



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate



Cassandra Sanchez
Child Advocate

November 28, 2022

Good afternoon, my name is Cassandra Sanchez, and I am the NH Child Advocate. I have with me today our Program Specialist, Karen Kimel. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the Office of the Child Advocate (the Office).

As you know, RSA 21-V:2, II, mandates the Office of the Child Advocate provide independent oversight of executive agencies defined in RSA 21-V:1, I as any department, institution, bureau, or office of the state, as well as other public and private children and youth service organizations providing services under contract or agreement with an executive agency. Further, under RSA 21-V:2, the Child Advocate ensures children receive timely, safe, and effective services; strengthens the state by collaborating with parties on cases under review; ensures children receive dignified treatment; examines system wide services to make recommendations and advises the governor, legislature, agencies, and the public on how to improve services; and periodically review policies, procedures, and practice to contribute to their improvement. The Child Advocate's mandate further includes investigating complaints, providing assistance to a child, consulting with policy makers, providing information and referral services, performing educational outreach and advocacy, and reviewing facilities where children may be placed. This broad mandate empowers, authorizes, and equips the Child Advocate to advocate for children with concerns about unmet needs.

Please allow me to give you a brief update of the Office, which will give context to the workload and therefore resource needs. The Office is in its fifth year of existence. It was established as an oversight agency in 2018 in response to multiple gaps in functioning of the child welfare system, culminating in tragedy. In September of 2020, Chapter 21-V was established, replacing RSA 170-G:18, codifying the Office of the Child Advocate in its own statute and expanding the mandate to provide oversight of all state provided, funded, or agreed-upon services for children that fall under the executive branch. The new statute also mandates that we visit children who are in state custody and assist them when needed.

In January 2022, the Office adopted a new mission: To lift up children by promoting equitable and effective reforms that meet the best interest of all New Hampshire children and strengthen public confidence and accountability in the State's systems that support children and families.

The Office achieves this by:

- Bringing children's voices and lived experience to committees and workgroups that have an impact on children
- Respecting the importance of every person in a child's life by highlighting Family First Prevention Services Act
- Building collaborative relationships with the agencies in which we oversee, community stakeholders, and state government for reform
- Promoting evidenced based practices that are proven to be effective to help children and families
- Using data and safety science to examine child deaths, other critical incidents, and systemic processes

- Providing education and information to the public including service providers, courts, CASA, children, families, and complainants that contact the office
- Listening to all concerns about child-serving agencies (public and private), providing referrals, and, if necessary, responding to complaints with a credible review process
- Maintaining independence and impartiality in all aspects of children's services oversight. Framing all work in child development, brain science, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and an understanding of trauma
- Reporting on trends and areas of need for children's services via the annual report and issue briefings

Current operations include 7 FTE positions and 1 temporary PT position FY23 operating budget is \$824,274

The Office of the Child Advocate's most recent reporting year ran from October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022. The following data speaks to the volume of work managed in the office:

- Received and reviewed 2508 incident reports
- Received, reviewed, responded to and monitored 318 citizen complaints
- Facilitated 3 System Review Mappings of critical incidents with teams of DCYF personnel
- Reviewed 120 critical incident reports and completed approximately 50 summaries of child and parent deaths, missing children, near-death incidents, and domestic violence
- In June 2022, started producing monthly data reports to the Oversight Commission on Children's Services
- Participated in over 25 events of outreach, education, and information sharing since July 1, 2022

We are an independent agency attached to the Department of Administrative Services for administrative purposes. Apart from certain personnel matters, we still conduct the majority of our administrative responsibilities such as recruitment and hiring, purchasing, inventory, budget development, and training to name a few. Given the extent of administrative duties the Office is responsible for, 2 of the 7.5 staff spend a significant amount of time and focus on these duties. This leaves 5.5 FTE dedicated to other duties within the mission and mandate as noted above, such as meeting with children, educating the public, and managing complaints from the public. While we have been remarkably productive, we need 3.5 FTE to meet all mandated obligations such as meeting reviewing a greater sample of critical incidents, conducting deeper analysis of performance outcomes on the agencies we oversee, and increasing our outreach in person.

The Office has identified a need to add a full time Public Relations Representative & Training Officer for FY24. One of the goals established through the strategic planning process is: "to expand public knowledge of the Office as a resource to understand and advocate for children and the best child-serving system". Duties within this role would include extended outreach efforts via an active social media presence and an enhanced website, additional education efforts through community partner sites, and trainings offered about the mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate, state agencies policy and practice, available community-based programs. Much of the world has shifted to utilizing technology for information gathering and sharing, youth especially. Currently the Office has social media accounts and a website but given the limited resources within the office, it is difficult to keep these up to date and to offer creative forms of outreach such as educational videos. This position will ensure the Office is known as a resource and recognized as well as assist children and families to navigate systems most effectively. Since the start of the fiscal year, 2 employees in the office have participated in 25 outreach events to inform about the office and educate. There have been requests by additional community partners to attend meetings to further share the mandate of the office, but given the high workload and current staffing, much of these have been scheduled for 2023.

The Office requires a full time Legal Secretary as this is currently the part time, temporary position. The primary responsibility for this role is to manage data entry of all incident reports and restraints/seclusion. DCYF compliance with reporting incidents commenced in December 2019. In

reporting year 2021, the Office received 1909 reports of incidents. Reporting year 2022 saw 2508 incidents reported, an increase of 31%, which does not yet reflect full reporting compliance. For example, we are not receiving reports of incidents involving all children placed out-of-state or incidents involving children who were placed by their schools. The volume is beyond capacity for any other positions in the Office. The mandate to surveil incidents would go unmet without this position. The trends in incidents increasing indicate a need for more time to enter and manage the data. Also, the Office now employs a Children's Services Analyst who is able to analyze all case and incident data to better identify trends, highlight areas of greatest need, and guides the focus of the office and informs policy decisions. The current part time Legal Secretary supports the Analyst by entering data timely and the Office by reviewing incident reports to identify cases that need immediate attention to ensure safety of children. With the increase in critical incident reports received, it is impossible to review and enter all immediately, which decreases capacity to provide timely, relevant data analysis for system support and reform. More hours for this position would optimize the data analysis and further support the mission of the Office. Without this position the Office will have delayed data capture and less timely investigations related directly to children's current safety and wellbeing.

Beginning in 2021, the Office worked with the Departments of Information Technology and Administrative Services to enhance our ability to use and format Salesforce. For background, the Office uses the Salesforce platform for case management and data collection concurrently. Case management consists of managing investigations of children's care (contacts, communications, complaints, tasks, updates, summaries, and key factors) and identifying trends among cases. The system is also used to store data about events and incidents and monitor for trends. Finally, instances of requests for information and trends in information requested are captured and reported. The Office Salesforce case management system is an unfinished pilot of the State of NH enterprise that must now be enhanced for purposes of usability and generation of meaningful data, including measuring outcomes of the Office work. This project is intended to better capture data, allow for consistency in data entry, and optimize substance of reporting. It focuses on refinement and capacity building for basic data collection of the current system. At the end of the project, the Office will be able to provide more context through data in reports and system reform efforts. The system improvements will also allow for a better ability to track state agency and child-serving agencies (public and private) compliance with contracts, laws, and policies/procedures. Without this enhancement, the Office will have delayed or insufficient data capture and less timely investigations related directly to children's current safety and wellbeing. The Office will also have decreased capacity to measure outcomes, and provide timely, relevant recommendations for system support and reform. An RFI was put out in the fall of 2021 and an RFQ process was done in the Spring of 2022 for the minimal version of the Office's needs for data gathering and monitoring services to children as outline above. The minimal amount needed to complete this project was \$200,000.

We have identified areas of fiscal savings and are working with DAS to realize those. For example, the Office was assigned storage space that we haven't a need for but are paying for. Without this, we could save approximately \$3,000 to allocate elsewhere.

The Office was created for oversight, the importance of which elevates in times of economic and social crisis. There is an abundance of evidence demonstrating societal stress paralleling stress on state social services. This is a point of highest risk and liability for state systems. Both the children and the State benefit from a focus on prevention by accessing services within the community and independent eyes on overwhelmed systems to ensure best outcomes.

To meet the mandate of RSA 21-V equitably and in timely manner, the Office is requesting a budget of:

- FY24 \$1,205,375 and FY25 of \$1,027,539

Thank you for this opportunity to explain our circumstances. I welcome any questions you may have.



Office of the Child Advocate

Cassandra Sanchez, Child Advocate

Governor's Budget Hearings for FY24-25 Biennium

November 28, 2022
State House, Rm 100
Concord NH



Mission & Mandate

Mission: To lift up children by promoting equitable and effective reforms that meet the best interest of all New Hampshire children and strengthen public confidence and accountability in the State's systems that support children and families.

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- Building collaborative relationships with the agencies in which we oversee, community stakeholders, and state government for reform
- Promoting evidenced based practices that are proven to be effective to help children and families
- Using data and safety science to examine child deaths, other critical incidents, and systemic processes
- Providing education and information to the public including service providers, courts, CASA, children, families, and complainants that contact the office
- Listening to all concerns about child-serving agencies (public and private), providing referrals, and, if necessary, responding to complaints with a credible review process
- Maintaining independence and impartiality in all aspects of children's services oversight
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Office Overview

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Prioritized Needs: Positions

Public Relations Representative & Training Officer (full time)

- To accomplish the goal identified in the strategic plan “to expand public knowledge of the Office as a resource to understand and advocate for children and the best child-serving system”
- Extended outreach efforts via an active social media presence and an enhanced website
- Offer trainings about the mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate, state agencies policy and practice, and available community-based programs
- Additional education efforts through community partner sites

FY24 \$43,622 & FY25 \$45,357

Without this position the Office will remain unknown to many across the state. It is our responsibility to be regarded as a primary resource for children, children's care, and to advocate for public policy affecting children. To do so, the Office's mandate needs to be well known by community stakeholders, State leaders, the public, and most importantly, the children we serve.

Prioritized Needs: Positions

Legal Secretary (full time)

- To accomplish the goal identified in the strategic plan “Be responsive to complaints, incidents, and opportunities to improve the State’s support and protection of children as their independent ally” by timely data entry of all incident reports and restraints/seclusion
- Support the Office by reviewing incident reports to identify cases that need immediate attention to ensure safety of children
- Reporting year 2022 saw 2508 incidents reported, an increase of 31%, which does not yet reflect full reporting compliance. For example, we are not receiving reports of incidents involving all children placed out-of-state or incidents involving children who were placed by their schools.

FY24 \$26,286 & FY25 \$27,359

Without this position the Office will not meet our mandate of timely review of all critical incidents. With the increase in critical incident reports received, it is impossible to review and enter all immediately, which decreases capacity to contribute valued input about the quality of children's services and effectiveness of the appropriate state agencies. More hours for this position would optimize the data analysis and further support the mission of the Office.

Prioritized Needs: Case Management System

Case Management System

The system organizes contacts and communication with constituent callers and stores data about events and incidents to identify trends.

At the end of the project, the Office will be able to:

- Provide more context through data in reports and system reform efforts
- Better track state agency and child-serving agencies (public and private) compliance with contracts, laws, and policies/procedures
- Generate meaningful data, including measuring outcomes of the Office work

2018 piloted the Salesforce State of NH enterprise system - Identified shortcomings
2021 worked with DoIT and DAS to release an RFI - Unable to proceed with another platform

2022 RFQ was released - Determined amount to meet our minimal needs

FY24 \$200,000 & FY25 \$700

Without this enhancement, the Office will have delayed or insufficient data capture and less timely investigations related directly to children's current safety and wellbeing. The Office will also have decreased capacity to measure outcomes, and provide timely, relevant recommendations for system support and reform.

Current
Budget/
Budget
Request

FY23

- 7FTE, 1 PTE
- Given the extent of administrative duties the Office is responsible for, such as recruitment and hiring, purchasing, inventory, budget development, and training to name a few, 2 of the 7.5 staff spend a significant amount of time on these duties. This leaves 5.5 FTE dedicated to other duties within the mission and mandate, such as meeting with children, educating the public, and managing complaints from the public.

FY2023		FY2024		FY2025	
Budget		Request		Request	
734,076	89%	749,159	92%	782,867	93%
62,556	8%	35,582	4%	34,482	4%
27,642	3%	26,225	3%	27,068	3%
824,274		810,966		844,417	

FY24/FY25

- Departmental Operating funding requests, the only line item with discretion, makes up 4% of funding for both years and has been decreased by \$27K.

Budgetary Needs

FY24 total amount requested

(MINUS the one-time amount of \$200k for Salesforce) is \$1,005,375; an increase of 21% over FY23

FY25 total amount requested

is \$1,027,539; an increase of 25% over FY23

- The fiscal request is not equivalent to the workload increase (reporting year '22 showed a 31% increase for critical incidents only) or expected future workload increase
- The \$200k will mitigate the workload increase on staff as the system will be easier to manage and more accurate in reporting, taking less staff time and effort
- The request does not include significant increases in operating costs; except the Salesforce request, we are asking for additional personnel