



New York City Comptroller
Scott M. Stringer

NEWS

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COMPTROLLER STRINGER AUDIT REVEALS ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES ABDICATED OVERSIGHT ROLE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE PROGRAM, PUTTING YOUTH AT RISK

ACS's mismanagement of 'Close to Home' service providers has "betrayed the very children it is supposed to be serving," Stringer said

(New York, NY) – The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) did not ensure that adequate care and rehabilitation services were provided to youths in the Close to Home program, according to an [audit](#) released today by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. Close to Home takes a community-based approach to put youths on a path out of the criminal justice system, but ACS has abdicated its oversight of the program, failing to meet with children and parents or adequately monitor troubled providers, potentially putting hundreds of children at risk.

"Every child in the Close To Home program deserves a chance to get back on the right track, but the Administration for Children's Services mismanagement and hands-off approach to oversight is robbing them of that opportunity," Stringer said. "The leadership of ACS has abdicated its responsibility to provide oversight of this program by not holding Close to Home providers accountable. This agency must take immediate action to ensure these children get the services and care they need."

The Administration of Children's Services launched the Close to Home juvenile justice program in 2012 to place youths ages 7 to 15 years old who have been determined to be delinquent by Family Court and who do not require a secure placement into residential care for rehabilitation. Placement in this program allows children to live in a home-like environment closer to their families and communities, instead of a detention center, to provide an easier transition back into society after treatment.

When a child is placed in the program, ACS evaluates his or her needs and assigns them to either a Non-Secure or Limited Secure Placement residence, usually for a stay of 6 or 7 months. In Non-Secure Placement sites, which house youth deemed lower-risk by Family Court, participants attend school, receive medical care or substance abuse services as needed, can regularly call or visit with family, and take part in recreational and cultural activities.

Although this program was intended to provide a community-based path toward rehabilitation for youths, a recent Department of Investigation report revealed significant safety and oversight issues with Close to Home providers. The Comptroller's audit takes a comprehensive look at how ACS has failed to oversee this program from top to bottom.

Auditors focused on ACS's oversight of its Non-Secure Placement vendor network during Fiscal Years 2014 and 2015. In this time period, 560 youths were transferred into the Close to Home program and \$94.9 million was spent to house them at a cost of roughly \$169,480 per participant. As of July 1, 2014, nine providers were contracted to provide services at 32 sites throughout the City.

While ACS is responsible for the safety and well-being of the youths in its care, the audit identified pervasive mismanagement that put these children at risk. Auditors found that ACS was not meeting with youths in the program, or with their families, to ensure they were getting the help they needed from the providers.

- Within the first week of entering a Close to Home provider residence, each child is supposed to receive a phone call from ACS. Auditors sampled the cases of nine children who were in the program for a total of 83 months and found that ACS could only prove that one child received that initial phone call.
- Each child is also supposed to have an in-person meeting with ACS within his or her first two weeks in the program, but auditors found that only 6 of 9 meetings took place.
- Within the first 60 days of in-take, parents or guardians are supposed to have an in-person meeting with ACS, but only 1 of 9 meetings occurred.
- Each child is supposed to have a monthly meeting with ACS to discuss their progress and ensure they are receiving proper care. However, ACS could not provide evidence that one-third of those mandatory meetings took place. When these meetings did occur, ACS often neglected to discuss serious incidents such as assaults, altercations, and AWOLs, as required.
- ACS policy also required staff to contact parents or guardians every month, but there was no evidence that 86% of these calls took place.

"When ACS doesn't bother to meet with children or contact their parents, they're telling these kids they don't matter, and giving up on them before they even have a chance to turn their lives around," Stringer said. "If ACS isn't doing their job, they can't know if the program is working for these kids, or if their living conditions are safe."

In order to ensure that residences are safe and secure, ACS policy requires that each Close to Home site receive one announced and one unannounced site visit each year. During these

visits, ACS is supposed to identify security issues, review incident logs, and assess how the program is working for youth at a given residence. Instead, auditors found:

- ACS does not track if and when site visits occur. It took ACS two months to provide auditors with a calendar of upcoming site visits, raising questions about whether such a calendar existed before it was requested.
- Two-thirds of Close to Home residences did not receive an unannounced site visit in 2014 and ACS failed to visit two sites operated by Children’s Village – Van Horn Cottage and Bayside Cottage – at all that year.
- When ACS did conduct site visits, they did not properly review program requirements to assess whether children were benefiting from the programs, attending school, working, or less likely to commit crimes in the future.

“By failing to conduct timely and consistent site visits, ACS is potentially putting these children directly in harm’s way. It’s outrageous that the City agency in charge of this program has no idea if windows are locked, children are behaving, or staff are doing their jobs. With children as young as seven years old in this program, it is unacceptable that no one can say definitively that these sites are safe,” Stringer said.

If ACS identifies consistent staffing, security, or operations issues with a provider that put children or the community at risk, that provider is placed on “heightened monitoring status.” Providers who do not make required changes are then placed on “corrective action status.” Children who live at these sites are at an increased risk of not receiving services and being subjected to unsafe conditions. But the audit uncovered that:

- In April 2015, ACS told auditors that no Close To Home providers were on corrective action status, even though Boys Town – which ran six sites in Brooklyn and Queens – had been placed on corrective action status fifteen months earlier.
- ACS did not have an accurate list of all providers on heightened monitoring or corrective action status. When the auditors received the list, the agency excluded seven sites operated by the provider SCO in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, which were placed on heightened monitoring in 2013.
- ACS did not adequately track what steps providers on heightened monitoring or corrective action status were taking to correct problems, potentially leaving children at risk.

The Comptroller’s Office made fourteen recommendations to ACS, including that it periodically verify that children in the Close To Home program are receiving required services; develop a system so supervisors can ensure staff conduct required monthly face-to-face visits with

children in Close To Home's care, and make sure staff discuss incidents including assaults, altercations, and AWOLs during these meetings; ensure that site visits assess providers' operations and verify if youth and communities actually benefit from the program; and make sure that corrective actions taken by providers on heightened monitoring and corrective action status are adequately tracked.

"ACS must take real responsibility and provide the necessary oversight to turn this program around. These are New York's children, and we all have a stake in their future. Whether it's the conditions of our homeless shelters for families, the resources missing from our classrooms, or the lack of services in our juvenile justice programs, we cannot and will not let our children suffer any longer," Stringer said.

To view a copy of the audit report, please click [here](#).