

**Office of the Child Advocate
Annual Report
2021**



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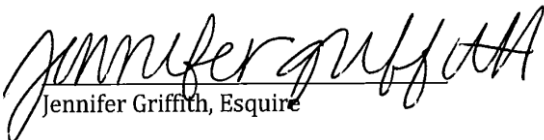
Introduction

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

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

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

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


Jennifer Griffith, Esquire

Mission Statement

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

Statutory Authority

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

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

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

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

(10) Investigate institutional abuse complaints;

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

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

(13) To apply for and accepts grants.

Staff

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

The hard work and dedication of the OCA staff over the past year should be acknowledged. The OCA experienced some staff shortages throughout 2021. The OCA experienced a loss in funding, which prevented us from filling our current vacancies. However, the OCA staff worked diligently to ensure that the statutory mandate of the office was fulfilled and to advocate for children in state care during a time when it was most needed.

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

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

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

The Child Advocate

Jennifer Griffith, Esquire

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

Assistant Child Advocate

Katelyn Medeiros, Esquire

Katelyn has worked as the Staff Attorney III for the Office of the Child Advocate since May 2014. In February 2017, Ms. Medeiros was promoted to serve as the Assistant Child Advocate. Ms. Medeiros graduated *summa cum laude* from Rhode Island College in 2010 with a Bachelor's Degree in Justice Studies and Sociology. She then pursued her Juris Doctorate at Roger Williams School of Law, graduating *magna cum laude* in 2013. In addition, she was a member of the Roger Williams School of the Law Honors Program. 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 first worked for the OCA from 2012-2013 as a Rule 9 Intern. She worked in private practice prior to her career with the OCA. Katelyn currently serves as a member of the OCA Advisory Committee and the OCA Child Fatality Review Panel. Also, Ms. Medeiros serves as the program director for Project Victim Services for the Office of the Child Advocate, providing assistance to children who have been victims of abuse, trafficking or witnesses to domestic violence. The OCA was named as the monitor to the Children's Rights Federal Lawsuit. Ms. Medeiros serves as one of the attorneys overseeing this lawsuit, ensuring DCYF's compliance.

Staff Attorney III

Diana Robbins, Esquire

Ms. Robbins joined the OCA Staff in May 2017 as the Staff Attorney and the Case Manager of the child victim compensation cases. She received her Bachelor of Arts & Sciences Degree in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Ms. Robbins graduated *cum laude* 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 managed the phone-a-thon 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.

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 also 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 to 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 for Youth (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, Former Executive Board Member of the RI Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Former Legislative Field Advocate for AFSP.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jacqueline Sanchez

Jacqueline Sanchez 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 Rhode Island Training School for Youth (RITS) from 2007 to 2017. There, Jacqueline worked to provide the custody, supervision, and security of detained youths, including assisting in the rehabilitation, education, treatment, care, and control of the residents. Jacqueline is serving as a Member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, a Member of the Human Trafficking Task Force, and a Member of the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center. Jacqueline is certified in Forensic Interviewing of Children and has completed several trainings and certifications related to Commercially Sexually Exploited Children.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jimmy Vilayvanh

Jimmy Vilayvanh is currently one of our Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists at the OCA. Prior to Joining the OCA Staff in October of 2018, he worked for the Department of Children Youth & Families (DCYF) in Juvenile Probation. There, Jimmy worked closely with pre-adjudicated youth involved in the family court system providing supervision for young men and women on home confinement with electronic monitoring. Prior to working for DCYF, Jimmy was also a Program Director for Outreach and Tracking at Tides Family Services for 7 years. His primary responsibility was to oversee the relationship with Tides Family Services and the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). There, he assisted with transition planning for youth to re-enter back into the community. The focus of the program was to assist youth to meet their conditions of Juvenile Probation while focusing on their

educational needs, mental health services and daily life skills. Jimmy remains an involved member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, The Continuity of Care group and the Coalition to support Rhode Island Youth. Jimmy is certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid and has completed training on Implementing an Effective Multidisciplinary Team Response to Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

Public Education and Information Coordinator

Kara A. Foley, MSW

Kara Foley is the Public Education and Information Coordinator at the OCA. Ms. Foley earned a Master of Social Work Degree with a Macro Concentration from Rhode Island College and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology with a minor in Psychology from Simmons University. She also completed a policy fellowship through The Women's Fund of Rhode Island's Women's Policy Institute in 2012. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2019, Ms. Foley served as a Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT where she was responsible for policy analysis, research, and writing on issues related to child welfare, child abuse and neglect, children in care of DYCF, adoption and permanency, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth referred to Rhode Island Family Court, youth at the Rhode Island Training School, 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. Ms. Foley serves as a member of the OCA Advisory Committee, a member of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Education Subcommittee, a member of the Community Engagement and Education and Employment subcommittees of the Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth, a member of the American Adoption Congress, and for more than ten years has volunteered as a guest speaker at foster/adoptive parent licensing trainings.

Confidential Secretary

Taylor Camirand

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

The Office of the Child Advocate is hopeful to receive funding to fill at least one (1) of our (2) vacancies.

Office Activities

A. OCA Oversight to Child Protective Services

a. CPS Log/Screen Outs/Prevention Services

In September 2020, DCYF initiated the Screening and Response Unit (SRU). The Department Operating Procedure (DOP) regarding this unit focuses specifically on assisting families that may need or want community services. According to the DOP, cases do not remain in the SRU for a lengthy period of time and are voluntary. The DOP also states, if a call is made to the CPS Hotline that does not meet criteria for an investigation the caller is referred to the SRU Hotline phone number to request assistance in obtaining services. While a Family Functioning Assessment (FFA) may be completed by an SRU worker, the FFA is not required. The SRU Hotline is not a recorded line and daily calls are not documented. As there is still much to learn with respect to the SRU the OCA continues to monitor and review the DOP into 2021.

On or about November 2020, the Department began using what is called a Prevention Response in addition to Screen Outs when a call to the child protection hotline does not meet criteria for an investigation. Additionally, the Screening and Response Unit was initiated and functions like the old "Intake" Unit that was disbanded under former Director. Additionally, the "Task" option was also disbanded under the former Director and has since been reinstated for situations warranting face to face contact with a family.

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

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

b. Investigations and Institutional Abuse

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

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

further investigation. If so, the OCA staff will follow up with the Department to provide them with an opportunity to complete their own investigation. However, should the Department deny the opportunity to review, the OCA staff completes their own independent investigation of the allegations.

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

c. **Critical Event Reviews**

Critical Event Reviews (CER) are conducted when a near death, death or serious situation involving children warrants a further review. In 2020, there were approximately **twenty-one (21)** critical events conducted by DCYF, all of which the OCA was invited to and participated. None of the critical events required or qualified for a full investigation or separate independent investigation by the OCA.

B. Inquiries

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

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

Between January 1, 2021-December 31, 2021, the OCA resolved a total of **626 inquiries**. The OCA continues to receive an influx of calls. We attribute this to the ongoing public education effectuated by our staff regarding the role of the OCA. This has been provided to various agencies, police departments, school social workers, attorneys, and school departments. Furthermore, the OCA experiences an increase in calls following the release of public reports and testimony.

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

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

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

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

C. Systemic Trends and Issues

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

a. Referral Process/Procedure

The OCA has 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 the child's needs and best interests are not being met. The ongoing cause for this issue is a lack of appropriate service array to meet the needs of the youth in State care (discussed further in following section), untimely referrals and inappropriate referrals. Youth awaiting placement in a hospital setting is a clear violation of the Children's Bill of Rights. Children have the right to be in the least restrictive placement that meets their needs. Hospitals should be used as a short term stay for children with acute needs and once the child stabilizes the goal is to move the child to a less restrictive setting. Furthermore, failure to adequately assess the needs of a child and placing a child in an inappropriate placement creates risk to that child and others.

This prompted an in-depth review of DCYF's referral practices and procedures. In 2019, the OCA began the process of reviewing the Children's Behavioral Health Unit/Central Referral Unit (CBH/CRU) Placement Unit practices and procedures. When COVID-19 hit, the OCA was unable to review the practices as all in-state and out-of-state placements were not accepting new youth into their programs. On or around July 2020 in-state and out-of-state programs began accepting referrals for placement requests. As of September 2020, the OCA requested to be notified of all Placement Referrals for any youth entering congregate care. The goal behind this request is to ensure children are being referred to appropriate placements that are able to meet their needs, address all clinical treatment, keep youth safe, and work effectively with a team to ensure the child's best interests are being met daily. The OCA also requested to be notified of any placement changes, including closure of programs, development of new programs, or changes to the services of existing programs. The OCA continues to be met with resistance from the Administrators of this Unit to be kept apprised and notified of changes in a timely manner.

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

Reviews of these cases have led to increased advocacy. The OCA has collaborated with CASA, relevant services providers and DCYF workers regarding this issue. This issue has also led to increased legal intervention. The OCA will continue to advocate for expedited and appropriate referrals to ensure that the needs of children in state care are being met.

b. Children's Behavioral Health

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

The OCA has continued to see significant decline in substance abuse and alcohol abuse treatment for youth after DCYF discontinued their contracts with agencies providing such supports to youth. The residential substance abuse treatment programs formerly available to youth in DCYF care provided group treatment with their peers, specifically geared toward the adolescent population, and in collaboration with placements treating co-occurring disorders. In 2021, the OCA was involved with multiple cases where the youth or young adult had co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders which were making it difficult for them to be successful in school and their supportive relationships.

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

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

An ongoing barrier to success of our young adult population is that lack of natural supports in the community when they are transitioning out of the child welfare system. While providers and DCYF can provide support when they are open to DCYF, there are gaps in this support when a DCYF is closed to a young adult. In 2021, the OCA continued to advocate for mentors and appropriate, supportive adults to be identified for youth in care, as young as fourteen (14), even if they are unable to provide placement. These long-term relationships will support and foster success when a young adult ages out of the child welfare system.

The OCA has continued to bring attention to the inequitable care provided to girls in Rhode Island. The OCA is committed to the development of a high-end residential program for girls coping with significant mental health issues and trauma, and/or who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. Additionally, the OCA is committed to the development of teen parenting programs in Rhode Island to ensure the success of young women and their children. These vulnerable populations of youth and young adults are continuously sent to programs out-of-state or have been held at the Rhode Island Training School for their safety. Keeping these young parents in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for their success. The OCA is committed to creating this programming for girls and young women in Rhode Island. In 2021, the Child Advocate and Assistant Child Advocate met with legislators, DCYF, and the Rhode Island Family Court on an ongoing basis to ensure that efforts were being made to create appropriate and adequate programming for females. Additionally, efforts were made to identify buildings, land, and communities where this program could be physically created in Rhode Island.

While all of these programs are crucial in a diverse and comprehensive service array, DCYF is struggling to place all youth and young adults in appropriate settings that can meet their individual needs. There were a significant number of youth and young adults languishing in hospital settings that the OCA advocated for in 2021. These youth and young adults are ready for discharge and simply have no place to go. The OCA zealously advocated in Rhode Island Family Court for DCYF to create the programs in Rhode Island that are crucial for the success of our youth and young adults. Additionally, this will prevent DCYF from making referrals to treatment programs outside of Rhode Island. When youth and young adults are sent far away to engage in services that can be provided in Rhode Island, DCYF is removing them from their family, their school, and their community.

c. Educational Advocacy

Throughout 2021, the OCA continued to receive an increase in calls regarding educational issues pertaining to students in State care. The OCA has been appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court to an increased number of cases requiring legal intervention and educational advocacy. The issues reported were specific to school enrollment, placement, issues related to IEP and 504 plans, and educational access. Access to education is the most common issue referred to the OCA. This is due to issues including access to education while languishing in a hospital setting, untimely registration, scheduling an ESSA call, conflicts

between school districts about who is responsible for the child, and issues regarding the ability of the school to meet the child's need. Following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were distance learning, the OCA experienced an increase in case referrals where children were refusing to go back to school due to their mental health. The OCA advocates for the supportive services necessary to ensure they feel safe and successful in school. When receiving these calls, the sole focus of the OCA is to ensure that the child begins to receive an education as quickly as possible to prevent any further disruption in their academics. Additionally, the OCA provides advocacy regarding a child's educational planning and supportive services both in and out-of-school to ensure a child can make meaningful progress in their education while in care. It is our hope to continue to expand our involvement with educational advocacy in an attempt to improve educational outcomes for youth in State care.

d. Access to Affordable Housing

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

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

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

In collaboration with Rhode Island Housing, DCYF, and Foster Forward, the OCA held a presentation on June 15, 2021 to provide an overview of the FYI program, DCYF's referral process, and Foster Forward's supportive services for the program. We invited 125 stakeholders, including members of the General Assembly, community providers, and staff from DCYF. **Eighty (80)** individuals registered for the event, many of whom included questions with their registration which were answered these during the event. The webinar was recorded and was emailed along with follow-up documentation to **one hundred and seventy-one (171)** stakeholders. We encouraged all recipients to share the information with their respective colleagues.

Towards the end of the year, with many transition age young adults exiting foster care, the OCA met with DCYF and Rhode Island Housing to obtain information about Rent Relief RI, which provides income-based rent relief to individuals for up to thirty-six (36) months. The OCA attended informational sessions

to learn how DCYF and Rhode Island Housing were going to ensure that our transition age young adults could engage in the application process and obtain this rent relief.

e. Review, Evaluate, Decide (RED) Team

In 2021, OCA staff attended **thirty-two (32)** weekly RED Team meetings facilitated by DCYF. DCYF's RED Team brings together DCYF workers, supervisors, and administrators, and community provider staff to review recommendations to place more than two unrelated children in a foster family placement, any child's placement that would cause the family to exceed the maximum number of children allowed in a single placement to more than five children, and any congregate care placement for youth under age 12.

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

f. Residential Treatment Agreements

The steady decline of voluntary placements for children in Rhode Island is due to the development of a new program initiated by a former DCYF Director, in which the family signs a Residential Treatment Agreement, as opposed to the Voluntary Placement Agreement. DCYF now provides parents with the option to open to DCYF for the purpose of funding placement through the CBH unit. The CBH Unit places children in residential facilities licensed by DCYF without oversight by their Family Services Unit (FSU) and the Rhode Island Family Court. Without a petition filed on behalf of these children, the OCA is not appointed as the Guardian *ad litem* in these cases. Parents are responsible for ensuring that the needs of their child are being met and for advocating to DCYF what is in their child's best interest. Currently, **three (3)** youth are having their needs assessed by the CBH Unit. There are **fourteen (14)** youth and young adults awaiting placement and **twenty-eight (28)** youth and young adults in residential placement. Of these youth and young adults, at least **fourteen (14)** are placed out of state. Of the **forty-two (42)** youth and young adults awaiting or in residential placement, **twenty-three (23)** are diagnosed with an intellectual developmental disability and **nineteen (19)** are youth determined to have a serious emotional disturbance. The OCA continues to monitor children placed outside the home by DCYF who are not currently overseen by the Rhode Island Family Court. These youth and young adults may remain in placement until age twenty-one (21) and will transition to adult services. R.I.G.L affords protections to young adults transitioning to adult services, including opportunities to be heard in Rhode Island Family Court to ensure that all state agencies involved in their care are thoughtfully planning for their transition. These protections are not afforded to young adults and their families who are not overseen by the Rhode Island Family Court.

While these youth and young adults have parents who are great advocates, parents do not have specialized knowledge of the DCYF child welfare system, the state benefits systems, and the residential placements where their child may reside. There are limitations to the services that are provided by the case workers in the CBH unit. They do not assist with transportation for visitation, applying for adult services, or applying for Social Security. These tasks are left up to the parents and if the parents are unable to, or do not complete these tasks, the youth or young adult is the one who faces the consequences. These are complicated systems that DCYF has the specialized knowledge to navigate through their trained social

caseworkers. Additionally, these children cannot benefit from the appointment of an educational advocate. When a child is placed out of the home, stability in education is crucial and it can be difficult for a parent to understand the dynamics between the child welfare system and their child's education. An ongoing issue that we are facing in Rhode Island right now is the lack of appropriate placements and services for our most vulnerable population, youth in the foster care system. A child may be admitted to the hospital with a clinical recommendation that the child requires a residential treatment level of care. When DCYF is unable to place that child in an appropriate placement, the child will languish in the hospital for an unknown length of time. This includes youth and young adults languishing in medical or psychiatric hospitals, or hospital step down programs. Currently, there are **twelve (12)** youth or young adults in these settings awaiting residential placements. There is no oversight by the Rhode Island Family Court for these children, no advocacy for these children by a trained guardian *ad litem*, and no recourse for families to appropriately advocate for their children. The OCA will continue to advocate for this population, ensure that parents are aware of their options, and advocate that DCYF create a system where all children are afforded the same rights when they are placed outside of their home.

D. Voluntary Placements

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

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

In our role as Guardian *ad litem*, an OCA attorney appears on behalf of, or alongside, the child in court hearings and monitors DCYF's compliance with case planning and permanency goals. The OCA tracks the child's progress in placement, visits the child, and attends treatment team, educational, and discharge planning meetings. For each court date, an OCA attorney provides an updated letter to the Rhode Island Family Court detailing any pertinent information regarding the child's treatment, education, and any additional information that would be vital for the Court to be advised of. The OCA proposes recommendations to promote the best interests of the child and ensures that progress is made in a child's

identified treatment and permanency goals. Should an issue arise, the OCA advocates on behalf of the child and if necessary, files a motion in Rhode Island Family Court. As of December 31, 2021, the OCA represents **thirty (30)** youth and young adults between the ages of **thirteen (13) and twenty (20)**. **Six (6)** of our clients are placed in an out-of-state residential facility. In 2021, there were **four (4)** petitions filed in response to a voluntary placement agreement. In 2021, there were **four (4)** voluntary placement agreements accepted by DCYF. The OCA begins their involvement with these cases when they are accepted and ensure that Miscellaneous Petitions are filed timely. The OCA will be appointed as Guardian *ad litem* when the petition is accepted by the Rhode Island Family Court.

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

The OCA communicates with BHDDH through 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. The OCA continues to discuss this issue internally, with DCYF, and BHDDH to come up with solutions to this problem.

During 2021, **twelve (12)** youth or young adults closed to our office. **One (1)** youth successfully reunified with their mother and remained stable for six (6) months. **Two (2)** young adults successfully transitioned to their own apartment to live independently. **Three (3)** young adults successfully transitioned to an adult group home supported by BHDDH. **One (1)** young adult is living in a shared living arrangement with family supported by BHDDH. **Five (5)** young adults remain in their DCYF supported group home. Due to issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as staffing, retention, and day programming, BHDDH experienced difficulty transitioning these young adults timely. While the Rhode Island Family Court may no longer have statutory jurisdiction due to the ages of these young adults, the OCA continues to work with the families, DCYF, BHDDH, and the school departments to ensure successful transition.

In 2021, there were **four (4)** petitions filed in response to Voluntary Placement Agreements. The continued decline in petitions is discussed at length in the section dedicated to systemic trends and issues.

E. Voluntary Extension of Care

In July 2018, the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program was passed by the General Assembly, which allows DCYF to provide services and supports to young adults from age eighteen (18) to age twenty-one (21). This legislation took effect July 1, 2018. DCYF established the Youth Development Services (YDS) Unit which included six (6) social caseworkers and two (2) supervisors. During 2021, an additional supervisor and social caseworker were added to the YDS Unit to assist with the growing number for VEC participants.

Prior to 2021, VEC Interagency Meetings, which included all state agencies, took place to discuss the ongoing barriers to success for VEC participants. In 2021, these meetings became focused on specific issues and were renamed VEC Core Team Meetings which took place on a weekly and then biweekly basis. Some of the issues discussed in these meetings were educational and vocational opportunities, and obstacles for VEC participants. The OCA worked closely with DCYF, the Rhode Island Family Court, community providers, and the Department of Labor and Training (DLT) on streamlining referral processes, developed flyers for support opportunities through the federal Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA), and created a comprehensive document outlining services, supports, educational and training opportunities available through CAA.

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

During 2021, the Rhode Island Family Court approved **sixty (60)** young adults for the VEC program. At the initial VEC hearing, the Rhode Island Family Court makes a series of findings establishing that the young adult executed their VPA freely and voluntarily, that they meet the eligibility requirements, that they met with the CASA attorney to discuss, and that entering this program will be in their best interest. Additionally, the Rhode Island Family Court appoints CASA to represent the young adult. Once appointed, the CASA attorney will attend all court hearings, communicate with the YDS worker about their clients' progress, and advocate for what is in their client's best interest.

At times, there is a conflict of interest, which prohibits CASA from representing the young adult on their VEC petition. In these cases, the OCA is appointed to represent the young adult on their VEC petition. In 2021, the OCA was appointed to represent **three (3)** young adults as their guardian *ad litem*. **Eight (8)** clients of the OCA closed in 2021. **One (1)** young adult closed because he moved out-of-state to live with his family. **One (1)** young adult obtained a good paying full-time job with overtime opportunities. They presented to the court that they no longer wanted to be involved with DCYF. This is a voluntary process, and the Court closed the case. **One (1)** young adult moved to another state, and we were unable to get in contact with her. The OCA advocated to keep this matter open, however, after many months of contact, the Court closed the case. **One (1)** young adult closed on their twenty-first (21st) birthday. **Four (4)** young adults closed on September 30, 2021. These young adults qualified for an extension for their

involvement with the VEC program due the CAA that was passed in December 2020. Additionally, all former clients of the OCA qualify for continued assistance with the rent and case management even though they are no longer open to the Rhode Island Family Court and DCYF.

The Rhode Island Family Court hears VEC petitions one (1) time per week. The OCA attended **three hundred and twenty-one (321)** court hearings to observe the progress of each case, identify systemic issues and provide additional assistance, when appropriate. During 2021, **one hundred and eighty-nine (189)** young adults attended court hearings either by phone or by video. The OCA participated in **thirty-five (35)** meetings for VEC participants who were not appointed to our office.

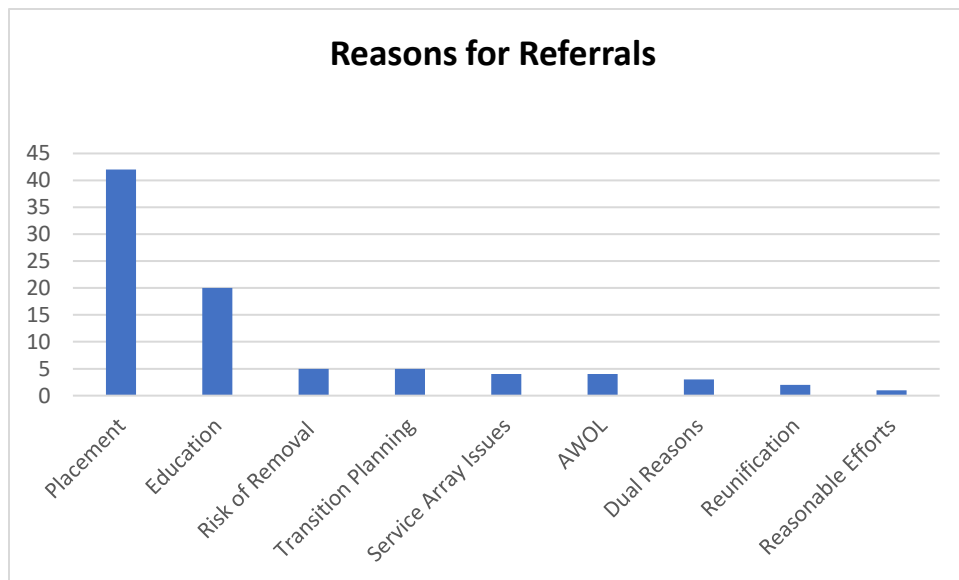
OCA Success Story: The OCA worked with a young adult in the VEC program for most of 2021. This young adult was working on successfully transitioning to adulthood. The barriers facing this young adult included housing, untreated mental health, a trauma history, and substance use. During the course of the year, we found safe, temporary, supported housing for this young person. We met with the treatment team regularly to engage this young person and encouraged the client to work toward their goal of independence. We were fortunate during this time that the federal government extended involvement in the child welfare past a young adult's twenty-first (21) birthday due to the COVID pandemic. This time was crucial for this young adult. While independence was the ultimate goal, the client determined that living on their own was not in their best interest and we applied to adult services and for SSI to ensure that they received the ongoing support and services they needed. They successfully transitioned to adult services when they closed to DCYF.

For most of these young adults, the VEC program presents their first opportunity to live independently. VEC participants reported they were struggling with procuring the basic supplies needed to maintain and live comfortably in their apartments such as cleaning supplies, dishes, and cooking utensils. The Rhode Island Public Safety Grant Administration Office (RIPSGAO) awarded a grant to the OCA and due to an unforeseen surplus in funds, 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 **sixty-five (65)** VEC participants moving into their first apartment. The OCA was able to secure additional funds to create **thirty (30)** additional kits for the coming year. The OCA finished developing the kits at the end of September 2019, which includes various household items such as a laundry basket, dishes, silverware, pots and pans, cooking utensils, dish towels, dustpan and broom, toilet paper and paper towels. The OCA delivered **fourteen (14)** kits between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021. We observed a decrease in VEC participants moving into new apartments during the pandemic due to the housing crisis. When delivering the starter kits, our office takes time to speak with the young adult to determine if they need assistance with finding a job, training program, GED program, or any additional items for their apartment. Additionally, the OCA has utilized gift cards procured from our annual fundraiser, the Duffle Bag Bash, to assist with clothing, groceries, or to cover the cost to obtain a copy of essential documents such as a birth certificate or social security card. Lastly, the OCA staff monitors various employment and vocational opportunities from local agencies, private non-profits, and state agencies. This information is provided directly to VEC participants, CASA attorneys, group home staff, DCYF social caseworkers, and the Rhode Island Training School to ensure this information is disseminated to as many young people as possible.

F. Court Appointed Cases

Pursuant to the statutory authority of the OCA, the Rhode Island Family Court can appoint the OCA as a child’s attorney. 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 2021, the OCA was appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court to **eighty-six (86)** cases. These cases presented crucial issues facing DCYF youth and young adults in care, including issues regarding education, placement, transition out of foster care, mental health services, jurisdiction, and children who absconded from placement. Once appointed, the OCA collects all records and attends all meetings and court hearings for these youth and young adults. In 2021, the OCA attended **two hundred and fifty-six (256)** court hearings for court appointed cases. Additionally, the OCA attended **eighty-seven (87)** education, placement, and treatment meetings. The OCA welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the matters and provide zealous legal advocacy.

During 2021, the OCA experienced a significant increase in court appointed cases. The major recurring issue in these cases is that there are not adequate placements for our youth and young adults requiring a residential treatment level of care. This is due to a depleted service array, terminated contracts over the years, lack of advancement of our community support services, and an inadequate hourly rate for staff. Additionally, DCYF has not been creating and developing new programs and residential facilities to meet the needs of our in-state youth and young adults. While the COVID-19 pandemic shined a spotlight on these glaring issues and exacerbated the staffing crisis, DCYF is mandated to meet complex needs of all youth and young adults in care. The OCA participated in **eight (8)** days of hearings with testimony to address the lack of appropriate placements that DCYF has to offer to youth and young adults in their custody and control. The OCA will continue to advocate in court and before the General Assembly to ensure DCYF meets their obligations under Rhode Island General Law to maintain a diverse and comprehensive service array, including appropriate placements and services.



G. Unlicensed Foster Homes

Pursuant to statutory authority, the OCA provides oversight to placements licensed by DCYF. The OCA fulfills this oversight role in a variety of ways including the participation in court hearings regarding unlicensed placements. To obtain a foster care license, a prospective foster parent must complete all

requirements including, completion of an application, providing references, physician's reference, background check, a thorough home study requiring multiple visits, completion of foster parent training, fire inspection, and lead inspection. Oftentimes, a child requires immediate removal and placement into a foster home. Facilitating placement with an appropriate family member or an adult know to the child is always a paramount goal. However, completing the licensing process takes time. In order to facilitate such placements, R.I.G.L § 14-1-34(c), enables DCYF to "... authorize the placement of a child in a prospective foster home pending licensure for a period not to exceed six (6) months only after the department has conducted a DCYF background check..." This allows the child to be placed while providing time to complete all licensing requirements.

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

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

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

During 2019, DCYF had to address hundreds of homes whose licensing requirements were not completed. These requirements included home studies, foster parent training, physician's references, and in some cases, fingerprinting and background checks. The OCA participated in every hearing, including attending follow-up hearings to continue to ensure these requirements were met.

During 2020, the OCA attended **one hundred and twenty (120)** foster care motion reviews at the beginning of the year. These cases were continued from 2019 to ensure that all vital licensing components were completed. During these hearings, DCYF demonstrated that the licensing components were completed.

Between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021, DCYF filed foster care motions to address lead and fire safety inspection issues. The OCA was present at **fifty-one (51)** foster care motion hearings in 2021. At the time of the hearings, some of the lead and fire safety inspections had resolved. All motions were granted.

H. Monitor to the Children's Rights Lawsuit

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

report on their findings to include recommendations as appropriate and this information is shared with all parties and the public.

During 2021, the Monitoring Team analyzed benchmark data and produced **two (2)** reports for Reporting Periods 4 and 5. The Monitoring Team supplied all reports to all parties, the Governor's Office, and posted all reports on the [OCA website](#) in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement.

Throughout the 2021 legislative session, the OCA presented at various hearings, including finance and oversight committees, on DCYF's progress in meeting and exiting from benchmarks set forth in the Settlement Agreement. The OCA will continue to work closely with the Data Validator to author more reports in compliance with our role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement and provide updates to the General Assembly as requested.

I. Facilities Reviews

The OCA is tasked with providing oversight to all facilities licensed by DCYF. This includes but is not limited to group homes, out of state residential placements utilized by the Department for children with high-end or specialized needs and the Rhode Island Training School. The OCA staff work to monitor and advocate on behalf of children in state care by performing routine visits or "drop-ins" to placements. During the OCA's visits the staff performs a visual inspection, can request documentation, and assess the overall quality of the facility. During these visits, the OCA staff meet with youth placed in the residential facilities to inform them about the role of our office, the work we do and how they can contact us. Our staff has worked to build a rapport with youth; this has provided youth with the comfort to contact our office when they are encountering an issue or concern. In 2021, the OCA staff completed visits to **thirty seven (37)** various residential facilities. The OCA met with more than **556 youth and young adults** at various locations including group homes, the Rhode Island Training School, Rhode Island Family Court, and meetings to follow up on specific issues and to advocate for their best interests.

If warranted, the OCA has the statutory authority to perform a more in-depth review to ensure the facility is in compliance with the Rhode Island Licensing Regulations. In 2021, the OCA completed **five (5)** site reviews. Upon completion, the OCA provides a comprehensive report with recommendations for corrective action, if applicable. If corrective action is necessary, the OCA provides a copy of the report along with any recommendations for corrective action to the Program Director, the DCYF Administration, DCYF Licensing, DCYF Contracts and Compliance, the DCYF Placement Unit and the Rhode Island Family Court.

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

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

The OCA continues to advocate for a high-end residential program in-state for girls who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. This vulnerable population of youth have been repeatedly sent to

programs out of state or have been held at the Rhode Island Training School for their safety. Keeping these youth in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for the youth's success. In an effort to make progress with this goal, the OCA continues to seek out appropriate settings for a girls' treatment center, advocates before the Rhode Island General Assembly, and meets with DCYF and the Rhode Island Family Court regularly to make meaningful efforts to ensure we create this necessary program.

Furthermore, the OCA works collaboratively to advocate for each youth referred to the CSEC MDT. In 2021, the OCA advocated for ***twenty-four (24)*** youth and young adults throughout the MDT process. The OCA attends the initial CSEC MDT meeting for every youth or young adult. If there are any ongoing issues at this meeting, the OCA will work with the team to address them. The OCA introduces themselves to the team and encourages that if there are problems, that are office be included.

K. Public Education

In 2021, the OCA continued efforts to educate the public on the role and responsibilities of our office. While school settings were more challenging to schedule, we identified other opportunities to present on the OCA's role and responsibilities. Furthermore, the OCA will continue educate others on our role with the Victim Compensation Program to assist children and families access these funds and necessary services. The OCA has given presentations at a variety of schools, police departments and provider agencies including but not limited to:

- Community Care Alliance
- YMCA of Woonsocket
- TIDES Family Services
- Woonsocket Library
- Central Falls High School
- Calcutt Middle School
- Central Falls Library
- Tolman High School
- Blackstone Valley Community Action Program
- Department of Human Services – Pawtucket Office
- Comprehensive Community Action Program Youth Center
- Pawtucket Library
- Rhode Island State Victim Assistance Academy
- Level Up Conference
- The Village for Foster and Adoptive Families
- Foster Forward – Policy and Advocacy Work Experience
- Special Education Conference Keynote Speaker
- Providence College
- Rhode Island College – School of Social Work
- Rhode Island Training School – Juvenile Probation Worker Academy
- Cumberland School Department
- Lincoln School Department
- Coventry School Department
- Community Conversations

- West Warwick School Department
- Pawtucket School Department
- Providence School Department
- Burrillville School Department
- Day One
- Congressman Cicilline’s Policy Staff
- Members of the General Assembly
- Fostering Youth to Independence Housing Program Presentation in partnership with Rhode Island Housing, DCYF, and Foster Forward



During 2021, the OCA gave **twenty (20)** public education presentations. In addition to focusing on public education presentations, this staff member updated informational resources which have been distributed digitally and in print to community members and significantly increased the OCA’s presence on social media (Twitter) in an effort to share vital resources and information pertaining to children, families, child welfare professionals, state partners, and legislators, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The OCA remains committed to increasing the number of public presentations in 2022 following significant scheduling challenges during the majority of 2020 and part of 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Public education presentations have proven to be effective, often resulting in an increase in calls to our office. Additionally, the OCA sought federal grant opportunities throughout the year. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 related federal grant opportunities did not match the mission of our agency or the population we serve. In 2022, the OCA will continue to seek grant funding to print updated informational resources about the office or a child’s rights while in care to distribute to the community.

L. Legislative Advocacy

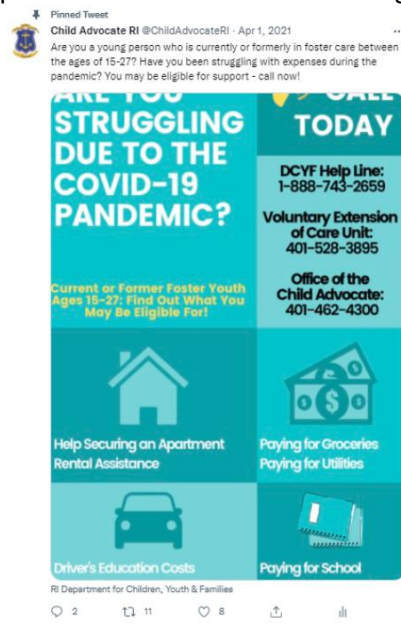
It is the OCA’s statutory responsibility to “take all possible action including but not limited to, programs of public education, legislative advocacy, and formal legal action to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children” in DCYF care. The OCA tracks legislation at the state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

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

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

In 2021, the OCA was very involved with implementation of CAA policies and procedures, assisting with a public education campaign to notify current and former youth in foster care about the services and supports available, and providing support and oversight in Court. OCA staff attended several webinars organized by FosterClub and the Juvenile Law Center to understand the scope of funding available, the various allocations permitted, and consider creative ways to engage youth to access the funding available to them. Additionally, OCA staff met with staff from Congressman Cicilline’s office to discuss the importance of the funding opportunity and to advocate for future permanency of the temporary funding expansion to benefit young adults currently or formerly in foster care.

The OCA met regularly as part of the VEC Core Team to regularly check in about implementation of CAA fund provisions and to ensure the provision of funds was functioning efficiently and effectively.



During the VEC Core Team meetings, the group determined an area of improvement in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) referral process. Youth were being referred and began the process but did not finish it. The VEC Core Team worked together to create a survey to administer to young people participating in the program to identify barriers that may be impacting the referral process. The OCA provided gift cards in the amount of twenty-five dollars as an incentive to the **thirty (30)** participants upon completion of the survey.

During the 2021 legislative session, the OCA participated in various advocacy efforts and testified on various pieces of legislation before the General Assembly. Some of the issues the OCA advocated on were the BHDDH, DCYF, and OCA budgets, ending child marriage, academic tracking for students in foster care, adoptee rights, and cultural sensitivity training for foster parents. The OCA also provided testimony before both House and Senate Oversight Committees on the status of the Children’s Rights Settlement Agreement and DCYF’s progress in meeting the benchmarks outline in the agreement.

M. Advisory Committee

In 2014, the OCA’s statute was expanded upon and a *Child Advocate Advisory Committee* was added to the OCA’s statute. Collaboration between the community and other agencies involved in the issues confronting children is critical in the continuation of successful advocacy. The purpose of the advisory committee is to provide support and advice to the Office of the Child Advocate. The advisory committee is comprised of nine (9) highly qualified experts in their field. Each of the members serve a five (5) year term on the committee. The members collaborate 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. The OCA is now exploring new appointments to ensure the advisory committee is complete with the nine (9) intended members. The OCA has outreached to all professional organizations included in the statute for new appointment recommendations and is in the process of solidifying such appointments for the new cohort of the Advisory Committee with a special focus on diversity among membership. As soon as the appointments are confirmed with these professional organizations, the OCA convene the Advisory Committee to set new goals for the upcoming calendar year.

N. Boards and Committees

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

- State of Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet appointed by Governor Gina M. Raimondo
- Panel on Human Trafficking appointed by Governor Gina M. Raimondo
- Human Trafficking Provider/Clinical Subcommittee
- Joint Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care
- Child Support Advisory Committee
- State of Rhode Island Child Death Review Team
- LGBTQQ Policy Committee
- Rhode Island Chapter of the American Suicide for Prevention
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook Advisory Committee
- Lawrence A. Aubin, Sr. Child Protection Center Multi-Disciplinary Team
- Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Work Groups
- Juvenile Justice Commission
- Executive Board of the Edward P. Gallogly Inn of Rhode Island Family Court
- Rhode Island Women’s Bar Association
- Continuity of Care Group
- Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth (Focused on Juvenile Justice and Re-entry)

- Youth Futures Council
- Governor’s Council on Behavioral Health – Prevention Advisory Committee
- Rhode Island Training School Student Transition Work Group

O. Project Victim Services

Section 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, assure they have access to necessary support services and promote the best interests of the child in the criminal justice system.

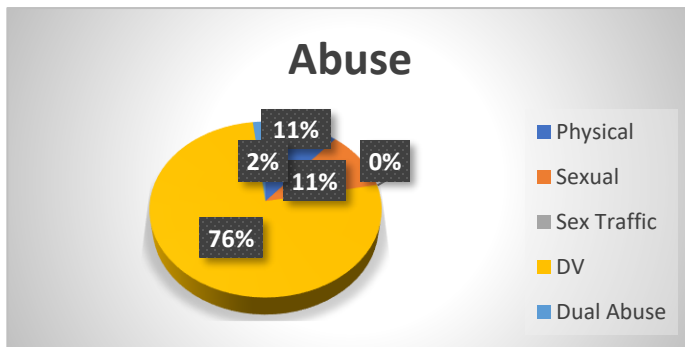
The Victim Compensation Program provides victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, institutional abuse or a witness to domestic violence, an opportunity to file a claim with the Fund. If approved, they are provided financial assistance for expenses related to the crime including, but not limited to, medical bills, mental health counseling, sexual assault assessments, and loss of earnings. The fund assists 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. Families can utilize this fund for any qualifying expenses for a lifetime up to \$25,000.00. The Fund has been 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 witnesses to domestic violence. Typically, the Case Management Coordinator, the Staff Attorney, and the Grants Manager research each case to determine if the child may be eligible for funds through the Victim Compensation Program. With our two vacancies, the Staff Attorney has continued the work of this project along with the support of other staff members at the OCA. 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.

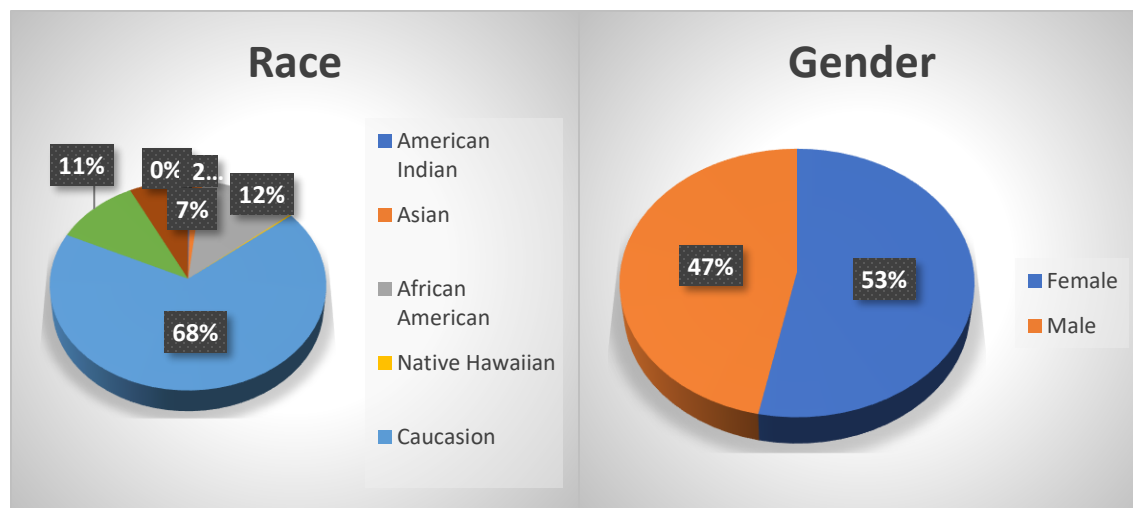
After our initial contact with each family, the OCA sends a follow up letter. We contact them a second time to provide an additional opportunity to review the information and contact our office. The OCA also created a resource list outlining services that may benefit the child and their family. This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

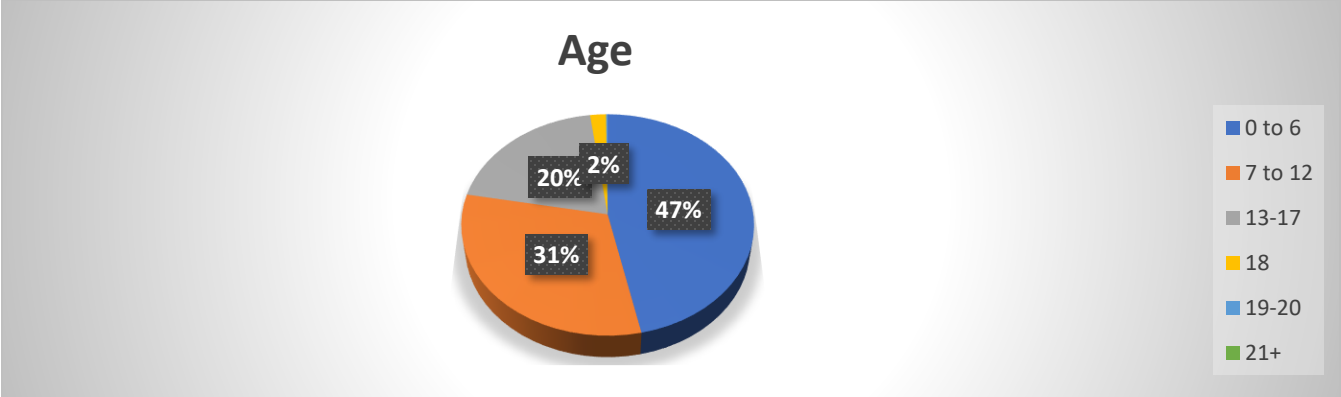
During 2021, the OCA has referred **116 children** for physical abuse and **112 children** for sexual abuse. Our office has referred **790 children** for witnessing domestic violence. Our office tracks those who have been victims of more than one type of abuse. Generally, this always includes some form of physical abuse in addition to witnessing domestic violence or experiencing sexual abuse.



The OCA has contacted and advocated for a diverse group of youth. The OCA has referred **485 males** and **552 females** to receive assistance through the Victim Compensation Program. Of the **1,038 children** referred, **126 children** were African American, **705 children** were Caucasian, **16 children** were Asian, **3 children** were Native Hawaiian, and **110 children** were Multi-Racial. There were **76 children** whose race remains undetermined. The OCA receives their information on each youth from DCYF. In some cases, information collected on the child such as race was incomplete or inaccurate. We are unable to verify or collect additional information until the family or social worker contacts our office. We will continue to work with the Department to ensure that our data is accurate and develop strategies for quality assurance.



The OCA makes referrals for children birth to age twenty (20). During 2021, the OCA has referred **2 (two)** individuals between nineteen (19) and twenty-one (21), **twenty (20)** individuals who were eighteen (18), **207 children** between the ages of thirteen (13) and seventeen (17), **325 children** between the ages of seven (7) and twelve (12) and **484 children** between the birth and age six (6).



The OCA makes every effort to make contact with the families and social caseworkers of these children as soon as possible. Sometime caregivers are addressing many issues regarding their child’s trauma, that they are not able to seek assistance from us in completing the victim compensation application. Our office’s goal is to send two letters to caregivers and social caseworkers to ensure that have all the information to make a decision about completing an application for their child. This year we sent out **444** 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, 2021 through December 31, 2021, there were approximately **147 infants** born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs. Although these infants appear on the monthly VOCA lists, they do not meet criteria for compensation through the Victim Compensation Fund. This number may not accurately reflect the complete number of infants born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs as the OCA has recognized inconsistency in how these calls are coded. In some cases, these calls have been coded as “physical abuse” which is why these calls are reflected on our report for potential VOCA claims. However, these calls have also been coded as “neglect”, which could skew the data we have on this. We will continue to collaborate with DCYF to ensure consistent reporting and accurate data. This data reflects the continued need to invest in community-based and preventative services to better support children and families who have been affected by substance abuse. This was outlined in detail in the Child Fatality Review Panel’s Report released in December 2017. The report also specifies a change in federal law, which provide for specific protocols in tracking infants exposed to substances and criteria for detailed treatment plans. Additionally, the federal law provides for grant funding to assist with the funding for community-based services. Legislative and policy change still needs to be drafted and implemented to comply with federal law.

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

Although statutory changes no longer provide for claims to compensate for pain and suffering, the OCA continues to maintain accounts on behalf **two (2)** individuals, who previously received this award. The VOCA administrator continues to utilize various resources, including the Department of Motor Vehicle

Records, former social caseworkers, and the assistance of the RI State Police, to locate these young adults. We were able to disburse **two (2)** trust accounts in 2021. The OCA met with recipients in-person and virtually due to the pandemic. In our discussions, the recipients indicated that they would utilize these funds for debt, purchasing a home, purchasing a car, and to create a savings account.

OCA Success Story: This family came to the attention of the Department when the police reported a domestic violence incident to the hotline. There was a teenager in the home at the time of the incident.

This youth was 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 a family member and not a parent, and sent the completed application to the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. The child was found eligible for assistance. Our Office provided the family with the information on how to access the funds and sent a list of service providers in the community to help them identify appropriate supports. The family member who was safely caring for the youth was active in ensuring treatment and services were in place. The family member successfully utilized the reimbursement on behalf of the child.

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

P. Workforce Development

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

- National Crimes Against Children Conference
- Victim Assistance Academy
- Family Court Conference
- Ocean Tides and Tides Family Services Annual Conference
- Trauma Informed Child Welfare Practice
- RI Human Trafficking Task Force: Lifting Voices, Empowering Action
- RI 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

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

Q. Philanthropic Initiatives

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

a. Duffle Bag Bash

In August 2021, the OCA, in collaboration with Adoption Rhode Island and Attorney Lise Iwon, hosted the Sixth Annual Duffle Bag Bash to collect monetary donations and gift cards to benefit children in state care. On a visit to one of our state's group homes, we witnessed the disturbing sight of a child being moved to his next placement with his belongings in trash bags. After discovering that this was a routine practice among kids in state care. The children in our state deserve more dignified treatment than that. This inspired the event!

We were fortunate enough to host this event in person this year. Many individuals and organizations supported this event, resulting in over \$19,404 raised. The funds were utilized to purchase backpacks, suitcases, and gift cards for children and youth in foster care. We are thankful to each of our hardworking volunteers and generous supporters without whom the success of our event would not be possible.



b. Recipe for Success

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

Between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021, the OCA delivered **fourteen (14)** kits to young people. When delivering the starter kits, our office takes time to speak with the young adult to determine if they need assistance with finding a job, training program, GED program, or any additional items for their apartment. Additionally, the OCA has utilized gift cards procured from our annual fundraiser, the Duffle Bag Bash, to assist with clothing, groceries, or to cover the cost to obtain a copy of essential documents such as a birth certificate or social security card. We have seen great success with this initiative and plan to continue disseminating these starter kits throughout 2022.

c. Community Involvement

The OCA’s partnership with the RYCO Creative Sewing Center introduced us to a very generous community member. During the 2021 holiday season, she reached out to her friends and family and donated bed sheets of all sizes, blankets, and towels for the OCA to distribute to VEC participants. The OCA added these to our Recipe for Success kits which allowed VEC participants to save their money for other important things they need when starting in their apartment for the first time.

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

d. Quilt Donations

In 2021, the OCA continued to receive support from the Caring and Sharing Group at RYCO Creative Sewing Center. They provided another generous donation of **two (2)** packages of handmade quilts. The quilts continue to be distributed to young people in out-of-home placement. We are so grateful for the support from this group.

R. OCA in the Media

a. Social Media

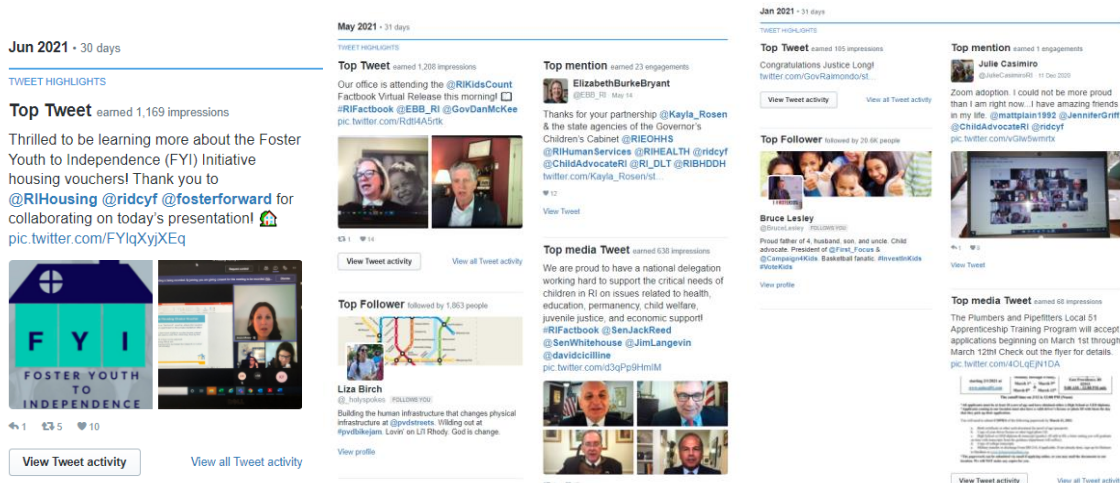
In 2021, the OCA continued to prioritize our Office’s presence on social media, specifically Twitter, in an effort to provide resources to children, families, and child welfare professionals, and to build connections for advocacy and information sharing. During 2021, the OCA increased the total number of followers on Twitter and shared more than **1,100** tweets with information and resources to benefit children, families, child welfare professionals, and legislators. The OCA shared workforce development and career opportunities, information about our philanthropic initiatives, information and resources from a variety of community providers, schools, and non-profits, and shared public health resources from Rhode Island state agencies and the federal government.

**Twitter Analytics
January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021**

New Followers	Profile Visits	Original Tweets	Shared Tweets	Tweet Impressions
76	1652	176	947	15062

**Twitter Highlights
January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021**

The screenshot displays Twitter analytics and highlights for two periods: December 2021 and August 2021. The December 2021 section shows a 'Top Tweet' about Lifespan's workforce and youth development programs, a 'Top mention' by Lisa Guillette regarding foster care housing, and a 'Top Follower' profile for RI NOW. The August 2021 section shows a 'Top Tweet' about the 6th Annual Duffie Bag Bash and a 'Top mention' from kids.come.first regarding confidentiality laws. Each tweet includes engagement metrics like replies, retweets, and likes, along with a 'View Tweet activity' button.



b. Digital and Print Media

Child advocate’s alarm over R.I., system should stir Mass. to take hard look at DCYF December 27, 2021

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/12/27/opinion/child-advocates-alarm-over-ri-system-should-stir-mass-take-hard-look-dcf/>

Opinion: A new home for RI’s ‘lost girls’ urgently needed - December 23, 2021

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/opinion/2021/12/23/opinion-new-home-ris-lost-girls-urgently-needed/8976947002/>

Former Warwick woman sentenced to 18 years in daughter's death, neglect of other children - December 22, 2021

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/local/2021/12/22/michele-rothgeb-warwick-rhode-island-18-year-sentence-death-adopted-daughter-neglect-other-children/8993605002/>

R.I. child advocate sounds the alarm, saying ‘it has never been this bad’ - December 14, 2021

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/12/14/metro/ri-child-advocate-sounds-alarm-saying-it-has-never-been-this-bad/>

‘Someone’s going to sue’: RI parks at-risk children in hospitals amid workforce crisis - November 29, 2021

<https://www.wpri.com/target-12/someones-going-to-sue-ri-parks-at-risk-children-in-hospitals-amid-workforce-crisis/>

Family Court judge blasts DCYF for treatment of girls, warns of discrimination lawsuit - October 15, 2021

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/local/2021/10/15/dcyf-failing-girls-who-need-psychiatric-care-family-court-judge-says/8467727002/>

Former Warwick woman admits to manslaughter, cruelty in 2019 death of 9-year-old daughter - August 25, 2021

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/courts/2021/08/25/michele-rothgeb-admits-manslaughter-death-daughter/5584212001/>

RI governor poised to sign ban on marriage under age 18 - June 22, 2021

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/06/22/metro/rhode-island-legislators-social-workers-union-call-audit-dcyf/>

House Oversight holding hearings into R.I. Department of Children, Youth, and Families - May 12, 2021

<https://www.wpri.com/target-12/someones-going-to-sue-ri-parks-at-risk-children-in-hospitals-amid-workforce-crisis/>

Goals and Recommendations of the Office of the Child Advocate

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

1. The OCA is committed to collaborating with DCYF to develop a high-end residential program in-state for girls coping with significant mental health issue or who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. This vulnerable population of youth are continuously sent to programs out of state or have been held at the Rhode Island Training School 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. The OCA is committed to making this treatment facility a reality in Rhode Island and at every opportunity will continue to advocate for this critical need. The OCA continues to meet weekly regarding the development of this program and will continue to search for an appropriate location for the facility.
2. The OCA will continue its efforts to visit and review facilities that are licensed by DCYF and provide corrective action and positive feedback to the program directors.
3. The OCA will continue to advocate for an appropriate service array for children in the State of Rhode Island. Ensuring that there are appropriate services and placements available will prevent the continued issue of youth languishing in inappropriate settings.
4. The OCA will conduct a review of the Residential Treatment Agreements accepted by DCYF to determine if this process is in the best interest of youth and young adults being placed outside of their home.
5. The OCA will continue to be present in Rhode Island Family Court and accept all cases referred to our office by the court to zealously advocate for youth and young adults who are having issues with placement, education, and access to services.
6. The OCA is committed to improving educational outcomes for children in state care. Our team will continue to closely monitor access to education for youth who are awaiting placement in a hospital setting. The OCA will also complete an in-depth review of systems issues contributing to poor educational outcomes for children in care. The OCA will also provide legal advocacy on behalf of youth in state care who are experiencing issues with timely access to education or are in need of additional supports and services to assist with academic achievement. The OCA is seeking to expand our involvement with educational advocacy by advocating that the Educational Advocates Office be returned to the Office of the Child Advocate.
7. The OCA will continue to work with municipalities to leverage as many federal housing voucher opportunities as possible to create more units for young adults or families currently and formerly in the child welfare system.

8. The OCA will be completing an in-depth review of DCYF's referral practices and procedures. The OCA will continue to closely monitor the referral process to ensure that placements are timely and appropriate. This has been an ongoing systemic issue.
9. The OCA will continue to focus on providing children in DCYF care with opportunities to establish a sense of normalcy. In carrying out this goal, the OCA will continue to be innovative in finding resources for children to participate in extracurricular activities and to obtain necessary materials and equipment. The OCA will seek additional grant funding and other resources to further the philanthropy work being performed by the office.
10. The OCA will reapply for grant funding from the Rhode Island Public Safety Administration Office to ensure that children in Rhode Island can access victim compensation.
11. The OCA will expand our public education initiative and outreach regarding a variety of topics, including the role and responsibilities of the OCA, education about the VEC program, and emphasis on the importance of calling the DCYF Hotline when concerns about children arise. The OCA will provide digital resources in follow-up to presentations.
12. The OCA will continue to expand our social media presence, specifically on Twitter. The OCA will continue to share resources and information through social media benefitting children, families, and child welfare professionals. The OCA will develop and distribute written resources to provide to children in state care and community professionals.
13. The OCA will appoint new Advisory Committee members for their five (5) year term with a focus on the diversity of the membership and work with the committee to establish goals and objectives for the year.
14. The OCA will introduce legislation as appropriate, continue tracking state and federal legislation, and will advocate at all levels for policy change and practice implementation that is in the best interest of children.
15. The OCA remains focused on improving the Voluntary Extension of Care program to ensure that youth are receiving adequate support, guidance, and resources.
16. The OCA will work with DCYF and Rhode Island Family Court to carry out a thorough implementation of the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Throughout the Pandemic Act, involve youth with lived experience in the process as appropriate, and ensure that federal funds are utilized to the fullest extent prior to the funding use deadline of September 30, 2022.
17. The OCA will work with DCYF and community providers to create pathways for youth and young adults in the care of the state to obtain their learner's permit, driver's license, car insurance, and in some cases, a vehicle.