

February 4, 2026

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Reporting: OCFS Staffers Blow the Whistle on Deplorable Conditions at Juvenile Facilities

Reporting Comes Ahead of Thursday's Legislative Budget Hearing Over OCFS

Legal Aid Calls on OCFS to Immediately Correct Unlawful and Inhumane Conditions at These Facilities

(NEW YORK, NY) — Lisa Freeman, Attorney-in-Charge of the Juvenile Rights Practice Special Litigation and Law Reform Unit at The Legal Aid Society, released the following statement in response to [reporting](#) by *New York Focus* featuring statements and accounts from New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) employees detailing deplorable conditions in juvenile facilities, ahead of this [Thursday's legislative budget hearing](#) on OCFS:

“These whistleblower accounts confirm what we already know and what required us to bring a class action lawsuit: young New Yorkers incarcerated at OCFS secure placement facilities continue to be subjected to unlawful, harmful, and inhumane conditions. The conditions described by OCFS staff reflect a system that is failing in every way to ensure the well-being of these young people. We hope that lawmakers, at Thursday's budget hearing with OCFS leadership, will press officials on the failures that have led to this crisis. OCFS must be held accountable for the harm being caused to youth in its care, and immediate action must be taken to ensure that all children — regardless of whether they are incarcerated — are treated with the human dignity, fairness, and respect the law requires.”

[Accounts from staff members](#) at the OCFS Industry Residential Center in Rochester, NY, describe incarcerated youth experiencing prolonged lockdowns caused by extreme understaffing. As a result, many youth are confined to small cells for up to 23 hours a day for days at a time and are routinely denied education, programming, recreation, and meaningful human contact.

Some are forced to use bottles to meet basic bodily needs. Staff report that these conditions have led to severe emotional distress among youth, including mental health deterioration, self-harm, and behavioral crises brought on by isolation and unmet basic needs. Workers also describe feeling morally compromised by being forced to enforce conditions they believe are inhumane, underscoring the harm these systemic failures are inflicting on young people in state custody.

This development comes just weeks after The Legal Aid Society and Jenner & Block LLP filed a [class action civil rights lawsuit](#) in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York [challenging](#) OCFS' unlawful policy and practice of routinely locking children in their care in solitary confinement, at times for weeks or months on end.

Photo of a cell at Industry Residential Center in Rochester, NY: <https://tinyurl.com/2whm9f7h>

Background

At each of the five secure placement facilities operated by OCFS — located in Columbia, Orange, Cayuga, Monroe, and Tompkins counties — youth are routinely confined alone in tiny, barren cells for up to 24 hours a day, according to the lawsuit. While locked in solitary confinement, these children are routinely denied access to mandated education, programming, recreational activities, and basic health and hygiene necessities. According to the complaint, youth are regularly forced to urinate or defecate in trash bins or buckets in their cells and required to eat their meals in these unhygienic conditions.

Despite a New York State prohibition against solitary confinement of youth in adult facilities, as well as widespread national recognition that it is extremely harmful to deprive a child of meaningful social interaction or mental stimulation, the complaint alleges that OCFS continues to utilize the practice of solitary confinement under different, misleadingly innocuous names.

In June, the union that represents many OCFS employees raised alarm bells about these harmful practices in a [letter](#) to lawmakers. Union leadership expressed concerns at what they said was an “escalating staffing, safety, and service delivery crisis” at OCFS’s Industry Residential Center. As of Memorial Day weekend 2025, union leadership wrote, “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 ... The fact that these youth — predominantly Black and Brown — are forced to live in squalid, dehumanizing conditions is unconscionable.”

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