



State of Missouri
Office of Child Advocate

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Committee Chairwoman Susan Concannon and Members of the Children and Seniors Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to answer any of your questions about the Missouri Office of Child Advocate (OCA). I hope to provide you with a quick history of our office, a brief overview of our main functions, and a few highlights of our accomplishments.

The Missouri Office of Child Advocate was created in 2002 by Executive Order of Democratic Governor Bob Holden and later placed into statute by Republican House Speaker Catherine Hanaway in 2003. OCA was created in response to the death of Dominic James while in foster care. There was strong support from the public, child advocates, press, and elected officials to have a third party review concerns within the child welfare system. OCA has continued to enjoy broad bi-partisan support from the legislature and has a strong working relationship with the Missouri Children's Division and child welfare stakeholders.

The Missouri OCA has eight main functions:

1. Foster care case management reviews such as safety concerns within a foster home; concerns the State is not meeting a child's medical or educational needs; concerns that a child is not moving to permanency either through reunification or termination of parental rights/adoption; concerns surrounding policies of family placement preference, sibling separation, reasonable efforts etc.
2. Unsubstantiated hotline reviews when there is a concern that a child is left unsafe.
3. Child fatality reviews when there is a history of child abuse, neglect concerns, or previous involvement with the Children's Division.
4. Reviews policy and procedures of Children's Division, the Juvenile Office and the guardian ad litem within a county when there is a repeated pattern of concerns (SB341 reviews).
5. Mediates between parents and schools regarding abuse allegations in a school setting.
6. Intervene on behalf of a child during judicial proceedings.
7. Provide information and referrals for families needing resources.
8. Increase knowledge of professionals and the general public regarding child welfare.

The OCA does not have an adversarial relationship with the Missouri Children's Division. To be completely honest, no one likes to be complained about, questioned, or reviewed. So individual caseworkers don't celebrate getting contacted by our office for a case specific review. But many times

they are surprised and relieved to receive a letter in agreement and noting best practices – something that rarely occurs in child welfare. Supervisors and leadership find it useful when we do note policy violations or practice concerns that they may not be aware of occurring in individual cases. Children’s Division has also appreciated our systemic SB341 reviews when there is a pattern of concern within a county. Sometimes we are able to have the tough conversations with all the child welfare partners including the court, law enforcement, schools etc. to improve overall communication and collaboration.

Finally, some of our greatest work occurs in policy formation and collaboration with the Division and child welfare stakeholders. Child welfare is the responsibility of multiple professionals; not just the Children’s Division. To be successful, members of the multidisciplinary team must have trust, communication, and role clarity. In order to improve the child welfare system, all professionals involved must be willing to have difficult conversations, review their own roles, and work together to move forward. Office of Child Advocate serves on the following task forces, committees, and workgroups that focus on improving child welfare policy and practices:

- Task Force on Child Safety
- Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Children
- Missouri Task Force on Children’s Justice
- Child Fatality Review Program State Panel
- Child Fatality Review Program, Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Subcommittee
- Task Force on Recruitment, Licensing, and Retention of Foster Care and Adoptive Homes
- Missouri State Foster Care and Adoption Board
- Missouri Alliance for Children and Families Advisory Board
- Missouri State Juvenile Justice Advisory Board
- Child Support Guidelines: Review Subcommittee of the Family Court Committee
- Safe Sleep Coalition
- Family First Statewide Implementation Team
- Kinship Navigator Steering Committee
- Stewards of Children Facilitator Network
- Children’s Division Critical Incident Review

OCA currently has a budget of \$392,355 with 6 FTEs. We are State of Missouri employees but housed in the Office of Administration to remain separate from the Department of Social Services and Children’s Division. By contract we have access to all division records for review. The Director is a joint appointment by the Missouri Supreme Court and Governor with confirmation by the Missouri Senate.

Thank you for inviting me to present information about the Missouri Office of Child Advocate. I look forward to answering any of your questions.

Sincerely,



Kelly Schultz
Office of Child Advocate