DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT of

REGIONAL and AREA OFFICE INQUIRIES

September 2017

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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 Office of the Ombudsman (Office) is housed within the Office of the Commissioner for the Department of Children and Families and serves many functions. The staff directly handle inquiries made to the DCF Commissioner from clients, youth, providers and concerned citizens as well as from the Governor's Office, federal, and state legislators, local officials, the Office of the Child Advocate and many other entities.

The Director of the Office also handles grievances filed by youth at Connecticut Juvenile Training School.

Last, the Director of the Office conducts Special Qualitative Reviews on cases regarding a child fatality, near fatality or other significant events that occur regarding a child/family currently working with the Department or whom had recent involvement.

Processes

The Ombudsman staff utilizes an objective, impartial, and collaborative process to facilitate fair and appropriate outcomes to concerns that are reported, and attempts to facilitate resolutions as amicably as possible.

As required, the Office, 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
- *Actively listen* to the concerns expressed
- *Assess* concerns

- *Answer* questions
- *Provide* information about departmental policy and procedures
- *Search* for a resolution of disputes
- *Promote* the client's voice
- *Mediate* and act as a liaison between all involved parties
- *Arrange* case conferences when necessary
- *Collaborate* with community providers
- *Educate* the community
- *Resolve* the presenting problem

Where Information is Located about the Office of the Ombudsman

Information pertaining to the role the Ombudsman plays within the Department and how to contact the Office can be found in multiple areas on the DCF website, and in written documents provided to all families as follows:

1) In the *Parent's Rights to Know Brochure*, information pertaining to the Office of the Ombudsman and the role the Office plays within the Department is documented including DCF phone numbers. This brochure is provided to all families upon initial visit by Department staff. That brochure can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/policy/pdf/PRTK_English_2013.pdf

2) On the DCF website under the "About DCF" heading, the *Complaints (Ombudsman)* link appears and when clicked, it takes you to the Ombudsman's brochure and our Annual Reports. Also under the "About DCF" heading, you will see *Ombudsman (Client/Family complaints related to casework*) link. Again, by accessing it, you are taken to the Ombudsman's brochure and our Annual Reports. That link can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2534&Q=532140

3) On the DCF website under the "Contact Us" heading, the *DCF Ombudsman's Office (Complaints Department)* is listed with our phone numbers. That link can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2534&Q=563562.

4) On the DCF website under the "For Families" heading on the left under the Commissioner's picture, the *Complaints (Ombudsman Office)* and the *Ombudsman – Complaints* heading can be clicked and it takes you to the Ombudsman's brochure and our Annual Reports. That link can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=4106&Q=447056&dcfNav=|

5) By simply typing in "complaints" on the DCF website's search engine, the link takes you to the Ombudsman's brochure which also can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/ombudsman/pdf/ombudsman_Brochure.pdf.

6) All of our Annual Reports can be accessed via the *DCF Data Connect* link found on the front right of our website along with all of our reports. The Ombudsman's reports are found under the *Alphabetical Listing* of reports link within that greater site. That link can be accessed here: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=4799&Q=573072.

Further, DCF's Regional Offices and Facilities actively discuss with their clients/residents the role of the Office of the Ombudsman within the Agency as a resources if there are disagreements or disputes that cannot be resolved.

The Ombudsman's role has also been noted in media stories throughout the year with respect to specific cases served by the Department. In addition, the Office's staff have been featured each month on a Connecticut radio show. This has been an opportunity to share with the public the availability and role of the Office and inform listeners as to the Department's inquiry and intervention processes.

The Director of the Office stays in regular communication with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to discuss case specific concerns, as well as Agency policy and practice. The OCA also copies the Director on all inquiries made to the DCF Regional Offices and Facilities. Families and professionals, when thought to be the best course of action, are also actively and directly referred to the Office of the Ombudsman by the OCA.

Data

During Calendar Year (CY) 2016, the Department served 36,248 families, which includes 5,834 children who spent any amount of time in placement during that time period. Of the families served, 12,265 were new to the system. The Office received 1,358 inquires, which is consistent with the number received during CY 2015. Over 75% of the inquiries received in CY 2016, represented unique families. Data analysis reveals that 174 families were responsible for 33% of the CY 2016 inquires.

It should be noted that the Department received an inquiry from only approximately 3% of the families who came to our attention.

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

Reason for Call	Inquiries - 2016	Inquiries - 2015	Inquiries - 2014	Inquiries – 2013
Case Management	257	442	500	425
Investigation Concern	205	132	135	50
Informational/General	167	23	12	70
Abuse/Neglect	127	78	17	21
Licensing Issue	78	14	13	4
Placement	69	89	86	44
Worker Complaint	64	88	63	77
Visitations	62	50	42	31
Case Practice	43	95	46	63
Payment	36	29	25	19
Legal Questions/Issues	31	30	40	57
Request for Documentation	25	17	13	42
Request for DCF Services	21	24	28	7
Adoption	18	15	12	11

Problems Obtaining Resources	15	15	15	10
Reunification	15	6	12	8
Administrative Hearing	13	21	10	11
Careline Concern	12	13	5	15
Foster Care	11	17	17	28
Custody	11	8	14	11
Removal	9	2	6	3
Voluntary Services Problem	9	14	6	8
Substantiation Hearing	6	10	17	21
Educational	5	7	5	18
Request for Voluntary Services	3	0	0	0
Court Issues	2	12	2	11
TPC/ACR Issue	2	1	0	0
Mental Health	1	9	8	11
TPR	1	0	1	1
Independent Living	1	0	1	3
Problem with Service Provider	1	6	4	2
Policy and Procedures	1	4	18	32

The top five reasons for calls to the Office of the Ombudsman and the nature of the inquiries will be explained in further detail in the paragraphs below:

Case Management

This category includes a wide variety of topics such as concerns expressed about decision making during the case planning process, how referrals to services are made including the timeliness of interventions, why cases remain open, direction of court proceedings, etc... The number of inquiries for case management declined by nearly 50% from CY 2015 to CY 2016. This decrease may likely be due to more pin-pointed data collection, whereby the Ombudsman's staff have better refined the specific concern rather than lumping it generically into "case management."

During the year, some clients expressed frustration believing their case should be closed due to, for example, their current engagement of required services (e.g., clinical). The Office does share that this decision is balanced with whether through use of the services progress to address the identified issues has been made versus simply complying with interventions. Nevertheless, the Ombudsman's staff does work with the Regions to ensure that the client's concern is heard.

Court involvement is another tough issue for families. Often, they seek guidance from the Ombudsman's staff on how to interpret the legal jargon utilized and/or to express a poor relationship with their court appointed attorneys.

Timeliness of DCF making referrals for services and the availability of needed programs for families are both other frequent areas of inquiry. Families indicate that they feel delays exist in staff connecting them to required interventions, which they believe prolongs their involvement with the Department. In discussing these concerns with staff, they indicate that they work timely and diligently to connect families and youth to the services best matched to their often very complex needs, particularly in their communities.

Investigation Concerns

The number of inquiries for Investigation Concerns increased from 132 to 205 between 2015 and 2016. Of interest is that almost all the inquiries in this category were made by either parents or kin. Fathers made the most inquiries about investigation concerns versus all other categories.

Families sometimes expressed frustration that the Department is investigating their family and wanted a clear explanation of what to expect during the process. They often believed a malicious report was made against them or that the Agency is making unreasonable demands in order for the case to close. On a number of occasions, families have provided a large number of documents as a means to try to refute the findings made against them.

Fathers who make inquiries in this category are often 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. 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.

Mothers who contact the Office often inquire about the length of time the Agency will be involved, if other individuals in their lives will be notified and question why the non-custodial fathers must be contacted.

Kin are often a valuable resource to social workers as the first-hand knowledge of family dynamics they possess can prove to be important information for the Department. Kin can sometimes clarify misinformation that they believe the Department is being told by the parents regarding their behaviors and those of other household members. While staff have to be mindful of confidentiality, when kin outreach to provide information, it is important that staff talk with them to receive what they may offer.

Informational/General Inquiry

During the CY 2016, the Office of the Ombudsman handled 167 case specific inquiries that were determined to be "informational" in nature. Generally, these inquiries pertained to matters such as: looking for a particular staff member, the correct division within the Agency to handle a matter, or how to obtain copies of their records.

The typical inquiry in this category is from a parent who recently had a social worker visit their home and they cannot remember the individual's name and number, or a parent attempting to access the chain of command in an office and would like information on who to contact, including their phone numbers or e-mail address.

Abuse/Neglect

An increase was seen again regarding inquiries in the Abuse and Neglect category. These were calls and emails made to the Ombudsman's Office to report suspected abuse and neglect. The inquiries in this category increased over the past three years from 17 to 78 in CY 2015, to now 127 during CY 2016.

It is believed, in part, that the annual increases in this category are a result of media attention about the Department, which triggers or prompts individuals to recognize an issue present in a family they know and make a call to the Department. Other factors may also be the significant training the Department has made available for mandated reporters and changes over the past couple of years regarding Connecticut's mandated reporter laws (expansion of who is a mandated reporter and increases in penalties for failure to report.

A number of these calls and e-mails results in the Ombudsman's staff connecting the individuals to the DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Careline. Callers are also educated on the statutory definitions of child abuse and neglect and how a particular situation may be concerning, yet it may not rise to the level requiring Department involvement. When the Ombudsman's staff educate the individual who contacted the office, this person can then go back and find out additional information resulting in a report being made at a later time if warranted.

Kin and non-custodial parents more frequently make inquiries in this category. They hear information, may not have access to the children in question and are seeking guidance on how to intervene. All information received on an open case is forwarded to the Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager assigned to the case regardless of whether a belief that child maltreatment has occurred.

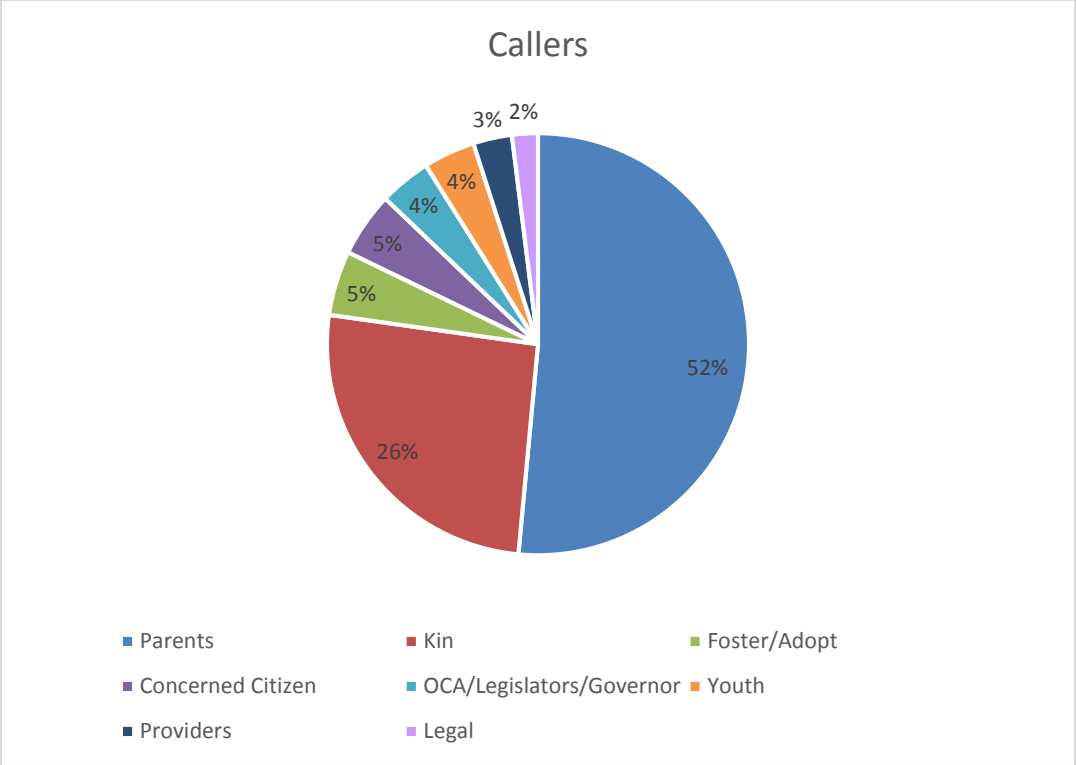
Licensing Issues

During CY2016, the Ombudsman's office received 78 inquiries pertaining to foster care licensing. The issues expressed are typically straightforward. Kin may contact the office to gain a greater understanding of what they can do to address a past criminal history or substantiated case of abuse and neglect that is preventing them being approved for placement.

Non-kin attempting to become foster parents sometimes expressed concerns about timeliness of licensure, parameters of the Department's expectations surrounding the conditions of their home, family background, and issues pertaining to their character that they think may impact the licensing decision, including information received from background checks.

The Callers

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

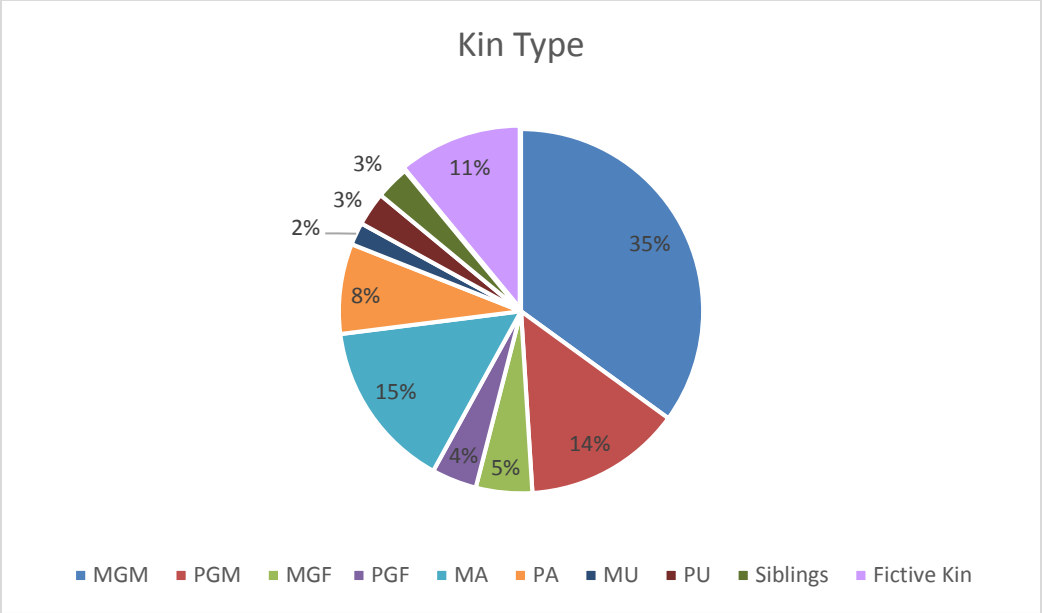


Parents account for 711 or 52% of the total inquiries. When this data pertaining to individuals identified as "Parents" is further analyzed, it shows Mothers represent 484 (68%) of the inquiries and Fathers represent 227 (32%) of the calls... Inquiries from Fathers are up 3% from 2015.

As the chart indicates, kin account for 26% of the total inquiries made to the Office of the Ombudsman, which is the same percentage as 2015. The concerns expressed by kin overlap many areas of the Agency and are across multiple categories. Kin were often well informed about Department policies and practices and articulate particular scenarios of concern. While kin tended, as might be expected, to express more emotion when presenting their concerns, they were usually steadfast in representing their views.

During CY 2016, an increase was seen in the number of individuals making inquiries to multiple places at the same time, such as the Office of the Ombudsman, Governor's Office and Legislators. These inquiries required coordination to ensure all entities had the same information and that there was clear communication.

The following chart illustrates the categories of kin who contacted the Office of the Ombudsman:



Looking further into the data, Maternal relatives account for 57% of the kinship inquiries, which is up from 54% in 2015. A decrease was seen in inquiries from Fictive Kin, moving from 11% of the inquiries in 2015 to now only 3%.Paternal relatives now account for 29% of the inquiries, which is up from 21% in 2015. Siblings made 3% of the inquiries, up from 2% in 2015. Further assessment is required to determine this disparity between the inquiries received by each type of kin.

Comparing Calendar Year 2015 and Calendar Year 2016 Data

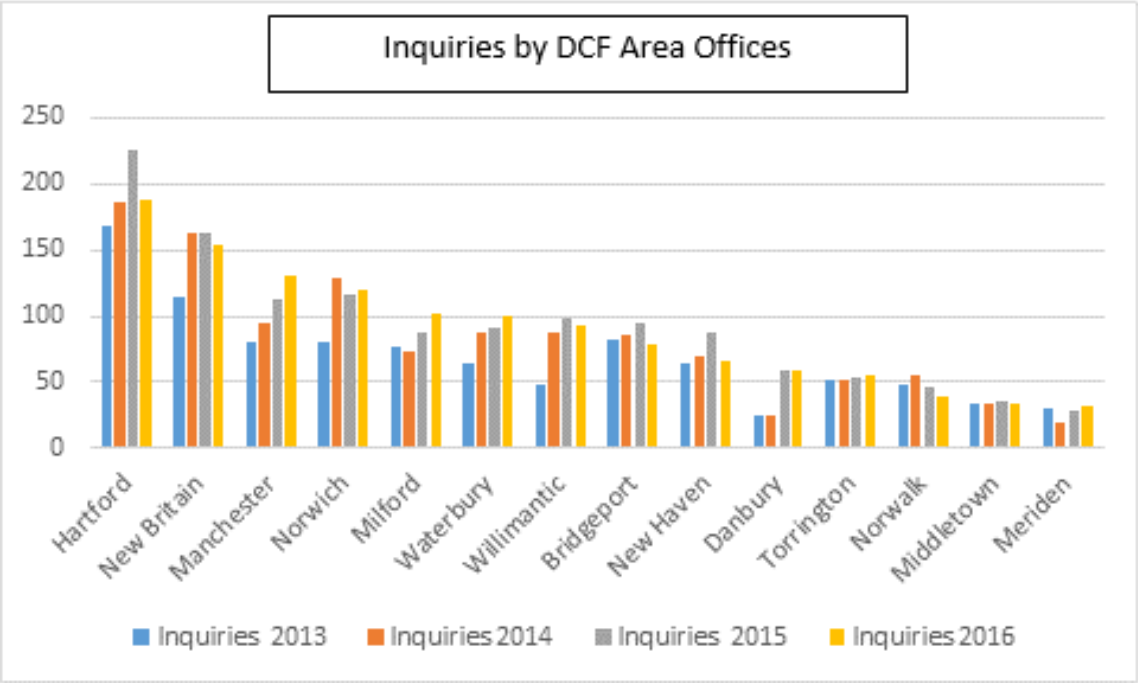
The following chart presents the inquiries, per Regional Office, for CYs 2015 and 2016. Also noted are the number of unique family inquiries versus the total number of inquiries received for 2016. It is important to keep in mind that some families may contact the Ombudsman's Office multiple times, concerning a variety of topics. Statewide, 76% of inquiries are received pertain to a unique family.

Furthermore, the chart allows comparisons to be made per Office when taking into account inquiries as compared to total cases and youth in placement served in 2016.

Discussions will occur on a Statewide, Regional and Office specific level about the trends seen in inquiries compared to the data across all inquiry categories. From that, additional interventions may occur which impact engagement with families, the case planning process and other topics as a result of what was gained from this analysis.

The breakdown of inquiries per Regional Office for the calendar year 2016 as compared to calendar year 2015 is as follows:

Regional Office	Total Inquiries 2015	Total Inquiries 2016	Unique Family Inquiries 2016	Percentage of Unique Families Inquiries	Total Unique DCF Cases 2016	Percentage of Unique Inquiries in Relation to Total Unique Cases	Total Unique DCF Youth in Placement S2016	Assigned Workers in 2016
Hartford	225	188	148	79%	4,190	.035	719	133
New Britain	163	153	116	76%	3,716	.031	510	110
Manchester	113	131	99	74%	3,364	.029	427	94
Norwich	117	119	91	75%	3,154	.029	616	92
Milford	87	101	79	78%	3,017	.026	360	87
Waterbury	91	100	80	80%	3,184	.025	675	129
Willimantic	99	93	81	87%	2,001	.040	422	63
Bridgeport	94	78	64	82%	3,402	.018	447	84
New Haven	87	66	58	89%	2,905	.019	391	88
Danbury	59	59	31	53%	1,470	.021	270	46
Torrington	54	55	36	65%	1,214	.029	190	31
Norwalk	46	39	31	82%	2,278	.013	240	57
Middletown	36	34	29	83%	1,319	.021	154	32
Meriden	29	32	27	84%	1,419	.019	217	40



Each Regional Office has a liaison to the Office of the Ombudsman who coordinates responses upon receipt of the initial inquiry. On an annual basis, the Regional Offices are provided the exact inquiries pertaining to each office. This supports the Region's access to catchment level information and data that can aid them with assessing specific areas of practice and interest.

Context of the Inquiries

Major themes as found on a statewide level are highlighted below. It is important to ensure the context of the work occurring in the Department is understood when reviewing these points. The outcomes of the Department's work are all impacted by factors such as the complexity of children's and families' needs, including the impacts of intergenerational trauma; internal and external budgetary and staffing pressures; higher DCF caseloads, increased demands on staff at all levels, media coverage, time and increased efforts to better ensure family (including fatherhood) engagement; and the impacts of environmental and societal factors such as the opioid crisis.

Further, an inquiry to the Office of the Ombudsman should not automatically be viewed as negative. Often, contact is initiated after staff have had difficult conversations with their clients about the nature of maltreatment a child has suffered, clarifying the next steps in case planning or permanency related actions which need to occur. Some clients simply seek an individual outside of the Regional Office to confirm the information they were told.

The Department is also scrutinized in a variety of ways, both publicly and privately by multiple entities. As stated previously, callers were found to be knowledgeable and well-versed about DCF policies and procedures; often reciting facts about major cases, budgets and programmatic changes that were currently highlighted in the media.

Major Themes:

1) *Investigations of Families* – Of interest is that almost all the inquiries on investigations were made by either the parents or kin. Fathers made the most inquiries pertaining to investigations as compared to all other categories. The nature of some of the investigation related inquires is as follows:
   - Parents state they are not aware a report they made to the Careline was non-accepted until they re-contacted the Careline themselves to clarify the status.
   - Kin offering information about the nature of maltreatment or adamantly deny children were harmed. This may include making multiple calls to express their views and/or why they believe the Department has erred in its decision making.
   - Parents expressed confusion when their child was viewed as unsafe with them, yet the non-custodial parent, who was not the perpetrator for this specific incident but has a CPS or Criminal history with other children from prior relationships, comes forward to be a resource and is allowed to take the child.
   - Families wish to provide a written statement to be included in the record when they do not believe the Investigator properly documented the facts of their interview.
   - A victim of intimate partner violence expressed concern that her significant other was substantiated and has moved out of the house, yet the case is remaining open in her name.
   - In domestic violence cases, women frequently express concerns Department staff are being influenced by the batterer's coercive pattern of control.
   - Non-offending or non-custodial parent, who do not live in the home, expresses concern they are not aware of the full allegations pertaining to their children in a timely manner.
   - Families indicating confusion regarding the difference between an Investigation versus a Family Assessment Response.
   - The timeframes, legal rights and expectations within a Safety Plan can sometimes be confusing to a family. Callers particularly would ask what action the Department will take if the parent violates or wants to end the Safety Plan.
   - Some Parents fear they could be violating a court order if their child, who is the subject of an allegation, is ordered to have visitation with the alleged perpetrator yet the Parent denies the visit. They also believe the Department may be contributing to the breach of a Family Court order if DCF encourages the visits to stop during the investigation process.
   - Some Individuals who have been substantiated against expressed dissatisfaction with the Investigator when a discussion about the nature of the Department's findings, including how to appeal the substantiation, was not reviewed with them prior to formal notice being given.

2) *Children in Placement* – The concerns about placement of children encompass many categories of inquiries and are provided to the Ombudsman's staff predominately by Mothers. Some are below:
   - At times, the root of a disagreement between the Department and families often centers on the parent believing they are "compliant" with services, yet the Department does not have information they are making "progress" towards changing their behaviors. This then leads to a delay in reunification.

- Callers express delays in services being implemented due to wait lists, or because the Social Worker had not been able to locate the correct services for a family.
- Clients indicate feeling overwhelmed with services especially when they perceive the Department increasing or adding on expectations after prior progress has been made.
- Parents 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 intervene. They also report delays in being notified when their child is injured, hospitalized or has a change of placement.
- Clients expressing that the relationship and role of their Court appointed Attorneys needs to be strengthened and broadened so parents and youth feel they have an advocate.
- Parents expressing disappointment when a visit with their children has been cancelled due to another case related emergency, illness or unavailability of staff to transport the children and/or supervise the visit, and makeup visits have not been rescheduled in a timely fashion.
- Parents can express disagreement when the Department has a viable kinship resource for their child, which may delay the placement process.
- Parents indicate they want their child removed from their current placement due to concerns about the conditions under which they are living. Some parents had difficulty distinguishing between abuse and neglect allegations versus regulatory or licensing issues.
- Kin often contact the Department with intentions of visiting a child in care yet given the caseload demands of the staff and time constraints, arranging additional visits may not be possible.

3) *Fatherhood Engagement* – Issues pertaining to the engagement of Fathers are expressed across multiple categories of inquiries. Inquiries from Fathers increased 3% from CY 2015 and Paternal relative inquiries increased 8% from the same period. This would seem to illustrate the Department's continued commitment to actively involving Fathers and Paternal relatives in the case planning and decision making process.
   - During an inquiry, it can take a lengthy period of time to clarify for Fathers who to contact and the systems available for child protection, when they have a concern about their child.
   - Fathers express the most frustration and in turn misinformation as it relates to their rights to being actively involved in their children's lives. Topics such as consistent visitation, having knowledge of their child's school events and progress, inclusion in medical and dental appointments are points they noted.
   - Fathers who made inquiries often perceived the Department as providing inconsistent services to them versus the array of supports provided to Mothers.
   - Talking to a Social Work Supervisor or Manager most often benefits a Father who is dissatisfied the with Department's policies and procedures.
   - Some Fathers who have been interviewed towards the end of an investigation state they are delayed in safeguarding their children and providing the Department important information about family history and dynamics that impact the family.
   - Fathers report inconsistencies both in notification when the Department has made the decision to close the Mother's case and in providing input into this process or decision.

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:
   - 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.
   - Confidentiality can be a confusing topic for kin given their interests in protecting children and knowing specific information about a family with whom the Department is currently interacting.
   - Kin expressed confusion or not being informed 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.
   - Kin providing care to a child sometimes expressed concerns that another kin called their character into question
   - Kin not chosen or able to be the caretakers of the child would indicate a desire to be a visiting resource or respite provider. This also included assisting with visitation between the parents.
   - Families indicating that licensed kin were restricting their access to the child or only allowing visitation through the Department's oversight.
   - Conflicts between kin were seen when one side of the family disallowed the other side to visit the child in their home when the child was in Departmental custody, or after permanency had been established.

5) *Foster Care and Adoptive Families* – A number of concerns have been expressed by foster and adoptive families and are included in many categories of inquiries. A benefit of the Department's system is that these individuals have a FASU Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor and Program Manager, and a CAFAP liaison who can be of assistance to them. Additional supports are also available if they are a Therapeutic Foster Family:
   - There were instances where a Therapeutic foster parents did not agree with a children being removed from their home, yet their TFC agency was not an active support or a part of the conflict resolution process they were having with the Department.
   - At times, communication did not occur during or following a placement disruption, sometimes resulting in disagreements about the removal.
   - Foster and adoptive families express not being notified of court hearings, having the ability to contact the child's court appointed Attorney and to attend and to provide updates to the Court directly regarding a child in their care.
   - Skilled and experienced foster parents have inquired as they are concerned their views regarding case planning and the services needed for a child are interpreted as them being controlling and crossing licensing boundaries.
   - A confusing message was provided to a family who at one point was determined to be appropriate to care for a child under a family arrangement, yet when they were

approached to become licensed for that same child, barriers were identified and the child faced removal due to licensing problems.
- Parents licensed for "legal risk" placements verbalize difficulty in fully understanding or accepting that reunification efforts must continue for the child in their care until the court determines otherwise.
- Foster families, who have previously cared for a child, express they would like to be considered a placement option again for that child if they must re-enter care regardless of whether their license is still active with the Department. They express the same thought if they are currently caring for a child and that child's siblings need to come into care.

6) *Youth Who Contact the Office of the Ombudsman* – A total of 15 youth contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for the CY 2016.
   - Multiple youth outreached with the intention of speaking directly to the Commissioner.
   - Youth inquired as to whether any level of financial support will be given to them or their self-identified caregivers if an adoptive or transfer of guardianship placement disrupts.
   - Youth inquired about how to re-enter the DCF system and the timeframes for the process.

7) *Youth* with Complex Behavioral Health Need*s* – It should be noted that currently very few calls are directed towards the Ombudsman's Office specifically in regards to accessing Voluntary Services or concerns pertaining to Voluntary Services case related decisions. Inquiries, across a variety of categories, generally concerning youth with complex behavioral health needs, however, continue to be received:
   - Some parents indicated that they do not agree with their child being placed into a Therapeutic Foster Home while involved in Voluntary Services as they believe their child requires a higher level of care.
   - Families do not understand how the Department came to the decision to file Uncared For with Specialized Needs petitions if they initiated services for their child.
   - Providers and families expressed confusion when a provider recommends out of home placement for a youth, yet the Department has determined that a provision of in-home services has not been fully offered or exhausted, and thinks at that given juncture those options are appropriate for the child.
   - If youth have not broken the law, some parents express dissatisfaction with the mechanisms available to enforce control over youth who exhibit runaway or other at-risk behaviors.
   - Delays in availability of community bases services specific to their child's needs remains a point of frustration for families.

8) *Permanency* - Below are some areas related to permanency in which inquiries were received:
   - A common call is from a mother who is approaching a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) trial and is asking what else she can do in order to be reunified.
   - Inquiries from adoptive parents about the timeliness and arrangements for their adoption subsidy. In some instances, permanency of children may have been delayed while pending requests for home modifications were addressed.

- An increase was seen in mothers whose rights have been terminated requesting to get back in touch with their children or to provide them letters when they reach the age of majority.
- Some adoptive parents report frustration at the length of time it takes Court processes to establish permanency and a misunderstanding about the extent reasonable efforts must be provided to parents.
- Adoptive parents expressing a desire to be notified if a sibling of their adopted child comes into care.

Inquiry Dynamics

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

1) Cognitive challenges exhibited by an inquirer can complicate the resolution process.
2) Callers under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time they make the inquiry can be difficult to understand and sometimes impact the ability to comprehend their concerns.
3) This year, one youth actually expressed suicidal thoughts during an inquiry and staff successfully had her remain on the line until 911 was contacted and the authorities arrived. She was subsequently connected to mental health services and remains at home with her family.
4) Parents, who were involved with DCF as a child, sometimes present as very emotional and anxious when making an inquiry. They express distrust with the system and tend to be very guarded with information.
5) On four occasions, kin whose adult child or sibling was murdered or died unexpectedly sought help from the office with placement and caring for the surviving child(ren).
6) Non-custodial parents, who have challenging relationships with their ex-partner, often continue to call, make allegations, and sometimes appear to be attempting to influence case decisions in their favor.
7) Grandparents are typically genuinely concerned about their grandchildren, yet sometimes have difficulty fully understanding the limits of both confidentiality and barriers to licensure when have had a prior Child Protection Services (CPS) or Criminal history.
8) Men who demonstrate extreme patterns of coercive control tend not to have their issues with the Department resolved quickly or to their satisfaction.
9) Clients who call close to when a Termination of Parental Rights hearing is scheduled to begin often cannot have their issues resolved prior to court, which can deepen their feelings of frustration.
10) Families seeking help from the Department, but who do not have an open case and or a circumstance that is within DCF's mandates, are often disappointed when they are referred to the community network of supports or other state agencies.

Engagement with Youth and Families

The Department will continue to empower families and youth to openly express their views about the relationship that exists between them and their workers, and their interactions with rest of the agency. Congruent with the Office of the Ombudsman's mission and vision for its work, open leading towards successful outcomes.

Over the course of the year, many factors such as race, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, generational issues and socioeconomic status all impacted DCF's work with families and youth. At times, families requested a Social Worker of a particular race or ethnicity while expressing their uncomfortable feelings towards working with currently assigned staff. Female victims of trauma sometimes expressed that working with a male staff member could be difficult given their prior abusive treatment by a former partner. Parents articulated thoughts that given their current socioeconomic status, judgements were made against them by DCF personnel who they believed came from a background of advantage.

Throughout the year, information was provided to the Office of the Ombudsman regarding actions, inactions or statements made by Department personnel that negatively impacted engagement with youth and families. Families and youth indicated that positive engagement with them might be enhanced by the following:

- Clients would like to be contacted as soon as possible if a Social Worker is going to be late to an appointment or if a visit needs to be cancelled.
- Clients felt staff should not text or e-mail while meeting with them as it appears that the worker is distracted or disinterested.
- Callers have expressed that working with staff who may have personal, non-case related information about them, is uncomfortable for them and that they would prefer to have a different worker under such circumstances. (For example, a staff member sharing a common friend with the client or having a prior relationship with one of their family members).
- Clients report calling their former staff members for advice, a referral for service or to disclose other information which may result in a new report of abuse or neglect being made. When these calls are not returned, clients state they feel desperate and that no one is listening to them.
- Youth and families access social media to gain information on Department staff members. Families state that they become more resistant and untrusting of staff when they read negative or sarcastic comments are made pertaining to clients on these sites.
- Families remain concerned about confidentiality as they have a heightened awareness of where and to whom their case related documents and information is sent. They indicate what relieves this stress an active discussion with staff about their specific issues and a reinforcement that our confidentiality practices are being followed.
- Clients, especially those in crisis, report the language and messaging staff utilize can be confusing yet indicate staff who repeat the message using different words while demonstrating patience are most helpful.

Messaging of Key Department Practices

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

"I cannot talk to you without a release"	*"He cannot go back to CJTS"*	*"We don't' pay for those things due to the budget"*
"My boss said I need to…"	*"I disagree with CPS that the child should be removed"*	*"You are just like your sister"*
"Just a custody case"	*"Call my supervisor"*	*"Unsubstantiations don't matter"*
"FASU said no"	*"Call the Careline"*	*"I am set up for failure"*

Best Practices Associated with Inquires

A number of best practices occurring in the Regional Offices has been identified associated to an Office of the Ombudsman inquiry. These aid with achieving positive resolution of inquiries and can support improvements in the associated areas. 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 their importance, and acting upon accordingly (e.g., impact on 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 timelier complaint resolution.
5) Documenting a managerial note in LINK upon review and response to an Ombudsman's inquiry.

Inquiries received from the Office of the Child Advocate and Legislators require further assessment.

Office of the Child Advocate Inquiries

Since July 2016, the Director of the Office of the Ombudsman has been copied on all inquiries received by the Regional Offices from the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA). During 2016, the Director of the Office of the Ombudsman became directly involved in 15 cases referred by the OCA. In general, the Office of the Ombudsman works to ensure that a quick and thorough response to the OCA occurs. Further, the Office seeks to support a collaborative relationship, including convening conference calls or

face to face meetings between the OCA and the Regional Offices to better resolve these often most complicated manners. In assessing inquiries coming from the Child Advocate's Office the following was observed and noted:

- Very few inquiries made to the OCA overlap with the same family who had contacted the Office of the Ombudsman.
- The OCA has the authority to maintain the confidentiality of the caller. At times, those who make inquiries may be concerned about retaliation if they express their concerns to the Department.
- Community professionals appear to contact the OCA, while family members tend to contact the Department.
- The Information received by the OCA at times is different or more than that which the Department may have at the time.
- OCA inquiries tend to focus on youth with complex, multi-systems involvement, or young children viewed as vulnerable who are in high risk situations.

Legislative Inquiries

A total of 35 legislative inquiries were made during CY 2016. A brief summary of the actual cases is as follows:

Regional Office	Presenting Issue
Region 2 - Milford	Mother's Attorney wrote a letter to her legislator expressing displeasure the Department recommended to the Juvenile Court that the Judge vest the Order of Temporary Custody to the father. This man was not the perpetrator in the incidents of abuse or neglect and was determined to be stable, supportive of the children, and able to protect them.
Region 2 - Milford	Maternal Grandmother contacted her legislator expressing grave concerns for the safety of her grandchild. The child's parents have a relationship that includes domestic violence. The Agency made extensive efforts to provide services to the family, including gaining Protective Supervision in the court and supporting the mother in gaining a Temporary Restraining Order against the father. The child was deemed safe. The Father was eventually arrested and placed in jail.
Region 2 - Milford	Parents contacted their legislator upset that a day-care teacher roughly handled their child and no report was made to the Department. The Department investigated the matter jointly with the Office of Early Childhood. Although a substantiation did not occur, concerns were noted about the facility and shared with the Office of Early Childhood.
Region 3 - Middletown	A legislator was advised by numerous parents of the inappropriate actions of a teacher at a private school in the area. Allegations were also made that the school did not report concerns timely. The Department investigated the allegations and substantiated abuse. Mandated reporter training was provided to school personnel.
Region 3 - Norwich	A foster family outreached to their legislator as they are caring for a set of twins who spent time with a respite family during the summer. The respite family wished to adopt them and this family was advocating for the placement to occur. The Department identified another family in the best interest of the children based upon a variety of factors, including another pending adoption in the respite home

Region 3 – Norwich	Paternal Grandmother expressed safety concerns to her legislator about the child's mother. The Department did investigate the case. Family Court gained the father full custody and mother was granted supervised visits.
Region 3 – Norwich	A legislator saw Facebook postings from an individual in the community expressing concerns about the Department's lack of response to a Careline call he made. The individual was contacted and he provided pertinent and actionable child abuse and neglect information. The Department investigated the matter and provided appropriate services.
Region 3 – Norwich	The mother on an open investigation contacted her legislator with questions about DCF's investigation process and why the Department did not substantiate physical abuse against the father. After a full investigation, the facts warranted substantiation against the mother, with the father obtaining full custody of the children after an extensive evaluation in Family Court.
Region 3 – Norwich	A client who had her rights terminated over three years ago contacted her legislator to determine if any other course of action could be taken for her to be reunified with her child. This client was contacted and it was explained that the appeal process has expired and she was referred back to her Attorney for additional questions.
Region 3 – Norwich	Kinship foster parents were threatened by the birth father of the child they were licensed to care for and asked for advice of their legislator. The Department convened a number of meetings with the family in order to safety plan for both themselves and the child. Father's actions subsequently resulted in an arrest and incarceration
Region 3 – Norwich	A legislator was contacted by a father who believed the department was discriminating against him and that DCF's false allegations lead to his arrest. This individual was substantiated for sexually abusing his daughter, he threatened his wife and was arrested for these acts. The individual also demonstrated concerning behaviors and statements in the presence of Agency staff prompting security measures to be put into place when he came to the office.
Region 3 – Norwich	The mother on an open protective services case contacted her legislator concerned that the Department was going to file for a Termination of Parental Rights. The facts of the case supported that this was the appropriate course of action.
Region 3 – Norwich	The legislator was contacted after the Department commenced an investigation on a family due to the father being accused of cultivating a sexual relationship with a minor aged girl in another state via the Internet. The wife did not understand why the Connecticut State Police and our Department would be investigating, yet did cooperate. Safety measures were put into place for her children.
Region 3 – Willimantic	A legislator contacted the Ombudsman's Office after a maternal great grandmother questioned why she would have to close her daycare in order to be licensed to care for a relative. The child in question had specialized needs and, per the OEC, the proposed kin provider had minor violations in her daycare. Her family situation was viewed as becoming too overwhelming if dual licensure was allowed.
Region 3 - Willimantic	Maternal Grandmother contacted her legislator upset that she was not considered a placement resource for her grandchildren. Upon review, this individual had significant involvement with the Department, including substantiations and was not deemed eligible to be licensed. She was offered visitation with her grandchildren.
Region 3 – Willimantic	A legislator contacted the Department after a conversation with a paternal grandfather who wished to be licensed to care for his granddaughter. The department is not moving forward with the

	placement as this individual and his wife do not believe the serious allegations against his son, refute the findings of medical experts, and are not viewed as able to provide a safe environment for the child.
Region 4 – Hartford	A potential foster family contacted their legislator as they were told their past history with the department disqualified them from being licensed. The Regional Office re-assessed the family and realized they had a previous unsubstantiated case after their child died of SIDS. It was determined that this incident did not preclude them from being licensed; the family was subsequently allowed to move forward with licensure.
Region 5 - Danbury	The legislator was contacted by the family as their infant suffered unexplained fractures and both children in the home were placed into foster care. Although the family disputed that they abused the child, per medical professionals the infant had non-accidental injuries, and thus the situation was determined to be unsafe. On a second occasion, an inquiry was received about the licensing of a paternal aunt who came to re-locate and become licensed. The department was very flexible in their licensing standards to support a kin placement.
Region 5 – Danbury	A legislator was contacted by a mother who has her son in foster care. This mother continues to contact multiple individuals to express her beliefs reunification should occur. The matter is before the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. Legal counsel has been provided to the mother.
Region 5 – Danbury	A mother outreached to a legislator believing weekly phone calls were not going to occur with her son who is in foster care. The mother had been quite difficult to reach and when she did return the social worker's calls, the phone calls proceeded as planned as there was no intention of them not proceeding.
Region 5 – Danbury	A legislator contacted the Department as he was receiving messages believed to be from a foster child who indicated they were in despair and wanted to return to their mother's care. Upon investigation, the texts were actually coming from the mother who had already outreached to a couple of different legislators pleading her case to have her son returned.
Region 5 – Danbury	The same mother who previously outreached to this same legislator on two occasions and a different legislator forwarded the same request to a third legislator in an attempt to have her case looked into and gain support for reunification. The case remains active in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters and the mother has a court appointed attorney.
Region 5 – Danbury	The legislator was contacted by an out of state relative who expressed concerns of abuse and neglect regarding another relative. This is an open case, the Department is closely monitoring the family and the information provided by the relative was made a part of the overall and ongoing assessment of safety and risk to this child.
Region 5 - Torrington	Mother inquired about the long drive her daughter has each day from her foster home back to her school of origin. It was deemed in the child's best interests not to be removed from her school given the supports they provide her and she wishes to remain in their program through the end of the school year.
Region 5 – Torrington	A family member outreached to their legislator expressing concerns that the Department allowed another family member to remain caring for a child despite his substance abuse and violent tendencies. The family dynamics contain much discord. The child was assessed to be safe and appropriate services were implemented for the caregivers.

Region 5 – Waterbury	The legislator was contacted by a maternal grandmother who believed her granddaughter was residing in an unsafe condition. The Department maintained an active investigation into the allegations and they were found to be unsubstantiated.
Region 6 – Meriden	A mother contacted her legislator who believed due to a conflict with the school, she was inappropriately reported for child abuse and neglect. This is an open case with the Department and the concerns in the family are so significant that the Department filed neglect petitions in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters seeking the court's oversight.
Region 6 – Meriden	A legislator contacted the Department on behalf of a mother who believed she was going to be homeless and had a son on the autism spectrum. The mother had not been fully cooperative with interventions made by the Department, but the family did receive help once they made themselves more available to Department personnel.
Region 6 - New Britain	Mother contacted the legislature to complain about the Department and the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. Mother has a chronic history with DCF. She was recently deemed incompetent and ordered into inpatient care. She is not capable of providing care to her children.
Region 6 – New Britain	A legislator inquired about a Safe Haven baby placed into a legal risk home. The Agency had genetic tests done on the child and found a match to another child currently in care and awaiting to be adopted by another family. The Department believed it was in both children's best interests to be placed together given they were siblings.
Region 6 – New Britain	A grandmother contacted her legislator wanting to visit her grandchild who was placed into an adoptive home. This grandmother could not be licensed but was allowed to see her grandson. Given the child was going to be adopted, it was important for the grandmother and foster parent to develop a relationship so visits can continue after the adoption was finalized.
Region 6 – New Britain	A mother who has a son placed at in a congregate care setting via the Voluntary Services program questioned why we would move him to a therapeutic foster home instead of a group home. Upon assessment, the child did not need that level of care, yet could not return home due to the risks he posed to his younger siblings.
Region 6 – New Britain	The legislator asked for a meeting to discuss a case whereby the Department removed one child due to serious unexplained injuries yet when the same mother had another child, she was allowed to care for that baby. A full explanation of the Department's actions was provided and it highlighted the unique differences surrounding both circumstances of each individual child and the point in time at which the mother gave birth and her current circumstances.
Region 6 – New Britain	The legislator requested a meeting to discuss the complaints received from a family who had two girls removed. The meeting occurred and it was explained that due to the extreme violence the father showed towards both girls, they were fearful of returning home and per court order, would remain in foster care.
Region 6 – New Britain	The legislator's office was seeking information on how to instruct a client to request their closed records. That information was provided.

Informational Calls

For CY 2016, the Office received 625 informational calls on. The breakdown of the main reasons for the informational calls is as follows:

Reason for Call	Number of Calls
Non-Specific or Other	119
Request for Phone Number	130
Inquiry – Legal/Custody Issues	46
Inquiry – DCF Policy/Procedures	57
Referred to DCF Hotline	60
Inquiry – Substantiation/ Appeal/Central Registry	58
Referred to Another State Agency	57
Inquiry – Housing/Financial Assistance	10
Inquiry Foster Care/Adoption	9
Referred to Another DCF Division	24
Inquiry – Medical/Mental Health Services	2
Closed Record Request	36
Out of State	2
Inquiry – Subsidy/ICPC/TOG	11
Inquiry – Education Matters	1
Request for DCF Case Services	3
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 almost 2,000 total inquiries received for CY 2016, a number of cross-systems themes and points of intervention have been identified. They are as follows:

System	Presenting Problems
Request for Services	The Department is increasingly being contacted by individuals who are seeking immediate housing as they are legally homeless, are without a source of income; and the shelter system is overloaded with no beds available. These requests also include a desire for the Department to provide a down payment for housing.

Legal Representation	Individuals not involved with the Department express a need for legal assistance with family matters. This includes custody issues, grandparents desiring to compel the court to allow visitation, and housing matters. When a client files for Reinstatement of Guardianship, they are not afforded a court appointed Attorney like they were when the case was active originally with the Department.
Family Court	Multiple callers continues to express concerns about the Family Court. Callers indicate parents are not allowed to communicate at all with their children and view the court as having a lack of urgency in responding to court motions and matters pertaining to non-compliance with visitation.
Children with Behavioral Health Needs	Increasing demands are seen from families in need of individualized services for their child. The behavioral health system often refers the family to the Department, yet services via medical insurance or community programming is available.
Youth Demonstrating At-Risk Behavior	Parents continue to contact the Department with grave concerns for their child who exhibits at-risk type behaviors such as not attending school, disobeying curfew or having been arrested for minor offenses. The caregivers are not of the belief the system has adequate accountability for these youth and they continue to get into more trouble.

Lessons Learned

Throughout all of the inquiries received in the Office of the Ombudsman, some basic lessons can be learned from the voice of youth, clients, foster parents and others who express their views. They are as follows:

- Families are eager to have their calls returned and contact should be made within a reasonable timeframe to acknowledge the call was received even if the full extent of the problem has not been resolved.
- Even if a release of information is not present, staff can speak to kin or concerned citizens who are advocating for a client as the Department can receive information at any time.
- Youth in care would benefit from clarity in understanding the chain of command in the Regional Offices or the formal mechanisms to address issues. Some youth expressed a delay in receiving CHAPS payments, wanting a new worker or dislike of their current placement, yet they had not requested to speak to anyone, including their Attorney, about these issues other than their assigned Social Worker.

- Reports of inconsistent response by the Department when a 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.
- The actions of the Department, court processes, attention to birth parent demands, visitations, legal timeframes and other issues that accompany a kinship placement are ones kin express confusion about and require ongoing education and support.
- Disagreements pertaining to post- secondary education planning do occur with youth. When fully assessed, the Department was found to be supportive of the youth yet not the exact program the youth is currently seeking.
- Conflicts between foster parents caring for siblings have resulted in those youth only visiting each other upon the efforts of the Department. When permanency is established, it is believed barriers will again exist for visitation to continue. This is also seen in kinship placements.
- Department staff who discuss placing a child permanently with a family, without the decision being approved via the Permanency Planning Team process, act too quickly in taking the steps towards finalizing a placement for a child.