



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
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November 15, 2023

Patrick Dowd, JD, Director Ombuds
Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds
6840 Fort Dent Way, STE 125
Tukwila, WA 98188

Re: 2023 OFCO Annual Report

Dear Director Dowd,

I want to thank the Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds (OFCO) team for their insights in the 2023 OFCO Annual Report. The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) concurs with your recommendations and observes the same challenges and necessary improvements, including:

- An urgent need for a more robust continuum of substance use disorder treatment services in Washington State for families affected by fentanyl.
- The need for expanded emergent placement settings for youth to address hotel stays and night-to-night placements.
- The need for DCYF to enhance staff safety and reduce and prevent physical assaults on staff or others.

Children remaining at home, with their parent when they can safely do so remains the best outcome. In the system we are building, many more children will be with their families, with support from DCYF and other state agencies ensuring safety. As mentioned in the 2023 report, one of DCYF's strategic goals has been to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care. That is also the goal of the Keeping Families Together Act. Since the act's implementation in July 2023, we have seen a 24.6% reduction in children and youth entering care statewide.

However, some children face very real threats in their birth family and need a safer temporary or permanent home. For the cases where we need to remove a child to keep them safe, we place the child with relatives as often as possible. We are working to provide relatives with the same financial support a stranger would receive to care for the child. Today, 58% of children are placed with relatives, and there is room to grow that number. We need to reduce the time a child is in out-of-home care to the shortest possible. We have more work to do.

You noted it, and I would be remiss if I did not also recognize that our staff are at risk far too often in this work. The people we rely on to protect children are not always protected well enough. Young people who have experienced profound trauma may struggle to control their aggression. That noted, we have an obligation to ensure the safety of our staff. Here are some of the ways we are addressing this challenge:

- We have increased mandatory de-escalation and safety awareness and response trainings.
- We increased the availability of cars with physical barriers built-in to protect staff and satellite phones for those in remote areas.
- We have submitted a decision package to the Office of Financial Management (OFM) requesting additional resources to expand safety and crisis response supports for our staff, including contracted mental health services, peer support and planning and training to reduce risks of staff assaults and injuries.
- We are expanding intensive services placements that are more appropriate for youth with high behavioral health support needs. We submitted a decision package to OFM requesting a rate increase for Emergent Placement Services, and have already secured a rate increase for Behavioral Rehabilitative Services (BRS)
- We have sought an expansion in available Children's Long-Term Inpatient Program (CLIP) beds.
- We supported a new law that means the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) will step in more often with dependent children to provide stable placements.

While significant progress is being made, our staff still faces challenges beyond safety, the first being workforce shortages and current workloads. In 2022, DCYF caseworkers provided a face-to-face response for more than 60,000 children where there were allegations of abuse or neglect. Only 6% of those responses resulted in placement into foster care, but the volume of work is still immense. Keeping kids at home is the right thing to do, and it requires more intensive engagement with families in the home, which requires staff. We must alleviate workload to meet the needs of families. We are working to develop a new workload and staffing model that accounts for changes in law, policy, and practice expectations.

The next challenge is the increase in fentanyl use and the lack of resources to address substance use disorder. The fentanyl crisis is the driving factor behind an increase in child fatalities. Washington has seen a three-to-four-fold increase in opioid-related emergency responses among all age groups since 2019. We are seeing a similar trend in child welfare.

We do not have the SUD treatment resources we need. In 2022, 737 infants were removed from parents needing substance use disorder treatment. Currently, the state capacity for Pregnant and Parenting Women is 156 beds, only operating out of six counties, with none in King or Pierce County. To maintain lower removal levels and ensure safety, we need to increase access to these beds as well as improved access to detox, medication for opioid use disorder and increased pay for SUD professionals.

Whether the issue is fentanyl, providing for youth who continue to fall outside the safest possible placements in our system, eliminating racial disparity in our systems, or ensuring staff safety, we have only begun. We appreciate your independent assessment and also the DCYF staff who supported your information gathering – and support Washington children and families every day.

Your findings help us to make the case for system change and ever-better results for children and families,

Sincerely,



Ross Hunter
Secretary