

March 11, 2021

Testimony to the Human Services Committee of the Vermont House of Representatives by Floyd Nease, Executive Director of the Lamoille Family Center in Morrisville, Vermont.

Why I support the concept of a Vermont Office of the Child Advocate

With the Chair's permission, I'm going to read from the website of the Office of the Child Advocate in New Hampshire.

"Mission of the Office of the Child Advocate: The mission of the Office of the Child Advocate is to provide independent and impartial oversight of the New Hampshire child welfare and juvenile justice systems to promote effective reforms that meet the best interests of children.

To achieve this we:

- Listen to all concerns about DCYF
- Respond to complaints with a credible review process
- Respect the importance of every person in a child's life
- Build collaborative relationships for reform
- Promote practices that are proven to be effective to help children and families
- Maintain independence and impartiality of all aspects of our oversight of DCYF

How does the Child Advocate help?

The Office of the Child Advocate investigates complaints about DCYF for:

- Children under protective supervision
- Children in foster care or institutional settings
- Children involved with juvenile justice
- Children in need of services

We turn complaints into building blocks for better child welfare and juvenile justice systems by:

- Educating policymakers and the public on what children need and best practices
- Promoting responsive public policy for child welfare
- Ensure that DCYF has the resources to effectively do the best for New Hampshire's children"

I have worked in human services in Vermont since 1977. I have worked in alternative schools, a parent/child center, a therapeutic foster care program, a Designated Community Mental Health Agency and currently am working at the Lamoille Family Center for the second time (after a 35-year hiatus). I served as a Legislator in the Vermont House for ten years. After that, I worked briefly at AHS, during which I was asked to serve as a Senior Advisor to the Governor for Health Care Reform.

It was in the latter role that I was asked as someone in the Governor's office with a background in human services and child welfare, to represent the Governor at regional meetings of Legislators and Administration officials called because of a disturbing pattern of infant deaths, while those infants and their families were involved with DCF. There was no Office of the Child Advocate (OCA). Had there been, the moment would have provided an opportunity for the OCA to examine any patterns that existed that

had put children at risk, and to make recommendations about how to mitigate them. Instead, what happened is that in the 18 months that followed, because DCF Social Workers felt that they needed to protect themselves from the press and the Legislature, more infants and toddlers were taken into custody than any time in the history of our child protection system.

Had there been an Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), the OCA could have done a private deep dive into the causes of the deaths, the policies, procedures and practices that might have contributed to them, and made recommendations to the Department for Children and Families and the Legislature. Had there been an OCA, instead of DCF Social Workers taking more infants and toddlers into custody to protect themselves, they could have implemented improved policies and procedures recommended by the OCA, that protected children.

The catch-22 that DCF suffers from is that in every case where they find they need to take action, they are damned if they do and damned if they don't. An OCA in Vermont, rather than posing a threat to DCF (which is how the proposal has always been treated, regardless of the party in power), could provide Vermont's child welfare system with a backbone of OCA recommended best practices and improved resources.

I have supported the implementation of an Office of the Child Advocate ever since I served on the Board of Voices for Vermont's Children, 15 years ago. I ask you to support this bill – imperfect in its present form – because Vermont needs an independent voice whose only job is to look after the best interests of our children, un-beholden to Governors, Secretaries, Commissioners or Legislators. It is time.

Respectfully submitted,

Floyd W. Nease
Executive Director
Lamoille Family Center