

**Advisory Council to the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate
October 19, 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: Arial Beaulac, Council Member, Lyndon Center
Matthew Bernstein, Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate
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
Mike Farnham, Council Member, Winooski

Public Members: None

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

Meeting Notes

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

Motion made by Ashley to approve the September 21, 2023, meeting minutes. Seconded by Arial. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

Chair Angel asked for any additions or deletions to the agenda? Motion made by Matthew to change the order of the agenda to have "Prioritizing the Work," precede "Updates from OCYFA – Matthew and Lauren." Seconded by Ashley. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

Prioritizing the Work – Discussion

- A member shared that they would like to see more focus on DCF "sitting with some risk," in that some risk may outweigh the harm caused by the removal of children from their homes; at times, DCF seems to be using safety planning and CCO's to keep children at home. They also expressed hope that DCF could provide more of an understanding of the tools with which they do their work, including the SDM (Structured Decision Making), internal training manuals and language.
- Members explored how DCF can use "lived experience" rather than (or in addition to) data to determine how removal affects families.

- One recurring theme in court cases involves the reliance on past events/actions rather than what's occurring in the present.
- Parents describe meeting the action steps in their case plan, yet DCF fails to acknowledge or appreciate this and "parents still lose their kids."
- Matthew shared the concept of "hidden foster care," in which safety planning and open family cases are utilized without any court oversight. Parents have few due process rights and DCF is unable to track numbers.
- Lauren asked the group about their experiences with case plan reviews (DCF policy is to hold a case plan review every six months for children and youth in DCF custody; facilitated by an independent evaluator). This is a venue in which parents (or any member of the team) can express disagreement with the case plan.
 - One member shared that they heard from a parent who was asked by their DCF worker to write a case plan, because the worker did not know how to write one.
 - Case plans are not being updated in a timely manner or are just copied.
- Matthew advised that parents with complaints should put those complaints in writing to DCF and cc the OCYFA. He encouraged them to keep positive and to focus on the facts of the concern, as this is better received.
- The training of FSW's was discussed in terms of what training they receive and for how long. Lauren provided the UVM Child Welfare Training Partnership website.

Motion made by Ashley to move on to updates from Matthew and Lauren. Seconded by Mercedes. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

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

- The report to the Governor and General Assembly is due December 1 and will focus on several key components, including the conditions of placements, recommendations for improvements in the system and data.
 - Matthew said he wishes that they'd had time to visit every residential placement, foster home and DCF office in the state but that has not been possible thus far. They will be making many stops around the state in the coming weeks.
- They would like to include a section in the report on the Advisory Council but are not yet sure what that will look like. A draft will be sent to Advisory members for feedback.
 - The Advisory Council still needs two more members.
- Lauren shared a positive story: DCF contacted their office to collaborate on a case involving a youth placed out of state. They viewed this as another step in the process of establishing a positive relationship with DCF.

- The office will be testifying at the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee next Thursday, October 26, re: high end system of care (secure placement facility).
- Administrative Updates:
 - Hoping to have the website live by December 1.
 - Referrals are “unending,” as expected.
 - The hotel project has consumed a lot of time, and it seems the need is increasing.
 - Reminder about W-9 forms so members can receive stipend. Members will also need to complete an expense form after each meeting. Matthew will send an email with W9 and expense form information.

Member asked about DCF’s response to their request for access to DCF records. Matthew shared that it was positive and is in process.

There will be no November meeting, as Matthew and Lauren prepare for their first major report to the Legislature.

Additions to December 21, 2023, Agenda

- Number of children and youth placed out of state.
- OCYFA Advisory Commission and OCYFA Oversight Commission connection.

Motion was made by Mercedes to move on to the next agenda item. Seconded by Ashley. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

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

Motion was made by Ariel to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Mercedes. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote. Meeting adjourned at 3:01pm.

Next meeting: Thursday, December 21 from 1:00pm-3:00pm. This meeting will be on zoom and possibly in person, location TBD.