

### OCA Listening Session Meeting Summarized Testimony

Name	Organization	City/Town	Summarized Testimony
<b>Tiffany Scott</b>	Parent Advocate with Proactive Families Advocacy, Rape Crisis Counselor with Pathways for Change	Worcester	Speaker expressed looking for an OCA candidate with lived experience rather than degrees and accolades, crucial for lived experience, someone who understands the challenges that families in the system face. A candidate who will prioritize accountability over funding and reputations, someone who has the strength to face corruption
<b>Jamie Sabino</b>	Director, Mass Law Reform Institute	Cambridge	Speaker emphasizes the need for the next Child Advocate to be a true partner to families, not just an authority figure. They stress that the role requires someone with empathy, collaboration skills, and a deep understanding of what families and children are experiencing—particularly those affected by coercive control and domestic abuse. The ideal advocate should work closely with community organizations, family preservation initiatives, and groups across Massachusetts to keep families together and ensure their voices are heard. The speaker also notes that while oversight of DCF is essential, the Office of the Child Advocate must go beyond being a "watchdog" to collaboratively address the broader issues impacting children and families statewide.
<b>Melissa Anderson</b>	Mass Alliance for Foster Families, Fostership Next Advocate	Falmouth	The speaker emphasized the need for transparent, accountable systems to support foster, adoptive, and kinship families, and vulnerable children. They stressed that the OCA should serve as an independent leader with strengthened autonomy to safeguard children's safety, well-being, and rights. The OCA must work independently and without bias, with expanded oversight, staffing, and funding to support its mission. Decisions should be informed by deep understanding of trauma and the child welfare system, grounded in lived experiences, and free from outside pressures. The OCA's focus should be on addressing systemic challenges, driving meaningful reform, and improving outcomes for children and families.
<b>Reese Thompson</b>	More Than Words	Greater Boston and Metrowest	Speaker emphasized that many young people are unaware of the Child Advocate and its role, which limits the office's ability to represent and protect the most vulnerable youth in our communities. They highlighted the need for the OCA to ensure children in foster care or unstable situations are not repeatedly traumatized and stressed the importance of the OCA holding child-serving agencies and systems accountable. Youth specifically referenced that the FYI (Foster Youth to Independence) voucher program in Massachusetts is underutilized.

<b>Jayden Hernandez</b>	More Than Words	Greater Boston and Metrowest	Youth acknowledge they have lived the reality of what this bill is trying to fix. Explains youth homelessness consists of sleeping on floors, trying to maintain job, attending school and feeling like we don't belong. Unhoused youth go unheard and unsupported. This bill gives us stability, time to breathe. It sends the message that "we are not giving up on you." Youth facing adverse experiences, including housing instability, want to build a future and not just survive the present. Youth have a message for every legislator: choose compassion over convenience. Youth is advocating that people in leadership positions take actions that convey to youth "you are worth investing in and we will not let you fall through the cracks."
<b>Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier</b>	MA State House	Pittsfield	Speaker emphasizes the importance of hearing from people with both system experience and lived experience. Speaker stressed that the next OCA must be independent—not working for the secretary or governor—to act as a truth teller. They also highlight that recommendations following adverse events must be actionable, not merely advisory. The OCA should have the independence and ability to ensure recommendations following adverse events are carried out.
<b>Tatiana Rodriguez</b>	CEO/Founder and Executive Director of Family Matters First		<p>Speaker reports that the selection process for the next Child Advocate as insufficient, noting invitations to participate came less than a week in advance and do not grant real power or influence. Stressed that families and children affected by DCF need actual decision-making authority, not symbolic participation.</p> <p>Tatiana is concerned around a serious conflict of interest in the nominating committee, where agencies accountable to the OCA effectively select their own oversight, which can undermine and take away the OCA's independent authority. Expressed a need for a Child Advocate who can dismantle harmful systems, address long-standing inequities affecting low income, Black, LGBTQ+, and immigrant children, and build real support and reparative measures.</p> <p>Requested that people directly impacted by these systems be given real seats at the table, so the OCA can protect children and families effectively rather than perpetuating harm.</p>
<b>Mary Hynes</b>	Former Foster Parent, Statewide Foster Parent Board for over 30 years	Greater Boston and Metrowest	Speaker expressed that there is a need for the next Child Advocate to hold DCF accountable and ensure foster parents' concerns and evaluations of social workers are taken seriously. Calling for a leader who is tough, relentless, fearless, and unafraid of bureaucracy. The sole focus would be protecting foster children and supporting their families. Optimism is valued asset, but the advocate must prioritize the interests of children and families over external pressures.

<b>Shaplaie Brookes</b>	Executive Director of the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth		<p>Speaker expressed that the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ youth has had ongoing collaboration with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) since 2022, including annual recommendations to strengthen policies, outreach, and services for LGBTQ+ youth.</p> <p>The next Child Advocate needs to demonstrate a strong, intersectional commitment to protecting vulnerable youth. The candidate should have both lived and professional experience that reflects current challenges faced by families and young people across the state.</p> <p>The next CA needs to be a leader with a fresh vision, proactive strategies, and a focus on collaborative oversight of DCF. A leader who prevents harm rather than reacting after failures occur. Speaker stressed the importance of transparency, inclusive community engagement, and ensuring that the voices of those most affected by state systems are truly prioritized in both the hiring process and the ongoing work of the OCA.</p> <p>Warned that the current lack of representation and outreach in this process reflects broader systemic issues that must be addressed to ensure lasting safety and equity for all children in the Commonwealth.</p>
<b>Danna Mauch</b>	Massachusetts Association for Mental Health	Lincoln	<p>The speaker highlighted the critical duties of the OCA, noting that few leadership roles require such deep trust to protect vulnerable children and families. The OCA must be able to examine the child welfare system, investigate incidents of abuse and neglect, and advise leaders on improvements. All of this requires a demonstrated set of abilities. Speaker expressed what is essential for the next CA: effective communication for change, strong coordination with both youth and families externally and government stakeholders internally, and to possess a deep understanding of the law. The role demands public accountability, prudence, and shrewdness in handling complex and delicate human matters. The OCA must engage in respectful collaboration while maintaining the independence of the office to deliver real solutions for youth and families in its care.</p>
<b>Richard Wexler</b>	National Coalition for Children Reform	Virginia based, although has roots in MA	<p>Speaker expressed that the child welfare system in Massachusetts is overwhelmed and unprepared, leading to mistakes that cause harm in multiple directions. Children placed in foster care experience significantly worse outcomes, including being four times more likely to die than children left safely with their families (the most common death is by suicide), and face numerous other documented harms.</p> <p>Speaker stated there is a need for a Child Advocate who recognizes these realities and is willing to confront and learn from systemic errors, particularly those resulting from unnecessary family separations driven by poverty rather than danger.</p>

<b>Nancy Allen Scannell</b>	MSPCC		<p>Speaker acknowledged the difficult yet excellent work of the current and past Child Advocates before addressing the future of the Office. The next Child Advocate should continue focusing on individual children, including investigating critical incidents, collaborating with stakeholders, and developing research and pilot programs to strengthen both state agencies and community supports for families.</p> <p>If children cannot remain with their families, the Commonwealth has an obligation to ensure they are cared for, supported, and given opportunities to thrive, not just survive. The next Child Advocate must have the courage to confront and publicly address harmful policies and practices that have led to tragic outcomes, while also providing clear, actionable recommendations to prevent recurrence.</p> <p>Speaker stressed the CA's importance of building strong, trust-based relationships with state agencies and service providers, relationships that are sturdy enough to withstand conflict and accountability while remaining guided by expertise and a steadfast commitment to children's well-being.</p>
<b>Tammy Mello</b>	President/CEO of Key Program and Board Member of the Child Welfare League of America, Former ED of Children's League. Former ED of the Governor's Council to Address Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence & Human Trafficking, former DCF Social Worker	Pembroke	<p>Speaker expressed the next Child Advocate will need to build on the OCA's evolution while addressing its current limitations. Highlighted the importance of including lived experience and youth voices not only in the selection process but also in ongoing policy development and system oversight.</p> <p>The OCA must oversee multiple systems together, not just DCF and ensure coordination across systems. Speaker called for the creation of formal spaces for young adults to help shape policies on emerging adulthood, independence, and housing.</p> <p>OCA currently lacks enforcement power to act on its recommendations, something that must change. Calling for an experienced, collaborative leader who can work effectively with the Legislature, administration, and families to drive meaningful reform and uphold the OCA's mission with commitment and compassion.</p>

<b>Kevin Coughlin</b>	Early Relational, Child & Adolescent, Adult Psychiatrist Medical Director, Neurodevelopmental Unit 5E, Adolescent Unit 5W, Somerville Hospital Division of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Cambridge Health Alliance Instructor, Harvard Medical School	work and live in Somerville	<p>Speaker described the challenges faced by children with autism and intellectual disabilities who fall between systems of care. He explained that these children are often “ping-ponged” between agencies, each deflecting responsibility while the youth remain unnecessarily hospitalized.</p> <p>He shared a case where, despite his team’s best efforts, a child experienced regression and emotional harm from prolonged hospitalization caused by systemic failures, not medical need. Timely coordination and intervention from the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) could have prevented such outcomes.</p> <p>The next Child Advocate must be someone who can mediate effectively across agencies, serve as a translator within complex systems, and amplify the voices of children and families who are often unheard. The OCA’s independence and authority are vital to addressing these systemic gaps and ensuring children receive appropriate, community-based care.</p>
<b>Gail Garinger</b>	First Child Advocate, Former First Justice of the Middlesex Juvenile Court Former Director of the Attorney General’s Child & Youth Protection Unit	Newton	<p>Speaker urged the committee to preserve the independence and original mission of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA). Despite some progress on child welfare benchmarks within the Commonwealth, marginalized populations continue to face poor outcomes, and too many children are still removed from their homes unnecessarily. Over 17 years, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) has achieved much but has also strayed from its original mission. The OCA’s core purpose is to serve as an independent office that proposes improvements, acts as a watchdog, and holds agencies accountable while remaining true to its founding values and meeting the needs of vulnerable communities. The committee should not limit consideration for a new CA to internal Massachusetts candidates; it must ensure that leadership deeply understands the complex issues affecting children and values the voices of those with lived experience. The OCA must reassert its independence—only through that independence can truly safeguard all children.</p>

<b>Ann Narris</b>	Managing Director of the Committee for Public Counsel Services Children & Family Law Division		<p>Speaker acknowledged progress made through collaboration between DCF and the Office of the Child Advocate - including improved data reporting, training to reduce bias, and joint reform efforts. However, she emphasized that the next Child Advocate must act as an independent "watchdog," not an extension of DCF.</p> <p>Speaker called for a leader who will speak up for vulnerable children, even when DCF disagrees, and who can critically examine systemic issues across executive agencies. She stressed the importance of investigating harm to children in custody thoroughly and independently, rather than relying solely on DCF coordination.</p> <p>The next advocate, she said, should prioritize family preservation, understand the trauma of child removal, and actively engage with children's attorneys who have firsthand knowledge of how youth are treated in foster care. She also urged for more transparency, stronger collaboration, and ongoing dialogue between the OCA and those working directly with children to better identify and address systemic problems.</p>
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<b>Kate Nemens</b>	Senior Attorney, Legislative Advocacy Director, and Supervising Attorney, Family Law Project at the Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee	Quincy	<p>Speaker expressed the OCA's role is to provide important services and protections, but stronger accountability is needed from OCA to ensure meaningful outcomes. Nominating committee falls short by continuing to exclude individuals with lived experience and key experts, including those from LGBTQ+ and disability communities. Expressed there is a need for independent leadership. Referenced that data shows Massachusetts fails to meet national standards for child well-being, with ongoing educational disruptions and significant disparities.</p> <p>Speaker further expressed DCF removals stem from abuse and neglect rooted in environmental factors like poverty, highlighting the harm caused by repeated system involvement. Federal funding should prioritize family preservation and address community vulnerabilities through policies and practices that strengthen family stability. As the OCA expands, increased accountability must follow. Next OCA will have a lasting impact on children and families and must reflect the diversity and needs of the Commonwealth.</p>
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<b>Tiffany Scott</b>	Parent Advocate with Proactive Families Advocacy, Rape Crisis Counselor with Pathways for Change	Worcester	<p>Tiffany volunteered to speak, stating there are concerns not yet raised that need to be vocalized. She raised concerns around DCF and the practice of forced adoptions in relation to federal funding that incentivizes placement, but not family reunification. She questioned how this differs from child trafficking, arguing that workers who manipulate records, lie, retaliate against families, or ignore misconduct should be held accountable. The issue points to a system where financial incentives create a “million-dollar price tag” on forced adoptions.</p> <p>She is concerned that DCF social workers submit inaccurate or false information, perpetuating generational trauma. Social workers are overwhelmed and systemic accountability and regional disparities remain unaddressed. Tiffany expressed DCF is functioning like a large-scale trafficking network, underscoring the urgent need for reform, transparency, and leadership that prioritizes family preservation and truth in reporting.</p>
<b>Ethan Shamey</b>	More Than Words	Greater Boston and Metrowest	Youth acknowledged not knowing about the OCA while in foster care. Foster family and youth's social worker also did not know. Youth expressed wishing someone had told them about the OCA then, just in case there was a need to access this support.
<b>Mary Hynes</b>	Former Foster Parent, Statewide Foster Parent Board for over 30 years		Expressed she is not here speaking as a representative of the Foster Parent Board but as an independent citizen. Recommends the OCA office should hold a listening session with the new CA so that folks can express the same concerns shared tonight.
<b>At the end, various participants asked to know who is on the nominating committee for the new OCA and whether they are in attendance.</b>			
<b>OCA nominating committee members in attendance introduced themselves:</b>	Jenn Valenzuela – Executive Director at the Children's Trust, Meri Viano – PPAL and MAMHC seat, Rachel Gwalthney – Children's League of Mass		Appreciative of all the comments and feedback from the community.