

# STATE OF CONNECTICUT OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

## OCA Responding Every Day to Calls about Children from Concerned Citizens

Every day the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) receives calls from citizens who are concerned about the well-being of a child. During the last several weeks of the year, OCA received **almost 50 requests for help**. Below are just some of the concerns brought to OCA's attention during this timeframe:

1. Young children with autism whose mother needs help accessing critical support services;
2. Concern regarding the well-being of a toddler involved in the child welfare system;
3. A young child in the hospital who needed help accessing services in the community;
4. A teenager, living without family, afraid of becoming homeless;
5. Concern regarding harmful seclusion of a child in school;
6. Multiple families request for help accessing appropriate special education services for children with special needs.

In all cases, OCA worked to connect the caller to appropriate services, advice or advocacy. OCA opened more than a dozen cases for further review. Above all, OCA tracked citizens' concerns to help identify systemic challenges for review and recommendation.

*OCA prioritizes constructive dialogue with our state agency and community partners and we value collaborative solutions whenever possible.*

## Meet Connecticut's New Child Advocate

**Sarah Eagan** began as the state's new Child Advocate on September 9, 2013. As Child Advocate, Sarah sets priority reviews for the OCA, manages office operations, and publishes vital information regarding the well-being of children and recommendations for system reform. Prior to this appointment, Sarah served for several years as the Director of the Child Abuse Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford, Connecticut. During her years at the Center, Sarah provided legal representation to children who were victims or abuse or neglect, or who had special education needs. Sarah has actively participated in drafting and seeking passage of legal reforms to improve outcomes for high need children and their families. Prior to working at the Center for Children's Advocacy, Sarah worked as a litigation associate at Shipman & Goodwin in Hartford. Sarah earned a degree in American Studies from Trinity College in Hartford, and graduated with honors from the University of Connecticut School of Law.

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## Leadership & Partnership

***OCA is meeting regularly with state leaders and community stakeholders to help ensure positive system changes for vulnerable children and youth.***

**OCA actively participates on more than 20 stakeholder task forces**, committees, councils and working groups that address children's mental health, child welfare reform, juvenile justice, needs of children with developmental disabilities, family violence, and educational disparities. OCA's unique access to real-time information about how children and youth are served by our state and local systems provides indispensable perspective for effective system reform.

In January 2014, OCA spoke at a legislative event aimed at "Raising the Grade" for children and youth in foster care.

In November 2013, OCA provided detailed comments to the Connecticut Health Innovation Model Taskforce, outlining our recommendations to promote children's population health.





## ***OCA Investigative Authority***

### **OCA Works to Prevent Unnecessary Restraint and of Children with Disabilities in Our Schools.**

OCA is currently reviewing policies and practices that lead to the unnecessary restraint and seclusion of young children with disabilities. In 2012, OCA, in partnership with the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, **released an investigative report of the “scream rooms”** being used in a Connecticut elementary school. The report found that children with and without disabilities were often placed in locked seclusion to control behaviors and mental health symptoms that were beyond the control of school staff.

The State Department of Education later reported **almost 40,000 incidents of restraint and seclusion of children with special needs during the 2011-12 school year.**

OCA supports absolute transparency in the use of restraint and seclusion techniques, the need for marked reduction and elimination of these non-evidence based practices, as well as the provision of school resources that will support teachers and administrators in their efforts to work effectively with children who have complex needs.

***OCA is co-hosting a forum regarding Prevention of Restraint and Seclusion, being held on January 23, 2013 at the Connecticut Legislative Office Building, starting at 9:30 in the morning.*** The forum will be co-hosted by the Office for Protection and Advocacy and will feature key note presentations from national experts on restraint and seclusion as well as a roundtable of legislators, agency representatives, and parents.

### **OCA Conducts In-Depth Review of Child Fatalities in Connecticut**

OCA co-chairs the State Child Fatality Review Panel. OCA is currently working on an in-depth report regarding children ages birth to five who died or were killed over the past year.

The fatality report will include comprehensive findings and recommendations for community providers and state agencies.

### **OCA Contacted With Concerns About Child-Serving Facilities**

OCA's priority is to ensure that the safety and well-being of children are closely safeguarded in state-licensed and state-run child-serving programs.

In the months of November and December 2013, OCA reviewed multiple complaints and questions regarding the safety and well-being of children with disabilities at child-serving facilities and programs. OCA works with state agencies to ensure such programs receive careful oversight and, where necessary, OCA will independently review the safety of a child-serving facility, including reviewing records, meeting with administrators, meeting with children, and conducting visits to program facilities.

## OCA Advocating for Abused and Neglected Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers who experience abuse or neglect often suffer with unidentified and untreated developmental delays and impairment. Research indicates that over 40% of infants and toddlers who are the subject of a child welfare investigation present with developmental impairments by age 3.

Developmental Screening is a low-cost and high impact way for doctors and providers to ensure that young children and their families are connected with critical supports in a timely fashion. Early intervention effectively increases family functioning, reduces disability, and increases children's independence.

OCA meets with child welfare stakeholders and decision-makers to highlight the specialized needs of abused and neglected infants and toddlers. OCA supports universal developmental and behavioral health screening for children of all ages, and access to evidence-based supports such as home visiting and Birth to Three for high need children and families.



### Contact Us

Concerns regarding the care and treatment of children

Office of the Child Advocate

999 Asylum Avenue

Hartford, CT 06105

860-566-2106 or 1-800-994-0939



## OCA Goes to Where Vulnerable Children Are: Hospitals, Residential Facilities, and Correctional Facilities

OCA knows how important it is to do the work where children are. Our staff travels around the state to see children in hospitals, residential programs and correctional facilities.

### Youth in Adult Corrections:

For children and youth ages 14 to 17 at Manson Youth Institution, OCA is actively working to ensure that youth have "contact" visit with family, meaning that they can see their loved ones, hold hand, hug, contact that all young people need to survive and thrive. OCA is partnering with the Department of Correction and UCONN Correctional Managed Health to ensure the special needs of youth in the adult criminal justice system can be met.

### Children in Hospitals and Facilities:

OCA is regularly meeting with state agency administrators to discuss how to better meet the specialized education needs of children in facilities and hospitals. Recently, OCA made specific recommendations to improve the way we identify and assess children's education needs in institutional settings.

### Transparency and Accountability:

OCA supports transparency and accountability for all state run or contracted facilities for incarcerated youth and youth with mental and behavioral health disabilities, including robust public reporting and strong partnership with community stakeholders and advisory groups.

### Closing the Achievement Gap:

OCA is participating in a Court Improvement Project Taskforce to help draft recommendations that will close the achievement gap for child welfare-involved children and youth.