

**Advisory Council to the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate
September 21, 2023 Meeting Minutes**

Location: 1:00-3:00pm 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
Celine Davis, Council Member, Montpelier
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: Mike Farnham, Council Member, Winooski

Public Members: None

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

Meeting opened with brief introductions and a review of the advisory council mission and community agreements.

Motion made by Ariel to approve the August 17, 2023, meeting minutes. Seconded by Ashley. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

Matthew shared that the public meeting can have additional attendees. The link to the meeting was shared with DCF Deputy Commissioner Aryka Radke.

Any additions or deletions to the agenda? One member asked to discuss the Social Equity Caucus and a second member asked to share about the Homelessness Forum. Both topics were added to the agenda.

Advisory Council Chair Discussion

- Matthew explained that statute requires the selection of a chair.
- Matthew and Lauren generated a list of chair responsibilities that was shared with members.
- Matthew suggested that the chair position rotate monthly, with a different member taking the role, noting the “democratic nature of that.”
- This would be voluntary – no member would be forced to hold the role.
- Several members expressed interest in being chair and all agreed that they like the idea of rotating.
- Motion made by Matthew that the role of chair rotate among interested members; Ariel seconded. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

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

- Last week Matthew and Lauren attended the United States Ombudsman Association (U.S.O.A.) Conference in Atlanta, GA. This was a great opportunity to network and collaborate with others in similar roles across the country. Matthew will be presenting about Ombuds and Child Advocate Offices having internal access to agency records at the U.S.O.A. Children & Families Chapter meeting in October.
- A letter was sent to DCF Commissioner Chris Winters re: access to DCF internal database; this will greatly streamline access to case information. They expect to hear back from the Commissioner by Friday, Sept 22.
- A homelessness forum was held on Sept 19, and a member shared that it was a great meeting, well-attended and that work will continue. Zoom link to the meeting was shared with members.
- Local podcast, The Social Work Lens, is doing a three-part series on youth voice. A member shared their experience as a guest on the podcast.
- Matthew and Lauren are prioritizing visits to residential placements.
- Their first report to the Legislature is due December 1.
- Calls are consistent with referral sources mostly from providers, GALs and parents. Themes of calls were presented.
 - Improve communication with parents re: status of their case, next steps, review case plans step by step
 - Working with parents with disabilities
 - Juvenile justice issues
 - Domestic docket and custody decisions
- Website is still in development.

Prioritizing the Work – Discussion

- A member recommended finding a strategy to organize the group around goals, capturing thoughts, action steps, etc.
- Discussion about the Social Equity Caucus and ongoing concerns with bullying/harming kids, families from the BIPOC community. How can this group help? Member to bring proposal of ideas to the next meeting.
- Domestic violence as it relates to working with DCF.
- Domestic (divorce, parentage) cases vs. CHINS/DCF cases – the office is hearing concerns from both.

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

Other small items

- Reminder about W-9 forms so members can receive stipend.
- Hoping to hold the October meeting in person and on Zoom.
- There will be no November meeting, as Matthew and Lauren prepare for their first major report to the Legislature.

Motion was made by Matthew to adopt the process of rotating the chair position among interested members, alphabetically by first name. Seconded by Arial. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote. Angel will chair the October meeting.

Matthew will send an email to gather agenda items for the next meeting. He will shift agenda so that "prioritizing the work/open discussion," comes before updates and other smaller items. One agenda item will focus on how to organize ideas/action steps (member to draft a plan).

Motion was made by Ashley to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Mercedes. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote. Meeting adjourned at 3:03pm.

Next meeting: Thursday, October 19, from 1:00pm-3:00pm. This meeting will be on zoom as well as in person with a location TBD.