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*Office of the Child Advocate*



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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** – January 31, 2023

## **New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate Releases 2022 Annual Report**

**CONCORD, N.H.** – Today the New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate released its 2022 Annual Report. The year 2022 was one of transition for the Office of the Child Advocate (the OCA and/or the Office). In April of 2022, Cassandra Sanchez was appointed as the Child Advocate for the State of New Hampshire. “It is a true honor and privilege to serve the children and families of the Granite State,” Sanchez stated. With the creation and implementation of the OCA’s Strategic Plan, this year was not only for systemic evaluation but action. “This report illustrates the continued profound systemic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commitment of the Office to advocate for micro and macro shifts within the New Hampshire child welfare system, the prioritization of outreach to ensure the OCA as a known resource by all community stakeholders, and the continued efforts to elevate the voices of the children we serve,” Sanchez continued.

In total this year, the OCA received 319 complaints, primarily from the families of system-involved children. There were 2,508 incident reports reviewed, which include events of restraint and seclusion of children in placement as well as missing children, parent and child fatalities, and injuries to children. Among these were critical incidents including 29 child fatalities with more than half of these children under the age of 1 year old. As in previous years, complaints and incident reports identified six key areas of focus.

The Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC) has been at the forefront of the Office and the public at large. As the New Hampshire Legislature swiftly reviews bills regarding the future of the program, the OCA has sought to keep the children’s best interest at the forefront of these discussions. An area of focus for the Office that has been monitored since its inception is any placement of children outside of their natural home. Research informs us of the negative implications on children’s future growth and development when separated from family and most specifically when placed in congregate care settings. Keeping children with their family systems through kinship/relative care can lead to positive outcomes. When children and families are provided the support they need, as early on as possible, everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

It is commonly understood that New Hampshire is in a mental health crisis, particularly for children. Many factors have exacerbated this crisis, such as the isolation experienced and workforce issues created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Immediate action is needed to provide these children with community supports and speedy access to acute psychiatric care. “COVID has had and continues to have a profound impact on child-serving systems,” Cassandra Sanchez explains. “We have heard from children and parents experiencing long wait times for community mental health services and lengthy emergency department stays for children in acute need. We have also heard from provider agencies that are striving to meet the needs of their communities while struggling with workforce shortages in all levels of care.” Going forward, a proactive approach must be implemented to create positive, lasting systemic solutions.

Pursuant to RSA 21-V, the Office of the Child Advocate provides independent oversight of all children’s services provided or arranged for by the State to assure that the best interests of children are being protected.

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