

H.265 An Office of the Child Advocate for Vermont

3/18/21

Good Morning,

My name is Alicia Cerasoli. I have lived in Vermont my entire life and I live in Burlington. I join you today as part of the team at Spectrum Youth and Family Services in strong support of bill H.265, in favor of an Office of the Child Advocate.

For the past three and a half years, I have worked as a Youth Development Coordinator with the Youth Development Program, a statewide program contracted through the Department of Children and Families. The Youth Development Program, or YDP, is facilitated by Spectrum Youth and Family Services in both the Burlington and St. Albans districts. In my role, I work closely with DCF to support youth ages fourteen to twenty-three throughout their transition into adulthood. Each of the youth YDP serves has experienced childhood trauma, faced adversity, and is frequently forced to confront adult-like decisions at a young age.

As their guardian, it is DCF's duty to support youth in their custody to create and implement plans that will prioritize each youth's needs and safety, make decisions in their best interest, and take steps towards strengthening their self-sufficiency. DCF workers make critical decisions throughout their day that have the power to impact a youth's current and future lives. With this decision making comes an abundance of responsibility fueling an inevitable power imbalance between each youth and the State of Vermont.

DCF involvement is inherently traumatic. The complex history of the youth we serve, in combination with the nature of DCF intervention, frequently discounts youths' autonomy, dismisses their trauma and silences their voices. Youth experiencing DCF involvement are not equipped with the tools to advocate for themselves when there are inequities in the services they receive from DCF.

In sitting alongside youth that we serve, I frequently hear stories from youth who state that they were discharged from DCF custody to homelessness. They tell me of transition plans that are left unaddressed by DCF, while they are left to wander Church St. and sleep at bus stops. Finally and most distressing, youth have told me that their DCF workers offered that if they terminate their parental rights for one of their children, the youth will be able to maintain custody of their other children. Given the reports I hear from youth and youth's impressions of DCF, both the youth and myself as a case manager need a place to take these reports in real time as they come up.

I strongly support that the State of Vermont needs an Office of the Child Advocate, as it is essential that we support young Vermonters to lead lives full of dignity. An Office of the Child Advocate creates opportunity for transparency, strengthens research-based practices through data collection, and encourages trauma-informed opportunities for youth to communicate their experiences to a third party.

Supporting H.265 means prioritizing the well-being of Vermont's children and youth. An Office of the Child Advocate is not intended to penalize the existing system, but rather to create space and opportunity for Vermont's marginalized youth to receive the care they deserve. An Office of the Child Advocate encourages accountability and transparency in the services that the State of Vermont delivers. An Office of the Child Advocate upholds, listens to, and honors the voices of our youth.