

To: Professors Erika Navalance and Nishi Kumar
From: Katrina Huber
Re: Acadiana Center for Youth: St. Martinville
Date: December 2, 2024

MEMORANDUM

I) INTRODUCTION

This memorandum discusses Acadiana Center for Youth: St. Martinville (“ACYSM”). ACYSM is one of six secure care facilities administered by the Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice (“OJJ”). It is located on the outskirts of the city of St. Martinville, the parish seat of St. Martin Parish. St. Martinville Parish is a mostly rural parish located in south-central Louisiana, immediately south of the city of Lafayette. ACYSM was established to house youth with a history of engaging in problematic behaviors in other secure care facilities and has attracted significant negative attention during its short history for abusive conditions and overuse of solitary confinement.

II) CHARACTERISTICS

Like all secure care facilities (Louisiana’s formal term for juvenile detention centers), ACYSM is wholly operated by OJJ. It has a total capacity of 24 and houses youth from across the state, although there is some preference for youth to be detained near their communities of origin to facilitate rehabilitation and family visits.¹

ACYSM was established in July 2021 to serve as a “maximum security” facility for youth who have exhibited particularly violent or destructive behaviors in other secure care facilities.² Immediately preceding the creation of ACYSM, a group of youth detained in the Swanson Center for Youth – Monroe allegedly barricaded staff outside the facility and incited a riot that destroyed much of the interior of the building.³ In response, OJJ entered into a contract with St. Martin Parish to begin housing youth in a pre-existing detention facility belonging to the parish sheriff’s department.⁴ What would become ACYSM was chosen because the layout allowed for youth to be housed in individual cells as opposed to larger dormitories, which were seen as higher risk for youth inclined to riot or attempt escape.⁵ It was designed to serve as a “transition facility” for the short-term care of youth with “an inability or unwillingness to discontinue violent or aggressive acts.” It has also has served as a COVID quarantine location at various points.⁶

¹

https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/state-months-behind-on-payments-for-damage-to-st-martin-juvenile-facility-caused-by-fights/article_2660a670-b04b-11ec-9b89-7b93fd1e233e.html.

²

https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21295527-ojj-st-martinville-lde-administrative-complaint_first-amended-complaint-final/?q=swanson&mode=document#document/p3.

³ <https://www.propublica.org/article/shackles-and-solitary-inside-louisianas-harshest-juvenile-lockup>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

According to the most recent Prison Rape Elimination Act (“PREA”) audit for ACYSM, ACYSM is currently housing 14 girls and one transgender boy.⁷ One of these individuals has an unspecified intellectual disability, and none speak any language other than English.⁸ Because of the confidential nature of juvenile proceedings, more detailed information on the population of ACYSM is not available. ACYSM began housing girls in the fall of 2023 following the termination of OJJ’s contract with Ware Youth Center, which had previously housed all detained girls in Louisiana.⁹ It appears from available PREA audits that no other Louisiana secure care facilities house girls.

ACYSM is managed by Warden Linda London.¹⁰ Information about Warden London’s tenure with ACYSM is not readily available. According to a LinkedIn page that appears to match her name and biographic data, she served as the Deputy Director of the OJJ Department of Public Safety and Corrections from 1990 to 2012 and has subsequently provided contract-based services to private providers working with OJJ.

According to ACYSM’s website, the facility follows the Louisiana Model for Secure Care, which seeks to prepare youth for re-entry by providing a “therapeutic environment that focuses on youth and staff interacting in small groups, involving family, and fostering positive peer culture.”¹¹ The website advertises a roster of educational programming, including academic classes and individualized academic counseling, opportunities to earn high school equivalency diplomas, career exploration classes, and dual enrollment in community colleges.¹² The website does not mention any specific counseling or therapeutic services on offer.¹³

Pursuant to OJJ’s contract with St. Martinville Parish, OJJ pays the parish a bed rate of \$55.39 per day for each child housed in ACYSM, with a minimum of 20 children housed at any one time.¹⁴ This rate includes food and telecommunications services, and the contract between the state and the parish indemnifies the parish from almost all forms of legal liability towards detained children and staff.¹⁵ A 2022 investigation by The Advocate found that OJJ owed the parish sheriff’s office over \$30,000 in outstanding invoices for repairs completed by the sheriff’s office that OJJ was contractually responsible for.¹⁶ As of October 2023, OJJ was also paying a private contractor called Coleman Consulting Group \$75 per hour to provide unspecified security services at ACYSM.¹⁷

The exact sum of money that OJJ sets aside to operate ACYSM is not publicly available. However, according to OJJ’s final budget for Fiscal Year 2025, the agency received \$63,453,288

⁷

https://ojj.la.gov/assets/PREA/OJJ_FACILITY_AUDIT_REPORTS/2024-Acadiana-Center-for-Youth-at-St.-Martinville-Final-Facility-PREA-Audit-Report.pdf.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ <https://iailluminator.com/2023/09/29/incarcerated-girls/>.

¹⁰ <https://ojj.la.gov/location/acadiana-center-for-youth-st-martinville>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴

https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/state-months-behind-on-payments-for-damage-to-st-martin-juvenile-facility-caused-by-fights/article_2660a670-b04b-11ec-9b89-7b93fd1e233e.html.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷

<https://thelensnola.org/2023/10/25/another-step-backwards-9-5-million-private-security-contract-for-louisiana-youth-prisons-raises-eyebrows/>.

to provide “treatment services” to youth at its four secure care facilities (of which ACYSM is one).¹⁸ This amounts to 36% of the agency’s total budget.¹⁹

According to a Zero Deaths Letter (“ZDL”) that I received from OJJ on September 24, 2024, there have been no deaths in any secure care facility (including ACYSM) from January 1, 2020 through the present. Since the facility was founded in 2021, this means there has never been a death.

III) EVIDENCE OF OVERSIGHT

Like other juvenile secure care facilities in Louisiana, ACYSM is not subject to meaningful independent oversight. The state Department of Children and Families (DCF) inspects and licenses group homes and pre-trial detention facilities for youth, and local school districts are responsible for providing education services to youth in these settings.²⁰ However, neither of these entities have any jurisdiction over secure care facilities (where youth go following sentencing).²¹ In what has been described as a “glaring gap in oversight” by the state legislature, all authority for administration of facilities like ACYSM rests solely with OJJ.²² The legislature recommended in 2019 that an outside agency be given authority to inspect OJJ secure care facilities, but this change has not been implemented.²³

The one audit that ACYSM consistently undergoes is an annual PREA audit, which all juvenile secure care facilities undergo. The annual PREA report provides some basic population data and indicates whether the facility exceeded, met, or failed to meet 43 separate standards related to sexual abuse and harassment prevention.²⁴ In its most recent PREA audit, based on conversations with a supposedly representative group of children and staff, ACYSM met all 43 standards, with zero “exceeded” or “did not meet” results.²⁵ The audit also tracks how many allegations of “inmate-on-inmate” and “staff-on-inmate” sexual abuse and harassment have been made, and how many of those investigations have been substantiated.²⁶ There were zero allegations reported at ACYSM in 2024.²⁷

The state also tracks the results of PREA audits across the years in all its youth secure care facilities.²⁸ For each year, the state lists the number of staff-on-youth and youth-on-youth sexual abuse investigations have occurred.²⁹ These investigations can be categorized as “substantiated,” “unsubstantiated,” “unfounded,” or “pending.”³⁰ One somewhat glaring transparency issue that this report raises is that the “pending” allegations do not appear to carry over from year to year. For example, in 2022, ACYSM had two pending allegations of

¹⁸ <https://senate.la.gov/FiscalServices/Presentations/2024/FY25%20Youth%20Services%20FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/louisiana-juvenile-detention-st-martinville-rcna19227>.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ https://www.bu.edu/pilj/files/2024/10/1.17.24_Final_PILJ_Manipulating-Parents.pdf.

²⁴

https://ojj.la.gov/assets/PREA/OJJ_FACILITY_AUDIT_REPORTS/2024-Acadiana-Center-for-Youth-at-St.-Martinville-Final-Facility-PREA-Audit-Report.pdf.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ <https://ojj.la.gov/assets/PREA/PREA-2023-Annual-Report.pdf>.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

staff-on-youth misconduct.³¹ However, in 2023, there are no mention of any substantiated, unsubstantiated, or unfounded staff-on-youth investigations, so it is not clear how the two investigations that were pending in 2022 resolved.³² Since reporting began in 2021, there has been only one substantiated allegation (of a 2022 youth-on-youth assault).³³

Available data on the St. Martin Parish web sites does not indicate that there have been any public hearings ACYSM at either the parish or city level.³⁴

IV) EVIDENCE OF TRANSPARENCY

Because ACYSM is a youth facility, data on who exactly is being held there is confidential and there is no inmate locator. Annual PREA audits provide the most extensive demographic data on current residents (detailed above). Data on ACYSM's annual budget and operating costs is relatively opaque as well: OJJ lumps all secure care facilities together in its publicly available budget requests to the state legislature, and I was able to find no public accounting of exactly what portion of OJJ's secure care budget goes to ACYSM.

Neither OJJ nor St. Martin Parish appears to maintain a practice of providing public briefings on ACYSM. The information available on OJJ's web page for ACYSM is limited to very basic descriptions of the educational services offered. OJJ has put out only two press releases on ACYSM, one general announcement of state-wide transfers in the juvenile secure care system and one announcement that a cohort of youth received diplomas.³⁵ The St. Martin Parish website does not mention ACYSM. For the most part, updates on the facility's operations come from local news.

In its three- and one-half year life span, ACYSM has attracted considerable media attention and has been the focus of multiple in-depth investigations, including one lengthy expose co-authored by three national news sources (ProPublica, NBC News, and the Marshall Project). This media attention itself has generated a significant volume of public information on ACYSM. However, journalists conducting investigations into ACYSM have noted a lack of transparency and access to information by both the facility and OJJ.

For example, journalists working on the above-mentioned ProPublica report stated that OJJ refused their request to tour ACYSM, and that ACYSM staff told journalists that they had been instructed not to talk to the media.³⁶ The report also noted that the state Department of Education was not aware of ACYSM's existence until it had already been open for three months.³⁷ The Lens Nola also commented on the lack of transparency around ACYSM's operations in the course of a 2022 investigation into OJJ's use of a private security contractor at the facility.³⁸ The Lens noted that OJJ had refused to turn over very basic documents regarding services the private contractor was providing.³⁹ Therefore, there was little to no public

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ <https://www.stmartinparish.net/search.php?q=acadiana+center+for+youth+-+st.+martinville+>.

³⁵ <https://ojj.la.gov/news?cat=&y=0&q=st.%20martinville>.

³⁶ <https://www.propublica.org/article/shackles-and-solitary-inside-louisianas-harshes-juvenile-lockup>.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸

<https://thelensnola.org/2023/10/25/another-step-backwards-9-5-million-private-security-contract-for-louisiana-youth-prisons-raises-eyebrows/>.

³⁹ *Id.*

transparency as to the nature and scope of services, the qualifications of the contractors, or what oversight OJJ was providing.⁴⁰

These reports seem to indicate an unwillingness by OJJ to make information about ACYSM accessible to the public. However, my subjective experience obtaining death records from ACYSM was actually remarkably straightforward. The request went through OJJ, as opposed to ACYSM-specific staff. An OJJ paralegal responded promptly, first to tell me that there had been no deaths in any OJJ facility in the period requested, and then to provide a Zero Deaths Letter after I asked for it.

V) NOTABLE CASES OR COMPLAINTS

On November 3, 2021, the Louisiana Center for Children's Rights and the Loyola Law Clinic brought a formal written complaint against OJJ on behalf of children with disabilities detained at ACYSM.⁴¹ The complaint alleged that OJJ was violating the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and corresponding state regulations by failing to provide all children held at ACSYM (including those with disabilities) with access to an education.⁴² Specifically, the complaint alleged that for at least four months following the establishment of ACYSM, children detained there did not receive any educational programming and were confined to their cells for 23 hours a day.⁴³ In January 2022, the state Department of Education revealed that it had begun providing at least four hours of in-person educational instruction a day, but that there were severe staffing shortages and it was unclear if this would be able to continue.⁴⁴ There do not appear to have been any more recent investigations into the educational programming at ACYSM, although an OJJ press release from January 2024 stated that, for the first time, a cohort of youth at ACYSM had graduated with their High School Equivalency Test (Hi-SET) diplomas, indicating that ACYSM youth are receiving at least some education.⁴⁵

Since ACYSM opened, it has generated significant controversy around its over-use of solitary confinement.⁴⁶ According to an investigation published in early 2022, youth were being held in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day, were forced to shower in handcuffs and leg irons, and frequently injured themselves so severely they required medical attention.⁴⁷ There do not appear to have been any lawsuits brought in response to these abusive conditions. However, the report mentions that in one child's delinquency case, a juvenile court judge took the rare step of holding ACYSM in contempt of court for its mistreatment of the child, after hearing accounts of the poor conditions and overuse of solitary confinement within the facility.⁴⁸ The details of these and similarly situated cases are not publicly available because juvenile cases are all kept confidential.⁴⁹

The investigation into ACYSM and the damning allegations of extreme use of solitary confinement prompted the state legislature to pass a bill restricting the length of time that

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹

https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21295527-ojj-st-martinville-lde-administrative-complaint_first-amended-complaint-final/.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ <https://www.propublica.org/article/shackles-and-solitary-inside-louisianas-harshes-juvenile-lockup>.

⁴⁵ <https://ojj.la.gov/news/acadiana-center-for-youth-celebrates-first-graduates-achieving-hiset-success>.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

children can be held in isolation.⁵⁰ Then-governor John Bel Edwards signed the bill into law on June 16, 2022 and it went into effect August 1 of that year.⁵¹

Although the facility generated a lot of controversy in the years immediately following its establishment, there does not seem to have been much follow up since 2022. I do not recommend suing this facility currently but would recommend continuing to monitor conditions there, especially given the history of abuse and the fact that it only houses detained girls.

⁵⁰ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/louisiana-limits-solitary-confinement-youth-rcna32720>.

⁵¹ *Id.*