

Dear Members of Council:

We at Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) call upon the members of Philadelphia City Council to hold hearings to ensure the safety and well-being of youth entrusted to the City's care, and to join us in requesting hearings at the state level, to create a comprehensive public record regarding the state of residential programs contracted to provide for the care and treatment of Philadelphia's dependent and delinquent youth.

Closure of Wordsworth Residential Treatment Facility

The investigation into the October suffocation death of 17-year-old David Hess at Wordsworth's now-closed youth residential facility reveals a grim history at the facility, and raises a giant, glaring red flag to those responsible for the care and treatment of Philadelphia's abused, neglected, and delinquent youth.

Despite a ten-year history of safety concerns at the facility, Wordsworth continued to be licensed by the state, and continued to have its contracts with Philadelphia's DHS and CBH renewed until October 24, 2016. Violations include:

- Over 800 calls summoned the police to Wordsworth since 2007.
- Police made reports of 12 rapes, two cases of involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, seven reports of indecent exposure, four cases of corruption of the morals of a minor, and one case of child endangerment, 23 reports of sexual abuse, and six reports of physical abuse against children, including broken bones.
- State inspections revealed lapses in training, delays in medical care, injuries to children through improper restraints, and reported abuse, with warnings regarding use of restraint issued for four of the past five years.
- Physical inspection of the facility revealed that children's rooms themselves had unsafe conditions, including holes in the walls, exposed wiring, broken light fixtures, and faulty heaters.
- Three girls at Wordsworth reported being coerced into having sex with a staff member since 2015.
- On October 13, 2016, David Hess was killed over an iPod. Two of the staff members involved in the altercation did not have the required training in the proper use of restraint (and should not have been allowed to work with children.)

*"They didn't believe me when I told," she said. "Nobody believes you. They all stick together."*  
Victim/Former Wordsworth resident,  
quoted in The Inquirer

## Residential Care for Philadelphia Youth

Until its closure on October 24<sup>th</sup>, Wordsworth was the only residential placement for abused, neglected, and delinquent youth with behavioral health issues that was located within city limits. Now, all contracted residential providers are out of county, with many youth placed as far as Erie and even Utah.

In fact, DHS contracts with over 25 residential placement facilities, who altogether provide over 300,000 days of care for Philadelphia youth in a given year.

The cost of residential care for one youth committed to the City is approximately \$119,000 per year. Philadelphia spends at least \$100 million annually on residential placements through DHS contracts alone. On top of DHS funds, providers are paid millions by CBH and approximately \$65 million by the School District to provide health and education services.

Meanwhile, youth are failing to graduate from high school once they leave residential placements. Up to 70% of child-welfare-involved youth and 90% of juvenile-justice-involved youth fail to graduate high school after placement.

## Questions Remain

The existing systems of oversight of residential programs for Philadelphia's youth allowed the conditions at Wordsworth to exist, and have repeatedly failed to protect children. How do we know if conditions are any better at other residential facilities?

Further, given the track record on safety, what are we likely to find out about their ability to provide for the health and education of the children in their care?

## For these reasons, we call on Philadelphia City Council:

- (1) **To hold public hearings that examine:**
  - **How both Philadelphia and Pennsylvania DHS must act to ensure the safety and well-being of youth entrusted to the City's care, and**
  - **Methods to hold contracted providers accountable to keep youth safe and help them become productive adults; and**
- (2) **To join PCCY's request to the Commonwealth for hearings that examine the adequacy of the state's role in licensing residential facilities.**

Sincerely,

Donna Cooper, Executive Director

Michelle Payne, Child Welfare Policy Fellow