



Moira O'Neill
Child Advocate

State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate



Contact: Moira O'Neill, Child Advocate
603-848-0413, Moira.K.ONeill@childadvocate.nh.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – December 2, 2021

Child Advocate Releases 2021 Annual Report

CONCORD, N.H. - The Office of the Child Advocate released its 2021 Annual Report today.

The year 2021 is ending with an impressive roll-out of long-awaited community-based services for New Hampshire's children and families, according to the Child Advocate's annual report released Thursday. However, there is still much work to be done, chiefly, ensuring that those who work with children, including State child protection caseworkers and juvenile justice probation and parole officers, know and trust in the new availability of services when planning for children in need. Moira O'Neill, the Child Advocate, said, "The report underlines the enormous stress children faced in 2021, and the challenges the State encounters to respond." In her opening remarks, O'Neill noted the over 100 years understanding of the negative impact on a child placed away from home in institutional care, citing President Theodore Roosevelt's emphasis on supporting families, and the need for the State to respond instead with informed interventions that meet child and family needs.

The Office received 330 complaints over the year. The majority being child welfare concerns, including about children's placement and permanency. There were 1,909 incident reports received, largely involving children placed in residential facilities. The most commonly occurring incidents were physical restraints or seclusion (1018). Also among critical incidents were 19 child deaths, six of which were related to unsafe sleep practices including co-sleeping and presence of soft bedding.

Trends in complaints and incident reports pointed to six key areas explored in the report. They are the impact of COVID-19 on children, most notably an exacerbation of mental health concerns. That exacerbation is complicated by chronically limited access to acute psychiatric care, especially for children whose mental illness is manifested as aggressive behavior. Those children are systematically excluded from acute psychiatric care in a State contract with Hampstead Hospital. The phenomenon of "crossover" in which abused and neglected children being shifted to the juvenile justice system emerged significantly in the past year. The report also sites positive changes under federal law that anticipate transformation of residential placements becoming brief episodes of care. These changes are evidenced in the State's contracts with 14 residential facilities. However, the report notes a hesitancy to recognize the usefulness of understanding children's behavior as a guide to determining the best intervention, including in decisions about placing children. On juvenile justice transformation, O'Neill noted, "Shifting children away from probation with individualized programs and maintaining their connections to home communities underscores the importance of understanding children and child development. Without that understanding, we cannot respond in children's best interest or keep communities truly safe."

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.

####