



# State of New Hampshire

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Office of the Child Advocate



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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – November 13, 2020**

## **Child Advocate publishes 2020 Annual Report, pandemic dominated in productive year.**

**Concord, NH-** The Office of the Child Advocate released its 2020 Annual Report today citing the COVID-19 pandemic as the dominating factor of the year in the lives of New Hampshire's children. Child Advocate Moira O'Neill praised efforts of the Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) in mobilizing to support families and prevent abuse or neglect in the disruption caused by pandemic restrictions. Key concerns identified were interruptions in children's access to school personnel who typically monitor for signs of abuse and neglect and heightened risk of exposure to the virus for children placed in congregate settings. The OCA has advocated for and identified rapid development of an expanded community-based system of care, supported in 2019 legislation and budget allocations, as the most crucial response to child and family needs, now exacerbated by the pandemic. Steps are being taken toward implementation. The Office stressed urgency of the situation.

The report outlines the work of New Hampshire's children's services oversight agency for their reporting year October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020. The Office receives complaints about state services for children and reports of incidents that involve children in state care or supervision. O'Neill noted that the workload increased astronomically in 2020 due to DCYF coming into compliance with the mandate to report incidents to the Office. "We received, reviewed and monitored outcomes of 2,183 incident reports," explained O'Neill, "that is an increase of three times what we saw in the year before." O'Neill clarified that the numbers reflect reporting compliance, not necessarily an increase in incidents. "The significance of this reporting," O'Neill explained, "is a new capacity to see the breadth of the problem of children enduring injuries, restraints, or going missing. With this data we can start to delve into ways of preventing incidents and better respond to children's needs.

In addition to processing incident reports, the small office, employing four full-time and one temporary part time staff processed 311 complaints or inquiries from concerned citizens and has undertaken in-depth reviews of 45 individual children's cases, residential programs, and critical incidents. A notable change to the Office in 2020, through House Bill 1162, is expanded jurisdiction to all state or state-funded services for children beyond DCYF. O'Neill characterized the change as a vote of confidence in the work of the Office of the Child Advocate. She noted the recognition that efforts to ensure children's needs are met can be more effective when available before a child is abused, neglected or adjudicated and brought into DCYF care.

Pursuant to NH RSA chapter 21-V, the Office of the Child Advocate provides independent oversight ensure that children involved with an agency, and in particular, children served by the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, receive timely, safe, and effective services and that their best interests are being protected.

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