



State of New Hampshire

# Office of the Child Advocate

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*Strategic Plan*  
*2022 - 2025*



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# Letter From the Child Advocate

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The genesis of the New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate (the Office) was tragedy. After years of budget cuts, weakening child protection services, and struggling families, New Hampshire awoke to a sobering reality with loss of life. In true Granite State form, we found the strength and commitment to change. The Office was a key factor of that commitment, promising independent oversight of the Division for Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) the child protection and juvenile justice agency. On January 30, 2018, the first Child Advocate was sworn into service. Subsequently, the Office opened doors, hired staff, purchased equipment, and established relationships and processes that continue to evolve each day.

Shining a light on the system designed to protect children and elevating children's voices are key expectations of the Office. We work to meet those expectations with substantive reporting ranging from the comprehensive annual report of Office activities and identified issues of concern, broad system reviews, individual child case reviews, and continually meeting with children to inform policy change with their voices and experience. All the work is possible through the Office's singular access to information about children and the actions of the State in their lives. Maintaining confidentiality to protect children, the Office has found ways to inform decision-makers and the public so they may be alert to the circumstances of children, the performance of the state on their behalf, and solutions to a stronger system of care. One primary solution to abuse, neglect, and delinquency is prevention. To that end, in 2020, the jurisdiction of the Office was expanded to allow the Office to advocate for all children involved with child-serving State agencies. The change aligns better with the Office's mandate to provide advice and guidance on improving systems in the interest of children. The Office is now in the position to advocate for access to essential preventive services, including but not limited to early intervention, special education, and developmental disability services.

In these first four years, the Office frequently acted in reactive mode, dissecting urgent concerns from long-held disappointments, while digging away at the bigger system picture. Now, with processes established, and a strong and growing staff at the ready, the Office takes a step back with community and State partners to determine the best steps forward to meet its statutory mandate, be responsive to citizen complaints, support a stronger system of care for children, and ensure children's interests are identified, understood, and protected.

With the generous support of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the Office set out to examine its progress to this point. This was an opportunity to engage with the broader community to co-create a roadmap for deeper impact and lasting system reform. Together we look forward, grounded in a review of the first four years of our progress and the work we have left, to be a well-established resource for children and their families. We are grateful to a Design Team of thought and practice leaders who provided advice and guidance. The team surveyed stakeholders in the community to find a consensus on vision, mission, and values, and to identify needed adjustments to the Office's core work and relationships. Through this work, the Office moves towards vision and mission accomplishment; identifies ways to safeguard and support the core work through key management systems over time, and continuously improves the outcomes of the Office's work through constant learning and quality assurance.

As the first Child Advocate's four-year term concludes, one thing is clear: The Office belongs to the community. Their views and hopes for what the Office will achieve are aligned with statutory intent. They have identified strengths, articulated areas for improvement, and agreed upon priorities. The next Child Advocate will be greeted with an exceptional staff, and a committed, guiding, and expectant constituency. This strategic plan captures those expectations and guides the Office towards achievement. The Office is ready to do children's work.

On behalf of New Hampshire's children, I would like to express gratitude to the members of the Design Team and the Office staff, whose contributions and input to this process and this plan were invaluable and to the participants of interviews and focus groups who helped us reflect the lived experience of children's services. Finally, I thank the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, who, through their commitment to children, made this all possible.

Sincerely,



**Moira O'Neill**

The Child Advocate

# Office of the Child Advocate Strategic Planning Design Team

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# Our Planning Process

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The planning process was launched in June 2021. The goals of this process were to create a shared vision and a plan to realize this vision. A third-party consultant (Fio Partners, LLC) was engaged to provide experience and input to the efforts. Fio gathered data from internal and external sources to capture observations of the Office from a variety of perspectives.

Activities undertaken or developed over the course of the process included extensive input from internal and external stakeholders, such as:

- Community focus groups: attorneys, CASA/GAL, children, foster parents, parents, providers
- Office staff focus group
- Oversight Commission on Children's Services member interviews
- Stakeholder interviews: leaders from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches
- Data scan of conditions in the community landscape

The information gathered was shared with members of the Design Team at a retreat in December 2021, where participants provided input on the mission, vision, and values of the Office. The Team sought to evolve the Office's work in key areas, further develop relationships, and gauge key metrics to assess the success and impact of the Office. Leadership staff used this input and feedback to shape this strategic plan.



# What We Learned

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## **The Office has garnered respect in its short time of existence and is a credible voice for children and system reform.**

The Office has generated overall good will in many quarters, despite its recent beginnings and the potentially contentious nature of the work that it does. The “brand” of the Office, among those familiar with it, is largely positive and it is seen as reliably transparent and a credible advocate for children. Indeed, there is a desire on the part of some for the Office to capitalize on its credibility and its nimbleness to advocate more broadly for children and related state government initiatives.

## **A lack of relationships with some residential providers has resulted in a degree of friction.**

There is an inherent tension between residential providers and the Office. On the one hand, providers have attempted to accommodate and treat some of New Hampshire’s most vulnerable children when few alternatives were available. On the other hand, the providers are adjusting to a shifting paradigm, based in the science of child development that grounds the federal Family First Prevention Services Act and other laws aimed at maintaining children’s essential relationships at home and in communities. As a promoter of that shift, and in the absence of familiarity and trust, in part inhibited by pandemic restrictions, the Office may represent a difficult change to the providers that manifests as friction that may impede future collaborative solutions in the best interest of children.

## **The Office is not yet widely known and has not developed relationships with all key stakeholders.**

Despite garnering respect among leadership and constituents aware of the Office's existence, the Office is still not known or not well known throughout the State. Many of the individuals and groups that were included in the information gathering process expressed a desire to better know and understand the work of the Office, and how they could see (and use) it as a resource. This included individuals and groups who are in the child welfare ecosystem (e.g., children, CASA/GAL) as well as others.

**There are capacity and resource limitations that challenge the Office to concurrently address specific cases, lead and support system-level reforms, and conduct outreach to develop relationships.**

Stakeholders across the board noted that the beneficial work of the Office could be expanded with additional resources, namely staff. Recent budget allocations increased the number of staff positions from 3 to 6.5 full-time employees by July 2022, though there have been delays in hiring due to a pandemic-related hiring freeze, and cumbersome hiring processes. Responding or reacting to individual child needs has absorbed capacity for outreach and education that would ensure the Office is well known as a resource as well as a partner in system reforms.

**The Office needs to clarify its role and strengthen its collaboration with child-serving state agencies while retaining its independence, both at the leadership and staff levels.**

With additional staff and capitalizing on partnerships such as the Design Team, the Office is building greater capacity for outreach and education about the Office. Additional staff will also accommodate increasing the numbers of System Review Mappings. The mappings engage DCYF staff and other team partners, empowering them to examine system needs, then taking ownership of strategies for system strengthening. Finding ways to further engage leadership would strengthen relationships and empower those field staff.

**There is a need for a shared vision of system building that includes, but is not limited to, integrated mental health, prevention, and a lifespan approach that supports children at all ages and in all domains of their lives.**

In addition to a continued focus on the most at-risk children involved with child welfare and juvenile justice, the Office has another role to play in facilitating the building of systems. This includes systems relating to children's health, mental wellness, developmental progress, education, prevention, and family-strengthening, beginning at the earliest ages. The Office's expanded statutory jurisdiction positions it as a platform for promoting prevention services and family supports. The Office should continue to build strong, trusting relationships at all levels to ease system integration.



## **The Oversight Commission on Children’s Services would benefit from active education and engagement as a partner with the Office.**

The primary responsibilities of the Oversight Commission are to vet candidates for the Child Advocate position every four years. It is also mandated to provide oversight to review and collaborate with the Office on coordinated system services, program review and identifying and implementing best practices on behalf of children and families. The Commission struggled early on to define itself once the first Child Advocate vetting process was complete. COVID-19 restrictions on public meetings further impacted its function by interrupting Oversight Commission meetings. Commission members noted a sense of disconnect and a sense of urgency to re-engage to fulfill its statutory role. Given the expanded legislative mandate for the Office, Commission members also believe that there is an opportunity to consider the role of the Commission, the nature of its specific work, training and education needed to enable this work, and its composition as it returns to meeting on a regular basis. In 2022, changes to the enabling statute of the Oversight Commission have been raised as a means to clarify their role and responsibility.

## **The Office would benefit from greater presence with the Legislature.**

The Office has been seen as a reliable, credible, and impartial source of information about children and state services. However, its reach on legislative matters has been confined to policy related to child protection and juvenile justice. There is a need to expand discussions and monitoring of proposals for policy change affecting child safety and wellbeing across the continuum and to be recognized as a resource for a broader reach of child-centric policy.



# Vision, Mission, Values

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## Our Vision for New Hampshire's Children

- All children thrive in a safe, stable, healthy, and loving home; and have equitable access to education, health care, and other community resources
- All families have the support they need so their children flourish
- Services for children are accessible, integrated, evidence-based, appropriately resourced, high quality, and supported by well trained, trauma-informed, developmentally sensitive staff
- There is a robust array of prevention resources that support children and families at home and in their communities, and at younger ages and earlier stages of need
- State child-serving agencies are coordinated and connected in their work
- Elected officials understand the needs of children and families and put the best interests of children first

## Our Vision for the Office of the Child Advocate

The Office will be:

- Appropriately funded and staffed to fulfill its mission and realize its vision for New Hampshire's children
- A safe space for children and their allies to share concerns and input on their care, and the overall system
- Viewed and included as an essential partner in efforts to build a responsive service continuum.
- A collaborative and trusted partner with, and convener of, state agencies and community providers while maintaining independence
- Well-known and respected by, and accessible to, the general public
- A leader in promoting prevention and early intervention initiatives



## Our Mission (adopted January 2022)

**The mission of the Office of the Child Advocate is to lift up children by promoting equitable and effective reforms that meet the best interests of all New Hampshire children and strengthen public confidence and accountability in the State's systems that support children and families.**

To achieve this we:

- Bring children's voices and lived experience to the table
- Respect the importance of every person in a child's life
- Build collaborative relationships for reform
- Promote practices that are proven to be effective to help children and families
- Use data and safety science to examine child deaths, other critical incidents, and systemic processes
- Provide information and referral services to the public
- Listen to all concerns about child-serving agencies (public and private) and, if necessary, respond to complaints with a credible review process
- Maintain independence and impartiality in all aspects of children's services oversight

## Our Values

**Collaborative** - The Office creates safe space to convene and engage all partners, including children themselves, as an inclusive network of support, guidance, and reform for building the most responsive child-serving system

**Independent** - The Office in structure, function, and appearance, is free from outside control or influence so it may function as an impartial and essential entity that reports findings and makes recommendations based solely on a review of facts, law, and best practice, in the light of reason and fairness.

**Integrity** - The Office is depended upon for its honesty, accountability, and transparency. It aspires to be a model for principled public service.

**Curious** - The Office promotes and demonstrates curiosity and the love of learning as a means to understand children and identify the best solutions to identified needs.

**Best Practice Informed** - The Office promotes and demonstrates processes and solutions that are grounded in evidence, are family and child-driven, developmentally sensitive, and trauma-informed

**Equity Focused** - The Office believes deeply in giving every child a fair chance in life to optimize their potential. That includes lifting up the most disadvantaged, so they have the same starting point as all children

# Our Goals

## **We have responsibility:**

Continue to be responsive to complaints, incidents, and opportunities to improve the State's support and protection of children as their independent ally

## **We are recognized:**

Expand public knowledge of the Office as a resource to understand and advocate for children and the best child-serving system

### **Vision**

All children thrive in a safe, stable, healthy, and loving home; and have equitable access to education, health care, and other community resources.

### **Mission**

Lift up children by promoting equitable and effective reforms that meet the best interests of all New Hampshire children and strengthen public confidence and accountability in the State's systems that support children and families.

### **Values**

Collaborative  
Independent  
Curious  
Best Practice Informed  
Equity Focused  
Integrity

## **We are relationships:**

Strengthen and expand relationships with system partners based in trust, collaboration, and impact

## **We are a resource:**

Invest in building the capacity of the Office to support the safety and wellbeing of all children



## Goal 1

**Responsibility:** Continue to be responsive to complaints, incidents, and opportunities for improving the state's support and protection of children as their independent ally.

### Strategies

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Assess and report on progress in the transformation of the System of Care and Probation

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Align system reviews with priority initiatives addressing prevention, system integration, and trends emerging in complaints and incident reports

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Be a guiding, independent voice for children's services system reforms

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Hold systems accountable for policy and system change

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Maintain Safety Science as the foundation of the Office's work

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## Goal 2

**Recognition:** Expand public knowledge of the Office as a resource to understand and advocate for children and the best child-serving system.

### Strategies

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Assess the community's knowledge of the Office and create a communications strategy to raise and maintain public awareness

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Increase outreach, education, and engagement to raise awareness among children and families, their allies, and key system partners

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## Goal 3

**Relationships:** Strengthen and expand our relationships with system partners based in trust, collaboration, and impact.

### Strategies

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Raise up children by giving them voice and sharing their perspective

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Demonstrate the benefits of oversight that emphasizes support of system improvements and resource allocation for Community and Residential Providers

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Prove the value of the Office's independence in pursuing mutual goals with State agencies

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Continue and enhance shared learning with the Judiciary

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Support the Oversight Commission on Children's Services with education and training

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Provide periodic briefings for members of the Legislature

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**Resource:** Invest in building the capacity of the Office to support the safety and well being of all children.

### Strategies

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Continue to invest in Office staff and the staffing model, education, and training to support expanding work of the Office

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Further develop and strengthen systems that underpin the work of the Office

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Explore opportunities to diversify funding to further protect the Office's independence

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Advocate for clarifying and aligning pathways for case-specific complaints through the Ombudsman, Office of the Child Advocate, DCYF Constituency Services, and the Governor's Constituent Services, to ensure efficient, accessible citizen assistance

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Enhance internal capacity for information and referral services

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# Monitoring Our Progress

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## Implementation Approach

The Strategic Plan is a living document that is a road map by which the staff of the Office should be held accountable. The plan should be utilized to create annual goals for the Office. Progress against annual goals can be monitored by ensuring regular updates on their achievement at Oversight Commission and other community meetings with consistent reporting on desired key results noted below.

In addition, the Office will use an implementation plan to track progress against the selected strategies and tactics for the first year and then update the plan accordingly for each successive year. In the third year, the internal and external assessment process will begin again as the Office synthesizes successes of this plan and areas for more attention in the subsequent plan.

## Key Results

The implementation of the Strategic Plan is envisioned to enact a set of measurable key results. For each goal, the table below outlines key results we are aiming for. The proposed key results are based upon areas of measurement (activities, events, accomplishments) that currently exist within the organization by which progress can be tracked. In these cases, targets were developed by the Office team.

In some areas, baseline data, as well as the management capacity to measure and report on progress, will need to be created as part of the first year of implementation. Already the Office is in the process of data systems redesign, and we envision a dashboard of key results for the public to track our progress and hold us accountable for the work we do to ensure children's best interests are met.

## Goal

## Key Results

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Be responsive to complaints, incidents, and opportunities to improve the State's support and protection of children as their independent ally.

The Office contributes valued input, grounded in constituent experiences, to deliberations about the quality of children's services, positively influencing system improvements.

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Expand public knowledge of the Office as a resource to understand and advocate for children and the best child-serving system.

The Office is regarded as a primary resource for children, children's care, and good public policy affecting children.

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Strengthen and expand relationships with system partners based in trust, collaboration, and impact.

The Office is included in and inclusive of a wide community of stakeholders and State leaders aligned in the best interest of child safety and well-being.

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Invest in building the capacity of the Office to support the safety and wellbeing of all children.

The Office is responsive to constituents and actively engaged in dialogues on caring for and protecting children.

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