

March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022

## **Testimony before the Senate Health and Welfare Committee**

Good Morning, Chairperson Senator Lyons, Vice Chair Senator Hardy, Senator Cummings, Senator Hooker, and Senator Terenzini. For the record, I am Linda E Johnson, Executive Director of Prevent Child Abuse Vermont.

I am here to testify regarding the importance of having an Office of Child and Youth Advocate in Vermont.

I believe establishing this proposed entity would greatly aid in the protection and health of children and youth who are in need of more advocacy and whose parents may be as well.

Over my 36 years, (next month), in my current position and 7 years as the Executive Director of the Lamoille Family Center, I have been reached out to more times than I can actually count for help to intervene with a family involved with DCF. I am not here to bash DCF. I have a clear sense of the difficult work they perform protecting children, helping parents impacted by drugs and alcohol, mental health challenges, domestic and sexual violence and more.

Their workloads and the vicarious trauma impacting front line social workers is a burden not for the faint of heart. They are heroes quite regularly, establishing safety and helping families heal and recover from multigenerational despair, and trauma. Sometimes they nurture new healthy families into being through adoption. I could go on, but today I

am here to talk about the missteps that occur and have come to my attention from parents, PCAVT staff, journalists, attorneys, other human services providers and advocates.

When a situation where poor social work, prejudice, negligence has been shared with me, I bring it to someone at the Central Office's attention for a deeper look. I have been gratified that over the years, in the vast majority of instances, corrective action has been taken. I also support and encourage various actions parents themselves can take to improve their situations and relationships with their social worker, attorney, the judge, and others.

I do not know how many folks like me are out there being turned to for help, when things are unfair, unjust, not safe and or, not well managed. It may be because I am someone willing to speak up and ask DCF for assistance. It is also, of course the right thing to do, and thankfully in recent years, someone in the Central Office usually hears the problem and is willing to help. That has not always been the case.

I believe it is in the very best interests of our most vulnerable children and youth that we establish an independent Office of a Child and Youth Advocate in Vermont. There must always be someone who can look into, explain, communicate honestly with all parties, and work for the best interests of the child.

I further believe that this Office needs to be part of State Government so that records are easily accessible. I also recommend that an oversight commission of non-conflicted individuals be named to serve on this body. This Office needs to set apart from DCF and like the Governor's Commission for Women, report to the Governor and not to the Secretary of the Agency of Human Services or a Commissioner from

any other State Agency. The OCA needs to be free of political constraints and financial considerations.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today.