

March 9, 2021

RE: Office of the Child Advocate

Dear Representative Pugh and Members of the House Committee on Human Services.

My name is Lynn Stanley and I am the Interim Executive Director for the National Association of Social Worker, Vermont Chapter. I am also the Executive Director of the New Hampshire Chapter. Thank you for hearing my testimony on the benefits of establishing an Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

The Office of the Child Advocate benefits families, workers, and the Department for Children and Families. Families who are Department involved often feel disempowered. Having an OCA ensures that the family's voice is truly heard and that DCF does their best to provide the necessary services to preserve families and protect children. The OCA can also be a powerful and unbiased voice advocating for the needs of DCF.

Child protection is a challenging responsibility. But we know that when we empower families to do well, our entire society reaps the benefits. Social workers and child protection service workers are in challenging positions often with limited internal and community supports and resources. Having an OCA can often provide that external voice of advocacy that workers are sometimes unable to raise internally. An OCA can also build those community supports and build partnerships with other organizations. They can help educate the public in ways that DCF cannot, speaking out in way that is not perceived as self-serving or defensive. All of these functions can assist families, workers, and the Department.

Within my role in New Hampshire, I have seen how the OCA has been a tremendous voice for families and NH DCYF. They are impartial, independent and have helped make reforms based on best-practices. I highly recommend instituting this Office in Vermont.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

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