



Cassandra Sanchez  
Child Advocate

# State of New Hampshire

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*Office of the Child Advocate*



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Good afternoon, my name is Cassandra Sanchez, and I am the Child Advocate for the State of New Hampshire. I have with me today our Associate Child Advocate, Lissa Mascio. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the Office of the Child Advocate (the Office).

As you know, RSA 21-V:2, II mandates the Office of the Child Advocate to provide independent oversight of agencies defined in RSA 21-V:1, I as any department, institution, bureau, or office of the state, as well as other public and private children and youth service organizations providing services under contract or agreement with an executive agency; as well as all “executive agencies” defined in RSA 21-V:1, VI as any state agency within the executive branch that provides services to children. Further, under RSA 21-V:2, the Child Advocate ensures children receive timely, safe, and effective services; strengthens the state by collaborating with parties on cases under review; ensures children receive dignified treatment; examines system-wide services to make recommendations and, advise the governor, legislature, agencies, and the public on how to improve services for children; and, periodically review agency policies, procedures, and practices to contribute to their improvement. The Child Advocate’s mandate further includes investigating complaints, providing assistance to a child, consulting with policy makers, providing information and referral services, performing educational outreach and advocacy, and reviewing facilities where New Hampshire children may be placed, both in-state and outside of the State. This broad mandate empowers, authorizes, and equips the Child Advocate to advocate for children’s best interests; and to address concerns about unmet needs.

The Office is in its seventh year of existence. It was established as an oversight agency in 2018 in response to multiple concerning gaps in the functioning of New Hampshire’s child welfare system, which resulted in tragedy, and initially was focused solely on the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In September of 2020, Chapter 21-V was established, replacing RSA 170-G:18, and codifying the Office of the Child Advocate in its own statute. RSA 21-V also expanded the Office’s mandate to provide oversight of all state-provided, funded, or agreed-upon services for children that fall under the executive branch, including contracted providers and residential facilities. The new statute also mandated that we visit children who are in state custody and assist them when needed; and, created the Oversight Commission for Children’s Services whom the Office reports to regularly.

In January 2022, the Office adopted a new mission statement: To lift up children by promoting equitable and effective reforms that meet the best interest of all New Hampshire children and strengthen public confidence and accountability in the State’s systems that support children and families.

Please allow me to give you a brief update on the Office since the last budget cycle, which will give context to the workload and therefore resource needs of the Office.

Current operations include 9 FTE positions, 1 unclassified position and 8 classified positions. Two additional positions were awarded in the last budget cycles. Our office is currently comprised of:

- **The Child Advocate.** I am the second Child Advocate appointed by the governor and have been serving in this position since April 2022.
- The **Associate Child Advocate**, who is an attorney and serves as our Legislative and Policy Director. Lissa is also our second Associate Child Advocate and has been serving in her position since March 2023. With the growth of the office, this position has transitioned into more of a system-level policy coordination position, even drafting legislation, and following hundreds of bills each session, creating important connections with legislators, community advocates, and other policy makers.
- Two **Assistant Child Advocates**, who both serve as Ombudsmen taking on the bulk of the direct case work of the office, fielding constituent inquiries, digging into cases, and visiting children in the care or custody of the State, across New Hampshire, and the country. Jason Taylor was the first Ombudsmen hired by the Office, and he has been with us since March 2020. The second position was filled by Jen Jones in December 2022. Both Ombudsmen have extensive experience in the child welfare field, with a wide array of specialized knowledge including assessment, field services, permanency, juvenile justice, and forensic interviewing.
- A **Legal Aide**, who is essentially the first line of contact for a majority of constituent inquiries, triaging calls and emails, providing support and a listening ear to constituents, and gathering an enormous amount of background information and research on the cases for the Ombudsmen. The legal aide also gathers research for legislative testimony and assists with bill tracking throughout the legislative session. This position was created and joined the Office in 2020.
- A **Children's Services Analyst**. This position was also created and joined the team in the Summer of 2020, allowing the OCA to take another step forward to effectively analyze the data received and identify trends, to ensure that children in care are receiving safe and effective care or treatment, and shine a light on situations that may not be. This position also analyzes data relating to restraints and seclusions of children placed at residential facilities across the State and region.
- A newly reclassified **Case Aide** position, which was previously a **Legal Secretary**. This position plays an essential role in the intake process, performing a bulk of the initial inquiry review and data entry of all critical incidents and restraint and seclusion reports. This position includes case reviews to assist the ombudsmen in their casework, works closely with the Legal Aide to manage inquiries, and collaborates with the Children's Services Analyst on trends relating to critical incidents or restraints and seclusions. The Legal Secretary position was approved to change from a part-time position to a full-time employee position within the FY 24-25 budget.
- A **Public Relations Representative & Training Officer**, a new position awarded in the last budget cycle. We initially hired for this position in November 2023. It is essential in getting the word out to the community about the Office jurisdiction through social media, tabling at community events, and providing information sessions to community stakeholder agencies. This role is also responsible for maintaining connections with media sources and drafting press releases or other documents for public consumption. As the Training Officer for the Office, this role also requires seeking out learning opportunities, whether it be trainings, conferences, webinars etc., for the office staff to grow and hone their skills.

- An **Office Coordinator** was a member of the original Office team, coming on second to the first Child Advocate in 2018. This position became vacant in October 2024. Prior to posting the position, we had to update the supplemental job description (SJD), to better reflect the current duties and tasks, which are focused largely on office management, finance and budgeting, HR duties, and policies and procedures. This position was filled in January 2025. Due to the decrease in budget target amount, the Office had to cut a position in order to maintain all other positions and maintain other line items critical to the functions of the Office. Although all positions in the office are critical to meet our statutory obligations, this was the position that appeared most reasonable to unfund in the FY 26/27 budget due to the prior vacancy.

The Office’s FY25 operating budget is **\$1,103,586** – more than the Governor’s Budget for FY2026 of \$1,075,552.

The Office of the Child Advocate’s 7th annual report will report on Office activity from **July 1, 2023, through June 20, 2024**, and is currently in development. The following preliminary data speaks to the volume of work currently being managed by the Office:

- Received **2,937** incident reports, including all critical incident reports from DCYF (serious injuries to children, child fatalities, parent fatalities, media coverage of DCYF involvement, etc.); and incidents documented by residential programs and SYSC, including restraints and seclusions; special investigations; and, missing children.
  - **86** of these reports were Critical Incident Reports from DCYF;
  - **1,510** of these reports were RSA 126-U Restraint & Seclusion reports on state-placed children in residential facilities.
- Received, reviewed, responded to, and monitored **349** citizen complaints.
- Legislation – the Office drafted or was intimately involved in the drafting of **6** bills; followed **141** bills; provided written or oral testimony on **23** bills; and, signed in on **53** additional bills during the 2024 Legislative session. We also attended meetings for several special committees and retained bill work sessions during the Fall of 2023.
- As of the last point-in-time review of case assignments, on 2/18/2025, the Assistant Child Advocates were assigned **41** and **39** cases each; the Legal Aide was assigned **34** cases; and the Child Advocate was assigned **6** cases.

### **Prioritized Needs**

The OCA is an independent oversight agency attached to the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) for administrative purposes. Apart from certain personnel matters, our Office internally conducts the majority of our administrative responsibilities, such as recruitment and hiring, purchasing, inventory, budget development, and training to name a few. Given the extent of administrative duties the Office is responsible for, 3 of the 9 staff members spend at least a portion of their time and focus on these duties. This leaves 6 FTEs dedicated to the essential duties within the mission and mandate of the Office, such as meeting with children, educating the public and legislature, managing complaints from the public, reviewing incidents reported to the office, analyzing data, and advocating for system improvements. While our very small team is remarkably productive, we are already stretched incredibly thin given the increase in inquiries and our growing caseloads. We need two additional FTEs and to maintain the current staffing within the office to meet all mandated obligations, as well as

the proposed reorganization to support the structure of a growing agency. Allocations for these needs would allow for more timely review of critical incidents and restraint and seclusion reports; conducting deeper analysis of performance outcomes on the agencies we oversee; more timely review and recommendations for larger systemic change; and, continuing to increase our in-person outreach, both to children directly and the community at large. In order to accomplish this, the Office requires:

- **Refund the Office Coordinator position** to ensure the critical functions of the office can be maintained, such as purchasing and procurement, budget preparation, and appropriate storage and maintenance of records; as well as coordinating travel to children and scheduling of meetings.
- **1 additional Ombudsman position** (Assistant Child Advocate) in order to allow for thorough review of constituent complaints. The two ombudsmen in the Office have been carrying an unmanageable number of cases for the past year, with numbers increasing each month. This leads to lag times in reviewing concerns brought to the office, many of which are immediate concerns for child safety.
- **1 additional Case Aide position** to manage the intake of inquiries and assist the ombudsmen with their increased workload; as well as complete and timely data entry of all incident and restraint and seclusion reports, highlighting trends, and bringing incidents of concern to the team.

Almost every other class line has been impacted due to the decrease in the target budget amount. These items are now included in Prioritized Needs, as they are critical to the functions of the office. The Office has always maintained conservative spending and continues to stretch our small budget as far as possible to meet the needs of our constituents and all New Hampshire children currently or previously involved with executive branch State agencies. Of the highest importance are:

- **Out of State and In State travel**, to visit children placed by the State. This assists the Office in meeting our statutory mandate *in RSA 21-V:2, II, (c) Ensure that children placed in the care of the state or receiving services under the supervision of an agency in any public or private facility, receive humane and dignified treatment at all times, with full respect for the child's personal dignity, right to privacy, and right to adequate and appropriate healthcare in accordance with state and federal law; and VII. Periodically review the facilities and procedures of any and all institutions or residences, public or private, where a child has been placed by an agency.* These children may be placed thousands of miles away from their home communities and support networks, leaving them extremely vulnerable.
- **Overtime** to permit our small team to be fairly compensated for time spent fulfilling their job duties. Due to the high caseload numbers and a continuously increasing number of incidents received, many of the Office staff need to work beyond their typical work hours to complete tasks timely. The Office has also had months of vacancies, covering three different positions. Overtime would allow staff members to work after hours to cover the job duties of vacant positions or while others are on leave.
- **Employee training**, to allow our team to stay up to date on current research, data and trends relating to the best interest of children. This particular field is constantly changing as psychological research and our understanding of the impact of trauma on children becomes more advanced. It is critical for all Office employees to remain up to date so that, as an office, we can continue to effectuate systemic change.

Although it is necessary to provide adequate supervision and support to staff, the **restructuring of the Office** which includes reclassification of two positions, has been lowered as a priority due to the need to reduce budget requests. We have also begun to explore the potential of **reducing office space** by leveraging telework and requiring shared workspaces with staff alternating office days.

The Office was created for oversight, the importance of which elevates in times of economic and social crisis. There is an abundance of evidence demonstrating societal stress paralleling stress on state social services. This is a point of highest risk and liability for state systems. Both the children and the State benefit from a focus on prevention by accessing services within the community, and the Office's independent eyes on overwhelmed systems to ensure best outcomes.

In order to meet its mandate of RSA 21-V equitably, in a timely manner, and keep even the same level of services currently being offered, the Office of the Child Advocate has requested an additional \$478,311 (*published as \$367,450*) in its FY2026 Prioritized needs, and an additional \$524,375 (*published as \$374,057*) in Prioritized needs for FY2027, for a Total request of:

- FY2026 \$1,538,195 and FY2027 \$1,584,259.

Thank you for this opportunity to explain our circumstances. I welcome any questions you may have.