

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/pennsylvanias-children-are-crying-for-our-help/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Help us please My jaw hurts The staff threw away his bloody white shirt

These desperate pleas for help, written by teenage boys at Glen Mills Schools, are among the most haunting parts of the *Inquirers* [report](#) last week on the entrenched culture of secret violence and abuse at the Harvard of Pennsylvania reform facilities. The boys who wrote those notes are routinely beaten, bruised, and threatened into silence by the very counselors hired to protect them. Once again, a government system created to protect our most vulnerable children has failed.

And while its good news that, in response to the *Inquirer* story, Philadelphia County quickly announced it will remove its 51 boys currently at Glen Mills, the dangers within Pennsylvanias residential facilities run far deeper than a single dysfunctional entity. Too many young people in Pennsylvania residential foster care are subjected to a pattern of abuse and maltreatment. As horrific accounts like those at Glen Mills come to light children kicked and punched, thrown through glass and injured so seriously they require stitches or staples the time for system-wide reform is now.

These ongoing abuses are precisely what prompted our investigation and public outreach on Pennsylvanias residential facilities in [Unsafe and Uneducated](#), a report released last year by Childrens Rights and the Education Law Center. Sampling nearly half of the states residential facilities, the report shows that sexual and physical abuse are widespread for the approximately 3,700 children in Pennsylvania foster care living in one of these facilities. At Glen Mills Schools, we found documented instances of belligerent and aggressive staff and repeated violence toward youth.

Glen Mills is only one of the entities we investigated.

Based on our findings statewide, the abuses reported at Glen Mills are far from isolated incidents. Of the reviewed facilities, 44 percent had repeat violations for physical or sexual maltreatment of children. Time and again, we found that kids are anything but safe at these facilities. Youth at Kidspeaces King House were pushed against the wall and choked as means of discipline. At a Woods Services facility, one staff member punched a child in the stomach.

No state system is perfect, but the degree and frequency of maltreatment in Pennsylvanias residential facilities is shocking with dire, even deadly consequences for youth. In one tragic incident at the [Wordsworth Academy in Philadelphia](#), a 17-year-old boy named David Hess was fatally restrained over a disagreement involving an iPod. One adult held David by his legs while the other violently punched him in the ribs, and though he was heard yelling I cant breathe, the restraint continued. David [died](#) that night.

Instead of applying a trauma-informed approach to caring for at-risk youth, many facilities like Glen Mills and Wordsworth Academy allow undertrained staff to employ violence to control childrens behavior. Often, these staff members have poor crisis intervention skills and are ill-equipped to protect the children in their care. In one illustrative incident at Williams House, a child became the victim of sexual abuse in her own bedroom by her roommate and another child on two separate occasions, and even though a staff member at the facility was aware that the assault had occurred and was ongoing, he did nothing to stop it.

These findings are particularly troubling in Pennsylvania, a state that places a higher percentage of its teens and young adults in facilities than the rest of the country: 47 percent of Pennsylvanias older youth in foster care (ages 14 to 21) are placed in a facility compared to 34 percent nationwide. Disproportionately, children placed in residential settings in Pennsylvania are children of color. LGBTQ youth are similarly over-represented in state care, according to national data and surveys.

Pennsylvanias most vulnerable youth are suffering in residential foster care. But ultimate responsibility lies with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA-DHS), which has continued to license these facilities. This allows counties to place children in environments with known violations and repeated reports of violence even when there are no adequate plans to address these dangerous situations.

How do we fix a system so broken?

First, vigorous oversight is needed to ensure that these children receive the care, and treatment, they need. That means PA-DHS must work with facilities and critically evaluate all plans of correction to quickly address and remedy violations, including allegations of violence and abuse. When grave dangers fail to improve, PA-DHS should exercise its authority to stop placing children there or even revoke the facilities license.

We also need to invest in people, particularly those on the frontlines taking care of youth. PA-DHS must ensure that staff at residential

facilities are adequately trained, which includes, at a minimum, education in trauma-informed care and crisis intervention.

Finally, we should strive to place children in the most family-like environments. Whenever possible, children should have the opportunity to live with a family. PA-DHS must ensure that youth are only placed in residential facilities when absolutely necessary.

Pennsylvanias children are crying for our help. We cannot ignore them. They deserve what every child deserves: safety and security at home and the opportunity to grow into healthy adults. We owe them no less.

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First Name	Last Name
Email Address	

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