

2013 – Office of the Ombudsman Inquiries

Introduction

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

The Ombudsman shall utilize a neutral and collaborative process, by which to facilitate fair and equitable resolutions to concerns that are reported, and will attempt to facilitate resolutions as amicably as possible.

As required, the Office of the Ombudsman, in collaboration with Regional and Facility staff, shall consult and problem-solve case-related and systemic issues in order to assist and support DCF staff and management with service provision.

Statistics

For the calendar year 2013, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 1,265 inquiries on specific cases. The breakdown of the main reasons for the inquiries is as follows;

Reason for Call	Number of Inquiries
Case Management	425
Worker Complaint	77
General Inquiry	70
Case Practice	63
Legal Questions/Issues	57
Investigation Concern	50
Placement	44
Request for Documentation	42
Policy and Procedures	32
Visitations	31
Foster Care	28
Substantiation Hearing	21
Abuse/Neglect	21
Payment	19
Educational	18
Medical	16
Hotline Concern	15
Request for a Meeting	14
Administrative Hearing	11
Adoption	11
Mental Health	11
Court Issues	11
Custody	11

For the calendar year 2013, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 2,048 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	472
Request for Phone Number	290
Referred to Another DCF Division	234
Inquiry – Legal/Custody Issues	154
Inquiry – DCF Policy/Protocols	153
Closed Record Request	124
Inquiry – Substantiation/ Appeal/Central Registry	113
Referred to DCF Hotline	106
Inquiry Foster Care/Adoption	84
Referred to Another State Agency	79
Inquiry – Housing/Financial Assistance	55
Inquiry – Subsidy/ICPC/TOG	49
Inquiry – Medical/Mental Health Services	37
Out of State	27
Wrong Number	26
Inquiry – Education Matters	24
Request for DCF Case Services	21

The breakdown of inquiries per Regional Office for the calendar year 2013 is as follows:

Regional Office	Total Inquiries
Hartford	169
New Britain	114
New Haven	82
Manchester	81
Norwich	80
Willimantic	77
Bridgeport	64
Milford	64
Torrington	51
Waterbury	48
Middletown	34
Stamford	31
Meriden	30
Danbury	24
Norwalk	17

Major Themes for the Department of Children and Families

- 1) Kinship Care and Kinship Caregivers
 - The threshold for deciding on a family arrangement versus taking a child into DCF custody
 - Honoring confidentiality when kin contact the Department with concerns
 - Timeliness of assessing kin as placement resources
 - Inconsistency of licensing a family with a CPS or Criminal history
 - Kin questioning the permanency plan of the youth in their care and the timeframes for achievement
 - Family arrangements and the clarity of the planning including timeframes for completion, expectation of all parties, and services offered while children are with alternative caregivers
 - Conflict of approving a caretaker to care for children under a safety plan yet they are then not approved for full licensure later in the case when the Department moves for custody
 - Relatives calling to be a resource for the child and not understanding why they are not chosen especially if they are deemed “unlicensable”
 - How to file a Motion to Intervene
 - Relative who was licensed and now has guardianship or adopted their kin and another child comes into care but they are not considered or notified of the additional child needing care
- 2) Child in Placement Phenomena
 - When is the parent “good enough” and has met expectations, yet reunification has not occurred
 - Delay in arrangement of services
 - Lack of understanding of the court process, right to a trial and how to oppose DCF actions
 - Inadequate relationship with Court appointed Attorneys
 - “Normalizing” of the placements with phone calls, visitation in non-DCF offices, allowing others to support the child while in placement
- 3) Investigations
 - Clients need to know, verbally and in writing, the outcome of the investigation
 - Standard of proof for a substantiation as it relates to a parent versus a professional
 - How to direct a client who believes an intentionally false report was made against them
 - True confidentiality of an “anonymous” reporter
 - Parameters of the “safety plan” and provision of services offered during this time
 - Remaining objective during custody battles when parents call on each other
 - Explaining the appeals process
- 4) Permanency and Legal Risk Placements
 - Prior to the placement, clarifying verbally and in writing, the legal process and risks involved in accepting a child under these legal auspices
 - Clarification of a “resource family” versus a “legal risk family?”
 - Family has the adopted siblings of a new child coming into care but were not consulted about their availability to provide a home for this additional child
- 5) Fathers
 - Inclusion in the casework planning process
 - Higher standard in order to be allowed to care for their children than mothers
 - More scrutiny regarding CPS and criminal histories than necessary

- 6) Foster Care and Adoptive Families
 - Clarification on why they are deemed “unlicensable”
 - Delay in being provided services immediately after placement due to approval chain
 - Consistency in offering kinship providers tangible and concrete supports
 - Lack of reliable and meaningful visitation or communication from child’s Attorney with the foster and adoptive parents
 - Right to know of court hearings and the option to attend and provide updates to the Court directly
 - Communication surrounding the permanency plan balanced with confidentiality
 - Allowing foster and adoptive parents to supervise sibling visits
 - Court processes taking too long to establish permanency
 - Factoring in the foster and adoptive parent’s schedules when we arrange for visitation
 - Birth parents not allowing foster parents visitation or phone contact after the child is reunified
- 7) Adolescents
 - Actions that can be taken between the 800 form being issued and while the request for a hearing is being scheduled
 - Clarify Post-Secondary Educational Funding policy
 - Speed of re-entry availability and the process
- 8) Custodial Calls
 - Maintaining objectivity when frequent reports are made against one another
 - Concerns expressed about condition of their child with whom they do not have access
 - Parameters of confidentiality
 - Education surrounding the role each parent plays in their child’s life especially involvement in school, custody, visitation, specialized services etc..
- 9) Voluntary Services –
 - The timeframe from call to the Careline and actual service beginning in the home
 - Decision to move from a Voluntary case to filing of Neglect Petitions
 - Communication surrounding the move of a child and the next placement option
 - Concern of parent that the child needs a higher level of care than the Department is willing to offer
 - Process to locate a congregate care provider

Special Focus – The Chronic Callers

- Ability to calm them down and validate their feelings while assessing the true reason for calling
- Understanding their emotion and giving them a "voice"
- Maintaining objectivity thru the crisis
- Connection to Court appointed Attorneys and bringing them into the resolution process
- We are effective by staying firm and using different words with the same message
- Face to face meetings in the office with Ombudsman presence works
- Understanding how mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse have impacted their ability to understand and comprehend the Department's interventions.

Major Systems Themes and Points of Intervention

Juvenile Court – Greater accountability is needed for Court appointed Attorneys to play an active role with their clients especially children. They also need to be brought into the Ombudsman’s process in more pronounced fashion.

Legal Aid – A significant need exists for additional resources to assist oppressed clients especially when domestic violence is prevalent in the case and in assisting kin providers who are not active with DCF.

Kinship Support – The systems of support for non-DCF involved kin should be explored with resources readily known and found in one place for Department staff. Work needs to occur with the Department of Social Services to streamline the application process for benefits and answer questions from kin.

Family Court – Emphasis needs to be placed on child development and both the reasons why and the length of time a parent is barred from having any contact with their children in the absence of safety concerns.

Housing – There is a dramatic lack of affordable housing in Connecticut.

Community Providers – Providers need to understand the chain of command at the Department and how to effectively utilize it without fear of retaliation. A greater awareness also needs to be established of the clinical support available in the Regional Offices and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to our decision making.

Next Steps for the Office of the Ombudsman

Topic	Activity
Website	Creation of a website complete with a Mission Statement, Statement of Ethical Standards, and links to informational material consistent with the themes stated above
Policy	Re-writing and updating of the Ombudsman's policy
Training	Development of a training manual and actual training activities
Database	Enhancement of the Ombudsman's database to reflect more specific data and outcomes

