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City to Move Teens Out of Troubled ACS Shelter to Park Slope Space

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PARK SLOPE — The Administration for Children's Services will move a dozen teens and young adults out of its troubled Manhattan foster care facility, where kids went missing nearly 1,600 times in 13 months (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20140915/kips-bay/kids-went-missing-1600-times-from-one-acs-center-data-show>), and into a renovated facility in Park Slope starting next month, officials said.

The new two-story facility on 9th Street, called The Virginia Residence, is being completely renovated to accommodate the new guests, and will be run by nonprofit social services organization MercyFirst (<http://www.mercyfirst.org/>). The facility had been used to shelter 10 teen moms and their babies until last year, MercyFirst President Gerard McCaffery said.

The new accommodations are a stark contrast to conditions that parents and children had described at the Nicholas Scoppetta Children's Center in Manhattan (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20140915/kips-bay/kids-went-missing-1600-times-from-one-acs-center-data-show>), where they said kids were forced to share a room with a dozen other children.

The Park Slope residence offers 12 single-bed units, six bathrooms, and will offer programming specifically created to serve an older youth population, MercyFirst officials said.

It will also feature two clinical social workers and three youth support counselors on site, who will supervise the children, prepare their meals and participate in different activities, according to McCaffery.

The facility will also have part-time staff, including two nurses, an art therapist, a psychiatrist and a psychologist. Transportation workers will also be available to drive kids to their various appointments and family visits, McCaffery said.

The Virginia Residence will also include a classroom with computers, where a teacher will give small group classes for children who are not in regular school programs, ACS officials said.

Since last December, ACS has been in the process of moving children ages 14 and up out of its emergency foster shelter at 492 First Ave. — which DNAINfo New York reported last year was plagued with bullying, theft and an indifferent staff. (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20140915/kips-bay/kids-went-missing-1600-times-from-one-acs-center-data-show>)

The center, which had been the only one of its kind in the five boroughs, housed children from birth to 21 who were taken into city custody because of abuse, neglect or because their parents were arrested and they had nowhere else to go.

The city moved a first wave of children to a new 12-bed facility run by MercyFirst in Syosset, Long Island, in December. (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20141226/kips-bay/city-move-teens-out-of-troubled-foster-care-facility>) the first of three "specialized short-term" facilities, where youths will stay until a permanent home can be found for them, ACS (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/acs>) spokesman Chris McKniff said.

ACS notified MercyFirst (<http://www.mercyfirst.org/aboutUs.asp>) in March that it had been recommended for ACS' three-year, \$6.5 million contract to run the Park Slope intake center, according to city records and MercyFirst.

"MercyFirst will be able to provide specific services to young [people] with higher behavioral and emotional needs that was not available at the Children's Center, with the goal of ensuring the safety of the residents and the surrounding community," McKniff said.

He added that MercyFirst was picked due to its "considerable history, extensive experience and array of social service programs serving youth in foster care, including ... their trauma-informed approach to work with children and youth in foster care."

The proposal for a contractor to run the third 12-bed facility has not yet been released, but is expected to be made public this summer, ACS officials said.

ACS held a public hearing about the project at its William Street offices on May 12. But no public testimony was given at the meeting, according to ACS officials.

Community Board 6 (<http://www.brooklyn6.org/>) District Manager Craig Hammerman, whose board encompasses the area where the new Park Slope facility is located, said he was not aware that the meeting had taken place but got a phone call from ACS officials two days later to inform him about the project.

"At no point did ACS mention that this was the subject of a public hearing on May 12," Hammerman wrote in an email, adding that he reached out to ACS officials to ask them to present the proposal to the board in June and is waiting to hear back from the agency.

MercyFirst officials were also unaware of the hearing, according to McCaffery.

ACS officials would not say whether any public members were present, but noted that the ACS Chief Contracting Officer and the Secretary and Deputy Contracting Officer had attended.

As of May 27, the contract was being reviewed by the city Law Department for approval. It will have to be signed by MercyFirst and approved by the Mayor's Office of Contracts (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/mocs/html/home/home.shtml>) Services and the Deputy Mayor before it's sent to the comptroller's office (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/comptrollers-office>) to be reviewed and registered, an ACS official said.

ACS hopes the process will be done in time for a June move-in date, a spokesman said.

MercyFirst previously used the site as a home for teen moms. The program ran for about 15 years before it closed last October because "it was just way too many teen moms in one location to be effective," McCaffery said.

ACS is looking to open one more facility in New York City to house the rest of the older children still residing at the First Avenue Children's Center. The agency could not say how many kids aged 14 and up are still there.

Kids at the Nicholas Scoppetta Children's Center are only meant to stay for a few days, but older teens often end up staying longer because it's harder to find foster homes for them, ACS officials said.

The new facilities will be better equipped to support older children who need longer-term care, McKniff said.



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