

## The Digest of Administrative Reports to the Governor

Fiscal Year 2022-23

Agency: Office of the Child Advocate/Office of Governmental Accountability  
Agency Head: Sarah Eagan, Child Advocate  
Deputy Head: Christina Ghio, Associate Child Advocate  
Established: 1995  
Statutory Authority: C.G.S. § 46a-13K, et seq.  
Central Office: 165 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105  
Number of Employees: 8  
Recurring Operating Expenses: \$979,966.79 (OCA/CHILD FATALITY)

Designated as a division of the OGA, the OCA maintains its independence and statutory authority/responsibilities. The office's administrative functions were transitioned to the Department of Administrative Services' SMART unit in 2016.

### Mission

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was created in 1995 to serve as 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 OCA's 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; investigating conditions of confinement for incarcerated youth age 15 to 21; providing training and technical assistance to children's attorneys; serving on the Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), and conducting a fatality review when child dies due to unexpected or unexplained causes, in order to identify trends and patterns of risk, facilitate development of prevention strategies, and 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. 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, distribution to relevant legislative committees, and on the OCA website ([www.ct.gov/oca/](http://www.ct.gov/oca/)).

## **ACHIEVEMENTS/IMPROVEMENTS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2022-23**

### Ombudsman Activities

Between July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2023, the OCA responded to 360 individual and systemic complaints regarding the provision of state-funded services to vulnerable children. The OCA responds to inquiries and concerns from family members, health/mental health care providers, school personnel, foster parents, attorneys, legislators, and employees of public agencies, as well as youth who are seeking assistance.

In most case intakes OCA provides information and guidance in how to effectively navigate the state's often complex service systems. When the concerns presented are more complex concerns about unmet needs of vulnerable children, OCA's investigation and advocacy efforts may 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 and related services for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.
- Children on discharge delay in hospital emergency departments or hospitals who could not access recommended levels of care, including in-patient, psychiatric residential treatment facilities, foster care, or community-based services.
- Children awaiting appropriate mental health services, who become justice involved while waiting.
- Safety or permanency concerns for children who have experienced abuse/neglect.
- Children and older youth in the justice system who are struggling to find a place to live with a consistent and caring adult and necessary supports.
- Lack of timely and available services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Children experiencing bullying and harassment.

#### 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.
- OCME reports unexpected and untimely deaths of children to the OCA. From January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, 87 child fatalities were determined to be Accidents, Homicides, Suicides or Undetermined.
- The Office of the Child Advocate and Dr. Kirsten Bechtel prepared and published (July 2023) the Infant and Toddler Fatality Report, which examined deaths of children under age 3 who died between January 2019 and August 2022. OCA reviewed data from several state agencies regarding children or families' receipt of benefits, services, or supervision prior to or at the time of the child's death.
- In February 2023 OCA published a report regarding the death of 1 year old Kaylee from Fentanyl intoxication, examining her family's involvement with the Department of Children and Families.

- 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.

- During the last year, OCA participated in the state's Juvenile Justice Police and Oversight Committee (JJPOC), and OCA worked with members of the JJPOC's Incarceration Subcommittee to draft recommendations for an improved re-entry framework for children returning to their communities. The legislature codified these recommendations in Public Act 23-188.
- OCA staff continue to monitor conditions of confinement for incarcerated youth age 15 to 22, meeting with youth, staff, and agency administrators at the DOC and JB-CSSD. OCA is preparing an updated investigative report for late 2023. This report will include information regarding youth's access to necessary services and will add a focus on discharge planning and community reintegration.
- 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.

### Educational Advocacy

- During the 2022-2023 fiscal year, the OCA assisted families in accessing disability support services, summer programming, early intervention services, and delivery of services in the least restrictive environment.
- During this reporting year, the OCA conducted systemic reviews/investigations of multiple public-school districts and privately run publicly funded programs that provide special education instruction. All the OCA's systemic educational reviews/investigations resulting in the issuance of a formal OCA Report, Letter of Findings and/or Program Concern are available on its website.
- OCA participates in several committees and working groups to address systemic educational concerns affecting children throughout Connecticut.
- This year OCA also advocated for several changes in state law to strengthen transparency for provision of special education services to children. Public Act 23-150 now requires the State Department of Education to publish summaries of complaints and corrective actions required by the Department regarding the provision of special education services by a school district.

### Child Welfare Advocacy

The OCA responds to individual complaints about children involved with DCF, providing advice to callers and following up with DCF regarding allegedly unmet needs of children for services, permanency, or protection. The OCA meets regularly with the DCF Executive Team to review child fatality/critical incidents involving children recently involved with or under the care/supervision of DCF, quality assurance data regarding OCA's child protection activities, foster care, and other systemic issues affecting children and youth. In the wake of the end of *Juan F.*, a federal court consent decree and federal court monitoring of DCF, OCA is regularly reviewing DCF systems data regarding core practice areas: safety, permanency, and wellbeing.

In 2023 OCA recommended to policymakers a structure for monitoring and supporting child welfare activities serving children and families. OCA has requested additional staffing resources to support facility and fatality/systems review. OCA will continue advocacy efforts to strengthen progress monitoring for the state's child welfare system.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Eagan, Esq.,

Child Advocate