



Moira O'Neill  
Child Advocate

# State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate



**Testimony of  
Emily Lawrence, JD  
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before  
The Vermont House Committee on Human Services  
March 23, 2021**

Good morning Chair Pugh, Vice Chair Wood, and esteemed members of House Committee on Human Services. My name is Emily Lawrence and I am the Associate Child Advocate and Legal Counsel for the New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you again today in support of **House Bill 265, An Act relating to the Office of the Child Advocate.**

The New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate continues to support the establishment of a Vermont Office of the Child Advocate as contemplated by H.265. I have been asked today to speak about funding sources for our Office and the makeup of our Oversight Commission. I will address these topics in my testimony and am happy to take any questions.

The Office of the Child Advocate is funded entirely through the State General Fund. The Office does not receive any IV-E or federal Family First Prevention Services Act funding. The Office sought and receives charitable funding for technical assistance from Casey Family Programs. Over the past two years, they have contracted with safety science consultants who designed two instruments for our office to use in critical incident review, including child deaths.

There are a few Child Advocate or Ombudsman offices that receive support other than state general funds. Maine's Child Welfare Ombudsman has received Medicaid funding for case review, a quality assurance mechanism. There are also a few offices that house child fatality review committees. Some of them receive grants from the Centers for Disease Control for collecting child fatality data.

The Office of the Child Advocate does not have a board. Instead, our statute provides for an Oversight Commission on Children's Services. Under the statute, the Commission consists of:

- 2 members of the senate, appointed by the senate president
- 2 members of the house of representatives, appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives
- 4 members representing the executive branch, appointed by the governor
- 2 members representing the judicial branch, appointed by the chief justice of the supreme court
- 2 representatives of the New Hampshire Association of Chiefs of Police, one of whom serves as chief of police for a city and one of whom serves as chief of police for a town
- 2 members of child advocacy organizations, appointed by the senate president

- 2 members of child advocacy organizations, appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives
- an individual who was formerly a recipient of child protection, juvenile justice, or voluntary services through New Hampshire's Division for Children, Youth and Families, appointed by the governor, and
- an individual who has served or is serving as a foster parent, appointed by the governor

The Commission is tasked with recommending at least 3 qualified candidates to the governor, in rank order, for appointment to the position of child advocate; except that in the case of reappointment, a single recommendation shall be sufficient. The Commission also provides oversight to the Office, reviews with the Office the efficacy of selected programs and services of executive agencies, and collaborates with the Office to identify and implement best practices on behalf of children and families. We hope to embark on an intensive strategic planning this spring and that process will involve the oversight commission. We anticipate that process will engage the commission and other stakeholders at a deeper level as we collaborate to identify priorities for our office.

Several other child advocate offices have advisory boards. The Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate has an advisory committee established in statute. As you may know, New Hampshire's Child Advocate, Moira O'Neill, previously worked as an Assistant Child Advocate in Connecticut. She recalls that, at that time, the advisory committee members were very involved in providing guidance to the office. The Colorado Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman has an independent, nonpartisan child protection board. By statute, the board oversees hiring the ombudsman and the ombudsman's performance, advises the ombudsman on the strategic direction of the Office, and provides assistance to the ombudsman as practicable or requested.

While the Oversight Commission is supportive of the work done by our Office, we have on occasion wished for an advisory board. The challenge with an oversight commission is that, while they do provide advice, we are unable to consult with them in executive session or out of view of the public – so we miss having an advisory group to turn to when making operational decisions. We have, however, nurtured relationships with stakeholders across the spectrum of children's services.

I will stop here and take your questions if you have them. I urge your support of **House Bill 265, An Act relating to the Office of the Child Advocate.**

Thank you very much.