

**Office of the Child Advocate
Annual Report
2022**



**State of Rhode Island
Office of the Child Advocate
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Introduction

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is issuing this Annual Report in compliance with R.I.G.L. § 42-73-6 and R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.1. This report constitutes a public record under Rhode Island General Laws 30-2-(d)(16). This report is in conformity with the Office's confidentiality obligation mandated by Rhode Island General Laws 42-73-1 et seq.

The OCA is an independent, autonomous state agency charged with the responsibility to provide oversight to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF or the Department). DCYF is the sole child welfare agency for the state of Rhode Island. The OCA is responsible for monitoring the operation of each unit within the Department and must ensure their compliance with internal policies and protocols, state law and federal law. In addition, the OCA monitors systemic issues and trends to ensure that the Department is operating within the best practices of child welfare and to inform whether systemic change is necessary. The OCA provides oversight to all 600+ DCYF employees and service providers, sub-contracted through DCYF.

Furthermore, the OCA monitors each child open to DCYF, to protect the legal rights of children in state care and to promote policies and practices which ensure that children are safe, that children have permanent and stable families, and that children in out-of-home placements have their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral needs met. The OCA is responsible for providing oversight to each child's case. The OCA has the right to meet with and speak to any child open to the Department. The OCA also has the right to intervene in any case to ensure that proper steps are being taken to secure the child's health and safety. Fulfilling this important role is accomplished through numerous mechanisms including but not limited to site reviews of facilities licensed by the Department, legal intervention, independent investigations, monitoring the Child Protective Services (CPS) call log, inquiries, legislative advocacy, policy review and reform, the review of child fatalities and near fatalities, and more. The OCA was also named the Federal Monitor to the Children's Rights Lawsuit.

The OCA staff is dedicated to ensuring the best interests of children in state care and will continue to do all that is necessary to ensure that children are receiving quality care, appropriate services, necessary supports, and access to a quality and consistent education.


Katelyn Medeiros, Esquire

Mission Statement

The mission of the OCA is to protect the legal rights of children in state care. To promote policies and practices, which ensure that children are safe and to make certain that children have permanent and stable families. To ensure that children placed out of their home have their physical, mental health, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral needs met.

Statutory Authority

The chief purpose of this Office is to provide oversight to the operations of DCYF. Children are placed in the care of the Department for a variety of reasons, but most often because their parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. Many are victims of abuse and neglect. Others have severe disabilities or behavioral health problems that are beyond the parents' ability to cope within the community. It is the Office's mission to ensure that DCYF offers all children in its care adequate protection and quality services, while maintaining respect for their individual rights and dignity.

The OCA is established by statute to protect the civil, legal, and special rights of all children involved with DCYF. The mandates of the Office are contained primarily in Rhode Island General Laws §§ 42-73-2.3; 42-73-7 and 42-73-9. By statute, the OCA has been provided with the authority to perform a number of important duties, which include but are not limited to:

- (1) To ensure that each child in protective care, custody or in treatment; and in proper cases, others interested in the child's welfare, is apprised of the child's rights;
- (2) Review periodically the procedures established by DCYF;
- (3) Investigate, in accordance with the established Rules and Regulations adopted by the Child Advocate, the circumstances relating to the death of any child who has received services from DCYF;
- (4) Review complaints of persons and investigate those where it appears that a child may be in need of assistance from the Child Advocate;
- (5) Periodically review the facilities and procedures of any and all institutions and/or residences, public and private, where a juvenile has been placed by the Family Court or DCYF;
- (6) Recommend changes in the procedures for dealing with juvenile problems and in the systems for providing childcare and treatment;
- (7) Take all possible action including, but not limited to, programs of public education, legislative advocacy and formal legal action, to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special rights of children involved with DCYF;
- (8) Provide training and technical assistance to guardian ad litem and special advocates appointed by the Family Court to represent children in proceedings before that Court;

(9) Review orders of the Family Court relating to juveniles with power to request reviews as required by the best interests of the child;

(10) Investigate institutional abuse complaints;

(11) Commence claims on behalf of child victims of crime in the care of DCYF, in accordance with Chapter 12-25 entitled "Criminal Injuries Compensation" of the General Laws;

(12) Initiate, with the assistance of a confidential and voluntary panel, reviews of any child fatality or near fatality (a) The fatality or near fatality occurs while in the custody of, or involved with, the Department, or if the child's family previously received services from the department; (b) The fatality or near fatality is alleged to be from abuse or neglect of the child; or (c) A sibling, household member, or day care provider has been the subject of a child abuse and neglect investigation within the previous twelve (12) months, including, without limitation, cases in which the report was unsubstantiated or the investigation is currently pending; and

(13) To apply for and accepts grants.

Staff

The staff at the Office of the Child Advocate are committed to providing for the best interest of children in the care of DCYF. The OCA staff genuinely believe that the best outcomes for children and family will occur through collaboration. However, legal, legislative, and other interventions will be used when it is appropriate to do so on behalf of children and families.

The hard work and dedication of the OCA staff over the past year should be acknowledged. The OCA experienced some staff shortages throughout 2022. However, the OCA staff worked diligently to ensure that the statutory mandate of the office was fulfilled and to advocate for children in state care during a time when it was most needed.

Additionally, the OCA has maintained positive relationships with the Rhode Island Government Internship Program, the Rhode Island College Graduate School of Social Work, Roger Williams University School of Law, Providence College, and other colleges and universities. Through these programs, the OCA has accepted student interns. The OCA works hard to provide each student with a glimpse into all the activities of the office, while providing them with an opportunity to work on meaningful projects. We look forward to continued collaboration with these programs.

The OCA is grateful for the continued support of the Rhode Island General Assembly. We are thankful for the many opportunities to brief members of both the House and the Senate regarding issues plaguing the child welfare system and their support of our efforts to effectuate change.

Our staff remains committed to promoting the safety, well-being, and best interests of children in state care. The current staff of the Office of the Child Advocate include the following employees:

The Child Advocate

Jennifer Griffith, Esquire

Jennifer Griffith was appointed by Governor Gina Raimondo on March 17, 2016 and received the advice and consent of the Rhode Island State Senate on April 7, 2016 for a five-year term as the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. She is a graduate of the College of the Holy Cross and Roger Williams School of Law. She is admitted to practice law in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and the United States Federal District Court of Rhode Island. Previously, she was a staff attorney at Rhode Island Legal Services for ten years handling all family law matters. She is a member of the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association, the Executive Board of the Rhode Island Family Inn of Court, the Rhode Island Family Court Bench Bar Committee, the Rhode Island Children's Cabinet, the Rhode Island Child Care Commission, the Rhode Island Child Support Advisory Committee, the Human Trafficking Task Force, the Rhode Island Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, and the East Providence Waterfront Commission.

Assistant Child Advocate

Katelyn Medeiros, Esquire

In July 2022, Katelyn was appointed to serve as the Acting Child Advocate, temporarily. Katelyn started her career with the Office of the Child Advocate in May 2014 as a Staff Attorney III. In February 2017, Ms. Medeiros was promoted to serve as the Assistant Child Advocate. Ms. Medeiros graduated *summa cum laude* from Rhode Island College in 2010 with a Bachelor's Degree in Justice Studies and Sociology. She then pursued her Juris Doctorate at Roger Williams School of Law, graduating *magna cum laude* in 2013. She was a member of Roger Williams School of the Law Honors Program, Public Interest Law Program and served as a Research Assistant. While participating in the Public Interest Law Program, Ms. Medeiros worked for the OCA as a Rule 9 intern from 2012-2013. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and the Massachusetts Bar in November 2013 and the U.S. District Court of Rhode Island in 2014. Katelyn serves as a member of a number of committees including but not limited to, the OCA Child Fatality Review Panel, CJA Task Force, OCA Advisory Committee and RI Trauma Informed Schools Commission. Ms. Medeiros serves as the program director for Project Victim Services for the Office of the Child Advocate, providing assistance to children who have been victims of abuse, trafficking or witnesses to domestic violence. The OCA was named as the monitor to the Children's Rights Federal Lawsuit. Ms. Medeiros serves as one of the attorneys overseeing this lawsuit, ensuring DCYF's compliance. Prior to working for the OCA, Ms. Medeiros worked in private practice.

Staff Attorney IV

Diana Robbins, Esquire

Ms. Robbins joined the OCA Staff in May 2017 as the Staff Attorney IV. She received her Bachelor of Arts & Sciences Degree in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Ms. Robbins graduated from Roger Williams School of Law with her Juris Doctor in 2014. While working on her Bachelor's and Law Degrees, Ms. Robbins worked for and held management positions for the respective Annual Giving Offices. Ms. Robbins received certificates in Mediation Training and Family and Divorce Mediation Training and mediated in Rhode Island Family Court and Small Claims Court. In addition, she worked for Rhode Island Legal Services for their Family Preservation Project as a Rule 9 Intern and then as a volunteer Staff Attorney. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and the Massachusetts Bar in 2014. Prior to joining the OCA, Ms. Robbins was a Staff Attorney for the Committee for Public Counsel Services in their Children and Family Law Division.

Staff Attorney III

Anna K. Sheil, Esquire

Anna joined the OCA in January 2023 as the Staff Attorney III. She graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 2015 with a Bachelor's Degree in Human Development and Family Studies. Ms. Sheil pursued her Juris Doctorate at New England Law | Boston and graduated in 2019. She was a member of the New England Law | Boston Law Review. In addition, Ms. Sheil worked for the OCA during both undergrad and law school as an intern. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and Massachusetts Bar in 2019. Prior to joining the OCA, Ms. Sheil worked in private practice.

Special Projects Coordinator

Kathryn R. Cortes

Kathryn Cortes has been with the OCA since 2007. Kathryn is currently the Special Projects Coordinator and is a certified Child Forensic Interviewer. Kathryn holds numerous certifications including but not limited to: Conducting Child Abuse Investigations, Child Death Investigations, Current Drug Trends, Youth Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences, Sexual Offenses Mind & Motivation, Grooming Behaviors and Often Counter-Intuitive Behaviors of Child-Victims. Kathryn previously served as a Senior Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist for the OCA from 2013-2017 and as the Chief Field Investigator for the OCA from 2007-2013, until her promotions in 2013 and 2017 respectively. Kathryn has a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice/Juvenile Justice from Salve Regina University located in Newport, RI. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2007, Kathryn began working as a Senior Residential Counselor in 1997 at Child & Family Services of Newport County in Newport RI. There, Kathryn worked to maintain a safe and therapeutic living environment for boys ages 6 through 12, which provided a structured program that promoted daily life skills, mental health services, and educational skills for the boys. Following her six (6) years at Child & Family Services, Kathryn moved onto Civigenics, Inc. in Marlborough, MA where she spent four (4) years as the Program Director of a therapeutic milieu program located in the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). Kathryn remains an involved member of both the professional and personal community in RI. Her positions include serving as a Member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, Member of the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, Member of the CSEC Task Force, Former Executive Board Member of the RI Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and Former Legislative Field Advocate for AFSP.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jacqueline Lafontant

Jacqueline Lafontant is currently one of our Senior Planning & Program Development Specialists at the OCA. Jacqueline has a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Rhode Island College. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2017, Jacqueline worked as Juvenile Program Worker (JPW) for the RITS from 2007-2017. There, Jacqueline worked to provide the custody, supervision, and security of detained youths, including assisting in the rehabilitation, education, treatment, care, and control of the residents. Jacqueline is serving as a Member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, a Member of the Human Trafficking Task Force, and a Member of the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center. Jacqueline is certified in Forensic Interviewing of Children and has completed several trainings and certifications related to Commercially Sexually Exploited Children.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jimmy Vilayvanh

Jimmy Vilayvanh is currently one of our Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists at the OCA. Prior to joining the OCA Staff in October of 2018, he worked for the Department of Children Youth & Families (DCYF) in Juvenile Probation. There, Jimmy worked closely with pre-adjudicated youth

involved in the family court system providing supervision for young men and women on home confinement with electronic monitoring. Prior to working for DCYF, Jimmy was also a Program Director for Outreach and Tracking at Tides Family Services. His primary responsibility was to oversee the relationship with Tides Family Services and the RITS. There, he assisted with transition planning for youth to re-enter back into the community. The focus of the program was to assist youth to meet their conditions of Juvenile Probation while focusing on their educational needs, mental health services and daily life skills. Jimmy remains an involved member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, The Continuity of Care group and the Coalition to support Rhode Island Youth, and the Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force. Jimmy is certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid and has completed training on Implementing an Effective Multidisciplinary Team Response to Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

Public Education and Information Coordinator

Kara A. Foley, MSW

Kara Foley is the Public Education and Information Coordinator at the OCA. Ms. Foley earned a Master of Social Work Degree with a Macro Concentration from Rhode Island College and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology with a minor in Psychology from Simmons University. She also completed a policy fellowship through The Women's Fund of Rhode Island's Women's Policy Institute in 2012. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2019, Ms. Foley served as a Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT where she was responsible for policy analysis, research, and writing on issues related to child welfare, child abuse and neglect, children in care of DCYF, adoption and permanency, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth referred to Rhode Island Family Court, youth at the RITS, alternatives to incarceration, and others. Prior to her role with Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, Ms. Foley was the Community Program Consultant for Adoption Rhode Island where she worked on foster care and adoption programming, research, development, and community outreach, and worked for the Providence VA Medical Center as a Research Health Science Specialist. Ms. Foley was instrumental in the passage of legislation to grant adult adoptees born in Rhode Island access to non-certified copies of original birth certificates at the age of 25, and the passage of legislation in 2021 to decrease the age to age 18, and received an Angel in Adoption Award from Congressman Cicilline in 2022. Ms. Foley serves as a member of the OCA Advisory Committee, a member of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Education Subcommittee, a member of the Community Engagement and Education and Employment subcommittees of the Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth, a member of the American Adoption Congress, and for more than ten years has volunteered as a guest speaker at foster/adoptive parent licensing trainings.

Confidential Secretary

Taylor Camirand

Taylor Camirand joined the OCA in August 2020 as the Confidential Secretary to the Child Advocate. Taylor received a bachelor's degree in Psychology in 2016 from the University of New Hampshire. Before joining the OCA staff, Taylor worked as a case manager for the foster care program at North American Family Institute (NAFI) from 2017 to 2020. There, she worked directly with children and families to help plan for and provide therapeutic foster care treatment. Prior to her experience at NAFI, Taylor worked at the Groden Center, a school for children with autism, as both a behavioral specialist and the school's secretary. Taylor has experience working with a multitude of populations within Rhode Island's child welfare system. In her current role as Confidential Secretary at the OCA, Taylor works directly with the Child Advocate and Assistant Child Advocate to ensure daily office tasks are completed.

The Office of the Child Advocate is hopeful to fill our remaining vacancy in FY 2024 as an educational advocate.

Office Activities

A. OCA Oversight to Child Protective Services

a. CPS Log/Screen Outs/Prevention Services

DCYF continues to utilize the Screening and Response Unit (SRU). The Department Operating Procedure (DOP) regarding this unit focuses specifically on assisting families that may need or want community services. According to the DOP, cases do not remain in the SRU for a lengthy period of time and are voluntary. The DOP also states, if a call is made to the CPS Hotline that does not meet criteria for an investigation the caller is referred to the SRU Hotline phone number to request assistance in obtaining services. While a Family Functioning Assessment (FFA) may be completed by an SRU worker, the FFA is not required. The SRU Hotline began documenting daily calls and any follow up interventions completed by SRU staff. The Department uses what is called a Prevention Response in addition to Screen Outs when a call to the child protection hotline does not meet criteria for an investigation.

The OCA has the authority to access DCYF's database, Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST), which contains the file for every family involved with the Department, records, data and reports. With this access, the OCA reviews the Child Protective Services (CPS) call log daily. The OCA staff provides heightened oversight to Screen Out Reports and Prevention Responses by CPS to ensure that the call does not warrant further intervention.

The OCA reviews the report from the call to CPS and any additional case information. Following this independent review, the OCA has the ability to request a call be Screened In if the OCA determines investigative actions are needed to ensure the safety of children. The OCA requested the Department to facilitate investigations on several cases, and while not every request was made an investigation, there was additional follow up with the family/child either by a CPI or the SRU. The OCA has and will continue to work collaboratively with CPS to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

b. Investigations and Institutional Abuse

Pursuant to the OCA's statutory mandate, the OCA has the right to investigate any claim of institutional abuse or neglect. The OCA utilizes a combination of the CPS logs and notifications from DCYF to monitor all claims of institutional abuse.

The OCA continues to provide heightened oversight to institutional abuse allegations. Upon receiving notification, our Special Projects Coordinator and our two Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists retrieve and review the reports. Allegations of institutional abuse, which are categorized as an Information/Referral (IR) are immediately reviewed to determine whether the allegations warrant any further investigation. If so, the OCA staff will follow up with the Department to provide them with an

opportunity to complete their own investigation. However, should the Department deny the opportunity to review, the OCA staff completes their own independent investigation of the allegations.

For allegations of institutional abuse, which the Department is investigating, the OCA staff will track the investigation for timely completion. Upon completion, the investigation will be reviewed for quality, outcome, and corrective action to ensure the proper steps are taken. If the OCA determines that additional intervention is required, an independent investigation is completed, and a report is generated outlining the findings of the office and recommendations to ensure the safety and well-being of the children placed at the facility. These reports are subsequently provided to DCYF Administration, DCYF Licensing, the DCYF Placement Unit, the program that was investigated and the Rhode Island Family Court.

c. Critical Event Reviews

Critical Event Reviews (CER) are conducted when a near death, death or serious situation involving children warrants a further review. In 2022, there were approximately **twenty-one (21)** critical events conducted by DCYF, all of which the OCA was invited to and participated. None of the critical events required or qualified for a full investigation or separate independent investigation by the OCA.

B. Inquiries

In accordance with state statute, the OCA is responsible for responding to calls and inquiries concerning children who are in the care and custody of DCYF or who have been recently closed to the Department. Each day the OCA receives calls from various sources including but not limited to providers, police departments, school departments, teachers, social workers, nurses, medical providers, outside attorneys, Rhode Island Family Court Judges, parents, foster parents, and even DCYF staff.

The calls received by the OCA involve a variety of topics and each call is processed or handled differently. The response can range from providing information, initiating independent investigations, site reviews, authoring of reports, referrals to other agencies, or legal intervention. Additionally, the OCA receives inquiries regarding a youth in need of services who is not yet involved with the Department. The OCA makes appropriate referrals to other agencies with regards to those inquiries. In some cases, the OCA can act as an intermediary on behalf of children in need of DCYF services when the families have been unsuccessful at navigating their way through the system. In appropriate instances, the OCA staff members can intervene on behalf of young children in need of DCYF services, either through direct interaction with Department staff at all levels or through Rhode Island Family Court intervention.

Between January 1, 2022-December 31, 2022, the OCA resolved a total of **604 inquiries**. The OCA continues to receive an influx of calls. We attribute the to the ongoing public education effectuated by our staff regarding the role of the OCA. This has been provided to various agencies, police departments, school social workers, attorneys, and school departments. Furthermore, the OCA experiences an increase in calls following the release of public reports and testimony.

Each OCA staff member is assigned inquiries/complaints based upon their area of expertise. For instance, if the matter is a legal issue, it may be assigned to one of the attorneys in the office. Often inquiries lead to necessary legal intervention on behalf of a child in state care. A portion of these inquiries are made by the Rhode Island Family Court. The Judges frequently assign our Office to cases that require immediate attention and closer scrutiny. When assigned, the OCA connects with DCYF, CASA, attorneys for parents,

the child's school, and all providers working with the child. Our attorneys then report back to the Court with recommendations that are in the child's best interest. Our attorneys continue involvement until the issue that prompted the initial referral has been resolved. If the inquiry requiring legal intervention is from a parent, attorney, provider, or someone other than the Rhode Island Family Court, our attorneys will follow the same process, and appear in Court alerting the presiding Judge that our Office is intervening pursuant to our statutory authority.

In analyzing the calls received by the OCA in 2022, we recognized several trends in the issues relayed. First, the OCA continues to receive calls from local hospitals regarding children who have been languishing in a hospital setting far longer than is recommended. Doctors, social workers, and staff of the hospital will contact the OCA when they have exhausted all other avenues of discharging this youth appropriately. The continued cause for this issue is our lack of appropriate service array to meet the needs of the youth in state care, untimely referrals, and inappropriate referrals. Youth awaiting placement in a hospital setting is a clear violation of the [Children's Bill of Rights](#). Children have the right to be in the least restrictive placement that meets their needs. When receiving these calls, the OCA will reach out to all parties on the case including CASA, DCYF, and other relevant service providers to determine the needs of the child and advocate for expedited and appropriate referrals to ensure the child is moved to an appropriate placement. Throughout the past year, this has often resulted in legal intervention.

During 2022, the OCA also received an influx of calls regarding a variety of educational issues. The most common call the OCA receives is that a child in care is not receiving an education. This could be due to a number of issues including languishing in a hospital setting, untimely registration, disagreement about scheduling an *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* call, a school indicating that they are unable to meet the needs of the child or conflict between districts on who is responsible for a child's education. When receiving these calls, the sole focus of the OCA is to ensure that the child begins to receive an education as quickly as possible to prevent any further disruption in their academics.

C. Systemic Trends and Issues

A thorough analysis of the work of the OCA in 2022 identified several systemic issues. This practice has assisted in informing our focus and goals for 2023. Unfortunately, many of the issues identified are the same areas that the OCA identified as issues in 2020 and 2021.

a. Referral Process/Procedure

Throughout 2022, the OCA continued to receive an influx of calls from service providers, local hospitals, and DCYF workers regarding children who have been languishing in a hospital setting far longer than recommended or residing in inappropriate placements with concerns that the child's needs and best interests are not being met. The ongoing cause for this issue is a lack of appropriate service array to meet the needs of the youth in state care (discussed further in following section), untimely referrals, and inappropriate referrals. Youth awaiting placement in a hospital setting is a clear violation of the Children's Bill of Rights. Children have the right to be in the least restrictive placement that meets their needs. Hospitals should be used as a short term stay for children with acute needs and once the child stabilizes the goal is to move the child to a less restrictive setting. Furthermore, failure to adequately assess the needs of a child and placing a child in an inappropriate placement creates risk to that child and others.

This prompted an in-depth review of DCYF's referral practices and procedures. As of September 2020, the OCA requested to be notified of all Placement Referrals for any youth entering congregate care. The

goal behind this request is to ensure children are being referred to appropriate placements that can appropriately meet their needs, address all clinical treatment, keep youth safe, and work effectively with a team to ensure the child's best interests are being met daily. The OCA also requested to be notified of any placement changes, including closure of programs, development of new programs, or changes to the services of existing programs. The OCA continues to be met with resistance from the Administrators of DCYF to be kept apprised and notified of changes in a timely manner.

The OCA found numerous discrepancies and systems issues within the information received from this unit, and in January 2021 the OCA began a detailed and more in-depth review of the unit. During 2021, this review expanded and developed more clarity and in 2022 remained ongoing to ensure all children's best interests are met and children receive the appropriate care and treatment they require.

Reviews of these cases have led to increased advocacy. The OCA attempts to collaborate with CASA, relevant services providers, and DCYF workers regarding this issue. This issue has also led to increased legal intervention. The OCA will continue to advocate for expedited and appropriate referrals to ensure that the needs of children in state care are being met. In 2022, this remained a significant issue for youth in DCYF care as many continue to languish in hospital settings due to lack of appropriate placement services.

b. Comprehensive Service Array

Rhode Island General Law § 42-72-5 outlines the responsibilities of DCYF, including being solely responsible for creating a comprehensive service array for the youth and young adults involved with the child welfare system. Throughout 2022, the OCA continued to advocate for specialized services crucial to the success of DCYF youth and young adults in out-of-home placement. Additionally, the OCA continued to advocate for adequate in-home and community-based services to assist with reunification and preventing removal of children from their home.

The OCA has continued to see significant decline in substance abuse and alcohol abuse treatment for youth after DCYF discontinued their contracts with agencies providing such supports to youth. The residential substance abuse treatment programs formerly available to youth in DCYF care provided group treatment with their peers, specifically geared toward the adolescent population, and in collaboration with placements treating co-occurring disorders. In 2022, the OCA was involved with multiple cases where the youth or young adult had co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders which were making it difficult for them to be successful in school and their supportive relationships.

Our child welfare system would benefit from programming developed for our youth and young adults who have a functional developmental disability and programming to meet the extensive needs of children under the age of twelve (12). These populations would greatly benefit from specialized therapeutic foster homes who have the adequate training to work with youth and young adults with complex needs.

We have committed community support provider agencies who have the specialized training and knowledge to meet the needs of the youth and young adults involved with DCYF in Rhode Island. These services need to be expanded to meet all permanency goals, including reunification, maintain in the home, guardianship and adoptions, and alternative permanent planned living arrangement. Each youth or young adult requires something different, depending on their permanency plan goal. The services need to be comprehensive and available to ensure the success for these youth, young adults, and their families.

An ongoing barrier to success of our young adult population is that lack of natural supports in the community when they are transitioning out of the child welfare system. While providers and DCYF can provide support when they are open to DCYF, there are gaps in this support when a DCYF is closed to a young adult. In 2022, the OCA continued to advocate for mentors and appropriate, supportive adults to be identified for youth in care, as young as fourteen (14), even if they are unable to provide placement. These long-term relationships will support and foster success when a young adult ages out of the child welfare system. The OCA has observed better outcomes among transition age young adults when they have an identified natural resource.

During 2022, the OCA continued to bring attention to the inequitable care provided to girls in Rhode Island. During the 2022 legislative session, the OCA advocated at length for money to be allocated in the budget for the development of a high-end residential program for girls coping with significant mental health issues and trauma, and/or who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. The OCA remains committed to the development of teen parenting programs in Rhode Island to ensure the success of young women and their children. These vulnerable populations of youth and young adults are continuously sent to programs out-of-state or have been held at the RITS for their safety. Keeping these young parents in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for their success. The OCA is committed to creating this programming for girls and young women in Rhode Island. In 2022, the OCA met with legislators, DCYF, and the Rhode Island Family Court on an ongoing basis to ensure that efforts were being made to create appropriate and adequate programming for females. In February 2022, the OCA facilitated a visit to an out-of-state placement to show legislators the type of facility and programming that would be beneficial to young women in Rhode Island. The intent of this visit was to offer a tangible example to legislators of the type of facility desperately needed to provide services and supports to young women who are otherwise in an out-of-state placement. Members of both the House and Senate attended as well as representatives from Rhode Island Family Court. Additionally, efforts were made to identify buildings, land, and communities where this program could be physically created in Rhode Island.

In Rhode Island, girls who require trauma informed treatment and intensive psychiatric care are being sent to out-of-state placements for the nuanced support they need. Young people who require out-of-state placement lose access to their families, friends, and educational communities, while costing the state higher daily rates for treatment that they should be able to access in Rhode Island. The OCA is thankful for the advocacy of the Rhode Island Family Court and for the strong support of the General Assembly and the Governor for allocating funding to the development of a residential girl's treatment facility and a psychiatric residential treatment facility here in Rhode Island. We look forward to being able to afford these young women the opportunity to access niche clinical services locally and to support the establishment of robust programming to meet their specialized needs.

While all of these programs are crucial in a diverse and comprehensive service array, DCYF is struggling to place all youth and young adults in appropriate settings that can meet their individual needs. There were a significant number of youth and young adults languishing in hospital settings that the OCA advocated for in 2022. These youth and young adults are ready for discharge and simply have no place to go. The OCA zealously advocated in Rhode Island Family Court for DCYF to create the programs in Rhode Island that are crucial for the success of our youth and young adults. Additionally, this will prevent DCYF from making referrals to treatment programs outside of Rhode Island. When youth and young adults are sent far away to engage in services that can be provided in Rhode Island, DCYF is removing them from their family, their school, and their community.

c. Educational Advocacy

During 2022, the OCA continued to receive an increase in calls regarding educational issues pertaining to students involved with DCYF. The OCA has been appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court to an increased number of cases requiring legal intervention and educational advocacy. The issues reported were specific to school enrollment, placement, issues related to IEP and 504 plans, and overall educational access. Access to education is the most common issue referred to the OCA. This is due to issues including access to education while languishing in a hospital setting, untimely registration, scheduling an ESSA call, conflicts between school districts about who is responsible for the child, and issues regarding the ability of the school to meet the child's need. Following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were distance learning, the OCA experienced an increase in case referrals where children were refusing to go back to school due to their mental health. The OCA advocates for the supportive services necessary to ensure they feel safe and successful in school. When receiving these calls, the sole focus of the OCA is to ensure that the child begins to receive an education as quickly as possible to prevent any further disruption in their academics. Additionally, the OCA provides advocacy regarding a child's educational planning and supportive services both in and out-of-school to ensure a child can make meaningful progress in their education while in care. It is our hope to continue to expand our involvement with educational advocacy to improve educational outcomes for youth in state care. In addition to our advocacy on individual cases, the OCA continues to convene with other stakeholders to evaluate the systemic issues impacting educational outcomes for children in care and develop recommendations for legislative and policy change that will promote streamlined inter-agency collaboration necessary to improve the overall success of children in the foster care system.

d. Access to Affordable Housing

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI) was established in July 2019 to specifically target housing assistance for young people aging out of foster care who are at increased risk of homelessness. FYI provides housing vouchers to local public housing authorities to prevent and put an end to homelessness among young people under age 25 who have recently left the foster care system without stable housing. Each local public housing authority is limited to a maximum of 25 vouchers per fiscal year and each voucher provides a maximum of 36 months of housing assistance per young person.

Accessing affordable and safe housing in Rhode Island is a challenge for many who live here, particularly for those young adults who are participating in the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program as well as for young families whose last barrier to closing their DCYF case in Rhode Island Family Court is to secure and maintain housing. In 2020, the OCA learned of the promising housing opportunities through FYI from our work with our colleagues at Rhode Island Housing and Foster Forward. The OCA has been working to identify the cities and towns in Rhode Island who could be eligible for these vouchers via their housing authorities. In 2021, two municipalities had agreed to apply and utilize these vouchers. We plan to continue working with the municipalities across the state to take advantage of any federal voucher program that we can to assist these young adults and families. During 2022, the OCA continued to advocate for municipalities to apply for FYI vouchers and collaborated with provider agencies seeking properties to refurbish to house transition age youth and young families.

The OCA also continues to search for housing opportunities and properties, which could provide safe and affordable housing for teen parents, young adults in the VEC Program, young adults using a FYI voucher, or young families using a Family Unification Program (FUP) voucher.

e. Review, Evaluate, Decide (RED) Team

In 2022, OCA staff attended **nineteen (19)** RED Team meetings facilitated by DCYF. DCYF's RED Team brings together DCYF workers, supervisors, and administrators, and community provider staff to review recommendations to place more than two unrelated children in a foster family placement and any child's placement that would cause the family to exceed the maximum number of children allowed in a single placement to more than five children. RED Team meetings are convened on a weekly basis and the vast majority of cases are reviewed by RED Team after the child has already been placed. This method can be challenging if the Team determines the child should go to a different placement. If the Team reviewed these cases in real time, it may limit some placement disruptions.

The OCA observed a pattern of single parent families being considered for placement that would exceed the five minor children maximum. In addition, several of those families had adult children living in the home that would often provide supplemental care to the children placed there, helping with daily routines, education, and supervision. It is the opinion of the OCA that since the adult children are not the licensed party, they should not factor into placement decisions, particularly if that placement would exceed the number of minor children permitted in a family setting.

a. Residential Treatment Agreements

The steady decline of voluntary placements for children in Rhode Island is due to the development of a new program initiated by a former DCYF Director, in which the family signs a Residential Treatment Agreement, as opposed to the Voluntary Placement Agreement. DCYF now provides parents with the option to open to DCYF for the purpose of funding placement through the CBH unit. The CBH Unit places children in residential facilities licensed by DCYF without oversight by their Family Services Unit (FSU) and the Rhode Island Family Court. Without a petition filed on behalf of these children, the OCA is not appointed as the Guardian *ad litem* in these cases. Parents are responsible for ensuring that the needs of their child are being met and for advocating to DCYF what is in their child's best interest. Currently, there are **five (5)** youth awaiting placement, **one (1)** youth at their home and **four (4)** youth at the hospital. There are **thirty-one (31)** youth and young adults in residential placement. Of these youth and young adults, at least **fifteen (15)** are placed out of state. Of the **thirty-six (36)** youth and young adults awaiting or in residential placement, **twenty-two (22)** are diagnosed with an intellectual developmental disability and **eleven (11)** are youth determined to have a serious emotional disturbance. **Three (3)** youth and young adults have a dual diagnosis, with both an intellectual disability and a serious emotional disturbance. The OCA continues to monitor children placed outside the home by DCYF who are not currently overseen by the Rhode Island Family Court. These youth and young adults may remain in placement until age twenty-one (21) and will transition to adult services. R.I.G.L affords protections to young adults transitioning to adult services, including opportunities to be heard in Rhode Island Family Court to ensure that all state agencies involved in their care are thoughtfully planning for their transition. These protections are not afforded to young adults and their families who are not overseen by the Rhode Island Family Court.

While these youth and young adults have parents who are great advocates, parents do not have specialized knowledge of the DCYF child welfare system, the state benefits systems, and the residential placements where their child may reside. There are limitations to the services that are provided by the

case workers in the CBH unit. They do not assist with transportation for visitation, completing the application for adult services, or support in applying for Social Security. These tasks are left up to the parents and if the parents are unable to, or do not complete these tasks, the youth or young adult is the one who faces the consequences. These are complicated systems that DCYF has the specialized knowledge to navigate through their trained social caseworkers. Additionally, these children cannot benefit from the appointment of an educational advocate. When a child is placed outside of the home, stability in education is crucial and it can be difficult for a parent to understand the dynamics between the child welfare system and their child's education.

An ongoing issue that we are facing in Rhode Island right now is the lack of appropriate placements and services for our most vulnerable population, youth in the foster care system. A child may be admitted to the hospital with a clinical recommendation that the child requires a residential treatment level of care. When DCYF is unable to place that child in an appropriate placement, the child will languish in the hospital for an unknown length of time, sometimes for weeks or months longer than clinically necessary. This includes youth and young adults languishing in medical or psychiatric hospitals, or hospital step-down programs. Currently, there are **four (4)** youth or young adults in these settings awaiting residential placements. There is no oversight by the Rhode Island Family Court for these children, no advocacy for these children by a trained guardian *ad litem*, and no recourse for families to appropriately advocate for their children. The OCA will continue to advocate for this population, ensure that parents are aware of their options, and advocate that DCYF create a system where all children are afforded the same rights when they are placed outside of their home.

Lastly, the policy that outlines the involvement of DCYF of these youth do not require in-person, monthly, face-to-face visits, that DCYF has to attend treatment and education meetings, and does not require service plans or identified permanency goals to work towards. This is contrary to the purpose and goals of DCYF involvement in the lives of youth and young adults in out-of-home placement.

D. Voluntary Placements

R.I.G.L §42-72-14 states that “the Director may, in his or her discretion, admit to the department on a voluntary basis any child who, in his or her opinion, could benefit from any of the services offered in foster care or residential facilities administered by or under contract, or otherwise available to, the department.” This statute enables parents, under certain circumstances, to place their child in the care of DCYF without surrendering custody. Generally, under RIGL 14-1-11.1, DCYF shall petition Rhode Island Family Court for care, custody, and control of a child when said child has been voluntarily placed with the department for the purpose of foster care by a parent or caretaker and who remains out of the home for a period of twelve (12) months. However, DCYF is not required to do this for a child with an emotional, behavioral, or mental disorder, or developmental or physical disability if the child is voluntarily placed for the purpose of accessing an out-of-home program specializing in the care the child requires.

The federal *Adoption and Safe Families Act* requires that any child subject to voluntary placement be monitored by administrative reviews, permanency hearings, and strict time frames for permanency. RIGL 14-42-72(c) states that within one hundred and twenty (120) days of admitting a child on a voluntary basis, DCYF shall petition the Court for a determination as to whether continuation in care is in the child's best interest and, if so, whether there is an appropriate case plan. Once the petition is filed, the Rhode Island Family Court assumes jurisdiction over the child in voluntary placement. At this point, the OCA is appointed to represent the child as their Guardian *ad litem* on the Miscellaneous Petition. When a Miscellaneous Petition is filed, parents still have custody of their child and retain the right to make any

decisions on behalf of their child. It is expected that the child's parents are to be fully involved in the treatment planning for their child. Parents are to remain in communication with the child's service providers, school, DCYF, and the OCA.

In our role as Guardian *ad litem*, an OCA attorney appears on behalf of, or alongside, the child in court hearings and monitors DCYF's compliance with case planning and permanency goals. The OCA tracks the child's progress in placement, visits the child, and attends treatment team, educational, and discharge planning meetings. For each court date, an OCA attorney provides an updated letter to the Rhode Island Family Court detailing any pertinent information regarding the child's treatment, education, and any additional information that would be vital for the Court to be advised of. The OCA proposes recommendations to promote the best interests of the child and ensures that progress is made in a child's identified treatment and permanency goals. Should an issue arise, the OCA advocates on behalf of the child and if necessary, files a motion in Rhode Island Family Court. As of December 31, 2022, the OCA represents **twenty-six (26)** youth and young adults between the ages of **twelve (12) and twenty (20)**. **Three (3)** of our clients are placed in an out-of-state residential facility. In 2022, there were **three (3)** petitions filed in response to a voluntary placement agreement. In 2022, there were **three (3)** voluntary placements agreements accepted by DCYF. **Two (2)** of these petitions have petitions filed or are currently in the process of being filed. **One (1)** was determined to fit the criteria of a Dependency Petition. This youth will be represented by the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) office, or a private guardian ad litem appointed by the family court. The OCA begins tracking these matters when a voluntary is accepted to ensure timely filing of their Miscellaneous Petition. Once this petition is filed, the OCA begins their involvement by connecting with the treatment team, education team, family, and the youth. The OCA will be appointed as Guardian *ad litem* when the petition is accepted by the Rhode Island Family Court.

Pursuant to R.I.G.L. §42-72-5(b)(24)(v), these youth have been found by the Rhode Island Family Court to be a child who is "seriously emotionally disturbed" or has a "functional developmental disability." In accordance with R.I.G.L. §14-1-6, if this determination is made, the Rhode Island Family Court retains jurisdiction over their cases until they reach the age of twenty-one (21). Once the Rhode Island Family Court makes this determination, the OCA works collaboratively with DCYF and the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals (BHDDH) to ensure a successful transition into adult services. Once our youth turn sixteen (16), DCYF begins the process of filling out the application for BHDDH services. These services can range from adult group homes, day programs, or outpatient services and case management. R.I.G.L. §14-1-6(c) requires DCYF to collaborate with BHDDH to provide the Court with a transition plan for individuals under the purview of the Rhode Island Family Court pursuant to R.I.G.L. §42-72-5(b)(24)(v). This transition plan shall clearly outline the level of service that this individual requires, health insurance options, an education plan, available mentors, continuing support services, workforce supports, and employment services. BHDDH and DCYF are required to provide this plan to the Rhode Island Family Court twelve (12) months prior to the youth's discharge from the Rhode Island Family Court, typically when the individual turns twenty-one (21). Within three (3) months of discharge, BHDDH and DCYF are to identify a residential placement if the individual requires this level of care.

The OCA communicates with BHDDH throughout eligibility, planning, and finalization of transition plans for individuals as they approach age twenty-one (21). The OCA often requests that the Rhode Island Family Court order BHDDH to not just provide a transition plan but to be present in Court to address any outstanding issues. The OCA seeks consistent and frequent updates regarding transition planning to ensure the case advances as it should. A major obstacle our clients face as they reach the age of twenty-

one (21) is the shortage of placements and day programs available through BHDDH. The OCA continues to discuss this issue internally, with DCYF, and BHDDH to come up with solutions to this problem.

During 2022, **nine (9)** young adults closed to our office. **One (1)** young adult successfully transitioned to the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program. **One (1)** young adult successfully transitioned to a Mental Health Psychiatric Rehabilitative Residences through BHDDH, which is a residential group home providing treatment services and support to adults who have a qualifying mental health diagnosis and are not able to live on their independently. **Seven (7)** young adults turned twenty-one (21) during 2022. They closed to our office as a result of turning 21. **Two (2)** of these young adults transitioned to an adult group home between **two (2)** months and **five (5)** months following their 21st birthday. **Five (5)** young adults remain in a DCYF licensed facility as an appropriate placement through BHDDH providing services to young adults with functional developmental disabilities has not been identified. BHDDH continues to struggle to identify appropriate placements timely for DCYF young adults transitioning to adult services. While the Rhode Island Family Court may no longer have statutory jurisdiction due to the ages of these young adults, the OCA continues to work with the families, DCYF, BHDDH, and the school departments to ensure successful transition.

In 2022, there were **three (3)** petitions filed in response to Voluntary Placement Agreements. The continued decline in petitions is discussed at length in the section dedicated to systemic trends and issues.

E. Voluntary Extension of Care

In July 2018, the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program was passed by the General Assembly, which requires DCYF to provide services and supports to young adults from age eighteen (18) to age twenty-one (21). This legislation took effect July 1, 2018. DCYF established the Youth Development Services (YDS) Unit which included six (6) social caseworkers and two (2) supervisors.

To enter the VEC program, a youth must first meet with the YDS Unit to receive information about the program. The young adult then meets with the YDS Unit and their Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to sign into the VEC program. The CASA attorney is present to protect the best interests of the young adult and provide clarification as to anything in their legal document. This document is the Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) which outlines the responsibilities of the young adult and DCYF. Once it is signed, DCYF files a petition in Rhode Island Family Court. DCYF filed the first VEC petition on December 19, 2018. The Rhode Island Family Court heard the first petition on January 8, 2019.

During 2022, the Rhode Island Family Court approved **sixty-four (64)** young adults for entry into the VEC program. At the initial VEC hearing, the Rhode Island Family Court makes a series of findings establishing that the young adult executed their VPA freely and voluntarily, that they meet the eligibility requirements, that they met with the CASA attorney to discuss, and that entering this program will be in their best interest. Additionally, the Rhode Island Family Court appoints CASA to represent the young adult. Once appointed, the CASA attorney will attend all court hearings, communicate with the YDS worker about their clients' progress, and advocate for what is in their client's best interest.

At times, there is a conflict of interest, which prohibits CASA from representing the young adult on their VEC petition. In these cases, the OCA is appointed to represent the young adult on their VEC petition. In 2022, the OCA was appointed to represent **two (2)** young adults as their guardian *ad litem*. **Three (3)** young adults closed to our office in 2022, as they turned twenty-one and were no longer eligible to receive assistance through the VEC program. **One (1)** young adult was continuing as a full-time student,

working part-time, and living with roommates when closed. **One (1)** young adult continued to work towards the goal of being an entrepreneur and a good parent. **One (1)** young adult was continuing to struggle with their mental health upon closing and was not open to assistance at that time. The OCA has made attempts to stay in contact with this young adult to provide any support or resources when they are ready to accept them.

The Rhode Island Family Court hears VEC petitions about one (1) time per week. The OCA attended **two hundred and forty-nine (249)** court hearings to observe the progress of each case, identify systemic issues and provide additional assistance, when appropriate. During 2022, of the hearings the OCA attended **one hundred and twenty-five (125)** young adults attended court hearings either by phone or by video. Due to staffing issues, our office was unable to attend some hearings. The OCA has since been at every hearing.

OCA Success Story: The OCA worked with a young adult in the VEC program during 2022. When they opened to VEC, they were living with family and unsure of their next steps. They were smart and hard-working but benefitted from the support of natural resources. During their time in VEC, they enrolled in college full-time, maintained high grades, obtained part-time employment, moved into an apartment with roommates, and was able to start a savings account. They took advantage of everything the VEC program had to offer and was stable when closing to DCYF.

For most of these young adults, the VEC program presents their first opportunity to live independently. VEC participants reported they were struggling with procuring the basic supplies needed to maintain and live comfortably in their apartments such as cleaning supplies, dishes, and cooking utensils. The Rhode Island Public Safety Grant Administration Office (RIPSGAO) allowed the OCA to utilize funds to provide assistance to VEC participants. The OCA submitted our “Recipe for Success” proposal to the RIPSGAO. This proposal outlined the needs of these young adults and requested the use of grant funds to provide starter kits to VEC participants moving into their first apartment. The OCA was able to secure additional funds to create **fifteen (15)** kits in 2022 for young adults. The OCA finished developing the kits at the end of September. The OCA provided **thirty-nine (39)** kits between January 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022.

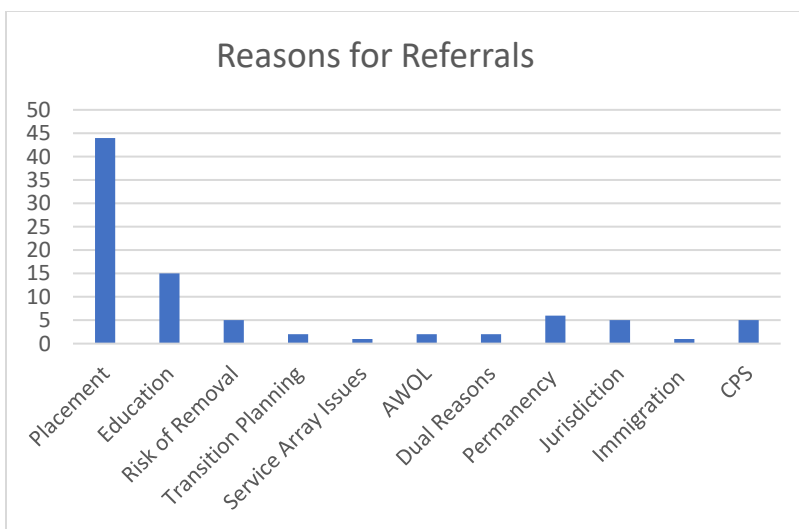
Additionally, the OCA has utilized gift cards procured from our annual fundraiser, the Duffle Bag Bash, to assist with clothing, groceries, or to cover the cost to obtain a copy of essential documents such as a birth certificate or social security card. Lastly, the OCA staff monitors various employment and vocational opportunities from local agencies, private non-profits, and state agencies. This information is provided directly to VEC participants, CASA attorneys, group home staff, DCYF social caseworkers, and the RITS to ensure this information is disseminated to as many young people as possible.

F. Court Appointed Cases

Pursuant to the statutory authority of the OCA, the Rhode Island Family Court can appoint the OCA to any child involved with DCYF. The OCA will enter into the case to represent the best interests of the child who is in the care and custody of the DCYF. In 2022, the OCA was appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court to **eighty-seven (87)** new cases. We continued involvement in **thirty-three (33)** cases that continued from 2021. These cases presented crucial issues facing DCYF youth and young adults in care, including issues regarding education, placement, transition out of foster care, mental health services,

jurisdiction, and children who absconded from placement. Once appointed, the OCA collects all records and attends all meetings and court hearings for these youth and young adults. In 2022, the OCA attended **three hundred and seventy (370)** court hearings for court appointed cases. Additionally, the OCA attended **three hundred and eighteen (318)** education, placement, and treatment meetings. The OCA welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the matters and provide zealous legal advocacy. Thank you to the support of the General Assembly, the OCA was able to hire an additional Staff Attorney in 2022 to assist our legal staff with the increased caseload.

During 2022, the OCA continued to receive an increase in court-referred cases, while also closing matters quickly, due to assisting to resolve the issue identified. The major recurring issue in these cases is that there are not adequate placements for our youth and young adults requiring a residential treatment level of care. This is due to a depleted service array, terminated contracts over the years, lack of advancement of our community support services, and an inadequate hourly rate for staff. Additionally, DCYF has not been creating and developing new programs and residential facilities to meet the needs of our in-state youth and young adults. While the COVID-19 pandemic shined a spotlight on these glaring issues and exacerbated the staffing crisis, DCYF is mandated to meet complex needs of all youth and young adults in care. The OCA is participating in matters at the Rhode Island Supreme Court due to the ongoing placement issues. The OCA will continue to advocate in court and before the General Assembly to ensure DCYF meets their obligations under Rhode Island General Law to maintain a diverse and comprehensive service array, including appropriate placements and services.



G. Unlicensed Foster Homes

Pursuant to statutory authority, the OCA provides oversight to placements licensed by DCYF. The OCA fulfills this oversight role in a variety of ways including the participation in court hearings regarding unlicensed placements. To obtain a foster care license, a prospective foster parent must complete all requirements including, completion of an application, providing references, physician’s reference, background check, a thorough home study requiring multiple visits, completion of foster parent training, fire inspection, and lead inspection. Oftentimes, a child requires immediate removal and placement into a foster home. Facilitating placement with an appropriate family member or an adult know to the child is always a paramount goal. However, completing the licensing process takes time. In order to facilitate such placements, R.I.G.L § 14-1-34(c), enables DCYF to “... authorize the placement of a child in a

prospective foster home pending licensure for a period not to exceed six (6) months only after the department has conducted a DCYF background check...” This allows the child to be placed while providing time to complete all licensing requirements.

At times, it can take longer than six (6) months to complete the licensing process. If this occurs, R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c) provides that:

“in the event the department is unable to complete the licensing process within six (6) months of the child’s placement in the foster home, and if the department determines that continues placement for the child in said foster home is in the child’s best interest, the department shall file a petition with the family court to seek authorization to allow the child(ren) to remain in the foster home pending the completion of the licensing process.”

Each year, the OCA is notified when the Motions for Authorization are filed by DCYF with the Rhode Island Family Court pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c). In past years, the Motions for Authorization were primarily for foster homes who were experiencing trouble with passing the lead or fire inspection due to the age of their home or living in a rental property that was not in compliance. Therefore, the Motions for Authorization were filed to request that the foster child remain in their current placement and discuss what mitigation steps were taken to ensure the safety of the children. For example, the installation of smoke detectors or routine lead testing.

Between January 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022, DCYF filed foster care motions to address lead and fire safety inspection issues. The OCA was present at **seventeen (17)** foster care motion hearings in 2022. At the time of the hearings, some of the lead and fire safety inspections had resolved. All motions were granted.

H. Monitor to the Children’s Rights Lawsuit

The OCA was named the Federal Monitor for the Children’s Rights Lawsuit. In fulfillment of this responsibility, the OCA monitors DCYF’s compliance with the settlement and reports on their progress with each benchmark to the Rhode Island Federal Court. The OCA and the independent Data Validator work together as the Monitoring Team. Every six (6) months, the Monitoring Team receives data on thousands of cases for review and analysis. After analyzing the data, the Monitoring Team drafts a report on their findings to include recommendations as appropriate and this information is shared with all parties and the public.

During 2022, the Monitoring Team analyzed benchmark data and produced **two (2)** reports for Reporting Periods 6 and 7. The Monitoring Team supplied all reports to all parties and posted all reports on the [OCA website](#) in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement.

Throughout the 2022 legislative session, the OCA presented at various hearings, including finance and oversight committees, on DCYF’s progress in meeting and exiting from benchmarks set forth in the Settlement Agreement. The OCA will continue to work closely with the Data Validator to author more reports in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement and provide updates to the General Assembly as requested.

I. Facilities Reviews

The OCA is tasked with providing oversight to all facilities licensed by DCYF. This includes but is not limited to group homes, out-of-state residential placements utilized by the Department for children with high-end or specialized needs and the RITS. The OCA staff work to monitor and advocate on behalf of children in state care by performing routine visits to placements. During the OCA's visits the staff performs a visual inspection, requests documentation, and assesses the overall quality of the facility. During these visits, the OCA staff meet with youth placed in the residential facilities to inform them about the role of our office, the work we do and how they can contact us. Our staff has worked to build a rapport with youth; this has provided youth with the comfort to contact our office when they are encountering an issue or concern. In 2022, the OCA staff completed visits to **eighty-two (82)** various residential facilities. The OCA met with more than **601 youth and young adults** at various locations including group homes, the RITS, Rhode Island Family Court, and meetings to follow up on specific issues and to advocate for their best interests.

If warranted, the OCA has the statutory authority to perform a more in-depth review to ensure the facility is in compliance with the Rhode Island Licensing Regulations. In 2022, the OCA completed **twelve (12)** site reviews. Upon completion, the OCA provides a comprehensive report with recommendations for corrective action, if applicable. If corrective action is necessary, the OCA provides a copy of the report along with any recommendations for corrective action to the Program Director, the DCYF Administration, DCYF Licensing, DCYF Contracts and Compliance, the DCYF Placement Unit and the Rhode Island Family Court.

J. Advocacy for Youth and Young Adults through the Multi-Disciplinary Team Process (MDT)

In Rhode Island, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), specifically DCYF involved youth has continued to be a pervasive issue. The OCA, in collaboration with DCYF, federal and local law enforcement, the Rhode Island Family Court, and community service providers have worked to address this issue. Through the work of the Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force and various sub-committees, we have worked to implement policies and procedures to prevent youth from becoming involved and to develop a coordinated approach once a youth is identified as a victim.

The OCA continues to advocate for a high-end residential program in-state for girls who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. This vulnerable population of youth have been repeatedly sent to programs out of state or have been held at the RITS for their safety. Keeping these youth in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for the youth's success. In an effort to make progress with this goal, the OCA continues to seek out appropriate settings for a girls' treatment center, advocates before the Rhode Island General Assembly, and meets with DCYF and the Rhode Island Family Court regularly to make meaningful efforts to ensure we create this necessary program.

Furthermore, the OCA works collaboratively to advocate for each youth referred to the CSEC MDT. In 2022, the OCA advocated for **sixty-four (64)** youth and young adults throughout the MDT process. The OCA attends the initial CSEC MDT meeting for every youth or young adult. If there are any ongoing issues at this meeting, the OCA will work with the team to address them. The OCA introduces themselves to the team and encourages that if there are problems, that are office be included.

K. Public Education

In 2022, the OCA continued efforts to educate the public on the role and responsibilities of our office. While school settings were more challenging to schedule, we identified other opportunities to present on the OCA's role and responsibilities. Furthermore, the OCA will continue educate others on our role with the Victim Compensation Program to assist children and families access these funds and necessary services. The OCA has given presentations at a variety of schools, police departments and provider agencies including but not limited to:

- Community Care Alliance
- YMCA of Woonsocket
- TIDES Family Services
- Woonsocket Library
- Central Falls High School
- Calcutt Middle School
- Central Falls Library
- Tolman High School
- Blackstone Valley Community Action Program
- Department of Human Services – Pawtucket Office
- Comprehensive Community Action Program Youth Center
- Pawtucket Library
- Rhode Island State Victim Assistance Academy
- Level Up Conference
- The Village for Foster and Adoptive Families
- Foster Forward – Policy and Advocacy Work Experience
- Special Education Conference Keynote Speaker
- Providence College
- Rhode Island College – School of Social Work
- Rhode Island Training School – Juvenile Probation Worker Academy
- Cumberland School Department
- Lincoln School Department
- Coventry School Department
- Community Conversations
- West Warwick School Department
- Fostering Youth to Independence Housing Program Presentation in partnership with Rhode Island Housing, DCYF, and Foster Forward
- Members of the General Assembly
- Pawtucket School Department
- Providence School Department
- Burrillville School Department
- Day One
- DCYF New Staff Training
- URI Criminal Justice, Psychology, Nursing Students
- Senator Reed and Staff
- Senator Whitehouse and Staff
- Congressman Cicilline and Staff

- Congressman Langevin and Staff

During 2022, the OCA gave **one-hundred six (106)** public education presentations. In 2022, OCA staff visiting group home facilities incorporated public education into visits through conversations with youth and staff about the role of our office and providing printed materials about the OCA for resources. In addition to focusing on public education presentations, this staff member updated informational resources which have been distributed digitally and in print to community members and significantly increased the OCA's presence on social media (Twitter) to share vital resources and information pertaining to children, families, child welfare professionals, state partners, and legislators, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The OCA aims to increase the number of public presentations with a special focus on public schools, community provider agencies, and student groups including young people with lived experience in child welfare.

L. Legislative Advocacy

It is the OCA's statutory responsibility to "take all possible action including but not limited to, programs of public education, legislative advocacy, and formal legal action to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children" in DCYF care. The OCA tracks legislation at the state and federal levels, providing testimony and advocacy as needed to support the best interest of children and families. The Child Advocate has testified before various committees in both the Rhode Island House and Senate regarding the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in state care, and collaborates with DCYF and Rhode Island Family Court on federal legislative implementation as appropriate.

In December of 2020, the federal *Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA)* became law which included *H.R. 7947 The Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act* to bring much needed aid to young people involved in the child welfare system. The provisions included in *H.R. 7947* The federal narrative in *H.R. 7847* focus on provisions for older youth including:

- Increasing the allocation of Chafee funds by \$400 million, which includes \$50 million for Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) and no requirement for state matching.
- Expanding Chafee Program Eligibility and Flexibility by increasing the age of eligibility for ETV up to age 27.
- Making continued placement and services available to youth ages 18-22 by prohibiting states from terminating placements and services due to age.
- Requiring states to provide reentry into foster care to youth who aged out between April 1, 2020 until September 30, 2021 up to age 22.
- Allowing states to draw down IV-E funds for youth until age 22 for the purpose of continuing services and providing re-entry.
- Allowing young people to retain IV-E eligibility even if they are unable to meet the school and work participation requirements for extended foster care and reentry.

In 2021, the OCA was very involved with implementation of CAA policies and procedures, assisting with a public education campaign to notify current and former youth in foster care about the services and supports available, and providing support and oversight in Court. OCA staff attended several webinars organized by FosterClub and the Juvenile Law Center to understand the scope of funding available, the various allocations permitted, and consider creative ways to engage youth to access the funding available

to them. Access to the CAA funding ended at the end of 2021, however, the OCA staff continue to advocate at the federal level for the CAA funding expansion to be made permanent.

In September 2022, OCA staff member, Kara Foley, met with Senator Reed, Senator Whitehouse, Congressman Langevin, and Congressman Cicilline, and their respective staff, in Washington, D.C. as part of the Angels in Adoption Hill Day event. Each delegate and their staff were presented with one pager summaries written by the OCA highlighting key areas of advocacy to support young people in foster care who have not achieved permanency. These key issues included expansion of the Victims of Crime Compensation Act (VOCA) funding to support child victims of crime, make the CAA expansion of Chafee Program funds permanent to support youth transitioning out of foster care, and expansion of the FYI program to offer more vouchers for safe and affordable housing for young people exiting foster care. The discussions were robust and highlighted the importance of allocating additional funding and the value of making temporary funding permanent to benefit young adults currently or formerly in foster care.

During the 2022 legislative session, the OCA participated in various advocacy efforts and testified on various pieces of legislation before the General Assembly. Some of the issues the OCA advocated on were allocating funding for the creation of a girls treatment facility in Rhode Island, timely mental health referrals for children entering DCYF care, and increasing the number of full-time equivalent positions at EOHHS for attorneys working with DCYF. The OCA also provided testimony before both House and Senate Oversight Committees on the status of the Children’s Rights Settlement Agreement and DCYF’s progress in meeting the benchmarks outline in the agreement.



M. Advisory Committee

In 2014, the OCA’s statute was expanded and the *Child Advocate Advisory Committee* was added to the OCA’s statute. Collaboration between the community and other agencies involved in the issues confronting children is critical in the continuation of successful advocacy. The purpose of the advisory committee is to provide support and advice to the Office of the Child Advocate. The advisory committee is comprised of nine (9) highly qualified experts in their field. Each of the members serve a five (5) year term on the committee. The members work together to review and assess patterns of treatment and services to children and families in the state, discuss policy implications, necessary systemic improvement and advise the Child Advocate on all aspects of child welfare with specific attention to the legal, medical,

and civil rights of children in state care. The five (5) year term for most advisory committee members concluded in 2019.

During 2022, the OCA solicited nine (9) new member appointments to create a new iteration of the Advisory Committee. The OCA has outreached to all professional organizations included in the statute for new appointment recommendations and confirmed memberships in the last quarter of the year. The OCA scheduled the first meeting of the newly appointed membership for January 11, 2023.

N. Boards and Committees

In addition to the work performed at the OCA, the OCA staff participate on multiple boards and committees, including but not limited to:

- State of Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet
- Panel on Human Trafficking
- Human Trafficking Provider/Clinical Subcommittee
- Joint Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care
- Child Support Advisory Committee
- State of Rhode Island Child Death Review Team
- LGBTQQ Policy Committee
- Rhode Island Chapter of the American Suicide for Prevention
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook Advisory Committee
- Lawrence A. Aubin, Sr. Child Protection Center Multi-Disciplinary Team
- Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Work Groups
- Juvenile Justice Commission
- Executive Board of the Edward P. Gallogly Inn of Rhode Island Family Court
- Rhode Island Women’s Bar Association
- Continuity of Care Group
- Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth (Focused on Juvenile Justice and Re-entry)
- Youth Futures Council
- Governor’s Council on Behavioral Health – Prevention Advisory Committee
- Rhode Island Training School Student Transition Work Group
- Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force
- Overdose Task Force
- Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force

O. Project Victim Services

R.I.G.L §42-73-9.1 of the Rhode Island General Laws empowers the OCA to commence civil actions for children pursuant to the federal *Criminal Injuries Compensation Act*. The OCA is the only Rhode Island Agency or Department, public or private, designated to provide assistance and representation to children in DCYF care who may be entitled to victim compensation. The goal of the program is to increase awareness regarding laws and legal procedures, pursue legal action on behalf of selected child victims of sexual and/or physical abuse, and child victims who witness domestic violence, assure they have access to necessary support services and promote the best interests of the child in the criminal justice system.

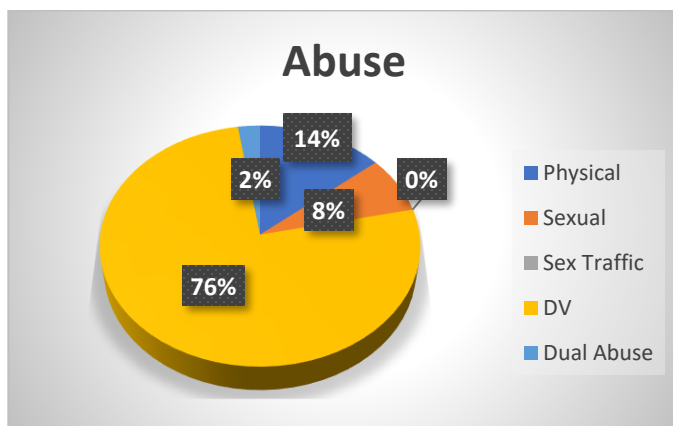
The Victim Compensation Program provides victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, institutional abuse or a witness to domestic violence, an opportunity to file a claim with the Fund. If approved, they are provided financial assistance for expenses related to the crime including, but not limited to, medical bills, mental health counseling, sexual assault assessments, and loss of earnings. These funds assist with expenses that are not covered by insurance, worker's compensation, temporary disability, public funds, sick/vacation time, or restitution. It is a fund of last resort. These funds are a vital resource to many families, providing access to support and services they may have been unable to access otherwise.

Each month the OCA receives a report from DCYF outlining children who have been a victim of reported physical or sexual abuse or witness domestic violence. Each case is researched to determine if the child may be eligible for funds through the Victim Compensation Program. The OCA continues to educate social workers and attorneys regarding the Victim Compensation Program. As a result, the OCA has received additional referrals for children who may not have been accounted for in the report forwarded by DCYF. After researching the case, the OCA contacts the parent, guardian, relative, or the DCYF social caseworker to assist in completing the application and consents required. Once completed, the OCA sends the necessary information to the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. These claims must be filed prior to the child's twenty-first (21st) birthday.

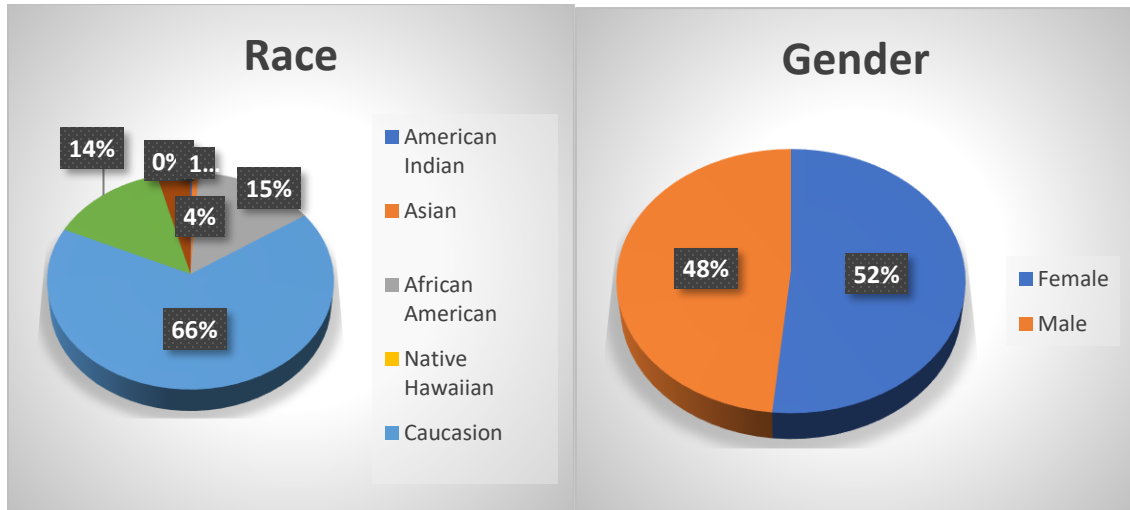
After our initial contact with each family, the OCA sends a follow up letter. We contact them a second time to provide an additional opportunity to review the information and contact our office. The OCA also created a resource list outlining services that may benefit the child and their family. This list is provided with the follow-up letter.

The OCA also reviews claims of institutional abuse to determine whether the allegations meet the criteria for the Victim Compensation Program. Institutional abuse is physical or sexual abuse, which occurred in a facility such as a foster home, group home, the RITS, or the hospital. Additionally, the OCA refers children that have been identified as victims of sex-trafficking. We will continue to work closely with DCYF and Day One to identify any child who has been a victim of sex-trafficking and work to assist them with a claim.

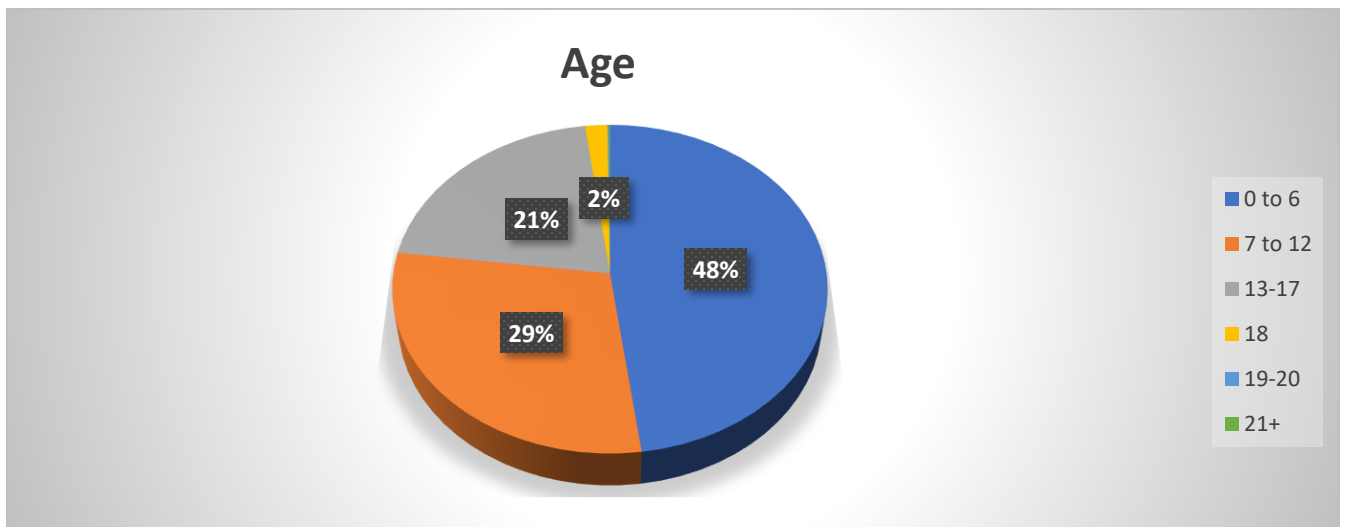
During 2022, the OCA has referred **132 children** for physical abuse and **72 children** for sexual abuse. Our office has referred **719 children** for witnessing domestic violence. Our office tracks those who have been victims of more than one type of abuse. Generally, this always includes some form of physical abuse in addition to witnessing domestic violence or experiencing sexual abuse.



The OCA has contacted and advocated for a diverse group of youth. The OCA has referred **488 males** and **458 females** to receive assistance through the Victim Compensation Program. Of the **946 children** referred, **138 children** were African American, **628 children** were Caucasian, **2 children** were American Indian, **7 children** were Asian, and **133 children** were Multi-Racial. There were **38 children** whose race remains undetermined. The OCA receives their information on each youth from DCYF. In some cases, information collected on the child such as race was incomplete or inaccurate. We are unable to verify or collect additional information until the family or social worker contacts our office. We will continue to work with the Department to ensure that our data is accurate and develop strategies for quality assurance.



The OCA makes referrals for children birth to age twenty (20). During 2022, the OCA has referred **2 (two)** individuals between nineteen (19) and twenty-one (21), **seventeen (17)** individuals who were eighteen (18), **198 children** between the ages of thirteen (13) and seventeen (17), **276 children** between the ages of seven (7) and twelve (12) and **453 children** between the birth and age six (6).



The OCA makes every effort to make contact with the families and social caseworkers of these children as soon as possible. Sometime caregivers are addressing many issues regarding their child's trauma, that

they are not able to seek assistance from us in completing the victim compensation application. Our office's goal is to send two letters to caregivers and social caseworkers to ensure that have all the information to make a decision about completing an application for their child. This year we sent out **344** additional letters. Our office heard back from some of these families, who might not have applied if we did not resend a letter. We intend to send many more in the coming year to ensure every family has the opportunity to apply for victim compensation for their child.

From January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022, there were approximately **149 infants** born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs. Although these infants appear on the monthly VOCA lists, they do not meet criteria for compensation through the Victim Compensation Fund. This number may not accurately reflect the complete number of infants born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs as the OCA has recognized inconsistency in how these calls are coded. In some cases, these calls have been coded as "physical abuse" which is why these calls are reflected on our report for potential VOCA claims. However, these calls have also been coded as "neglect", which could skew the data we have on this. We will continue to collaborate with DCYF to ensure consistent reporting and accurate data. This data reflects the continued need to invest in community-based and preventative services to better support children and families who have been affected by substance abuse. This was outlined in detail in the Child Fatality Review Panel's Report released in December 2017. The report also specifies a change in federal law, which provide for specific protocols in tracking infants exposed to substances and criteria for detailed treatment plans. Additionally, the federal law provides for grant funding to assist with the funding for community-based services. Legislative and policy change still needs to be drafted and implemented to comply with federal law.

When the Victim Compensation Fund began, the OCA, by statute, could seek pain and suffering awards on behalf of youth. Youth could be awarded up to \$25,000. The OCA would deposit these funds into accounts and serve as a Joint Trustee/Owner on behalf of the youth. As the youth aged out of DCYF care, the OCA VOCA administrator met with the youth to counsel them with regards to an appropriate plan for the use of the funds. Upon completion of counseling and an appropriate plan, the monies held were disbursed to them. The OCA serves as trustee to protect the interests of children in state care who have qualified for awards.

Although statutory changes no longer provide for claims to compensate for pain and suffering, the OCA continues to maintain accounts on behalf **two (2)** individuals, who previously received this award. The VOCA administrator continues to utilize various resources, including the Department of Motor Vehicle Records, former social caseworkers, the Office of the Mental Health Advocate, police departments in other states and the assistance of the RI State Police, to locate these young adults.

OCA Success Story: This family came to the attention of the Department when the police reported a domestic violence incident to the hotline. There were two young children present at the time of the incident.

The children were represented by the OCA for the purpose of pursuing a claim under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act for reimbursement for expenses related to the trauma of witnessing domestic violence. The OCA contacted their primary caretaker, who was their parent, and sent the completed application to the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. The child was found eligible for assistance. Our Office provided the family with the information on how to access the funds and sent a list of service providers in the community to help them identify appropriate supports.

The OCA applies for our VOCA grant in June of every year. In 2020, the federal funding made available to Rhode Island agencies was cut in half from the previous year. In 2021 and 2022, the federal funds made available decreased significantly again. After we applied for our grant in 2022, we met with the Public Safety Grant Administration Office (PSGAO), and they informed us that our grant from 2021 would be extended through 2022 to operate our project. They stated that moving forward, this may not be possible. This is primarily due to the lack of funds available. Additionally, most of the programs run by state agencies were not funded for 2022. The OCA is the only agency to provide the specific service of applying for VOCA funds for youth involved in the child welfare system. Our office will continue to apply for VOCA funding, as there were many initiatives in 2021 and 2022 that were aimed at increasing VOCA funds again.

P. Workforce Development

The OCA staff have the opportunity to participate in several conferences and trainings to network with experts in the field and learn from child welfare professionals across the nation. We attend numerous conferences on a broad range of topics, methods and strategies being implemented in child welfare by other states. These experiences have been vital for our staff and has opened our minds to innovative ideas and strategies being implemented within child welfare. Some of the conferences and trainings attended by OCA staff include:

- National Crimes Against Children Conference
- Victim Assistance Academy
- Family Court Conference
- Ocean Tides and Tides Family Services Annual Conference
- Trauma Informed Child Welfare Practice
- Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force: Lifting Voices, Empowering Action
- Rhode Island Training School: The Building Bridges Initiatives
- Sex Trafficking 101
- Extended Child Forensic Interview Certification Course
- NACC Child Welfare Conference
- Conducting Child Abuse Investigations
- Secondary Traumatic Stress: Recognizing and Responding to the Impact Workshop
- Changing the Culture: Bystander Intervention Virtual Workshop
- Race and Culture in Adoption and Foster Care Series - Three Webinars
- Reflective Supervision: A Trauma-informed Approach to Supervising Advocates
- Advocacy Discussion: LGBTQ Foster Care and Adoption
- FosterClub and Juvenile Law Center Webinar Series on the Consolidated Appropriations Act
- The Center for Advanced Practice's Spring Discussion Series: Search and Reunion, Youth Permanency, and Creating a Racially and Culturally Just System for Children
- Safety Planning for Victims of Child Abuse
- Autism Youth, A Look into Their World
- Child Abuse, Following the Evidence
- Sexual Offenses
- Preventing Burnout
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)
- Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Child Sex Trafficking

- Suicide: Screening, Prevention and Response
- You Can Trust Me! How Child Molesters Groom Caregivers and Children
- Rhode Island Family Court Conference

The OCA will continue to seek new opportunities for our staff to continue their education and strengthen their work in the field.

Q. Philanthropic Initiatives

In fulfilling the role of our office, it is our mission to ensure that each child who finds themselves in the unfortunate circumstance of being removed from their family, is treated with both dignity and respect. Oftentimes we are focused on large scale, systemic issues, however it is often the small details of daily life that have the greatest impact on the child. The OCA continues to engage in more philanthropy work to better the quality of life and enhance the experiences children in state care receive.

a. Duffle Bag Bash

In August 2022, the OCA, in collaboration with Adoption Rhode Island and Attorney Lise Iwon, hosted the Sixth Annual Duffle Bag Bash to collect monetary donations and gift cards to benefit children in state care. On a visit to one of our state’s group homes, we witnessed the disturbing sight of a child being moved to his next placement with his belongings in trash bags. After discovering that this was a routine practice among kids in state care. The children in our state deserve more dignified treatment than that. This inspired the event!

Many individuals and organizations supported this event, resulting in over \$20,756 raised. The funds were utilized to purchase backpacks, suitcases, and gift cards for children and youth in out-of-home placements. We are thankful to each of our hardworking volunteers and generous supporters without whom the success of our event would not be possible.

b. Recipe for Success

As discussed in the Voluntary Extension of Care section of this report, young adults entering the VEC program expressed barriers in accessing basic supplies needed to maintain and live comfortably in their apartments such as cleaning supplies, dishes, and cooking utensils. In 2019, the OCA drafted a proposal to initiate the “Recipe for Success” program. The OCA’s proposal was approved by the Rhode Island PSGAO in August 2019, to provide **sixty-five (65)** VEC participants with apartment starter kits. In 2021, we worked with the PSGAO to expand this program to include **thirty (30)** more kits moving forward. We continue to assist any VEC participant moving into their own apartment.

Between January 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022, the OCA delivered **thirty-nine (39)** kits to young people. When delivering the starter kits, our office takes time to speak with the young adult to determine if they need assistance with finding a job, training program, GED program, or any additional items for their apartment. Additionally, the OCA has utilized gift cards procured from our annual fundraiser, the Duffle Bag Bash, to assist with clothing, groceries, or to cover the cost to obtain a copy of essential documents such as a birth certificate or social security card. We have seen great success with this initiative and plan to continue disseminating these starter kits throughout 2023.

c. Community Involvement

The OCA's partnership with the RYCO Creative Sewing Center introduced us to a very generous community member. Our point of contact reached out to her friends and family and donated bed sheets of all sizes, blankets, and towels for the OCA to distribute to VEC participants. The OCA added these to our Recipe for Success kits which allowed VEC participants to save their money for other important things they need when starting in their apartment for the first time.

The OCA utilized the gift cards from our annual Duffle Bag Bash to purchase items from Kohl's to further assist VEC participants in other areas. When we received the sheets and blankets donations, we researched sales and were able to purchase pillows, pillowcases, fleece blankets, and bathroom kits, which included towels, hand towels, face cloths, and bathmats.

d. Quilt Donations

In 2022, the OCA continued to receive support from the Caring and Sharing Group at RYCO Creative Sewing Center. They provided another generous donation of **six (6)** packages of handmade quilts. The quilts continue to be distributed to VEC participants moving into their first apartment. We are so grateful for the support from this group.

e. OCA Book Drive

In March 2022, the OCA was contacted by a young person in out-of-home placement who expressed a need for new books. The OCA created a flyer and tweeted about collecting gently used books for young people in out-of-home placements. The outpouring of generosity was tremendous, and we received many donations, including a large donation from the Rhode Island Family Court attorneys and a carload full of donations from Representative Casimiro. OCA staff were able to supply books to the RITS, multiple group homes, and hospitals.



f. Basketball Tournament

In July 2022, OCA staff partnered with Tides Family Services staff to host a basketball tournament for young people living in out-of-home placements, specifically group homes. The tournament took place at Tides Family Services in Providence and pizza, snacks, and drinks were provided. Representatives from Providence Police not only attended but also formed a team to play in the tournament. Approximately **twenty-five (25)** young people participated.



R. OCA in the Media

a. Social Media

In 2022, the OCA continued to prioritize our Office’s presence on social media, specifically Twitter, in an effort to provide resources to children, families, and child welfare professionals, and to build connections for advocacy and information sharing. During 2022, the OCA increased the total number of followers on Twitter and shared tweets with information and resources to benefit children, families, child welfare professionals, and legislators. The OCA shared workforce development and career opportunities, information about our philanthropic initiatives, information and resources from a variety of community providers, schools, and non-profits, and shared public health resources from Rhode Island state agencies and the federal government.

**Twitter Analytics
January 1, 2022 – December 31, 2022**

New Followers	Profile Visits	Mentions	Tweets	Tweet Impressions
88	5994	151	326	31361

Twitter Highlights

January 1, 2022 – December 31, 2022

RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Jun 29, 2022

The Center for Dynamic Learning offering hands on learning opportunities through the Teen Apprenticeship Program in engineering, leadership, and design for Providence students ages 14-18!



DO YOU LIKE BEING CREATIVE?
DO YOU ENJOY HANDS ON LEARNING?
DO YOU HAVE AN INTEREST
IN STEAM CAREERS?

Are you 14-18 attending a Providence Public School?
 Come join CDL's TAP,
 Teen Apprenticeship Program
 July 5th--August 12th,
 Mon-Friday, 8:30am-3:00pm

TAP:
Teen Apprenticeship Program
Engineering, Leadership & Design

TAP provides high school students with a dynamic learning experience, providing a laboratory-style classroom for simulated work-related experiences and real-life on-site practical experience. Students can earn valuable certifications (CPR/AED/First Aid and Osha) over the course of the summer, while exploring career fields of design, construction, manufacturing, and engineering.
 @ The Center for Dynamic Learning
 Providence, RI

ENROLL TODAY!
 EMAIL: cdlsteam@gmail.com
 \$500 stipends
 Awarded with successful completion of the program!

Questions????
 Please email Beth@cdlri.org or call/text 401.749.9810

Explore... Investigate... Experience...

RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Jul 20, 2022

There is still time to donate food, supplies, or gift cards for the raffle for the upcoming Duffle Bag Bash! Call our office at 401-462-4300 and ask for Taylor!

RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Jul 8, 2022

The Duffle Bag Bash is almost here and we hope you join us! Check out the flyer for details!



**The 7th Annual
Duffle Bag Bash**

Fostering Hope for Children in State Care

Children and teens living in foster care or residential placements often keep and transport their belongings in trash bags. By providing children and teens with their own rolling duffie bag or suitcase, they have a safe place to keep their personal items when changing placements. Help us show them that we care...

Please join us for an afternoon of fun, food, festivities for all ages, music and more!

Sunday, August 7th
 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Matunuck Community Association
 619 Matunuck Beach Rd., Matunuck, Rhode Island
Rain date: Monday, August 8th

ADMISSION • Adult: One brand new rolling duffie bag or suitcase AND/OR • \$25 gift card/per adult • Child: One brand new backpack	RSVP To RSVP or for more information contact Adoption RI at 401-865-8000 or register/learn more online at: DuffieBagBash.eventbrite.com	UNABLE TO ATTEND? Donations can be dropped off at: Adoption Rhode Island 290 W. Exchange St., Ste 100 Providence, RI
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Hosted by:
 Adoption Rhode Island
 Lisa M. Iwon

Sponsored by:
 **Cardi's**
 KIEL JAMES PATRICK
 **MEWS**
 **Ocean Mist**

Confirmed as of 8/1/2022



RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Oct 31, 2022 ...
 Thrilled to attend the Senate Education Summit: Increasing Access to Mental Health Supports in Schools last week. OCA staff joined legislative champions, advocates, and young people to talk about strategies and solutions to support students and education professionals.



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RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Nov 21, 2022 ...
 Thrilled to be part of @RIKidsCount 22nd Annual Celebration of Children's Health today with our colleagues in Government and across health, education, child welfare! #RiteCareWorks



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RI Office of the Child Advocate @ChildAdvocateRI · Oct 31, 2022 ...
 Thrilled to attend the Senate Education Summit: Increasing Access to Mental Health Supports in Schools last week. OCA staff joined legislative champions, advocates, and young people to talk about strategies and solutions to support students and education professionals.



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You Retweeted

DLT **RI Department of Labor & Training** @RI_DLT · Jan 10, 2022 ...
 GRATIS entrenamiento para emprendedores de @OperationHOPE
 Clases comienzan el 18 de enero a las 6:00 pm

Información: eventbrite.com/e/operation-ho...

financiamiento: dlt.ri.gov/wds/program-fu...

	eventbrite.com OPERATION HOPE'S ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINI... OPERATION HOPE is a nonprofit organization with a mission to expand economic opportunity, ...
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You Retweeted

DLT **RI Department of Labor & Training** @RI_DLT · Jan 10, 2022 ...
 Calling all entrepreneurs @OperationHOPE is offering a FREE
 Entrepreneur Training Program to teach you how to startup your own
 business. Classes begin on Jan. 18 at 6:00pm

Learn more: eventbrite.com/e/operation-ho...

Program funding details: dlt.ri.gov/wds/program-fu...

	eventbrite.com OPERATION HOPE'S ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINI... OPERATION HOPE is a nonprofit organization with a mission to expand economic opportunity, ...
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b. Digital and Print Media

[DCYF says maltreatment was a factor in head-on crash that nearly killed two children](#)

[DCYF says neglect contributed to near death of 16-month-old child from Coventry](#)

[Newport lawmaker files bill that would help students with special needs get needed services](#)

[DCYF reports 5-year-old from Providence almost died from maltreatment](#)

[Families say special education is broken in RI and call for a new office to help fix it](#)

[DCYF discloses death of 10-month-old from Providence](#)

[Parents rally for creation of special education 'watchdog' for students with disabilities](#)

[At odds with the Portsmouth school district, moms give their support to special ed bill](#)

[DCYF: 9-month-old West Greenwich child died of maltreatment almost two years ago](#)

[DCYF says maltreatment contributed to death of 5-year-old in West Warwick](#)

Goals and Recommendations of the Office of the Child Advocate

The paramount goal of the OCA is to ensure the safety and well-being of children in state care. The OCA is committed to continued systemic change while ensuring the improvement of each child's individual experience. The OCA has outlined a set of goals to work towards the improvement of the child welfare system. Some of those goals include:

1. The OCA is committed to collaborating with DCYF to develop a high-end residential program in-state for girls coping with significant mental health issue or who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. This vulnerable population of youth are continuously sent to programs out of state or have been held at the RITS for their safety. Keeping these youth in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for the youth's success. Thank you to the support of the General Assembly and the Governor, this treatment facility will become a reality here in Rhode Island. The OCA will continue to collaborate with DCYF and the Rhode Island Family Court throughout the development of this program.
2. The OCA will continue its efforts to visit and review facilities that are licensed by DCYF and provide corrective action and positive feedback to the program directors.
3. The OCA will continue to advocate for a comprehensive service array for children in the State of Rhode Island. A service array that will provide our state with a much needed continuum of care. Ensuring that there are appropriate services and placements available will prevent the continued issue of youth languishing in inappropriate settings. The OCA will continue to advocate for the completion of a comprehensive needs assessment by DCYF, as required by RI General Law.
4. The OCA will continue to visit every out-of-state program providing residential treatment services to DCYF youth and young adults to ensure they meet the standards that are required in Rhode Island.
5. The OCA will continue to monitor youth and young adults open to DCYF through a Residential Treatment Agreement who have no oversight by the Rhode Island Family Court or the advocacy of a guardian ad litem.
6. The OCA will continue to be present in Rhode Island Family Court and accept all cases referred to our office by the court to zealously advocate for youth and young adults who are having issues with placement, education, and access to services.
7. The OCA is committed to improving educational outcomes for children in state care. Our team will continue to closely monitor access to education for youth who are awaiting placement in a hospital setting. The OCA will also complete an in-depth review of systems issues contributing to poor educational outcomes for children in care. The OCA will also provide legal advocacy on behalf of youth in state care who are experiencing issues with timely access to education or are in need of additional supports and services to assist with academic achievement. The OCA is seeking to expand our involvement with educational advocacy.

8. The OCA will continue to work with municipalities to leverage as many federal housing voucher opportunities as possible to create more units for young adults or families currently and formerly in the child welfare system.
9. The OCA will be completing an in-depth review of DCYF's referral practices and procedures. The OCA will continue to closely monitor the referral process to ensure that placements are timely and appropriate. This has been an ongoing systemic issue.
10. The OCA will continue to focus on providing children in DCYF care with opportunities to establish a sense of normalcy. In carrying out this goal, the OCA will continue to be innovative in finding resources for children to participate in extracurricular activities and to obtain necessities that they may require.
11. The OCA will expand our public education initiative and outreach regarding a variety of topics, including the role and responsibilities of the OCA, education about the VEC program, and emphasis on the importance of calling the DCYF Hotline when concerns about children arise. The OCA will provide digital resources in follow-up to presentations.
12. The OCA will continue to expand our social media presence, specifically on Twitter. The OCA will continue to share resources and information through social media benefitting children, families, and child welfare professionals. The OCA has developed some written resources to provide to children in state care and community professionals. However, the OCA will develop resources on an ongoing basis to provide vital information to our community and children in state care.
13. The OCA will introduce legislation as appropriate, continue tracking state and federal legislation, and will advocate at all levels for policy change and practice implementation that is in the best interest of children.
14. The OCA remains focused on improving the Voluntary Extension of Care program to ensure that youth are receiving adequate support, guidance, and resources.
15. The OCA will continue to work with DCYF and community providers to create pathways for youth and young adults in the care of the state to obtain their learner's permit, driver's license, car insurance, and in some cases, a vehicle.