



National Ombudsman Day: 1,900 Reasons for the Office of Community Relations October 8, 2020

Last year, there were more than 1,900 reasons why the Department of Children and Families (DCF) needed an Office of Community Relations. That was the number of inquiries into the Office from parents and families, foster parents, members of the general public, and others.

Today, October 8, is recognized by the United States Ombudsman Organization as National Ombudsman Day. Ann Adams, the Director of the Office of Community Relations, said the day provides an opportunity to reflect on how the Department responds to feedback from families and others who are interacting with the Department.

"The office is an independent unit that conducts conflict resolution and is solution focused," said Ms. Adams, who has worked for the Department in various roles since 2002. "We're internal to the Department, but it's crucial that we remain impartial, have empathy and gather the perspectives of all parties."

The Office of Community Relations was born in 2019 when newly appointed Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes established the Bureau of External Affairs for the first time within the Department. Bureau Chief Ken Mysogland indicated the decision to rename what was previously called the Ombudsman office was done to reflect a broader vision for the office.

"This is not just an office to process complaints," Mr. Mysogland said. "We want to ensure our families and those with whom we interact are empowered to express their views. I have the highest regard for the staff. By their work, voices are heard, and we can impact the way families perceive the Department."

Ms. Adams and her team - Johnny Callas and Gus Guevara - certainly are more than busy.

Last year, the 1,900 inquiries came in through phone calls, emails and even walk-ins, Ms. Adams said. The office maintains a data base to track and analyze the inquiries into 43 different categories by subject matter. Concerns over case management constitute most of the inquiries, and most of these concern communication issues of various kinds, she said. Typically, it is a family member who calls.

These inquiries require that the Office of Community Relations strives to ensure that families understand the process by which the Department does its work and how decisions are made. "It's about taking the time to really explain how the Department does things and to inform them of their rights," she said. "We bring together all the parties around the table to resolve the issues."

In addition to case management issues, other common discussions involve visitation and placement decisions. "Relatives wanting to know why a child isn't living with them, or a parent asking why their kids have not been returned to them or why we don't close their case," Ms. Adams said.

"So, it becomes our job to mediate between the families, the area office and the different units within the Department," she added. "We do our research, notify the different units that need to be involved, and notify the family of the resolution."

Ms. Adams said the office strives to be "honest, transparent and respectful of all parties involved," including the families and Department staff. "We're partnering with the callers and the area office."

She said the office works hard to see the situation from multiple perspectives. "Child welfare is so complicated, so the Ombudsman can and must look at the situation from many different sides, which requires us to be impartial and independent."

The office also provides direct assistance to families. "We inform families about what help they can get from other state agencies and elsewhere, and we advocate for them," Ms. Adams said. "It gives us an opportunity to partner with the family to find their strengths and improve their situation."

Ms. Adams said the office has made a direct impact in many instances, including facilitating a reunification of a mother and child that is expected to occur today. Ms. Adams said she worked with the mother to help her understand what she needed to do to get her child back. The child was taken into care due to an unexplained injury, Ms. Adams said, and the mother did not understand why the Department did not simply believe her when she said she had nothing to do with the injury. After explaining that the Department had to resolve the unanswered safety questions, Ms. Adams convinced mother to engage in parenting classes. She took the classes and now is getting her child back.



Ann Adams

"She began to partner with the Department to get the answers to questions the Department had concerning her ability to keep the child safe," Ms. Adams said, adding that she worked with the area office to determine exactly what they needed to feel confident that mother would ensure the child's safety.

This was a gratifying moment, she said, but one that the office is always working to realize.

"We explain how the Department makes decisions in the best interest of families," said Ms. Adams. "At the same time, we also are committed to ethical standards that require that we be impartial and respectful of each perspective. It requires looking at our own biases and the ability to be patient and listen to their side of the story."

John Callas

In the social work field I think there has to be a relatively objective place beyond the normal channels where a client can tell their story, be validated for their feelings and engaged as a partner where they can bring about change in their case that best serves their child.

What is most satisfying is when I am able to help facilitate an outcome that has better served a child and the solution has been produced by the Client and the Region and in doing so has fostered a more positive partnership between both parties moving forward.



Gus Guevara

Helping children and families is at the Heart of whom we are as well as what we do. We strive to demonstrate Respect, Advocacy, System/individual accountability and performing our mandates by taking time to understand our families. Satisfaction comes by seeing a Family/children succeed in finding Permanency. Genuinely working together in assuring the safety, growth and lives of the children we serve.

