

The Digest of Administrative Reports to the Governor

Fiscal Year 2023-24

Agency:	Office of the Child Advocate/Office of Governmental Accountability
Agency Head:	Sarah Eagan, Child Advocate
Deputy Head:	Christina Ghio, Associate Child Advocate
Established:	1995
Statutory Authority:	C.G.S. § 46a-13K, et seq.
Central Office:	165 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105
Number of Employees:	8
Recurring Operating Expenses:	\$886,106.51 (OCA/CHILD FATALITY)

Designated as a division of the OGA, the OCA maintains its independence and statutory authority/responsibilities. The office's administrative functions were transitioned to the Department of Administrative Services' SMART unit in 2016.

Mission

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was created in 1995 to serve as an independent voice for children rather than an administrator of programs. OCA's mission is to oversee the care and protection of Connecticut's children and to advocate for their well-being. OCA is committed to ensuring that all children receive the care and supports that they need.

Statutory Responsibilities

The OCA's statutory responsibilities include: evaluating the procedures for and the delivery of state-funded services to children; investigating inquiries or complaints about services for children; recommending changes in state policy; conducting programs of public education, legislative advocacy and proposing systemic reform; reviewing conditions and procedures of all public and private facilities where children are placed; investigating conditions of confinement for incarcerated youth age 15 to 21; providing training and technical assistance to children's attorneys; serving on the Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), and conducting a fatality review when child dies due to unexpected or unexplained causes, in order to identify trends and patterns of risk, facilitate development of prevention strategies, and improve coordination of services for children and families in the state.

Public Service

OCA continues to shine the light on the needs and circumstances of children in Connecticut, and works to bring about necessary change for children and families. Specific reviews and investigations assist the OCA in identifying systemic issues and such investigations often shape OCA's public policy and legislative advocacy. OCA shares its public investigative reports, public health alerts, issue briefs and other relevant educational information through a listserv, distribution to relevant legislative committees, and on the OCA website (www.ct.gov/oca/).

ACHIEVEMENTS/IMPROVEMENTS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023-24

Ombudsman Activities

Between July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024, the OCA responded to nearly 400 individual and systemic complaints regarding the provision of state-funded services to vulnerable children. The OCA responds to inquiries and concerns from family members, health/mental health care providers, school personnel, foster parents, attorneys, legislators, and employees of public agencies, as well as youth who are seeking assistance.

In most case intakes OCA provides information and guidance in how to effectively navigate the state's often complex service systems. When the concerns presented are more complex concerns about unmet needs of vulnerable children, OCA's investigation and advocacy efforts may include record reviews, program visits, and communication with state and community-based agencies to ensure the needs of children are appropriately assessed and addressed.

Frequent issues addressed or investigated by the OCA this year included:

- Safety or permanency concerns for children who have experienced abuse/neglect.
- Lack of access to appropriate special education and related services for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.
- Lack of timely and available mental health treatment services across the continuum, from outpatient to in-home to residential treatment.
- Children on discharge delay in hospital emergency departments or hospitals who could not access recommended levels of care, including in-patient, psychiatric residential treatment facilities, foster care, or community-based services.
- Children awaiting appropriate mental health services and/or foster care, who become justice involved while waiting.
- Lack of timely and available services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Children experiencing bullying and harassment.

Child Fatality Prevention/Child Safety

- OCA continues to co-chair and staff the state Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP), meeting monthly with a multi-disciplinary panel to review unexpected and unexplained deaths of CT's children reported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) and develop strategies for fatality prevention.
- OCME reports unexpected and untimely deaths of children to the OCA. From January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, 67 child fatalities were determined to be Accidents, Homicides, Suicides or Undetermined.
- The Office of the Child Advocate and Dr. Kirsten Bechtel prepared and published (July 2023) the Infant and Toddler Fatality Report, which examined deaths of children under age 3 who died between January 2019 and August 2022. OCA reviewed data from several state agencies regarding children or families' receipt of benefits, services, or supervision prior to or at the time of the child's death.

- In December of 2023, the Child Fatality Review Panel hosted a [virtual summit](#) to discuss the findings of the Infant/Toddler Fatality Report, and the CFRP invited several national experts to present their findings and research regarding infant/toddler fatalities.
- In October of 2023, OCA released an investigative report examining the circumstances preceding the death by homicide of 2-year-old Liam Rivera on or about December 28, 2023, in Stamford, Connecticut. Liam had an open child protection case with DCF and the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters at the time of his death (he was under court-ordered Protective Supervision), and his father was on Adult Probation supervision by the Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division (JB-CSSD) due to a previous child abuse charge. Liam had an attorney and Guardian ad Litem appointed by the Office of the Chief Public Defender (OCPD) to represent him in the child protection case. OCA found state agency/s staff did not adhere to all applicable rules/expectations for the protection of children. OCA continues to work with all agencies in making relevant systemic improvements.
- In February 2024, OCA released an investigative report examining the circumstances preceding the June 2023 death by homicide of 10 month old Marcello Meadows from Fentanyl and Xylazine intoxication. Marcello's family had an open child abuse/neglect case with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) until three weeks before his death. His mother had outstanding warrants for violation of probation, issued by the court shortly after Marcello's birth, which were served at the time of Marcello's death. Again, OCA identified the need for certain practice and systemic improvements, and OCA continues to work with the state agencies involved with Marcello's families to address recommendations from the fatality report.
- The OCA, in consultation with CFRP, conducted an Ad-Hoc review of young adults, ages 18-21, who died unexpectedly from January 1, 2018 through September 30, 2022 in CT. These findings were shared with colleagues and may have policy/practice implications for those working with this population.
- In addition to its investigatory work and publications, OCA actively participates on several committees, taskforces, and working groups, local and national, focused on prevention efforts for children at risk of intentional and unintentional injuries/fatalities.

Facility Oversight and Investigation

The OCA staff visit children and youth in both public and privately operated settings including, but not limited to, hospitals, residential treatment programs, detention, correctional facilities and both public and private school classrooms. OCA's authority allows our staff to meet with children and youth, assess their environment of care, observe care and treatment in vivo, interview program staff and administration and review both program and child-specific records thus allowing appreciation of the true experience of the children and families served.

- During the last year, OCA participated in the state's Juvenile Justice Police and Oversight Committee (JJPOC), and OCA worked with members of the JJPOC's Incarceration Subcommittee to improve re-entry services for children returning to their communities.
- OCA staff continue to monitor conditions of confinement for incarcerated youth age 15 to 22, meeting with youth, staff, and agency administrators at the DOC and JB-CSSD. OCA is preparing an updated investigative report for Fall 2024. This report will include information

regarding youth's access to necessary services and conditions for individuals 18 to 21 in DOC facilities' Restrictive Housing units.

Educational Advocacy

- During the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the OCA assisted families in accessing disability support services, summer programming, early intervention services, and delivery of services in the least restrictive environment.
- During this reporting year, the OCA conducted systemic reviews/investigations of multiple public-school districts. Investigations addressed issues concerning educational administration and programming, Title IX compliance, Title VI language-based discrimination, and exclusionary discipline and disproportionate impact on children of color. All the OCA's systemic educational reviews/investigations resulting in the issuance of a formal OCA Report, Letter of Findings and/or Program Concern are available on its website.
- In March 2024, the OCA, in partnership with Disability Rights of Connecticut (DRCT), concluded a two-year investigation into High Road Schools, a private-equity owned group of eight state-approved private special education programs (APSEPS). OCA and DRCT concluded that many of the students at High Road Schools were underserved both in terms of educational planning and service delivery. In addition, OCA/DRCT investigation revealed significant deficiencies with respect to the oversight and monitoring by CSDE and the LEAs of services to these students— disproportionately low-income children of color. Based on the deficiencies identified during its investigation and lack of LEA oversight, the OCA and DRCT filed a joint complaint with the Department of Justice against four Districts included in its investigation.
- OCA participates in several committees and working groups to address systemic educational concerns affecting children throughout Connecticut.

Child Welfare Advocacy

- The OCA responds to individual complaints about children involved with DCF, providing advice to callers and following up with DCF administrators regarding allegedly unmet needs of children for services, permanency, or protection. The OCA meets regularly with the DCF Executive Team to review child fatality/critical incidents involving children recently involved with or under the care/supervision of DCF, quality assurance data regarding OCA's child protection activities, foster care, and other systemic issues affecting children and youth. OCA reviews DCF systems data regarding core practice areas: safety, permanency, and wellbeing.
- In September 2023, the OCA published an investigative report on conditions for children in state-licensed shelters, called STAR homes. OCA found that many children in the STAR homes have significant child welfare histories and unmet mental health treatment needs. OCA advocated with policymakers for increased oversight of the STAR homes as well as improved resources to meet the permanency and treatment needs of the children. In early 2024, DCF announced several changes to improve services and supports for children in shelter care, and

to increase treatment options for children. OCA continues to work with legislators, DCF, and policymakers to address recommendations contained in the OCA's 2023 report.

- In 2024, OCA worked cooperatively with DCF to draft and pass new legislation that will strengthen membership and oversight activities of the DCF Statewide Advisory Committee and improve transparency and accountability for the state's child welfare system. OCA is working with the Office of the Chief Public Defender to improve delivery of legal services to children in child protection proceedings. The OCPD recently announced its intention to hire twenty social workers to support the legal representation of children in child protection proceedings.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Eagan, Esq.,

Child Advocate