

Responses to the Proposed Office of the Child Advocate:

1. I read the recent article and the short form. I think that if the office were properly situated – within the executive branch so as to have ready access to confidential information, not as a non-profit, outside of the chain of command of any particular department or other arm of the government and as apolitical as possible – it could be a positive for children. I would much prefer to see the focus be on children, not children AND families, because I think there can frequently be competing interests at play and it would be difficult for any “advocate” to support both simultaneously.

The best thing for this position would be someone who could evaluate the system and pinpoint what we should replicate and what isn't working. There will need to be a balance on case-specific issues with systemic issues. The worst thing for this position would be a politically-motivated individual/staff who is driven by legislative pressures, reactivity to incidents that are anomalous as opposed to representative of larger systemic shortfalls, or is otherwise unable to integrate an understanding of the current system with future-oriented thinking about what would best serve children.

I hope this helps.

2. While I find some the information in the *VT Digger* articles grossly generalized, I do think FSD would benefit from independent oversight. I agree with Rep. Rosenquist that the Office of the Child and Family Advocate is a more encompassing name. I hope the long form of the bill is available soon. I would be interested to know the specifics.
3. I have read some of these articles over the years. I am not opposed to looking at our work as a department more closely so that it feels fair and equitable-and so that the decisions that we make seem to make sense to the public and the families we serve. I liked the idea of having some positive information come out of this proposal. We don't often hear positive stories about DCF, but there are many .

My concerns are similar to how I feel about all of the additional policies that are constantly being put in place at DCF-FSD. It is great to have new ideas and to be creative about how we should do our work, but putting new policies-or in this case an office of the child advocate-in place that results in a longer to-do list, without added resources or staff, is not sustainable. At this point the policy additions we have had over the last several years are numerous, unable to be consistently applied in all situations, and do not fit within the time constraints of our job. I feel like these policies are setting up workers to fail and to have more liability placed on them when they are not able to accomplish all of the tasks within each policy.

I fear that an office such as this would yield a similar dynamic. We will be asked to respond to each individual complaint and perform tasks that we otherwise might not be doing, adding time to our already long days of work that are never done. We already respond to complaints and reviews of substantiations which take time away from our daily work. I would be curious about

the expected volume. Many times parents complain with justification, and many times they might just be upset that a judge ordered their child into DCF custody for clear safety reasons. How will those be weeded out?

So some questions remain. How much time would this add to our already over scheduled days?

Most importantly, if we increased our staff and we were able to respond to the needs of the children and families on our caseloads, would we even have as many complaints or needs for the office of the child advocate as we have now?

Those are my initial thoughts but it's an interesting topic for sure. I do think some of the ways in which we do our work need to be examined; especially when the pendulum swings back and forth over the years due to incidents on our caseloads or due to consumer complaints.

4. I support it.
5. In my quick review of this, it seems like a redundancy of services. There is a commissioner complaint line for families or service providers to call. The problem is the commissioner's office tends to send the complaint back to the district office for them to manage. Families then don't feel heard. So I think that an outside "agency" looking at things may help families feel empowered, I also think if the commissioner's complaint line was more willing to be able to speak with folks that call that may also eliminate the need for such a position.
6. I don't know much about what they will actually do but having oversight for the dept- outside of the dept -I think could be a good thing for the children/youth and I think employees. If its inside the state hierarchy- I worry it will be one more chain of command for dictating work, blaming and ultimately reprimands. Not sure how they would address the confidentiality issues if outside state government- could address via laws. It is complicated.
7. I am in support of passing the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) bill. I hope that VSEA will support it too. I have worked in other child protection jurisdictions that have an Office similar to the purpose of the one proposed. Many times OCA will align with systemic and field work changes needed and proposed by workers to help them complete their directives in an efficient and safe way (i.e. upgraded database systems, quality assurance initiatives for enhanced community based supports that work for families, etc.). The OCA could be considered a prevention model to field concerns or grievances so federal lawsuits do not necessarily need to be filed (i.e. Woodside).

And most importantly, when budget cuts come around, there is no greater ally and advocate to maintain and expand direct child protection work than the OCA.