

# **Office of the Child Advocate**

## ***At a Glance***

**SARAH EAGAN, Child Advocate**

**Mickey Kramer, Associate Child Advocate**

**Established - 1995**

**Statutory authority - C.G.S. §46a-13K, et seq.**

**Central office - 999 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105**

**Number of employees - 7**

**Recurring operating expenses - \$653,457**

Through P.A. 11-48, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was consolidated for administrative purposes with several other government watchdog agencies into the Office of Governmental Accountability (OGA). Designated as a division of the OGA, the OCA maintains its independence and statutory authority/responsibilities.

## **Mission**

*The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) speaks for Connecticut's children. The OCA was created in 1995 to be an independent voice for children rather than an administrator of programs. OCA's mission is to oversee the care and protection of Connecticut's children and to advocate for their well-being. OCA is committed to ensuring that all children receive the care and supports that they need.*

## **Statutory Responsibilities**

The statutory responsibilities include: evaluating the procedures for and the delivery of state-funded services to children, investigating inquiries or complaints about services for children, recommending changes in state policy, conducting programs of public education, legislative advocacy and proposing systemic reform, reviewing conditions and procedures of all public and private facilities where children are placed, providing training and technical assistance to children's attorneys, initiating or intervening in court cases on behalf of children, serving on the Child Fatality Review Panel and conducting a fatality review on the circumstances of the death of a child due to unexpected or unexplained causes in order to facilitate development of prevention strategies to address identified trends and patterns of risk and to improve coordination of services for children and families in the state.

## **Public Service**

OCA continues to shine the light on the needs and circumstances of children in Connecticut, and works to bring about necessary change for children and families. OCA helps children/youth, families, community members, health, human service and education professionals and others by educating and informing them about services and supports available, coaching them through various public systems, reviewing individual cases, advocating for children at risk and addressing broad public policy issues impacting the well-being of children. Specific reviews and investigations assist the OCA in identifying systemic issues and serve as a catalyst for setting internal priorities, and help to focus policy and legislative change initiatives.

### **Achievements/Improvements for Fiscal Year 2015-16**

#### **CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

- In follow up to the February 2015 OCA public report *Seclusion and Restraint in CT Schools: A Call to Action*, as well as continued calls expressing concerns about specific programs and/or students, OCA has initiated a broader review of the provision of special education services and behavior management practices utilized in the state's approved private special education programs (APSEPS). This review is ongoing and we expect to conclude later this year.
- In response to reported concerns from early intervention providers, OCA initiated a review of the appropriateness and quality of preschool special education services offered young children with disabilities in a large CT school district. We expect to issue a public report of findings and recommendations in early Fall 2016.
- OCA, in partnership with the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, published a Disability Rights Advisory regarding Seclusion and Restraint of Students in Connecticut Schools. The advisory described Public Act 15-41 and provided information on evidence based strategies for reducing and preventing unnecessary restraint and seclusion of children in school.
- OCA continued its collaboration with the CT Interagency Restraint and Seclusion Prevention Initiative, and in September 2015 was a cosponsor of the third statewide educational forum at Central Connecticut State University. The forum featured national experts, consumers, and almost 500 participants to learn strategies to prevent restraint and seclusion of children and adults across all human service settings.

#### **CHILD FATALITY PREVENTION**

- OCA continues to co-chair the state Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), meeting monthly with a multi-disciplinary panel to review unexpected and unexplained deaths of CT's children and develop strategies for fatality prevention. During calendar year 2015, OCA reviewed the deaths of 72 children.
- December 2015, OCA and the CFRP released a fatality report on Londyn S., a 2-year-old whose death was determined to be a homicide due to suboxone toxicity. This report contained recommendations that focused on the Department of Children and Families'

Differential Response model of investigative practices and outlined all 2014 Homicide deaths of infants and toddlers in Connecticut.

- September 2015, OCA in collaboration with Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV), released a joint fatality report regarding the stabbing death of infant Zaniyah C., by an extended family member who was under the influence of substances. This report offers recommendations to Connecticut's Court Support Services Division regarding supervision and drug testing for probationers and police departments' response to domestic violence calls, among others.

## OMBUDSMAN ACTIVITIES

- Through our ombudsman activities, OCA responded to over 450 citizen concerns about the provision of state funded services to children. Approximately 50% of these calls resulted in the need for OCA to open an investigation and/or conduct direct advocacy on behalf of a child. Frequent issues reviewed by the OCA this year include: concerns regarding access to appropriate special education services for children; families of children with autism and frequently co-occurring complex mental health diagnoses, who lack access to critical treatment and support services; concerns regarding children in the child protection system; and concerns about children who are bullied or inappropriately disciplined in schools.

## FACILITY OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATION

- In July, 2015 OCA published an investigative report and subsequent addendum outlining whistleblower complaints regarding conditions of confinement and treatment for youth at the Connecticut's state run facilities that confine delinquent youth, namely the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and the Pueblo secure girls unit. This report's findings detailed inappropriate and sometimes illegal restraint and seclusion practices, deficient handling of allegations of abuse and neglect of youth within the facility, and the facilities' inadequate response to youths' suicidal behavior, among other issues. Ultimately, Governor Malloy has called for the planned closure of CJTS. The Pueblo secure girls unit has been closed.
- OCA continued active monitoring and oversight of the conditions of confinement and treatment for youth incarcerated in the state's adult prisons. OCA continues to meet regularly with Department of Correction's executive leadership to develop policies that are appropriate for the adolescent population and that will continue to improve access to rehabilitative and educational support services.

## OTHER

- OCA meets regularly with policy-makers, human service professionals and law makers regarding strategies to improve access to critical support services for children and their families. OCA participates in numerous state taskforces and working groups for the purpose of advocating for system reform to better meet the needs of children who have disabilities, are in need of mental health care or special education services, are at risk of

committing suicide or exposed to domestic violence, reside in out-of-home care or facilities, and many other circumstances in which their needs may not be optimally met.

- OCA submitted legislative testimony on numerous matters during the 2016 session, providing legislators with expertise, experience and recommendations regarding diverse matters affecting children, including: reducing restraint and seclusion, preventing child fatalities, improving outcomes for the juvenile justice system, and increasing access to health services for children.