



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – March 26, 2019

Child Advocate reviewing system response to infants born substance-exposed.

Concord: As New Hampshire gears up to address massive substance use problems, the State Child Advocate warned today of potentially forgotten casualties of the crisis: newborn infants. The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) released its first “System Review Briefing” this morning. It outlines plans for a system-wide review of the Division for Children, Youth and Families’ (DCYF) response to infants who are born exposed to illicit substances and resources available beyond DCYF.

“New Hampshire is benefitting from extraordinary partnerships with the federal government to combat opioid use,” said Moira O’Neill, the Director of the State of New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate, “We need to be sure infants and children are safe in the meantime, and we need to acknowledge there are equally deadly substances to opioids that infants are exposed to.” The briefing notes that there were 466 children involved in DCYF abuse/neglect assessments in 2018 in which the characteristics indicated “Child Born Drug Exposed.” O’Neill pointed out that the OCA has received 5 reports of deaths of children who were born substance-exposed, two in the last reporting period, three in the current. The deaths have occurred up to 23 months after enhanced assessments. The OCA has further received reports of eleven additional children who have been involved in critical incidents other than deaths since their birth (e.g. serious injury, parent death). “We need to understand if we are seeing a trend among at-risk infants and whether our child welfare and public health systems have the resources they need to address it,” O’Neill said.

The OCA System Review Briefing is described as a means to hold the OCA accountable to the public and ensure transparency of the office’s work. Briefings are published when a review is expected to take more than a standard of 60 business days and require additional office resources. The Briefing will identify the areas of additional research, how the system review will proceed, and an estimation of time to completion. The Briefing and full review will be posted on the OCA’s website. This System Review is targeted for completion by July 1, 2019.

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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