



State of Connecticut
CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY
STATE CAPITOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591

September 13, 2023

Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes
Department of Children and Families
505 Hudson Street
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Commissioner Dorantes:

We are shocked by the allegations that have surfaced about the Short Term Assessment and Respite (STAR) Home in Harwinton operated by Bridge Family Center. As you know, this facility provides temporary housing for female youths with mental or behavioral problems, which make these allegations even more appalling. According to a CT Inside Investigator article written by Marc E. Fitch on September 10, 2023, the Town's Resident State Trooper identified hundreds of calls to first responders over the course of two years coming from the Home. These incidents include:

- The arrest of a 26-year-old man suspected of sex-trafficking for pursuing a 14-year-old girl after the home failed to remove the juvenile's cell phone, even after troopers warned that the child was making contact with males on dating apps after repeatedly going missing from the home;
- The investigation of an 18-year biological male who was transitioning to a female for sexually assaulting a 15-year-old female, despite the suspect being kicked out of another group home after doing property damage and threatening another youth;
- The arrest of an unsupervised 42-year-old male staffer for sexual intercourse with a 14-year-old female resident;
- Allegations of a 25-year-old female staffer sexually assaulting 4 female residents between the ages of 14 and 17;
- The arrest of a 39-year-old male staffer for physically assaulting a 17-year-old female resident following a violent altercation by repeatedly slamming her to the ground and kneeling on her as a form of restraint;
- The arrest of 4 juveniles for assaulting two state troopers who were responding to a fight at the home; and
- The theft of STAR Home's vehicles by its residents.

Unquestionably, these conditions are unacceptable to the children, staff and the community at large who are put in danger as a result of the behavior that has been allowed to occur repeatedly.

The seriousness of this situation compels us to review and, if necessary, propose legislation to take action and address these issues. To that end, I would appreciate the Department's cooperation in providing timely responses to the following requests:

- A description of how Bridge Family Center was selected to operate STAR and, if it was through a competitive bid process, how many other bids were submitted for consideration;
- The extent of the oversight the Department has over the operation of the homes and all temporary housing like this one?;
- A description of any contractual protections the Department has against injuries or death;
- Any metrics used by the Department to evaluate the effectiveness of the services to help these children;
- Any safety protocols that the Department requires as a condition of ensuring the safety of the residents;
- A description of the protocols established by the Department for crisis intervention;
- The extent of the screening and background checks required by either the Department or Bridge Family Center for the staff;
- A description of the process used in collecting and logging incidents,
- A timeline describing when DCF was first notified of these serious incidents and any remedial action taken by the Department;
- Any action/corrective plans requested by the Department of Bridge Family Center and the outcome of those actions;
- Any training or guidance issued by the Department on how to de-escalate potentially volatile situations;
- Confirmation of whether the Department or the facility requested or suggested that police calls be avoided or minimized;
- Whether health and mental health services have been provided to the youth victims involved in the assaults; and
- The Department's actions towards youths who perpetrated the criminal acts or aggressions and whether they continue to remain in the homes or have been – or will be - transferred to other facilities.

With ever increasing number of high-risk juveniles, the STAR Home model does not appear from our perspective to be providing positive recovery for the children or preserving the safety of our communities. Furthermore, the Center for Children's Advocacy is discouraging the placement of children in STAR Homes for clinical and developmental reasons. It may be time for the Department to consider reopening the Middletown Juvenile Training School for its high-risk juveniles where more appropriate rehabilitative services and monitoring can be provided.

We will continue to closely monitor the situation and, considering the seriousness of these allegations, your prompt response is appreciated.

Sincerely,



State Rep. Vincent J. Candelora, R-86



Lisa Seminara
Senate Ranking Member – Committee on Children



Lezyle Zupkus
Representative 89th District



Henri Martin
Senator 31st District



John Piscopo
Representative 76th District