



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate

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Child Advocate Releases 2019 Annual Report

CONCORD, N.H. - The Office of the Child Advocate released its 2019 Annual Report today. It is the second annual report for the office established to oversee the Division for Children Youth and Families (DCYF) and assure the best interests of children are protected. The report marks a generous and optimistic year in New Hampshire policy affecting children and documents the case and system review of the Office.

In 2019 the Office undertook broad system reviews examining the State's response to children with incarcerated parents, infants born substance exposed, and the use and reporting of restraint and seclusion in residential facilities. The Office also launched a unique System Learning Review (SLR) process grounded in safety science to examine critical incidents and deaths involving children known to DCYF. DCYF frontline staff and administrators collaborated with the Office in the SLR to ensure authentic representation of the daily pressures encountered in child protection and juvenile justice. In addition to system reviews the Office received, reviewed, and responded to over 1000 calls of concern and reports of incidents involving children involved with DCYF.

Moira O'Neill, Director of the Office, stated, "Similar key findings emerged in all of our work: the importance of open communications and relationships across all domains of children's services, and the essential need for establishing interprofessional relationships. Community-building is key to achieving the best outcomes for children. We must also acknowledge the barriers of personal and systemic bias that prevent children and families from being healthy and successful."

"Overarching all of these findings is the necessity of understanding child development and the need for continuing expansion and stabilization of New Hampshire's array of services for children and families," O'Neill said. Senate Bills 6 and 14, passed in 2019, support the expansion of the DCYF workforce and expansion of a comprehensive community-based system of care for children. O'Neill applauded these accomplishments, but urged mindfulness of more work needed. "Until all positions are filled and stabilized, caseworkers struggle with caseloads significantly higher than recommended. Even with enough caseworkers, children and families will continue to struggle if we do not have the right resources matched to clearly identified needs. There is great momentum forward for children in New Hampshire, we must maintain that movement."

The OCA looks to this upcoming year as an opportunity to better understand and elevate the voices of New Hampshire's children. "Children know what they need, and are often their own best advocate. We just need to listen to them," O'Neill stated.

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. O'Neill was appointed the first director of the new office in January 2018.

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