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James Metz, MD
PO Box 503
Hinesburg, VT 05461
(802) 324-6579
James.Metz@uvmhealth.org

House Committee on Human Services – Testimony
House Bill 265

Good Morning Representative Pugh and Members of the House Committee on Human Services. Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today in favor of House Bill 265, establishment of an office of the child advocate.

My name is James Metz and I am a pediatrician at the University of Vermont Medical Center. My specialty is in child abuse medicine which means that I evaluate children with medical concerns associated with any type of child maltreatment. I am the only practicing board certified child abuse pediatrician in Vermont. I also serve on several boards related to my work including the Vermont Citizen's Advisory Board (VCAB), The Child Fatality Review Board, Voices for VT Children and Prevent Child Abuse Vermont. I returned to Vermont in 2018 after 12 years training and working in Seattle, Washington, a state that has an Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds.

Having practiced in Vermont for the past few years, I have seen the strengths and weaknesses of the child welfare system in the state and have appreciated the opportunity to work closely with folks from the Department for Children and Families. I have seen the incredibly challenging work that they do and am humbled by the situations that they are confronted with.

I am also humbled by the stories that families share with me about their experiences navigating the child welfare system.

And what I have noticed over the years is that the child welfare system, regardless of how well it is working, is perceived as adversarial to families. While I know that this isn't necessarily the case, when I have to tell a family that we are making a report to DCF because of the injuries we see on their child, I am never thanked for offering the support of an outside agency.

The cases of child abuse that I am involved in pose significant challenges for the child welfare system. There is rarely a straightforward case and families often feel disenfranchised from the decision making surrounding their child. And while DCF holds paramount the best interest of the child in cases of maltreatment, this is not always clear.

The role of the child advocate, as an independent and impartial entity can help bring clarity and objectivity to what often seems like a less than transparent process. On a global scale, the office of the advocate, through data collection, interviews and investigation can provide a broad overview of the

status of the child welfare system in the state. It can help guide the priorities of DCF by pointing out some of the issues in the system.

On a more granular level, it can help families and care providers understand the decisions DCF makes and look into and respond to concerns that they may have.

For DCF, The Office of the Child Advocate would provide a buffer from some of the criticism that is often leveled at DCF and allow an impartial process determine whether their actions were appropriate.

From my experience, the elements integral to an effective office are: 1) one that is inherently non-adversarial to DCF, 2) that is independent, and 3) that has a specific mandate to ensure the safety of children and rights of caregivers.

From my perspective, anything that frees DCF up to focus on their job of helping families care for children while allowing an outlet for families to voice their concerns thereby bettering the child welfare system in Vermont is well worth it.

When I entered UVM medical school in 2006, I didn't even know there was a specialty in medicine devoted to child abuse. I found this specialty while practicing pediatrics in urban Seattle. And while I wish Vermont was spared of this problem, I have found abuse as prevalent here as in Washington. My hope is that as Vermonters we can work towards developing as robust a system as possible for protecting children and families and that we see it as a public good not a burden. The measure of our success is how much attention we pay to those who have the least voice among us.

I think this bill is a great start towards providing this voice and I look forward to working with you on it further.

Thank you.