

# In The System: Stories from Colorado's YOUTH

Firsthand Accounts of Colorado's Child Protection System



## *One 17-year-old shares his experience in a Division of Youth Services' youth center.*

It's nearly midnight on a fall night in 2019. A 17-year-old boy is in a concrete cell with the door locked from the outside. He continually slams his head into the wall and punches himself in the nose over and over again until it bleeds. He bleeds in his room for hours. There is blood on his clothes and all over his room. He smears his own blood on the door, an adult sits outside his room, looks up, and according to the youth, does nothing to stop him from harming himself.

"They left me in a room full of blood. I slept on a metal frame all night without a mattress or a blanket," the youth said. At one point, he thinks he lost consciousness.

The Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) recently spoke to the now 18-year-old about this experience in a youth center run by the Division of Youth Services (DYS).<sup>1</sup>

During that fall night, he smeared blood on the window of his door in an effort to obstruct staff's view so he could continue to hurt himself.<sup>2</sup> The young man felt the youth center staff knew he was harming himself but did little to intervene and help him. Despite continuing for hours, they only entered his room one time, to make sure he was breathing and then they left. No other medical attention was provided that night.

Even as he continued hurting himself, the youth told the CPO that he still longed for support and compassion from the staff at the place he has called "home" for more than three years. He knew he was in the youth center for committing crimes for which he was sentenced. However, he was also managing a lifetime of childhood trauma, having been involved on and off with state systems since the age of nine.

Looking back, the youth now knows that his actions were a cry for help, even if he couldn't express that in words at the time. During that night, he

wanted someone to check on him. Someone to help him stop hurting himself. Just someone taking time to listen and talk to him may have made all the difference.

Eventually, the youth drifted to sleep. Several hours later, he woke up in his own blood. He heard staff talking and laughing with other youth. He felt like they were laughing and talking about him. He felt like they were laughing at the blood smeared on his door. He walked out of his room to get a mop, which he used to clean up the blood he slept in all night. Later, that morning, he was finally seen by a medical professional.

The youth told the CPO he wanted to report the incident to child welfare services. He wanted someone to know he did not get the care he needed that night. But he told the CPO he "did not want retaliation" by staff.

The youth shared his memories of that horrible night because he said he wants his story to be heard. He told the CPO that while he does not believe that the DYS youth center helped him, he wants to improve the DYS system for other youth.

"If it's happening to me, it must be happening to other kids, and I don't want other kids to be hurt," the youth said of his experience and the lack of services and care he received.

Looking back on this experience, the youth believed it further traumatized him. He thinks it fostered an extreme distrust in staff and contributed to his inability to engage in services. He reports that this lack of trust eventually led to his actions that resulted in new criminal charges against staff in the DYS youth center.

Regrettably, he admits that "I am an example of what not to do."

*Continued on the next page.*



## *What Would You Do Differently?*

When asked what ideas he had to improve the system, he barely hesitated before sharing his thoughts: Make services in the youth center “more trauma-informed.” Implement more training for staff on how to work with youth who are hurting themselves. Let youth know when they are doing something well. Prioritize incentives for good behaviors instead of only instilling fear of punishment for “bad” behaviors, many of which could be influenced by mental health concerns and past trauma. Most importantly, show that you care. Simply feeling like adults care enough to help when you are struggling and visibly injured, even if you are labeled as a “bad kid,” can make a world of difference.

## FOOTNOTES


<sup>1</sup> Youth who are detained in DYS reside in a youth center and are pending criminal charges or probation violations. When a youth pleads, or is found, “guilty” of a crime, they are said to be adjudicated. One possible penalty of adjudication is commitment to a DYS youth center, which means the youth resides at the youth center for treatment and rehabilitation efforts until they are released on parole.

<sup>2</sup> The CPO reviewed the youth’s case file and other documents to confirm the details of his account.

### *About the Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman*

The Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) is an independent state agency committed to ensuring the state’s child protection system consistently provides high quality services to every child, family and community in Colorado. The CPO studies the child protection system to ensure a better future for Colorado’s children and youth. By highlighting experiences of children and youth with lived experience in Colorado’s publicly funded safety nets, the CPO is working to ensure their unique perspectives are heard and considered.

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