

**Oversight Commission on Child, Youth, and Family Advocate
Virtual Meeting - Minutes
Monday, March 11, 2024, 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM**

Members Present: Representative Dan Noyes, Steve Dale, Director Xusana Davis, Amy Rose, Shela Linton, Laura Schaller, Nate Farnham, Lynn Messier

Members Absent: Senator Ginny Lyons

Public Members: Matthew Bernstein, Lauren Higbee and Nate Hine

Minutes By: Amy Rose

Website: <https://aoa.vermont.gov/content/oversight-commission-children-youths-and-families>

Welcome, review and vote on previous minutes

Meeting called to order at 10:04 by Rep. Dan Noyes. Steve Dale motioned to approve the minutes; Laura Schaller provided a second. All voted to approve.

Review agenda and public comment

No public comments made at this time, some public comments were made throughout the meeting.

Oversight Commission Review structure and purpose Reimbursement for participation Meeting schedule (in person or remote, set times) for 2024
Partner email addresses have been set up for Commissioners and will be used going forward. Rep. Noyes will send out the protocols for reimbursement for participation after this meeting. The Commission will meet quarterly, on June 17, September 16, and December 16 from 10am -

noon. The membership acknowledged that speaking in person can be meaningful especially for difficult conversations and the time commitment to travel can be burdensome for members who do not live in central VT for a standard meeting. Rep. Noyes can reserve space in Randolph. The Commissioners will review the agenda in advance of each meeting and decide when it feels important to meet in person.

Combined agenda items - OCYFA report with questions or comments & updates from the Office. Possible topics - Raise the Age, data system, housing, secure facilities, H.644 How is the OCYFA engaging in systems level improvements? How is the OCYFA engaging with children, youth, and families? What might not be on our radar that should be?

Matthew provided an overview of [the Office's first annual report](#) and the [OCYFA website](#).

[DCF data system](#) -

Matthew shared the request for additional funding for the DCF data system within the House Human Services FY25 budget letter. This system will allow the state to draw down federal funds and will remove barriers to prevention work. A member wondered why we are celebrating the \$3 million increase when we know that the data system will be \$20 million - \$40 million. The Commission discussed the importance of a data system, the slow pace at which progress has been made and the current commitment to create a new system by advocates and some members of the legislature.

One Commissioner recommended looking to other states and other systems as there are databases that hold information everywhere. The economic services division is also in need of a system. Questions were raised about whether the state was taking a thoughtful and broad approach to upgrades.

Lauren said that it is difficult to focus on the data system when there is actual harm happening. She said that the need for a CCWIS system is not just about drawing down federal funds, but when they look at errors being made, the impact on day-to-day operations becomes clear.

The Chair shared that we (Vermont) don't know how to buy a smoke detector or a battery - but we sure can buy a fire truck. He acknowledged that there will be cuts in social services to reduce property taxes. Unless we can draw down federal funding, we will lose valuable services.

The guest finds what is happening at the legislature is disgraceful. We (as a state) say we care about kids, but we aren't funding kids. Kids are being harmed as we speak. He discussed the scarcity myth and his frustration with the lack of progress on reform. He named teenagers that he works with who are being turned from scared kids to criminals because of the way we deal with them.

One Commissioner expressed frustration with data and the way it has been weaponized against BIPOC individuals. Data has harmed folks as well. Data continues to harm BIPOC communities disproportionately. Wondering why we are spending so much money on collecting more information rather than helping people. Other options for spending state money include reparations, universal health care, college, and meeting needs. We are an immensely wealthy society that has persuaded ourselves that we are poor.

There is an opportunity to think about what information we collect and why we collect it. Who has access to data? Who can contribute to the collection? Whose narrative is being told and who is the storyteller?

Youth Voice-

Another Commissioner names progress that has been made due to youth/young adult led advocacy.

Matthew discussed ways in which the OCYFA highlights youth voices including youth justice. Nate and Matthew [spoke on a radio show](#).

Ongoing issue - kids aren't listened to. Sometimes due to their age. It is sensitive, but it matters. People should listen to kids.

Relationships -

A Commissioner named the importance of building relationships. Matthew and Lauren attended an [event at the Root Social Justice Center](#). People shared more about themselves and were vulnerable. What came out of that is the need for more focused meetings. History will repeat itself if we don't make different choices.

Cash matters -

Direct cash transfers were discussed, the Spectrum pilot is one example (\$1500/month for some youth transitioning out of state care for 18 months). Free college. Baby bonds. The need for universal financial support was named.

Questions about the report -

A Commissioner asked what has the impact of the report been so far? The OCYFA named a positive response. They sent the report to DCF a couple of days in advance- they wrote a few technical comments, but overall, the response has been supportive. The OCYFA won't create as long of a report each year, but the report reflects the work, and the report has been used in advocacy (the data system and jj are two examples). The Office is young and is still showing its worth. The federal delegation reached out about the federal opportunities embedded within the report.

[Referrals](#) -

One Commissioner said that she is getting many calls about kids going back to their parents when the home is not safe. "There is a child that we almost lost twice, living and doing well with a kin - yet DCF is working to reunify". Caregivers do not have a voice in court. The OCYFA shared that the number one referral source is caregivers.

We need to have a high-quality system to get the balance right. We leave some kids in care too long, and other kids are not in care for enough time.

Caregivers are being told that they are biased and don't like the parents when that is not the case. They have concerns for the safety of the kids. VKAP, the Commissioner, and the OCYFA will be meeting together later this month to talk about some of these concerns.

Understanding the issues -

A Commissioner shared the book [Gather](#), and recommended it as another way to get a better understanding of the complexities of life.

Office structure -

Will the office be expanded? The OCYFA requested three new positions; the Gov's budget did not include any. HHS included one new position in their budget memo.

The OCYFA attended the District management teams meeting on Friday. It was positive and non-adversarial. Barriers have been put up to attend the Vermont Citizens Advisory Board meetings at this time.

Restraint and seclusion -

The OCYFA is struggling to get data. It is very limited. Lauren explained the process of requesting information and current barriers to access. It is a top priority. The OCYFA was told that kids are not being restrained in foster homes, but they have also been given contradictory info. Are restraints happening in other settings? Tracked? Regulated? Are restraints being tracked at AOE? Kids are being restrained hundreds of times and no one is tracking it. It is deeply concerning. It would be helpful to get a better sense of kids' experiences across settings.

Raise the Age-

Raise the age is the nationally groundbreaking legislation - [Act 201](#) of 2018. Act 201 was intended to increase the age of offenders who are referred to family court instead of criminal court for committing nonviolent offenses. The first stage of the law — raising the age to the offender's 19th birthday — went into effect in 2020. The second phase, which would include 19-year-olds, has yet to be implemented. There have been some

positive conversations emerging, including the option to eliminate the big 12 altogether, which would leave us with the youthful offender statute. Currently before due process hearing, teens end up in the media.

Woodside -

Lauren has been taking the lead in writing up a report on choices made when creating Woodside that could inform the process of serving youth today.

How can the Commission best support the OCYFA?

Spread the word about the office, the need for more positions. Note when you hear restraints are happening. Office is setting up their own data system.

Adjourn -

Shela Linton moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:02pm. Steve Dale provided the second. All agreed.

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