

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN



Calendar Year 2014

**ANNUAL REPORT of REGIONAL and AREA OFFICE
INQUIRES**

Introduction

The Office of the Ombudsman addresses inquiries and complaints related to Department of Children and Families services in order to resolve the identified issues and to help ensure that the rights of individuals involved with the Department are upheld and maintained.

The Ombudsman staff utilizes a neutral and collaborative process to facilitate fair and equitable resolutions to concerns that are reported, and attempts to facilitate resolutions as amicably as possible.

As required, the Office of the Ombudsman, in collaboration with Regional and Facility staff, consults and problem-solves case-related and systemic issues in order to assist and support DCF staff at all levels and across each division.

What We Believe

Mission - The mission of the Office of the Ombudsman is to assist in assuring the safety and well-being of Connecticut's children, to improve effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of state government, and to promote public confidence in the child welfare system.

Vision - Our vision is a collaborative and transparent system whereby individuals in our community can freely express themselves about the Department's work resulting in improvements from a case, systems, policy or statutory perspective.

Values - We engage in the values of compassion, understanding and a commitment to each individual with whom we communicate as we believe they deserve to be heard and feel respected throughout their involvement with the Department.

How We Conduct Our Work

- *Respond* promptly to inquiries
- *Engage* the caller
- *Assess* concerns
- *Answer* questions
- *Provide* information about departmental policy and procedures
- *Search* for a resolution of disputes
- *Speak* on behalf of the client
- *Mediate* and act as a liaison between all involved parties
- *Arrange* case conferences when necessary
- *Collaborate* with community providers
- *Educate* the community

Data

The Department of Children and Families served 36,282 unique families during the calendar year 2014. During this period of time, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 1,244 inquiries on 1,101 unique families. A further analysis of the data shows that a 143 families were responsible for 418 inquiries or 37% of the total for the year.

The breakdown of the main reasons for the inquiries is as follows:

Reason for Call	Number of Inquiries
Case Management	500
Investigation Concern	135
Placement	86
Worker Complaint	63
Case Practice	46
Visitations	42
Legal Questions/Issues	40
Payment	25
Policy and Procedures	18
Foster Care	17
Substantiation Hearing	17
Abuse/Neglect	17
Request for Documentation	14
Custody	13
Medical	12
Adoption	12
General Inquiry	11
Administrative Hearing	10
Mental Health	8
Educational	5
Hotline Concern	5
Request for a Meeting	3
Court Issues	2

The number of Case Management inquiries for 2014 was relatively consistent with the amount received the previous year. This category includes a wide variety of topics such as concerns expressed about case planning, decision making, referrals for service, barriers to closing a case, decisions to pursue court action and many others.

It should be noted that from calendar year 2013 to 2014, the number of inquiries for Investigation Concerns rose from 50 to 135.

An interesting dynamic seen is that when Fathers contact the Agency about the manner in which the investigation was handled, the allegation tends to center around domestic violence. The Fathers are well-versed in policy and procedures and often inquire about the chain of command resulting in numerous phone calls and e-mails sent to the Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager. It is also seen that the Father expresses his desire to file a formal complaint with Human Resources or Affirmative Action if they believe the staff has not conducted themselves according to Agency standards.

Another point worth noting is that a high number of inquiries for Investigation Concerns were generated by kin. Kin frequently contact the Department expressing concerns for a child and have a generational context for their thoughts and can provide valuable information both about family dynamics and the

overall family functioning. Although we have to maintain confidentiality, the Department can receive information from any party at any time and connecting with these kin resources can lead to the receipt of valuable information for the Department's assessment.

For this same period, the number of inquiries pertaining to Placement increased from 44 to 86 for the calendar years 2013 to 2014.

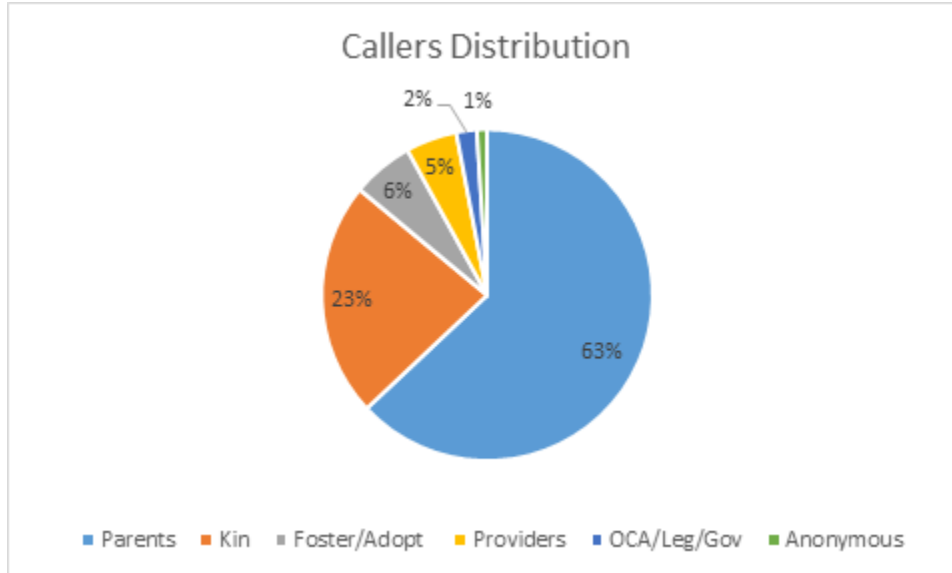
Kin are also frequent callers to the Office of the Ombudsman in this category as well. They both express their concerns about a child in care and offer support during the placement process including their desires to become a placement resource.

A point to highlight is that an overwhelmingly high number of inquiries come from the Mothers of the children in care and not the Fathers. Further assessment is needed to fully understand this issue and whether it is because the engagement with the Father is insufficient or if the majority of services pertaining to reunification are with the Mother.

When an inquiry is made in the Worker Complaint category, it primarily centers on staff not calling the client back timely, alleged violations of confidentiality and staff conducting themselves in an unprofessional manner.

The Callers

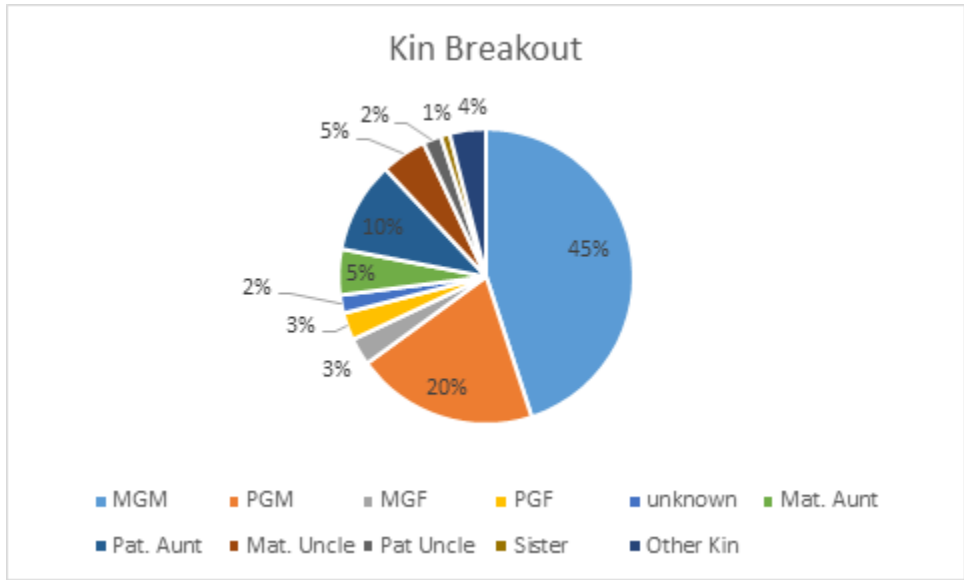
A breakdown of the individuals who contact the Office of the Ombudsman are as follows:



Parents account for 759 or 63% of the total inquiries. When this data is further analyzed, it shows Mothers are responsible for 554 inquiries or 73% and Fathers encompass 205 or 27% of the calls when a parent makes an inquiry.

As the chart indicates, Kin account for 23% of the total inquiries made to the Office of the Ombudsman. They are emotional, informed about Department policies and practices, present compelling scenarios and are seen as diligent and persistent in bringing forth issues. Their concerns overlap between many

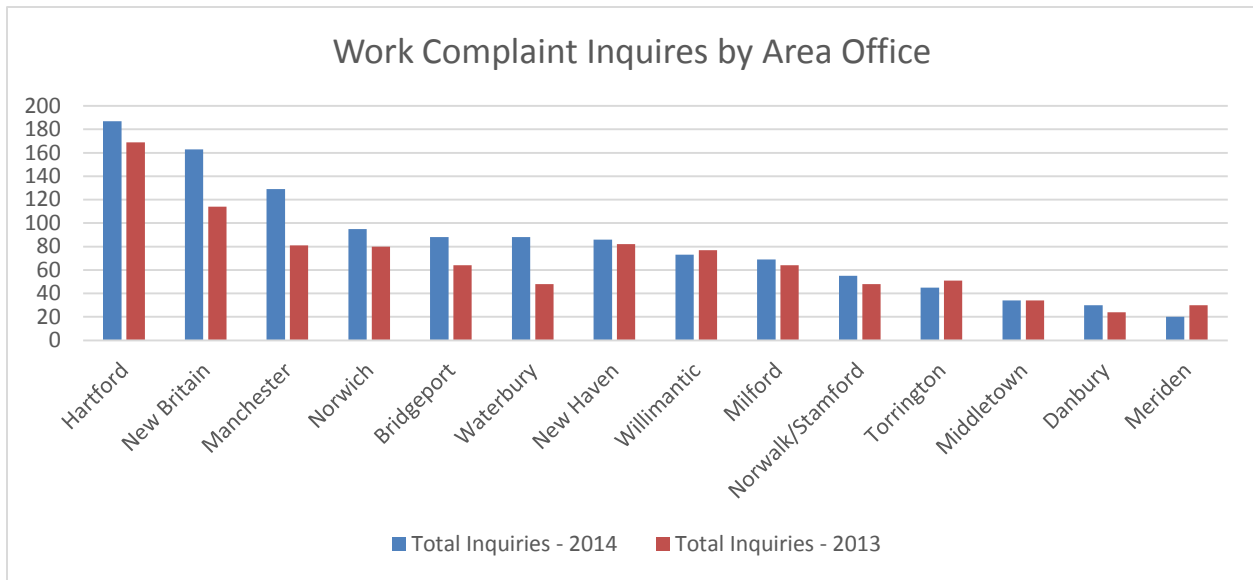
areas of the Agency and encompass multiple categories of inquiries. The following chart documents the type of kin who contacted the Ombudsman’s Office:



Regional Office Inquiries

The breakdown of inquiries per Regional Office for the calendar year 2014 including the number of assigned workers as compared to calendar year 2013 is as follows:

Regional Office	Total Inquiries - 2014	Assigned Workers	Total Inquiries - 2013
Hartford	187	146	169
New Britain	163	104	114
Manchester	129	93	81
Norwich	95	92	80
Bridgeport	88	92	64
Waterbury	88	100	48
New Haven	86	93	82
Willimantic	73	55	77
Milford	69	85	64
Norwalk/Stamford	55	47	48
Torrington	45	36	51
Middletown	34	37	34
Danbury	30	38	24
Meriden	20	38	30



Each Regional Office has a liaison to the Office of the Ombudsman who coordinates responses upon receipt of the initial inquiry. The database has recently been enhanced and we will soon be able to provide a summary identifying the exact issues of concern per Regional office. It is important that each Region continue to assess their own data and trends pertaining to Ombudsman’s inquiries. Below is an overview of the consistent themes found on a statewide level:

Major Themes for the Department of Children and Families

- 1) *Kinship Care and Kinship Caregivers* – These are the issues brought forth by and/or pertaining kin who are currently caregivers or who wish to become caregivers for children.
 - a. Kin state they do not understand the full range of services or supports available to them while caring for a child under a family arrangement or pursuing guardianship through Probate Court.
 - b. Kin also express confusion about the process to obtain a straight Transfer of Guardianship for a child through the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters or agreeing to become fully licensed.
 - c. Our staff face a unique balance of honoring confidentiality when kin contact the Department and at the same time giving the proposed caregiver enough information to make an informed decision about being a resource for a child up to and including offering themselves as a placement resource.
 - d. Kin have expressed frustration with the length of time it has taken to assess them. Given the advances in our work and locating supports, we are now seeing multiple kin come forward for a child. It is recognized that these individuals are prioritized by Regional staff and not everyone can be assessed at once.
 - e. Callers report inconsistent information being told to them about having substantiations overturned prior to licensure versus the Department pursuing waivers for individuals.
 - f. Kinship caregivers remain in need of constant education and discussion surrounding the permanency plan of the youth in their care and the timeframes for achievement.

- g. Kin who contact the Department to be a resource for a child interpret our message to them as they are “un-licenseable” if they are not chosen to be a placement resource over another kin member. In these circumstances, the individual may be able to be used as a support in some other fashion to the child yet they do not remain involved in that capacity.
 - h. Discord may exist between the Maternal and Paternal kinship families. Once the Department makes the placement, the conflicts continue as the kinship placement resource is not allowing the other set of relatives to call, visit or take part in the child’s activities without DCF intervening to assist. They also may make note they will not continue involving other kinship members in the child’s life after the permanency of the child is established.
 - i. Kinship caregivers would like permission to coordinate and supervise visitation among the children in state custody, but who are not all placed together. This might be helpful to our staff, given that it is not always possible for all kin to visit a child in our care. This leads to frustration and hard feelings on behalf of the family members.
 - j. Consistency is needed in the manner in which we offer kinship caregivers tangible and concrete supports at the time of placement. These families tend not to typically think to ask for supports but will accept them if prompted by the Department.
- 2) *Placement* – As stated earlier, an increase was seen in the number of inquiries this past year regarding placement of children.
- Parents who contact the Ombudsman’s Office regarding placement of their children express a high amount of emotion and will recite a long history of personal trauma. Sometimes, for example, at the root of their disagreement with the Department about the overall permanency plan for the children is that the parent may be “compliant” with services but is not making “progress” towards changing their behaviors.
 - Another issue expressed is that parents feel they are “good enough” and have met expectations, yet reunification has not occurred because the Department wants a “perfect” home for the child to be returned.
 - A delay in arrangement of services is a common theme among the callers pertaining to placement. It is often hard to distinguish if the problem is actually because of a delay on behalf of the Social Worker making a referral or because they have been placed on a wait list.
 - The Ombudsman’s staff consistently encounter a lack of understanding from the clients regarding the court process, legal terminology, the right to a trial and to present evidence, and how to oppose DCF actions via the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters.
 - Clients clearly do not understand the chain of command or accompanying decision makers in the Regional Office structure in which to express their concerns.
 - The relationship with Court appointed Attorneys and the engagement with their adult clients do not appear to be strong outside of the courtroom. This adds to the client feeling oppressed and without a voice.
 - Parents express that they are not encouraged to take an active role in their children’s lives e.g., attending their child’s medical appointments and school functions and are also not being notified timely of their injuries, hospitalizations and changes of placement.

- Parents express a frustration with not being notified of when their child has run away or has not returned to their placement as they believe they can be helpful in the process to locate them.
 - It is recognized that visits between children and their parents may need to be cancelled. Tension and frustration from parents exists, however, when they do not think the visits have been rescheduled in timely manner.
- 3) *Investigation Concerns* – An increase was also seen in the number of concerns expressed about investigations this past year. At times, not just the client but others related to the client or friends of the client will contact the Ombudsman’s Office to express their views.
- Clients indicate that they do not know the outcome of the investigation, including clarification that an “unsubstantiated” finding does not mean risk factors or concerns are not present in the home.
 - Parents who make reports are not aware if the report was non-accepted unless they contact the Careline back on their own after they see no activity has commenced.
 - Parents who report a concerning situation to the Careline do not appear to understand their rights, absent a court order, to remove a child from a situation in which they believe is harmful and wait for the Department’s intervention and guidance.
 - The Ombudsman’s Office receives a high number of requests for closed records. It is not clear that clients understand the appeals process, including their right to obtain a copy of their closed record, during our involvement.
 - Clarification is needed regarding the timeframes of when the non-offending or non-custodial parent should be interviewed during the course of the investigation. Fathers, who do not live in the home and are not the alleged perpetrator, tend to be interviewed towards the end of the investigation and are not made part of the process at an earlier stage.
 - Direction is required about what we can tell the non-offending parent regarding the allegations pertaining to their children.
 - It does not appear that clients understand the parameters of the “safety plan” and provision of services offered during this time. Additional reinforcement of this with the family might be considered.
 - Clients express that the confidentiality of the Mother’s new address and whereabouts when she has been a victim of domestic violence is not always well maintained.
- 4) *Foster Care and Adoptive Families* – A number of concerns have been expressed by foster and adoptive families. A benefit of our system, however, is that these individuals have a FASU Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager who can be of assistance to them.
- Confusion exists about the process to express a concern and whether the foster parent should discuss an issue with the child’s Social Worker or the FASU staff.
 - Families report not having a clear understanding of why they cannot be licensed or if they are licensed, why children have not been placed into their home.
 - Some attorneys representing children do not appear to have regular and meaningful visitation or communication with their client’s foster and adoptive parents.

- Foster and adoptive parents do not seem to be aware that they have the right to know of court hearings and the option to attend and to provide updates to the Court directly regarding a child in their care.
 - There exists a unique balance between confidentiality and communication surrounding the permanency plan for a child in care. The foster and adoptive parents do not report they disagree with the planning but simply want to be informed of the case direction.
 - Foster and adoptive parents report frustration at the length of time it takes Court processes to establish permanency.
 - Some foster and adoptive parent's family indicate that some DCF staff are not always cognizant of their demands and the impact on scheduling visitation.
- 5) *Voluntary Services* – Concerns expressed regarding Voluntary Services do not result in a high volume of calls to the Ombudsman's Office. When they are received, however, they are often generated by a Legislator or a parent who is a strong advocate and brings forth multiple people to support them in working with the Department.
- It is expressed by parents that confusion exists regarding how particular decisions are made to move a case from Voluntary Services to filing of Neglect Petitions.
 - Parents strongly express discontent at the Department's planning for their child as it relates to not placing them into a congregate care facility. They report staff telling them the Department "does not" place children any longer into congregate care facilities.
 - Challenges ensue when providers focus on "level of care" rather than the types of services needed. Conflict often arises when a provider recommends out of home placement for a youth, yet the Department does not believe in-home services have been fully offered or exhausted. This becomes very confusing to the family.
- 6) *Family Arrangements* – There is no category to capture the number of times a family arrangement has been discussed during an Ombudsman's inquiry. In multiple cases, however, the issue has been brought forward as it has resulted in great confusion among clients, kin and community providers.
- The threshold for taking a child into custody versus placement via a family arrangement is often unclear and confusing.
 - Family arrangements appear to be inconsistent. Sometimes, they are not in writing or with identified time frames and expectations. Families report being not clear about what they can and cannot do while children are with alternative caregivers.
 - While tangible services can be offered to the caretakers while the child is under a family arrangement there appears to be inconsistency in the approval process.
 - Family arrangements should be time limited with clear expectations, preferably in writing, to the caretakers about what they can and cannot do during this time period and in case of emergency.
 - Clarification is needed regarding the requirements for the initial assessment of a caretaker for a child under a family arrangement. During the year, situations occurred when a child was placed via a family arrangement but when the Department finally took legal custody of the child, the person with whom the child had been residing for a period of time was deemed "unlicenseable".

Best Practices

It is important to highlight a number of best practice issues that are present in the Regional Offices leading to positive resolution of Ombudsman's inquiries. Those activities include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) When the Ombudsman's Inquiry is treated as a sentinel event in the life of a case, this prompts a case conference with the Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager. It is not common that an inquiry is made and the information provided may prove important in the overall case assessment.
- 2) Documenting the outcome of the case conference and discussion about the inquiry in LINK is beneficial when reviewing case history.
- 3) It is preferred that the Social Work Supervisor or Program Manager outreach to the person who made the inquiry to confirm the Department is looking into the matter and to discuss a mutually agreed upon solution. We find that often, the caller receiving clarity that they were heard and responded to by the Regional Office calms the situation.
- 4) Conducting a large family meeting is helpful when multiple individuals have inquired about a case as a way to coordinate supports for a family.
- 5) Responses to the Office of the Ombudsman should be reviewed by a Program Manager or above prior to submission. Again, careful consideration of the reasons why an individual is making an inquiry and the problem noted can prove helpful.
- 6) The Regional Office Liaison should maintain an active list of Ombudsman's inquiries, the general themes and report them to Administration on a consistent basis. This information should be reviewed on a regular basis with Regional Management.
- 7) If a client has mentioned calling the Office of the Ombudsman or is likely to make an inquiry, it is helpful to notify our office about the potential phone call so a response can be coordinated before the inquiry is made.

Informational Calls

For Calendar Year (CY) 2014, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 1,613 informational calls on non-specific cases. The breakdown of the main reasons for the informational calls is as follows:

Reason for Call	Number of Calls
Non-Specific or Other	260
Request for Phone Number	247
Inquiry – DCF Policy/Protocols	176
Inquiry – Legal/Custody Issues	175
Referred to DCF Hotline	130
Inquiry – Substantiation/ Appeal/Central Registry	113
Referred to Another DCF Division	86
Closed Record Request	83
Inquiry Foster Care/Adoption	78
Referred to Another State Agency	64
Inquiry – Medical/Mental Health Services	59
Inquiry – Housing/Financial Assistance	52
Inquiry – Subsidy/ICPC/TOG	37

Inquiry – Education Matters	28
Wrong Number	16
Request for DCF Case Services	16
Out of State	13

It should be noted that the above inquiries are made on families with no current or past involvement with the Department. The Office of the Ombudsman also handles questions and inquiries from the general public, as a part of its function.

Statewide Systems Themes and Points of Intervention

As a result of the 1,816 total inquiries received for CY 2014, a number of cross-systems themes and points of intervention have been identified. They are as follows:

System	Presenting Problems
<i>Legal Aid</i>	A significant need exists for additional resources to assist oppressed clients especially when domestic violence is prevalent in their lives and in assisting kin providers who are not active with DCF.
<i>Department of Social Services(DSS)</i>	Kin report long wait times to talk with DSS staff and inconsistent approvals for entitlements such as Husky insurance, monthly stipends and other services.
<i>Family Court</i>	Callers indicate concerns about the family court. There appears to be confusion with respect to the reasons why and the length of time a parent is barred from having any contact with their children when they perceive there is an absence of safety concerns. Furthermore, concerns are expressed about oversight of Guardians Ad Litem.
<i>Housing</i>	There is a dramatic lack of affordable housing in Connecticut. Individuals report concerns about both locating and affording alternative places to live.

Ombudsman’s Website – Frequently Asked Questions

As a result of assessing the common themes from the CY 2014 calls and e-mails, the Ombudsman’s Office is updating their website to include Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and links to Department and community programs that can be of assistance. The proposed FAQs, accompanying response and hyperlinks are as follows:

“I am being investigated, what are my rights?” – Every year, the Department of Children and Families Careline receives approximately 100,000 phone calls pertaining to child maltreatment. We investigate over 20,000 reports of child abuse and neglect annually as a result of a community member providing us information that they believe a child is being harmed. Simply because you are being investigated, does not mean you have done anything wrong. In fact, countless individuals find our interventions very helpful and supportive to families. Below are some links to information about the investigation process that we feel are important for you to have:

- Parents Right to Know Brochure
- Family Assessment Response Brochure
- Investigations Policy
- Operational Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect
- Substantiation Appeal Policy

“What can a Father do if his children are involved with the system?” – Fathers play a valuable role in the lives of their children. It is important that they are aware of the conditions under which their children are residing and have an opportunity to support them. We ask that Fathers actively work with the DCF staff involved with their family. Since 2010, the Department has put greater emphasis on the involvement of Fathers and engaging them in our casework processes and practices. Some helpful information is below:

- Fatherhood Matters Initiative Policy

“My family member or someone I know is in DCF custody, what can I do?” – The decision to place a child into DCF custody is a very difficult one and involves the input of many individuals. Each year, the Department places over 2,000 children into state custody due to exposure to unsafe conditions. The Department moves quickly as soon as possible to return children home and reunified with their caretakers, when it can safely occur. It is important that you notify the assigned Social Worker for the children in which you are inquiring to see how you might be of support. The information below discusses some aspects of the placement process and how you might be able to be involved;

- Services to Prevent Out-Of-Home Placement and Facilitate Reunification
- Considered Removal Brochure
- Removal Policy
- Foster Care and Adoption Website
- Foster Care Myths and Misperceptions Document
- CAFAP Website
- DCF Offices

“What can I know about a family member who is involved with DCF?” – The Department is involved in the lives of thousands of families across the State of Connecticut. We understand that our Department is large and it may be difficult to understand how to find the answer to questions. Below is some information about the Department and what can be shared about a family involved with DCF:

- Confidentiality Policy
- Parents Right to Know Brochure
- Frequently Asked Questions About Child Abuse
- DCF Offices

“I am a Grandparent. What are my rights?” – Grandparents play a unique role in the lives of children and we encourage them to provide us information on their grandchildren so we can support their safety and well-being. In our work, we find that Grandparents play many supportive roles to families, which may even include caring for their grandchildren. Although the Department cannot readily disclose information we know about a family and the grandchildren, we can receive information at any time from a Grandparent. The links below identify some key information for Grandparents:

- Grandparents brochure
- Generations United Report
- Frequently Asked Questions About Child Abuse
- Confidentiality Policy
- Foster Care and Adoption Website
- Foster Care Myths and Misperceptions Document
- CAFAP Website
- DCF Offices

“How do I become a foster or adoptive parent?” – Connecticut continues to need stable, loving and nurturing homes for our children who are placed in out of home care. If you are interested in being a foster or adoptive parent, please review the following information:

- Foster Care Website
- CAFAP Website
- Foster Care and Adoption Myths and Misperceptions Document

“My worker and I don’t get along, can I have a new one?” – A mutually respectful relationship between a family member and our staff is an important component of our work. It is understood that sometimes this relationship can become strained due to the circumstances in the case. All DCF Social Workers report a Social Work Supervisor. We encourage you to contact them if problems continue to exist with the current staff with whom you are working. If the issue still cannot be resolved, we suggest you contact the Program Manager on the case or Office Director. Some useful links to information about contacting individuals in the office with whom you are working are:

- DCF Offices
- DCF Managers and Office Directors

“Where can I find help for my child who needs counseling or other mental health services?” –

The State of Connecticut funds a variety of services and programs to assist families with various behavioral health needs. The following are links to supports that might help connect you to the appropriate services for your child or family member:

- Infoline.org
- CT Behavioral Health Partnership
- Voluntary Services Policy
- Department of Developmental Services
- Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

“My family is struggling and we need some help, what do you provide?” – If your family is involved with the Department, it is best to share your needs with your DCF Social Worker so that she/he can partner with you to identify the best services available to assist your family. For families who are not DCF involved, there are other entities that may be able to connect you needed services and resources:

- Infoline.org
- Department of Social Services

“I left DCF but realize I now need help. Can I come back?” - The Department has established a Re-Entry Policy for youth, currently under age 24, who have left our care and are now in need of assistance. Please contact our Careline at 1-800-842-2288 to begin the process. Also, follow the links below in order to learn more about this program:

- Adolescent and Juvenile Services Page
- DCF Re-Entry Services Frequently Asked Questions

Ombudsman’s Office Next Steps

Data Development Agenda – The database for the Office of the Ombudsman requires revision so we can further analyze the data including the breakdown of inquiries by race of the family.

Results Based Accountability – Criteria will be formulated to determine How Much, How Well and Who is Better Off as a result of an inquiry and subsequent response.

Training and Training Plan – A training plan is being developed to standardize the manner in which calls and e-mails are responded to leading towards improved customer service techniques. The plan will include written vignettes the staff will review and discuss as a group as well as having quality assurance staff contact the Ombudsman’s Office to conduct “secret shopper” activities.

Quality Assurance Plan – A statement of Ethics/Conflict of Interest will be established for the staff. In addition, a Satisfaction Survey are being discussed for the staff and the clients with whom we come into contact.

Communication Plan – An overall plan will be put into place to promote the work of the Office of the Ombudsman and the findings in this report.

