

Office of the Child Advocate Office of Governmental Accountability

At a Glance

SARAH EAGAN, *Child Advocate*

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Established - 1995

Statutory authority - C.G.S. § 46a-13K, et seq.

Central office - 18-20 Trinity Street, Hartford, CT 06105

Number of employees - 7

Recurring operating expenses - \$649,545

Effective 7/1/2016, the administrative functions of the remaining divisions of the Office of Governmental Accountability were transitioned from the former OGA Office of the Executive Administrator to the Department of Administrative Services SmART unit. Designated as a division of the OGA, the OCA maintains its independence and statutory authority/responsibilities. In February 2017, the OCA moved from 999 Asylum Avenue to 18-20 Trinity Street, Hartford.

Mission

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) speaks for Connecticut's children. The OCA was created in 1995 to be an independent voice for children rather than an administrator of programs. OCA's mission is to oversee the care and protection of Connecticut's children and to advocate for their well-being. OCA is committed to ensuring that all children receive the care and supports that they need.

Statutory Responsibility

The statutory responsibilities include: evaluating the procedures for and the delivery of state-funded services to children, investigating inquiries or complaints about services for children, recommending changes in state policy, conducting programs of public education, legislative advocacy and proposing systemic reform, reviewing conditions and procedures of all public and private facilities where children are placed, providing training and technical assistance to children's attorneys, initiating or intervening in court cases on behalf of children, serving on the Child Fatality Review Panel and conducting a fatality review on the circumstances of the death of a child due to unexpected or unexplained causes in order to facilitate development of prevention strategies to address identified trends and patterns of risk and to improve coordination of services for children and families in the state.

Public Service

OCA continues to shine the light on the needs and circumstances of children in Connecticut, and works to bring about necessary change for children and families. OCA helps children/youth, families, community members, health, human service and education professionals and others by educating and informing them about available services and supports, reviewing individual cases, advocating for children at risk and addressing public policy issues impacting the well-being of children. Specific reviews and investigations assist the OCA in identifying systemic issues and such investigations often shape OCA's public policy and legislative advocacy. OCA shares its public investigative reports, public health alerts, issue briefs and other relevant educational information through a listserv as well as the OCA website (www.ct.gov/oca/).

Achievements/Improvements 2016-2017

OMBUDSMAN ACTIVITIES

Through our ombudsman activities, OCA responded to approximately 500 citizen concerns about the provision of state funded services to children. Approximately 40% of these calls resulted in the need for OCA to open an investigation and/or conduct direct advocacy on behalf of a child. Frequent issues reviewed by the OCA this year include: concerns regarding children in the child protection system; children with complex mental health needs in need of access to specialized services; access to appropriate special education services for children; families of children with autism and frequently co-occurring complex mental health diagnoses who lack access to critical treatment and support services; and concerns about children who are bullied or inappropriately disciplined in schools.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

- OCA continues to examine the state's continuum of services for children with complex developmental disabilities and advocate for needed systems development and enhancement. This work includes examination of both access to and quality of special education services, critically needed home and community services and intensive treatment programs. OCA is an active participant on the Developmental Disabilities working group established through P.A. 16-142.
- OCA continues its collaboration with the CT Interagency Restraint and Seclusion Prevention Initiative, and in September 2016 was a co-sponsor of the fourth statewide educational forum held at Southern Connecticut State University. The forum, featuring national experts, provided approximately 350 participants with information to assist in the continued work focused on prevention of restraint and seclusion of children and adults across all human service settings.
- In October of 2016, the OCA published an investigative report detailing educational service delivery for preschool age children with disabilities entering New Britain public schools. In its investigation, the OCA identified an alarming number of children with significant developmental delays who received services inconsistent with best practices or state guidelines. The report contained a number of strategies and recommendations to ensure that the District improve IDEA Compliance and educational services delivery for children entering from birth to three or otherwise in need of special education services. Following the investigation but prior to issuance of the OCA's report, the District took steps to address the issues identified by the OCA.

CHILD FATALITY PREVENTION

- OCA continues to co-chair the state Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), meeting monthly with a multi- disciplinary panel to review unexpected and unexplained deaths of CT's children and develop strategies for fatality prevention. During calendar year 2016, OCA/CFRP reviewed the deaths of 145 children (81 natural deaths) and unintentional and intentional injuries accounted for 64 deaths (30 accidents, 19 Undetermined, 8 Suicides, and 7 Homicides).
- In December 2016, OCA, in consultation with the CFRP, issued a five year report (2011-2015) which outlined aggregate data and provided analysis of child death trends during that timeframe. The report also provided a series of recommendations to support and enhance child death prevention efforts in our state as well summary data of 15 years of child death review in Connecticut.
- In May 2017, the OCA and CFRP issued a public health alert regarding safe use of diphenhydramine (aka Benadryl) in children, in response to several highly publicized deaths of young children who died from diphenhydramine toxicity.
- In addition to its investigatory work and publications, OCA actively participates on several committees, taskforces, and working groups, local and national, focused on prevention efforts for child at risk of intentional and unintentional injuries/fatalities.

FACILITY OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATION

- OCA continues to assess and monitor conditions of confinement and treatment for children and youth in the state's juvenile/youth correctional and adult correctional facilities, as well as the state hospitals, for the purpose of supporting and guiding practice reform.
- OCA continues as an active member of the legislative Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Council (JJPOC) and has assisted the work of the Council by providing several reports on the conditions of confinement for youth in juvenile and adult correctional facilities.
- OCA staff advocate for the needs of specific youth with complex needs served in state funded/operated facilities as well as systemic practice change.

OTHER

- In September 2016, the OCA, in partnership with the Center for Children's Advocacy, produced an issue brief focused on prevention of school suspension of young children.
- In October 2016, the OCA published an investigative report detailing the circumstances leading to the critical injuries and near-death of one-year-old Dylan C. from child abuse and neglect while in the care of the Department of Children and Families in 2015. The report makes recommendations for change to ensure that no child completely dependent on the state for his or her care will languish in similar deprivation or experience such abuse. OCA assisted with the development of P.A. 17-92 which codifies several of the recommendations from OCA's report.
- In February 2017, the OCA published an investigatory report concerning compliance of Hartford Public Schools ("HPS") with state laws regarding mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect. The investigation identified deficiencies in HPS's mandated reporting policies, procedures and practices. The report contained a number of strategies and recommendations to ensure that HPS was adequately protecting children from potential abuse/neglect, many of which have begun to be implemented by HPS.

- OCA meets regularly with policy-makers, human service professionals and law makers regarding strategies to improve access to critical support services for children and their families. OCA participates in numerous state taskforces and working groups for the purpose of advocating for system reform to better meet the needs of children who have disabilities, are in need of mental health care or special education services, are at risk of committing suicide or exposed to domestic violence, reside in out-of-home care or facilities, and many other circumstances in which their needs may not be optimally met.
- OCA submitted legislative testimony on numerous matters during the 2017 session, providing legislators with expertise, experience and recommendations regarding diverse matters affecting children, including: reducing restraint and seclusion, preventing child fatalities, improving outcomes for the juvenile justice system, and increasing access to health services for children.