

**Advisory Council to the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate
March 20, 2024, Meeting Minutes**

Location: 1:00-2:30 pm via Zoom

Website: [Child, Youth, and Family Advisory Council | Agency of Administration \(vermont.gov\)](https://www.vermont.gov/child-youth-family-advisory-council)

Members Present: Ariel Beaulac, Council Member, Lyndon Center
Matthew Bernstein, Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate
Mike Farnham, Council Member, Winooski
Lauren Higbee, Office of the Child, Youth and Family Deputy Advocate
Melanie Hudson, Council Member, Brattleboro
Mercedes King, Council Member, Montpelier
Angel Mason, Council Member, Calais
Ashley Nutbrown, Council Member, Barre

Members Absent: Celine Davis, Council Member, Montpelier

Public Members: Nate Hine

Minutes by: Laura Schaller, Vermont Judiciary/OCYFA Commission Member

Meeting opened by Chair Ariel with a review of the advisory council mission, community agreements and minutes from October 19, 2023.

Any additions or deletions to the agenda? A council member has some updates they'd like to share during the open discussion portion of the meeting.

Public comment offered. No public comments were requested or made.

Open Discussion

- A member shared their frustrations with the housing process, as it relates to former foster youth obtaining a co-signer with (typically) no family or other resources to access for one. This process should be easier.
- A member shared that a national advocacy group is working on a "Child Neglect Fact Sheet," to give to parents/caregivers in language that can be understood by the average person.

- Is there another term to use besides “neglect?” It is a harmful word, is broadly defined and may cause further trauma to families.
- Could there be a separate category for parents with substance issues (similar to CHINS) who are struggling but not “neglecting” their children?
- “Recovery risk” or “misuse” versus “abuse” language.
- “Mandating supporting” versus “mandating reporting.”
- Lived experience is so critical to systemic change.
- Should the council focus on certain, specific issues in order to be heard/make change? How can this group connect with the right change-makers?
- Matthew shared that there are SO many issues posing a challenge to the office. Maybe focusing on smaller, more specific issues would be more manageable.
- Are any national organizations already working on some of the issues we/the council wants to address?
- Peer support, peer navigator (or other “cool” name) offered to parents who become involved with DCF.
- Matthew shared some trainings that are being offered: “Reimagining the Foster System” and “Know Your Rights.” The office could help offer trainings.

Updates from the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate (Matthew and Lauren)

- A lot of work has been focused on the juvenile justice system – differing approaches in how we accomplish this – punitive versus restitution, community service, etc. Is a locked facility necessary? Cost-effective? How might we best address?
- The system needs more lived experience. Vermont tends to lean to an authoritative culture: “I know better,” attitude of government, executives, “professionals” versus asking/hearing from those who’ve lived it/experienced it.
- The House Committee on Human Services unanimously passed H.661 ([Bill Status H.661 \(vermont.gov\)](#)) An act relating to child abuse and neglect investigation and substantiation standards and procedures.
- Bill will now go to the Senate. Part of the bill would change the “reasonable person believes” standard to “a preponderance of the evidence” standard.
- The office continues to support and advocate funding for a new database for FSD/DCF. There is still momentum right now.
- The OCYFA website is growing.
- Lauren shared that there was a lull in referrals in February, but March has seen an uptick, with most referrals coming from kinship providers and GALs.
- A memorandum of understanding with DCF is close to completion re: the OCYFA having the ability to access records directly.

- A member asked about aggregate data and what is accessible, what is DCF collecting and what do “we” think should be collected?
- What are the numbers on “staffings” (FSW’s staying with a youth 24/7 in various locations) and how are these truly impacting DCF’s ability to manage ‘raise the age,’ is their workforce truly “in crisis,” and do we really need a locked facility?

Other small items

- Lauren shared that interviews for additional council members are ongoing. They are trying to gauge existing members’ availability as well.
- Matthew asked if members would be ok with their bios and pictures posted on the OCYFA website. Please reach out to Matthew and Lauren if you do not want your bio/pic posted.
- Submit W9 (if applicable). Obtaining payment is improving.

Continued Discussion Items

- Number of children and youth placed out of state.
- OCYFA Advisory Commission and OCYFA Oversight Commission connection.
- Action Steps for Council could include: neglect language; being a voice/peer support/wraparound services prior to DCF/court involvement; lived experience needs; youth who are aging out need more supports.

Meeting adjourned at 2:30pm.

Next meeting: Wednesday, April 17 from 1:00pm-2:30pm on Zoom.