



Office of the Child Advocate

Cassandra Sanchez, Child Advocate

House Budget Hearing for FY26-27 Biennium

February 26, 2025

Legislative Office Building, Rm 212

Concord NH



New Hampshire
Office of the Child Advocate

Mission & Mandate

Mission: 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.

The Office achieves this by:

- Bringing children's voices and lived experience to committees and workgroups that have an impact on children.
- Respecting the importance of every person in a child's life by highlighting the Family First Prevention Services Act.
- Building collaborative relationships with the agencies which we oversee, community stakeholders, and state government to effectuate reform.
- Promoting evidenced-based practices that are proven to be effective in serving the safety and welfare of children and families.
- Using data and safety science to examine child deaths, other critical incidents, and systemic processes.
- Providing education and information to the public including service providers, courts, CASA, children, families, and complainants that contact the office.
- Listening to all concerns about child-serving agencies (public and private), providing referrals, and, if necessary, responding to complaints with a credible review process.
- Maintaining independence and impartiality in all aspects of children's services oversight.
- Reporting on trends and areas of need for children's services via the annual report and issue briefings.

Office Staffing

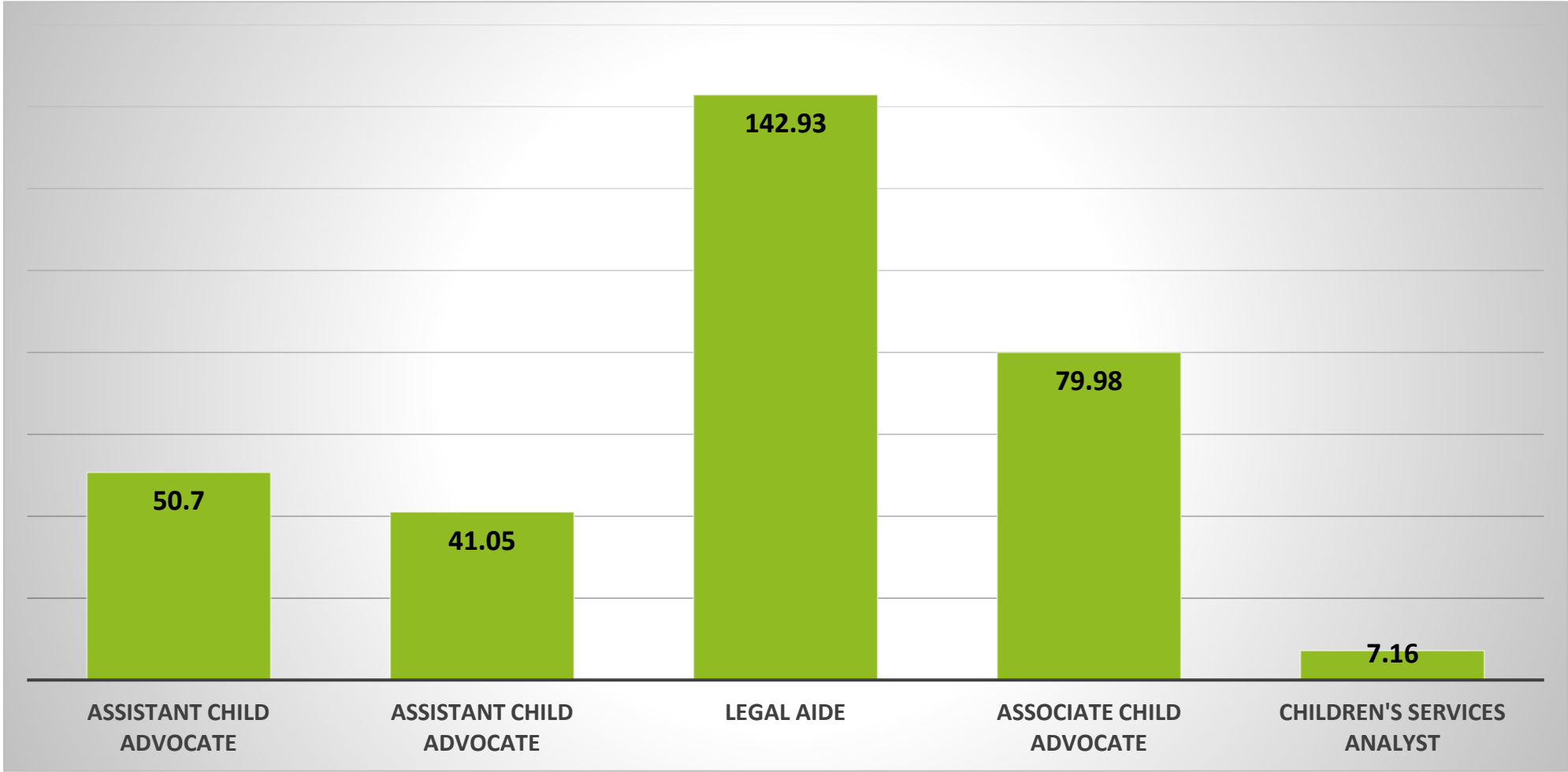
The Office of the Child Advocate is currently funded for 9 FTE positions: 1 unclassified and 8 classified. There are NO vacancies. The positions are:

- **The Child Advocate** – unclassified position
- The **Associate Child Advocate** – the second in command and the attorney in the office; this position is the lead on legislation.
- Two **Assistant Child Advocates** – Ombudsmen who manage the calls of complaint to the office, meet with children in placement, and directly work with all involved parties on cases to ensure that concerns regarding the system are addressed.
- A **Legal Aide** – facilitates system reviews, synthesizes and summarizes research findings for issue briefs and/or legislation, and reviews critical incident reports and DCYF case records pertaining to all critical incidents.
- A **Children’s Services Analyst** – coordinates the collection, analysis, and reporting of data; also maintains the case management system with the plan to have access to editing the system to better meet the office needs.
- A **Case Aide** – completes data entry, bringing issues and trends in incidents to the Child Advocate’s attention, and conducts case reviews to support the work of the Assistant Child Advocates.
- A **Public Relations Representative & Training Officer** – scheduling outreach opportunities and trainings, maintaining the office website, creating marketing materials, connecting with media outlets, and maintaining the social media platforms.
- An **Office Coordinator** – coordinates travel and meetings, prepares the budget, manages purchasing and procurement, and maintains office records.
 - This position has been unfunded in the FY 26/27 budget, although critical to the functions of the Office. This position was vacant between October 2024-January 2025 which is why it was the position selected to unfund.

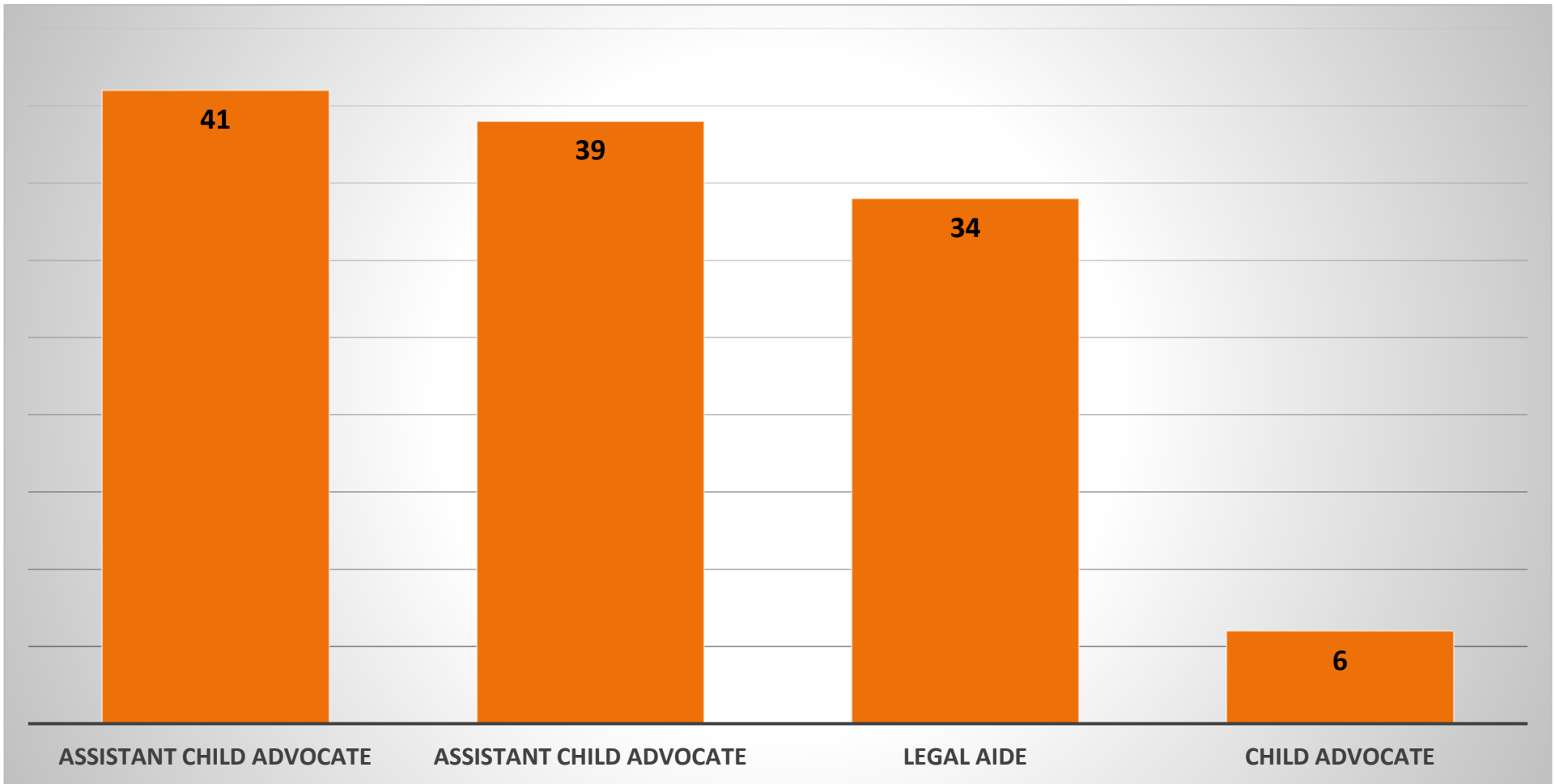
Office Overview

The Office of the Child Advocate's 7th annual report will report on Office activity from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, and is currently in development. The following data speaks to the volume of work managed by the Office:

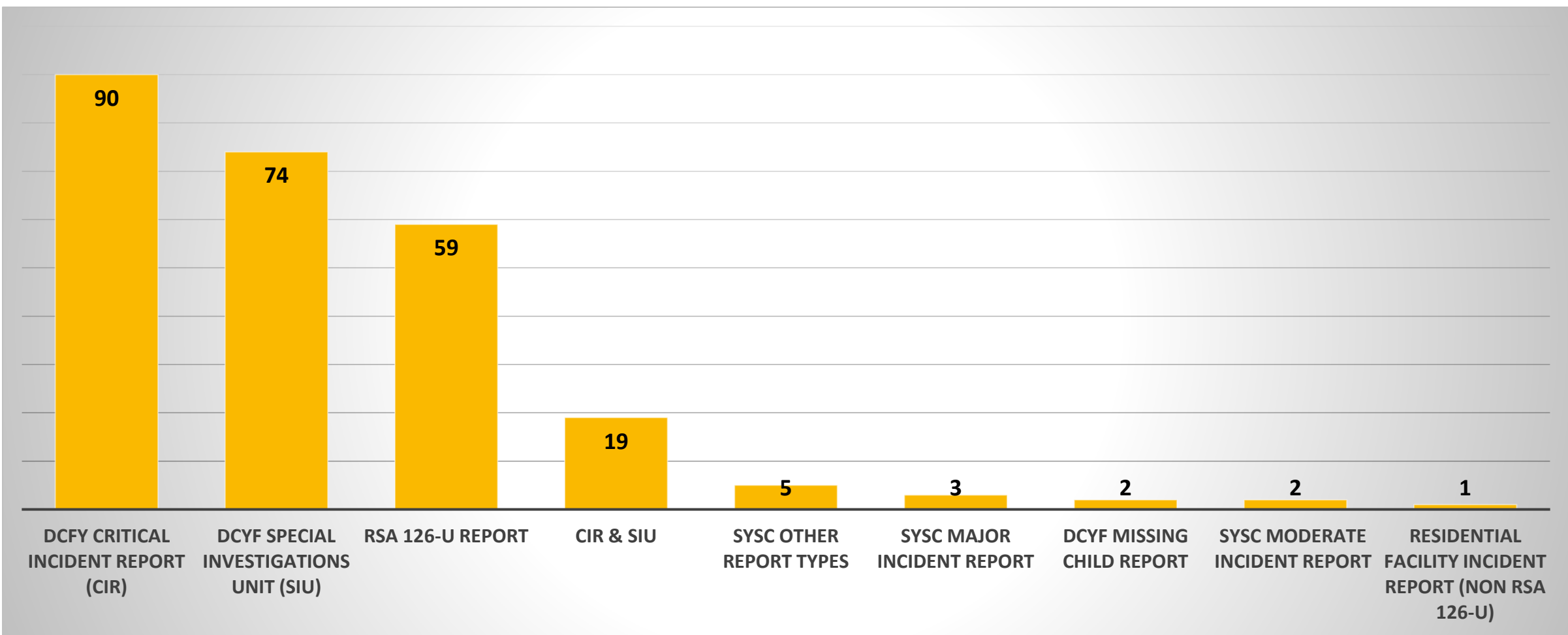
- Received **2,937** incident reports including all critical incident reports from DCYF (serious injury to children, child fatalities, parent fatalities, media coverage of DCYF involvement, etc.) and incidents documented by residential programs and SYSC, including restraints and seclusions, special investigations, and missing children.
 - **86** of these reports were Critical Incident Reports (CIRs) 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** bills during the 2024 session. We also attended meetings for several special committees and retained bill work sessions during the Fall of 2023.



Comp Time Earned Since 11/01/2025



Open Inquiries by OCA Staff Member
Point in Time 2/18/2025
Total Open Inquiries: 120



Open Critical Incidents by Type
 Point in Time 2/18/2025
 Total Open Incidents: 255

Prioritized Needs: Positions

Office Coordinator (FTE)

- The Office Coordinator is an integral position to ensure the Office functions smoothly. This is an administrative role which includes budget development and management, purchasing and procurement of office supplies, recruitment and hiring, policy maintenance and drafting, and inventory. If this position is not funded moving forward, these tasks will fall to the Child Advocate and Associate Child Advocate, both of whom focus their work in the legislature to create systemic improvements; on specific cases to advocate for children's safety and best interest; regular meetings with agency leadership to ensure safe and dignified treatment for all children; educating the public about our State's child-serving systems, trauma-informed care, and children's best interest; and, preparing reports and reviews to provide transparency to the public, including monthly in-person reports to the Oversight Commission on Children's Services.
- Losing this position would lead to slower response times to concerned citizens and an inability to address child safety timely.

Pay & Benefits

FY26 \$110,862.40 FY27 \$115,094.25

The Office's achievement of target performance goals is reliant upon this position being re-funded, to manage the necessary day-to-day tasks of a state agency, to allow other positions to fulfill their own primary duties, rather than pick up things like accounts receivable/payable, HR, and budgeting tasks. Without this position, the OCA would struggle to meet the mandate of RSA 21-V in a timely and thorough manner as inquiries, caseloads, and policy work continue to increase, and requires the full attention of the other positions.

Prioritized Needs: Positions

Assistant Child Advocate (FTE)

- The current Ombudsmen are each carrying an untenable number of cases to meet the mandates in RSA 21-V to review complaints, conduct investigations, and evaluate services and supports to children (pursuant to RSA 21-V:2, II & III), causing the Legal Aide to also carry a substantial caseload. 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.
- Not only are the case loads higher, but the cases are each more intensive, resulting in multiple meetings involving multiple team members over many months. Previously, cases may require only one or two meetings and then could be monitored through the case records.

Pay & Benefits

FY26 \$92,345.37 FY27 \$97,068.87

The Office's achievement of target performance goals is reliant upon this new position to review and investigate our ever-increasing inquiries and complaints, and to assist with the examination of systemic trends and issues relating to the best interest and well-being of NH's system-involved children. Without this position, the OCA would struggle to meet the mandate of RSA 21-V in a timely and thorough manner, as caseloads have become unmanageable.

Prioritized Needs: Positions

Case Aide (FTE)

- To accomplish the goal identified in the strategic plan “Be responsive to complaints, incidents, and opportunities to improve the State’s support and protection of children as their independent ally,” by timely data entry of all incident reports and restraint & seclusion reports.
- As we prepare our 7th Annual Report, preliminary data shows **2,937** incidents were received for the Office to review between July 1, 2023 and June 31, 2024. This is a **17.2% increase** from the last biennium. This does not yet reflect full reporting compliance. The Office is not receiving reports of incidents involving all children placed out-of-state, children placed via an “episode of treatment” through BCBH, or children who were placed by their schools.

Pay & Benefits

FY26 \$71,675.18 FY27 \$75,402.66

Without this position the Office will not meet our mandate of timely review of all critical incidents. With the increase in critical incident reports received, it is impossible to review and enter all immediately, which decreases capacity to contribute valued input about the quality of children's services and effectiveness of the appropriate state agencies. An additional position to assist with data entry would optimize the Office's ability to perform essential data analysis and further support the mission of the Office.

Prioritized Needs: Other Line Items

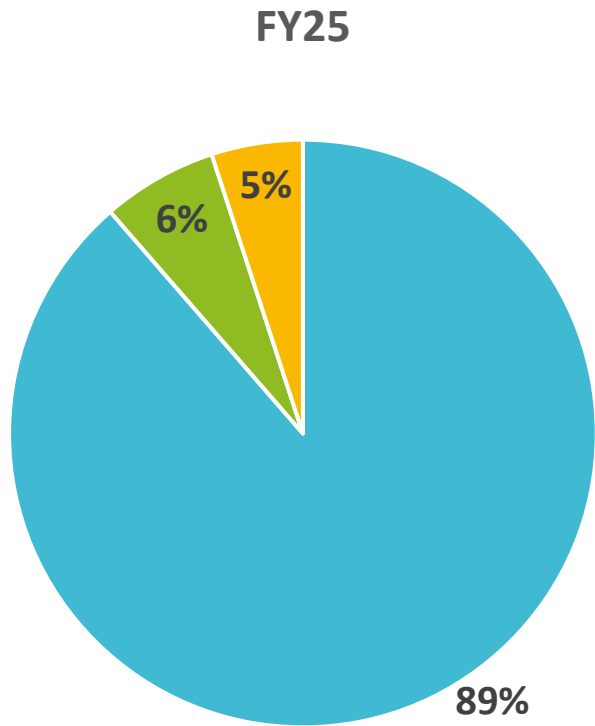
Other Line Items - Operating Expenses

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, such as:

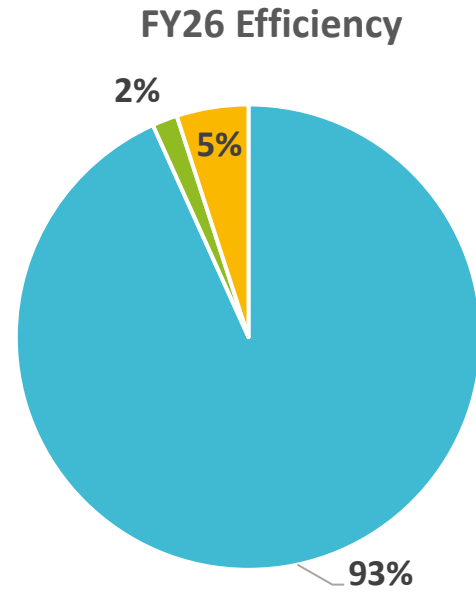
- **Out of State and In State travel** to visit children placed by the State. This assists the Office in meeting our statutory mandate *in RSA 21-V:2, II, (c)* to ensure that children are receiving appropriate services to meet their needs.
- **Overtime** to permit our small team to be fairly compensated 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.
- **Employee training** to allow our team to stay up to date on current research and data and trends relating to the best interest of children, so we can continue to effectuate systemic change.

FY26 \$92,567 & FY27 \$86,491

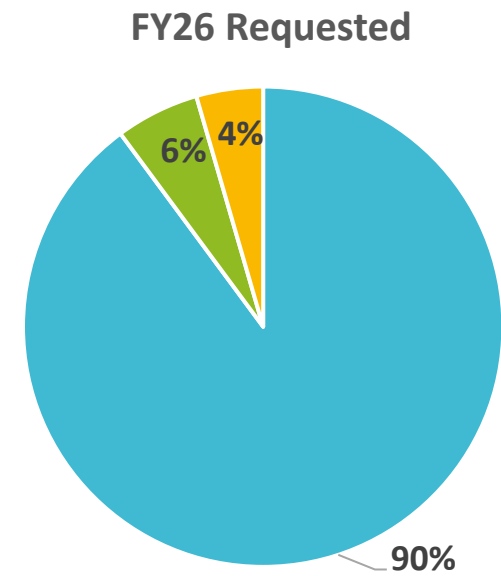
Without additional funds, the Office will not be able to pay for basic needs in order to fulfill our mandates related directly to children's safety and well-being. The Office was created for Oversight, the importance of which is elevated in times of economic and social crisis.



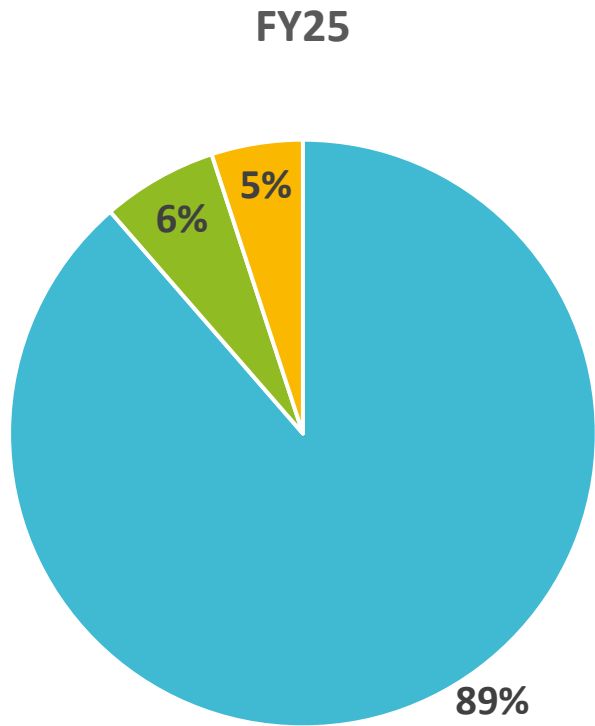
- Total Pay & Benefits
- Total Operating
- Total Rent, Leases & Payments to Other State Agencies



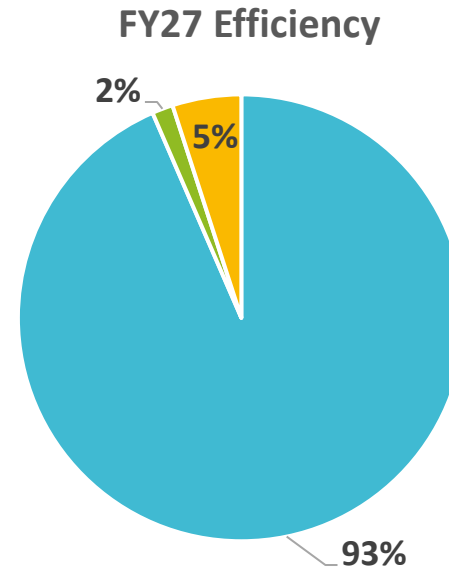
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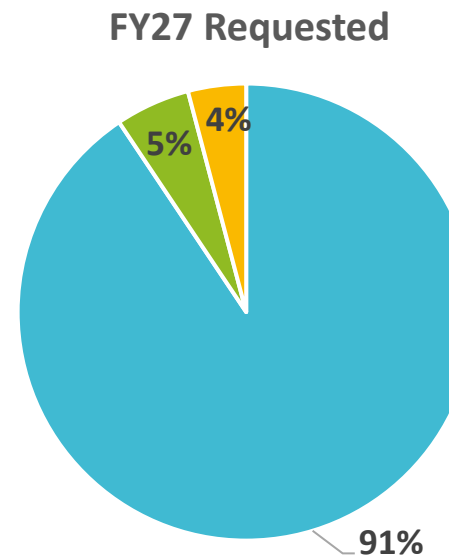
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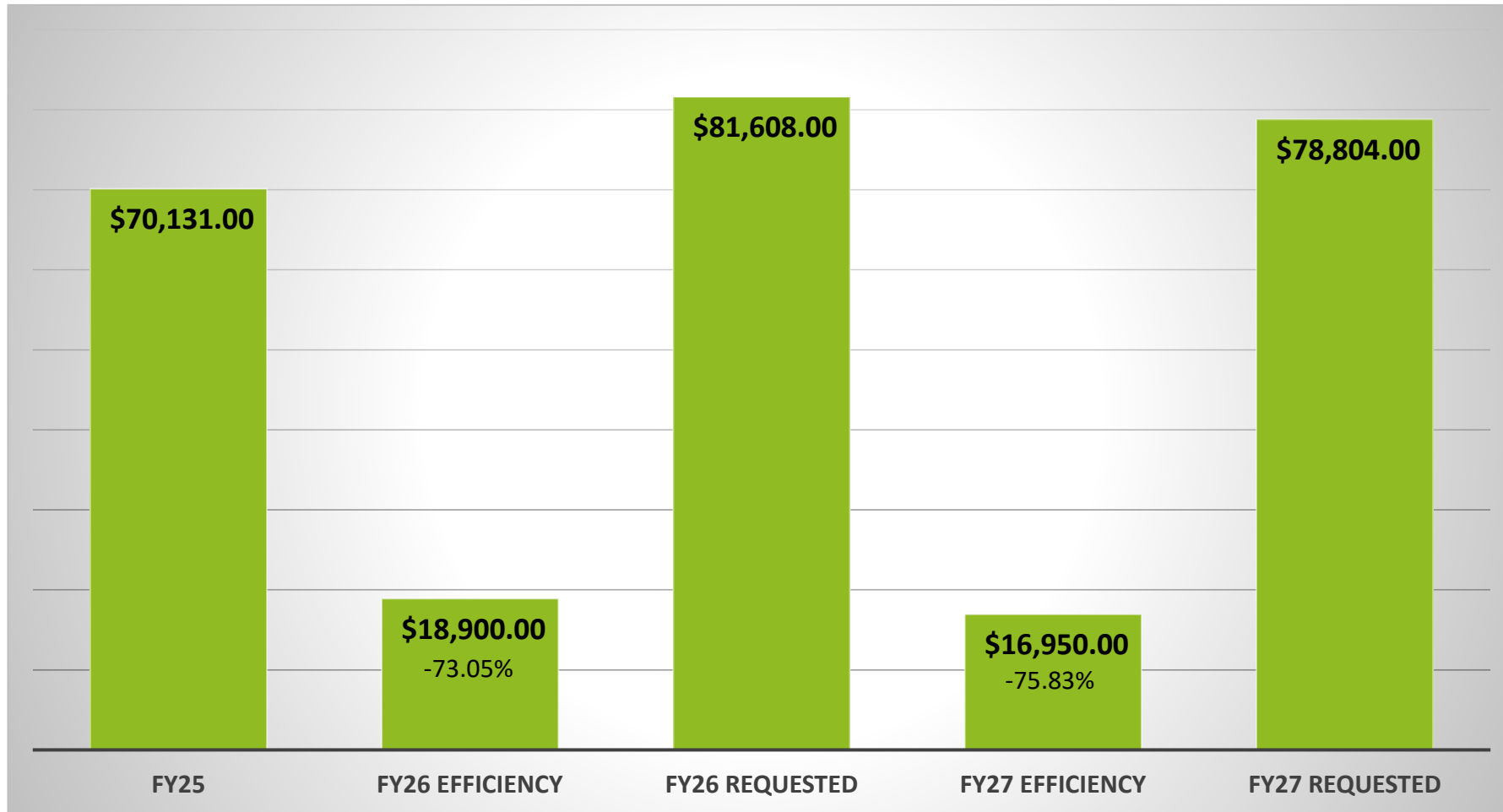
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Total Operating Budget

Budgetary Needs

FY25

Pay & Benefits = \$977,963 or 88.6% of the total budget

Operating = \$70,131 or 6.4% of the total budget

Rent, Leases & Payments to other state agencies = \$55,492 or 5% of the total budget

FY26

Pay & Benefits Efficiency = \$1,004,590 or 93.3% of the total budget

Pay & Benefits Request = \$1,300,611 or 89.9% of the total budget

Operating Efficiency = \$18,900 or 1.8% of the total budget

Operating Request = \$81,608 or 5.6% of the total budget

Rent, Leases & Payments to other state agencies Efficiency = \$53,738 or 5% of the total budget

Rent, Leases & Payments to other state agencies Request = \$64,997 or 4.5% of the total budget

FY27

Pay & Benefits Efficiency = \$1,043,492 or 93.5 % of the total budget

Pay & Benefits Request = \$1,352,188 or 90.6% of the total budget

Operating Efficiency = \$16,950 or 1.5% of the total budget

Operating Request = \$78,804 or 5.3% of the total budget

Rent, Leases & Payments to other state agencies Efficiency = \$55,670 or 5% of the total budget

Rent, Leases & Payments to other state agencies Request = \$61,307 or 4.1% of the total budget

Reorganization & Reclassification of Positions

- The OCA has been in need of a reclassification of two positions, the Associate Child Advocate and the Legal Aide: Reclassifying the Associate Child Advocate to a management-level position and Legal Aide to a supervisor position, as currently all employees report directly to the Child Advocate for supervision and administrative approvals. Given the growth of the office, the level of supervision required to conduct quality work is unmanageable for a single person.
- Due to budget constraints, the OCA has dropped this item down to prioritized need # 14 out of 20. Although this remains a necessity, it is more critical to ensure adequate funding for the agency than to request a reclassification at this time.

Areas to Consider Cost Saving

Transfers to Plant & Property

- The OCA does not currently have enough space, in the small area that we rent in Johnson Hall, to provide offices to all staff members which provide the necessary confidentiality. Given the current cost of rent, we do not have the funds to move to a larger space without incurring additional financial burden.
- At this time, the OCA is considering reducing the amount of office space used by leveraging telework and requiring shared space on opposing office days. This could lead to a cost savings of approximately \$10,000 per annual year.