

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
18-20 TRINITY STREET, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06105**



**Sarah Healy Eagan
Acting Child Advocate**

**OUTLINE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE FOR
THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

February 22, 2021

STAFFING, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND ACTIVITIES OF THE OCA

The Office of the Child Advocate is the state's independent agency charged with responding to citizen concerns, investigating and publicly reporting regarding the efficacy of publicly-funded services for vulnerable children. OCA appreciates the state's current fiscal challenges and we strive to do everything we can to ensure OCA is fiscally responsible and that we are helping to promote accountability and transparency across all child-serving systems. The OCA, created by the legislature after the death of a young child under DCF supervision, now has a 25 year legacy of being a voice for the state's most vulnerable children. As the State's Child Advocate for the past 8 years, I deeply appreciate the legislature's enduring commitment to the work of the OCA and the children and families we serve.

FTEs—7

- Child Advocate: Directs systemic investigations and drafts public reports, conducts legislative and systemic advocacy, and directs office communications.
- Associate Child Advocate: Advocates for individual children; conducts systemic advocacy with state agency personnel; assists with facility investigation.
- Assistant Child Advocate: Facility Investigator.
- Assistant Child Advocate: Child Fatality Investigator.
- Assistant Child Advocate: Handles intakes involving children with complex needs; facility and program investigation. Currently vacant.
- Staff Attorney: Assists with legal issues in the office; conducts special education reviews; helps develop investigative reports.
- Human Services Advocate: Speaks directly with families who are calling for help.

RESPONDING TO CITIZEN CONCERNS

OCA receives calls directly from individuals seeking help for children in a variety of areas: child welfare, special education, access to services for children with disabilities, and juvenile justice.

- OCA provides all callers with advice and referral, and opens many cases for direct advocacy or investigation.
- OCA utilizes a list-serve to better inform stakeholders, legislators and the public regarding developments and information affecting children's rights.
- OCA staff conduct regular trainings regarding special education, child welfare issues, suicide prevention and other issues related to child fatality prevention.

CHILD FATALITY INVESTIGATIONS

OCA is a permanent member and the co-chair of the state's Child Fatality Review Panel, created by C.G.S. 46a-13(l). OCA is the only entity with statutory authority to investigate child fatalities in the state. In 2020, OCA published or co-developed the following reports regarding unexpected child deaths and critical injuries in Connecticut.

- *OCA 2019-20 Annual Report with Child Fatality Summary*
- *Public Health Alert: Youth Suicide, October 2020.*
- *Public Health Alert: Burn Injuries to Children; Keeping Babies Safe.*

FACILITY/PROGRAM INVESTIGATIONS

OCA responds to concerns regarding the safety and well-being of children in state-funded, state-licensed or state-operated settings. In 2020, OCA activities included the following:

- Development and participation in working group to implement new statutory requirements for public reporting of quality/safety information regarding DCF-licensed treatment facilities for children (*Special Act 19-19*).
- November, 2020, OCA published *Investigative Report—Conditions of Confinement for Incarcerated Youth Age 15-21 in the Department of Correction*. OCA's findings of concern included inadequate mental health care and rehab programming, use of chemical agent with youth who have psychiatric disabilities, use of in-cell restraint for youth, and over-reliance on isolation as a behavior management tool. OCA made numerous recommendations for system transformation and accountability. In December, 2020, the DOC published an Action Plan to address deficiencies identified in OCA's report.

ADDITIONAL SYSTEMIC INVESTIGATIONS AND ADVOCACY EFFORTS

- In response to concerns raised with our office, OCA investigated Waterbury Public Schools' reliance on police to respond to behavioral crises of children in PreK-8th grade. In September, 2020, OCA published its report -- *Advocacy for Young Children in School—Investigation of Waterbury Public Schools' Use of Police to Address Behavioral Health Crises of Children*. The OCA found that Waterbury Public Schools called police almost 200 times in a six month period during the 2018-19 school year in response to behavioral health crises involving children in PreK through 8th grade, disproportionately impacting young children of color with psychiatric, developmental, and educational disabilities. OCA made several recommendations for local practices and statutory changes, and continues to work with the school district, mayor's office, and the State Department of Education on corrective actions.
- Throughout COVID-19, OCA has been working with state and local partners to help children and families most profoundly impacted by the extended crisis. OCA helps to facilitate multiple

working groups examining supports for our most vulnerable children, including infants and toddlers and children with disabilities.

STAFFING VACANCIES/PROJECTIONS

OCA anticipates two retirements of our most senior staff in the next year.

In early 2022, OCA expects that its child fatality investigator, the only staff for the state's Child Fatality Review Panel, and the Associate Child Advocate, the primary contact for families with children who have complex needs, will retire from state service. Both staff members have been with the OCA for more than twenty years. OCA is not of the size or budget where we can on-board new staff to support transition while senior staff remain on salary. To fulfill our statutory responsibilities on behalf of children and families, OCA will need to develop strategies to mitigate the impact of the loss of our two senior staff. We are happy to keep legislators apprised of our staffing needs.

Respectfully,

Sarah Healy Eagan

Acting Child Advocate, State of Connecticut