

Mark Redmond

H.265 An Office of Child Advocate for Vermont

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Good morning, my name is Mark Redmond, I am the executive director of Spectrum Youth & Family Services. Spectrum has been in existence for 51 years in Burlington, where we work with teenagers and young adults who are homeless, runaways, victims of human trafficking, suffering from substance use disorders, dealing with mental health difficulties, high school dropouts, in the juvenile justice system and in the foster care system. And it is very common to have youth who combine these various characteristics.

About seven years ago DCF invited Spectrum to start working with youth in DCF custody in the St. Albans district, ages 14-23, helping them with case management and independent living skills, and only last week we opened up a Drop-In Center in that city.

I testified in favor of an Office of the Child Advocate I believe ten years ago, and I testified on it last year. And I believe it is absolutely time and absolutely essential that the State of Vermont move forward on this.

We are the only state in New England without such an Office, and in fact before I came to Vermont in 2003, I worked for five years in Connecticut, where there was an Office of the Child Advocate and I saw there how effective it was. And that is because it was outside of the official Department of Children and Families.

Also, keep in mind: there is already a similar Office in Vermont for health care, for senior citizens and for people with disabilities, so it is not as if this is an entirely new concept in our state. It's just that there is not one for children and families who interact with DCF.

I know an Office of the Child Advocate in Vermont will have to start off smaller and with a more limited scope than Connecticut's, largely due to fiscal realities, but it at least can start with these two critical functions:

One: receiving and reporting on data from the different parts of the child protection and juvenile justice system. There is already much data being produced, but it isn't integrated and analyzed from a wholistic perspective. This Office can refine data so that we have indicators of what a successful DCF actually is and does.

Two: an Office where parents and children can register complaints, recommendations and comments. At present if a parent or child believes they are not being treated fairly or according to the law, there is no place for them to go.

I would like to give you just one example of something I frequently hear in which an Office of the Child Advocate could play an important role. In 2007 the Vermont Legislature passed H.449 - An Act Relating to Foster Care Services and Supports. I know you will remember this bill

Madame Chair because you played a pivotal role in getting it through the Legislature and signed by then-Governor Douglas. In fact I have a picture in my office of you in the Spectrum Drop-in Center, giving a speech at the bill-signing, which was held there. And then a few months later you were awarded the Legislator of the Year award by the KidSafe Collaborative because of your leadership on that bill.

What that bill was designed to do was make the 18th birthday just another nice and memorable birthday for a youth in the custody of the State of Vermont. Prior to that bill, youth had to leave their foster home or group home on their 18th birthday. As you will remember, many were then ending up homeless and/or in the prison system.

H. 449 was designed to change that, and I believe it did, at least for a while. But if so, then why do I continually hear now, that foster youth are frequently discharged to homelessness at age 18? I hear that all the time. Why did I hear only last week, in this committee, the Associate Child Advocate and Legal Counsel from New Hampshire, Emily Lawrence, say this:

“A Vermont youth approaching age 18 and mandatory release, incarcerated in New Hampshire’s detention center. There was no plan in place for Vermont authorities (DCF) beyond picking the child up and bringing him back to Vermont. There was a high risk of homelessness and the child reached out to our office because of the lack of a transition plan.”

Why did I hear on a recent podcast, a young woman from Vermont state, “I was in foster care, and it ended at 18, so I started couch surfing?”

This is not supposed to be happening. This is why we worked so hard and for so long to pass H. 449, to prevent these very tragedies. And this is why we need some kind of external check on DCF, why we need an entity that is going to receive information from children and parents, which is going to collect data to determine if there are patterns of not following the law or policies, and if those patterns are in one particular district or are system-wide.

And that is just one example. I could give you others, but suffice it to say, we need this Office and we need it now. The Office of the Child Advocate is not an instrument of intimidation. It is an instrument of accountability, and if anything right now is needed in government, it is accountability, especially when it comes to the rights and treatment of children and teenagers and their families.

Thank you.