

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN



REGIONAL and AREA OFFICE INQUIRIES

Office of the Ombudsman

Overview

The Office of the Ombudsman addresses inquiries and complaints related to Department of Children and Families (DCF/Department) services in order to resolve the identified issues and to help ensure that the rights of individuals involved with the Department are upheld and maintained.

The Office of the Ombudsman (Office) is housed within the Office of the Commissioner for the Department of Children and Families and serves many functions. The staff directly handle inquiries made to the DCF Commissioner from clients, youth, providers and concerned citizens as well as from the Governor's Office, federal, and state legislators, local officials, the Office of the Child Advocate and many other entities.

The Director of the Office also handled grievances filed by youth at Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) when it was open.

Last, the Director of the Office conducts Special Qualitative Reviews on cases regarding a child fatality, near fatality or other significant events that occur regarding a child/family currently working with the Department or whom had recent involvement.

Processes

The Ombudsman staff utilizes an objective, impartial, and collaborative process to facilitate fair and appropriate outcomes to concerns that are reported, and attempts to facilitate resolutions as amicably as possible.

As required, the Office, in collaboration with Regional, Facility and Central Office staff, consults and problem-solves case-related and systemic issues in order to assist and support DCF staff at all levels, and across each division.

What We Believe

Mission - The mission of the Office of the Ombudsman is to assist in supporting the safety and well-being of Connecticut's children, to improve effectiveness, quality, efficiency and responsiveness of DCF and connected services and supports, and to promote public confidence in the child welfare system.

Vision - Our vision is a collaborative and transparent system whereby individuals can freely express themselves about the Department's work, resulting in improvements from a case, systems, policy, and/or statutory perspective.

Values - We engage in the values of compassion, understanding and a commitment to each individual with whom we communicate, as we believe they deserve to be heard and feel respected throughout their involvement with the Department.

How We Conduct Our Work

- *Respond* promptly to inquiries
- *Engage* the caller
- *Actively listen* to the concerns expressed
- *Assess* concerns
- *Answer* questions
- *Provide* information about departmental policy and procedures
- *Search* for a resolution of disputes
- *Promote* the client's voice
- *Mediate* and act as a liaison between all involved parties
- *Arrange* case conferences when necessary
- *Collaborate* with community providers
- *Educate* the community
- *Resolve* the presenting problem

Where Information is Located about the Office of the Ombudsman

Information pertaining to the role the Ombudsman plays within the Department and how to contact the Office can be found in multiple areas on the DCF website, and in written documents provided to all families as follows:

- 1) In the *Parent's Rights to Know Brochure*, information pertaining to the Office of the Ombudsman and the role the Office plays within the Department is documented including DCF phone numbers. This brochure is provided to all families upon initial visit by Department staff. That brochure can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF/Multicultural-Affairs/Parents-Right-to-Know>
- 2) On the DCF website under "Most Popular Links" the "*About DCF*" heading can be located. When clicked, the DCF Ombudsman's Office (Complaints Department) is listed with our phone numbers. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/dcf>
- 3) On the DCF website under "Most Popular Links" the "*Contact Us*" heading can be located. When clicked, the DCF Ombudsman's Office (Complaints Department) is listed with our phone numbers. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/dcf>
- 4) On the DCF website under "Most Popular Links" the "*Ombudsman's Office (General Complaints and Inquiries)*" appears and when clicked, takes you to the Ombudsman's brochure and our Annual Reports. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF>
- 5) On the DCF website under "Most Popular Links" the "*What Every Parent Should Know*" appears and when clicked, takes you to the Ombudsman's brochure and our Annual Reports. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF>

- 6) On the DCF website under the headings “For Families and “For Providers” sections can be located. When clicked, the *Parents Rights to Know Brochure* is located which includes information about the Office of the Ombudsman. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF>
- 7) By simply typing in “complaints” on the DCF website’s search engine, the link takes you to the Ombudsman’s brochure. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF/Search-Results?SearchKeyword=complaints>
- 8) All of our Annual Reports can be accessed via the *DCF Data Connect* link found on our website under the heading “About DCF”. The Ombudsman’s reports are found under the *Alphabetical Listing* of reports link within that greater site. That link can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF/Data-Connect/Home>

Further, DCF’s Regional Offices and Facilities actively discuss with their clients/residents the role of the Office of the Ombudsman within the Agency as a resources if there are disagreements or disputes that cannot be resolved.

The Ombudsman’s role has also been noted in media stories throughout the year with respect to specific cases served by the Department.

The Director of the Office stays in regular communication with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to discuss case specific concerns, as well as Agency policy and practice. The OCA also copies the Director on all inquiries made to the DCF Regional Offices and Facilities. Families and professionals, when thought to be the best course of action, are also actively and directly referred to the Office of the Ombudsman by the OCA.

Data

During Calendar Year (CY) 2017, the Department served 36,540 families, which includes 6,538 children who spent any amount of time in placement during that time period. Of the families served, 11,200 were new to the system. The Office received 1,271 inquiries, which is 87 inquiries less than the number received during CY 2016. This decrease can be attributed to the Ombudsman’s staff working to clarify the difference between when a caller is actually requesting assistance with a problem, which should be documented as an inquiry, versus asking for a phone number or other general piece of information pertaining to the Department.

Over 77% of the inquiries received in CY 2017, represented unique families as compared to 75% in CY 2016. Data analysis reveals that 167 families were responsible for 438 or 34% of the CY 2017 inquiries.

It should be noted that the Department received an inquiry from only approximately .03% of the families who came to our attention.

The breakdown of the main reasons for the inquiries is as follows:

Reason for Call	Inquiries - 2017	Inquiries - 2016	Inquiries - 2015	Inquiries - 2014	Inquiries - 2013
Case Management	295	257	442	500	425
Investigation Concern	135	205	132	135	50
Abuse/Neglect	129	127	78	17	21
Placement	105	69	89	86	44
Visitations	59	62	50	42	31
Informational/General	58	167	23	12	70
Legal Questions/Issues	55	31	30	40	57
Request for DCF Services	50	21	24	28	7
Case Practice	35	43	95	46	63
Licensing Issue	34	78	14	13	4
Worker Complaint	32	64	88	63	77
Payment	29	36	29	25	19
Reunification	29	15	6	12	8
Problems Obtaining Resources	28	15	15	15	10
Request for Documentation	25	25	17	13	42
Administrative Hearing	24	13	21	10	11
Careline Concern	13	12	13	5	15
Voluntary Services	12	3	0	0	0
Adoption	10	18	15	12	11
Foster Care	10	11	17	17	28
Custody	10	11	8	14	11

Comparing Calendar Year 2016 and Calendar Year 2017 Data

The following chart presents the inquiries, per Regional Office, for CYs 2016 and 2017. Also noted are the number of unique family inquiries versus the total number of inquiries received for CY 2017. It is important to keep in mind that some families may contact the Ombudsman’s Office multiple times, concerning a variety of topics. Statewide, 984 or 77% of inquiries received pertain to a unique family.

Discussions will occur on a Statewide, Regional and Office specific level about the trends seen in inquiries compared to the data across all inquiry categories.

Annual Report

Annually, the Office of the Ombudsman produces an Annual Report which documents the total number of inquiries received per Office and the breakdown of inquiries per type. The report then identifies and provides feedback on the following themes:

- Inquiry Dynamics
- Engagement with Families
- Messaging of Key Departmental Practices
- Best Practices Associated with Inquiries
- Office of the Child Advocate Inquiries
- Legislative Inquiries
- Lessons Learned