

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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TESTIMONY OF SARAH EAGAN, ACTING CHILD ADVOCATE FOR THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT

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Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, and all other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee.

I am Sarah Eagan, the Acting Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut. I was appointed to this position in August 2013 by Governor Malloy and began my term on September 9, 2013. Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Governor's proposed FY15 budget adjustments for the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

The Office of the Child Advocate recognizes and appreciates the support of the Governor and this legislature through these difficult fiscal times. Though OCA staffing levels have decreased from twelve persons to six over the past several years, we understand our obligation to stretch our resources and maintain our commitment to ensuring our most vulnerable children are well-served.

The obligations of the OCA are to review, investigate where necessary, and make recommendations regarding how our state-funded systems meet the needs of children. Much of our work relates to the following priorities:

CALLS FOR HELP

During the last fiscal year, the OCA responded to several hundred individual requests to help at-risk, abused, neglected or special needs children. An example of recent calls to OCA:

1. A mother concerned that she would lose educational and service supports for her developmentally disabled child;
2. A mother concerned that she couldn't access community-services for her four year old child with autism;
3. A grandparent concerned about abuse and neglect of her young grandbaby;
4. A professional concerned that a disabled child in school was placed in seclusion and not permitted access to a restroom;
5. A concern regarding harmful practices in a facility providing care for youth with special needs;
6. A parent concerned about her child experiencing bullying.

OCA supports all callers, helps connect them with appropriate advocacy resources, and opens individual reviews in approximately 15% of cases. This Legislature granted OCA broad authority regarding access to information about children and state-funded facilities and programs. This knowledge allows OCA to advocate on behalf of specific children and to work effectively with agency personnel and leadership regarding recommendations for system improvement.

CHILD FATALITY REVIEW

The OCA staffs and co-chairs the Connecticut Child Fatality Review Panel. The OCA is notified of all unexpected or unexplained child fatalities that are referred to the State Medical Examiner. Annually, OCA issues aggregate child fatality information in our Annual Report to legislators.

In 2014, the OCA plans to issue regular public health alerts regarding child deaths reviewed, and recommendations for prevention. The first two reports OCA recommends will relate to Sudden Unexplained Infant Death and Pediatric Homicide. Virtually all deaths in these two categories are preventable, and OCA looks forward to collaborating with our partners to highlight and prioritize this important work. In the last fiscal year there were more children who died from potentially unsafe sleep environments (often categorized as SUID) than from child abuse. However, very tragically, 2013 saw 10 early childhood homicides, a significant increase from past years.

RESPONDING TO HIGH PRIORITY SYSTEMS ISSUES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

OCA is currently working on the following policy issues, emanating from our citizen response work:

1. Eliminating unnecessary seclusion and restraint for children with disabilities (SDE reports over 33,000 incidents in schools for the 2012-13 school year). The United States Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services report that seclusion and restraint are non-evidence based practices, should not be considered therapeutic, and are emergency response measures only.
2. Increasing access to quality early intervention services for infants and toddlers, particularly children who are at risk of or who have been abused or neglected. Research tells us that over 40% of children who touch a child welfare investigation present with a developmental delay by age 3.
3. Highlighting and preventing early childhood fatalities.
4. Closing the achievement gap for child welfare and juvenile justice involved children.
5. Promoting transparency and accountability of state-licensed and state-run child-serving facilities. Facilities should record and publish data to enable policy and law makers to inform assessment of healthcare continuum for children.

OCA VISITS HOSPITALS, RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES AND CORRECTIONS

- Our staff travels around the state to see children where they are being served. For children ages 14 to 17 in the adult correctional system, OCA is partnering with the Department of Correction and UCONN Correctional Managed Health to ensure the special needs of youth are met for visitation, nutrition and education.
- OCA regularly meets with state agency administrators to discuss how to best meet the specialized education needs of children in facilities and hospitals.

LEADERSHIP & PARTNERSHIP

- OCA prioritizes constructive dialogue with our state agency and community partners and we value collaborative solutions whenever possible.
- OCA actively participates on more than 20 stakeholder taskforces, committees and working groups that address children's mental health, child welfare reform, juvenile justice, and needs of children with developmental disabilities, family violence, and educational disparities.

RESOURCES AT OCA: PARTNERING WITH PROFESSIONALS

OCA is honored to work with numerous professionals who volunteer their time to support OCA's work on behalf of children. In the last several months, OCA has initiated partnerships in the following ways:

- OCA works with and supervises a Masters in Social Work intern who assists with Child Fatality Review, specifically case investigation and recommendations.
- OCA, with the support of our partners at Yale University, is working with two Masters in Public Health students to support public policy work and the development of Child Fatality Review public health alerts.
- OCA thanks multiple child welfare mental health professionals who have been providing pro bono consultation to support Child Fatality Review investigation and recommendation.
- OCA is grateful for the support of an experienced educational expert who is volunteering time to support Child Fatality Review investigations and recommendations.
- OCA also relies on the support of a Yale University researcher to support analysis of early childhood fatalities and to help develop systems recommendations.

In conclusion, we thank the Governor and the legislature for continuing to prioritize educational reform, early educational opportunities and increased mental health care access. The OCA is proud to work with you on behalf of Connecticut's most vulnerable children.

Sincerely,



Sarah Healy Eagan, JD
Acting Child Advocate, State of Connecticut