




## For troubled foster kids in Houston, sleeping in offices is "rock bottom"

No child is supposed to sleep or spend more than a few hours at the Harris County Youth Services Center's Point of Entry in Houston. But Texas' foster care placement crisis has forced some of the state's most troubled teens to sleep in a place that isn't equipped to care for them.

BY **NEENA SATIJA**, THE TEXAS TRIBUNE AND REVEAL APRIL 20, 2017 12 AM CENTRAL



Some foster kids in Harris County with nowhere else to go have to spend the night here, at an office that was never set up to be a child-care center.  Neena Satija

HOUSTON — The walls, painted blue and yellow, are accented with inspirational words: "HOPE. BELIEVE. DREAM. FAITH." Shelves and cubbies line one wall, stacked with toys and books.

The room has a television and a limited supply of board games. Cribs are set up next door for napping infants. There's a laundry room, showers, and a large closet full of extra clothes and toiletries. Sometimes the staff take the kids outside to use the basketball pavilion. That's about all there is to do.

No one is supposed to sleep or spend more than a few hours in this little building at the Harris County Youth Services Center, called the Point of Entry. It's meant to be a waiting area for young children whose families are being investigated for abuse or neglect.

But Texas' embattled child welfare system doesn't have enough available beds, so office spaces like the Point of Entry are now being used as temporary homes for foster kids that nobody else wants. That's why cots with twin-sized beds are stacked in a corner.

And while kids who stay here have to be supervised at all times, if they decide to leave, no one is likely to stop them — a [reality](#) thrown into sharp relief earlier this month when a 15-year-old girl [named](#) Daphne Jackson was struck and killed by a minivan after running from a different child welfare office in Houston. (That office was not open for media tours.)

Little is known about Daphne's circumstances. But "children without placement," as they're officially called, tend to be very troubled teenagers, and Texas is [facing a crisis](#) in finding good homes for them.

The state relies mostly on private companies to place and house foster children, and it pays them very little to do so. Few group facilities are willing to get into such an expensive business, and others have recently shut down because of safety concerns. In the past year and a half, Texas lost hundreds of beds meant for kids with complex emotional and behavioral problems — leaving many with no other option but [psychiatric hospitals](#), juvenile detention or government offices.

Daphne had run away from foster care [multiple times](#) in the months before she died. That would have made foster families and group facilities hesitant to accept her, and when no one did, she ended up in a place even less equipped to keep her from running away.

Sleeping in a state office "is rock bottom for some of these kids," said Katrina Griffith, a judge who presides over child protective services cases in Harris County. "You can see that in their face and in the demeanor ... they look tired, and some of them just look like they're hopeless. They've lost contact with their family, and now they don't even have a place that wants them.

"There just has to be a better facility for these children," she said.



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Texas' foster care placement crisis has continued to make headlines, and the problem has only worsened. In March, 65 kids in Texas' care had to spend at least two consecutive nights in places like child welfare offices or hotels. That's more than double the number from February.

Patrick Crimmins, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, called those numbers "disappointing" and said the agency has a new plan to grow foster care capacity.

But that will be difficult to do if the Texas Legislature doesn't provide more funding for child welfare. While state lawmakers appear willing to increase payments to foster care providers by about \$115 million, child welfare officials asked for far more than that.

Crimmins would not provide data on the number of children who had to sleep in specific offices, such as the Point of Entry. But Harris County Protective Services staff provides children who sleep there with a hot meal each night. On a recent weeknight, they delivered two paper plates with pizza, corn and fruit cups. In recent months, they've had to send up to 30 meals in one night — they put the boys in the main room while the girls slept in a nearby conference room.

Ginger Harper, administrator of Harris County's Youth Services Division, said she has seen children stay at the Point of Entry for as long as a month. If they are without placement for more than a day, they're supposed to be enrolled in school. But that's not what she has observed for some kids.

"During the day, their [caseworkers] pick them up, and they go to their workers' offices," Harper said. "And then in the evenings they're brought back here to spend the night."

If it's a weekend or a holiday, she said, the kids will spend all day at the Point of Entry, watching television and amusing themselves with whatever toys are available.

That was Lena's experience when she stayed there. Lena, a sex-trafficking victim profiled by the Tribune in March, was a chronic runaway foster kid who often found herself sleeping at the Point of Entry.

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"It was pretty okay, they fed us," Lena remembered. (To protect her privacy, she is being identified only by her middle name.) But "they just gave us a place to sleep and take a shower." She had to sit in her caseworker's office all day.

It was easy to leave, Lena said. "I'd walk out. I wouldn't even run away, I'd walk."

Had Lena been at a licensed child-care facility, the staff would be required to follow children when they run away and use a variety of methods to try to convince them to stay.

But the Point of Entry isn't set up for that. A flyer on the refrigerator in the brightly-colored room says: "If a child runs away please make sure you call the [Houston Police Department] non-emergency line to make a report."

Last November, at age 17, Lena ran from the Point of Entry for the final time. She never returned to foster care and aged out of the system about a month later. Her social media accounts indicate that she continues to be sold for sex all over Houston.

For now, the staff at the Point of Entry say they're doing the best they can. When kids talk about running, they do their best to stop them, calling their caseworkers and talking to them about the dangers of the streets. They say they lock the doors from the outside so no one can come in without permission. They also have 24-hour security, since they're a waiting area for young children whose families are under investigation.

But no one can lock the doors from the inside or physically stop a child from leaving — and no one can prevent adults from lurking right outside.

“The life outside is much more attractive to them than what we have to offer them,” said Rosie Christal, a program director for the state’s child welfare agency who works at the Point of Entry. “And people out there take advantage of the kids. So that’s what we have to deal with.”

**Read related Tribune coverage:**

- Read more about [Lena](#), a young sex-trafficking victim who slept at the Point of Entry multiple times while she was in foster care.
- A recent Texas Tribune [investigation](#) exposed how the state’s broken child welfare system feeds Texas’ sex-trafficking underworld.
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