



Office of the Child Advocate

State of Rhode Island

Katelyn Medeiros, Esq. - Child Advocate

childadvocate.ri.gov

35 Howard Avenue, 3rd Fl. - Cranston, RI 02920

tel: 401.462.4300

SENATE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

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Thank you, Chairman DiPalma and members of the Senate Committee on Finance for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would like to take the opportunity to thank Senate Fiscal staff, Stephen Whitney, Emmerly Brakke-Lautman, and Makenzie Pratt for their guidance and support throughout the budget process. I would also like to thank Katherine Connors De, Sarah LeClair, and Carmela Corte from the Office of Management and Budget for their assistance with the preparation of our budget. They were available to our office to answer our many questions as we navigated our budget preparation and worked to move this agency forward.

I also want to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) staff, which presently includes, Assistant Child Advocate, Diana Robbins; Special Projects Coordinator, Kathryn Cortes; Senior Planning and Program Development Specialists, Jacqueline Lafontant, Virawood Vilayvanh, and Kristin Anslo; Public Policy and Communications Manager, Kara Foley; Staff Attorney IV, Anna Sheil; Staff Attorney IV, Siobhan Bogosian; Staff Attorney III, Peter Capalbo; Principal Planning and Program Specialist, Kristine Bouthillier; Education Coordinator, Ashley Chiari; and Confidential Secretary, Taylor Camirand. Over the past year, the OCA staff has continued to advocate on behalf of children and youth involved in the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems, work that is both deeply meaningful and profoundly challenging. Our team routinely confronts complex cases and difficult circumstances, yet they remain steadfast in their commitment to ensuring that the voices and needs of vulnerable children are not overlooked. Their work requires persistence, compassion, and an unwavering belief that every child deserves safety, support, and opportunity. I am honored to work alongside professionals whose passion for this mission drives them to persevere even in the face of significant challenges. Their dedication to improving outcomes for the young people we serve is evident every day, and I am incredibly proud of the integrity and commitment they bring to this critical work.

The OCA is an independent and autonomous state agency responsible for protecting the legal rights and interests of children in state care. The OCA functions as the oversight agency for the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and is responsible for monitoring the operation of each unit within DCYF and ensuring compliance with internal policies and procedures, state law and federal law. In addition, the OCA monitors issues and trends to ensure that DCYF is operating within the best practices of child welfare and to inform whether any systemic change is necessary. This responsibility includes providing oversight to all DCYF employees, outside service providers sub-contracted through DCYF, and the cases of thousands of children open in some capacity to DCYF.

We will remain steadfast in fulfilling our statutory mandate and will push for the outcomes that children and youth deserve. We will continue to fiercely advocate for what is right and in the best interest of children. The focus and allegiance of the OCA has been and will always remain with the children of Rhode Island.

Staffing and Office Updates

The OCA is better resourced to support the critical work of our office and have been afforded the opportunity to further expand our outreach and oversight, on behalf of the children and youth we serve, due to the investments allocated by the General Assembly. During 2025, two staff positions were upgraded: a Staff Attorney III was upgraded to a Staff Attorney IV and the Public Education and Information Coordinator was upgraded to the Public Policy and Communications Manager. The OCA was able to coordinate these upgrades with OMB utilizing the funding already allocated to the OCA. In addition, our Public Education and Information Coordinator, which operated under the title Education Coordinator, was licensed to practice law here in Rhode Island during 2025. He transitioned into the vacant Staff Attorney III position to focus specifically on legal issues pertaining to education. Lastly, we filled the OCA's two vacant positions including the vacated Public Education and Information Coordinator (Education Coordinator) position and the Principal Planning and Program Specialist, which functions as a social worker for the OCA. Although our agency has only had these positions filled for a short period of time, we have seen an immediate impact on the operations of our agency. We are confident that this growth will be further illustrated in 2026.

Amended FY 2026 and FY 2027 Request

The OCA did not make any staffing requests for FY 2027. Now that we are fully staffed, the OCA will reassess our needs throughout FY 2027. The OCA did submit one decision package to support the legal advocacy of the OCA. Pursuant to R.I.G.L. § 42-73-7(6), the OCA must "[t]ake 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..." While the law grants the OCA explicit authority to pursue legal proceedings to ensure the safety, well-being, and constitutional protections of children, the OCA has not been resourced to carry out this work. This decision package requests funding for litigation-related expenses such as filing fees, transcription services, and costs related to discovery, which are necessary for the OCA to act swiftly and effectively when administrative remedies fail, or a child's rights are at risk. Providing these resources will ensure that the statutory protections envisioned by the General Assembly can be fully realized. The OCA requested **\$4,000** in our amended FY 2026 budget and **\$6,000** in our FY 2027 budget to support the legal work of the OCA. This decision package was included in the Governor's Recommended Budget. The OCA has and will continue to pursue legal action on behalf of children experiencing the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems to ensure the enforcement of their legal rights.

The OCA also requested an additional **\$12,800** for several increases in operating expenses including, staff training, stenographic services, office supplies, dues/fees, travel, and computers/software. Costs in these categories are anticipated to increase now that the OCA is fully staffed.

2025 Update on the OCA's Work

The OCA is afforded the opportunity to fulfill our critical role through a broad statutory mandate and is tasked with numerous responsibilities. The 2025 Annual Report for the OCA has been finalized and is available

to the public on the OCA's website. However, we will provide a brief overview of the accomplishments of the office over the past year and provided a five (5) year overview of some of the work performed by the OCA.

Site Visits and Investigations

The OCA reviews placement facilities contracted with and licensed by DCYF including congregate care placements both in state and out-of-state, foster homes, and the Rhode Island Training School (RITS). The OCA ensures that licensed group care facilities remain in compliance with pertinent federal and state law, DCYF licensing regulations, and contractual provisions. The OCA reviews placements through both scheduled comprehensive reviews and unannounced drop-in visits. The OCA assessed and updated the site review process through development of a more comprehensive process. Site reviews include an extensive review of licensing, clinical, personnel, and education documentation, analysis of policies and procedures, a more formalized interview process with staff and youth, and any additional follow-up needed to address incomplete information. Once the review is complete, a report is written including findings and recommendations.

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.

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 establishment of an effective Residential Monitoring Unit. This will be addressed further in the OCA's testimony regarding DCYF's budget.

The OCA has the statutory authority to independently investigate any claims of institutional abuse, issue reports, findings, and make recommendations to all agencies involved to ensure the safety and well-being of children. The OCA staff closely monitor calls to Child Protective Services, follow up on individual cases where a child or family may need assistance, and reviews the calls to ensure that proper policies and procedures are being followed.

OCA Child Fatality Review Panel

Pursuant to our statutory mandate, the OCA must review child fatalities or near fatalities in cases where a child was in the care and custody of DCYF, or the child's family had recent contact with DCYF. In cases of fatalities or near fatalities that meet the statutory requirement for review, the OCA convenes a Child Fatality Review Panel consisting of various subject matter experts to comprehensively review the case(s). The preparation of each case for review is an arduous process. The OCA staff collect, compile, and analyze all case records, developing comprehensive timelines of each case for review by the panel. The panel identifies systemic issues and provides recommendations for reform with the goal of preventing future tragedies.

Beginning in 2023 and throughout 2024, the OCA convened a panel reviewing twenty-three (23) near fatalities and seven (7) fatalities related to substance abuse and substance exposure. The OCA issued the Child Fatality Review Panel public report in [May 2025](#), which highlighted a need for stronger coordination between responsible state agencies, implementation of intensive care coordination, increased access to critical supports and services, and increased public education and resources promoting the safe storage of medication.

Following the release of the report, the OCA began meeting with DCYF, Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH), the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), and the Department of Health (DOH) to discuss the recommendations and identify opportunities for collaboration on solutions. The Governor's Overdose Task Force Director provided further expertise and feedback. The OCA appreciates the commitment of each agency in collaborating on implementation of the report recommendations with our office. We urge EOHHS, DCYF, BHDDH, and DOH to provide periodic public updates on the ongoing efforts to support this population of children and youth.

On September 30, 2025, the OCA issued a press release announcing the convening of a Child Fatality Review Panel to review cases for children ages 0-6. This panel is underway assessing thirty (30) fatalities and ten (10) near fatalities. The OCA anticipates the panel will conclude their review in April with a report to follow.

Preparation is already underway for a third panel, which as of March 9, 2026, will include twenty-two (22) fatalities and twenty-one (21) near fatalities. The cases involve fatalities and near fatalities due to gun violence, death by suicide, and overdoses so experts in related fields will be impaneled to review these cases. Many of the cases under review will take additional time and consideration as they include youth with lifelong involvement with DCYF. The OCA is committed to an in-depth review of each case to illuminate the need for systemic reforms.

Inquiries

The OCA responds to calls concerning children who are in the care and custody of DCYF or who have been recently closed to DCYF. The OCA receives calls from a variety of individuals including but not limited to service providers, police departments, school departments, teachers, social workers, nurses, medical providers, outside attorneys, Judges, parents, and even DCYF staff. Inquiries are handled by all staff members and are assigned based on the staff member's expertise. In 2025, the OCA handled a total of **1,030 inquiries**, reflecting an increase from 1,028 in 2024, 723 in 2023, 604 in 2022, and 626 in 2021. We attribute this increase to our public education efforts regarding the role of the OCA and increased referrals to our office due to the systemic issues impacting children and families. The response required for each call is varied, ranging from providing information to taking legal intervention. In some instances, the OCA acts as an intermediary on behalf of children in need of DCYF services, when the families have been unsuccessful at negotiating their way through the system.

Legal Advocacy

The OCA is empowered to take formal legal action, to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children open to DCYF. Throughout 2025, a steady flow of cases required court involvement by the OCA. Cases came to the attention of the OCA through an appointment to the case by the Rhode Island Family Court or through an inquiry to the office. The OCA also serves as Guardian *ad litem* to children with significant developmental disabilities and mental health issues who are open to DCYF through a voluntary agreement and to youth open to the Voluntary Extension of Care Program. In 2025, the OCA intervened in **sixty (60) new cases** and continued involvement in **forty (40) cases** that opened in previous years. The OCA attended **seven hundred and forty-seven (747) court hearings** in Rhode Island Family Court. When court involved in any matter, the OCA attends treatment meetings and individualized education program (IEP) meetings to ensure these children receive the appropriate services and level of care. Many of the cases involved complex legal issues, requiring frequent reviews by the Rhode Island Family Court. The most common issues requiring court involvement include placement issues and issues pertaining to a child's education. The OCA's legal advocacy pertaining to educational issues expanded in 2025.

Educational Advocacy

The OCA continues to elevate issues pertaining to equity in education for youth experiencing the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. The educational outcomes for youth in state care over the last twenty (20) years shows in stark detail how significant the problems have become and offers some of the best evidence of the need for change. It is time to address these inequities with intentional and innovative reform. Experiencing the child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems should not risk long-term academic achievement for youth and young adults. Presently, for the first time, the OCA has two (2) full-time employees dedicated to working on educational issues in individual cases and exploring solutions to address the needs for systemic reform.

Throughout the 2025 legislative session, the OCA spoke frequently about our concerns regarding the educational outcomes of youth in state care, and those concerns remain. In fact, the four-year high school graduation rate for students in foster care decreased **from 51%** among the class of 2023 **to 43%** among the class of 2024 compared to 84% among all students – the same rate as the class of 2014, according to the 2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook. Across nearly every meaningful indicator, the youth we serve continue to underperform educationally relative to their peers.

Robust discussion on educational outcomes for youth in state care led to the introduction of legislation to establish the Special Legislative Commission to Study Educational Outcomes for Children in State Care, which brought together many stakeholders engaged and interested in supporting this work. The OCA collaborates with Commission members to identify solutions to address systemic gaps impacting students in state care. In preparation for the commission, the OCA conducted a state-to-state comparison of various legislative approaches to examine how other states have tried to support innovative 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 OCA developed a list of potential legislative interventions along with a written resource of relevant laws and policies that require strengthening to promote positive educational outcomes for youth in state care the educational success of youth in state care. The OCA will continue to serve on this Commission and provide meaningful feedback and recommendations to address areas requiring systemic change.

In addition to advocating for systemic reforms related to education, the OCA also advocates on behalf of individual youth experiencing education issues. Throughout 2025, the OCA continued to receive calls regarding educational issues pertaining to students in state care and the Rhode Island Family Court has referred the OCA to several cases 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, IDEA procedural issues, Section 504 plan issues, and truancy. Educational access is one of the most common issues referred to the OCA due to issues including access to education while languishing in a hospital setting, untimely registration, scheduling a best interest determination call pursuant to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 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. 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**. The sole focus of the OCA is to ensure that the child resumes their educational services as quickly as possible to prevent any further disruption in their academics. 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. The OCA is exploring all legal pathways to enforce the educational rights of children experiencing state care. We will continue to fiercely advocate and defend their rights, empowering

our youth to reach their full potential. Our team will work tirelessly to ensure coming into state care does not define a child's future.

Transition Age Youth

The OCA proactively engages with youth in the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) Program, a program established with extensive support from the General Assembly in 2018. VEC is a voluntary program that provides extended services and supports up to youth up to age 21 who were in foster care on their 18th birthday. Since implementation, the OCA has increased collaboration with young people who participate in the program and staff from DCYF and provider agencies who support participants. OCA attorneys participate in the VEC calendar at the Rhode Island Family Court to engage with young people, maintain contact with Youth Development Services Unit (YDS) staff and community providers, and advocate for young people in the VEC program as needed.

In 2025, the OCA worked with DCYF to routinely receive dispositions for youth who have been referred to the VEC program. 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 offerings. 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. The OCA has connected with several youth through this process and has helped them coordinate access to the supports provided through VEC and DCYF. Given the high number of youth experiencing homelessness, the supports provided through VEC are a critical resource for promoting long-term stability and success for young people. Exploring expansion of the upper age limit would have a significant impact on this population of youth. The potential impact would be greater stability for young people as they transition to adulthood, providing them with the time, guidance, and resources needed to secure housing, pursue education or employment, and build the foundation for independent and successful lives.

The OCA observed and identified many systemic issues related to transition age youth and brought them to the attention of DCYF through a letter sent 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.

Additionally, using VOCA grant funds received in prior fiscal years, we have continued our "Recipe for Success" program, which provides independent living starter kits for youth transitioning into their own apartment. The kit includes items such as dishes, pots and pans, bed sheets, and towels. Also included are a list of community resources available to the youth. In 2025, the OCA distributed these resources to approximately **16 youth**. The OCA is no longer receiving grant funding through VOCA and will need to explore alternative funding streams to maintain this impactful program.

In March 2025, the OCA in partnership with the YDS Unit at DCYF, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, the Rhode Island Department of State, and Communities for People co-facilitated a training focused on civic engagement. Young people involved in the VEC program were invited to learn about voting, the legislative process, and how to develop testimony to engage in legislative advocacy at the Rhode Island General

Assembly. Approximately **twenty-five (25) youth** attended the training which included dinner, education materials, and a gift card for participation. The OCA continues to explore ways to continue educating young people about their civic rights and how to safely share their lived experiences to support policy change in Rhode Island.

Public Education, Legislative Advocacy, Committees, and Philanthropic Initiatives

The OCA prioritizes public education to expand awareness of the OCA's function. We have participated in speaking engagements throughout the state with professional organizations, students, legislators, and community provider agencies. In 2025, the OCA conducted a total of **two hundred and twenty-five (225) public education presentations**. As part of our public education efforts, we significantly expanded our presence on social media by regularly sharing resources to support children and families on X (formerly Twitter).

The staff of the OCA actively advise on a number of committees including but not limited to, the Children's Cabinet, the Multi-Disciplinary Team for the Lawrence A. Aubin, Sr. Child Protection Center at Hasbro Children's Hospital, the Child Death Review Team for the Rhode Island Department of Health, Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative Steering Committee, various Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Workgroups, Human Trafficking Task Force, Governor's Council on Behavioral Health, and the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee.

The OCA also promotes necessary systemic change through legislative advocacy and policy change. The OCA provides testimony regarding bills impacting children and youth throughout each legislative session. This work is further outlined in our 2025 Annual Report. The primary legislative goal of the OCA during the 2026 legislative session is to reform the practice of using federal Social Security benefits, specifically Social Security Income (SSI) and survivor benefits, belonging to children in foster care, to reimburse the Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) for their care costs. The OCA fully supports the nationwide advocacy to cease this practice in every state, including Rhode Island, to ensure that Rhode Island youth experiencing state care are protected when they exit state care by having access to the federal benefits to which they are entitled. The OCA wants to ensure that Rhode Island takes the most comprehensive approach to conserving Social Security benefits for foster youth, similar to the approach adopted in Massachusetts. Young people involved in the child welfare system did not choose this involvement, yet they are disproportionately burdened, often bearing the financial cost of their own care. This responsibility should never rest on their shoulders. Ensuring that youth have access to these funds upon their exit from state care is not merely a corrective measure; it is an essential investment in their stability, opportunity, and long-term success.

In 2023, the OCA also re-established the OCA Advisory Committee, which is required by statute. The Committee is comprised of individuals from a variety of professional organizations and three appointments by the Child Advocate, one of which must be an individual with lived experience. During 2025, the Advisory Committee met **three (3) times, one meeting had to be postponed to January 2026**, to discuss and advise on many issues plaguing the child welfare, juvenile justice, and children's behavioral health systems in Rhode Island.

The OCA has expanded our philanthropic engagement to better the quality of life and enhance the experiences children receive. During 2025, the OCA in partnership with Adoption Rhode Island and Attorney Lise Iwon, held the 10th Annual Duffle Bag Bash. This event raises awareness to the degrading process of moving the minimal belongings of children in state care in trash bags when transitioning to a new placement. Annually, duffle bags, gift cards, and cash donations are collected, to support children and youth in state care.

In December 2025, the OCA partnered with Child and Family, NAFI, and Children’s Friend to host a holiday event where children in foster care, along with their foster families, got to experience a horse drawn sleigh, therapy dogs, holiday arts and crafts, gifts music, food and more. This was such an uplifting event enjoyed by all.

Lastly, the OCA established the Youth Art Initiative to provide an opportunity for young people to express themselves through art. In 2025, the OCA invited young people to create artwork based on what inspires them. Young people were provided art materials and upon completion of their project, they received a gift card for participation. Once all the pieces are framed and hung in 2026, the OCA plans to host an open house for the artists to showcase their work.

We recognize that making meaningful and lasting change within our children’s behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems is challenging work. These systems serve youth with complex and evolving needs and often operate within the reality of limited resources and increasing demand. Addressing these challenges will require fierce advocacy, a unified and coordinated approach across agencies and community partners, and a continued commitment to transparency and solution-focused strategies. The OCA remains dedicated to working collaboratively to identify and advance solutions that strengthen our systems of care and improve outcomes for the children and youth we serve.

Summary of the OCA’s FY 2027 Request and Future Requests

In total, the OCA requested an additional **\$18,800** in FY 2027. The OCA did not request additional staffing for FY 2027, as the agency is now fully staffed and will spend the coming year carefully assessing its operational and programmatic needs. The OCA will also work with Human Resources and the Office of Management and Budget to review staff salaries, which have not been formally evaluated in several years. As a small office with a broad statutory mandate, OCA staff often fulfill multiple roles within a single position. Conducting this review will help ensure that staffing levels and compensation are aligned with the responsibilities of each role and remain comparable to similar positions across state government. This will help the office effectively sustain its mission of advocating for Rhode Island’s children and youth while supporting the retention of experienced staff.

Thank you for your continued support of our agency and the children and youth we serve.

Sincerely,



Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.
Child Advocate