DCFS or the youth's legal rights, a formal complaint was accepted for later follow-up by the Ombudsman.³³ Each youth was given a flyer describing OFCO's services and contact information.³⁴ Extra surveys and return envelopes were left with group home staff to allow any residents unable to attend the meeting to participate.

What We Found

We met with **120 youth** from **22 group homes** across the state, and received **106 completed questionnaires**.³⁵ The vast majority of youth we spoke with had never heard the word "**Ombudsman**," and very few were aware of OFCO's existence or role in the child welfare system. The group discussions about daily life in the group home varied greatly from group to group: from animated, opinionated insights about exactly what was going right and what was going wrong, to subtle hints of information revealed more by the youths' bored, anxious or unhappy demeanors than by their verbal responses, to brief positive responses, surprising in their simplicity, reflecting general contentment. Some youth were wary and tentative in their feedback, while others jumped at the chance to "tell it like it is" to adults perceived as having some power to make some changes in their lives. Our objective was to allow youth as much time as they needed to feel heard.

The facilities we saw varied greatly in their physical environment. Some of the larger group homes felt institutional and appeared run-down and drab; others felt home-like and modern. The smaller homes often presented like larger foster homes, where caregivers were viewed more like foster parents than "staff" by the youth who lived there. Interestingly, the youth in some of the plainer facilities presented amongst the most satisfied youth, naming well-liked and competent staff as one of the best things about the group home.

³³ See OFCO's forthcoming annual report for further information about the Ombudsman's investigation of youths' complaints.

³⁴ See OFCO Flyer in Appendix D.

³⁵ The survey response rate was 88 percent.

Almost all of the youth who were living far from their home regions were unhappy about this.³⁶ Less contact with family and friends, unfamiliarity with the area and difficulty transitioning from a large urban area to a small urban or rural area were the reasons youth cited most often as the source of their unhappiness.

Additionally, when group homes had to accommodate widely differing needs among youth, there was a higher level of discontent by residents. Some of the smaller group homes in particular serving a wide range of ages seemed to generate a fair amount of discontent.

Youth Demographics

Youth had the option to disclose demographic information in the written survey. Seventy-nine percent of youth surveyed were 14 years of age or older. Five percent of youth we surveyed were over 18 years of age and were able to access services and pursue higher education through the Foster Care to 21 program.³⁷

While the majority of youth responded to most questions, certain demographic questions elicited fairly low levels of response: many youth (39 percent) didn't identify their legal status, 43 percent identified themselves as dependent; 25 percent of the youth did not identify their race; and 28 percent did not report the length of stay in their current placement. The low response rates on these questions make it difficult to accurately describe these demographic data. But, in general we estimate that at least half the youth were dependent, and that based on the youth's self-reporting in OFCO's survey, Caucasians and Hispanic youth were underrepresented in group homes in comparison to their total numbers in out-of-home placements.³⁸ Very few youth had been living in the group home for two years or longer, or less than a week. Over one-third had lived in the group home up to a year.

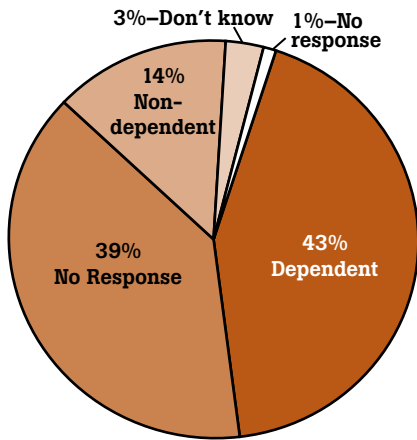
³⁶ RCW 74.14A.020 specifies that children should be placed "in close proximity to the family home".

³⁷ The Foster Care to 21 Program "is a program in Washington State that allows up to 50 youth in foster care per year to stay in foster care after they turn 18 so that they can go to a college or vocational program." <http://www.independence.wa.gov/programs/fc21.asp>

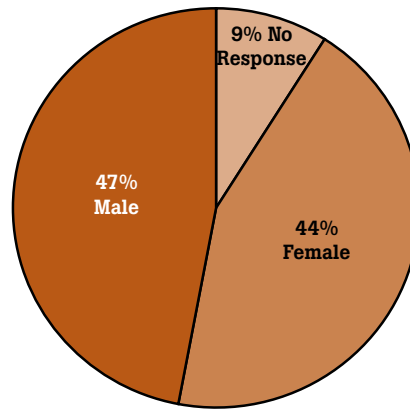
³⁸ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Children's Administration. 2007 Performance Report. ONLINE. 2008. Available: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/07Report2Intro.pdf> [3 Aug. 2008]

Youth Demographics

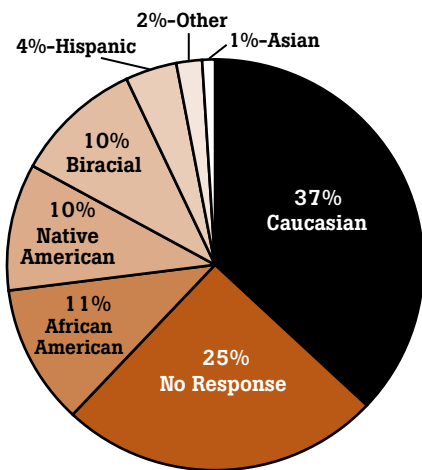
Dependent Status



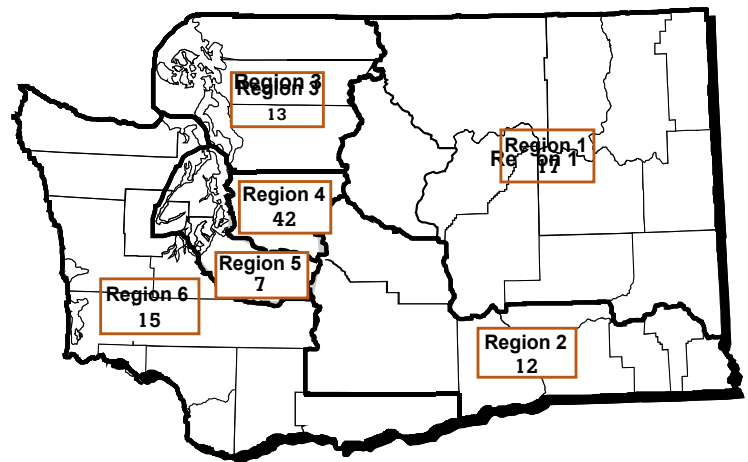
Gender



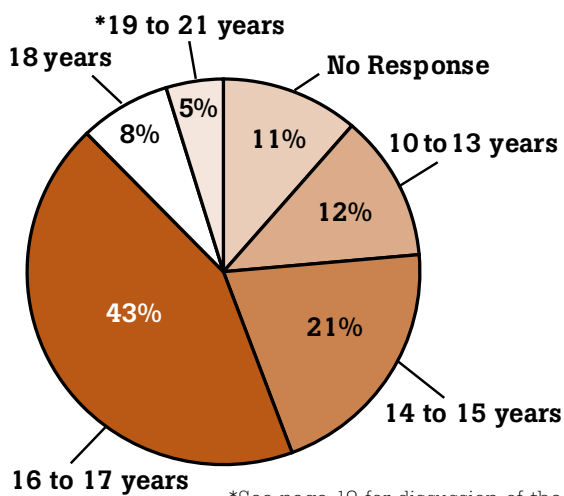
Race/Ethnicity



Number of Youth by Region

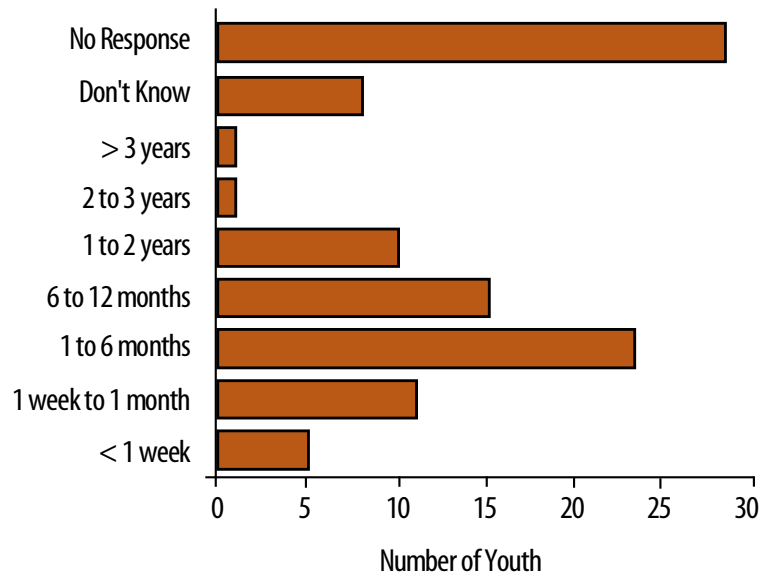


Youth Age



*See page 18 for discussion of the Foster Care to 21 program.

Length in Current Placement



Youth Survey Responses

The following section discusses survey responses from the **106 completed surveys** we received. Survey questions are grouped according to the broader themes that the individual questions were designed to capture. Background information related to the survey question (such as legal requirements of group care providers) is also provided.

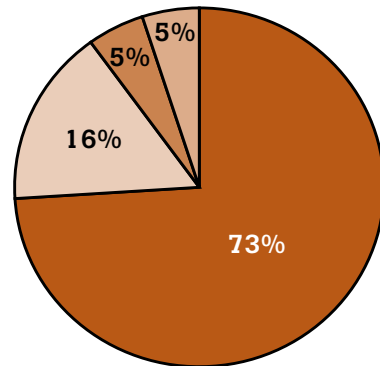
Basic Needs & Safety

Group care providers are required to provide children with a healthy and safe environment that meets their basic needs and protects them from any kind of child maltreatment.³⁹ They are also required to develop and follow a treatment plan and provide any specialized services needed by the children in their care, either through their own program or via other resources in the community.⁴⁰

³⁹ WAC 388-148-0005; WAC 388-148-0420

⁴⁰ WAC 388-148-0560; WAC 388-148-0690

Survey Question (SQ): Are your physical needs met?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes ■ No Response

Although three-quarters of youth responded affirmatively to this question, those who said “no” gave concrete examples of truly basic needs that should be met under the law. Clothing vouchers were a frequent source of complaint; specifically, lack of timeliness in providing them, and their insufficient amount.

“I need my contact lenses. I’ve been waiting for two months.”

“I need a doctor.”

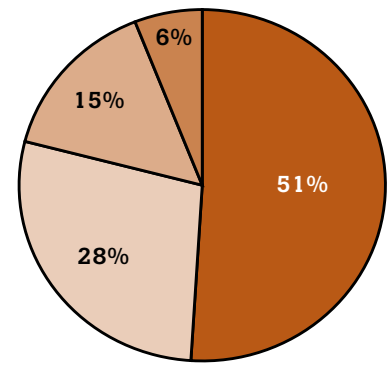
“I need school clothes and shoes.”

“Not really much physical activity.”

“Dental care.”

“Exercise. We don’t get it!”

SQ: Are your emotional needs met?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes ■ No Response

Approximately half the youth reported that their emotional needs were being met. However, it is concerning that about one-third of the youth reported feeling that their emotional needs are either sometimes met (6 percent) or not met at all (28 percent). Many of these youth provided explanatory comments, as illustrated by the examples below.

“If I have a problem it takes them too long to get to me.”

“I need a therapist.”

“Not enough contact with family.”

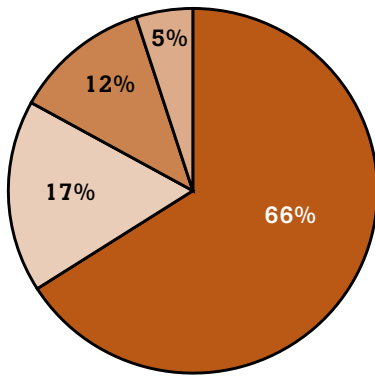
“I need ‘help with my depression and suicidal thoughts.’”

“I need more sympathy from staff.”

“It depends who is working. I don’t feel comfortable talking to females about my problems or feelings.”

"No one to really talk to and actually listen to me."

SQ: Do you feel safe here?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes ■ No Response

This was one of the most important questions on the survey. The majority of youth (66 percent) reported feeling safe in their current group home. However, 17 percent reported not feeling safe; an additional 12 percent reported sometimes feeling unsafe. Examples of these youths' comments are illuminating.

In nearly a quarter of the 22 homes surveyed (five homes, or 23 percent), 100 percent of youth respondents reported feeling safe at all times. Conversely, there were four group homes in which over half of the youth reported feeling largely unsafe or unsafe at times⁴¹. In one home, for

⁴¹It should be noted that the sample sizes for individual group homes is very small, and youth were not randomly sampled; therefore these data are not statistically significant.

example, some youth reported being uncomfortable with frequent police visits to the home due to a resident's out-of-control behavior. OFCO took action to investigate the history of licensing and CPS referrals on these facilities, and monitored any current investigations and corrective action being taken by DLR (see "Youth Ideas for Improving Group Care" on p.19 for details).

Yes, because "the lady who owns the group home was also a foster kid so she knows what its [sic] like."

"It's a secure and safe environment."

"[Yes] cuz [sic] they really care so much about us."

"I feel that if someone is being abusive staff will help."

"Except from wild animals."

"Safer than most places."

"I feel safe with people I know but it's better to be here instead of the streets."

"No, because staff cannot see everything."

"No, because I was hit in the past."

"Not really, because a resident is making threats and threw something at me yesterday."

"I don't know if I can keep my cool and not hit someone."

"Kind of – the [residents] are out of control."

"Staff doesn't keep good lookout for [residents] here."

"Sex offenders live down the street and knock at our window at night."

"[Staff] make me feel uncomfortable."

"People or staff looking and starring [sic] at me all the time."

"We have violent girls and staff can't really control them."

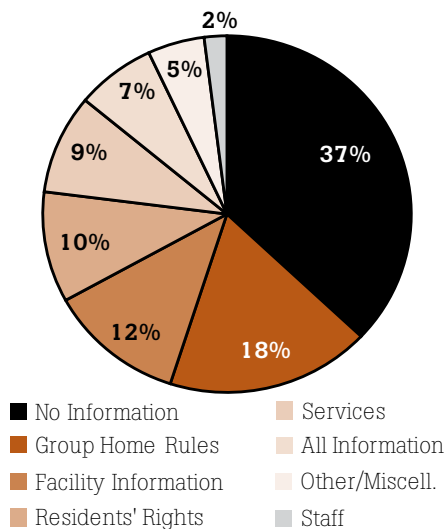
"Except when kids have to get restrained, out of control."

Informing Youth

OFCCO was curious to know what information is routinely provided to youth in group care. Although we could not find a policy setting forth what information must be provided to such youth, we did find a specific policy for youth in the Behavioral Rehabilitative Services (BRS) program. The BRS Handbook for contracted service providers requires that youth must be informed about their individual behavior management plan (IBMP) within 24 hours of their admission to a BRS program. In addition, BRS providers are required to orient youth within eight hours of the youth's admission, including information regarding behavioral expectations of the youth, how to contact their social worker, and a crisis response protocol. The Handbook does not stipulate that

youth be informed of their rights, or the group home's grievance process.⁴²

SQ: What information did you have about this group home prior to moving in?

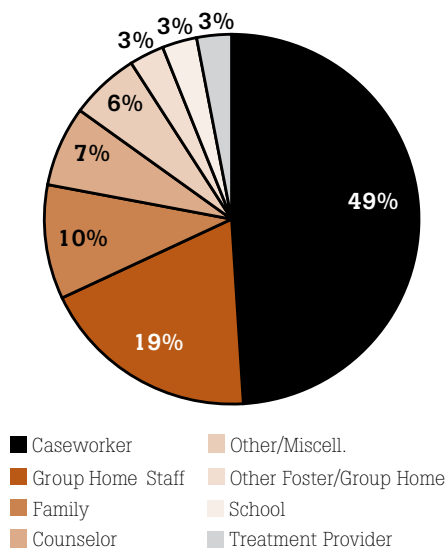


102 youth responded to this question. Some youth provided multiple responses. Over one-third of the youth (37 percent) reported getting no information at all.

Youth who did not know where they were being moved to reported feeling scared and anxious. One youth reported having been sent to a new placement on a plane without knowing where she was going.

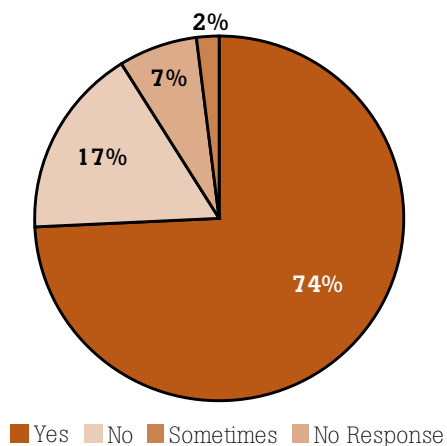
⁴² Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Children's Administration. Behavioral Rehabilitative Services Manual. ONLINE.2008. Available: <http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/CA/BRSHandbook.pdf> [3 Aug. 2008]

SQ: Where did this information [about your group home] come from?



Fewer than 70 youth reported the source of their information.

SQ: Do you know your rights and the grievance process in your home?



OFCO reviewed several informational documents addressing the rights of youth in out-of-home care developed in other states. At the time of our site visits, we could not find such a document for youth in Washington (although various state statutes

reference general or specific rights of children in out-of-home care).⁴³ The Mockingbird Society has since completed a useful pamphlet setting forth the rights of youth. Some of these basic rights include the right to physical and medical care, reasonable discipline, contact with an attorney and other professionals, education, visits with siblings, phone calls and letters, and to refuse medication. One of the larger group homes provided OFCO with detailed written information provided to residents regarding their rights and the grievance process, but most group homes (especially the smaller ones) did not seem to have written information they give to residents.

It was clear in talking with youth that they were very interested in knowing the grievance process. Many youth described specific instances when the process had been used. While several youth stated that their group home's grievance process was not helpful in bringing about changes, a few youth reported changes occurring as a result of following the internal grievance process.

⁴³ See Appendix E for a list of such rights listed in statute.

Our group discussions revealed that many of the dependent youth did not appear to know whether they had an attorney or a CASA/ guardian ad litem assigned to them, or who that person was, and how to contact them. OFCO referred these youth to the group home staff or their caseworker for assistance in contacting their attorney. We asked youth to contact us if they faced any difficulties in reaching their attorney.

"I talk to staff and they listen."

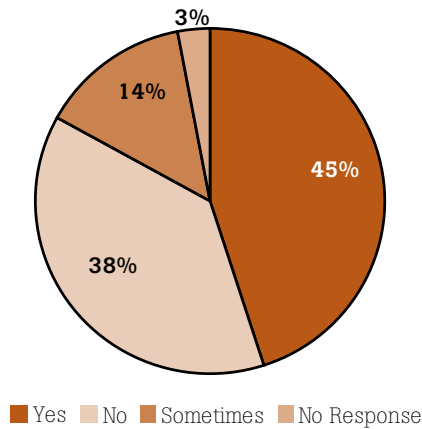
"We have complaint forms."

"They don't explain anything to me."

Privacy

Children in out-of-home care generally have a right to receive personal mail and phone calls. However, DSHS or its delegates (which could include group care providers) are permitted to censor mail and/or monitor telephone calls "to the extent necessary and in the manner specified by the court order for the child's safety or well-being."⁴⁴

SQ: Do staff respect your privacy?



"I think the staff members respect my privacy. They are in the middle because when I use the bathroom the door has to be open for safety or not."

"Sometimes they don't even knock on the door of your room."

"Staff pull down our bed covers to do bed checks"

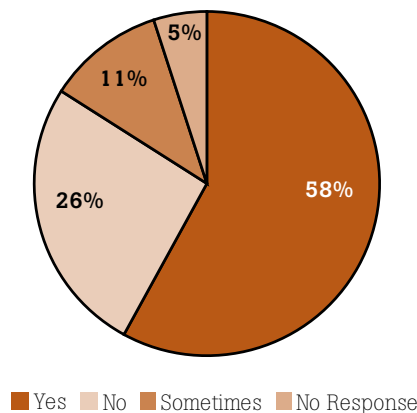
"Yes, except for night person. Opens door and makes me uncomfortable."

"Staff are ok people."

"Wish they would [respect my privacy]."

"Everything I do is told to everybody."

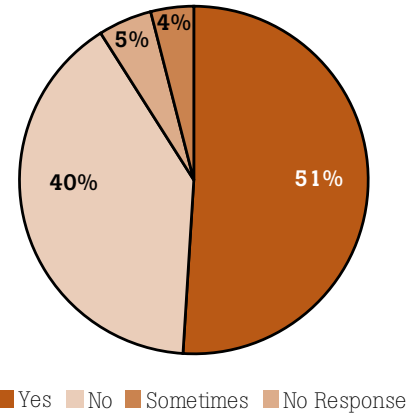
SQ: Do other residents respect your privacy?



"For the most part."

"They know what it's like, so they respect privacy."

SQ: Is there a place in your home where you can make confidential phone calls?



The responses to this question were group home-specific. Youth in several homes reported having to make calls in the open for anyone to hear. Others reported only being able to make calls in the presence of a staff member. Youth described phone calls with family, friends, and their service providers as being a very important aspect of feeling supported. The phone policy was a hot-button issue that frequently came up in our informal discussions and on survey comments.

"I have to use the staff phone to make phone calls. The staff phone is in the open. Everybody can listen to my conversation."

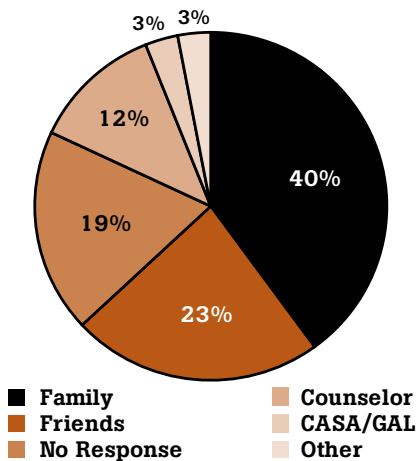
"Yes, but I don't get confidential messages."

⁴⁴ WAC 388-148-0422.

Well-being

A group care program is required to support the developmental needs of children.⁴⁵ This is a broad obligation, which might include access to a variety of service providers, recreational activities, or simply contact with family and friends.

SQ: Who do you turn to for help and support?

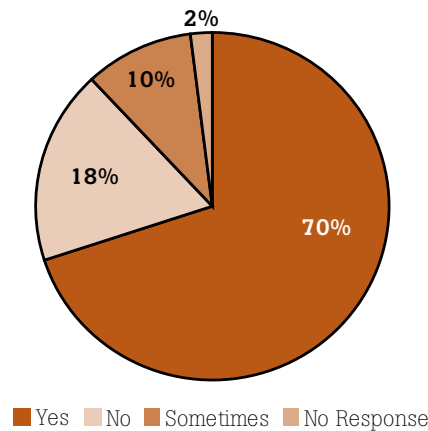


As might be expected, a large number of youth identified family (40 percent) and friends (23 percent) as a primary source of support. Almost one-fifth of the youth (19 percent) did not respond to this question.⁴⁶ These youth may feel they have no source of support at all.

⁴⁵ WAC 388-148-0680

⁴⁶ Unfortunately, our survey did not include "I do not have anyone I feel I can turn to" as a response option to this question, which may have increased the response rate.

SQ: Do you have visits with the people you turn to for support?



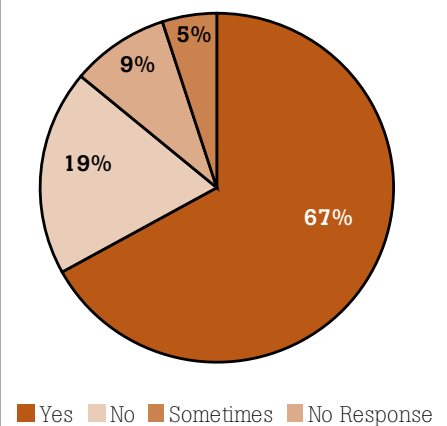
We were encouraged to find that the majority of youth reported having face-to-face contact with supportive people in their lives. Again, the almost one-fifth of youth reporting a lack of face-to-face contact with sources of support reflects a gap in meeting a critical need for these youth. A number of youth talked about how being placed in a home that was distant from their family and friends (often in another region of the state) limited their ability to have satisfying contact with these sources of support.

Non-Discrimination

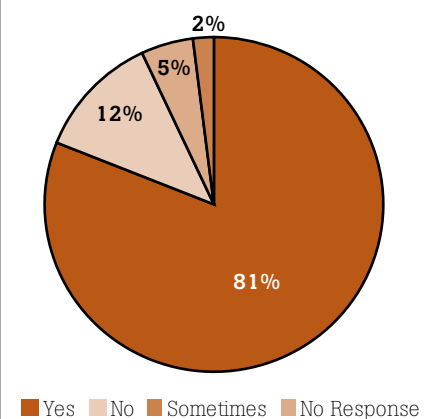
While it is encouraging to see that the majority of youth (81 percent) do not believe that their race affects how they are treated by staff, a little more than one in ten youth believe it does, at least sometimes (14 percent). Of greater concern was the high number of

youth – almost one in four (24 percent) – who reported that their race factored into how they are treated by other residents. Group home staff are expected to follow all state and federal laws regarding non-discrimination in their provision of services.⁴⁷

SQ: Has your race/ethnicity affected how you are treated here by staff?⁴⁸



SQ: Has your race affected how you are treated here by other residents?



⁴⁷ WAC 388-148-0425

⁴⁸ Of the nineteen percent of youth (20) who reported that race affected how they are treated by residents: nine did not identify their race; seven identified as Caucasian; two identified two or more racial groups; one identified as African American; one identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

"I'm in more programs because I'm Native."

"Some Black staff make fun of me."

"[The residents are] racist."

"Everything I do is based on my race. They always call me white-girl."

Self-determination and Future Planning

OFCO was interested in how much choice youth are provided in where they live and who provides them with services. For older youth, we wanted to know how they are assisted with planning for adulthood. Regarding the first question, we could find no policy addressing whether or how youths' preferences should be considered in placement or service decisions. Regarding future planning, although there is no specific law or policy requiring group home providers to assist youth with future planning, it may be argued that the more general policy requiring group homes to "provide specialized services that are needed by the group that [they] serve"⁴⁹ would cover this type of service for older youth.

Youth in the BRS program, some of whom are in group care, are covered by very specific policy

⁴⁹ WAC 388-148-0690

regarding future planning. Youth aged 16 and older are required to have, as part of their individual service and treatment plan, an Independent Living Service Plan.⁵⁰ Dependent youth aged 15 and older are eligible for the Independent Living (IL) program. A new policy regarding planning for adolescents' transition to independence became effective on April 15, 2008. DCFS caseworkers are now responsible for ensuring that youth aged 15 and older who have been in out-of-home care for 30 days or longer, have an independent living assessment and plan as part of their Individual Safety and Service Plan. The assessment and plan may be conducted by a contracted IL provider, such as a group home. The Independent Living program includes the following services⁵¹:

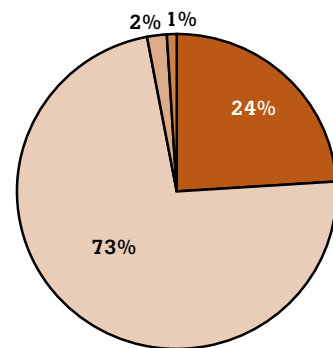
- Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) and Learning Plan
- Daily Living Skills

⁵⁰ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Children's Administration. Behavioral Rehabilitative Services Manual. ONLINE.2008. Available: <http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/CA/BRSHandbook.pdf> [3 Aug. 2008]

⁵¹ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Children's Administration. Independent Living Program. ONLINE. Available: <http://ca.dshs.wa.gov/intranet/programs/adolIL.asp> [3 Aug. 2008]

- Educational Support
- Career Exploration
- Vocational Training
- Job Placement and Retention
- Funding available up to \$500 for Independent Living enrichment activities

SQ: Did you choose this home?

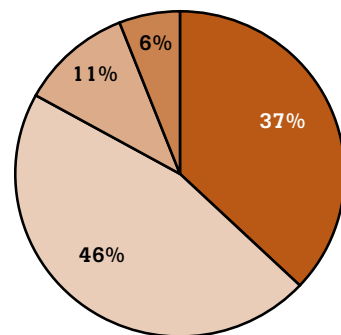


■ Yes ■ No ■ Kind of/Sometimes ■ No Response

"I do not know why I moved here. My caseworker chose it."

"I chose to live here so I could move to an independent living home."

SQ: [Many youth have several helping professionals in their lives]. Do you have a choice in who you work with?⁵²



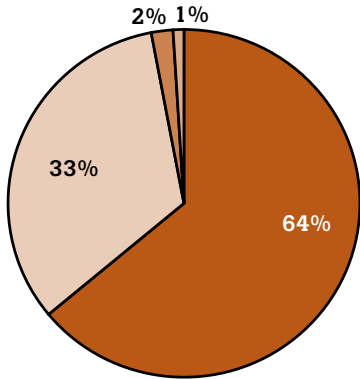
■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes ■ No Response

⁵² This question followed a survey question asking "Who are some [of the helping professionals] that you work with and what do they do for you?" This question had a very low response rate and data is excluded from this report for that reason.

"I wish I did."

"I don't but I like it like that."

SQ: Do you have plans for where you will live next?



■ Yes* ■ No ■ Maybe ■ No Response

"Hopefully I will be living with my mom or my sister."

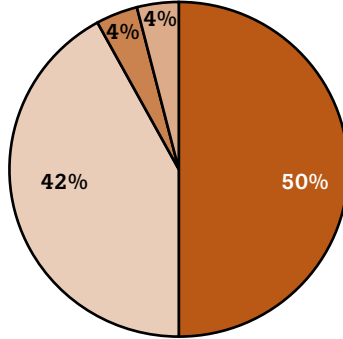
"I want to get emancipated but every time I talk to someone they never give me information."

*A caveat on these "yes" responses is that many youth acknowledged in the comments section of this question that they have plans for where they wanted to live next, but were unsure whether these were false hopes versus a realistic possibility.

Most youth were unaware of the new state law passed in 2007 allowing legally free youth ages 12 and older to petition the court to reinstate previously terminated parental rights of a parent under certain circumstances.⁵³ Several youth believed this might apply to them and were interested in hearing about this information. They were referred to their attorneys for legal advice.

⁵³ RCW 13.34.215. See ENGROSSED SUBSTITUTE SENATE BILL 6792.

SQ: Have group home staff helped you with your future plans/goals?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes ■ No Response

"They have pushed me to my limits to do the best I can."

"We make goals then we talk about them."

What Youth Say is Working

We asked youth to identify two of the "best things" about living in their group home. Most youth readily provided appreciative comments. By bringing these to the attention of stakeholders in group care, we hope to focus energy and resources on those aspects of group care that are working well and encouraging replication and enhancement of such strengths. The youths' responses are summarized by theme in the table on the following page.

Some youth gave elaborate responses, providing us with insights that may not have been

captured in our group discussion or elsewhere in the survey. Many youth used this section to express the impact that their group homes have had on their individual lives and outlooks. Here are some of their comments:

"The first couple of months I was here I was really violent and verbally aggressive towards others. Now I have totally changed. I listen to feedback positively, I'm a great role model, and I give positive peer support. This place has changed my life."

"Staff and this program has helped me a lot and my son and I bonding."

"My experience here has been great. I'm maturing and getting my life back on track. I'm doing well and I'm moving on. I have changed since I have been here. I have a job. I have learned to be independent."

Lastly, one youth's overall perspective on life in a group home:

"It's hard, but possible."

“Two Best Things” About Group Care

Learning Life Skills and Gaining Self-confidence

“Treatment. And more treatment.”
 “I get treatment and learn skills.”
 “The groups: relational healing and anger management.”
 “I can talk about what I need to talk about.”
 “Next step.” (A treatment program)
 “I am able to become a better person.”
 “Becoming able to treat people right.”
 “The staff and treatment.”
 “Anger management.”
 “Get a second chance to do treatment.”
 “I can learn to be independent and be ready to move out when I’m 18.”
 “I can get my life prepared.”
 “I get treatment.”
 “I learn skills.”
 “Learning DBT skills.”
 “I have a good attitude.”
 “Me, everyone likes me.”
 “I can talk about what I need to talk about.”

Freedom, Privacy, Independence

“I have more freedom.” (x2)⁵⁵
 “The amount of freedom is better than where I was last. It’s not as strict as where I was at.”
 “Independent.”
 “I can rely on myself. I don’t have to have people do things for me. I can learn to be independent and be ready to move out when I’m 18.”
 “I can be alone when I want.”
 “Quiet time.”
 “You have your own space.”
 “I get to do things that I couldn’t do before.”
 “I have privacy in my room.”
 “Getting a job.”
 “I have ‘multiple choices’.”
 “They let me live.”
 “You get to lock your room door and have a key.”

People Who Care

“Having people who care.”
 “The people.”
Staff
 “The staff—they are nice and always help.”
 “The staff are usually helpful.”
 “Some of the staff.” (x4)
 “Help with school work.”
 “Cool staff.”
Other Residents
 “Some of the kids at the group home”
 “The kids—they are fun.”
 “The other residents.”
 “I get to make lots of friends.” (x3)
 “Having friends” (x3)
 “Having friends to depend on.”
 “Being with family.” (This youth’s cousin is also a resident.)
 “Girls.”

“Foster Care to 21”

Several youth we surveyed were previously-dependent youth between 18 and 21 years old, participating in Washington’s new “Foster Care to 21” program.

This three-year pilot program (from 2006 through 2008) allows dependent youth to stay in their current foster or group care placement after they turn 18, as long as they are pursuing post-secondary education. Eligible youth must be graduating, have graduated, or received a GED, from high school during the calendar year in which they are applying. Additionally, youth must have been accepted or applied for a college or vocational program for the following year.

Youth who return to their biological family may not participate in the program. Only fifty youth are accepted into the program each calendar year, and not all youth who apply are accepted.⁵⁴ The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) is evaluating the effectiveness of the program and will

⁵⁴ To access information on how to apply for the program, see <http://www.independence.wa.gov/programs/fc21.asp>

⁵⁵ Number of occurrences of similar comments.

Safety, Structure, Basic Needs**Activities and Community /
Family Contact****Facility and Location**

"You're able to have a home and a place to call home."	"Fishing and boats."	"The house."
"Provides a safe home and environment for me and my child."	"Swimming."	Being "centrally located."
"I feel safe and comfortable."	"Going on passes with family."	Its "great location." (x2)
"A place to stay until further notice."	"Seeing my brother."	"The area."
"It's not jail."	"The online net connection."	Its "beautiful view."
"A roof overhead."	"Games." (x4)	
"A bed."	"T.V." (x2)	
"Low rent."	"Free activities."	
"It's free." (x4)	"Outings." (x4)	
"Free rent."	"My passes."	
"Outings and money."	"They take me places."	
"Getting a job."	"The activities."	
"The allowance." (x2)	"I get to go into the community."	
"We get money to buy stuff."	"Going places is fun."	
"Having structure."	"I love living here. We go to the lakes, swimming at the Y, and to the park."	
The food. It is very good! (x11)	"I have an online net connection."	
Food choice.	"Fun stuff – games, color, art project."	
Free food.	"Playing rec for an hour."	
"Cooking on our own."	"We get free time and go outside."	
	"I like calling my mother (she can call me)."	

be reporting its final results to the Washington State Legislature by December 31, 2008, in time for the 2009 legislative session.

The youth we surveyed commended the program for allowing them to transition to college by assisting them with rent, food, and health care, and by maintaining other critical support services they had received through the foster care system, and continued to need in order to succeed academically and live independently.

Youth Ideas for Improving Group Care

Equally valuable insights were gained from youths' suggestions for ways to improve their group home and the group care system. Some prominent themes arose in our discussions and in the open-ended survey questions. While there were several comments expressing strong negative feedback about the group home ("I don't like it here"; "I hate it here"; "I want to leave"; "Close it down"; "It's stupid"), the majority of

youth provided constructive, concrete suggestions for making daily life in a group home easier and more enjoyable for them.

Theme 1: More Freedom, Contact with Family and Friends, and Privacy

Regardless of the facility, youth repeatedly voiced their desire for more freedom in terms of activities, communication within the group home, and contact with family and friends.

<i>"More freedom." (x3)</i>	<i>"Being allowed to go swimming without a lifeguard."</i>
<i>"Talk to people our own age for experience from someone you trust on the phone."</i>	<i>"Not be so strict."</i>
<i>"Less rules/less strict"</i>	<i>"Go on walks whenever for 20 minutes or less."</i>
<i>"Be allowed more privileges."</i>	<i>"Walks by myself."</i>
<i>"I would ask for more freedom for each person."</i>	<i>"Do what we want."</i>
<i>"Going places by ourselves and not just one hour."</i>	<i>"More privacy."</i>
<i>"More independence."</i>	<i>"Private phone calls." (x3)</i>
<i>"Let us wear what we want."</i>	<i>"Communication."</i>
<i>"Let us stay up later."</i>	<i>"Cell phones."</i>
<i>"Let people visit me."</i>	<i>"I would like to be able to call any family [member] I want."</i>
<i>"More phone calls."</i>	<i>"More time to talk to friends and more calls - it is what keeps us sane!"</i>
<i>"The phone is a BIG problem I need the phone to stay sane and I only get 3 phone calls a day that are 15 minutes only!"</i>	<i>"Let us work/give us more money."⁵⁶</i>

Theme 2: Improve Staffing and Management

Youth had some practical suggestions for improving the running of their group homes. They frequently mentioned the qualifications and skills of staff. Youth readily identified (and highly valued) staff they viewed as competent and caring, and who treated them fairly.

<i>"Better qualified management."</i>	<i>"Things should get done faster."</i>
<i>"They need to get more staff cleared so we could go on more outings."</i>	<i>"Strong staff."</i>
<i>"If management would talk to us more and staff do what their [sic] supposed to do."</i>	<i>"Revise some rules."</i>
<i>"Staff [should be] more willing to negotiate consequences."</i>	<i>"More staff." (x2)</i>

⁵⁶ WAC 388-148-0695 requires group care facilities, except receiving centers, to provide children under their care, based on age, needs and ability to handle money, with an allowance. Facilities must keep track of allowance in a ledger. WAC 388-148-0440 states that children may do regular household tasks without payment, and they that may do other work assignments "that are appropriate to physical conditions and receive monetary compensation if this is part of their service plan."

Theme 3: Increase Safety

Some of the youth's suggestions about safety revealed their concerns that staff were behaving in an emotionally or even physically abusive manner. Their specific comments correlate strongly with youth's perceptions that staff lacked adequate skills and sensitivity, indicating a need for better training and more rigorous screening or higher qualifications of staff. The Ombudsman followed up on specific safety concerns by reviewing licensing complaints and CPS referrals regarding facilities in which youth made any statements of concern, to ensure that they were being appropriately investigated and acted upon by DLR, and taking further action as necessary (see "Safety" in Discussion section, page 23).

"Not getting hurt by staff (restraining, throwing, laid on top of)."

"Staff mean."

"Staff not grabbing me for no reason, yelling, racist, cussing at us."

"Staff abuse us emotionally; staff favor. It takes months to get clothes; it's gross and dirty; no one keeps to their word; promises are constantly broken; we're bribed."

"No yelling at children that aren't yours."

"I keep to myself."

"Less fighting and yelling."

"When people come home high and put other people's children in danger they should not get second, let alone third chances."

"This place needs to be shut down!"

"The boys boss me around."

"Not allow people to run away."

Theme 4: Increase Nurturing and Respect

Many youth expressed a desire to be treated with more respect and fairness.

"Equality from every staff."

"More respect."

"Not to have as much of an attitude."

"Negotiate more."

"Respect from staff at group homes."

"Understanding."

"Not butting in others' business."

"More maturity."

"Have ideas listened to and tried."

"More respect for all."

"More respect from floor staff."

"Respectful staff."

"Increase fairness."

"It's unfair."

"People don't respect our orientation!"

"... just listen to the staff."

Theme 5: Meeting Basic Needs

Food, cleanliness and money were the main sub-themes in this category.

"Being able to have jobs when needed."

"Better mattresses."

"Cleaner rooms, bathrooms, and the rec room."

"More food."

"Cleanliness."

"They need to get much better food."

"Food."

"Our needs should be met."

"Different/cleaner showers."

"More work opportunities."

Theme 6: More Structure and Activities⁵⁷

In contrast with the many suggestions to increase the level of freedom given to youth, there were almost as many suggestions expressing a desire for greater structure and clearer rules. Many youth expressed boredom and a need for more structured activities.

"Designated bath times."

"I think foster kids should have the chance to have they [sic] dreams come true, but they [sic] caseworker won't take them and when they do they don't have the money to get you the classes. It's not fair and I will do whatever it take [sic] to get the governor to listen."

"More rules."

"More strict rules."

"Things to do."

"I really don't like it here; staff are lazy and don't like to do anything. We don't do anything but sit on our butts all day."

"No more quiet time."

"More outings." (x4)

"More stuff to do with staff and peers."

"Going to football games."

"Put a game system in the home."

Discussion

What is Working Well?

Youth identified the following elements as the "best things" about their group home:

- The learning they experienced from therapeutic interventions;
- A sense of freedom, and being trusted with responsibilities;
- Having their privacy respected;
- The important role played by staff and residents;

⁵⁷ WAC 388-148-0445 requires out-of-home care providers to offer youth activities "that contribute to developing their physical, mental, social, and emotional skills."

- Recreational activities, and opportunities to have contact with family and friends; and
- Good food, a comfortable and pleasant physical space, and the location of the home.

Interestingly, these same themes were echoed in youths' suggestions for improvements to group home life, providing us with a consistent message about their values, their hopes and their priorities regarding the care they wish to receive.

Youth in this sample appear to feel fairly positive regarding their safety and basic physical care. Regarding the latter, however, there were some complaints specific to a small number of group homes that were concerning (such as cleanliness of the facility, unhealthy/unappetizing food, limited opportunities for physical exercise, and access to health care). OFCO followed up to ensure that these were being investigated by DLR.

The "Foster Care to 21" Program received very favorable feedback from youth, who are probably unaware that this is not a permanent change in the law. Hopefully, evaluation data will confirm the participants' perceptions regarding the positive outcomes this program has afforded them.

Areas for Improvement

Safety

Youths' safety concerns prompted OFCO to contact DLR to request reviews and/or corrective action with specific facilities. One facility we flagged as problematic was directed to take no further placements until a corrective action plan was devised and implemented; that facility reopened but has since been closed again temporarily. Another two facilities OFCO flagged as problematic have been closed. At OFCO's request, a fourth facility is being reviewed by DLR for the pattern of referrals and ongoing concerns identified in DLR investigations, at OFCO's request. A fifth facility has received a combination of coaching and corrective action by DLR to improve the safety of residents.

Basic needs

It is unacceptable that several youth identified that they had unmet physical needs such as clothing, personal hygiene items, decent food, and cleanliness of the facility in general. Any such problems reported by youth should receive priority attention from DLR.

Staff Supervision & Capacity

OFCO found that the state requirements for ratio of staff to residents and credentials of staff did not meet recommended COA standards. A high concentration of youth with challenging behaviors who are being managed by unskilled staff.

Give me more freedom, but give me boundaries too!

The apparent contradiction in both the large number of responses indicating a desire for greater freedom, and the number of responses indicating a desire for greater structure and fairness can be seen as

developmentally typical of adolescents, and warrants further exploration by policy-makers and individual group homes to find the ideal balance for these competing needs. The ideal balance to be achieved is so dependent upon the age group, “treatment” population, and the structure and type of facility; it might be impossible and in fact undesirable to have a “one size fits all” policy dictating what this balance should look like. This appears to be an area where highly successful or more experienced facilities may have lessons to share with less experienced and less successful homes (such as homes with a high runaway rate or a high level of complaints from residents). After most of our visits, we were left with a clear impression of either general contentment or general dissatisfaction among residents.

Social and emotional needs

Youths’ desire for much more attention to their emotional, social and recreational needs came through loud and clear in the survey comments and in the group discussions. The yearning for connection with family and friends as well as with staff and residents, for youth who felt that was lacking, was painfully evident. Given the history of abuse or neglect that so many of the youth in out-of-home care have, the need for therapeutic connections is great, and should receive high priority, regardless of whether or not the youth are in a “treatment” facility.

Privacy

The fact that over half the youth felt their privacy was either not respected or only sometimes respected by staff in group homes, begs further inquiry into what privacy means to these youth and how privacy can be better protected while still protecting youths’ safety and well-being. This area could be further explored by OFCO in future visits to other group homes.

Interracial tension between youth

The high number of youth (almost one in four) reporting that they feel differently treated by other residents because of their race is concerning and warrants further exploration. Various levels of interventions could be considered, from simply increasing the level of monitoring of resident interactions by group home staff, to increasing the level of staff intervention in racially discriminatory statements or behaviors between residents. On a broader level, group homes with higher levels of interracial tension should consider providing educational programs for youth to promote racial tolerance.

Youth rights and access to information

Lack of information regarding their group home, their rights, resources available (including attorneys and CASAs) and their case plan was a common theme for many youth. It was also clear that youth feel they have little to no choice regarding where they are placed and who provides them with services. While choice is a luxury seldom available given the scarcity of placements and services in general, where choices are possible, youth should be given options.

Unfortunately, our survey question regarding youths’ knowledge of their rights combined the more general concept of “rights” with the more specific “grievance process”. As a result, while it was encouraging to see

that three-quarters of the youth reported knowing their “rights and the grievance process”, in the group discussions youth were more inclined to discuss the specific grievance process related to complaints about their group home, and appeared to have more knowledge of this than of their rights in general.

In instances when OFCO investigated a youth’s complaint that they lacked specific information (such as who their attorney or CASA was), the youth’s caseworkers often reported that the youth had been provided with the information in question. It may be useful to explore ways in which this information can be more effectively provided to youth, and to ensure that youth fully understand the important information they need to advocate for themselves.

Planning for the future

Given the range of ages in this sample, the fact that half the youth reported receiving assistance in planning for the future is encouraging. The new CA policy regarding independent living planning for youth ages 15 and older should result in an increased focus on this important transition planning for youth in care.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Children’s Administration and other stakeholders in the child welfare system:

- 1. Prioritize youths’ need for basic essentials.** Complaints or concerns expressed by youth about unmet basic needs such as food, clothing, personal hygiene items, and basic cleanliness and maintenance of facilities should be addressed and given high priority by caseworkers, DLR, and others responsible for the youth and facility
- 2. Improve safety and quality of care by reducing the minimum “social service” staffing ratio.** Minimum social service staffing ratios for group homes should be lowered, from the current ration of 1:25, to the ratios specified in COA standards of 1:15.⁵⁸ This would enable staff to provide and implement more carefully tailored service and treatment plans for the youth in their care.⁵⁹ **Revise the minimum qualifications for group home “child care” staff** to meet COA standards. This would require all youth care workers to have a bachelor’s degree or to be actively pursuing a degree. Compensation should reflect the educational qualifications and experience of staff and allow for successful recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce. **Ensure that staff (and caseworkers) receive ongoing training and supervision,**⁶⁰ including on matters such as a youth’s right to receive and make private phone calls.

⁵⁸ WAC 388-148-0610; COA standard PA-GLS 14.05, Ibid.

⁵⁹ Although current policy regarding staffing ratios for direct care of youth is in line with Council on Accreditation standards for group care (i.e. 1:8), since many youth raised this as a concern [what kind of an issue—safety or supervision?], this warrants further inquiry. It may be that required staffing ratios are not consistently being followed by some group homes, or that this ratio is insufficient in the homes serving youth with more severe behavior problems.

⁶⁰ COA standard PA-GLS 14.04, ONLINE. Available: www.coastandards.org/standards.php [3 Aug. 2008]

3. **Empower youth by engaging them in all decision making** regarding changes in their case plans and placement in a timely manner (give consideration to the manner in which the individual youth is best able to understand and absorb this kind of information, e.g. written versus verbal, telephone versus face-to-face, etc. If the youth disagrees with the case plan, their attorney should be brought into the decision making process); **by distributing to them a publication that describes their legal rights and the dependency process**⁶¹ (and a poster with such information to be posted in each group home, with publications providing OFCO's contact information); and **by ensuring that dependent youth have an attorney or CASA/GAL** (preferably an attorney for youth ages 12 and up) **and know how to contact them.** The youth's attorney or CASA should be informed about any change in placement.
4. **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 standards. Current WACs regarding staffing should be amended to require this.
5. **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.⁶²

OFCO will continue its periodic visits to state-licensed group homes, with the goal of reaching each home in the state. To increase direct contact from youth about issues of concern to them, we will also mail flyers to group homes to ensure that information about our services is easily accessible. These mailings will include a letter to management to maintain staff awareness of OFCO's role as a resource for youth.

Recommendations for individual group homes:

1. **Actively facilitate contact between youth and their sources of support**; this should consist of face-to-face visits wherever possible. Push the bounds of what is convenient for the adults – this was a key need identified by youth. For youth who are placed distant from their family and community in particular, effective communication needs to occur between the assigned caseworker, the worker providing courtesy supervision of the placement, and the group care provider to assure coordination of visits and services to the youth and family.
2. **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.** (Consider adopting the BRS guidelines for providing information/orientation to new residents,

⁶¹ 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/>

⁶² 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/>

for all group homes.) Youth should understand their rights as well as their responsibilities.

3. **Balance individual youths' needs for independence with their need for supervision** (possibly by developing an individual plan tailored to each youth's particular needs) to provide the least restrictive environment for each youth where possible.
4. **Ensure that the group home's phone policy is consistent with the legal rights of youth** under State law, i.e. that children in care have the right to private phone calls and letters unless otherwise ordered by the court⁶³. Educate staff on the policy to ensure that residents can exercise their rights in this regard.
5. **Actively solicit youth suggestions for improvement of daily routines, rules, structure, and activities.** In larger homes, provide opportunities for leadership by youth themselves in organizing resident participation in the shaping of the home's policies, such as a youth advisory committee.
6. **Consider introducing educational programs for both residents and staff to promote cross-cultural understanding.**⁶⁴

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.

⁶³ WAC 388-148-0422

⁶⁴ Two examples of widely used programs are the "Undoing Racism" workshop developed by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond [www.pisab.org], and the "Teaching Tolerance" program developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center [www.tolerance.org].

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