



Office of the Child Advocate

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Senate Finance Committee Budget Hearing for FY24-25 Biennium

April 18, 2023
State House, Rm 103
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.

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
- Reporting on trends and areas of need for children's services via the annual report and issue briefings

Office Overview

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 319 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 events
- 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

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

History

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.

Prioritized Needs: Travel

Travel Reimbursements

- The Office has made it a priority to visit with children in placement both in and out-of-state, attend in-person meetings, engage in events where we can educate on the OCA statute, and testify regularly at legislative sessions. To do so, significant travel is required in personal vehicles as well as parking expenses incurred.
- Physically visiting allows opportunities to monitor facilities, and educate children, facility leadership, and staff about the OCA's role and statute. Because NH is unable to meet the needs of all children in-state, some must be placed far from home. These children are among the highest need and are highly vulnerable. When we can visit facilities and gain a better understanding of their mission and therapeutic modality, this allows for better assessment of children's safety and whether their best interests are being met.

In-state travel: FY24 \$9,000 & FY25 \$13,800
Out-of-state travel: FY24 \$9,600 & FY25 \$10,000

Without these funds the Office will not meet our mandate of outreach and education to children in placement, community stakeholders, program leadership/staff, and providers. We would not be able to visit facilities to ensure children's safety and best interests are being assessed, nor would we have the information to advocate on behalf of the children if needs are going unmet.

Prioritized Needs: Expenses

Marketing Expense

- 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”
- There have been statutory changes that require updates to current promotional materials as well as new campaigns planned. Materials are distributed across the state, displayed in children’s facilities, made available at the office and partner agencies, and distributed at events. With the cost of all materials increasing, we are finding that it is just as expensive to create and print our own materials.

FY24 \$5,500 & FY25 \$5,500

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Prioritized Needs: Expenses

Current Expenses

- With the new mandate in RSA 21-V, an increase in staffing, and the current economic climate, the Office sees an increased need in consumable supplies funds. The Office strives to reduce waste and only consume expenses that are pertinent to the mission of the office. With that said, increase in staff working for the office and cost of goods in this current climate leads to a need for additional expense funds.

FY24 \$4,500 & FY25 \$3,500

Without these funds the Office will be limited in our ability to complete the functions of our mandate through statute. With increased travel and outreach efforts the costs for health safety such as disinfectant wipes and sanitizer are anticipated to increase, as is the costs of office supplies overall. The office is also acquiring new copy equipment that can accommodate different supplies than previously used such as oversized paper.

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

Current Budget/ Budget Request

Adjusted Authorized

- FY23 \$824,274

Governor's Recommended Budget FY24/FY25

- FY24 \$892,560
- FY25 \$920,849

House Passed Operating Budget FY24/FY25

- FY24 \$1,113,159
- FY25 \$947,348

OCA Proposed Budget FY24/FY25

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