

Dear Chair Pugh and Members of the House Human Services Committee,

I am writing in reference to H 265, specifically regarding the proposed Oversight Committee.

I am pleased to see that the Oversight Committee includes a representative from the federally authorized Vermont Citizens Advisory Board to the Department for Children and Families (VCAB). I would like to specifically address the concern that was raised regarding a possible conflict of interest.

I would like to share a bit of background with you. When I joined VCAB, and for a number of years, VCAB was administratively supported by DCF, specifically by the Executive Assistant to the Commissioner and then by the Executive Staff Assistant, Public Information Officer in the Commissioner's office. VCAB agendas, meeting organization, meeting minutes and annual report were prepared by this person, with input from and review and approval by the VCAB Co-Chairs. Given that there was no specific funding to support the work of VCAB, this administrative support was helpful and necessary. In 2018 I met with then Deputy Commissioner Karen Shea and proposed that this function be moved out of the Commissioner's office, and at the same time the Commissioner's office indicated they were no longer able to provide this level of administrative support.

KidSafe Collaborative, where I serve as Executive Director, has provided administrative support and management for the Child Fatality Review team for a number of years, with a small grant from DCF. As both CFRT and VCAB are mandated by federal law, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), it was and is logical for KidSafe to provide a similar function for VCAB. Starting in 2018, DCF entered into a contract with KidSafe to do this. The contract enabled this function to move out of and be independent from the Commissioner's office, and for the Co-Chairs to have direct control of the agenda, minutes, annual report, etc., as well as for the Commissioner's staff to be relieved of this responsibility.

The funds provided by DCF support the operations of the two teams, including mileage reimbursement for CFRT and VCAB members to/from meetings if not reimbursed by their own organizations; meeting supplies and materials; it has funded the purchase of Pediatric Death Investigation manuals for the CFRT members; it has funded a facilitator for a planning meeting/retreat (held at the Waterbury state complex) for VCAB. And it supports KidSafe Collaborative's administrative and management work for these two teams. The total amount of the contract is \$12,350 annually.

KidSafe Collaborative is a non-profit organization based in Burlington, whose mission is to engage individuals, organizations and groups to work *together* to prevent and address child abuse and neglect. In my role as Executive Director I convene Child Protection and Family Support Teams, the CHARM (Children and Recovering Mothers)

team, co-convene the Children Exposed to Domestic Violence Committee, and KidsNET (Chittenden Co. Network for Children Youth and Families). I serve on the Child Fatality Review Team, the Chittenden Co. Family Treatment Court Docket planning group, the UVM Children's Hospital Child Protection Committee, and I co-Chair VCAB. KidSafe Collaborative developed the Mandated Reporter on-line training that is used statewide. All of our work focuses on improving the systems and supports around Vermont's prevention of and response to child maltreatment. I share this with you to demonstrate that our work necessarily connects with DCF, and at the same time is independent from DCF. This does not necessarily present a conflict, but rather demonstrates a collaborative approach to addressing these critical issues.

I believe VCAB is certainly independent from DCF and operates as such. We rely on the Commissioner's office to provide us with information at each of our quarterly meetings, but no one from DCF serves on the Board and they do not have a vote or specific voice. Co-Chair Dr. James Metz, from whom you heard earlier in the week, and I develop the agenda together, in consultation with the Deputy Commissioner for Family Services in order to determine key issues, priorities and policies of the Division. For example for this past year two major items have been consistently highlighted on our agenda: the Division's response to the COVID-19 crisis, and the Division's work on Racism and Racial Justice. VCAB members, who include those with lived experience related to child abuse and the child welfare system, including a parent with past DCF involvement whose child was removed from her custody, a foster parent and a past foster/adoptive parent, and a kinship care provider, also contribute to the agenda and regularly raise issues of import to the members.

Vermont necessarily and rightfully relies on independent organizations to carry out much of the work around ensuring safe, health and stable families, and of course this work is funded through our state funding mechanisms including the Department for Children and Families. That does not necessarily obviate the ability of individuals from or appointed by one of these organizations to function independently from that funding source.

In conclusion I would like to briefly address another issue regarding the Oversight Committee. I have followed the Committee's work on this bill on-line, and while I understand the expansion from Office of Child Advocate to the Office of Child Youth and Family Advocate, I would like to emphasize the importance of maintaining a mission focus on children. I believe it is vital to name that we are talking about child protection and safety, health, and well-being, and while family is the most important element of that, there are indeed situations where a child or youth is not and cannot be safe with their family of origin. Who is the voice for that child/youth? Please make sure that the child-centered focus of this bill does not become diluted.

I am available to provide further information and answer any questions you may have, and can best be reached by email sallyb@kidsafevt.org or by cell phone: 802.373.5593.

Respectfully,
-*Sally*

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KidSafe Collaborative: working *together* to end child abuse