

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Jordan Steffen, Deputy Ombudsman

jsteffen@coloradocpo.org | 720-625-8645

Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman calls for better surveillance in Colorado secure youth centers to protect young people from use of force injuries.

Broken bones, chipped teeth, bruises and cuts. These are some of the injuries suffered by Colorado youth in secure facilities when staff use force to detain them. To be clear, Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Youth Services (DYS) [policy](#) allows staff to use force to physically restrain youth who pose a danger or threat to themselves or others. But an analysis of such cases by the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) found that current reviews of these restraints are insufficient and fail to determine if the use of force was justified.

The use of physical force within DYS youth centers has been at the center of discussions in Colorado for more than a decade. In fact, during the past two fiscal years, the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was contacted by 130 youth currently or formally residing in DYS facilities. In total, 25 percent of those cases concerned staff misconduct or the misuse of physical restraints – the majority of which were called in by youth themselves.

“I have witnessed many videos where youth have been shoved into floors and walls suffering extensive injuries from broken bones, to cuts and bruises,” says Stephanie Villafuerte, Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman. “We cannot ignore the evidence in front of us. Youth are being hurt and it is imperative that we act now to do all that we can to ensure their safety and well-being. The level of force we have seen used against youth is disturbing and simply unacceptable.”

The CPO independently reviews case documentation, video surveillance footage and staff-generated incident reports detailing these incidents. However, the agency has not been able to determine whether the staff’s use of force was appropriate. This is because none of the current DYS surveillance systems capture audio of incidents inside facilities – a key element in making such a determination.

In a brief released today, the CPO demonstrates how this gap impacts the safety and well-being of youth in DYS facilities. These concerns are compounded by data that shows the use of physical restraints have recently started to increase in Colorado – more so for youth of color. In several cases brought to the CPO, youth have stated that staff antagonized them with racial slurs before or during the restraints.

The brief also lists a series of recommendations to address this issue, including the use of body-worn cameras by DYS staff. Such methods have been employed widely in adult corrections and other states working to improve their youth systems.

“When a child is physically and emotionally harmed you are creating life-altering trauma for that youth,” says Villafuerte. “Audio surveillance systems and body worn cameras provide a check and balance on the DYS system to ensure youth are safe from harm.”

About the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) is an independent government agency that ensures the state’s child protection systems consistently, fairly and equitably deliver services to every child, youth and family. Established in 2010, the CPO offers free, confidential and neutral services to ensure the highest attainable standards of care and works with people, government agencies and other stakeholders to resolve issues and disputes. The CPO engages communities across the state and collaborates with stakeholders and lawmakers to improve child protection services, policies and laws. More information can be found at: <https://coloradocpo.org>

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