

**Office of the Child Advocate
Annual Report
2025**



**State of Rhode Island
Office of the Child Advocate
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Introduction

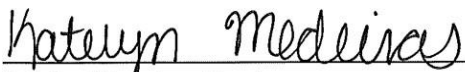
The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is issuing this Annual Report in compliance with R.I.G.L. § 42-73-6 and R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.1. This report constitutes a public record under Rhode Island General Laws § 30-2-(d)(16). This report is in conformity with the OCA's obligation under Rhode Island General Laws § 42-73-1 *et seq.* to maintain confidentiality.

The OCA is an independent, autonomous state agency charged with providing oversight to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). DCYF is the sole child welfare agency for the State of Rhode Island. The OCA is responsible for monitoring the operation of each unit within DCYF and ensuring compliance with internal policies and protocols, state law and federal law. In addition, the OCA monitors systemic issues and trends to ensure that DCYF is utilizing best practices and to inform whether systemic change is necessary. The OCA provides oversight to all 650+ DCYF employees and service providers, sub-contracted through DCYF.

Furthermore, the OCA is responsible for protecting the legal rights of children in state care and for recommending policies and practices which ensure that children are safe, have permanent and stable families, and have their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral needs met.

The OCA has the right to meet with and speak to any child open to DCYF. The OCA has the right to intervene in any case to ensure that proper steps are being taken to secure the child's health and safety. Fulfilling this important role is accomplished through numerous mechanisms including but not limited to site reviews of facilities licensed by DCYF, legal intervention, independent investigations, monitoring the Child Protective Services (CPS) call log, inquiries, legislative advocacy, policy review and reform, the review of child fatalities and near fatalities, and more.

The OCA staff is dedicated to ensuring the best interests of children in state care and will advocate to ensure that children are receiving quality care, appropriate services, necessary supports, and access to a quality and consistent education. Our committed and passionate team works tirelessly to improve the lives of children and youth navigating the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems, ensuring they receive the support and opportunities they deserve to thrive. Thank you to the OCA team for your hard work to improve the safety and well-being of children and youth in the State of Rhode Island.


Katelyn Medeiros, Esquire

Mission Statement

The mission of the OCA is to protect the legal rights of children in state care. To recommend policies and practices, which ensure that children are safe and to make certain that children have permanent and stable families. To ensure that children placed out of their home have their physical, mental health, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral needs met.

Statutory Authority

The OCA was established by statute to protect the civil, legal, and special rights of all children involved with DCYF. The mandates of the OCA are contained primarily in Rhode Island General Laws §§ 42-73-2.3; 42-73-7 and 42-73-9. By statute, the OCA has been provided with the authority to perform a number of important duties, which include but are not limited to:

- (1) To ensure that each child in protective care, custody or in treatment; and in proper cases, others interested in the child's welfare, is apprised of the child's rights;
- (2) Review periodically the procedures established by DCYF;
- (3) Investigate, in accordance with the established Rules and Regulations adopted by the Child Advocate, the circumstances relating to the death of any child who has received services from DCYF;
- (4) Review complaints of persons and investigate those where it appears that a child may be in need of assistance from the Child Advocate;
- (5) Periodically review the facilities and procedures of any and all institutions and/or residences, public and private, where a juvenile has been placed by the Family Court or DCYF;
- (6) Recommend changes in the procedures for dealing with juvenile problems and in the systems for providing childcare and treatment;
- (7) Take all possible action including, but not limited to, programs of public education, legislative advocacy and formal legal action, to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special rights of children involved with DCYF;
- (8) Provide training and technical assistance to guardian ad litem and special advocates appointed by the Family Court to represent children in proceedings before that Court;

(9) Review orders of the Family Court relating to juveniles with power to request reviews as required by the best interests of the child;

(10) Investigate institutional abuse complaints;

(11) Commence claims on behalf of child victims of crime in the care of DCYF, in accordance with Chapter 12-25 entitled "Criminal Injuries Compensation" of the General Laws;

(12) Initiate, with the assistance of a confidential and voluntary panel, reviews of any child fatality or near fatality (a) The fatality or near fatality occurs while in the custody of, or involved with, the Department, or if the child's family previously received services from the department; (b) The fatality or near fatality is alleged to be from abuse or neglect of the child; or (c) A sibling, household member, or day care provider has been the subject of a child abuse and neglect investigation within the previous twelve (12) months, including, without limitation, cases in which the report was unsubstantiated or the investigation is currently pending; and

(13) To apply for and accepts grants.

Staff

Child Advocate

Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.

Ms. Medeiros started her career with the Office of the Child Advocate in May 2014 as a Staff Attorney III. In February 2017, Ms. Medeiros was promoted to serve as the Assistant Child Advocate. In July 2022, Ms. Medeiros was appointed to serve as the Acting Child Advocate. In May 2024, Ms. Medeiros was appointed by Governor Daniel J. McKee as the Child Advocate for a five-year term. Ms. Medeiros graduated *summa cum laude* from Rhode Island College in 2010 with a Bachelor's Degree in Justice Studies and Sociology. She then pursued her Juris Doctorate at Roger Williams School of Law, graduating *magna cum laude* in 2013. She was a member of Roger Williams School of the Law Honors Program, Public Interest Law Program and served as a Research Assistant. While participating in the Public Interest Law Program, Ms. Medeiros worked for the OCA as a Rule 9 intern from 2012-2013. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and the Massachusetts Bar in November 2013 and the U.S. District Court of Rhode Island in 2014. Ms. Medeiros serves as a member of several committees including but not limited to, the OCA Child Fatality Review Panel, OCA Advisory Committee, Children's Cabinet, Governor's Council on Behavioral Health, and the RI Special Legislative Commission to Study Educational Outcomes for Children in State Care. Previously, Ms. Medeiros served on the Special Legislative Study Commission on Mandated Safety Protocols for Rhode Island Schools and the RI Trauma Informed Schools Commission. Prior to working for the OCA, Ms. Medeiros worked in private practice.

Assistant Child Advocate

Diana Robbins, Esq.

Ms. Robbins joined the OCA Staff in May 2017 as the Staff Attorney III. In November 2022, she was promoted to Staff Attorney IV. In August 2024, she was promoted to Assistant Child Advocate. She received her Bachelor of Arts & Sciences Degree in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Ms. Robbins graduated from Roger Williams School of Law with her Juris Doctor in 2014. While working on her Bachelor's and Law Degrees, Ms. Robbins worked for and held management positions for the respective Annual Giving Offices. Ms. Robbins received certificates in Mediation Training and Family and Divorce Mediation Training and mediated in Rhode Island Family Court and Small Claims Court. In addition, she worked for Rhode Island Legal Services for their Family Preservation Project as a Rule 9 Intern and then as a volunteer Staff Attorney. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and the Massachusetts Bar in 2014. Prior to joining the OCA, Ms. Robbins was a Staff Attorney for the Committee for Public Counsel Services in their Children and Family Law Division.

Staff Attorney IV

Siobhan Bogosian, Esq.

Siobhan M. Bogosian is a Staff Attorney IV. She joined the OCA in 2024. Ms. Bogosian earned both a Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Science Degree in the Administration of Justice from Salve Regina University. She went on to earn her Juris Doctorate from Roger Williams University School of Law while working as a paralegal in the Criminal Division at the Rhode Island Office of Attorney General. In 2007, upon her admission to the Rhode Island Bar and U.S. District Court Bar, she was sworn in as a Special Assistant Attorney General and served as a criminal prosecutor for 16 years. Ms. Bogosian then went on to work in private practice where she focused primarily on Family Law.

Staff Attorney IV

Anna K. Sheil, Esq.

Anna joined the OCA in January 2023 as the Staff Attorney III and was promoted to Staff Attorney IV in August

2025. She graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 2015 with a Bachelor's Degree in Human Development and Family Studies. Ms. Sheil pursued her Juris Doctorate at New England Law | Boston and graduated in 2019. She was a member of the New England Law | Boston Law Review. In addition, Ms. Sheil worked for the OCA during both undergrad and law school as an intern. She was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar and Massachusetts Bar in 2019. Prior to joining the OCA, Ms. Sheil worked in private practice.

Special Projects Coordinator

Kathryn R. Cortes

Kathryn Cortes has been with the OCA since 2007. Kathryn is currently the Special Projects Coordinator and is a certified Child Forensic Interviewer. Kathryn holds numerous certifications including but not limited to: Conducting Child Abuse Investigations, Child Death Investigations, Current Drug Trends, Youth Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences, Sexual Offenses Mind & Motivation, Grooming Behaviors and Often Counter-Intuitive Behaviors of Child-Victims. Kathryn previously served as a Senior Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist for the OCA from 2013-2017 and as the Chief Field Investigator for the OCA from 2007-2013, until her promotions in 2013 and 2017 respectively. Kathryn has a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice/Juvenile Justice from Salve Regina University located in Newport, RI. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2007, Kathryn began working as a Senior Residential Counselor in 1997 at Child & Family Services of Newport County in Newport RI. There, Kathryn worked to maintain a safe and therapeutic living environment for boys ages 6 through 12, which provided a structured program that promoted daily life skills, mental health services, and educational skills for the boys. Following her six (6) years at Child & Family Services, Kathryn moved onto Civigenics, Inc. in Marlborough, MA where she spent four (4) years as the Program Director of a therapeutic milieu program located in the Rhode Island Training School. Kathryn remains an involved member of both the professional and personal community in RI. Her positions include serving as a Member of the Rhode Island Child Death Review Team, Member of the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, Member of the CSEC Task Force, Former Executive Board Member of the RI Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and Former Legislative Field Advocate for AFSP.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jacqueline Lafontant

Jacqueline Lafontant is currently one of our Senior Planning & Program Development Specialists at the OCA. Jacqueline has a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Rhode Island College. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2017, Jacqueline worked as Juvenile Program Worker (JPW) for the Rhode Island Training School from 2007-2017. There, Jacqueline worked to provide the custody, supervision, and security of detained youths, including assisting in the rehabilitation, education, treatment, care, and control of the residents. Jacqueline is serving as a Member of the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center. Jacqueline has earned a certificate in Juvenile Justice and Youth Development from Rutgers University. Jacqueline is certified in Forensic Interviewing of Children and has completed several trainings and certifications related to Commercially Sexually Exploited Children.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Jimmy Vilayvanh

Jimmy Vilayvanh is a Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist. Before joining the OCA staff 7 in 2018, he worked for the Department of Children Youth & Families (DCYF) in Juvenile Probation. At DCYF, Jimmy worked closely with young people involved in the legal system. He supervised young men and women on home confinement with electronic monitoring. Before working for DCYF, Jimmy was a Program Director for Outreach and Tracking at Tides Family Services for 7 years. His main responsibility was overseeing the relationship between Tides Family Services and the Rhode Island Training School. There, he helped young people transition back into the community. The program helped young people meet the conditions of Juvenile Probation while addressing their educational needs, mental health

services, and life skills. Jimmy is actively involved in various groups and teams, including the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center, Rhode Island Anti Human Trafficking Task Force (RIATTF). He is certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid, Conducting Child Abuse Investigations, and Forensic Interviewing.

Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist

Kristen Anslo

Kristin Anslo is a Senior Planning & Program Development Specialist. Before joining the OCA staff in 2024, she worked as a Child Protective Investigator for DCYF for 6 years. Her role involved conducting investigations of child abuse and neglect in addition to safety planning, referring children for services, completing Family Functioning Assessments, and managing reports made to the hotline. Previously, she was a research assistant for Butler Hospital and Brown University researchers. For several years, Kristin worked with children with disabilities in various capacities including as an ABA therapist and Residential Milieu Therapist. Kristin is a member of the Human Trafficking Task Force, and the Multi-Disciplinary Team at Hasbro Children's Hospital/Aubin Child Protection Center.

Public Policy and Communications Manager

Kara A. Foley, MSW

Kara Foley was promoted to Public Policy and Communications Manager in July 2025. Ms. Foley joined the OCA as the Public Education and Information Coordinator in December 2019. Ms. Foley earned a Master of Social Work Degree with a Macro Concentration from Rhode Island College and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology with a minor in Psychology from Simmons University. She also completed a policy fellowship through The Women's Fund of Rhode Island's Women's Policy Institute in 2012. Prior to joining the OCA staff in 2019, Ms. Foley served as a Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT where she was responsible for policy analysis, research, and writing on issues related to child welfare, child abuse and neglect, children in care of DCYF, adoption and permanency, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth referred to Rhode Island Family Court, youth at the Rhode Island Training School, alternatives to incarceration, and others. Prior to her role with Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, Ms. Foley was the Community Program Consultant for Adoption Rhode Island where she worked on foster care and adoption programming, research, development, and community outreach, and worked for the Providence VA Medical Center as a Research Health Science Specialist. Ms. Foley was instrumental in the passage of legislation to grant adult adoptees born in Rhode Island access to non-certified copies of original birth certificates at the age of 25 and the passage of legislation in 2021 to decrease the age to age 18. In 2022, Ms. Foley received an Angel in Adoption Award from Congressman Cicilline. Ms. Foley serves as a member of the OCA Advisory Committee, a member of the Child Fatality Panel, a member of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Education Subcommittee, a member of the Community Engagement and Education and Employment subcommittees of the Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth, and for more than ten years has volunteered as a guest speaker at foster/adoptive parent licensing trainings.

Staff Attorney III

Peter Capalbo, Esq.

Peter Capalbo was promoted from the Education Coordinator to a Staff Attorney III in May 2025. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in History from Bridgewater State University and Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in English from Rhode Island College. In 2023, Peter earned a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Massachusetts's School of Law. He received a Public Interest Law Fellowship while studying there. Peter is certified as a secondary English teacher by the Rhode Island Department of Education. Before joining the OCA in 2023, Peter worked for Tides Family Services for almost 20 years. During his time there, he worked as a teacher, senior administrator, and educational advocate.

Principal Planning and Program Specialist

Kristine Bouthillier

Kristine Bouthillier is the Principal Planning and Program Specialist. Before joining the OCA staff in 2025, Kristine worked as a Training Manager at Child & Family where she oversaw onboarding and staff development across various programs, chaired the Inclusion Diversity Equity Accessibility Committee, co-chaired the Safety Committee, contributed to agency-wide quality improvement efforts, and supported the organization's Council on Accreditation process. Kristine also spent several years working in child and family services, first as a case manager and later as a foster parent supervisor, recruiter, trainer, and licenser, and finally as a certified Parenting with Love and Limits program clinician. Also, she is trained in Trauma Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence - Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting foster parent training, Safety Assessment Through Family Engagement home study, multiple de-escalation models, and has led numerous trainings for foster parents and staff. Early-on she held roles as a Speech-Language Pathology Assistant and an Applied Behavior Analysis therapist supporting children with autism in school settings. Kristine earned her Bachelor's Degree from the University of Connecticut and is pursuing a Master's Degree in Human Services. Outside of work, Kristine serves on the board of a local foundation, volunteers with various nonprofits, and provides emergency foster care for cats.

Education Coordinator

Ashley Chiari

Ashley Chiari is the Education Coordinator. Ashley has a Bachelor's degree from the University of Connecticut in both Human Development and Family Studies as well as Sociology. Before joining the OCA in 2026, Ashley worked for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) working with both transitional age youth and adults in the community with major mental illness. As a DMH case manager, Ashley supported persons served with crisis intervention, referrals to mental health treatment and additional community supports. Previously, Ashley worked at Massachusetts Mentor, an intensive foster care agency, serving high risk and medically complex youth who faced challenges such as out-of-home placements, independent living alternatives or involvement in the juvenile justice system. As the intake worker, Ashley worked to make appropriate matches amongst youth and foster parents. Ashley also served as a clinical coordinator, following the youth placements and ensuring that their best interests were being served by both the foster parents, the families, and the school systems.

Confidential Secretary

Taylor Camirand

Taylor Camirand joined the OCA in August 2020 as the Confidential Secretary to the Child Advocate. Taylor is deeply involved in the philanthropic work of the OCA and is the lead point of contact with the Enterprise Rescue Planning from the OCA. Taylor received a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology in 2016 from the University of New Hampshire. Before joining the OCA staff, Taylor worked as a case manager for the foster care program at North American Family Institute (NAFI) from 2017 to 2020. There, she worked directly with children and families to help plan for and provide therapeutic foster care treatment. Prior to her experience at NAFI, Taylor worked at the Groden Center, a school for children with autism, as both a behavioral specialist and the school's secretary. Taylor has experience working with a multitude of populations within Rhode Island's child welfare system. In her current role as Confidential Secretary at the OCA, Taylor works directly with the Child Advocate and Assistant Child Advocate to ensure daily office tasks are completed.

Oversight

A. Child Protective Services (CPS)

1. CPS Log and Screen Outs

The OCA has the authority to access DCYF's database, Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST), which contains the file for every family involved with DCYF, including records, data, and reports. With this access, the OCA reviews the Child Protective Services (CPS) call log daily. The call log includes every call made to the DCYF Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline (hereinafter Hotline). There can be several responses when a call is made to the Hotline. The outcomes include an investigation, a screen out with no further action, or a prevention response. A prevention response is initiated when allegations may not rise to the level of an investigation, however, the family or child may require additional supports and services, which are voluntary. DCYF outreaches to the family to offer these supports and services. A screen out indicates that the allegations made did not rise to the level of an investigation nor did they prompt a prevention response. OCA staff provide heightened oversight to screen outs and prevention responses by CPS to ensure that the call does not warrant further intervention.

The OCA conducts an independent review of the report to the Hotline and any additional case information. If the OCA determines investigative actions are required to ensure the safety of children, the OCA will request that the allegations made to the Hotline be investigated. During 2025, the OCA recommended DCYF conduct investigations following our independent review, and although DCYF did not follow through on our recommendations in every situation, there was additional follow-up with the family/child either by DCYF or the OCA. The OCA has and will continue to work collaboratively with CPS to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

B. Congregate Care/Institutions/Placements

1. Investigations and Institutional Abuse

Pursuant to the OCA's statutory mandate, the OCA has the right to investigate any claim of institutional abuse or neglect. Institutional abuse or neglect refers to known or suspected abuse or neglect by a foster parent or an employee at a public or private residential care home or facility. The OCA utilizes the CPS call logs and notifications from DCYF to monitor all claims of institutional abuse.

The OCA provides heightened oversight to institutional abuse allegations. Upon receiving notification, our Special Projects Coordinator and our three (3) Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists review the reports. Allegations of institutional abuse categorized as screen outs are reviewed to determine whether the allegations warrant any further investigation. If so, the OCA staff will follow up with DCYF to provide them with an opportunity to complete their own investigation. However, should DCYF fail to review the allegations, the OCA staff has the authority to complete their own independent investigation of the allegations.

When DCYF investigates allegations of institutional abuse, OCA staff tracks the investigation for timely completion. Once DCYF's investigation is completed, the outcome and any corrective action is reviewed to ensure the proper steps were taken. If the OCA determines that additional intervention is required, the OCA follows up with DCYF or initiates an independent investigation.

When the OCA completes an independent investigation, a report is generated outlining the findings of the office and recommendations to ensure the safety and well-being of the children placed at the facility. These reports are subsequently provided to DCYF Administration, DCYF Licensing, the DCYF Placement Unit, the program that was investigated, and the Rhode Island Family Court.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA continues to receive calls to our office that may result in legal intervention, educational advocacy, or investigations of congregate care placements. In 2025, the OCA received an inquiry that there was a safety concern at a DCYF licensed congregate care placement related to supervision. The OCA responded to the group home and conducted a comprehensive investigation, reviewing documentation, meeting with youth, and speaking with leadership, staff and DCYF. During the investigation, the OCA determined that there were inconsistencies in reporting and following staffing ratios. The program collaborated with our office and based on recommendations from our investigative team were able to rectify these issues.

2. Facility Reviews

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA remains committed to reviewing licensing regulations, individual program policies and procedures, and DCYF's policies and procedures to ensure that youth are receiving consistent and quality care while they are experiencing residential placement. Since the release of the St. Mary's Home for Children Investigation (hereinafter St. Mary's report) in 2023, the OCA has continued to recommend that DCYF develop a comprehensive process to assess, evaluate, and monitor programs that are licensed by DCYF. The OCA has recommended that DCYF develop a Residential Monitoring Unit to conduct this critical work. Additionally, the OCA has recommended that DCYF utilize and require that all congregate care placements in Rhode Island implement residential best practices. This ensures that youth requiring higher levels of care are receiving the treatment necessary to access these time-limited interventions and successfully discharge to the least restrictive level of care. Throughout 2025, the OCA continued to identify concerns with licensing and monitoring of programs licensed by DCYF. While the OCA advocated for necessary changes with DCYF Administration, the OCA also pursued legal action.

The OCA oversees all facilities contracted with and licensed by DCYF to provide residential services to youth and young adults. This includes but is not limited to independent living apartments, community-based group homes, in- and out-of-state high-end residential treatment facilities, and the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). OCA staff conduct in-depth site reviews to monitor placements, which includes a visual inspection, reviewing requested documentation, assessing the quality of the facility, and meeting with administration, staff, and youth placed at the facility. The OCA advocates for youth by ensuring that the facility complies with state [Residential Child Care Licensing Regulations](#) and follows up on any concerns regarding the facility. Upon completion, the OCA provides a comprehensive report and recommendations, if applicable. The OCA provides a copy of the report along with any recommendations for further action to the Program Director, DCYF Administration, DCYF Licensing, DCYF Contracts and Compliance, the DCYF Placement Unit and the Rhode Island Family Court. Following dissemination of the report, the OCA will provide ongoing monitoring to follow up on the recommendations made. The OCA conducted **nineteen (19) comprehensive site reviews** in 2025.

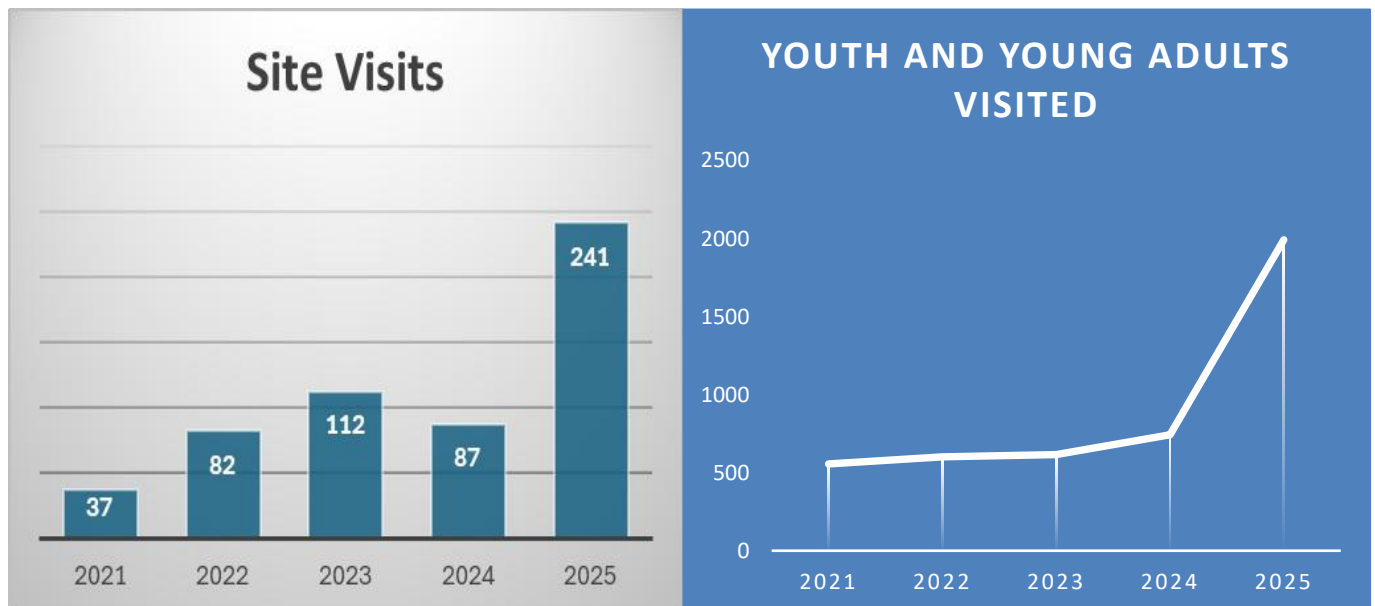
In addition to periodic site reviews, the OCA conducts routine and unannounced drop in visits to facilities. During these visits, OCA staff meet with youth placed in the residential facilities to inform them about the role of our office, the work we do, and how they can contact us. Our staff continues to build rapport with youth to provide them with the information to contact our office and ensure they feel comfortable contacting our office when they have any issue or concern. OCA staff offer to meet with youth individually to provide an opportunity for youth to ask questions or outline concerns, which OCA staff will address on-site or follow-up with other team members, as necessary. In addition to meeting with youth, the investigative team will also check the conditions of the program. The team also reviews required logs and

documentation to ensure documentation is thorough and complete, in accordance with state regulations. If issues are identified while on site, the OCA will follow up with the necessary administrators of the program and will request further action as necessary. As the licensing authority for in-state programs, any and all identified issues are also brought to the attention of DCYF. Some site reviews and ongoing monitoring can extend for months as the team monitors the implementation of recommendations for further action, requests additional information, and completes unannounced visits to connect directly with youth placed at the facility.

In 2025, OCA staff completed visits to **two hundred forty-one (241) various residential facilities** and met with around **one thousand nine hundred ninety-two (1,992) youth and young adults** at their placement, the RITS, Rhode Island Family Court, and during meetings to follow up on specific issues and to advocate for their best interest. Following a drop in, if there are any issues or concerns noted, the OCA may initiate a full site review to fully assess the facility.

The OCA reviews and provides feedback to licensed facilities and our statute also requires an assessment of DCYF licensing and residential monitoring practices. Since 2023, the OCA has repeatedly raised serious concerns and issued formal recommendations calling for a substantially strengthened licensing framework and the creation of a fully developed, effective Residential Monitoring Unit. A strong licensing framework will delineate clearly enforceable practices and procedures ensuring that licensing violations are identified, addressed efficiently, and residential best practice standards are consistently implemented.

Since the release of the St. Mary's report in 2023, the OCA continues to document significant deficiencies in DCYF's capacity to identify licensing violations, rigorously monitor facility quality and outcomes, and enforce contractual compliance. In some instances, the OCA and DCYF have simultaneously reviewed facilities and have had altogether different findings. This furthers the OCA's concerns regarding the reliability and adequacy of DCYF's internal oversight processes. In response to these ongoing deficiencies, the OCA has issued additional reports and formal recommendations and has initiated legal action to compel necessary reforms. The OCA will persist in pressing for these critical changes. The safety, protection, and well-being of children in placement are paramount and must remain the highest priority.



*These charts include a five-year lookback at the number of site visits conducted and number of visits with youth and young adults.

C. Fatalities and Near Fatalities

The OCA is responsible for reviewing any child fatality or near fatality under R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.3(b):

- (1) the fatality or near fatality occurs while in the custody of, or involved with, the department, or the child's family previously received services from the department;
- (2) The fatality or near fatality is alleged to be from abuse or neglect of the child and the child or child's family had prior contact with the department; or
- (3) A sibling, household member, or daycare provider has been the subject of a child abuse and neglect investigation within the previous twelve (12) months, Including, without limitation, cases in which the report was unsubstantiated or the investigation is currently pending.

DCYF notifies the OCA of all reported child fatalities and near fatalities, from birth to age twenty-one (21). The OCA reviews the circumstances of each incident and history of the family to determine if it meets the criteria for review under the above-referenced statute. If it meets the criteria, the OCA will convene a Child Fatality Review Panel.

Pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-73-2.3 (e), "[t]he child advocate ... [is to] publicly announce the convening of a child fatality review panel, including the age of the child involved". Panel members are chosen based on areas of expertise and their ability to exercise independent judgment. The panel is tasked with reviewing the circumstances surrounding the death or near death of the child, addressing current trends, developing prevention strategies to improve the overall coordination of services, identifying gaps in services and assessments, and to make recommendations for systemic change impacting children and families involved in state care.

1. 2023-2025 Child Fatality Review Panel: Fatalities and Near Fatalities Related to Substance Exposure or Substance Use

A press release was first issued on April 12, 2023, to announce the convening of a Child Fatality Review Panel to review the fatality of a fifteen (15) year old, open to DCYF. A second press release was issued regarding this panel, on June 20, 2023, to announce the panel members and to note that three (3) additional cases would be added to the review. Throughout 2023-2024, there were additional child fatalities and near fatalities related to substance use and substance exposure. Upon review of all cases from 2019-2024 that met the statutory mandate for review, the panel made the decision to expand the scope of the initial review to include cases related to substance use or substance exposure, as we had already impaneled experts to focus specifically on the needs of this population of children and youth. While there were additional fatalities and near fatalities that occurred during this timeframe, these cases will be reviewed in another report by a separate panel. On February 21, 2024, the OCA started reviewing cases with the convened panel. Over nine (9) meetings, ending on January 8, 2025, the panel reviewed **twenty (20) near fatalities and six (6) fatalities**. In May 2025, the OCA issued a [Report of the Office of the Child Advocate Child Fatality Review Panel](#) outlining findings and recommendations.

On May 21, 2025, the House Oversight Committee held a [hearing](#) reviewing the findings and recommendations of the OCA Child Fatality Review Panel report. DCYF and Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals (BHDDH) also presented their response to the report.

Following the completion of this report, the OCA began meeting with DCYF, BHDDH, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), and the Department of Health (DOH) to discuss the findings and

recommendations made by the Child Fatality Review Panel. The Director of the Governor's Overdose Task Force attended to provide expert input. The goal of these meetings was to engage agency leadership in robust, cross-system discussion about the findings and recommendations to implement necessary changes. The OCA is committed to working with each agency to develop a plan to implement the findings and recommendations. We also hope that all agencies involved in this critical work will provide updates to the public regarding the work underway on behalf of this vulnerable population of youth.

2. 2025-2026 Child Fatality Review Panel: Fatalities and Near Fatalities of Children Birth to Age 6

A press release was issued on September 30, 2025, to announce the convening of a Child Fatality Review Panel to review fatalities and near fatalities of children birth to age 6 between 2019-2026 that met the statutory mandate for review. The panel is reviewing **thirty (30) fatalities and ten (10) near fatalities**. On September 25, 2025, the OCA convened the first meeting for this review. The panel met **four (4) times** in 2025 to review these cases and this work remains ongoing.

3. Critical Event Reviews

The OCA attends Critical Event Reviews (CER), which are conducted by DCYF when there is a fatality or near fatality that is the result of abuse or neglect, and/or have been involved with DCYF within the last twelve (12) months. In 2025, the OCA was invited to and participated in **ten (10) CERs**. During these reviews, DCYF staff members involved with the case, DCYF Administrators, Lawrence A. Aubin, Sr. Child Protection Center staff, OCA, and for cases related to substance use, BHDDH will meet to review the facts of the case and other pertinent information. At the conclusion of the review, a final report is generated by DCYF outlining their findings and recommendations regarding the case, policies, gaps in resources and other recommendations determined to be necessary after reviewing the case. The OCA staff members in attendance will review the final report to ensure recommendations made during the CER are complete and accurate. OCA staff may follow up with DCYF to add, edit, or correct any information in the final report to ensure it is complete and accurate.

4. Child Death Review Team (CDRT)

The OCA is a member of the Rhode Island CDRT. This multi-disciplinary team was established in 1997 and under the direction of the Rhode Island Office of State Medical Examiners and DOH. The CDRT conducts monthly meetings to review the deaths of all Rhode Island children and youth, birth to age 17, to identify ways in which similar deaths may be prevented.

D. Placement and Community Based Services

1. Consent Decree

In 2025, the OCA was named in the Department of Justice (DOJ) Consent Decree with DCYF following a lawsuit targeting the population of youth who were languishing in the hospital awaiting appropriate placement. The OCA serves on the Consent Decree Advisory Board which is required by the Consent Decree. In accordance with the Consent Decree, "the State and the United States will meet with the Child Advocate's Office and RI Coalition for Children & Families to provide information about the goals and requirements of the Consent Decree and seek input into development of the Implementation Plan. The State will consider input from these stakeholders in developing the proposed and final versions of the Implementation Plan". In this capacity, we serve with the Rhode Island Coalition for Children & Families (RICCF) on the Executive Board for the Advisory Committee and could

provide direct feedback on the implementation plan. The OCA also meets consistently with the Federal Monitor to provide observations of the office and updates regarding issues identified in the system. The OCA continues to advocate in many forums to support the system transformation. However, the OCA believes the work underway should extend beyond the focus population and address the needs of the entire children's behavioral health system. In reviewing the outcomes of other states, this is a necessary approach to effectively address the needs of our children and youth.

The OCA is committed to Rhode Island initiating Intensive Care Coordination (ICC) for youth and families in Rhode Island that are experiencing the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. The OCA traveled to New Jersey in October 2025 to learn about their ICC programming which has already had documented success. The OCA will continue to advocate for the necessary system change in order to create this coordinated system of care in Rhode Island and improve outcomes for Rhode Island youth and families.

The OCA also worked with the Federal Monitor to identify and schedule stakeholder meetings within the state, facilitating presentations and discussion regarding the New Jersey Children's System of Care. Our state is closely examining the model implemented in New Jersey, which has demonstrated success through measurable improvements in care coordination, access to services in the least restrictive setting, and overall outcomes for children and families. These presentations provide a valuable opportunity to engage directly with providers and system leaders, ask questions, and gather insights that may help guide our own reform and implementation efforts.

2. Referral/Placement Process

Throughout 2025, the OCA monitored all youth requiring a congregate care placement, youth awaiting placement at the hospital, and youth who are waiting to step-down from a congregate care setting. The OCA continued to receive an influx of calls from service providers, local hospitals, and DCYF workers regarding children who have been languishing in a hospital setting far longer than recommended or residing in inappropriate placements with concerns that the child's needs and best interests are not being met. The lack of an appropriate service array to meet the needs of the youth in state care, untimely referrals, and inappropriate referrals contribute to this issue. Children have the right to be in the least restrictive placement that meets their needs. Hospitals should be used as a short-term stay for children with acute needs and once the child stabilizes, they should move to a less restrictive setting. Furthermore, maintaining a child in an inappropriate placement prevents the child from receiving the clinical treatment, education, community connection, and opportunities for normalcy required to be successful, and is a clear violation of the Children's Bill of Rights. The OCA attends monthly meetings with Bradley Hospital and DCYF to discuss youth who are awaiting hospital discharge and any barriers that may be preventing their release from the hospital. The OCA tracks repeated issues that arise and address them in Rhode Island Family Court, with DCYF directly, and with the Rhode Island General Assembly. Additionally, the OCA has been attending bi-weekly meetings on youth transitions with DCYF and all foster care provider agencies. The meeting presents youth experiencing congregate care, but who may be appropriate for foster care, to determine if there are available foster families that fit their needs and preferences. Similarly, the OCA tracks repeated system and case-specific issues at these meetings and addresses them accordingly.

The OCA continues to receive all placement referrals and intervenes legally to advocate for children to be placed in the least restrictive setting that can address clinical needs, keep youth safe, and work toward their goals. The OCA collaborates with the assigned team to ensure the child's best interests are being met. The OCA makes recommendations regarding the placement policies and procedures at DCYF and advocates for changes in practice to streamline the placement process so tailored, child-specific placement referrals are being made for each youth. This issue continues to be identified when we review programs and conduct site reviews. The OCA requested to be notified by DCYF of any placement changes, including closure of programs, development of new programs, or changes to the services of existing programs.

Reviews of these cases have led to increased legal advocacy and intervention for expedited and appropriate referrals. The OCA zealously advocates in Rhode Island Family Court for the individual needs of youth and for appropriate placements to be identified in-state to ensure their success. Youth and young adults who are sent out-of-state to engage in services that can be provided in Rhode Island are placed far away from their family, their school, and their community. The OCA advocates for youth and young adults to receive treatment programming in Rhode Island whenever possible. Youth and young adults should only require out-of-state referrals and placement for highly specific and niche clinical reasons.

Additionally, based on the work conducted by the OCA, specifically through our legal intervention and the St. Mary's report, the OCA identified systemic issues with respect to how the placement referral process is operating. In the report, the OCA made formal findings and recommendations regarding how referrals are made, what information is sent to programs, and the system's approach to service delivery for our children. As will be outlined in subsequent sections, the OCA continues to underscore the significance of home- and community-based programming to deter youth from experiencing congregate care settings. When youth are unable to remain in their home or in their community, the OCA advocates before the Rhode Island General Assembly for funding allocations to support appropriate, time-limited, evidence-based residential facilities to provide treatment.

3. Comprehensive Service Array

R.I.G.L. § 42-72-5 outlines the responsibilities of DCYF, including being solely responsible for creating a comprehensive service array for the youth and young adults involved with the child welfare system. Additionally, R.I.G.L. § 40.1-1-13 outlines the responsibilities of the BHDDH with regards to the statewide plan for substance use education, prevention, and treatment, specifically to "[t]o establish and promulgate the overall plans, policies, objectives, and priorities for state substance abuse education, prevention, and treatment; provided, however, that the director shall obtain and consider input from all interested state departments and agencies prior to the promulgation of any such plans or policies." Additionally, BHDDH is "Confer with all interested department directors to coordinate the administration of state programs and policies that directly affect substance abuse treatment and prevention." Throughout 2025, the OCA advocated for a comprehensive needs assessment of all programming at DCYF to evaluate what youth and families in Rhode Island require to be successful. In order to appropriately identify what services will best meet the needs of youth and families, an assessment needs to be conducted on current programming. The Rhode Island General Assembly provided the funding to DCYF in SFY 2025 to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. DCYF has entered into a contract for the statewide needs assessment to be completed.

While the needs assessment is an important step, youth and families require a comprehensive service array now to prevent removals, access the right level of treatment in real-time, and support reunification. Rhode Island has committed community provider agencies with the specialized training and knowledge to meet the needs of the youth and young adults involved with DCYF in Rhode Island. These services need to be expanded to meet all permanency goals, including maintenance in the home, reunification, guardianship, adoption, and alternative permanent planned living arrangement. Each youth or young adult requires an individualized service plan and timely transition planning, tailored specifically to their permanency plan goal and unique needs. Appropriate services need to be readily available and accessible to all youth, young adults, and families.

In 2025, the OCA continued to monitor the progress of the treatment facility being built in Exeter to support girls with complex behavioral health needs in the state of Rhode Island. The OCA played an active role in ongoing planning meetings, involving all stakeholders. While this is a significant step in the right direction, the OCA

continues to advocate to utilize state dollars in the most effective way possible. The OCA has continued to collaborate with providers, state agency leaders, and DCYF to explore all options for developing our home-based and residential service array to keep youth and young adults in their community and near their natural supports whenever possible. This work is ongoing while the needs assessment is completed, and the components of the DOJ Consent Decree are implemented. The OCA has been a strong advocate for the development of a multi-year financial plan to implement the necessary changes to comply with the Consent Decree, to meet the current needs of youth and young adults experiencing the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems and to highlight future cost savings when care is delivered in the right setting, at the right time, for the right duration.

Rhode Island would benefit from programming developed for our youth and young adults who have a functional developmental disability and programming to meet the extensive needs of children under the age of twelve. Additionally, services for youth experiencing co-occurring substance use and behavioral health diagnoses as highlighted in the Child Fatality Review Panel report are necessary. Our state has focused on the development of intensive behavioral health services for our adolescent girls but there is a need for similar capacity for our adolescent boys. The OCA continues to highlight the need for additional supports for teen parents and youth identifying as LGBTQ+ as critical needs within the service array. These populations would greatly benefit from expanded specialized community-based services, congregate facilities, and therapeutic foster homes who have the adequate training to work with youth and young adults with complex and specialized needs.

During the 2025 legislative session, we advocated in budget testimony for a robust continuum of services and placements to meet the needs of our youth, from home-based and community-based services, a diverse pool of foster families, and residential placements to meet the complex needs of our youth. We will continue monitoring the progress of the needs assessment and advocate for any recommendations to be implemented.

E. Inquiries

In accordance with our statute, the OCA is responsible for responding to calls and inquiries concerning children who are involved with DCYF or who have been recently closed to DCYF. The OCA receives calls from various sources including but not limited to providers, police departments, school departments, teachers, social workers, nurses, medical providers, outside attorneys, Rhode Island Family Court Judges, parents, foster parents, and even DCYF staff.

Each call is processed or handled differently. The responses may include providing information, initiating independent investigations, conducting site reviews, authoring reports, referring to other agencies, scheduling public education presentations, or engaging in legal intervention. Additionally, the OCA receives inquiries regarding youth in need of services who are not yet involved with DCYF. The OCA refers the callers to appropriate agencies to provide support and services or assists the caller in reengaging with DCYF. In some cases, the OCA can provide assistance on behalf of children in need of DCYF services when the families have been unsuccessful at navigating the system. When appropriate, OCA staff members intervene on behalf of youth requiring DCYF services, either through direct interaction with DCYF or through the Rhode Island Family Court.

Between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025, the OCA resolved a total of **1,030 inquiries**. The OCA has prioritized increasing our public education to make as many people aware of our office, as possible. The OCA conducts public education with all community partners, including police departments, school departments, provider agencies, foster parents, new DCYF staff, students, and any other agency providing services to youth

and families. Furthermore, the OCA experiences an increase in calls following the release of public reports and legislative testimony.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2025, the OCA received an inquiry outlining concerns about a youth’s transition plan following long-term placement at a high-end residential treatment facility out-of-state. The OCA brought this issue to the attention of DCYF and worked in collaboration with the DCYF social caseworker, DCYF placement unit, parents, family, and the youth’s out-of-state placement to develop a transition plan and identify an appropriate step-down placement for the youth. After weeks of collaboration, the youth was appropriately placed at an appropriate in-state residential treatment program. The youth is thriving at the program, attends school at a specialized program at Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) daily, and is engaged with various providers.

Inquiries are assigned to OCA staff members based upon their area of expertise. For instance, if the matter is a legal issue, it will be assigned to an attorney. Inquiries may lead to necessary legal intervention on behalf of a child in state care. Judges frequently refer cases to our office that require immediate attention and closer scrutiny. When referred, the OCA connects with DCYF, CASA, attorneys for parents, the child’s school, and all providers working with the child. Our attorneys then report back to the Rhode Island Family Court with recommendations that are in the child’s best interest. Our attorneys continue involvement until the issue that prompted the initial referral has been resolved. If the inquiry requiring legal intervention is from a parent, attorney, provider, or someone other than the Rhode Island Family Court, our attorneys will follow the same process and appear in Rhode Island Family Court to intervene pursuant to our statutory authority.

During 2025, the OCA identified an increase in calls pertaining to the education of youth and young adults involved with DCYF in any capacity. The OCA increased the number of staff members specializing in special education and standard education law. Additionally, the OCA has been training all staff who are working with youth and young adults directly to identify education issues early and often. Youth and young adults experiencing out-of-home placement continue to have lower success rates in school than their peers who are not experiencing out-of-home placement. R.I.G.L. § 42-72-15, Rhode Island’s Children’s Bill of Rights provides that all children in the care of DCYF are entitled to a free appropriate education, immediate enrollment in school, and that DCYF and state and local education agencies shall coordinate their efforts to provide for the timely initiation and continuation of educational services.



*This bar graph is a five-year look back on the OCA’s inquiries.

F. Reviewing Policies and Procedures

R.I.G.L. § 42-73-7(2) requires that the OCA review the procedures established by DCYF, which carry out their duties under R.I.G.L. § 42-72. Throughout 2025, the OCA reviewed many Department Operating Procedures (DOP) that were updated by the DCYF Director and administrative team.

Historically, when DCYF updated a policy, there would be an opportunity for public comment. DCYF now utilizes DOPs to amend policies and procedures, which DCYF can amend outside of the Administrative Procedures Act (APA) under R.I.G.L. § 42-35-1 *et seq.* The OCA has requested with prior administrations, as well as the current administration, for the opportunity to review DOPs prior to being finalized, to provide feedback. DCYF collaborated with the OCA to outline a process for the OCA to review DOPs prior to finalization. On September 30, 2024, the OCA and DCYF agreed on a plan for the OCA to review amended DOPs and provide feedback. DCYF has provided the OCA access to their internal software which includes all of their DOPs. DCYF notifies the OCA when changes have been made to a DOP. If the changes are substantive, the OCA has thirty (30) days to review the DOP and provide feedback. In many cases, the OCA does not have the opportunity to review DOPs before they are finalized.

The OCA will continue to review DOPs as mandated by our statute and provide feedback to DCYF. During 2025, the OCA was notified and provided written feedback within 30 days to DCYF on:

- DOP 700.0075 Educational Stability
- DOP 700.0180 Enhanced Case Management for Voluntary Extension of Care Youth
- DOP 700.0105 Housing Assistance
- DOP 1000.0035 Psychotropic Medication Review
- DOP 1200.0175 Resident Mail
- DOP 700.0175 Voluntary Extension of Care
- DOP 1200.0170 Visitation

The OCA will continue to review DOPs as mandated by our statute and provide feedback to DCYF. The OCA has inquired with DCYF about which policies and procedures are required to be promulgated in accordance with the APA. Specifically, the OCA was notified in 2025 that there were concerns with DOPs relating to the RITS. In following up with DCYF, the OCA expressed that when DOPs are impacting the rights of residents at the RITS, these changes shall first be promulgated through the process outlined in the APA and subject to public comment. The OCA first followed up on this issue jointly with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Rhode Island on February 27, 2025, and have continued to advocate for the DCYF's compliance with the APA. The OCA continues to review all changes made to DOPs and make recommendations regarding DOPs that should be promulgated as regulations in accordance with the APA.

Advocacy

A. Legal Advocacy

1. Guardian ad Litem

R.I.G.L. § 42-72-14 states that “the Director may, in his or her discretion, admit to the department on a voluntary basis any child who, in his or her opinion, could benefit from any of the services offered in foster care or residential facilities administered by or under contract, or otherwise available to, the department.” This statute enables parents, under certain circumstances, to place their child in the care of DCYF without

surrendering custody. Generally, under R.I.G.L. § 14-1-11.1, DCYF shall petition Rhode Island Family Court for care, custody, and control of a child when said child has been voluntarily placed with the DCYF for the purpose of foster care by a parent or caretaker and who remains outside of the home for a period of twelve (12) months. However, DCYF is not required to do this for a child with an emotional, behavioral, or mental disorder, or developmental or physical disability if the child is voluntarily placed for the purpose of accessing an out-of-home program specializing in the care the child requires.

The federal *Adoption and Safe Families Act* requires that any child subject to voluntary placement be monitored by administrative reviews, permanency hearings, and strict time frames for permanency. R.I.G.L. § 14-42-72(c) states that within one hundred and twenty (120) days of admitting a child on a voluntary basis, DCYF shall petition the Court for a determination as to whether continuation in care is in the child's best interest and, if so, whether there is an appropriate case plan. Once the petition is filed, the Rhode Island Family Court assumes jurisdiction over the child in voluntary placement. At this point, the OCA is appointed to represent the child as their Guardian *ad litem* on the Miscellaneous Petition. When a Miscellaneous Petition is filed, parents retain custody of their child and retain the right to make any decisions on behalf of their child. It is expected that the child's parents remain fully involved in the treatment planning for their child. Parents are to remain in communication with the child's service providers, school, DCYF, and the OCA.

In our role as Guardian *ad litem*, an OCA attorney appears on behalf of, or alongside, the child in court hearings and monitors DCYF's compliance with case planning and permanency goals. The OCA tracks the child's progress in placement, visits the child, and attends treatment team, educational, and discharge planning meetings. For each court date, an OCA attorney provides an updated letter to the Rhode Island Family Court detailing any pertinent information regarding the child's treatment, education, and any additional information that would be vital for the Judge to be advised of. The OCA proposes recommendations to promote the best interests of the child and ensures that progress is made in a child's identified treatment and permanency goals. Should an issue arise, the OCA advocates on behalf of the child and if necessary, files a motion in Rhode Island Family Court. As of December 31, 2025, the OCA represented **eleven (11) youth and young adults** between the ages of **thirteen (13) and twenty (20)**. **Three (3) of our clients** were placed in an out-of-state residential facility. In 2025, there were **three (3) petitions** filed in response to a voluntary placement agreement. In 2025, there were **three (3) voluntary placements agreements** accepted by DCYF. The OCA begins tracking these matters when a voluntary is accepted to ensure timely filing of their Miscellaneous Petition. Once this petition is filed, the OCA begins their involvement by connecting with the treatment and education teams, the youth, and their family. The OCA will be appointed as Guardian *ad litem* when the petition is accepted by the Rhode Island Family Court.

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2025, the OCA worked with a youth and DCYF to successfully transition the youth into their own apartment prior to their 21st birthday. This youth had previously experienced multiple psychiatric hospitalizations and out-of-home placements at high-end residential treatment facilities. Due to the commitment of the youth and their team, this youth was able to successfully transition home with a family member. During the youth's time at home, the youth engaged with outpatient treatment, attended community college, and worked full time. When the youth closed to DCYF, they were living in their own apartment, enrolled at community college, and gainfully employed.

Pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-72-5(b)(24)(v), these youth have been found by the Rhode Island Family Court to be a child who is "seriously emotionally disturbed" or has a "functional developmental disability." In accordance with R.I.G.L. § 14-1-6, if this determination is made, the Rhode Island Family Court retains jurisdiction over their cases until they reach age twenty-one (21). Once the Rhode Island Family Court makes this

determination, the OCA works collaboratively with DCYF and BHDDH to ensure a successful transition into adult services. Once a youth reaches age sixteen (16), DCYF begins the process of filling out the application for BHDDH services. These services can range from adult group homes, day programs, or outpatient services and case management. R.I.G.L. § 14-1-6(c) requires DCYF to collaborate with BHDDH to provide the Court with a transition plan for individuals under the purview of the Rhode Island Family Court pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-72-5(b)(24)(v). This transition plan shall clearly outline the level of service that this individual requires, health insurance options, an education plan, available mentors, continuing support services, workforce supports, and employment services. BHDDH and DCYF are required to provide this plan to the Court twelve (12) months prior to the youth's discharge from the Rhode Island Family Court, typically when the individual reaches age twenty-one (21). Within three (3) months of discharge, BHDDH and DCYF are to identify a residential placement if the individual requires this level of care.

The OCA communicates with BHDDH throughout eligibility, planning, and finalization of transition plans for individuals as they approach age twenty-one (21). The OCA often requests that the Rhode Island Family Court order BHDDH to not just provide a transition plan but to be present at court hearings to address any outstanding issues. The OCA seeks consistent and frequent updates regarding transition planning to ensure the case advances as it should. The OCA continues to remain in contact with DCYF and BHDDH to identify any barriers in transitioning youth to adult services.

During 2025, **six (6) youth or young adults** closed to our office. **Two (2) young adults** turned twenty-one (21) during 2025. **Four (4) young adults** had a plan to transition to adult group homes through BHDDH.

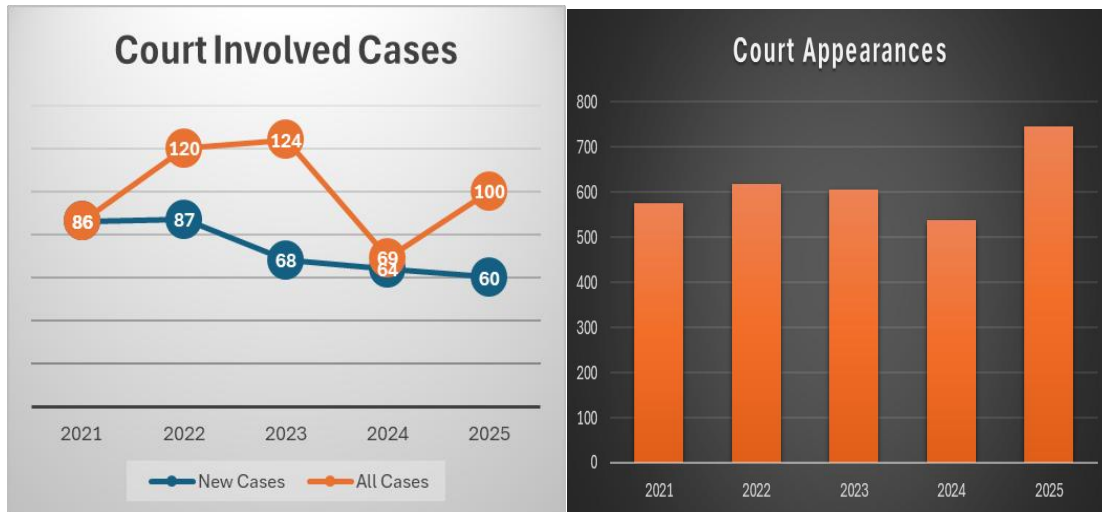
DCYF continues to utilize Residential Treatment Agreements in lieu of Voluntary Placement Agreements. Residential Treatment Agreements allow a family to sign an agreement with DCYF to fund a residential treatment facility for their child, however, the family retains all responsibility to navigate the different systems involved with the support of a Family Navigator. This differs from Voluntary Placement Agreements because families are not assigned a social caseworker from the Family Services Unit who ensures appropriate treatment, attends regular meetings, is responsible for applying for BHDDH, Social Security Income, and making necessary referrals. This level of support can be crucial for a family unfamiliar with these complicated systems. The OCA continues to request the updated DOP that outlines the role of DCYF when families sign a Residential Treatment Agreement and express concerns with the lack of oversight and support for the child when a family opts to sign this agreement in lieu of a Voluntary Placement Agreement. The OCA continues to request an updated policy related to cases assigned to Family Navigators without legal status. The OCA began requesting an updated policy in March 2023.

2. Court Involved Cases

Advocacy Spotlight: In 2025, the OCA continued to provide assistance to a young adult who began receiving advocacy support from the OCA in 2021. During 2025, the young adult stabilized in their own apartment, started college, joined recreational sports, and successfully transitioned out of DCYF care. Over the course of involvement with the OCA, the young person struggled with hospitalizations, changes in placement, and finding common ground with their parent. The placement team that was finally identified assisted this young person in changing course and identifying a path to success. This young person was able to maintain full-time employment and received a promotion. Most importantly, this young person identified natural supports within their chosen community to assist them.

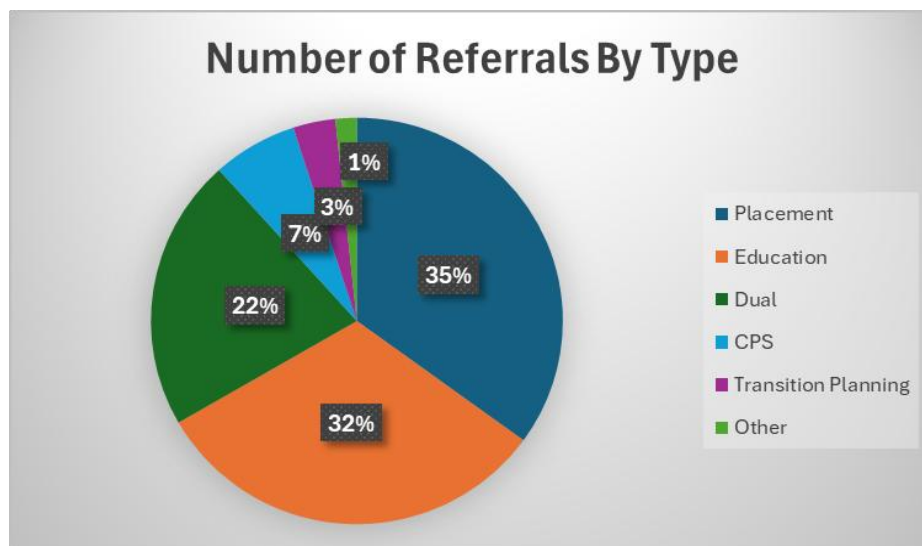
Pursuant to the statutory authority of the OCA, the Rhode Island Family Court can appoint the OCA to any support any child involved with DCYF. The OCA will enter into the case to represent the best interests of the child who is in the care and custody of the DCYF. In 2025, the OCA intervened in **sixty (60) new cases**. We continued involvement in **forty (40) cases** that opened in previous years. These cases presented crucial

issues facing DCYF youth and young adults in care, including issues regarding education, placement, transition out of foster care, mental health services, jurisdiction, and children who are missing from care. Once appointed, the OCA obtains records and attends all meetings and court hearings for these youth and young adults. While the total number of court involved cases declined, the complexity of the cases required a steady number of court appearances. In 2025, the OCA attended **seven hundred forty-seven (747)** court hearings in Rhode Island Family Court. The OCA will continue to provide zealous advocacy for these cases.



*This data includes a five-year lookback for our Court Involved Cases and our Court Appearances.

During 2025, the OCA continued to receive court referred cases and identified resolutions to issues on other cases leading to efficient case closures. The OCA continued to be referred cases related to inappropriate placement or a lack of placement options for youth with complex needs. The OCA has been referred an increased number of cases involving youth who are struggling with co-occurring behavioral health diagnoses, including substance use. Due to the lack of residential facilities in Rhode Island specializing in substance use disorders, young people are being sent out-of-state. Unfortunately, these placements are short-term, and our young people are struggling to with substance use specific treatment while also requiring behavioral health treatment. Lastly, the OCA continued to see referrals related to school enrollment, issues with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), special education, and plans relating to 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (hereinafter Section 504).



3. Voluntary Extension of Care

In July 2018, the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program was established by the Rhode Island General Assembly, which requires DCYF to provide services and supports to young adults from age eighteen (18) to age twenty-one (21).

To enter the VEC program, a youth must first have an intake meeting with the DCYF Youth Development Services (YDS) Unit to receive information about the program. The young adult then meets with the YDS Unit and their CASA attorney to sign into the VEC program. This document is referred to as a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) which outlines the responsibilities of the young adult and DCYF. The CASA attorney, guardian *ad litem* or the OCA attorney is present to protect the best interests of the young adult and provide clarification as to anything in their legal document. Once it is signed, DCYF files a petition in Rhode Island Family Court. DCYF filed the first VEC petition on December 19, 2018, and the Rhode Island Family Court heard the first petition on January 8, 2019.

At the initial VEC hearing, the Rhode Island Family Court makes a series of findings establishing that the young adult executed their VPA freely and voluntarily, that they meet the eligibility requirements, that they met with the CASA attorney to discuss, and that entering this program will be in their best interest. Additionally, the Rhode Island Family Court appoints CASA to represent the young adult.

At times, there is a conflict of interest, which prohibits CASA from representing the young adult on their VEC petition. In these cases, the OCA is appointed to represent the young adult on their VEC petition. In 2025, the OCA was appointed to represent **six (6) young adults** as their guardian *ad litem*. **One (1) young adult** reached age twenty-one (21) and closed to our office in 2025. In addition to being assigned as GAL to certain cases, the OCA attends every VEC hearing for every young adult.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA worked with a young adult and their DCYF worker to stabilize prior to turning twenty-one (21). This young adult had a long history with DCYF and was unable to identify strong natural supports in their family. Throughout their participation in the VEC program, they experienced ups and downs. When they closed to DCYF, they had obtained their GED, enrolled in community college, were working, and were in a safe and appropriate apartment. The VEC program made a huge difference for this young person.

The Rhode Island Family Court hears VEC petitions about one to two times per month. The OCA attended **three hundred seven (307) court hearings** to observe the progress of each case, identify systemic issues and provide additional assistance, when appropriate. During 2025, of the hearings the OCA attended, about **one hundred sixty-three (163) young adults** attended court hearings either by phone or by video.

The OCA observed and identified systemic issues and brought them to the attention of DCYF on February 3, 2025. The OCA outlined major issues facing transition age youth, including the lack of natural supports identified, timeliness of outreaching adult services, referrals to Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics, accessing federal benefits, and most critically, developing comprehensive transition plans for all youth. The OCA requested additional program information and data from DCYF in this letter. The OCA continues to advocate for systemic reforms and the identification of additional supports for our transition age youth, and monitors progress of youth nearing age 18 and VEC participants.

The OCA receives all dispositions for VEC youth, including acceptances, denials, and status updates, and reviews all dispositions to determine if follow-up is necessary. The OCA will follow-up if there are unclear or inappropriate denials, denials that are not in accordance with the law, or if the OCA determines that the youth could benefit

from additional clarity about the program and what it offers. When youth decide that they do not want to enter VEC, the OCA sends a letter with the VEC brochure to the young adult, so they know how to access the program if they change their mind about participating.

4. Monitor to the Children's Rights Lawsuit

The OCA was named the Federal Monitor for the Children's Rights Lawsuit Settlement Agreement. The Settlement Agreement outlined specific thresholds that were required to be met by DCYF to exit each respective benchmark. The OCA monitored DCYF's compliance with the settlement and reported on their progress with each benchmark to the Rhode Island Federal Court. The OCA and the independent Data Validator worked together as the Monitoring Team. Every six (6) months, the Monitoring Team received data from DCYF on thousands of cases for review and analysis. After analyzing the data, the Monitoring Team drafted reports on their findings to include recommendations and this information was shared with all parties and the public. All Monitoring Team Reports remain publicly available on the [OCA website](#) in compliance with our former role as outlined in the Settlement Agreement.

On June 6, 2025, a joint notice of exit was granted in Federal Court after DCYF successfully met the benchmarks outlined in the Settlement Agreement.

5. Unlicensed Foster Homes

Pursuant to statutory authority, the OCA provides oversight to placements licensed by DCYF. The OCA fulfills this oversight role in a variety of ways including the participation in court hearings regarding unlicensed placements. To obtain a foster care license, a prospective foster parent must complete all requirements including, completion of an application, providing references, physician's reference, background check, a thorough home study requiring multiple visits, completion of foster parent training, and home inspections for fire and lead safety. Often, a child requires immediate removal and placement into a foster home. Facilitating placement with an appropriate family member or an adult known to the child is always a paramount goal. However, completing the licensing process takes time. In order to facilitate such placements, R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c), enables DCYF to "... authorize the placement of a child in a prospective foster home pending licensure for a period not to exceed six (6) months only after DCYF has conducted a DCYF background check..." This allows the child to be placed while providing time to complete all licensing requirements.

At times, it can take longer than six (6) months to complete the licensing process. If this occurs, R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c) provides that:

"In the event the department is unable to complete the licensing process within six (6) months of the child's placement in the foster home, and if the department determines that continues placement for the child in said foster home is in the child's best interest, the department shall file a petition with the family court to seek authorization to allow the child(ren) to remain in the foster home pending the completion of the licensing process."

The OCA is notified when DCYF files Motions for Authorization with the Rhode Island Family Court pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 14-1-34(c). Motions for Authorization are primarily for foster homes who are struggling to pass the lead or fire inspection due to the age of their home or living in a rental property that was not in compliance. Therefore, the Motions for Authorization are filed to request that the foster child remain in their current placement and discuss what mitigation, such as installation of smoke detectors or routine lead testing, to keep the child safe.

Between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025, DCYF filed Motions for Authorization to address lead and fire safety inspection issues in foster homes. The OCA was present at ***nine (9) foster care motion hearings*** in 2025. At the time of the hearings, some of the lead and fire safety inspections had resolved. All motions were granted.

B. Legislative Advocacy

It is the OCA's statutory responsibility to "take all possible action including but not limited to, programs of public education, legislative advocacy, and formal legal action to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children" in DCYF care. The OCA tracks legislation at the state and federal levels, providing testimony and advocacy to support the best interest of children and families. The Child Advocate has testified before various committees in both the Rhode Island House and Senate regarding the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in state care, and collaborates with DCYF and the Rhode Island Family Court on implementation of federal legislation as appropriate.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA supported [House Bill 5077](#) to require DCYF to establish a separate savings account for youth involved in the child welfare system who receive social security benefits, supplemental security income, veteran's benefits or railroad retirement benefits to be provided to the youth upon exiting care. While the legislation did not pass, there is a national movement to ensure this practice is established in all states. The OCA has connected with national partners working on this reform and will continue our advocacy for this change with legislative champions throughout 2026.

During the 2025 legislative session, the OCA participated in various advocacy efforts and testified in support of FY 2026 OCA and DCYF agency budgets, and various pieces of legislation before the Rhode Island General Assembly. Some of the issues the OCA provided testimony for include but are not limited to ensuring comprehensive funding for DCYF's budget, education opportunities for students in foster care, expansion of the Voluntary Extension of Care Program, sibling privileges, Mobile Response and Stabilization Services, workforce certificate programs at CCRI, and establishment of a legislative commission to study the educational outcomes of youth in state care.

C. Educational Advocacy

In 2025, the OCA's Educational Coordinator was promoted to Staff Attorney III with a primary focus on legal issues pertaining to education. Due to the additional staffing provided to the OCA by the Rhode Island General Assembly in FY 2025, the OCA was able to hire a new Education Coordinator to work with the Staff Attorney on educational issues. This employee joined the OCA staff in January 2026. As the oversight agency to DCYF, the OCA is in a unique position to take a holistic approach to the educational advocacy of children in state care by considering their trauma history, clinical needs, familial involvement, and their placement history.

The addition of these staff members has provided the OCA with the opportunity to expand our advocacy for youth experiencing barriers with their education as well as spotlight systemic issues and programing gaps that have negatively impacted the educational outcomes for students in state care. We have received positive feedback from schools, DCYF front line workers and supervisors, the Rhode Island Family Court, CASA, and community providers, regarding the support our office has been able to provide to youth in need.

Throughout 2025, the OCA continued to receive an increase in calls regarding educational issues pertaining to students in state care. The OCA also continued to receive referrals from the Rhode Island Family Court, community providers, family members, and school departments for youth requiring legal intervention due to the need for educational advocacy. The primary issues raised in these cases include qualifying for special education services, the provision of special education services, procedural issues with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 plan issues, and truancy. Education access is one of the most common issues referred

to the OCA due to difficulty accessing education while languishing in a hospital setting, untimely registration, scheduling an ESSA call, conflicts between school districts about who is responsible for the child, and issues regarding the ability of the school to meet the child's need.

When receiving these calls, the OCA advocates for the child to resume their educational services as quickly as possible preventing any further academic disruption. Additionally, the OCA provides advocacy regarding a child's educational planning and supportive services both in and out-of-school to ensure they can make meaningful educational progress. During 2025, the OCA was referred **forty-two (42) new education referrals** and continued to provide support on **twenty (20) education referrals** from previous years.

Advocacy Spotlight: The OCA was made aware of a youth open to DCYF whose Local Education Agency (LEA) was unclear, and the child's individualized education program (IEP) was not current. The OCA collaborated with DCYF to identify the responsible school department and to ensure that DCYF could work with the school to have the youth's IEP appropriately updated. During the course of this case, the OCA was able to guide and assist the DCYF team in providing the appropriate advocacy for the youth. It is the OCA's goal to work with stakeholders to reach reasonable solutions in the best interest of children and youth open to DCYF services.

Although the OCA zealously advocates on behalf of individual children and youth experiencing educational issues, there are also systemic issues at play which continue to negatively impact the educational outcomes of children in state care. The *2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* reported that in the class of 2024, only 43% of youth in foster care graduated from high school in four years, compared to 84% of all students – a decline from 51% the previous year. This data illustrates that more intervention is needed to improve educational outcomes for students in state care. The OCA is committed to providing support and advocacy to improve the educational outcomes for youth and young adults involved with DCYF.

As a member of the Special Legislative Commission to Study Educational Outcomes for Children in State Care, the OCA has taken an active role in collaborating with other stakeholders to examine systemic gaps negatively impacting students in state care. The OCA provided a written resource of relevant laws and policies that require strengthening to promote positive educational outcomes for youth in state care. Additionally, the OCA developed a list of potential legislative interventions that would support the educational success of youth in state care. In developing these recommendations, the OCA conducted a state-to-state comparison of various legislative approaches to examine how other states have tried to support similar initiatives. Many of the systemic issues facing students in state care are not unique to Rhode Island so it is helpful to see how other states have addressed these issues in creative and innovative ways. The Child Advocate will continue to serve on this Commission and provide meaningful feedback and recommendations to highlight areas that require systemic change.

In addition to DCYF, the OCA provides guidance and feedback to other state agencies regarding education related matters. The OCA considers policy language, implementation, and identifies opportunities to educate and support front-line staff working directly with youth and families. The OCA reviewed and provided feedback to the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) on the [Attendance and Academic Achievement Guidance for Local Education Agencies \(LEAs\)](#) released in September 2025 and outlined concerns for unintended consequences for students in state care. The OCA will continue to provide feedback and advocate for stronger mechanisms of information collection to identify systemic issues pertaining to youth impacted by state care.

During 2025, the OCA explored legal avenues to enforce the educational rights of children in state care. The OCA filed a due process complaint with RIDE which alleged that an LEA violated the rights of a youth under federal law. While the final decision by the hearing officer assigned was that the OCA did not have standing to bring a due process complaint, the OCA appealed this decision in federal court. The OCA is committed to exhausting all avenues to support the educational rights of youth in state care.

In 2025, the OCA began reviewing the 1988 Proposed Amended Consent Decree that sets the performance goals and requirements for the Surrogate Parent Program at the Sherlock Center. The Consent Decree is jointly

supervised by RIDE and DCYF. Upon request, the OCA may be provided information generated by the terms of the consent decree, allowing the OCA to review implementation fidelity concerning the terms of the Consent Decree. As part of this review, the OCA requested surrogate parent assignments from RIDE and DCYF, seeking a conclusive list of students and their assigned educational advocate. The OCA received some of this data, but both RIDE and DCYF reported that they do not fully track all youth assigned an educational advocate. This lack of data makes it difficult for the OCA to effectively review the performance of the Consent Decree without a clear understanding of the number of youth being served, which youth may require educational advocacy services, and the specific youth the OCA needs to work with. The OCA will continue to work with RIDE and DCYF to take further action and ensure that the terms of the Consent Decree are being performed to fidelity as required.

The OCA conducted targeted public education presentations to gather information about trends in education and the needs of youth in state care to guide advocacy efforts in Rhode Island and inform the public about the role and advocacy the OCA can provide.

D. Advocacy for Youth and Young Adults through the Multi-Disciplinary Team Process (MDT)

In Rhode Island, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), specifically among youth involved with DCYF has continued to be a pervasive issue. The OCA collaborates with DCYF, federal and local law enforcement, the Rhode Island Family Court, and community service providers to address this issue. Historically, this work has been conducted through the work of the Rhode Island Human Trafficking Task Force and various sub-committees. The OCA has attended meetings and provided feedback on policies and procedures implemented with the goal of preventing youth from becoming CSEC involved and to effectuating a coordinated approach once a youth victim is identified. Based on R.I.G.L. § 11-67.1-19, the Governor is creating the Council on Human Trafficking to continue this critical work in accordance with statute.

The OCA continues to participate in developing a high-end residential programming in-state for girls who have been identified as a victim of sex trafficking. This vulnerable population of youth have been repeatedly sent to programs out-of-state or have been held at the RITS for their safety. Keeping these youth in their community, close to family and support systems while receiving treatment, is vital for their success. Furthermore, the OCA advocates for youth referred to the CSEC MDT when the team determines that additional support is necessary.

Advisory Committee

In 2014, the OCA's statute was expanded, and the Advisory Committee to the OCA established. Collaboration between the community and other agencies involved in the issues confronting children is critical in the continuation of successful advocacy. The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to provide support and advice to the OCA. The Advisory Committee is comprised of nine (9) highly qualified experts in their field, one of whom must have lived experience with the child welfare system as a youth or parent, appointed to serve a term of five (5) years. The members work together to review and assess patterns of treatment and services to children and families, discuss policy implications, identify opportunities for systemic improvement, and advise the Child Advocate on all aspects of child welfare with specific attention to the legal, medical, and civil rights of children in state care.

In 2025, the Advisory Committee *met three (3) times*, one meeting was rescheduled due to attendance issues, to discuss and advise on many issues plaguing the child welfare, juvenile justice, and children's behavioral health systems in Rhode Island. The Advisory Committee received updates on the work of the OCA, legislative priorities, systemic updates, updates on the Child Advocate appointment, and discussed

various topics including educational advocacy, chronic absenteeism, out-of-state placements, and the continuum of care in Rhode Island. Lastly, the Advisory Committee participated in legislative advocacy in support the OCA Budget and accompanying requests to move the educational advocates back to the OCA and upgrading one (1) FTE position.

To read the Annual Report from the Advisory Committee, please see **Appendix A** at the end of this report.

Project Victim Services

R.I.G.L § 42-73-9.1 empowers the OCA to commence civil actions for children pursuant to the federal Criminal Injuries Compensation Act. The OCA is the only Rhode Island Agency or Department, public or private, designated to provide assistance and representation to children in DCYF care who may be entitled to victim compensation. The goal of the program is to increase awareness regarding laws and legal procedures, pursue legal action on behalf of selected child victims of sexual and/or physical abuse, and child victims who witness domestic violence, assure they have access to necessary support services and promote the best interests of the child in the criminal justice system.

The Victim of Crime Compensation Act (VOCA) Program provides victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, institutional abuse, or a witness to domestic violence, an opportunity to file a claim with the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. If approved, they are provided financial assistance for expenses related to the crime including, but not limited to, medical bills, mental health counseling, sexual assault assessments, and loss of earnings. These are funds of last resort to assist with expenses that are not covered by insurance, worker's compensation, temporary disability, public funds, sick/vacation time, or restitution. These funds are a vital resource to many families, providing access to support and services they may have been unable to access otherwise.

Each month the OCA receives a report from DCYF outlining children who have been a victim of reported physical or sexual abuse or witness domestic violence. Each case is researched to determine if the child may be eligible for program funds. The OCA continues to educate social workers and attorneys regarding the Victim Compensation Program. As a result, the OCA has received additional referrals for children who may not have been accounted for in the report forwarded by DCYF. After researching the case, the OCA contacts the parent, guardian, relative, or the DCYF social caseworker to assist in completing the application and consents required. Once completed, the OCA sends the necessary information to the Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer. These claims must be filed prior to the child's twenty-first (21st) birthday.

The OCA is no longer receiving federal funds to administer this program due to budget cuts and changes within the federal government. Due to these changes, the OCA has been forced to make changes to this program due to limitations with resources. The OCA is collaborating with DCYF to find streamlined ways to make families impacted by abuse or neglect aware of their child's rights with respect to victim compensation.

Between January 1, 2025 and December 31, 2025, approximately ***ninety-eight (98) infants*** were born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs whose caregivers were indicated for Physical Abuse: Drug/Alcohol. Although these infants appear on the monthly VOCA lists, they do not meet criteria for compensation through the Victim Compensation Fund. This number may not accurately reflect the complete number of infants born with exposure to alcohol and/or drugs as the OCA has recognized inconsistency in how these calls are coded. In some cases, these calls have been coded as "physical abuse" which is why these calls are reflected on our report for potential VOCA claims. However, these calls have also been coded as "neglect", which could skew the data we have on this. We will continue to collaborate with DCYF to ensure consistent

reporting and accurate data. This data reflects the ongoing need to invest in community-based and preventative services to better support children and families impacted by substance use. The last Child Fatality Review Panel analyzed cases related to substance exposure or substance use and issued a report detailing comprehensive recommendations that was released publicly on the OCA website in May 2025.

When the Victim Compensation Fund began, the OCA could seek pain and suffering awards up to \$25,000 on behalf of youth. The OCA would deposit these funds into accounts and serve as a Joint Trustee/Owner on behalf of the youth. As the youth aged out of DCYF care, the OCA VOCA administrator met with the youth to counsel them with regards to an appropriate plan for the use of the funds. Upon completion of counseling and an appropriate plan, the monies were disbursed to them. The OCA serves as trustee to protect the interests of children in state care who have qualified for awards.

Although statutory changes no longer provide for claims to compensate for pain and suffering, the OCA continues to maintain accounts on behalf **two (2) individuals**, who previously received this award. The VOCA administrator continues to utilize various resources, including the Department of Motor Vehicle Records, former social caseworkers, the Office of the Mental Health Advocate, police departments in other states, and the assistance of the Rhode Island State Police, to locate these young adults.

Outreach/Training/Education

A. Public Education

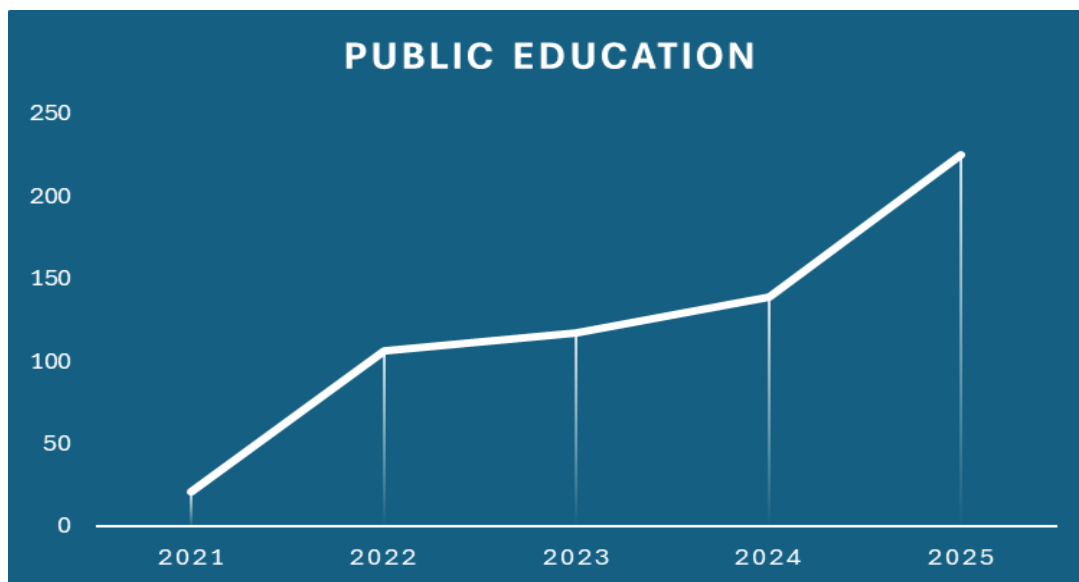
In 2025, the OCA continued efforts to educate the public on the role and responsibilities of our office. The OCA prioritized outreach to provider agencies contracted with DCYF and professional organizations. The OCA met with several community provider agencies contracted with DCYF to educate new staff about the role of our office and to gain a better understanding of advocacy opportunities for the children they serve. In addition, the OCA held a public education session specifically for foster parents and heard concerns and feedback related to improving the experience of foster parents, strengthening recruitment and retention efforts, in Rhode Island. The OCA has given presentations at a variety of schools, police departments, and agencies including, but not limited to:

- TIDES Family Services
- The Village for Foster and Adoptive Families
- Foster Forward
- Providence College
- Rhode Island College Graduate School of Social Work
- Rhode Island Training School – Juvenile Probation Worker Academy
- DCYF New Staff Trainings
- Rhode Island Psychological Association
- Sargent Rehabilitation Center
- URI Criminal Justice, Psychology, Nursing Students
- Senator Reed and Staff
- Senator Whitehouse and Staff
- Congressman Amo and Staff
- Congressman Magaziner and Staff
- Providence Student Union
- OCA Advisory Committee
- Youth and Young Adults Involved with Youth Development Services

- Child Welfare & Child Well-Being Leadership Summit
- Lucy's Hearth
- Seven Hills
- Annual Rhode Island Youth Summit
- Children's League of Massachusetts
- Tides Family Services Provider Fair
- Communities for People
- Key Program
- Children's Advocacy Institute
- Rhode Island College Foster Youth Scholarship Program Staff
- Individuals with Developmental Disabilities Work Group
- Members of the Rhode Island General Assembly
- LGBTQIA+ Symposium
- Providence Student Union
- Tides Family Services Provider Fair
- National Partnership for Child Safety

During 2025, the OCA gave **two hundred twenty-five (225) public education presentations**. On an ongoing basis, OCA staff visiting group homes speak with youth and staff about the role of our office and provide printed materials about the OCA. The OCA distributes hard copy and digital handouts to community members and significantly increased the OCA's presence on social media to share vital resources and information pertaining to children, families, child welfare professionals, state partners, and legislators.

The OCA aims to increase the number of public presentations with a special focus on engaging individuals with lived experience and connecting with foster parents during pre- and in-service trainings to further public awareness of the role of our office and share how we can be a resource to members of the public.



*This data includes a five-year lookback for our Public Education.

B. Boards and Committees

The OCA staff participate on multiple boards and committees, including but not limited to:

- State of Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet
- Joint Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care
- State of Rhode Island Child Death Review Team
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook Advisory Committee
- Lawrence A. Aubin, Sr. Child Protection Center Multi-Disciplinary Team
- Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI) Steering Committee and Work Groups
- Juvenile Justice Commission
- Edward P. Gallogly Inn of Rhode Island Family Court
- Coalition to Support Rhode Island Youth (Focused on Juvenile Justice and Re-entry)
- Governor’s Council on Behavioral Health – Prevention Advisory Committee
- Rhode Island Council on Human Trafficking
- Overdose Task Force
- CJA Task Force
- Court Improvement Project
- Bi-Weekly Youth Transition Meeting
- Special Legislative Commission to Study the Educational Outcomes of Youth in State Care
- Healthcare Systems Planning
- Olmstead Planning and Interagency Workgroup
- Olmstead Data Council
- Consent Decree Advisory Committee

C. Workforce Development

The OCA staff participate in conferences and trainings on a broad range of topics, methods, and strategies being implemented in other states with respect to child welfare, juvenile justice, and children’s behavioral health to learn from and network with colleagues. These experiences have been vital for staff and has opened our minds to innovative ideas and strategies being implemented within child welfare. Some of the conferences and trainings attended by OCA staff include but are not limited to:

- National Crimes Against Children Conference
- Victim Assistance Academy
- Rhode Island Family Court Conference
- Trauma Informed Child Welfare Practice
- Extended Child Forensic Interview Certification Course
- NACC Child Welfare Conference
- Conducting Child Abuse Investigations
- Reflective Supervision: A Trauma-informed Approach to Supervising Advocates
- Safety Planning for Victims of Child Abuse
- Autism Youth, A Look into Their World
- Child Abuse, Following the Evidence
- Sexual Offenses
- Preventing Burnout
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)
- Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Child Sex Trafficking
- Suicide: Screening, Prevention and Response
- Forensic Interviewing
- Responding to an Unexplained Child Death

- Following the Evidence in Child Abuse/Exploitation Cases
- Intersection of Social Justice, Criminal Justice & Behavioral Health
- Disruptive & Related Disorders – Signs, Symptoms, Risk & Prognostic Factors
- Keeping Our Babies Safe: Working Together to Reduce Sudden Unexpected Infant Death
- National Child Welfare Law Conference
- Supporting Regulation in Families and Youth
- When to be Concerned About Psychiatric Reports and Their Recommendations
- Understanding Tiered Care Coordination
- National Partnership for Child Safety Systems Mapping
- National Partnership for Child Safety Debriefing
- National Partnership for Child Safety Writing Meaningful Improvement Opportunities

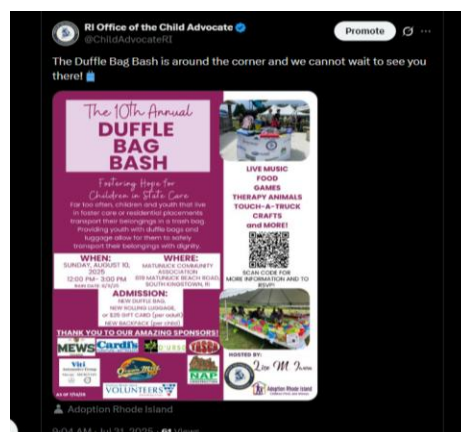
The OCA will continue to seek new opportunities for our staff to continue their education and strengthen their expertise in the field.

D. Philanthropic Initiatives

In fulfilling the role of our office, it is our mission to ensure that all children who are removed from their family, are treated with dignity and respect. Oftentimes we are focused on large scale, systemic issues, however it is often the small details of daily life that have the greatest impact on a child. The OCA continues to engage in more philanthropic initiatives to improve the quality of life and enhance the experiences children in state care receive.

Prior to developing the Duffle Bag Bash, it was common practice for children to enter the system, or move placements, with their belongings in trash bags which inspired the idea to host an event with the goal of providing duffle bags to children and youth moving through placements in the child welfare system. The OCA in collaboration with the event hosts effectuated a dignified change in practice so youth could keep their belongings safe during their time in out-of-home placement.

In August 2025, the OCA, in collaboration with Adoption Rhode Island and Attorney Lise Iwon, hosted *The Tenth Annual Duffle Bag Bash* to collect monetary donations and gift cards to benefit children in state care. Many individuals and organizations supported this event, resulting in over \$19,000 raised. The funds were utilized to purchase backpacks, suitcases, and gift cards for children and youth in out-of-home placements. We are thankful to each of our hardworking volunteers and generous supporters without whom the success of our event would not be possible.



1. Recipe for Success

For most young adults, the VEC program presents their first opportunity to live independently. VEC participants reported they were struggling with procuring the basic supplies needed to maintain and live comfortably in their apartments such as cleaning supplies, dishes, and cooking utensils. The Rhode Island Public Safety Grant Administration Office (RIPSGAO) allowed the OCA to utilize funds to provide assistance to VEC participants. The OCA submitted our “Recipe for Success” proposal to the RIPSGAO outlining the needs of these young adults and requested the use of grant funds to provide starter kits to VEC participants moving into their first apartment. The OCA continued this program throughout 2025.

The OCA has utilized gift cards donations from the Duffle Bag Bash to assist with clothing, groceries, or to cover the cost to obtain a copy of essential documents such as a birth certificate or social security card. The OCA staff monitor various employment and vocational opportunities from local agencies, private non-profits, and state agencies. This information is provided directly to VEC participants, CASA attorneys, group home staff, DCYF social caseworkers, the RITS and posted on social media to disseminate to as many young people as possible.

2. Quilt Donations

The OCA continues to receive support from the Caring and Sharing Group at RYCO Creative Sewing Center. They provided another generous donation of **four (4) packages of handmade quilts**. The OCA is so grateful that through their generosity, quilts continue to be distributed to VEC participants moving into their first apartment.

3. Holiday Party

In December 2025, the OCA partnered with Child & Family, NAFI, and Children’s Friend to hold a Holiday Party at their main office in Middletown for foster families and youth in their care. The party included food, games, arts and crafts, gifts, party favors, a visit from Santa, therapy dogs, and horse drawn carriage rides. This event was a huge success spreading holiday cheer with our agency partners, foster families, and most importantly youth who are involved with DCYF.



4. Youth Art Initiative

During 2025, the OCA established the Youth Art Initiative for young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 with lived experience in the child welfare system. Youth were invited to participate by creating artwork in response to the prompt “I am inspired by...” with art supplies of their choosing provided by the OCA. Upon completion, youth received a \$50.00 Visa gift card for their participation. Submitted artwork has been framed and hung on the walls of the OCA office featuring the incredible talent of our young people. The initiative is ongoing and the OCA plans to hold a gallery opening in the Summer of 2026.

5. Rhode Island Training School Donation

The OCA donated various hygiene products including hair, body, and oral healthcare items to the residents at the Rhode Island Training School in 2025. Following the donation, the OCA posted on social media to notify members of the public how to reach the coordinator of the Giving Closet to donate.



E. Media

1. Social Media

The OCA continues to prioritize our Office’s presence on social media, specifically X (previously known as Twitter), to provide resources to children, families, and child welfare professionals, and to build connections for advocacy and information sharing. During 2025, the OCA increased the total number of followers and shared information and resources to benefit children, families, child welfare professionals, legislators, and members of the public. The OCA shared workforce development and career opportunities, information about our philanthropic initiatives, press releases, and resources from a variety of community providers, schools, and non-profits, and shared public health resources from Rhode Island state agencies and the federal government.

X Analytics

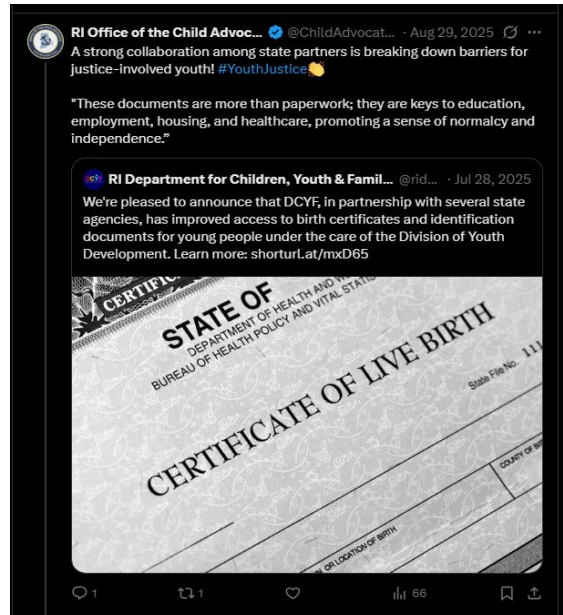
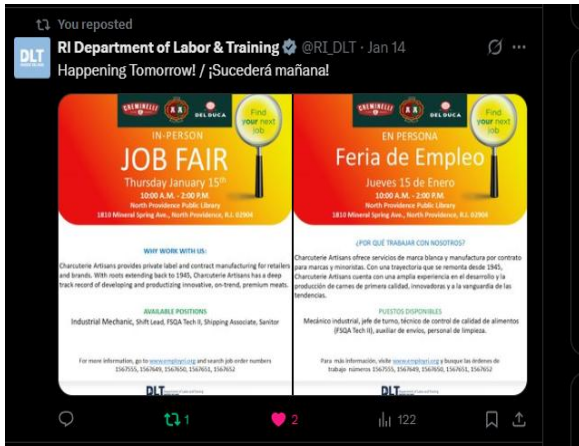
January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025

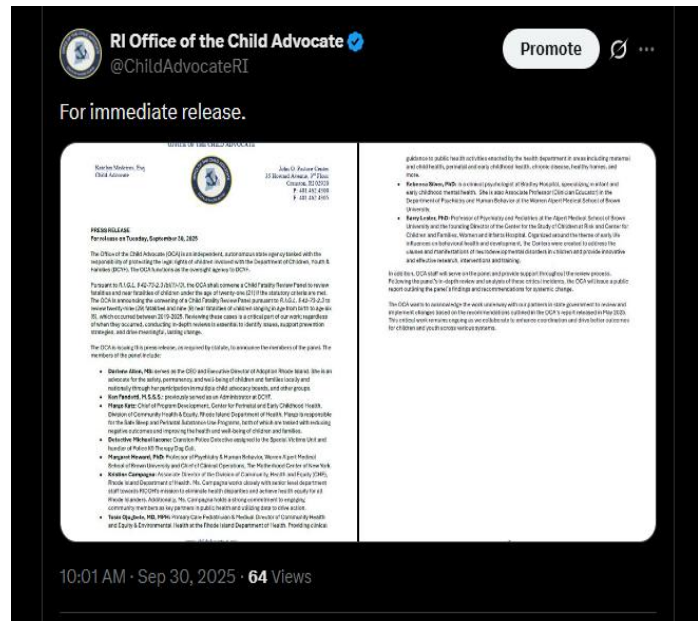
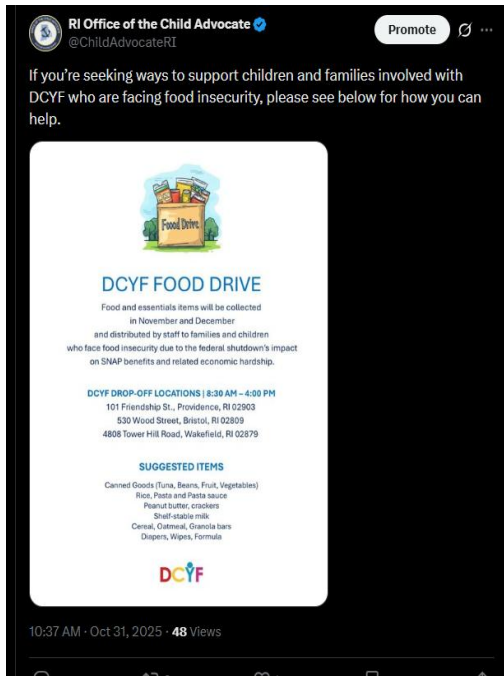
New Followers	Profile Visits	Replies*	Engagement Rate*	Tweet Impressions
43	2,127	3	10.1%	4,053

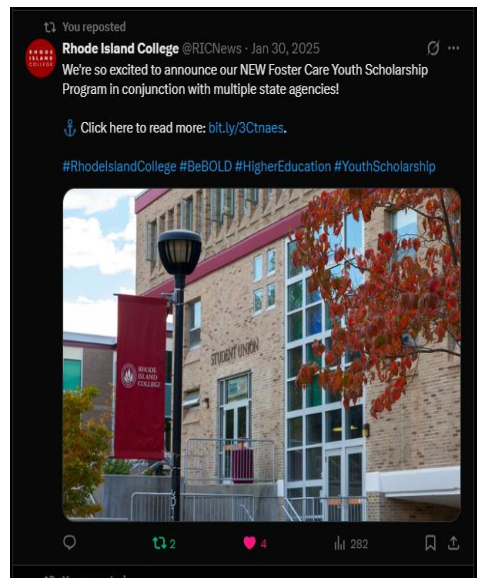
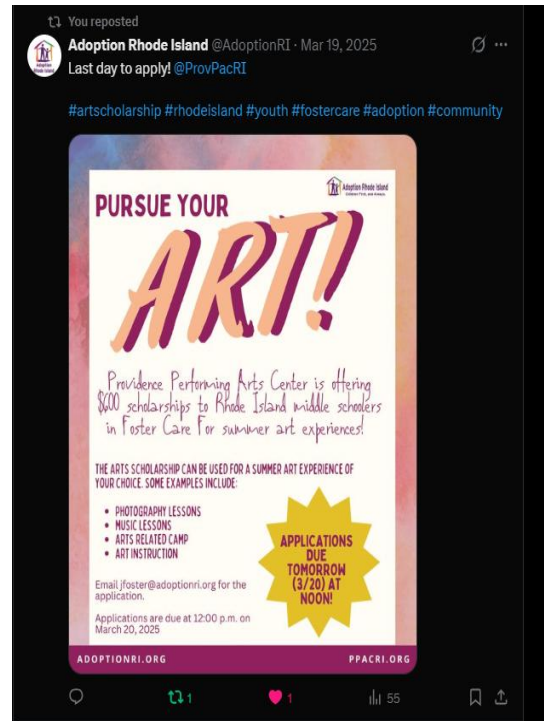
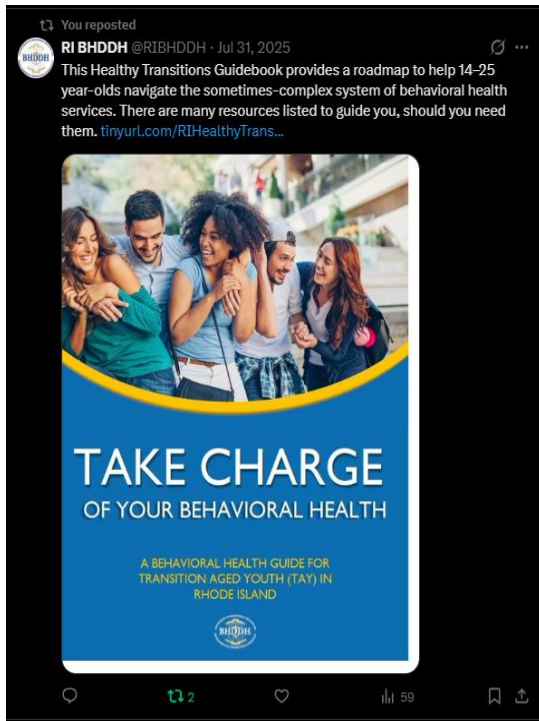
*X (formerly known as Twitter) has altered the information provided in analytics therefore the OCA is reporting on two new categories available in the new version of analytics.

X Highlights

January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025







2. OCA in the Media

[Oversight hearing probes failure to prevent youth deaths, substance use in R.I. child welfare system](#)

[RI Child Advocate Issues Report on 7 Deaths and 23 Near Fatalities](#)

[RI's Child Advocate releases report on 30 DCYF child deaths and near deaths. What it says.](#)
[Panel of experts to review 29 child fatalities and near-fatalities in Rhode Island since 2019](#)

[Rhode Island's foster kids struggle to graduate high school. 17 people hope to fix that.](#)

[Another "Near Fatality" Reported by DCYF - "Maltreatment" of Six-Month-Old](#)

[RI DCYF Announces Death of 2-Month-Old From "Maltreatment"](#)

[DCYF discloses death of RI infant from maltreatment. What we know.](#)

[Rhode Island child welfare agency reports near death of teenager](#)

[RI could buy troubled former St. Mary's Home for Children. What we know.](#)

[DCYF looks to buy St. Mary's Home for Children at a discount but costly upgrades needed](#)

[DCYF: One Child Dead and Two Near Fatalities in Recent Months](#)

[RI DCYF Announces Second Child Fatality in One Month](#)

[Rhode Island DCYF Discloses Death of 3-Month-Old](#)

[DCYF discloses the near death of a 17-year-old](#)

Goals and Recommendations

The OCA is committed to continued improvement on both individual and systemic issues impacting child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice. After analyzing the work of the OCA throughout 2025, the OCA's goals and recommendations are the following:

1. Pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-73-6, the OCA is required to outline any recommendations made following a Child Fatality Review Panel. The OCA incorporated all recommendations made in the [May 2025 report](#), here. We will continue to meet with the state agencies outlined in the report and advocate for the implementation of the recommendations. Accessing timely and appropriate treatment for co-occurring disorders, education, and community resources are critical to prevent fatalities and near fatalities related to substance use.
2. Pursuant to our statutory mandate, the OCA will continue to expand our oversight of placements and foster homes licensed by DCYF, to ensure compliance with licensing regulations and monitor the progress of individual youth. The OCA will continue to advocate for DCYF to develop best practice standards for residential placements and effective and intentional licensing policies and procedures to provide critical oversight to these programs. Youth experiencing placement in congregate care should be receiving time-limited clinical and behavioral healthcare to discharge to the least restrictive level of care. A critical piece of this work is ensuring all providers collect consistent outcome data to assess and evaluate program effectiveness.
3. The OCA continues to receive all placement referrals made for congregate care and review all placement packets that are submitted on the child's behalf. The OCA recommends that DCYF continue to develop home- and community-based programming to prevent residential placement, as well as develop appropriate in-state programming to ensure that youth do not have to leave Rhode Island to receive treatment. The OCA will support DCYF in developing these programs. Ensuring there are effective and appropriate interventions at the time the youth and family need it will prevent lengthy hospitalizations, residential placements, and out-of-home placements. The OCA also maintains our prior recommendations regarding the transformation of the placement referral process and initial assessments to ensure the information collected and the referrals for services are done through a thoughtful and intentional process.
4. The OCA is committed to providing educational support to all youth involved with DCYF and will continue to address systemic issues through legal, policy, and legislative interventions. The OCA recommends that DCYF continue to assess the barriers causing the disparity in graduation rates for youth experiencing the foster care system compared to their peers. The OCA also recommends DCYF assess their internal policies, resources, and expertise devoted to monitoring the education of youth entrusted in their care.
5. The OCA will continue to assess the VEC program to ensure that youth who are eligible for this statutory entitlement are able to access it and when youth who participate in the VEC program exit foster care, they are prepared for independence. Pursuant to federal and state law, the OCA recommends that DCYF effectively transition plan with youth ages 14 and older to adequately prepare them for exiting the child welfare system. The OCA recommends that DCYF assess their internal processes to ensure this is happening routinely throughout every case and the plans developed are comprehensive.
6. The OCA will continue to review and provide feedback for all policies, procedures, and proposed regulations from DCYF, RIDE, and BHDDH that impact children experiencing the child welfare, children's

behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. The OCA recommends that DCYF make all policy change in accordance with the APA.

7. The OCA supports all legislation that will have a positive impact on youth involved with DCYF. The OCA is committed to a legislative change creating a separate savings account for youth receiving federal benefits and will continue to advocate at the Rhode Island General Assembly to effectuate this in statute.
8. The OCA will develop and provide trainings and presentations to providers, community members, guardian *ad litem*s, and any other interested party on education, transition planning, and the role of our office.
9. The OCA will continue to expand our public education to ensure there is wide-spread understanding of the role of the OCA among foster parents, biological and adoptive parents, community members, providers, and DCYF staff. The valuable feedback the OCA receives during public education presentations directly informs our advocacy priorities for individual youth and systemic reforms across child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice.
10. The OCA will collaborate with other members of the Consent Decree Advisory Board for the DOJ Consent Decree and advocate for complete system reform, including intensive care coordination and the necessary legislative and policy changes required for this change. The OCA recommends DCYF develop a multi-year budgetary investment plan to ensure incremental change to complete this critical reform.
11. The OCA prioritizes youth voice and will continue to connect with you, develop internal initiatives, and collaborate with community partners to ensure that youth voice directly impacts OCA priorities and advocating for legislative and policy changes.

APPENDIX A

ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE ANNUAL REPORT 2025

R.I.G.L § 42-72-2.1 established an Advisory Committee for the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to be composed of local professionals who would advise and support the Child Advocate, e.g., to review and assess patterns of treatment and services, policy implications and necessary systemic improvements.

Committee Membership

Appointed by the Rhode Island Medical Society
Linda Shaw, MD, MSSW - Chair

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Ken Fandetti, MSSS - Vice Chair

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Mary Archibald, Ph.D.

Appointed by the Rhode Island Medical Society
Tanuja Gandhi, MD, FAPA

Appointed by the Rhode Island Bar Association
Lise Iwon, Esq.

Appointed by the Rhode Island Family Court
Lia Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice

Appointed by the Rhode Island Psychological Association
Deidre Donaldson, PhD, ABPP, MA

Appointed by the National Association of Social Workers Rhode Island Chapter
Amy Mello Messenger, LCSW

Appointed by the Child Advocate
Denezia Fahie, Providence Student Union Executive Director

The Advisory Committee met on the following dates: April 2, 2025, June 4, 2025, and September 10, 2025. All meetings were open, in person, and held at the Rhode Island Bar Association office.

The Committee began 2025 by reviewing the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) FY2026 budget request and the Office's response to any consideration the Child Advocate position be eliminated. Subsequently, the Committee sent testimony to the House Finance Subcommittee on Human Services and Senate Finance Committee in support of the OCA Budget Proposal.

Our 2024 Annual Report was completed in February and was included in the Appendix of the OCA's 2024 Annual Report. In February 2025 we reviewed a set of bills introduced at the General Assembly which the OCA was supporting that session.

The Committee discussed/reviewed the OCA and DCYF budget requests, as well as a proposed legislative study commission looking at educational outcomes of youth in state care, at our April 2025 meeting.

The OCA's most recent Child Fatality Review Panel Report was released on May 13, 2025. The Advisory Committee had the opportunity to read and discuss this important Report prior to the House Oversight Hearing at which the Child Advocate presented.

The June meeting was focused on legislative updates including a Social Security Income (SSI) bill and Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) expansion, and the upcoming Legislative Study Commission on educational outcomes for youth in state care. The Committee discussed the role of DCYF for ensuring students in their care are receiving appropriate educational services and supports, the Surrogate Parent Program, and Youth Education Data Collection, etc., with the OCA's Staff Attorney III leading this conversation.

The 10th Annual Duffle Bag Bash on August 10th, 2025, was strongly endorsed by the Advisory Committee.

In early September, the Committee was able to review a link to the first Special Legislative Commission to Study the Educational Outcomes for Children in State Care, held on August 13, 2025. At the September 10, 2025 meeting, we discussed the work ahead for that Commission. Additionally, we discussed responses to [May 2025 Fatality Report](#) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) Consent Decree. We had the opportunity to review and provide input to the OCA on their response to the Rhode Island Department of Education Attendance and Academic Achievement Guidance for Local Education Agencies, dated September 2025.

The scheduled meeting for December 10, 2025 had to be rescheduled due to the majority of members being unable to attend and was rescheduled to early January 2026.

Advisory Committee Goals for 2026

1. Advise and support the OCA in its role of monitoring the Department of Children, Youth and Families with public education, legislative advocacy, investigation, and litigation.
2. Evaluate and provide testimony for the OCA's budget request.
3. Stay abreast of the OCA's participation in the Special Legislative Commission to Study the Educational Outcomes for Children in State Care.
4. Discuss the next Fatality Review Report, focusing on policy and/or legislative changes needed for prevention.
5. Participate in and spread awareness about the OCA's philanthropic events, e.g, the Duffle Bag Bash, holiday gifting etc.
6. Remain facile in educating ourselves around a multitude of issues, as the OCA protects the legal, civil and special rights of all children and youth involved with DCYF.