HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

April 28, 2021

Thank you, Chair Marszalkowski and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) FY 2022 budget.

My name is Jennifer Griffith and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight to DCYF. As part of our role as the oversight agency, we monitor each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met.

Throughout my appointment as Child Advocate, I have seen the results of underfunded DCYF budgets firsthand. The fatality review reports completed by my office in the last five years specifically reference the downward trend of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions allocated to DCYF along with high caseloads for frontline workers that exceed the national best practice standard. It is critical that DCYF have the funding and full-time equivalent positions to ensure frontline workers are not burdened by caseloads which result in poor work performance and in extreme cases, significant injury or the death of a child.

The workload of frontline staff remains a long-standing problem so much so that a workload study was embedded in the Children's Rights Lawsuit and subsequent Settlement Agreement. The OCA is the appointed federal monitor to the Settlement Agreement and in this role we are directed to collaborate with DCYF on a workload study to review the caseloads of

frontline workers. To date, DCYF has not initiated the workload study required by the Settlement Agreement.

The fatality reports written by my office have also referenced the significant need for updating the antiquated Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST) that DCYF staff have used for more than twenty years to track case management and data pertaining to children and families involved with DCYF. The system is outdated, extremely difficult to navigate, and is not user friendly. RICHIST hinders the ability of my staff to efficiently track and monitor detailed case information and presents issues when tracking and extracting critical data for oversight. Additionally, accessing any technical experts to address issues with the system is nearly impossible given how much the system lags technologically. While DCYF's practices and procedures have changed with time, it has been nearly impossible to incorporate those changes into the RICHIST system. Therefore, I want to advocate for funding to ensure DCYF has access to the most up to date technology to enable staff to care for our most vulnerable children efficiently.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of increased funding to support frontline DCYF staff and to ensure access to critical advanced technology to support our most vulnerable children.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Griffith

Jennifer Griffith, Esq.
Child Advocate