

**Office of the Child Advocate
Annual Report
2024**



**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 OCA's obligation under Rhode Island General Laws § 42-73-1 *et seq.* to maintain confidentiality.

The OCA is an independent, autonomous state agency charged with providing oversight to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). 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 DCYF and ensuring compliance with internal policies and protocols, state law and federal law. In addition, the OCA monitors systemic issues and trends to ensure that DCYF is utilizing best practices 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 is responsible for protecting the legal rights of children in state care and for recommending policies and practices which ensure that children are safe, have permanent and stable families, and have their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral needs met.

The OCA has the right to meet with and speak to any child open to DCYF. The OCA 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 DCYF, 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 staff is dedicated to ensuring the best interests of children in state care and will advocate to ensure that children are receiving quality care, appropriate services, necessary supports, and access to a quality and consistent education. Our committed and passionate team works tirelessly to improve the lives of children and youth navigating the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems, ensuring they receive the support and opportunities they deserve to thrive. Thank you to the OCA team for your hard work to improve the safety and well-being of children and youth in the State of Rhode Island.



Katelyn Medeiros, Esquire

Mission Statement

The mission of the OCA is to protect the legal rights of children in state care. To recommend 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 OCA was established by statute to protect the civil, legal, and special rights of all children involved with DCYF. The mandates of the OCA 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

Throughout 2024, the OCA struggled with staffing shortages as we were constrained in our ability to hire until June 2024. Starting in June, we were able to fill our Assistant Child Advocate and Staff Attorney IV positions. The OCA also received funding in July 2024 to add three (3) full-time equivalent positions our team. We have hired another Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist. We are in the process of hiring a Social Worker and a Staff Attorney III. This growth has had an immediate impact on what we have accomplished, and we will continue to see this as our agency increases capacity.

Child Advocate

Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.

Ms. Medeiros 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. In July 2022, Ms. Medeiros was appointed to serve as the Acting Child Advocate. In May 2024, Ms. Medeiros was appointed by Governor Daniel J. McKee as the Child Advocate for a five-year term. 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. Ms. Medeiros serves as a member of several committees including but not limited to, the OCA Child Fatality Review Panel, OCA Advisory Committee, Children's Cabinet, the Special Legislative Study Commission on Mandated Safety Protocols for Rhode Island Schools, and RI Trauma Informed Schools Commission. Prior to working for the OCA, Ms. Medeiros worked in private practice.

Assistant Child Advocate

Diana Robbins, Esq.

Ms. Robbins joined the OCA Staff in May 2017 as the Staff Attorney III. In November 2022, she was promoted to Staff Attorney IV. In August 2024, she was promoted to Assistant Child Advocate. 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 IV

Siobhan Bogosian, Esq.

Siobhan M. Bogosian is a Staff Attorney IV. She joined the OCA in 2024. Ms. Bogosian earned both a Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Science Degree in the Administration of Justice from Salve Regina University. She went on to earn her Juris Doctorate from Roger Williams University School of Law while working as a paralegal in the Criminal Division at the Rhode Island Office of Attorney General. In 2007, upon her admission to the Rhode Island Bar and U.S. District Court Bar, she was sworn in as a

Special Assistant Attorney General and served as a criminal prosecutor for 16 years. Ms. Bogosian then went on to work in private practice where she focused primarily on Family Law.

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 a Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist. Before joining the OCA staff

in 2018, he worked for the Department of Children Youth & Families (DCYF) in Juvenile Probation. At DCYF, Jimmy worked closely with young people involved in the legal system. He supervised young men and women on home confinement with electronic monitoring. Before working for DCYF, Jimmy was a Program Director for Outreach and Tracking at Tides Family Services for 7 years. His main responsibility was overseeing the relationship between Tides Family Services and the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). There, he helped young people transition back into the community. The program helped young people meet the conditions of Juvenile Probation while addressing their educational needs, mental health services, and life skills. Jimmy is actively involved in various groups and teams, including the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, Rhode Island Anti Human Trafficking Task Force (RIATTF). He is certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid, Conducting Child Abuse Investigations, and Forensic Interviewing.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Kristen Anslo

Kristin Anslo is a Senior Planning & Program Development Specialist. Before joining the OCA staff in 2024, she worked as a Child Protective Investigator for DCYF for 6 years. Her role involved conducting investigations of child abuse and neglect in addition to safety planning, referring children for services, completing Family Functioning Assessments, and managing reports made to the hotline. Previously, she was a research assistant for Butler Hospital and Brown University researchers. For several years, Kristin worked with children with disabilities in various capacities including as an ABA therapist and Residential Milieu Therapist. Kristin is now a member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, the Human Trafficking Task Force, and the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center.

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. In 2022, Ms. Foley received an Angel in Adoption Award from Congressman Cicilline. 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.

Education Coordinator

Peter Capalbo, JD

Peter Capalbo is the Education Coordinator. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in History from Bridgewater

State University and Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in English from Rhode Island College. In 2023, Peter earned a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Massachusetts's School of Law. He received a Public Interest Law Fellowship while studying there. Peter is certified as a secondary English teacher by the Rhode Island Department of Education. Before joining the OCA in 2023, Peter worked for Tides Family Services for almost 20 years. During his time there, he worked as a teacher, senior administrator, and educational advocate.

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.

Oversight

A. Child Protective Services (CPS)

a. CPS Log and Screen Outs

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 DCYF including records, data, and reports. With this access, the OCA reviews the Child Protective Services (CPS) call log daily. The call log includes every call made to the DCYF Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline. There can be several responses when a call is made to the hotline. The outcomes include an investigation, a prevention response, or a screen out. A prevention response is initiated when allegations may not rise to the level of an investigation, however, the family or child may require additional supports and services, which are voluntary. DCYF outreaches to the family to offer these supports and services. A screen out indicates that the allegations made did not rise to the level of an investigation nor did they prompt a prevention response. OCA staff provides heightened oversight to screen outs and prevention responses by CPS to ensure that the call does not warrant further intervention.

The OCA conducts an independent review of the report to the hotline and any additional case information. If the OCA determines investigative actions are required to ensure the safety of children, the OCA will request that the allegations made to the hotline be investigated. During 2024, the OCA recommended DCYF conduct investigations following our independent review, and although DCYF did not follow through on our recommendations in every situation, there was additional follow up with the family/child either by DCYF or the OCA. The OCA has and will continue to work collaboratively with CPS to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

B. Congregate Care/Institutions/Placements

a. 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 the CPS call logs and notifications from DCYF to monitor all claims of institutional abuse.

The OCA provides heightened oversight to institutional abuse allegations. Upon receiving notification, our Special Projects Coordinator and our three (3) Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists review the reports. Allegations of institutional abuse categorized as screen outs are reviewed to determine whether the allegations warrant any further investigation. If so, the OCA staff will follow up with DCYF to provide them with an opportunity to complete their own investigation. However, should DCYF fail to review the allegations, the OCA staff has the authority to complete their own independent investigation of the allegations.

For allegations of institutional abuse, in which DCYF investigates, OCA staff tracks the investigation for timely completion. Once the investigation is completed, the outcome and any corrective action is reviewed to ensure the proper steps were taken. If the OCA determines that additional intervention is required, the OCA follows up with DCYF or initiates an independent investigation.

When the OCA completes an independent investigation, 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.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2023, the OCA released a report with specific findings and recommendations for both St. Mary’s Home for Children (St. Mary’s) and DCYF. St. Mary’s subsequently closed, however, the OCA continues to monitor the recommendations that were made with respect to DCYF. The recommendations highlighted concerns with how DCYF monitors the programs that are used to provided residential treatment. While the report was specific to St. Mary’s, the recommendations can be applied across all congregate care settings.

As of the date of this report, the recommendations issued by the OCA are still underway. The OCA continues to highlight the importance of ongoing review and appropriate monitoring by DCYF of all congregate care facilities as required by state law.

The St. Mary’s Report can be found [here](#).

The OCA testified before the House Oversight Committee regarding the findings and recommendations of our report on January 23, 2024. The video of the hearing can be found [here](#).

b. Facility Reviews

The OCA oversees all facilities contracted with and licensed by DCYF to provide residential services to youth and young adults. This includes but is not limited to independent living sites, community-based group homes, in-state and out-of-state high-end residential treatment facilities, and the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). OCA staff conduct periodic and in-depth site reviews to monitor placements, which includes a visual inspection, reviewing requested documentation, assessing the quality of the facility, and meeting with administration, staff, and youth placed at the facility. The OCA advocates for youth by ensuring that the facility complies with state regulations and follows up on any of the concerns they have regarding the facility. Upon completion, the OCA provides a comprehensive report with recommendations for corrective action, if applicable. 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. The OCA conducted twelve (12) site reviews in 2024.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2024, the OCA conducted a site review of an out-of-state placement and identified significant concerns regarding the use of chemical restraints. It was determined that the chemical restraints being used by the program were not in line with the regulations and state law in Rhode Island. The OCA communicated with DCYF immediately about these concerns and requested that DCYF conduct a full review of all out-of-state residential programs that DCYF contracts with and their policies on chemical restraints. The OCA requested that all contracts be amended to ensure there is clear language around the use of chemical restraints on Rhode Island youth.

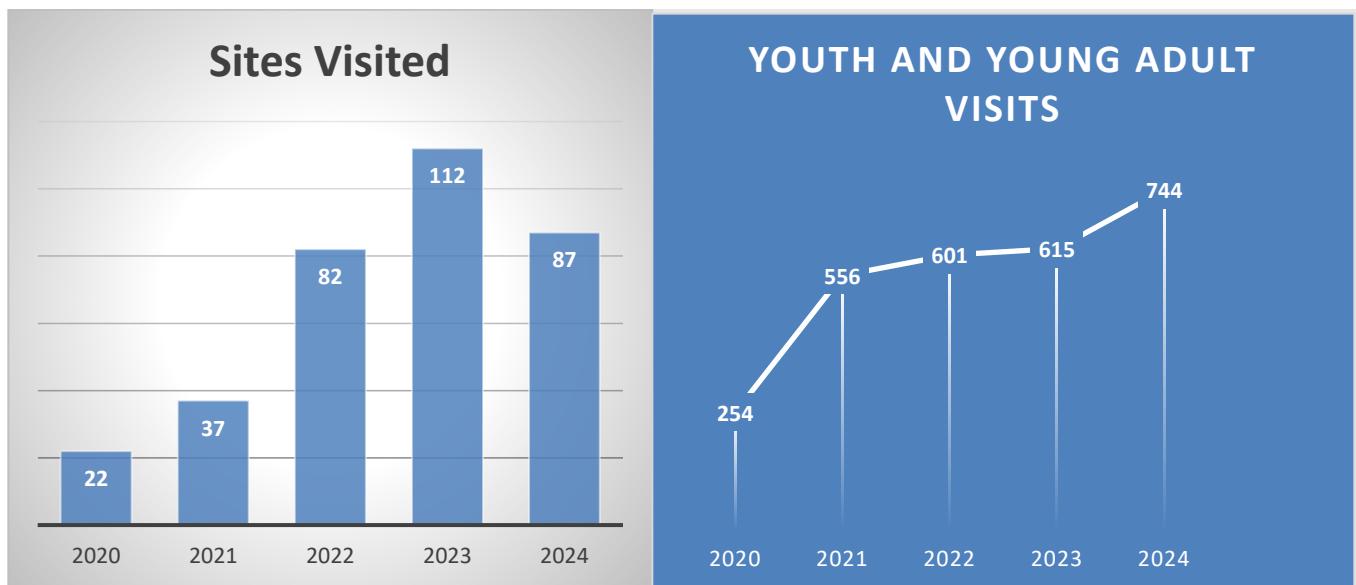
The OCA requested that a plan be developed immediately to transition the youth at this program back to Rhode Island. Both youth are now residing in Rhode Island.

In addition to periodic site reviews, the OCA conducts routine and unannounced drop in visits to facilities.

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 continues to build rapport with these youth to provide them with the information to contact our office and ensure they feel comfortable contacting our office when they have any issue or concern. The OCA staff offer to meet with youth individually to provide an opportunity for youth to ask questions or outline concerns, which OCA staff will address on-site or follow up with other team members, as necessary. In addition to meeting with youth, the investigative team will also check the conditions of the program. The team also pulls and reviews required logs and documentation to ensure documentation is thorough and complete, in accordance with state regulations. If issues are identified while on site, the OCA will follow up with the necessary administrators of the program and will request corrective action as necessary. As the licensing authority for in-state programs, identified issues are brought to the attention of DCYF.

In 2024, the OCA staff **completed visits to 87** various residential facilities and met with more than **744 youth and young adults** at their placement, the RITS, Rhode Island Family Court, and meetings to follow up on specific issues and to advocate for their best interest. Following a drop in, if there are any issues or concerns noted, the OCA may initiate a full site review in order to fully assess the facility.

The OCA faced staffing shortages well into 2024 and attributes the decrease in site visits to our lack of staffing. The OCA remained committed to connecting with as many youth as possible and saw an increase in the number of visits with youth.



*These charts include a five-year lookback at the number of site visits conducted and number of visits with youth and young adults.

c. Fatalities and Near Fatalities

The OCA is responsible for reviewing any child fatality or near fatality under R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.3(b):

- (1) the fatality or near fatality occurs while in the custody of, or involved with, the department, or the child’s family previously received services from the department;
- (2) The fatality or near fatality is alleged to be from abuse or neglect of the child and the child or child’s family had prior contact with the department; or
- (3) A sibling, household member, or daycare 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.

The OCA is notified by DCYF of all child fatalities and near fatalities, from birth to age twenty-one (21). The OCA reviews the circumstances of each incident and history of the family to determine if it meets the criteria for review under the above-referenced statute. If it meets the criteria, the OCA will convene a child-fatality-review panel.

Pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.3 (e), “[t]he child advocate ... [is to] publicly announce the convening of a child-fatality-review panel, including the age of the child involved”. Panel members are chosen based on areas of expertise and their ability to exercise independent judgment. The team is tasked with reviewing the circumstances surrounding the death of the child, addressing current trends, developing prevention strategies to improve the overall coordination of services to children and families involved in state care, identifying gaps in services and assessments and to make recommendations for systemic change.

A press release was first issued on April 12, 2023, to announce the convening of a child fatality review panel to review the fatality of a fifteen (15) year old, open to DCYF. A second press release was issued regarding this panel, on June 20, 2023, to announce the panel members and to note that three (3) additional cases would be added to the review. Throughout 2023-2024, there was an increase in the number of child fatalities and near fatalities related to substance use and substance exposure. Upon review of all cases from 2019-2024 that met the statutory mandate for review, the panel made the decision to expand the scope of the initial review. The decision was made to include all cases that were identified as a case related to substance use or substance exposure, as we had already impaneled experts to focus specifically on the needs of this population of children and youth. While there were additional fatalities and near fatalities that occurred during this timeframe, these cases will be reviewed in another report by a separate panel. On February 21, 2024, the OCA started reviewing cases with the convened panel. Over nine (9) meetings, ending on January 8, 2025, the panel reviewed twenty (20) near fatalities and six (6) fatalities. The report will be completed in 2025.

The OCA attends Critical Event Reviews (CER), which are conducted by DCYF when there is a fatality or near fatality that is the result of abuse or neglect, and/or have been involved with DCYF within the last twelve (12) months. In 2024, the OCA was invited to and participated in **twenty-two (22)** critical event reviews. During these reviews, staff members involved with the case, DCYF Administrators, and OCA staff meet to review the facts of the case and other pertinent information. At the conclusion of the review, a final report is generated by DCYF outlining their findings and recommendations regarding the case, policies, gaps in resources and other recommendations determined to be necessary after reviewing the case.

Additionally, the OCA is a member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team (CDRT). This multi-disciplinary team was established in 1997 and under the direction of the Rhode Island Medical Examiner’s Office and the Rhode Island Department of Health. The CDRT conducts monthly meetings to review the deaths of all Rhode Island children and youth, birth to age 17, to identify ways in which similar deaths may be prevented.

C. Placement and Community Based Services

a. Referral Process/Procedure

Throughout 2024, the OCA monitored all youth requiring a congregate care placement, youth awaiting placement at the hospital, and youth who are waiting to step-down from a congregate care setting. 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, untimely referrals, and inappropriate referrals. 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 should move to a less restrictive setting. Furthermore, maintaining a child in an inappropriate placement prevents the child from receiving the clinical treatment, education, community connection required to be successful, and is a clear violation of the Children's Bill of Rights.

The OCA continues to receive all placement referrals and, in many instances, have intervened legally to advocate for a placement that will ensure children are placed in the least restrictive setting that can address all clinical treatment, keep youth safe, and work effectively with a team to ensure the child's best interests are being met. The OCA has made recommendations regarding the placement policies at DCYF and have advocated for changes in practice to streamline the placement process and ensure only appropriate placement referrals are being made for each youth. This was a focal point of the recommendations following the St. Mary's investigation. 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.

Reviews of these cases have led to increased legal advocacy and 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. Additionally, 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. 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.

b. Comprehensive Service Array

R.I.G.L § 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 2024, the OCA advocated for a comprehensive needs assessment of all programming at DCYF to evaluate what youth and families in Rhode Island require to be successful. In order to appropriately identify what services will best meet the needs of youth and families, an assessment needs to be conducted on current programming. The General Assembly provided the funding to DCYF in SFY 2025 to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. While the needs assessment is an important step, youth and families require a comprehensive service array now in order to prevent removals, access the right level of treatment in real-time, and support reunification. Rhode Island has committed community provider agencies with 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 maintenance in the home, reunification, guardianship, adoption, and alternative permanent planned living arrangement. Each youth or young adult requires an individual service plan, depending on their permanency plan goal and unique needs. Appropriate services need to be readily available and accessible to all youth, young adults, and families.

In 2024, the OCA continued to monitor the progress of the treatment facility being built in Exeter to support girls with complex behavioral health needs in the state of Rhode Island. The OCA played an active role in ongoing planning meetings, involving all stakeholders. While this is a significant step in the right direction, the OCA continues to advocate to utilize state dollars in the most effective way possible. Following the closure of St. Mary's Home for Children, the OCA called on the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and DCYF for a plan to address this additional gap in our service array. St. Mary's was the only Psychiatric Residential Treatment

Facility (PRTF) in Rhode Island. The State initially invested \$11 million dollars into St. Mary's to expand the PRTF capacity at this facility. After the closure of St. Mary's, we continued to see an increased number of children and youth placed out-of-state. The OCA contacted the aforementioned state agencies on three (3) occasions, requesting a plan outlining the reinvestment of the remaining funds allocated to the expansion, the plan to recuperate the funds already invested, and how they would spend the money already allocated to the contract possessed by St. Mary's. The OCA sent a formal letter on August 30, 2024, followed up via email on October 25, 2024, and reiterated our request on December 17, 2024. The OCA made the following request on all three (3) occasions:

"The OCA is reiterating its request from our letter on August 30, 2024 for a comprehensive written plan from EOHHS and DCYF outlining next steps to address the critical need for a continuum of care. Additionally, the OCA is specifically requesting an update on the plan for [PRTF capacity]. Further, the OCA is requesting an update on the status of the funds in the amount of \$11,000,000 that was earmarked to expand St. Mary's. The OCA urges the State of Rhode Island to reinvest these funds into building our continuum of care now, while DCYF makes all efforts to make the long-term shift away from congregate care facilities."

The OCA continued to advocate for an opportunity to be a part of the process and planning. This was an opportunity for inter-agency collaboration to address the immediate needs of our most vulnerable children and youth. While the OCA has received an update regarding the plans of EOHHS and DCYF for PRTF capacity, the OCA expressed concerns around whether this would address the needs of our State.

Rhode Island 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). Additionally, services for youth with a substance use disorder, youth with co-occurring disorders, teen parents, and youth identifying as LGBTQ+ are critical for Rhode Island's service array. These populations would greatly benefit from specialized community-based services, congregate facilities, and therapeutic foster homes who have the adequate training to work with youth and young adults with complex and specialized needs.

During the 2024 legislative session, we advocated in budget testimony for a robust continuum of services and placements to meet the needs of our youth, from community-based services, a diverse pool of foster families, and all levels of congregate care. We will continue monitoring the progress of the needs assessment and advocate that any recommendations are implemented.

D. Inquiries

In accordance with our statute, the OCA is responsible for responding to calls and inquiries concerning children who are involved with DCYF or who have been recently closed to DCYF. 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.

Each call is processed or handled differently. The responses may include providing information, initiating independent investigations, conducting site reviews, authoring reports, referring to other agencies, or engaging in legal intervention. Additionally, the OCA receives inquiries regarding youth in need of services who are not yet involved with DCYF. The OCA refers the callers to appropriate agencies to seek support and services or assist the caller in reengaging with DCYF. In some cases, the OCA can provide assistance on

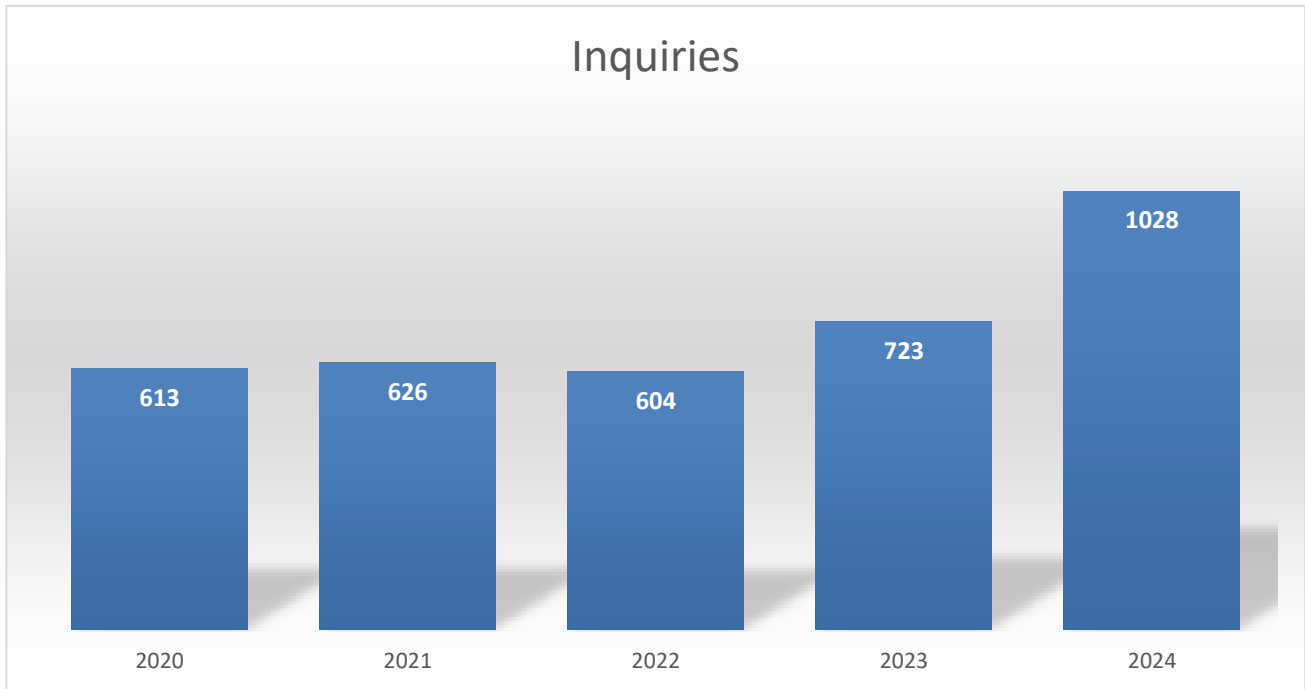
behalf of children in need of DCYF services when the families have been unsuccessful at navigating the system. When appropriate, OCA staff members intervene on behalf of youth requiring DCYF services, either through direct interaction with DCYF or through the Rhode Island Family Court.

Between January 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, the OCA resolved a total of **1,028 inquiries**. This is almost a thirty percent (30%) increase in calls to our office in just a one-year period. The OCA has prioritized increasing our public education in order to make as many people aware of our office, as possible. The OCA will conduct public education with all community partners, including police departments, school departments provider agencies, foster parents, and any other agency providing services to youth and families. Furthermore, the OCA experiences an increase in calls following the release of public reports and legislative testimony.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2024, the OCA received an inquiry outlining the challenges for youth experiencing the juvenile justice system in accessing their birth certificates and obtaining state identification to pursue job opportunities. The OCA brought this issue to DCYF and has worked in collaboration with members of the DCYF team, the DMV, the Rhode Island Department of Health and the Rhode Island Family Court to resolve ensure that youth will have free access to both their birth certificates and state identification. Policies are in the process of being updated to reflect these changes. This has been a long-standing area of need. The process should be finalized in the coming weeks. This is a true example of inter-agency collaboration to address the needs of our youth. The OCA is so thankful for the hard work of all involved to get this accomplished.

Inquiries are assigned to OCA staff members based upon their area of expertise. For instance, if the matter is a legal issue, it will be assigned to an attorney. Inquiries may lead to necessary legal intervention on behalf of a child in state care. Judges frequently refer cases to our office that require immediate attention and closer scrutiny. When referred, 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 to intervene pursuant to our statutory authority.

In analyzing the calls received by the OCA in 2024, 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 the youth appropriately. The continued cause for this issue is Rhode Island's 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.



*This bar graph is a five-year look back on the OCA's inquiries.

E. Reviewing Policies and Procedures

R.I.G.L. § 42-73-7(2) requires that the OCA review the procedures established by DCYF, which carry out their duties under R.I.G.L. § 42-72. Throughout 2024, the OCA reviewed many Department Operating Procedures (DOP) that were updated by the new DCYF Director and the administrative team. In many cases, the OCA does not have the opportunity to review DOPs before they are finalized.

Historically, when DCYF updated a policy, there would be an opportunity for public comment. DCYF now utilizes department operating procedures or DOPs to amend policies and procedures, which DCYF can amend outside of the Administrative Procedures Act under R.I.G.L. § 42-35-1 *et seq.* The OCA has requested with prior administrations, as well as the current administration, for the opportunity to review DOPs prior to being finalized, to provide feedback. DCYF collaborated with the OCA to outline a process for the OCA to review DOPs prior to finalization. On September 30, 2024, the OCA and DCYF agreed on a plan for the OCA to review amended DOPs and provide feedback. DCYF has provided the OCA access to their internal software which includes all of their DOPs. DCYF notifies the OCA when changes have been made to a DOP. If the changes are substantive, the OCA has thirty (30) days to review the DOP and provide feedback.

In 2024, the OCA was notified that DCYF updated DOP 700.0070: Missing or Absent Children and Youth. The OCA provided written feedback to DCYF in thirty (30) days.

Additionally, DCYF made proposed changes to the Foster Care Regulations pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act, as referenced above. The OCA provided comprehensive feedback and subsequently met with DCYF to review our feedback.

Lastly, the OCA was asked to provide feedback on DCYF's Mandated Reporter Manual. While the OCA agrees with all efforts to ensure that members of the public are aware of their obligation as mandatory reporters under the law, the OCA provided feedback with respect to language and accessibility. DCYF did not adopt all of the recommendations provided by the OCA. In response to the feedback, DCYF developed a one-page guide to address mandatory reporting. This is not included in the manual but will be made available to the public.

The OCA will continue to review DOPs as mandated by our statute and provide feedback to DCYF.

Advocacy

A. Legal Advocacy

a. Guardian ad Litem

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 R.I.G.L § 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. R.I.G.L § 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 retain 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, 2024, the OCA represented **fourteen (14)** youth and young adults between the ages of **twelve (12) and twenty (20)**. **Three (3)** of our clients were placed in an out-of-state residential facility. In 2024, there was **one (1)** petition filed in response to a voluntary placement agreement. In 2024, there were **three (3)** voluntary placements agreements accepted by DCYF. A Miscellaneous Petition for **one (1)** youth was filed in 2024 and **two (2)** are due to be filed in 2025. 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.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2024, the OCA worked with the treatment team, DCYF, and family for an adolescent to successfully transition home with their family. This youth had previously required multiple hospitalizations and treatment at a high-end residential treatment facility. Due to the commitment of the family and the thoughtful planning by the treatment team, this youth has been maintained at home for one year.

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 a youth reaches age 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 2024, **six (6)** youth or young adults closed to our office. DCYF filed a Dependency Petition on **one (1) youth** to provide an increased amount of support as his or her plan changed. **Three (3)** young adults turned twenty-one (21) during 2024. **Two (2)** young adults had a plan to transition to adult group homes through BHDDH. **One (1)** young adult had a plan to transition to a shared living arrangement home through BHDDH. **One (1)** youth successfully reunified with their family and closed to DCYF. **One (1)** young adult identified a transitional living home in New Hampshire that his or her family was funding and no longer required the support of DCYF.

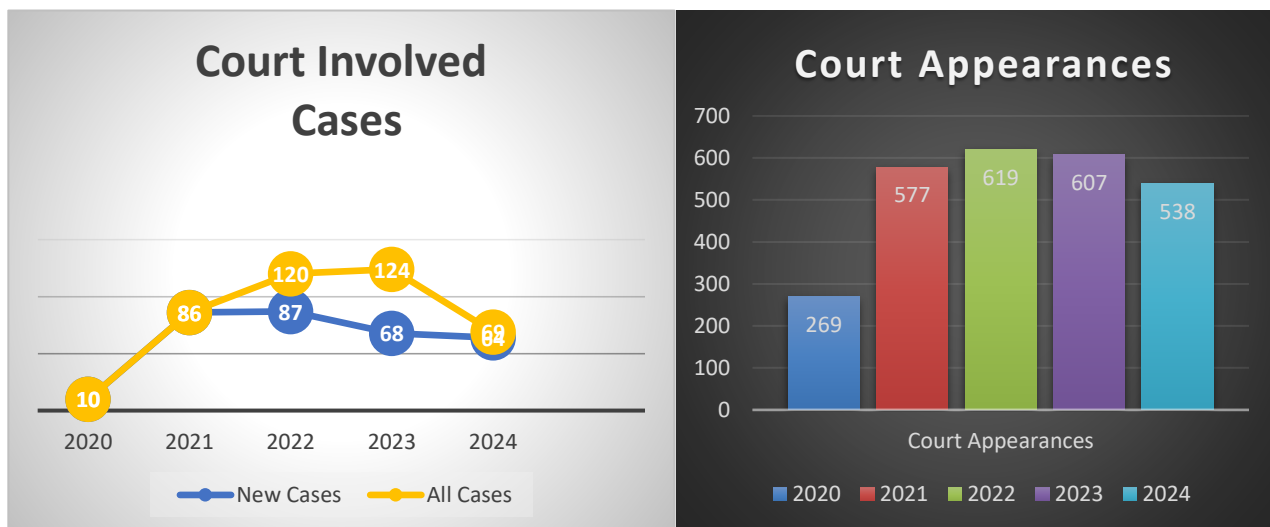
DCYF continues to utilize Residential Treatment Agreements in lieu of Voluntary Placement Agreements. Residential Treatment Agreements allow a family to sign an agreement with DCYF to fund a residential treatment facility for their child, however, the family retains all responsibility to navigate the different systems involved with the support of a Family Navigator. This differs from Voluntary Placement Agreements because families are not assigned a social caseworker from the Family Services Unit who ensures appropriate treatment, attends regular meetings, is responsible for applying for BHDDH, SSI, and making necessary referrals. This level of support can be crucial for a family unfamiliar with these complicated systems. The OCA continues to request the updated Department Operating Procedure that outlines the role of DCYF when families sign a Residential Treatment Agreement. The OCA continues to express concerns with the lack of oversight and support for the child when a

family opts to sign this agreement in lieu of a Voluntary Placement Agreement. The OCA has been requesting an updated policy with regards to cases assigned to Family Navigators without legal status. The OCA began requesting an updated policy in March 2023.

b. Court Involved 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 2024, the OCA intervened in **sixty-four (64) new cases**. We continued involvement in **sixty-nine (69) cases** that opened in previous years. 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 obtains records and attends all meetings and court hearings for these youth and young adults. While the number of court involved cases declined, the complexity of the cases required a steady number of court appearances. In 2024, the OCA attended **five hundred and thirty-eight (538)** court hearings in Rhode Island Family Court. The OCA will continue to provide zealous advocacy for these cases.

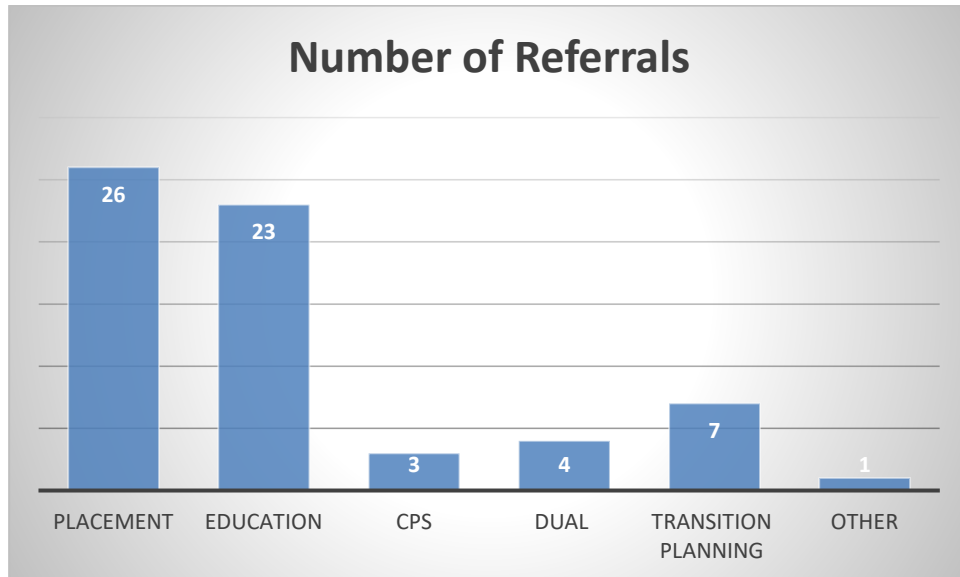
Advocacy Spotlight: In 2024, the OCA continued to provide assistance to a young adult who had been referred to our office in 2022. During 2024, the young adult was hospitalized and unable to return to their previous placement. There was a lot of uncertainty for this young person on their next steps and future. Following many meetings and court hearings, the treatment team, including DCYF, CASA, the OCA, BHDDH, and treatment providers were able to collaborate with a community partner to provide supervision and treatment to assist this young adult in readying themselves to turn twenty-one (21). When they turned twenty-one (21) in 2024, they successfully transitioned to an adult group home through BHDDH.



*This data includes a five-year lookback for our Court Involved Cases and our Court Appearances.

During 2024, the OCA continued to receive court-referred cases, while also closing matters efficiently, due to assisting in a resolution to 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, the OCA has continued to see an increase in referrals due to education related issues to placement, individual education plans (IEP), and 504 plans.



c. 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 currently includes two (2) units each with a supervisor and four (4) social workers.

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 CASA attorney to sign into the VEC program. This document is the Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) which outlines the responsibilities of the young adult and DCYF. The CASA attorney is present to protect the best interests of the young adult and provide clarification as to anything in their legal document. 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.

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 2024, the OCA was appointed to represent **two (2)** young adults as their guardian *ad litem*. **One (1)** young adult closed to our office in 2024, as they turned twenty-one and were no longer eligible to receive assistance

through the VEC program. In addition to being assigned as GAL to certain cases, the OCA attends every VEC hearing for every young adult.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA worked with a young adult and their DCYF worker to stabilize prior to turning twenty-one (21). This young adult had a long history with DCYF and was unable to identify strong natural supports in their family. Throughout their participation in the VEC program, they experienced ups and downs. When they closed to DCYF, they had obtained their GED, enrolled in community college, were working, and were in a safe and appropriate apartment. The VEC program made a huge difference for this young person.

The Rhode Island Family Court hears VEC petitions about one to two times per month. The OCA attended two hundred and eighty-three (283) court hearings to observe the progress of each case, identify systemic issues and provide additional assistance, when appropriate. During 2024, of the hearings the OCA attended, about one hundred and twenty-seven (127) young adults attended court hearings either by phone or by video.

d. Monitor to the Children’s Rights Lawsuit

The OCA was named the Federal Monitor for the Children’s Rights Lawsuit Settlement Agreement. The Settlement Agreement outlines specific thresholds that are required to be met by DCYF to exit each respective benchmark. 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 from DCYF 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 2024, the Monitoring Team analyzed benchmark data and produced **one (1)** report for Reporting Period 12. DCYF has exited from sections 1-10 of the Settlement Agreement. As of the last meeting between all parties and the Monitoring Team on January 13, 2025, the parties are determining next steps related to exiting the settlement agreement in its entirety. The Monitoring Team provided the report to all parties and posted the report on the [OCA website](#) in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement.

The OCA will continue to work closely with the Data Validator to author more report in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement and provide updates to the General Assembly.

e. 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 known 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.”

The OCA is notified when DCYF files Motions for Authorization with the Rhode Island Family Court pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c). Motions for Authorization are primarily for foster homes who are 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 are filed to request that the foster child remain in their current placement and discuss what mitigation steps are necessary to ensure the safety of the children. For example, the installation of smoke detectors or routine lead testing.

Between January 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, DCYF filed foster care motions to address lead and fire safety inspection issues. The OCA was present at *eleven (11)* foster care motion hearings in 2024. At the time of the hearings, some of the lead and fire safety inspections had resolved. All motions were granted.

B. 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.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA supported Budget Amendment 12 to distribute \$1.0 million to Rhode Island College (RIC) Foundation to support a last dollar scholarship program for DCYF involved students exiting the system to attend RIC. As a result, RIC established the [Foster Care Youth Scholarship Program](#) in 2024 to provide financial support to students for tuition, fees, campus housing, meals and more.

During the 2024 legislative session, the OCA participated in various advocacy efforts and testified in support of FY 2026 OCA and DCYF agency budgets, and various pieces of legislation before the General Assembly. Some of the issues the OCA provided testimony for include but are not limited to ensuring comprehensive funding for DCYF’s budget, tuition waivers and higher education opportunities for students in foster care, Olmstead planning commission, caseload limits for DCYF workers, foster parent grievance process, locked suggestion boxes for youth in out-of-state placements, and adding prescriptive language for a comprehensive needs assessment across the children’s behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.

C. Educational Advocacy

In 2023, the OCA advocated for additional FY 2024 funds to upgrade our 10th FTE to function as an educational advocate, dedicated specifically to the improvement of educational outcomes for children in

DCYF care. We are truly thankful for the support of the House and Senate Finance Committees with this request. We hired an Education Coordinator in October 2023, and this has already proven to be a vital asset to our team. The OCA, as the oversight agency to DCYF, is in a unique position to take a holistic approach to the educational advocacy of children in state care by considering their trauma history, clinical needs, familial involvement, and their placement history. The addition of this staff member has provided the OCA with the opportunity to expand our advocacy for youth experiencing barriers with their education. We have received positive feedback from schools, DCYF front line workers, the Rhode Island Family Court, and providers, regarding the support our office has been able to provide to youth in need.

Throughout 2024, the OCA continued to receive an increase in calls regarding educational issues pertaining to students in State care. The OCA has been referred by the Rhode Island Family Court to an increased number of cases requiring legal intervention due to the need for educational advocacy. The primary issues raised in these cases include qualifying for special education services, the provision of special education services, IDEA procedural issues, Section 504 plan issues, and truancy. Access to education is one of the most common issues 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.

Since October 2023, the OCA has provided educational advocacy support for **ninety-five (95)** youth open to DCYF. We successfully resolved **sixty-three (63)** of those cases and are currently providing support for **thirty-two (32)** additional youth. Of the 32 open cases, youth, **nineteen (19)** were referred to our office by the Rhode Island Family Court and **thirteen (13)** cases opened through inquiries to our office.

The OCA works with several state agencies to provide educational support and advocacy for a variety of matters facing youth open to DCYF. Those agencies include DCYF, CASA, Rhode Island Family Court, Drug Court, and local school departments. The goal of our education advocacy is to work collaboratively with various service providers, families and schools to address each youth's individual needs and ensure that they are receiving the educational resources need to ensure their success.

Advocacy Spotlight: The educational advocacy provided by the OCA staff this year has played an important role in ensuring youth open to DCYF are provided the supports they need to be successful in school. In one case, the OCA provided educational advocacy support for a youth with significant psychiatric needs. When a disagreement arose between the youth's clinical team and the school team regarding an appropriate school placement, the OCA held a provider meeting to discuss the concerns. Guided by the medical diagnoses and the best interests of the youth, the OCA staff reached an agreement with the youth's service providers which was later proposed to the school team. Ultimately, the school team concurred with the negotiated position and the youth was placed in an appropriate school placement.

When receiving these calls, the sole focus of the OCA is to ensure that the child resumes their educational services 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 they can make meaningful progress in their education and care. Although the OCA zealously advocates on behalf of children and youth experiencing educational issues, there are systemic issues at play which continue to negatively impact the educational outcomes of children in state care. In fact, data provided in the 2024 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT highlighted that in the class of 2023, only 51% of youth in foster care graduated from high school, in comparison to 84% of all students. This illustrates a desperate need for improvement. The OCA is committed to providing support and advocacy to improving the educational outcomes for all DCYF youth and young adults involved with DCYF.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA was asked to provide educational advocacy support for a youth who had been truant for several years and had a neuropsychological evaluation providing multiple diagnoses that impacted their ability to attend school. When the youth's school declined special education services, the OCA met with the team and made the case that the youth should qualify for special education based on the evidence in the evaluation. The team agreed to qualify the youth, but when that qualification was later scrutinized, the OCA was successful in ensuring that the youth continued to qualify and receive the services needed. The OCA staff worked with the school and DCYF to develop a comprehensive plan designed to return the youth to school on a regular basis.

D. 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 participate in developing 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.

Furthermore, the OCA works collaboratively to advocate for each youth referred to the CSEC MDT. In 2024, the OCA continued to advocate for 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 our office be included.

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 OCA. The advisory committee is comprised of nine (9) highly qualified experts in their field, one of whom has personal experience with the child welfare system as a youth or parent. 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.

In 2024, the OCA Advisory Committee met five (5) times to discuss and advise on many issues plaguing the child welfare, juvenile justice, and children's behavioral health systems in Rhode Island. At the January meeting, the Advisory Committee hosted DCYF Director, Ashley Deckert, to present and answer questions about the vision for the Department under her leadership. Additionally, the Advisory Committee received

updates on the work of the OCA, legislative priorities, systemic updates, updates on the Child Advocate appointment, and discussed various topics including educational advocacy, chronic absenteeism, out-of-state placements, and the continuum of care in Rhode Island. Lastly, the Advisory Committee participated in legislative advocacy in support of additional full time equivalent positions for the OCA and comprehensive funding for DCYF.

To read the Annual Report from the Advisory Committee, please see [Appendix A](#) at the end of this report.

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 Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. 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.

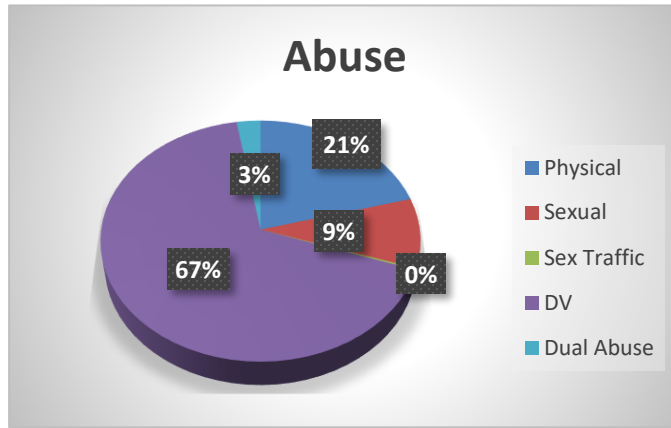
Each month the OCA receives a report from DCYF outlining children who have been a victim of reported physical or sexual abuse or witness domestic violence. Each case is researched to determine if the child may be eligible for funds through the Victim Compensation Program. The OCA continues to educate 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.

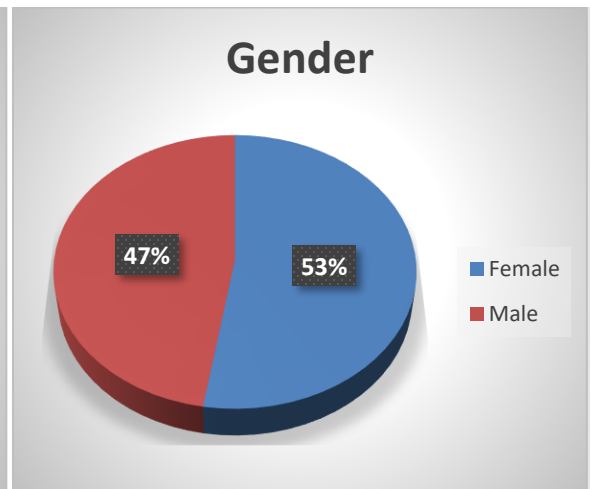
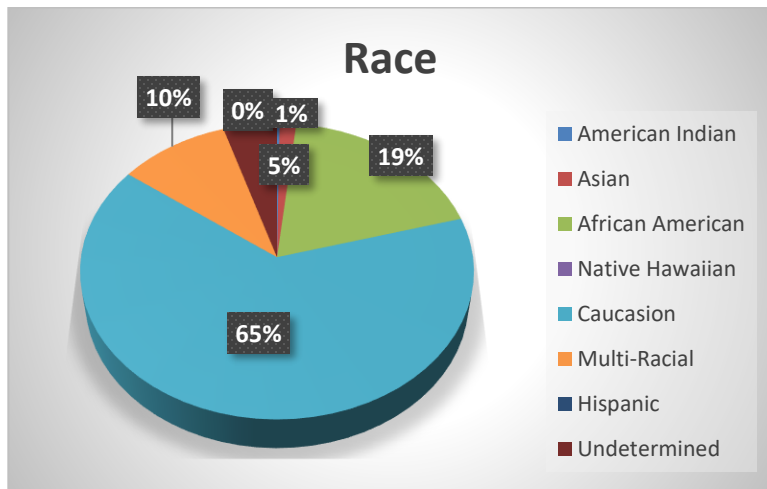
The OCA also reviews claims of institutional abuse to determine whether the allegations meet the criteria for the Victim Compensation Program. Institutional abuse is physical or sexual abuse, which occurred in a facility such as a foster home, group home, the RITS, or the hospital. Additionally, the 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 2024, the OCA referred **one hundred and eighty-one (181) children** for physical abuse, eighty-one

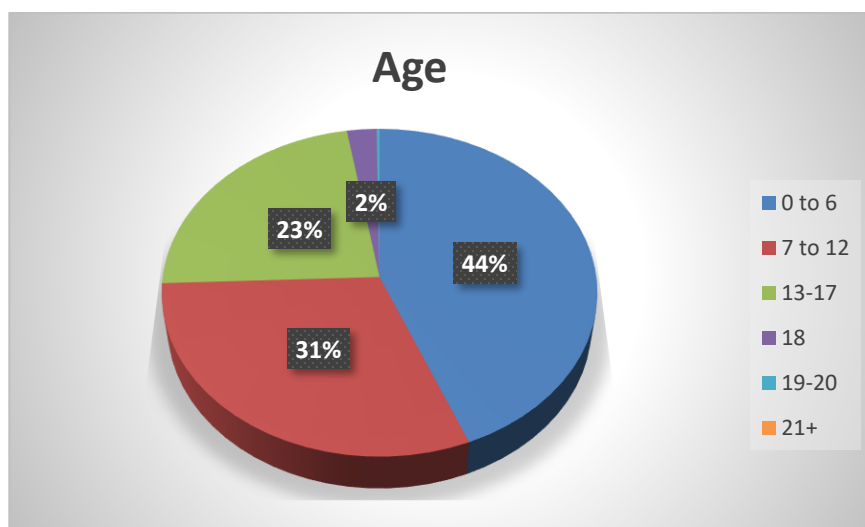
(81) children for sexual abuse, and **two (2) children** specifically for commercial sex trafficking. During 2024, the OCA referred **584 children** for witnessing domestic violence. Our office tracks those who have been victims of more than one type of abuse. In 2024, **twenty-three (23) children** experienced 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.



During 2024, the OCA has referred **413 males** and **458 females** to receive assistance through the Victim Compensation Program. Of the **871 children** referred, **165 children** were African American, **562 children** were Caucasian, **two (2) children** were American Indian, **thirteen (13) children** were Asian, and **eighty-seven (87) children** were Multi-Racial. There were **forty-two (42) children** whose race remains undetermined. The OCA receives the 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 2024, the OCA has referred **two (2)** individuals between nineteen (19) and twenty-one (21), **twenty-two (21)** individuals who were eighteen (18), **two-hundred (200) children** between the ages of thirteen (13) and seventeen (17), two hundred sixty-six (**266) children** between the ages of seven (7) and twelve (12) and **three hundred eighty-two (382) 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. During 2024, we sent out **one hundred thirty-one (131)** 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, 2024, through December 31, 2024, there were approximately **ninety-two (92)** infants born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs whose caregivers were indicated for Physical Abuse: Drug/Alcohol. 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 use. This was outlined in detail in the Child Fatality Review Panel’s Report released in December 2017. The report also specified 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 Rhode Island State Police, to locate these young adults.

Advocacy Spotlight: This family came to the attention of the Department when the police reported an incident of domestic violence witnessed by all three (3) children. The family utilized our office to successfully apply for victim compensation. The OCA assisted in coordinating with the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer to forward all reimbursement claim information that was provided by the caregiver.

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. All three (3) children were 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.

Outreach/Training/Education

A. Public Education

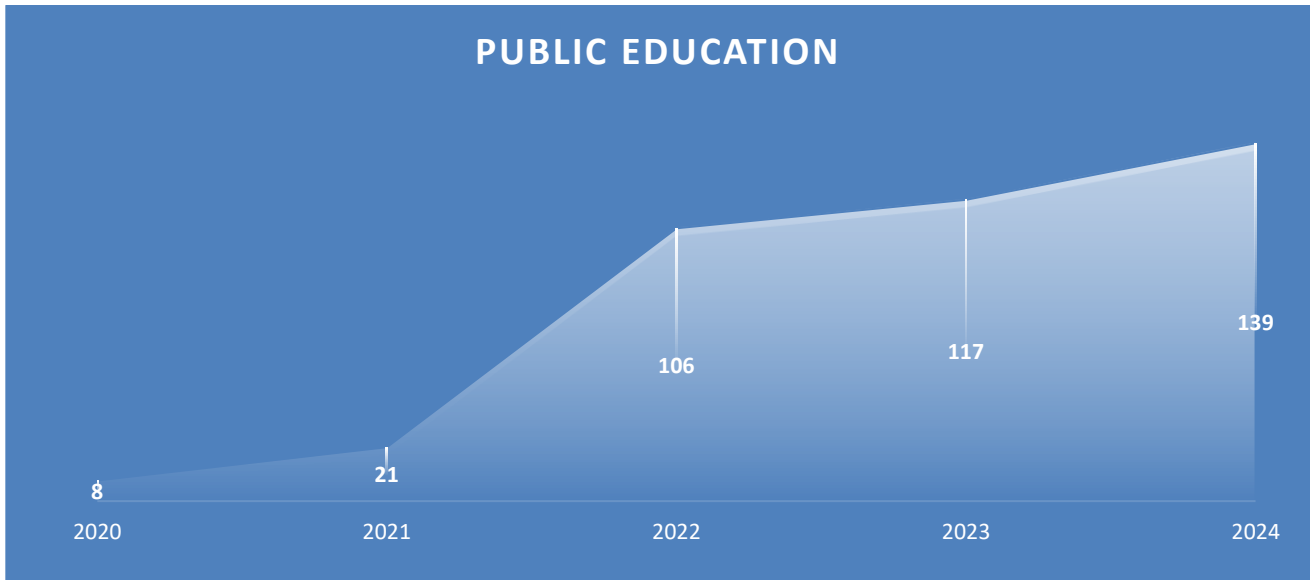
In 2024, the OCA continued efforts to educate the public on the role and responsibilities of our office. The OCA prioritized outreach to school staff, provider agencies contracted with DCYF, and professional organizations. Specifically, the OCA met with several community provider agencies contracted with DCYF to educate new staff about the role of our office and to gain a better understanding of advocacy opportunities for the children served by provider agencies. In addition, the OCA conducted a public education session specifically for foster parents and heard concerns and feedback related to improving the experience of foster parents in Rhode Island with an aim at strengthening recruitment and retention efforts. The OCA will continue to 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 Trainings
- RI Psychological Association
- ARIASE Conference
- RI School Psychologists
- Sargent Rehabilitation Center
- URI Criminal Justice, Psychology, Nursing Students
- Senator Reed and Staff
- Senator Whitehouse and Staff
- Congressman Cicilline and Staff
- Congressman Langevin and Staff
- OCA Advisory Committee – New Membership
- NASW Rhode Island Chapter School Social Worker Conference

During 2024, the OCA gave ***one-hundred and thirty-nine (139)*** public education presentations. On an ongoing basis, 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, the OCA provides informational resources which have been distributed digitally and in print to community members and significantly increased the OCA's presence on social media to share vital resources and information pertaining to children, families, child welfare professionals, state partners, and legislators.

The OCA aims to increase the number of public presentations with a special focus on public schools, community provider agencies, and young people with lived experience in child welfare to further public awareness of the role of our office and share how we can be a resource to members of the public.



*This data includes a five-year lookback for our Public Education.

B. 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
- Human Trafficking Provider/Clinical Subcommittee
- Joint Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care
- State of Rhode Island Child Death Review Team
- LGBTQQ Policy Committee
- 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
- Edward P. Gallogly Inn of Rhode Island Family Court
- Continuity of Care Group
- Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth (Focused on Juvenile Justice and Re-entry)
- Trauma Informed Schools Commission
- Governor’s Council on Behavioral Health – Prevention Advisory Committee
- Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force
- Overdose Task Force
- CJA Task Force
- Court Improvement Project
- Bi-Weekly Youth Transition Meeting

C. 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
- Forensic Interviewing
- Responding to an Unexplained Child Death
- Following the Evidence in Child Abuse/Exploitation Cases
- Child Abuse: From Suspicion to Disclosure
- Minimal Facts Gathering

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

D. 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 a child. The OCA continues to engage in more philanthropic initiatives to improve the quality of life and enhance the experiences children in state care receive.

a. Duffle Bag Bash

In August 2024, the OCA, in collaboration with Adoption Rhode Island and Attorney Lise Iwon, hosted the Ninth 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 \$23,000 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

For most of 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 continued this program throughout 2024.

Additionally, the OCA has utilized gift cards procured from 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 monitor 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.

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 the 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 2024, the OCA continued to receive support from the Caring and Sharing Group at RYCO Creative Sewing Center. They provided another generous donation of **four (4)** 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. Christmas Party

In December 2024, the OCA partnered with Child & Family to hold a Christmas Party at their main office in Middletown for foster families and youth in their care. The party included food, games, arts and crafts, gifts, party favors, a visit from Santa, therapy dogs, and horse drawn carriage rides. This event was a huge success spreading holiday cheer with our agency partners, foster families, and most importantly youth who are involved with DCYF.

E. Media

f. Social Media

The OCA continues to prioritize our Office’s presence on social media, specifically X (previously known as Twitter), in an effort to provide resources to children, families, and child welfare professionals, and to build connections for advocacy and information sharing. During 2024, the OCA increased the total number of followers and shared 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.

X Analytics

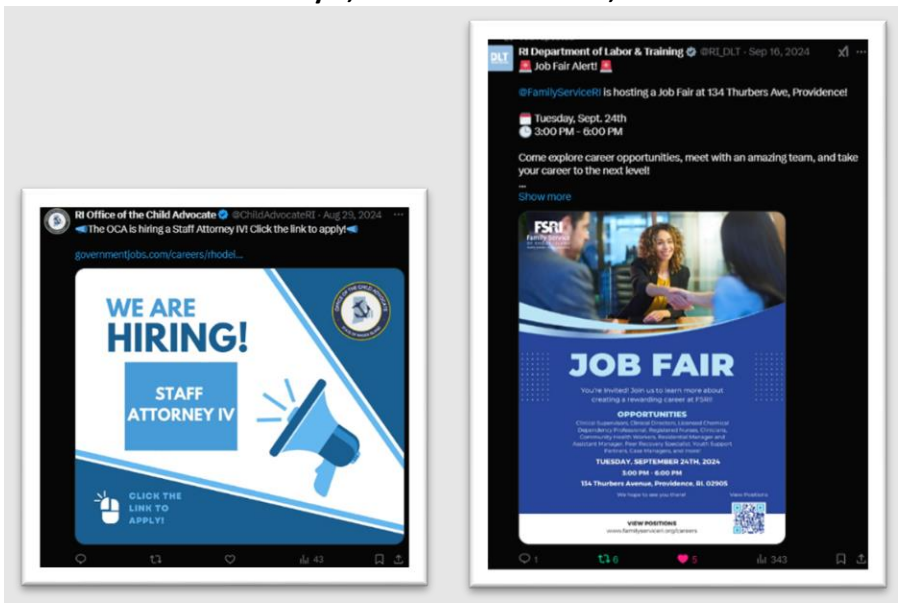
January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024

New Followers	Profile Visits	Replies*	Engagement Rate*	Tweet Impressions
75	2,246	3	8.1%	4,406

*X (formerly known as Twitter) has altered the information provided in analytics therefore the OCA is reporting on two new categories available in the new version of analytics.

X Highlights

January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024



Central Falls @CentralFallsRI · Sep 4, 2024

Are you unemployed or underemployed and interested in starting a career in healthcare? Enroll in the Medical Assistant Certificate program at the RIC HUD (304 Dexter St)

Learn more at: bit.ly/dp47G



MEDICAL ASSISTANT CERTIFICATE OF CONTINUING STUDY

Employment training includes:

- Medical Terminology
- Medical Law and Ethics
- Medical Office Procedures
- Medical Billing and Coding
- Medical Records Management
- Medical Insurance
- Medical Office Management
- Medical Office Safety
- Medical Office Communication
- Medical Office Technology
- Medical Office Customer Service
- Medical Office Infection Control
- Medical Office Quality Improvement
- Medical Office Compliance
- Medical Office Security
- Medical Office Disaster Preparedness
- Medical Office Emergency Response
- Medical Office Crisis Management
- Medical Office Risk Management
- Medical Office Legal Liability
- Medical Office Regulatory Compliance
- Medical Office Accreditation
- Medical Office Certification
- Medical Office Licensure
- Medical Office Credentialing
- Medical Office Credential Maintenance
- Medical Office Credential Renewal
- Medical Office Credential Suspension
- Medical Office Credential Revocation
- Medical Office Credential Appeal
- Medical Office Credential Reinstatement
- Medical Office Credential Reciprocity
- Medical Office Credential Portability
- Medical Office Credential Transfer
- Medical Office Credential Verification
- Medical Office Credential Validation
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- Medical Office Credential Credential Authentication
- Medical Office Credential Credential Authorization
- Medical Office Credential Credential Accreditation
- Medical Office Credential Credential Certification
- Medical Office Credential Credential Licensure
- Medical Office Credential Credential Credentialing

Next Cohort Begins December 2024

Cost for International Students and Fees

Apply now!

Apply to: www.ri.edu

Kelsey Bala @KelseyBala · Aug 13, 2024

Congratulations @ChildAdvocateRI & @AdoptionRI on a fantastic turnout at the Duffle Bag Bash! No child in care should have to move their belongings in undignified ways. New bag. New start. New opportunities ❤️

@RIKidsCount



Lisa Ranglin and Darlene Allen

RI Office of the Child Advoc... @ChildAdvocat... · Aug 13, 2024

The OCA joined @GovDanMcKee @RIHouseofReps @RISenate @ridcyf @RIJudiciary @RIEOHHS @GilbaneBuilding at a groundbreaking ceremony for the new DCYF Female Youth Residential Facility which will provide nuanced clinical and educational services & supports to young women in RI!



RI Department for Children, Youth & Families and 6 others

You reposted

Rhode Island Senate @RISenate · May 30, 2024

Congratulations to Katelyn Medeiros on her appointment as @ChildAdvocateRI.



RISenate SENATE CHAMBER RHODE ISLAND STATE HOUSE THURSDAY | MAY 30 | 2024

RI Office of the Child Advoc... @ChildAdvocat... · May 14, 2024

Thank you to @JulieCasimiroRI @AdoptionRI @tidesfamilysvs @CaseyPrograms @NCSLorg for convening advocates and legislative champions for the Child Welfare & Child Well-Being Leadership Summit!



Family Service of RI @FamilyServiceRI · Jun 7, 2024

Join us on July 30, 2024, at RI College for the "Advancing Equity in Child Welfare" conference. Learn more or register today! bit.ly/4aRIMxa

FSRI Family Service OF RHODE ISLAND Family Service - RI's voice

JOIN US FOR THE **ADVANCING EQUITY IN CHILD WELFARE CONFERENCE**

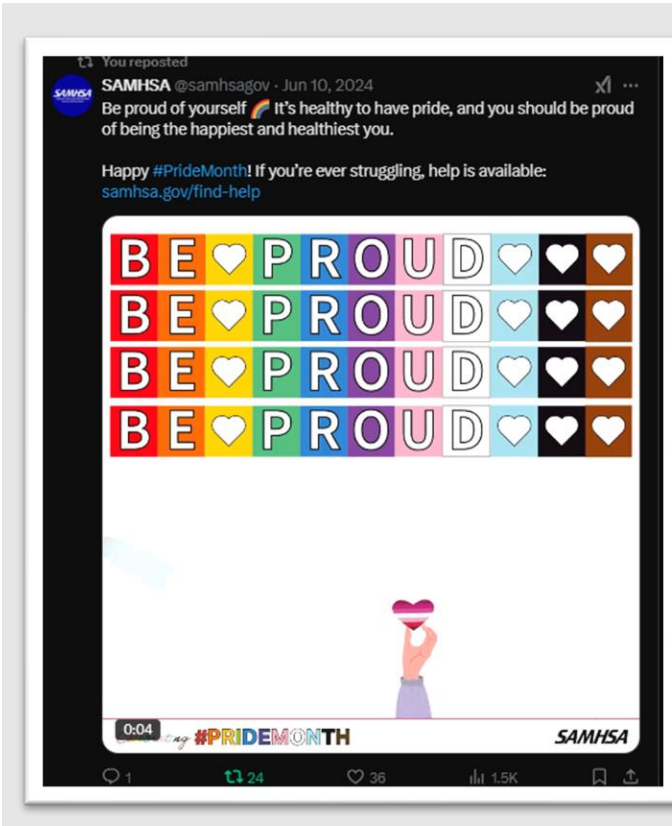
Keynote Speaker
Ernestine Briggs-King, PhD

We are thrilled to announce our distinguished keynote speaker, Dr. Ernestine Briggs-King, an esteemed authority in the field of child psychology, trauma, and wellness.

July 30, 2024 - 8:00a-12:30p
Rhode Island College, Gage Hall

Hosted in partnership with
DCYF RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

Register online
www.familyserviceofri.org/advancing-equity/



g. OCA in the Media

[St. Mary's Home for Children closing its psychiatric residential facility in R.I., moving all children out by June 7](#)

[St. Mary's Home for Children interim CEO calls report 'beyond disturbing' as he focuses on improving staffing conditions](#)

[Institutionalized in R.I.: A thousand nights stuck in a system that fails kids](#)

[Rhode Island to remove residents from St. Mary's Home for Children 'as soon as possible'](#)

['He's no safer there than he is at home': One family's nightmare at St. Mary's Home for Children](#)
[Marianne Raimondo on what's needed to turn around embattled St. Mary's Home for Children](#)
[St. Mary's Home for Children announces new leadership team](#)

[Weekly Roundup: Key Developments in Rhode Island's General Assembly \(Jan 22-26\)](#)

[Children's home in Rhode Island under fire after report shows assaults, neglect, and biker gang on campus](#)

['This is inhumane': ACLU, parents slam RI youth mental health system in new lawsuit. What it says.](#)

[What comes next for DCYF after U.S. Attorney's scathing accusations? Here's a look.](#)

[DCYF discloses near fatality of 13-month-old](#)

[Top 10 stories of 2024 in Rhode Island](#)

[RI DCYF discloses death of 18-year-old](#)

[After 147 years, St. Mary's Home for Children cuts remaining services](#)

[Troubled St. Mary's Home for Children under new management. Here's what to know.](#)

[DCYF is removing its kids from St. Mary's Home for Children. What comes next?](#)

[Advocates call for new cabinet-level state agency to oversee children's behavioral health](#)

[Why DCYF tolerates abusive institutions: Ashley Deckert says the quiet part out loud](#)

[Lawsuit says R.I. is 'failing' kids with serious mental, behavioral health needs](#)

[Feds: R.I. child welfare agency warehoused vulnerable kids in hospital for months, even years](#)

[Months after a bombshell report, St. Mary's Home for Children responds to accusations](#)

['We trusted them to care for our neediest, most vulnerable children. And they failed.'](#)

[Overdoses, assault and restraints: Inside a damning report on St. Mary's Home for Children](#)

[NBC 10 I-Team: Scathing report no surprise to some for St. Mary's](#)

[Abrupt closure of St. Mary's Home for Children leaves families of vulnerable Rhode Island kids looking for answers](#)

['Appalling': Feds accuse RI DCYF of 'warehousing' children at Bradley Hospital. What to know.](#)
[Child Advocate nominee praised for commitment to improving the child welfare system](#)

[Nonprofit says it will operate St. Mary's Home for Children in North Providence](#)

[Gov. Dan McKee nominates interim child advocate to fill role permanently](#)

[Governor McKee nominates Wayne Salisbury, Jr. to lead the Rhode Island Department of Corrections and Katelyn Medeiros as the next Child Advocate](#)

[DCYF was warned about leaving kids in psychiatric hospitals for months. Here's a look back.](#)

[Gov. McKee nominates Acting Child Advocate Katelyn Medeiros to be new director](#)

[Office of the Child Advocate report details alleged abuse, neglect at St. Mary's Home for Children](#)

[Rhode Island's new Child Advocate: 'we have a lot to accomplish'](#)

[News | Federal Lawsuit Filed Against RI Child Advocate to Obtain St. Mary's Investigation Information](#)

[Office of Child Advocate faults St. Mary's Home for Children for 'minimal solutions'](#)

APPENDIX A

ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE ANNUAL REPORT 2024

R.I.G.L § 42-72-2.1 established an Advisory Committee for the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to be composed of local professionals who would advise and support the Child Advocate, e.g., to review and assess patterns of treatment and services, policy implications and necessary systemic improvements.

Committee Membership

During 2024, as per statute, the Committee was composed of a diverse group of individuals appointed by either their respective professional entity or appointed directly by the Child Advocate:

Appointed by the Rhode Island Medical Society
Linda Shaw, MD, MSSW - Chair

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Ken Fandetti, MSSS - Vice Chair

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Mary Archibald, Ph.D.

Appointed by the Rhode Island Medical Society
Tanuja Gandhi, MD, FAPA

Appointed by the Rhode Island Bar Association
Lise Iwon, Esquire

Appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court
Lia Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice

Appointed by the Rhode Island Psychological Association
Catherine Vieira-Baker, Ph.D.

Appointed by the National Association of Social Workers Rhode Island Chapter
Amy Mello Messenger, LCSW

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Rachel Briggs

2024 Meetings

The Advisory Committee met on the following dates during 2024: January 31, March 30, July 17, October 30, and December 12.

The Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) Director, Ashley Deckert, attended the first meeting on January 31, 2024, and presented DCYF's 2024 goals. The Committee discussed the presentation, asked questions, and assured the Director of our eagerness to improve the wellbeing of children and families in Rhode Island.

At each meeting the Child Advocate updated the Committee on important issues the Office was addressing. For example, we discussed legislative priorities, Child Fatality Review Panel recommendations for the past several years, the lack of in-state psychiatric residential placement capacity for youth, the OCA's investigation and ultimate closing of St. Mary's Home for Children, the need for a comprehensive plan for children's behavioral health and the OCA's strategic planning for 2025. The Committee provided specific feedback around reviewing the Child Fatality Review Panel recommendations, the role of the OCA's Education Coordinator, and chronic absenteeism regarding the Rhode Island Training School.

In March of 2024, the Committee provided testimony to the House and Senate Finance Committees, strongly supporting the budget request by the OCA for additional staff. Our advising role had given us the opportunity to understand the multiple demanding and extensive responsibilities the OCA is mandated to undertake and the great value of adequate staff to accomplish these mandates.

Advisory Committee Goals for 2025

The OCA is charged with fulfilling a statutory mandate to protect the legal, civil and special rights of all children and youth involved in the care of the Department of Children, Youth and Families. The OCA's work is broad, including oversight of DCYF licensed facilities and legal representation for some children voluntarily placed in state care and in the VEC program. The OCA's multiple responsibilities also focus on reviewing procedures established by DCYF as well as orders for the Rhode Island Family Court relating to children, and investigating circumstances relating to the death of any child who has received services from DCYF.

In order to advise and support the OCA in these and its other important roles of public education, monitoring, and legislative advocacy, the Advisory Committee will strive to:

1. Stay abreast in our individual areas of expertise to best advise OCA regarding their mandates.
2. Attend the majority of meetings in person. If unable to attend, provide counsel on pertinent issues, per upcoming agenda, prior to meetings.
3. Review OCA updates to the Committee between meetings, providing timely feedback when requested.
4. Study Committee minutes, informational materials and agendas prior to meetings, in preparation of meeting discussions and feedback for OCA.
5. Stay informed of Rhode Island and national news and trends related to child wellbeing and child maltreatment.