



New York State
**PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
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June 18, 2025

Dear Senator/Assemblymember;

On behalf of the Public Employees Federation (PEF), I am writing to raise the alarm regarding an escalating staffing, safety, and service delivery crisis at the OCFS Industry Residential Center in Rush, New York. Despite good faith engagement with the new Commissioner, the situation has deteriorated to a point that demands immediate State-level intervention. In all fairness, this is beyond the capacity of any Commissioner to resolve alone. What we are witnessing is disturbingly reminiscent of the staffing collapse at DOCCS that culminated in the “wildcat strike.”

Since 2022, PEF has received repeated and deeply troubling reports from members at Industry. They describe chronic understaffing, unsafe conditions, and retaliatory management practices that have not only endangered staff but have also decimated essential youth programming. In October 2023 alone, multiple assaults on staff led to serious injuries and surgeries. PEF conducted health and safety walkthroughs and submitted concrete recommendations — nearly all of which remain unaddressed. *(Attached: photos of staff injuries.)*

We welcomed Commissioner Harris-Madden’s appointment in Spring 2024 and initially viewed it as a turning point. PEF met consistently with her and her team, engaged in additional walkthroughs, shared actionable proposals, and supported a legislative tour in September 2024. Yet, despite our collaborative efforts, the crisis has worsened.

At the time of the legislative tour, only **42 of 247** required Youth Support Specialists (YSS) were available to work. Of **47 Youth Support Counselor (YSC)** positions, only **22** were filled—and many were unavailable due to injury or leave. Staff worked dangerous levels of overtime, including 40+ hour continuous shifts. Critical therapeutic programs, education, and mental health counseling were suspended due to inadequate staffing.

As of Memorial Day weekend 2025, only **22 YSS** and **10 YSCs** remained available. Youth were reportedly confined to their rooms for up to **23 hours a day**, often denied basic access to restrooms and served food in unsanitary conditions. A suicide attempt occurred under these conditions; only the quick action of a PEF member, who cut down the youth in time, prevented tragedy. The fact that these youth—predominantly Black and Brown—are forced to live in squalid, dehumanizing conditions is unconscionable.

The physical infrastructure is equally alarming. In 2025, a staff member sustained life-altering injuries from an assault by a youth using a vent cover torn from a decrepit housing unit. That same unit had previously been shut down in 2018 for safety concerns, only to be reopened without any renovations. Walkthroughs this year revealed persistent hazards: unsecured ceiling grates, makeshift weapons, the presence of drugs, and broken ventilation systems.

These unsafe conditions result in numerous workplace injuries. Over the last five years, OCFS has had over 2,534 workplace incidents with 86,956 lost days. That is equivalent to the loss of **344** full-time employees! Workers compensation costs for OCFS for that period totaled **\$16,372,560**, with costs steadily increasing each year, and nearly one million dollars higher in 2024 than in 2019. (*source NYS Department of Civil Service Annual Report of Workers Compensation Claims*).

PEF offered feasible and cost-conscious proposals to stabilize the workforce and improve safety:

- Temporarily reducing the facility census;
- Deploying campus-based HR staff;
- Providing improved onboarding;
- Re-establishing Rapid Response teams;
- Implementing workplace violence prevention and safety programs;
- Offering incentive-based overtime, modeled after successful efforts in other agencies.

OCFS has implemented **none** of these. Instead, the facility *increased* its census and converted office spaces into resident rooms, worsening the crisis. Despite ongoing engagement with Commissioner Harris-Madden and her executive team, the situation at Industry is spiraling. The workforce is beyond exhausted. Youth services are collapsing. Staff and residents alike are losing hope.

PEF is urging your office to champion immediate, decisive intervention, including:


- Emergency staffing relief and enforcement of overtime limits;

- A temporary census reduction and capital funding for urgent repairs;
- Implementation of overdue health and safety improvements;
- A formal investigation into retaliation against staff who raise concerns.

After years of internal advocacy and outreach, there has been little meaningful change. Staff and residents deserve far more than bureaucratic inertia and lip service. What is happening inside OCFS juvenile detention facilities today rivals—if not surpasses—the staffing crisis that previously engulfed DOCCS. It is both a moral and operational failure of government. We respectfully request your support in pressing OCFS and the Division of Budget for urgent corrective action. PEF stands ready to provide supporting documentation, incident reports, and firsthand testimony as needed.

Thank you for your time and commitment to ensuring the safety of New York's youth and public servants.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wayne Spence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Wayne Spence

President

New York State Public Employees Federation, AFL-CIO