



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate

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NH Child Advocate Releases System Review of DCYF's Response to Substance Exposed Infants

Concord NH: The reality of the impact of substance use on children is hitting home in New Hampshire. This was the conclusion of the State Child Advocate in a report released today chronicling the Division for Children, Youth and Families' (DCYF) response to infants born exposed to substances. A recent national report estimated 14,000 New Hampshire Children were affected by the opioid epidemic in 2017. Moira O'Neill, Director of the Office of the Child Advocate, said, "The problem extends to other substances too, including alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco."

O'Neill explained that her office has received notice of 18 DCYF critical incident reports involving children who were born exposed to substances. Though the incidents were often unrelated to the substance-exposed birth, the Office suspected a pattern of risk among children born exposed, which prompted the System Review to discern whether DCYF had an adequate response to meet their needs.

The report notes a steady incidence of exposed births; approximately 500 infants were monitored in New Hampshire hospitals for conditions related to substance exposure between July 2018-September 2019. Over the past five years, 430 children in out-of-home care had a history of being born exposed to substances. Despite the concerning numbers, the year-long review found promising practices: a specialized DCYF caseworker role, a community networking collaborative inclusive of DCYF, parent partner peer supports, and an active State task force sharing vital information and guidance.

"The problem," O'Neill said, "is inconsistency with these initiatives. Only one DCYF district has a specialist. Only one district partners with a community collaborative; and although there is a Parent Partner program in every district, DCYF staff identified the need for more partners to strengthen family engagement." O'Neill noted, "We have identified these themes in other reviews: inconsistent practice from district to district, barriers to communication, inter-professional unfamiliarity, bias, and knowledge deficit - in this case, related to substances and their impact on children."

Ultimately, "Timing is everything", the report states. The Office of the Child Advocate found that the best intervention is recovery-friendly pre- and post-natal care and rapid access to early supports and services. The report calls for expansion of the specialist role to every district office, establishment of interprofessional community collaboratives in all districts, and in addition to filling open casework positions, education for all staff about substances and their effects on infants.

For more information on New Hampshire initiatives supporting infants born exposed to substances visit: [The Perinatal Substance Exposure Task Force](#) of the NH Governor's Commission on Alcohol and Other Drugs or contact: Monica Edgar, APRN, Chair of the Perinatal Substance Exposure Task Force, medgar@crhc.org.

Pursuant to NH RSA 170-G:18, the Office of the Child Advocate provides independent oversight of the Department for Children, Youth and Families to assure that the best interests of children are being protected.

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