



Addressing the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)

Youth with a history of abuse, trauma, poverty, housing instabilities and poor educational outcomes are at a high risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation. With the number of children being exploited in Allegheny County increasing, DHS has been trying to find the best way to address these issues.

For the last year and a half, DHS has required Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) staff and placement providers to complete a Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) screening on all children involved with CYF any time a runaway episode occurs from placement or home and within 24 hours of the child's return. This screening is completed whenever evidence, circumstance or new information suggests a likelihood of CSEC. If, upon completion of the screening, the youth is found to be at risk for CSEC, they are referred to Human Services Administration Organization (HSAO) which completes an in-depth CSEC assessment and teams with CYF to ensure connection of the child to appropriate services and supports.

Over this past year, CYF has added to its work by offering CSEC training to its staff. In partnership with Pittsburgh Action Against Rape (PAAR), all CYF staff members have participated in a 6-hour training to learn how youth become involved in CSEC, indicators and risk factors associated with it, and how child welfare staff can support youth with a history of sexual exploitation. Additionally, nearly 50 staff from CYF and provider agencies were trained as CSEC practice leaders, receiving more in-depth training to support system-level capacity building efforts and response around CSEC.

"All of the trafficking victims in Allegheny County have had some level of DHS system involvement, including CYF, probation, police, health and foster care. This means that our staff must play a large role in helping youth to avoid exploitation and offering immediate help to those who have a history of exploitation," said Melissa Gombkoto, CYF trainer. "These trainings show that just because everything looks okay on the surface, doesn't mean that it is. As child welfare staff, we must dig deeper and make sure the lines of communication are open."

In addition to internal education, PAAR is partnering with local group homes to teach youth about healthy relationships, and has opened a CSEC drop-in center. The drop-

in center is a safe place for youth ages 13-23 of all genders and sexual orientations who are victims and survivors of CSEC. At the center, case managers assess the needs of each individual – such as housing, food, clothing, medical, educational, employment, or legal services – and provide consistent support and guidance as they pursue short and long-term goals.

Plans are in place to educate foster parents later this year on trafficking concerns as well as how to parent youth who are at risk of CSEC or have experienced CSEC.

“CSEC is an issue in our community, and we want to make sure that staff, providers, foster parents, and even youth are knowledgeable about sexual exploitation, how to avoid it, and what to do if you find out someone has been exploited,” Twanda Clark Edgal, CYF trainer, added. “When we know better, we do better.”

To learn more about DHS's work to combat CSEC, contact Andrea Rudek at Andrea.Rudek@alleghenycounty.us.