

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN



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

June 16, 2016

Introduction

The Office of the Ombudsman addresses inquiries and complaints related to Department of Children and Families (DCF/Department) 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 outcomes 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, Facility and Central Office 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 supporting the safety and well-being of Connecticut's children, to improve effectiveness, quality, efficiency and responsiveness of DCF and connected services and supports, and to promote public confidence in the child welfare system.

Vision - Our vision is a collaborative and transparent system whereby individuals can freely express themselves about the Department's work, resulting in improvements from a case, systems, policy, and/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 35,648 unique families during the calendar year 2015. During this period of time, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 1,332 inquiries, which is a 7% increase from calendar year 2014. Inquiries were received on 1,020 unique families. A further analysis of the data shows that 161 families were responsible for 400 inquiries or 39% of the total for the year.

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

Reason for Call	Inquiries - 2015	Inquiries - 2014	Inquiries – 2013
Case Management	442	500	425
Investigation Concern	132	135	50
Case Practice	95	46	63
Placement	89	86	44
Worker Complaint	88	63	77
Abuse/Neglect	78	17	21
Visitations	50	42	31
Legal Questions/Issues	30	40	57
Payment	29	25	19
Administrative Hearing	21	10	11
Foster Care	17	17	28
Request for Documentation	17	14	42
Adoption	15	12	11
Careline	13	5	15
Court Issues	12	2	11
Substantiation Hearing	10	17	21
Mental Health	9	8	11
Custody	8	14	11
Educational	7	5	18
Policy and Procedures	4	18	32
Request for a Meeting	3	3	14

The top six reasons for calls to the Office of the Ombudsman will be explained in further detail.

The number of Case Management inquiries declined from 500 to 442 for calendar year 2015. 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. The change in inquiries volume is not viewed as significant.

Closely related is the category of Case Practice where inquiries about the manner in which our work is conducted and the messaging of Departmental practices are documented. In this category, the number of inquiries rose to 95 from 46 the previous year. Specifics surrounding the messaging of certain Departmental practices will be outlined later in this report. We will continue to look further into this data.

It should be noted that from calendar year 2014 to 2015, the number of inquiries for Investigation Concerns remained consistent. Four major dynamics were seen in the inquiries pertaining to this category.

First, as found in previous years, often when Fathers contact the Department about the manner in which the investigation was handled, the allegation tends to center around domestic violence. During the inquiry, Fathers often inquire about specifics of their case, will follow-up their concerns in writing and

expect a quick resolution leading to an end of the Department's involvement. Typically, they are also well-versed in policy and procedures, using DCF's own language to demonstrate their point and why they believe the Department is not adhering to its guidelines when involved with their family. At times, some Fathers will also advise that they want to file formal complaints with Human Resources or Affirmative Action if they believe the staff has not conducted themselves according to DCF standards. Many share their concerns to the entire chain of command in the Regional Office and the Office of the Ombudsman.

Next, we have seen a number of contacts by Mothers to the Office of the Ombudsman who make a complaint about the manner in which the investigation is being handled. It is believed that often she was told to do so by the Father who is frequently in the room during the phone call. Typically, when the Mother inquires on a domestic violence case, the progress towards case planning is dramatically insufficient to either consider having the child reunified or to close the case. This fact calls into question the motivation and influence for the call.

Kin represent a high percentage of inquiries in the Investigation Concerns category. Many kin point out misinformation that they believe the Department is being told by the parents regarding their behaviors and those of other household members. The Ombudsman's Office does try to connect these kin with the Area Offices as this contact can lead to the receipt of valuable information for the Department's assessment. The generational context for their thoughts and the first-hand knowledge of family dynamics kin possess can prove to be important information for the Department to obtain. During these interactions, staff must be mindful of confidentiality.

Last, clients are expressing an understanding of what is entailed in an Investigation versus a Family Assessment Response and question why certain activities are taking place with their family when they may appear to be inconsistent with our informational brochure or what the Social Worker may have initially stated. We have also observed instances when the non-offending parent calls and expresses concerns that the Department may not be thoroughly looking into the allegations because of the Family Assessment Response case designation.

For this same period, the number of inquiries pertaining to Placement remained consistent from 86 to 89 for the calendar years 2014 and 2015.

In this category, kin remain frequent callers and emphasize two points. While expressing their interests about a child in care and offering support during the placement process, they are also found to be vocal advocates on why a child should not be placed with a different kin member and tend to recite their past history of negative experiences with that person.

In the Placement category, an overwhelmingly high number of inquiries come from the Mothers of the children in care versus the Fathers. This could be because the Mother is actually receiving the majority of services pertaining to reunification, resulting in the Department having the most contact with her. Also, some Fathers might be more difficult to engage or may be viewed as having less resources and supports, and that might impact, to some degree, the frequency and nature of contact with Fathers.

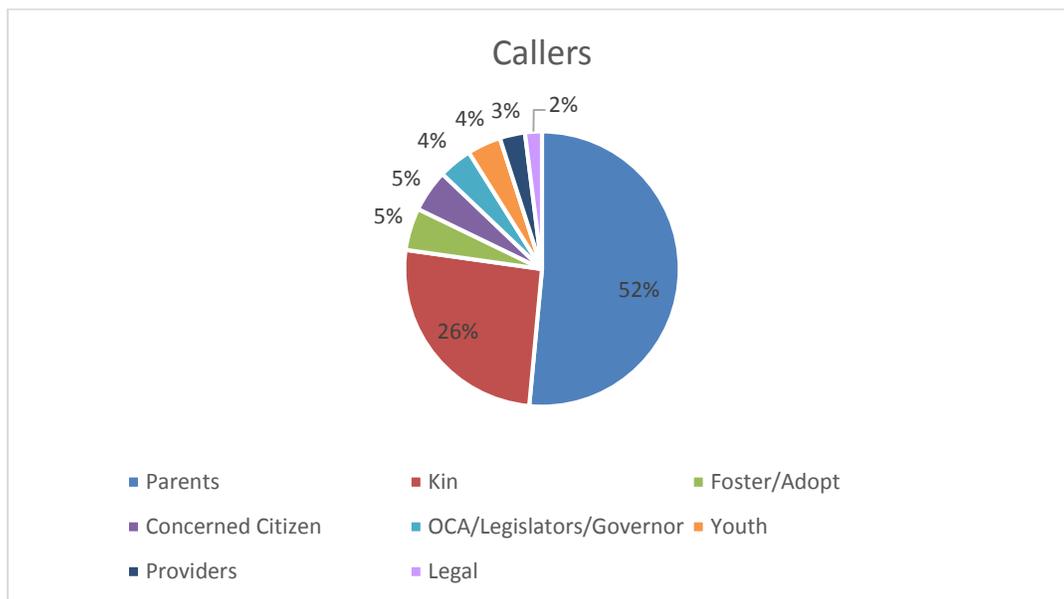
When an inquiry is made in the Worker Complaint category, it primarily centers on staff not calling the client back timely, allegations of statements being made that are insulting or negative towards the client and/or breaches of confidentiality. The context of these complaints is very important to keep in mind as

clients will express their perception of a problem, which tends to be quite different when the inquiry is fully understood after the Regional Office has provided a response. This has been especially true in some instances when the client has expressed frustration that calls have not been returned in a timely fashion, yet when fully assessed, the client only recently made the call and has unrealistic expectations regarding when they believe the return communication should have been received.

A dramatic jump was seen in the Abuse and Neglect category. The inquiries increased from 17 to 78 during calendar year 2015. In this category, clients, youth and members of the public provide information as to why they believe a child is being abused or neglected. A number of these calls results in the Ombudsman's staff connecting individuals to the Careline. Callers are also educated on the statutory definitions of child abuse and neglect and how a particular situation may be concerning, yet it does not rise to the level requiring Department involvement.

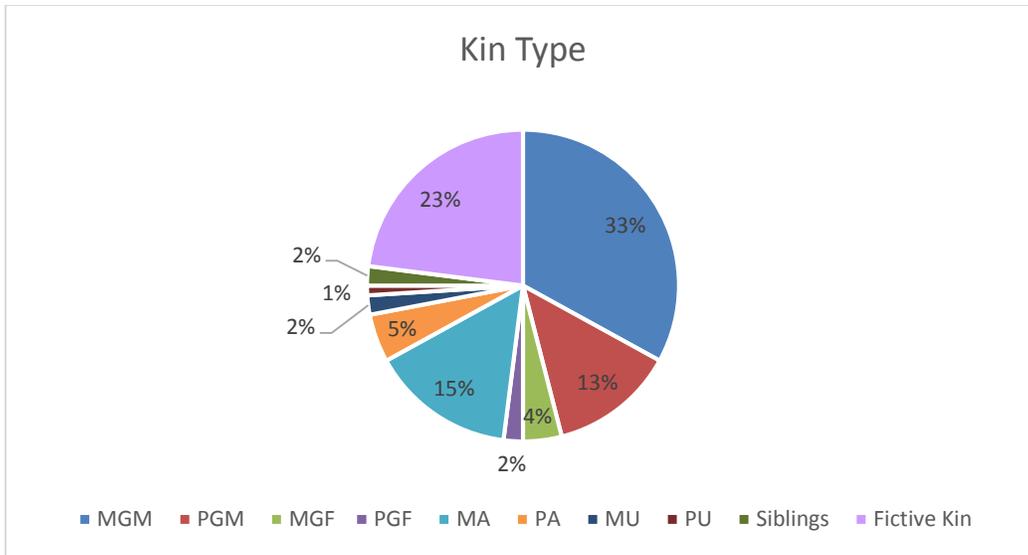
The Callers

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



Parents account for 677 or 52% of the total inquiries. When this data is further analyzed, it shows Mothers are responsible for 484 inquires or 71% of that total and Fathers are responsible for 193 or 29% of the calls to the Ombudsman's Office from a parent.

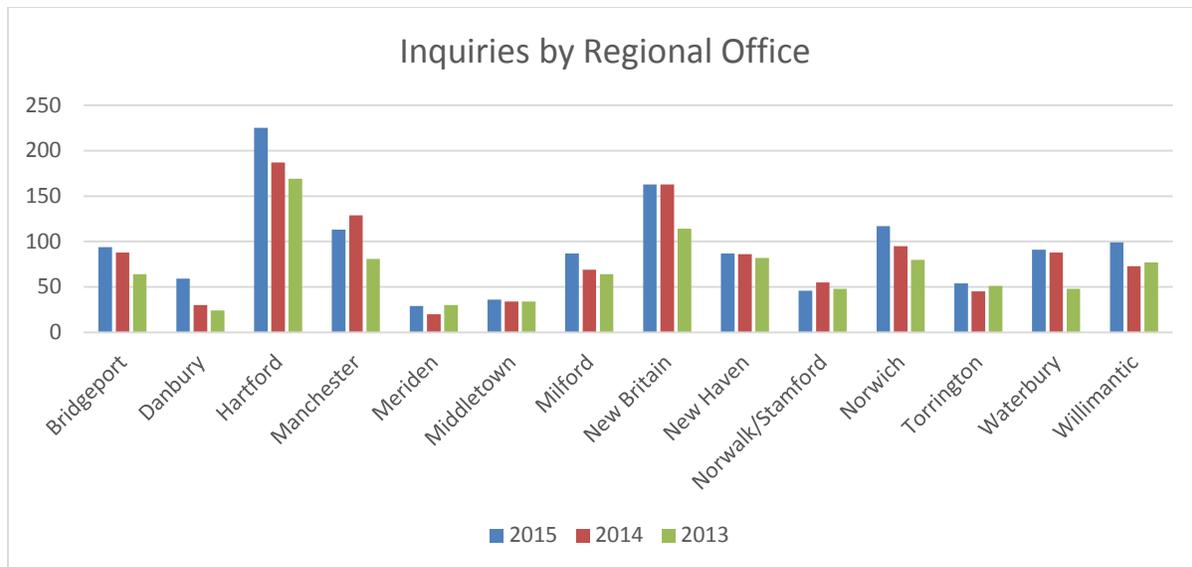
As the chart indicates, kin account for 26% of the total inquiries made to the Office of the Ombudsman. The concerns expressed by kin overlap between many areas of the Agency and are across multiple categories. Kin were often well informed about Department policies and practices, articulate scenarios of concern to them and express emotion while remaining steadfast in representing their views. The following chart illustrates the categories of kin who contacted the Office of the Ombudsman:



Looking further into the data shows that Maternal relatives account for 54% of the kinship inquiries with Fictive Kin accounting for 23%, Paternal relatives accounting for 21%, and Siblings 2% of the inquiries. Further assessment is required to determine this disparity between the inquiries received by each type of kin.

The breakdown of inquiries per Regional Office for the calendar year 2015 as compared to calendar year 2014 and 2013 is as follows:

Regional Office	Inquiries 2015	Inquiries 2014	Inquiries 2013	Assigned Workers in 2015
Hartford	225	187	169	139
New Britain	163	163	114	97
Norwich	117	95	80	88
Manchester	113	129	81	57
Willimantic	99	73	77	73
Bridgeport	94	88	64	94
Waterbury	91	88	48	105
New Haven	87	86	82	81
Milford	87	69	64	80
Danbury	59	24	24	40
Torrington	54	51	51	31
Norwalk/Stamford	46	55	48	50
Middletown	36	34	34	35
Meriden	29	20	30	40



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 the Regional Offices will now be provided the exact inquiries pertaining to each office. It is important that each Region continue to assess their own data and trends pertaining to Ombudsman’s inquiries.

Context of the Inquiries

Below is an overview of the major themes found on a statewide level. The context of the work occurring in the Department must be understood when examining these highlighted points. Factors such as higher caseloads, increased demands on staff at all levels, intensity of the activities related to engagement with families, permanency related efforts and the complexity of the trauma and maltreatment experienced by the children and families we serve all play a part in the outcomes of our work.

The Department is also being scrutinized in a variety of ways by multiple entities. During calendar year 2015, callers were found to be knowledgeable and well-versed about Departmental policies and procedures; often reciting facts about major cases, budgets and programmatic changes that were currently highlighted in the media.

Major Themes:

- 1) *Investigation Concerns* – The mix of types of individuals expressing concerns about investigations during calendar year 2015 has broaden, yet the total number of inquiries in this category has remained consistent from last year.
 - Families often believe an unsubstantiated finding means the Department has no further grounds for involvement and do not understand that even without a substantiation, risk factors or maltreatment concerns can be present in a home requiring further intervention.
 - Parents state they are unaware a report they made to the Careline was non-accepted unless they call back and inquire about the status themselves.
 - Non-offending or non- custodial parents indicate they tend to be interviewed towards the end of the investigation. This seems to be more prevalently raised by Fathers than Mothers.

- Direction is required pertaining to what we can tell the non-offending or non-custodial parent, who does not live in the home, regarding the allegations pertaining to their children. This issue becomes even more complicated if the alleged perpetrator is a household member living with the child's custodial parent.
- The timeframes, legal rights and provision of services offered during a Safety Plan can be confusing to a family. Callers would particularly express confusion about what action the Department will take if the parent violates or wants to end the Safety Plan.
- Parents may wait for the Department's intervention and guidance on how to remove a child from a harmful situation believing we are the only entity who can commence such an action.
- The comments and demands made by clients are more pointed, and increasingly cite DCF policies and procedures. Callers frequently include references to recent stories in the media about the Department

2) *Fatherhood Engagement* – Issues pertaining to the engagement of Fathers are expressed across multiple categories of inquiries.

- Fathers often needed to be informed about who to contact and the systems available for child protection when they have a concern about their child.
- Some Fathers required more prompting to better identify and express their thoughts.
- A Father's right to consistent visitation, having knowledge of their child's school events and progress, inclusion in medical and dental appointments and to all other aspects of their child's life are points which Fathers express the most frustration and misinformation provided to them.
- The rights and procedures to access the Family Court in order to gain immediate temporary custody of their child is a major issue expressed in repeated inquiries.
- Fathers interviewed towards the end of the investigation may have been delayed in safeguarding their children and providing the Department important information about family history and dynamics that impact the family.
- Fathers report inconsistent notification when the Department has made the decision to close the Mother's case or that they have had input in this process or decision.

3) *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.

- Clarification is required regarding placement of a child via a Family Arrangement versus taking a child into protective custody.
- Clarifying the assessment process to allow, where appropriate, kin with substantiations and criminal histories to care for children under Family Arrangements must occur.
- Inconsistency is reported regarding expectations during Family Arrangements. At times, written documentation is provided to the family and caretakers with identified time frames and clarification of responsibilities. In other instances, only verbal agreements are established.

- 4) *Kinship Care and Kinship Caregivers* – Kin have presented the following issues with respect to their capacity as either current caregivers, a person who wishes to be a support for children, or someone who has knowledge of a particular child’s situation.
- Kin express confusion about the full range of services or supports available to them while caring for a child under a Family Arrangement; pursuing guardianship through Probate Court; 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 as a kinship placement, which may lead to either a Subsidized Guardianship or Adoption.
 - Inconsistent practice appears to occur in some instances with respect to kinship placements. For example, the Ombudsman’s Office has encountered scenarios where placement with kin does not occur until after a substantiation is overturned or criminal history is fully assessed, but in other instances, a child is placed and then a waiver is obtained.
 - Some kin have expressed that they would like to be a visiting resource or respite provider even if they are not chosen to be the caretaker of a child.
 - Families contacted the Ombudsman’s Office to express frustration about licensed kin restricting their access to the child or only allowing it through the Department’s oversight.
 - Many kinship caregivers appear to require education and ongoing open discussion to fully understand the actions of the Department, court processes, management of the birth parent demands and other issues that accompany a kinship placement.
- 5) *Foster Care and Adoptive Families* – A number of concerns have been expressed by foster and adoptive families that are included in many categories of inquiries. A benefit of our system is that these individuals have a FASU Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager who can be of assistance to them, as well as the CAFAP liaison.
- Some licensed providers misinterpret the Department’s role which is to find families for children, and not children for families.
 - Families who expressed frustration about lack of children being placed in their homes appeared to have narrow and restrictive criteria for the children they wanted to have placed in their homes.
 - Few foster and adoptive families express an understanding that they have the right to be notified of court hearings, to attend and to provide updates to the Court directly regarding a child in their care.
 - Some adoptive parents reported frustration at the length of time it takes Court processes to establish permanency and a misunderstanding of the extent reasonable efforts must be provided to parents.
 - Clarification appears to be needed regarding what specialized services can be written into the Adoption Subsidy. This was an area of confusion for adoptive parents and some attorneys.
 - Coordination of and expectations about sibling visits was an area of confusion and concern for some foster families. It appears that clarification and guidance to foster parents about this area would be beneficial.
 - Some foster parents, including former foster parents, expressed interest in being notified if a child previously in their care re-enters care so that they might be considered as a resource.

Similarly, some adoptive parents expressed a desire to be notified if a sibling of their adopted child comes into care.

- Problematic situations have occurred when a legal risk family is told that our search for kinship resources is over yet we then later find a suitable kin as our search efforts were not discontinued or were insufficient at the time of original discussion with the family. This then leads to the child being removed and hard feelings expressed by the family towards the Department.
- In some instances, permanency of children may have been delayed while pending requests for home modifications were addressed.

6) *Children in Placement* – The number of inquiries this past year regarding placement of children remained consistent and are provided to the Ombudsman’s staff predominately by Mothers.

- Parents express that they feel they are “good enough” and have met expectations, yet reunification has not occurred because the Department wants a “perfect” home for the child prior to reunification. At times, the root of the disagreement between the Department and families often centers around the parent being “compliant” with services, yet they are not making “progress” towards changing their behaviors.
- Timely service delivery is a common theme brought forth by the callers. At times, the delay of a service being implemented is due to a wait list and in other occasions because the Social Worker has not been able to locate the correct service for a family.
- Some parents reported not being told when their child is injured, hospitalized or has a change of placement. They also feel they can be helpful when their child has run away or has not returned to their placement and wish to be notified immediately so they can commence locating them.
- The Ombudsman’s staff consistently encounter clients feeling oppressed and without a voice if their child has been removed from their care. This might suggest that the relationship and role of the Court appointed Attorneys with our client’s needs to be strengthened and broadened so parents feel they have an advocate.
- A common inquiry received is from parents who had a visit with their children cancelled and felt that it had not been rescheduled in a timely fashion.
- Some parents of children expressed concerns about the conditions they believe their child is exposed to while in placement. Some parents had difficulty distinguishing between abuse and neglect allegations versus regulatory or licensing issues, which do not result in a removal of the child.

7) *Youth Who Contact the Office of the Ombudsman* – The number of youth who contacted the Office of the Ombudsman increased for the calendar year 2015.

- Youth frequently ask about the availability of the subsidy for college if they have been adopted or if a transfer of guardianship has occurred.
- When an adoptive or transfer of guardianship placement disrupts, youth inquire to determine whether any level of financial support will be given to their self-identified caregivers.
- Some youth expressed a delay in receiving CHAPS payments, wanting a new worker or dislike of their current placement. Many of these youth did not seem to be well versed

about the chain of command in the Regional Office or the formal mechanisms available to address their issues.

8) *Complex Youth* – In multiple inquiries across different categories, concerns have been expressed about youth who exhibit high risk behaviors.

- Some parents expressed dissatisfaction with the mechanisms available to enforce control over youth who exhibit runaway or other out of control behavior, yet have not broken the law.
- Clarification is needed regarding the protocol to locate victims of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, including the request for Law Enforcement to issue a Silver Alert.
- It appears that the private provider network would benefit from continued outreach and training to further assist in their understanding of the DCF and Non-DCF funded community service array.
- Some parents reported an inconsistent response from the Department when their child is in custody and they run away or are missing. In such instances, parents may be delayed in acting as a support to assist the Department in locating the child or partnering with other community systems to coordinate a response.
- Youth adopted from other countries and who are in need of services in Connecticut often present with extremely complex and unknown trauma histories resulting in unique and intensive service provision.

9) *Voluntary Services* – Inquiries 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 multiple people to support them in working with the Department.

- For many parents, the intent for initiating the Voluntary Services request was to have their child placed in a congregate care facility. They express frustration when this does not occur and the perceived message from Department staff that we “do not place into congregate care” any longer.
- When a provider recommends out of home placement for a youth, yet the Department does not believe a provision of in-home services has been fully offered or exhausted, this becomes very confusing to the family.
- Some parents expressed that they do not agree with their child being placed into a Therapeutic Foster Home while involved in Voluntary Services.

10) *Worker Complaints* – Below is a list of themes for common complaints made against workers:

- Workers arriving late or who are a no-show to the visit, and not contacting the client prior to the time the activity was to occur.
- Lack of promptness in calling back clients.
- Staff appearing to be distracted or disinterested when interacting with clients (e.g., texting or checking emails, etc.)
- A worker having personal information, non-case related, about a family and not disclosing that to their supervisor. Callers have expressed that working with staff under such circumstances is uncomfortable for them.

11) *Staff Safety* – Important themes were seen pertaining to the safety of our staff :

- Some clients exhibiting intense behaviors and statements that border on threats. One such call did result in the arrest of a client.
- Callers disclose knowing personal information about staff, often gained from social networking sites such as Facebook.

Messaging of Key Department Practices

The following are quotes frequently shared by callers to the Office of the Ombudsman. While it's difficult to truly contextualize some of these remarks, it would appear important for the Department to be aware of some of the sentiments that callers are suggesting staff are imparting.

<i>"Previous unsubs don't matter"</i>	<i>"Kinship at all costs"</i>	<i>"We don't place in congregate care"</i>
<i>"I need to meet with you prior to 45 days being up"</i>	<i>"It's just a FAR"</i>	<i>"Nothing I can do"</i>
<i>"Just a custody case"</i>	<i>"Need to meet my benchmark"</i>	<i>"We don't place children"</i>

Dynamics of the Callers

There are particular calls that present complex challenges to both engage the caller and resolve their presented issue. Some are as follows:

- 1) Parents who were involved with our agency as a child tend to present as very emotional and highly anxious when making an inquiry. The current Department involvement may be more difficult for them emotionally given their previous experiences, especially if they were placed into care.
- 2) Non-custodial parents who have challenging relationships with their ex-partner. They often continue to call, make allegations, and attempt to influence the case decisions in their favor.
- 3) Foster parents, especially pre-adoptive parents, suggesting an inadequacy in provided services or the perceived inappropriateness of a proposed subsidy agreement. Such cases may have other underlying issues (e.g., familial discord, fear or possible ambivalence towards becoming a permanent resource).
- 4) An older sibling, who has left the family due to previous abuse and neglect, expressing concerns about the siblings who remain in the home. These callers will speak of the conditions to which they were exposed and express concern that the cycle is repeating itself.
- 5) Most grandparents are genuinely concerned about their grandchildren. Many have difficulty fully understanding the limits of both confidentiality and the Department's obligations to remain involved with families.

A number of best practice issues are present in the Regional Offices. These aid with achieving positive resolution of Ombudsman’s inquiries. Those activities include, but are not limited to the following:

- 1) Regions viewing an inquiry to the Ombudsman’s Office as a sentinel event in the life of a case and recognizing the value an inquiry, and the problem noted, may have to the case assessment.
- 2) When a Social Work Supervisor or Program Manager outreaches to the person who made the inquiry to confirm the Department is looking into the matter and to discuss a mutually agreed upon solution, this often helps the caller to feel they were heard and aids in calming the situation.
- 3) Conducting a large family meeting when multiple individuals have inquired about a case. This further allows the family to feel heard and assists with better coordinating supports for a family.
- 4) Regions connecting with the Ombudsman’s Office in advance of a likely call/inquiry have allowed for smoother and more timely complaint resolution.

Informational Calls

For Calendar Year (CY) 2015, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 868 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	169
Request for Phone Number	125
Inquiry – Legal/Custody Issues	110
Inquiry – DCF Policy/Procedures	105
Referred to DCF Hotline	93
Inquiry – Substantiation/ Appeal/Central Registry	48
Referred to Another State Agency	44
Inquiry – Housing/Financial Assistance	32
Inquiry Foster Care/Adoption	32
Referred to Another DCF Division	31
Inquiry – Medical/Mental Health Services	25
Closed Record Request	19
Out of State	10
Inquiry – Subsidy/ICPC/TOG	7
Inquiry – Education Matters	7
Request for DCF Case Services	7
Wrong Number	4

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

Statewide Systems Themes and Points of Intervention

As a result of the 2,200 total inquiries received for CY 2015, a number of cross-systems themes and points of intervention have been identified. They are as follows:

System	Presenting Problems
<i>Legal Aid</i>	Clients expressing need for additional resources especially when domestic violence is present in their lives, and for kin providers who are not active with the Department and need assistance with family matters.
<i>Grandparent Visitation</i>	If specific criteria is achieved, grandparents do have the right to pursue a court order and compel the parent to cooperate with visitation. This process is confusing and typically the caller does not have the financial resources to hire an Attorney or to advocate for themselves.
<i>Housing</i>	Locating and affording appropriate housing in Connecticut is an identified problem. The office receives many calls from families who are not involved with DCF requesting assistance. Also, callers seek for the Department to provide a security deposit and first month's rent for active clients under certain circumstances.
<i>Family Court</i>	Callers indicate concerns about the Family Court, often perceiving a lack of urgency in which the court responds to complaints about non-compliance with visitation and other court orders. Some callers suggest that parents have been barred from having any contact with their children despite an absence of safety concerns.
<i>Community Case Management Services</i>	Families not involved with the Department have indicated difficulty locating agencies that can provide them solely case management services versus having it through/with other coupled interventions such as counseling.