

An Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate for Vermont

Creating a restorative, transparent Child Protection System that instills trust through independent oversight.

An Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate (OCYFA) is essential to provide independent and impartial oversight of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems in Vermont and promote effective reforms that meet the best interests of children, youth, and families. Transparency is a hallmark of just governance, and while Vermont's child protection system depends on maintaining public trust, that trust is currently undermined by the lack of an independent oversight body. This office will bring a powerful, necessary voice to Vermont's constituents, and inform comprehensive reform.

Key Functions of the Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate

The OCYFA will:

- Listen to all concerns about Vermont's Department for Children and Families regarding
 - Children under protective supervision
 - Children in foster care or institutional settings
 - Children involved with juvenile justice
 - Children in need of services
- 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

Improving the Child Protection System Response

The OCYFA will 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
- Ensuring that DCF has the resources to work effectively and in the best interests of Vermont's children and youth

Credible Review Process

1

Listen. Understand the concern. Provide resources and referrals if appropriate, or open a case.

2

Gather information. The Advocate must have access to all case records and associated files.

3

Assess whether any breach of law, policy, or procedure took place. If so, determine whether DCF had the resources, training, and staff needed to meet policy standards. Provide a preliminary report to DCF with time for a response.

4

File a final report.



Vermont consistently ranks among the highest rate of out-of-home placement in the United States. Separating children from their family of origin is traumatic even when executed well. We need to understand why Vermont’s rate is so high.

The rate of children being placed in two or more foster homes in VT (41% in 2018) is also higher than the national average (35%) and second only to Massachusetts among New England States.

Low-income families are much more likely to come in contact with the child protection system. Yet while poverty is not an allowable cause for a child protection investigation, conditions related to income can prevent family reunification—for example if the parent is unable to secure housing.

The Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate will analyze these factors and more to move toward an equitable, effective child protection system.

Structuring the Office for Success

Voices for Vermont’s Children suggests that the Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate report to an Oversight Commission comprised experts in policy, children’s services, child advocacy, the courts, and public safety. Voices recommends that this commission include the Vermont Citizens Advisory Board leadership as well as members of the Legislature and other stakeholders.

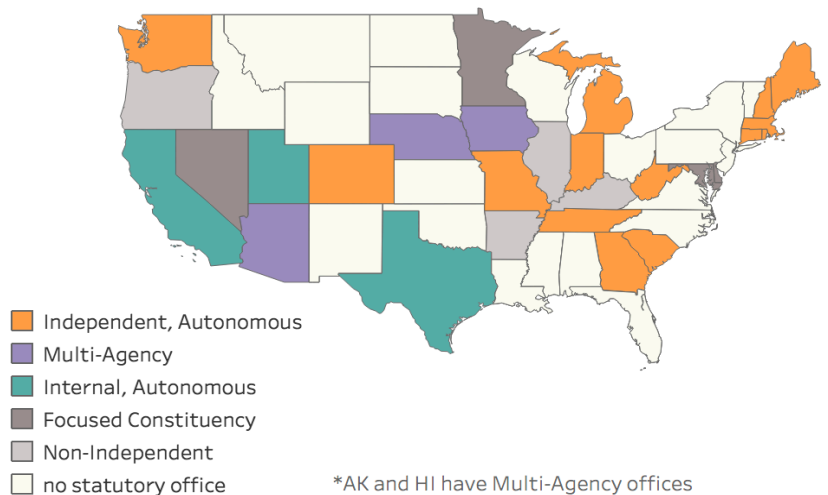
The Commission would:

- Recommend qualified candidates to the governor for appointment as Director of the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate
- Provide oversight of the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate
- Collaborate with the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate to identify and promote best practices
- Receive the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate’s Annual Report and ensure its dissemination

An OCYFA director has the opportunity for regional collaboration and a national collective, which would assist in informing best practices for Vermont. 36 States have some form of independent oversight of their child protection agency, including the other five New England States.

Voices believes the newly established OCYFA in New Hampshire is the model for Vermont to follow.

States with Independent Oversight of Child Protection*



*Source: *National Conference of State Legislatures*