

Office of the Child Advocate

Office of Governmental Accountability

At a Glance

SARAH EAGAN, *Child Advocate*

Mickey Kramer, *Associate Child Advocate*

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: \$724,793 (OCA/CHILD FATALITY)

Effective 7/1/2016, the administrative functions of the divisions of the Office of Governmental Accountability were transitioned to the Department of Administrative Services SMART unit. Designated as a division of the OGA, the OCA maintains its independence and statutory authority/responsibilities.

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 Responsibilities

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 (CFRP) 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 for Fiscal year 2018-2019

Ombudsman Activities

Consistent with previous years, for the time period July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2019, the OCA responded to approximately 500 inquiries regarding the provision of state and state-funded services to children. The OCA receives questions, concerns, and complaints from parents and other family members, providers of health/mental health services, educators, foster parents, attorneys, legislators, and employees of state agencies, and often from youth who are in need of services. OCA ombudsman activity regularly informs our systemic reviews/investigations as well as both administrative and legislative advocacy efforts.

The OCA seeks to be responsive to the concerns of everyone reaching out with a question, concern or problem by providing information and guidance in how to effectively navigate the state's often complex service systems. In the most complex cases involving concerns about unmet needs of vulnerable children, OCA's investigation and advocacy efforts will include record reviews, program visits, and communication with state and community-based agencies to ensure the needs of children are appropriately assessed and addressed. Frequent issues addressed or investigated by the OCA this year included:

- § Lack of access to appropriate special education services for children with disabilities;
- § Unmet needs of children for intensive mental health treatment;
- § Safety and well-being concerns for children who have experienced abuse/neglect;
- § Lack of access to adequate home, community and intensive out of home treatment services for children with complex developmental disabilities, who often have co-occurring mental health disorders or special health care needs;
- § School climate and safety concerns , including children experiencing bullying, maltreatment by school staff, or inappropriate discipline;
- § Children/youth with unmet needs confined in the juvenile and adult correctional systems.

Child Fatality Prevention/Child Safety

- OCA continues to co-chair and staff the state Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), meeting monthly with a multi-disciplinary panel to review unexpected and unexplained deaths of CT's children reported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) and develop strategies for fatality prevention.
- From January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2018, 69 child fatality cases were reported to the OCA by OCME for purpose of an autopsy due to an unexpected/untimely death of a child. Of those child fatality cases
 - Ø 57 deaths were from unintentional or intentional injuries;

- Ø 12 deaths were determined to be from natural causes (including SIDS, Asthma, and other medical complications).
- OCA, in consultation with the CFRP, produced two public reports related to child fatality review which will be discussed later in this report:
 - Ø The Deaths of Nine Children in Unlicensed and Licensed Day Care Settings 2016-2017 (Report Date: December 18, 2018);
 - Ø Legislative Hearing Report: Albert J. Solnit Center South and OCA's Review of the Circumstances Leading to the Death of Destiny G. (Report Date: September 26, 2018);
- 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 children at risk of intentional and unintentional injuries/fatalities.

Facility Oversight And Investigation

The OCA staff visit children and youth in both public and privately operated settings including, but not limited to, hospitals, residential treatment programs, detention, correctional facilities and both public and private school classrooms. OCA's authority allows our staff to meet with children and youth, assess their environment of care, observe care and treatment in vivo, interview program staff and administration and review both program and child-specific records thus allowing appreciation of the true experience of the children and families served.

- OCA responded to the June 2018 tragic death of a young girl and her unborn child who was a resident at Albert J. Solnit Center South Campus' Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (Solnit S. PRTF), which is a program run by the Department of Children and Families, and OCA published an investigative report concerning the circumstances leading to those deaths. In September 2018, the OCA presented its investigatory findings and recommendations for improving youth safety and quality of treatment at Solnit South in a legislative public hearing.
- In January 2019, the OCA published an investigative report regarding conditions of confinement for youth detained or incarcerated in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The report provided information regarding key issues affecting such youth, including: (1) suicidal behavior and suicide prevention; (2) use of force (restraint) and physical isolation (seclusion) of youth; (3) availability and utilization of clinical and rehabilitative programming; (4) access to educational programming for youth; (5) access to family visits and family therapy/engagement; and (6) child abuse/neglect reporting and prevention, in the following state-run juvenile and adult correctional facilities:
 - Juvenile Detention Facilities (Bridgeport/Hartford) — Operated by the Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division ("CSSD");
 - Department of Correction Adult Correctional Facilities that House Minors—Manson Youth Institution (MYI) (boys) and York Correctional Institution (YCI) (girls);
 - Connecticut Juvenile Training School ("CJTS") — Operated by the Department of Children and Families State-Run Juvenile Correctional Facility (Locked) for Boys Through April 2018—Now Closed.
- Following the release of the January 2019 report, OCA has continued rigorous assessment and monitoring of conditions of confinement children and youth in the state's juvenile and

adult correctional and facilities-CSSD operated detention programs and the Department of Correction operated Manson Youth Institution and York Correctional Institution.

- OCA continues as an active member of the legislative Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Council (JJPOC).
- In response to myriad reported concerns regarding the care provided to individual children, OCA staff made numerous site visits to residential programs and educational settings serving children, addressing identified program strengths and concerns with facility administration and agency leadership.
- OCA's facility oversight responsibilities have resulted in regular meetings with leadership across state agencies and a call for increased transparency and accountability for all licensed child-serving programs.

Legislative Advocacy

- OCA continues to serve as a resource to legislators as they review matters related to child safety and well-being across all child serving systems, responding to their requests for information and assistance as well as actively participating on multiple legislative working groups.
- OCA's testimony to the legislature regarding the death of a teen while inpatient at Solnit South (see above) contributed to the passage of new legislation.
 - Ø *Special Act No. 19-16 An ACT CONCERNING THE LICENSURE OF THE ALBERT J. SOLNIT CHILDREN'S CENTER*
- OCA's facility investigation work resulted in the passage of new legislation.
 - Ø *Special Act No. 19-19 An ACT CONCERNING THE PROVISION OF CERTAIN INFORMATION PERTAINING TO CONGREGATE CARE FACILITIES LICENSED OR ADMINISTERED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.*
- During the 2019 legislative session provided testimony on more than two dozen bills addressing the safety, health and wellbeing of vulnerable children.