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Contact:

[Press@legal-aid.org](mailto:Press@legal-aid.org)

**\*\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\*\***

## ***Legal Aid Responds to Citizen Review Panel Letter Calling for Action to Address Deplorable Conditions in OCFS Juvenile Facilities***

### ***In January, Legal Aid and Pro Bono Counsel Filed a Federal Class Action Challenging OCFS's Use of Solitary Confinement for Youth***

(ALBANY, NY) — The Legal Aid Society released the following statement in response to a [letter](#) issued by the Western New York Citizen Review Panel, which was reported by [New York Focus](#), raising serious concerns about prolonged solitary confinement, unsafe staffing conditions, and a documented rise in self-harm among youth in New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) custody:

“This urgent call to action underscores the need for OCFS to immediately address the horrendous conditions that children in its custody have endured for far too long. We continue to receive reports of children subjected to prolonged isolation, denied basic human needs, and left to deteriorate both physically and mentally. As our lawsuit makes clear, these conditions are not only inhumane — they are unlawful. New York cannot continue to warehouse children in environments that inflict lasting harm.”

The letter cites reporting, staff testimony, and union accounts describing youth held in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, often without access to education, programming, or basic necessities, in conditions the Panel warns may constitute prolonged solitary confinement. It also highlights a sharp increase in self-harm incidents in recent years and describes a workforce in crisis, with severe understaffing, excessive mandatory overtime, and staff reporting serious safety risks and moral distress.

This development comes only a few months 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**

This past February, staff members at the OCFS Industry Residential Center in Rochester, NY, [blew the whistle](#) on conditions, describing 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, sometimes 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.

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.

Last 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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*The Legal Aid Society is a nonprofit law firm that exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For 150 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of the people we serve and helps improve our communities.*

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