

Statement by Mark Redmond to the Vermont Senate Health and Welfare Committee

March 23, 2022

Re: H. 265 An Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am the executive director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services. I have served at Spectrum for 19 years. I have worked in the field of caring for youth who are in the foster care system, juvenile justice system, homeless or considered at-risk for the last 40 years, first in New York, then Connecticut and now Vermont.

I testified on this bill last year in House Human Services. I believe this is my third or fourth time testifying on this bill, going back to I believe 2008. I have testified more on this bill than on any other, and that is because I believe it is urgently needed. For one thing, there is a parallel office for those individuals with disabilities, one for health care and one for long term care. There is nothing for children and parents and there should be.

Even more importantly, I worked in the Connecticut foster care system for four years prior to coming to Vermont and I saw how effective and important the Office of the Child Advocate, which is what it was called there, was. It was an entity outside of DCF to which parents and children and teenagers could go when they believed they were not being treated fairly by DCF or their rights being violated. Without that, they go to DCF itself, and that does not suffice. DCF is staffed primarily by workers who are dedicated, compassionate, intelligent and hard-working. There are others who are okay. And there are a few who are not okay.

Given that reality, mistakes can be made, jeopardizing the safety and lives of children and parents, and those mistakes can affect not only that one person, but the entire family, and possibly reverberate through generations. Workers at Spectrum have told me of instances in which a DCF worker tells a parent whom they suspect of abuse or neglect words to the effect of, "If you voluntarily give up one of your children to DCF, we will let you keep the others. But if you do not voluntarily give up that one, we will move to remove all of your children." I am not saying this happens frequently, but it does happen and I have heard it from more than one Spectrum staff. It is immoral and likely illegal. We also know of youth in custody who hit age 18 and are discharged to homelessness. I heard testimony from the Child Advocate in New Hampshire last year who talked about Vermont youth placed at the Sununu Center who reach age 18 and there is absolutely no plan in place created by the Vermont DCF worker responsible for the youth. I was not surprised at all, because I have heard Spectrum workers complain about this more than once. This Committee played a key role in 2007 passing H. 449 which was designed to prevent exactly this, it was passed in order to make sure youth are not ending up homeless at age 18 after being in DCF.

Another reason I am urging you to pass this bill and create this Office is that it is not only about resolving individual grievances by parents and children. It is about recommending reforms which are very much needed in the DCF system as a whole. I saw this happen in Connecticut. I saw the Office of the Child Advocate make recommendations that actually made a difference in how that system functioned. I saw fewer children ending up in group homes and institutions, fewer children being sent out of state, more services in place to support families and keep children in those families whenever possible. It wasn't

strictly the Office of the Child Advocate that made the difference, but they were certainly major players in it.

You may hear from officials at DCF that the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate is an instrument of intimidation. It is not. It is an instrument of accountability, and accountability is what is needed now more than ever before.

The creation of this Office will not solve all the problems at DCF, it won't solve the lack of a data system or high worker turnover. It is not a panacea. But it is an important step in the right direction.

I truly hope this is my final time testifying on this bill, and that it passes in this committee and in the overall Senate.

Thank you.