

The Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate

An Introduction

House Committee on Human Services

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Child, Youth, and Family Advocate



Goals for Today

1. Introduce this Office and congratulate you for creating it
2. Briefly review the Office's statutory structure and mandate
3. Discuss Office accomplishments in its first 4 weeks
4. Present a few preliminary impressions of the current state of CPS, JJS, and services for children, youth, and families in Vermont
5. Discuss current and future goals and focus
6. Questions

Section 1:

Pause for a Breath – Here We Are

- You did it. Thank you.
- This is truly about improving outcomes for Children, Youth, and Families.
- This Office is here to stay for the long term.
- The OCYFA is committed to independence, impartiality, and transparency

Section 2: Statutory Goals and Purpose of OCYFA

- Brief summary of statute – won't cover everything
- Big themes in statute:
 1. Work cross-disciplinarily to break down silos
 2. Engage with the community
 3. Collaborate to improve systems
 4. Center racial and social equity and justice

Statutory Goals and Purpose (33 VSA § 3202)

- **Advance the interests and welfare** of Vermont's children and youth.
- **Advocate for the welfare** of children and youth:
 1. receiving services from the Department directly, or through funds provided by the Department
 2. those involved in the child protection system
 3. those involved in the juvenile justice system

Duties and Authority (§ 3203)

- Provide information to the public
- Analyze and monitor developments in law and policy
- Receive and investigate complaints
- Advise government entities (all 3 branches)
- Push for systemic reforms
- Submit a report each December 1 (next slide)

OCYFA Report to “Governor and the General Assembly” (§ 3203)

To include:

- A. the conditions of placements for Vermont’s children and youth;
- B. findings related to services for and assistance to children, youth, and families within the child protection and juvenile justice systems;
- C. recommendations related to improving services for children, youth, and families; and
- D. data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, disability status, and any other categories that the Advocate deems necessary.

DCF Required Reports to OCYFA (§ 3206)

1. all incidents of actual physical injury to children or youths in the custody of the Commissioner or at significant risk of such harm; and
2. instances of restraint or seclusion of any child or youth in custody of the Commissioner.
3. The Department shall notify the Office within 48 hours of any fatality of a child or youth in its custody.

Other Important Parts of the Statute (more depth another day)

- Advisory Council (§ 3205)
- Access to information and facilities (§ 3207)
- Cooperation of state agencies (§ 3208)
- Confidentiality (§ 3209)
- Oversight Commission (§ 3211)

Section 3: Accomplishments So Far

- Administrative: HR, Budget, Executive, Organizational
- Office: Chittenden County: “99.7% of the population growth over the last 10 years concentrated among residents who are Hispanic, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Native Hawaiian.”¹
- Deputy – We are hiring!
- Advisory Council – We are interviewing!
- Data systems – In process
- Budget - \$414k requested for FY24 – thank you for support!

Accomplishments So Far

- Fielded first two complaints
- Meetings – 20+ meetings conducted or set up. Examples: NH Advocate, DCF Safety Manager, GALs, Child Attorneys on all sides, Ross Greene (R/S), Child psychologists, Casey Family Programs, CJA Task Force, Early Childhood Day, JJ administrators, Becca Balint staffers, Gov Scott's office, judiciary, and more...
- Read read read
- Connect with community in Vermont and nationally
- Running list of what don't know

Accomplishments So Far

- Meetings conducted or set up with key DCF officials:
 - Secretary Chris Winters
 - Deputy Commissioner Aryka Radke
 - Director of Operations Brenda Gooley
 - Director of Policy Planning Beth Sausville
 - Revenue Enhancement Unit Director Heather McLain
 - Adolescent Services Unit Director Tyler Allen
 - Child Safety Manager Nancy Miller
- And more...

Section 4: Preliminary Systemic Impressions: Assets

- Real will to improve systems. People (esp DCF) truly care
- Lots of know-how, professionalism, experience that can be leveraged
- Move to Safety Science and focus on systems has transformative potential
- Room to bring more federal money to Vermont
- ...and a lot more...

Preliminary Impressions: Potential Changes

- DCF: Training and experience vary, low morale, insufficient funding
- DCF data system impedes workers and harms children
- Lack of diversity in VT contributes to poor outcomes for children
- Lack of evidence-based, preventive, community services, esp. rural
- Lack of high-quality mental health placements – kids go out of state
- Inconsistency in quality of legal representation of children; low rates of pay for attorneys; variance in judicial knowledge of children's law issues, reliance on corps of unpaid Guardians ad litem

Poor Outcomes in Vermont

- Vermont: High rate of children in custody, high rate of termination of parental rights
- Mandatory reporting law overinclusive – VT has highest rate of reporting – and screened out calls – in the country. Burdens DCF and community. “Family surveillance”
- CHINS cases consume high percentage of judicial time and esp court staff time
- Disproportionality – racial, ability, and more – throughout system for both white and non-white people

Section 5: Future Goals and Focus

Listen Listen Listen

- Tour state to: Community organizations, Mental health facilities and placements, Probation and JJS, Foster homes, Courts, and more...
- Collaborate with DCF and three branches on systemic improvements
- Partner on website that provides clear information to the public
- Expand office: data analyst is likely next hire after Deputy
- Work with nationwide experts to support maximization of IV-E funding
- And more...

Refocus: Equity and Justice

- Racial justice work is community work: organizing, meeting, reaching out.
- Collaborate with and learn from VT Office of Racial Equity, OCYFA Advisory Council, Social Equity Caucus, BTV Equity Office, The Root, and on...
- Racial justice, diversity justice, LGBTQ+ involvement, expand culturally responsive services.

Thank you!

- Questions?
- Please don't hesitate to reach out:
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