

OCA Listening Session – Submitted Written Testimony – Updated 11 18 202 @ 10:00 am

Updated submissions highlighted in yellow

Date Submitted: 11/12/2025

Submitted by: Reese Thompson from Power is Yours representing More Than Words

Hello, my name is Reese Thompson and I'm from Power is Yours representing More Than Words and the many youth who are part of our team. More Than Words is a non-profit organization that works with system involved youth from across the state. Most of us have been involved with DCF, the justice system, or have been made homeless. Power Is Yours is our youth advocacy division that inspires youth to speak up and show out for the issues they care about.

We're here as Power Is Yours to say something simple: none of us even really knew about or got help from the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), which is the crux of the issue. You can't represent the most vulnerable youth in MA if you don't know them.

We understand that the OCA was created to be a watchdog. But right now, it feels more like a quiet observer. Since we're the ones impacted by these systems, we wanted to make sure the committee hears from us directly.

OCA is supposed to make sure state agencies like DCF, DMH, and DYS give kids quality services and protect us from harm. That means holding those systems accountable. But we don't see that happening.

In my own case, I had dealt with neglect on behalf of DCF, and an unwillingness to step in when it counted most. If there were people in the proper positions to hold DCF accountable, I could have escaped a dangerous and continuously traumatizing situation.

Let's talk facts:

- Massachusetts ranks 45th out of 50 states for placement stability. That means kids in foster care are bounced around constantly.
- Since 2019 MA has only accessed 119 FYI vouchers and is ranked 37th in the country in accessing and using these vouchers.

At MTW, we learn about compassionate accountability. That means clear expectations, real consequences when we mess up, and relentless support to help us get back on track. That's how we grow. This is the framework OCA needs to uphold moving forward.

We keep hearing about transition plans. But if aging out still means sleeping on floors, bouncing between couches, or ending up in a shelter, then that's not a plan. That's survival.

Every year, about 700 youth age out of DCF. And we know that nearly half end up homeless. Not because they failed—but because the system failed them.

At MTW, we're held to clear goals. We're supported, but we're held accountable, and it works.

So we want to know: what goals will the next Child Advocate set for the systems that are supposed to protect us? What does success actually look like? Because for us, it's not data— it's whether we have a home, a future, and someone who doesn't give up on us.

The next Child Advocate can't just meet with agencies and agree. They need to challenge them. They need to center youth, not systems. They need to make it clear; *I don't work for the agency, I work for the kids.*

We're not asking for perfection. We're asking for urgency, leadership, and someone willing to fight with us not later, but now.

Date Submitted: 11/12/2025

Submitted by: Rayna Hill, MA, MPP from Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth

11.12.2025 EHS-OCA Hiring Committee Good evening, Thank you for the opportunity to speak at the listening session last week. The Commission on LGBTQ Youth writes to share its perspective for the OCA Hiring Committee on strengths and areas of improvement. The Commission is an independent state agency tasked by the Legislature with providing expert advice and policy recommendations to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on how to improve services and eliminate inequities facing LGBTQ youth. Since 2022, the Commission has issued annual recommendations to the Office of the Child Advocate on how it can improve its LGBTQ-inclusive policy, actions, and outreach across the state. Our focus has primarily been on ensuring that state services, resources, research, and programming have an intersectional focus, particularly for QTBIPOC youth. The recommendations are:

1. Visit, investigate, and report on congregate care facilities.
2. Conduct an LGBTQ-centered training audit of youth-serving facilities.
3. Develop a strategic plan for LGBTQ youth outreach and ensure meaningful LGBTQ community participation in all projects and initiatives.
4. Address the needs of LGBTQ transition-aged youth.
5. Continue to report on available SOGI data and collaborate with child-serving agencies on consistent reporting and intersectional data analysis.
6. Examine needs of LGBTQ youth in residential schools and identify opportunities to collaborate with the Commission's Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students.
7. Continue to identify opportunities to address suicidality among LGBTQ youth, including through collaboration with the Commission. The request that the public has received from the Committee is to identify what works, what needs improvement, and what qualities are most important in the next

Child Advocate. In recent years, we have appreciated the opportunity to share our concerns with the OCA and issue a number of recommendations to uplift issues affecting LGBTQ, TAY, and marginalized youth in this state. The Commission has stressed the importance of intersectional service provision in an effort to support our communities and hopes that the new Child Advocate will have a shared commitment in protecting all 1 youth within the commonwealth. We would further expect that a priority area for the Child Advocate is ensuring the safety and wellbeing of youth in congregate care settings. The quality we believe is most important is a strong commitment to ensuring that youth and families feel heard; are a part of not just this hiring process, but all OCA initiatives - and that DCF is held accountable to the marginalized youth and vulnerable families who are falling between systemic cracks. Our hope is that the new child advocate has both lived and professional experience. That this experience not only reflects frontline engagement with families, but that they are not so far removed from the work in that their recent experience reflects the current issues that youth, families, advocates, and state government are facing. We want to express the need for fresh vision and cross-sectional collaboration across systems, cultures, and experiences. It is imperative to have someone with proactive strategies for protecting youth across the state. Someone that believes in the strength of every family and is able to hold DCF accountable. The new Child Advocate should have a vested interest in collaborative DCF oversight that not only improves our AFCARS scores, but that preemptively protects our youth - not reactive approaches to accountability after we have already failed. As for areas that need improvement. At the core of our concern in this moment is the lack of transparency and intentional, intersectional community outreach from stakeholders invested in this process - and for the OCA to uplift the voices of our most marginalized community members. From its own mission statement, "The OCA's mission is to ensure that children receive appropriate, timely and quality state services, with a particular focus on ensuring that the Commonwealth's most vulnerable and at-risk children have the opportunity to thrive." And yet, that commitment to ensuring that youth thrive in our state is not publicly apparent in this hiring process nor has it been apparent during the current tenure. We have significant concerns that the voices of those who are most-impacted by our state systems are not being appropriately prioritized. The current climate is evidence enough that the way we have been operating is in need of drastic change. The permanency, safety, and well-being of children in our state depends on this decision. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of youth across the Commonwealth. Sincerely, Shaplaie Brooks | She/Her Executive Director

Date Submitted: 11/10/2025

Submitted by: Jamie Ann Sabino, Attorney with the MA Law Reform Institute

To members of the Nominating Committee for the next Massachusetts Child Advocate

On behalf of the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, I appreciate this opportunity to provide perspectives to help inform the Child Advocate search process. As you may know, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute has long worked on issues of family and child well-being – through work around the child welfare system as well as more broadly issues of economic justice and the well-being of children in matters of domestic relations. This work has led to a firm opinion about the qualities that are most important in the next Child Advocate.

While the Child Advocate and the Office of the Child Advocate must be a “watch dog” for government agencies – especially the Department of Children and Families, we believe that the more important role is to be a partner to non-profits and community groups throughout the state and to listen to the people most effected by Massachusetts policies around child well-being.

There is much innovative work going on in Massachusetts to try to protect family and child wellbeing. One example is the work being done by the Family Preservation Project (FPP), a project of civil legal services and the Committee for Public Counsel Services. The FPP provides assistance and representation to families with DCF involvement but before a court petition has been filed. Lawyers, advocates, and social workers assist these families in working with DCF and in finding the resources necessary to keep their children safely at home.

Why is this so important? As others who have provided information to this Committee have shown, it is uncontroverted that going into the “system” is bad for children on so many levels – and providing the support and resources to keep children safely at home is crucial to children’s well-being. This work draws on the communities where these families reside. It has long been clear that DCF cannot (and in some cases will not) provide the necessary resources and support. Thus it is important to build up such resources in the community. The Office of the Child Advocate must partner in making sure these resources are available and accepted as valid by the state.

The Child Advocate must go beyond lawyers and community groups and directly be a partner to those with lived experience. This must be more than “listening”. The new Child Advocate must learn how to bring people with lived experience to the table to participate in guiding the OCA – making decisions and implementing best practices.

Beyond “direct” child welfare work, there is much else going on in Massachusetts that affects the well-being of children. Through amended state statutes and extensive research and training, there is a new recognition about the harm that can come from coercive and controlling behaviors. There are many who would like to partner with the OCA to examine the effect of these behaviors on children and how to best protect them in many arenas, including in domestic relations matters.

Finally, the next Child Advocate must prioritize and advocate for the expansion of economic resources for children and families - this is key for family preservation and for child well-being. The CA must name child/family poverty as a priority. This work is already going on – and example of which is that the OCA has endorsed a bill to repeal the Learnfare law (H.210/S.399), which cuts cash assistance grants for students who miss school. The OCA has recognized the need to repeal a law that financially punishes our lowest-income students living in poverty. Work along these lines must be continued and expanded.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share these thoughts.

Jamie Ann Sabino, Esq.

Deputy Director of Advocacy

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

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Date Submitted: October 3, 2025

Submitted by: Rep Tricia Farley-Bouvier and Senator Jo Comerford

Signed by:

June Ameen, Co-founder, ChildThrive Initiative

Jane Lyons, Co-founder, ChildThrive Initiative

Gail Garinger, Commonwealth's first Child Advocate and former First Justice of Middlesex County Juvenile Court

Leon Smith, Executive Director, Citizens for Juvenile Justice

Tatiana Rodriquez, Impacted Person and Executive Director Family Matters 1st

Phillip Kassel, Esq., Executive Director, Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee

Georgia Katsoulomitis, Executive Director, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Shaplaie Brooks, Executive Director, Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth

The Children's Law Center of Massachusetts

More Than Words

Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Bobby Brown, Financial Secretary/Treasurer IAM Local 264 Boston, Secretary Treasurer Merrimack Valley Central Labor Council

David Sullivan, Northwestern District Attorney

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Beth A. Crawford, Retired First Justice Franklin Probate and Family Court

Clare Higgins, Former Executive Director Community Action Pioneer Valley/Mayor of Northampton

Sarah Segura, Co-Director, Friends of Children

Debi Belkin, Co-Director, Friends of Children

Hon. Jay Blitzman (Ret)

Maureen Flatley

Letter:

Dr. Kiame Mahaniah, Secretary

Executive Office of Health and Human Services

1 Ashburton Place

Boston, MA 02108

September 4, 2025

Dear Secretary Mahaniah,

Congratulations on your appointment as Health and Human Services Secretary. We wish you the best.

We are writing regarding an appointment to be made later this year, following the retirement of Maria Mossaides, the current Director of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

The OCA enabling legislation (MA General Laws, Chapter 18C, Part 1, Title II, Section 3) gives the OCA and the Director responsibilities that are critical for the Commonwealth to ensure the well-being of children and young adults. These responsibilities, per the OCA website, include “works to ensure Massachusetts state agencies provide children with quality services and that children receiving state services are protected from harm”.

We have a lot of work to do in this state to meet those goals.

In terms of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), it has failed to address or actively work to repair the ways it falls far short. By federal standards, which are measured under the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), Massachusetts has had several persistent areas of failure for over twenty years. These areas are critically important to protecting children from harm, including aspects of the system that in fact cause additional trauma to DCF-involved children and families.

While DCF’s Annual Reports do acknowledge many of the racial and ethnic disparities in who is removed, the high rates of placement moves, the overuse of neglect as a cause to remove children from poor families, the overuse of congregate care, and the poor educational outcomes of students in foster care, there is additional data and reporting that shows that there is much more to address beyond what is made public by DCF.

These measures can be reviewed in several forms, including many of the OCA reports, the CFSR reports themselves, as well as data and reporting from the MA Commission on

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LGBTQ Youth and the Boston Globe. The report Failing our Kids captures most of this

information in one site, and shows that MA outcomes for children and young adults in outof-home placement are some of the worst in the country and have not improved for years

(Failing Our Kids, MA Commission on LGBTQ Youth Recommendations FY2026, Boston Globe—"A child's alleged rape by a group home worker sparks scrutiny of MA welfare system").

We understand that EOHHS, per the OCA enabling legislation, is responsible for coordinating the work of the Nominating Committee as it identifies three Child Advocate nominees for the Governor, Auditor, and Attorney General to consider in making the final selection of the state's Child Advocate. In that role, we ask that you consider the following basic, but critically important, components and tenets.

First, we request the following be incorporated into the process:

1. A national search to identify candidates with the experience and credentials required to ensure the OCA achieves its stated mandate.
2. No deference to internal candidates, and an acknowledgement that an external candidate, with a fresh approach and ideas, may be the best decision for the wellbeing of children of the Commonwealth.

Additionally, we believe implementation of the following will provide a review of the OCA that helps to identify the leadership needed at this time and informs MA citizens as to the impact the agency has had on children of the Commonwealth:

1. A survey of stakeholders across the state to gather information about the current function of the OCA and their experience with the OCA. Those stakeholders, at a minimum, should include: lived experts (parents and young adults), advocates, service providers, and other agencies. This process must be conducted by a third party to ensure an independent, objective review.
2. A complete review of OCA reports, recommendations, and achievements over the past 10 years to evaluate the effectiveness of the agency's efforts. The review might also include a comparison to State Child Advocate functions in other states. MA OCA has grown from six employees in FY2016 to 30 employees in FY2024, and from a budget of \$600,000 in FY2016 to \$9.8 million in FY2026. It would be prudent for the Commonwealth to examine the effectiveness and impact of this growth. This review should also be conducted by a third party.

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The next selection of the MA Director of the Office of the Child Advocate is even more

important in this time of unprecedented cuts to the social and economic safety nets, which help protect children, impacts that we are just beginning to understand and experience. We believe this change in OCA leadership presents a significant opportunity for MA to not only address the persistent inequities of the child welfare system but provide a blueprint to other states on how to stand up during a time of an all-out attack on poor, immigrant, and LGBTQ youth and families and children and families with disabilities. The next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate must be one who will be bold in their efforts at reform and to prevent poor people from being unnecessarily charged with neglect, protect immigrant families, and act to truly stabilize and care for traumatized children. We hope that the Administration shares our urgency to get this right. We make ourselves available to assist in any way that we can. We will reach out to your office to schedule a meeting to discuss this in more detail.

Sincerely,

June Ameen, Co-founder, ChildThrive Initiative

Jane Lyons, Co-founder, ChildThrive Initiative

Gail Garinger, Commonwealth's first Child Advocate and former First Justice of Middlesex County Juvenile Court

Leon Smith, Executive Director, Citizens for Juvenile Justice

Tatiana Rodriguez, Impacted Person and Executive Director Family Matters 1st

Phillip Kassel, Esq., Executive Director, Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee

Georgia Katsoulomitis, Executive Director, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

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Debi Belkin, Co-Director, Friends of Children
Hon. Jay Blitzman (Ret)
Maureen Flatley

Date Submitted: 11/5/2025

Submitted by: Melissa Trajick

Written Comments from the Massachusetts Alliance for Foster Families (MAFF):

Foster, adoptive, kinship, and guardianship caregivers provide care for some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children. These families rely on a system that is responsive, transparent, and accountable.

MAFF believes it is essential that the next Child Advocate be a strong, independent leader—someone who can collaborate effectively while remaining free from undue influence by the very systems they are tasked to oversee. The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) must maintain the autonomy necessary to ensure the safety, well-being, and rights of all children in Massachusetts.

From our perspective, the OCA's autonomy has worked well and should continue to be strengthened. The ability to operate independently allows the Office to provide unbiased oversight and ensure accountability across agencies. We encourage the Committee to consider expanding the OCA's authority and capacity for oversight where needed and to provide adequate funding and staffing to support this critical work.

MAFF also believes the next Child Advocate must possess a deep understanding of trauma and the child welfare system, informed by experience with children and families directly impacted by these systems. This understanding is essential to ensure decisions and recommendations are grounded in the realities of children's lived experiences, free from outside influence or political pressure.

We further urge the Committee to consider candidates who can lead the OCA's continued growth in oversight and responsibility, expanding its ability to identify systemic challenges and promote meaningful reforms that improve outcomes for children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We appreciate the Committee's thoughtful consideration as it selects the next Child Advocate for the Commonwealth.

Respectfully submitted,

Massachusetts Alliance for Foster Families (MAFF)

Melissa "Missy" Tarjick

Co-Chair | Massachusetts Alliance for Foster Families (MAFF)

Supporting, Educating & Empowering Foster, Adoptive & Kinship Families

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Date Submitted: 11/6/2025

Submitted by: Richard Wexler

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WHO WATCHES THE WATCHDOG?

Written comments of Richard Wexler, Executive Director,
National Coalition for Child Protection Reform
to the Nominating Committee for the next Massachusetts Child Advocate
November 6, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written statement. I will conclude it with an introduction to my organization and our long history following child welfare in Massachusetts.

But I want to start with the heart of the matter: what I hope you will look for in the next Child Advocate. To do that, I want to start more than 3,700 miles from Massachusetts – in Sweden.

That was the scene of the latest, and perhaps most horrifying, in a long line of studies documenting the enormous inherent harm of tearing children from their families, and the need to take this action far less often than Massachusetts does it today.

The Swedish study looked at more than 20,000 cases. Conducted by a scholar based both in Sweden and at MIT, and using a methodology pioneered by another MIT scholar, the study compared the fate of children placed in foster care to that of children alleged to be comparably maltreated, but left in their own homes. Please note the part about comparably-maltreated. The foster youth did not have worse problems; they did not suffer worse alleged maltreatment.

And yet, by age 20, those placed in foster care were more than four times more likely to have died. Let me repeat that: More than four times more likely to be dead. The most common cause: suicide.

One might argue, I suppose, that somehow the Swedish foster care system is vastly worse than the one in Massachusetts. But it would be hard to make that argument with a straight face.

The findings from the Swedish study come on top of all those other studies, one after another after another, documenting worse outcomes for foster youth than for allegedly comparably-maltreated children left in their own homes.

Richard Wexler/Written Statement/2

That's not because foster parents are evil; most want to do the very best for the children in their care. Even group homes and institutions often are staffed by well-meaning people. Rather, it's a testament to the inherent harm of family separation. Think back to the children torn from their parents at the Mexican border. Listen to their cries in this audio. Yes, there is a difference: caseworkers for the Department of Children and Families almost always mean well. But the children cry out the same way for the same reason.

None of this means that no child ever should be taken from her or his parents. But it does mean that foster care needs to be used sparingly and in small doses. But for decades, Massachusetts has prescribed mega-doses of foster care. As of 2024, Massachusetts was tearing apart families at a rate more than 40% above

the national average – even when rates of child poverty are factored in.

All this means that Massachusetts needs a Child Advocate who understands this, a child advocate who understands that in child welfare, the errors, including the worst errors, go in all directions, a child advocate who understands the need to call out, and learn from, the errors in all directions.

Perhaps the only thing about Massachusetts child welfare about which everyone agrees is that caseworkers are overwhelmed and underprepared, rushing from case to case. Under those circumstances, it should be obvious that there will be terrible mistakes in all directions. An office that finds errors only one way, concluding that workers constantly leave children in dangerous homes and never take children needlessly – or vice versa – probably has a structural problem and definitely needs better leadership.

Yet for the current Child Advocate, the errors go only one way. Her reports follow the same pattern: Find the worst horror story, draw sweeping conclusions from that single case, and press for measures bound to lead to taking away more children. That approach only further overloads the system, doing enormous harm to children needlessly taken, while leaving workers with less time to find the relatively few children in real danger - making the next horrible tragedy more likely. An advocate who sees error in only one direction encourages a system that makes all children less safe.

The one time the current advocate accidentally faced real accountability was revealing. She led a commission on mandatory child abuse reporting laws. For more than a year, that commission heard only what the child advocate wanted it to hear – so its initial draft called for further expanding mandatory reporting. But then, when OCA had to hold a public hearing, a bit like this one, the commission heard from all sides. They heard the evidence that mandatory reporting has backfired, increasing the danger to children. Commissioners were, in their own words, “shocked,” “surprised” and “taken aback.”

Richard Wexler/Written Statement/3

The commission rebelled. It chose to make no recommendations at all.

The other key reason to change OCA’s approach is the simple fact that the current advocate’s approach hasn’t improved anything. The current Massachusetts Child Advocate has been in office for ten years. In that time, she’s produced a ton of sensational headlines. But there is no evidence that any of it actually has made Massachusetts children safer.

Massachusetts children need an advocate who will demand accountability, and demand that we learn the right lessons both when children are left in dangerous homes and when children are torn from everyone loving and familiar and consigned to the chaos of foster care.

A child advocate who understands that the errors go in all directions would commit to a key method for discovering errors in all directions: an annual audit of a random sample of cases to assess system performance and make recommendations.

The audits should be conducted by a diverse team of stakeholders — former family defense attorneys and former child abuse prosecutors, for example. At my organization’s suggestion, New Jersey’s first child advocate, Kevin Ryan, pioneered a similar approach 19 years ago, producing a report that found — no surprise — errors in all directions.

Restructuring the office

Though it is beyond the mandate of this committee, I want to urge it to recommend not only a new child advocate but a new structure for OCA.

We all know the cliché: Knowledge is power. The corollary, though, is that anyone who has a near-monopoly on knowledge will have enormous power to shape public opinion. That enormous power brings enormous potential for abuse.

Agencies like DCF tend to be more secret than the CIA. So whoever becomes a state’s “child advocate” has that enormous power. But while such offices are

conceived as a way to watch over state child welfare agencies, lawmakers sometimes forget a crucial question: Who watches the watchdog?

So a new child advocate isn't enough. I hope you will urge lawmakers to restructure the office.

Right now, as you know, three public officials name the child advocate. S/he serves a fixed five-year term. While the advocate demands accountability from everyone else, s/he is accountable to – no one. No one can set her priorities, no one can remove her except for cause, no one can fact-check her, no one can serve as a check and balance against any biases s/he may bring to the job.

Richard Wexler/Written Statement/4

Many who spoke at this committee's "listening session" spoke of the need for the child advocate to be independent. He or she already is entirely independent – independent to a fault. Because while it is reasonable, indeed essential, that OCA as an office be insulated from political interference, someone still needs to watch the watchdog. Here's how it could be done:

OCA should be governed by a board of directors that is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability; vital for a state with a child welfare system where Black, Native American and Hispanic children are grossly overrepresented. It also must be diverse in terms of lived experience and viewpoints.

The board should include current and/or former foster youth, foster parents, kinship foster parents, birth parents who lost children to the system, current or former frontline caseworkers, representatives of the disability and LGBTQ communities, child abuse prosecutors and family defense attorneys.

But it can't stop there. Mental health and domestic violence are constantly cited as reasons for child welfare intervention. So the board would need mental health practitioners, people who work with survivors of domestic violence, and survivors themselves. In addition, in Massachusetts, as in most states, the system focuses almost exclusively on poor people, often confusing poverty with neglect. So the board should have leaders of anti-poverty organizations.

Then, after what would, no doubt, be vigorous debate, this group should choose the Child Advocate. The board would also set the office's priorities, determine its approach and review all reports before publication.

This way, OCA as an office remains fully independent, but the leader of that agency is subjected to internal checks and balances to increase the likelihood that recommendations will be wise and unbiased.

Because independent does not equal unbiased. I was surprised to hear one speaker equate the two during the listening session.

We all have biases. And in a field as fraught as child welfare, the biases can run deep. Whoever is named the next child advocate almost certainly will have a background in the field. The personal experiences one encounters in any part of this field can be searing. And while any honorable leader seeks to check and control her or his biases, that is not enough. They need the guidance of others, in this case, a board whose diversity of personal experience allows for a check and balance against the biases, however unintended, of any one individual.

The problem of bias would be even worse if, as seemed to be suggested by one speaker, the child advocate were allowed to become a virtual dictator, whose every recommendation would have to take effect. This would be an abdication of responsibility by the state's elected representatives. They are ultimately responsible for determining policy and practice in child welfare, and every other field subject to governance by the commonwealth, on behalf of those they represent.

Richard Wexler/Written Statement/5

This committee, of course, does not have the power to make the changes I recommend here. That, too, would rest with the elected representatives of the people. But it does have the power to recommend a restructuring. And it certainly has the power to recommend a child advocate who understands that the

errors go in all directions.

Thank you.

About NCCPR

The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a small nonprofit child advocacy organization dedicated to trying to make the child protection system better serve America's most vulnerable children. We are a Virginia-based organization with Massachusetts roots.

The group was established at a 1991 Harvard Law School conference by the late Betty Vorenberg, a former member of the National Board of the ACLU, former Deputy Director of the Department of Public Welfare during the Dukakis Administration and former Deputy Director of the Massachusetts Advocacy Center.

You can read all about our distinguished Board of Directors here <https://nccpr.org/nccpr-board-and-staff/> and about what others in the field say about us here: <https://nccpr.org/what-others-say-about-nccpr/> My own background is in journalism: 19 years as a practitioner, including two at WGBY Public Television in Springfield, three as a professor. I spent much of my time covering child welfare, work that culminated in publication of a well-received book, Wounded Innocents (Prometheus Books, 1990, 1995).

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Date Submitted: 11/6/2025

Submitted by: Debi Belkin

November 6, 2025

To the Nominating Committee for the position of Child Advocate:

My name is Debi Belkin and I am the Co-Executive Director of Friends of Children, a child advocacy agency that provides a Court Appointed Special Advocates Program (CASA) for Franklin and Hampshire Counties and runs the FOCUS Program, a statewide mentoring program for former foster youth, ages 18-30. Prior to my current position, I worked for 34 years for DCF, as a social work supervisor. I would also like to note that in the early 1980s, I was a child Advocate for the Office for Children, when the agency existed under EOHHS. I mention this, as I often recall the Interdepartmental Team process led by OFC, that was instrumental and effective in resolving issues within and between the child serving agencies. This was made possible due to having the authority to make decisions regarding the assignment of responsibility and the provision of services to the most vulnerable children and families within the Commonwealth.

Most recently through my work with CASA, I have had several instances where I have reached out to the Office of the Child Advocate to try and obtain assistance in helping children and families that were having extreme difficulties with the Department of Children and Families. I was able to convey my concerns but not once did I hear back as to what was done and what the outcome was. Can I feel confident that these concerns were addressed? Not at all.

In one particular CASA case, the child who was 17 and had medical issues, wrote to the Child Advocate, DCF Commissioner, the Judge overseeing their case and several State Legislators advocating and asking for assistance in being allowed to return home and receive the SSI benefits they were entitled to. Every entity with the exception of the OCA and DCF Commissioner responded to their request and collaboratively worked to get this young person home with the services and support they were entitled to have. This experience illustrates the concerns that several have raised to the committee around the relationship between the OCA and DCF and lends to the appearance of a lack of true independence by the office of the OCA.

During your listening session, you heard multiple agency representatives and individuals with lived experience express their concerns around the OCA and the lack of authority and independent action. You also heard in that forum as well as others this year, that DCF is in trouble. Social workers are struggling to learn

and conduct the job remotely; they are young and inexperienced for the most part and the turnover is the worst it has ever been. These issues negatively impact our families and children every day. Creating new policies that only serve to add more work to overburdened social workers has never been effective. It is time that we have an entity such as the OCA that can begin to take an independent and global look at DCF and identify what this agency should be responsible for, and what they are not able to manage and 241 King St, Ste 227, Northampton, MA 01060 | (413)586-0011 | friendsofchildreninc.org should be provided elsewhere. Since DSS / DCF was created in 1979, it has grown considerably in the scope of responsibility and activities and is failing to do any of these well.

I understand that the office of the OCA is tasked with enormous responsibility and DCF is only one of several agencies that come to the attention of the office. The position needs to be held by an individual who understands the complexity of the child serving agencies, and can help to negotiate and order if needed, certain responsibilities, services and solutions to the critical issues facing our families and children who are negatively impacted on a daily basis by these systems. This type of structure was previously successful under the Office for Children and I would urge the legislature to authorize the OCA with the same level of authority. I would add that if the OCA does not have lived experience themselves, that they surround themselves with staff who do and provide ongoing opportunities for dialogue with those most affected by their decisions.

Thank you for providing this opportunity for comment.

Respectfully,

Debi Belkin, LICSW

Co-Executive Director

Friends of Children, Inc.

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Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Hon. Jay D. Blitzman (Ret.)

EOHS OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE LISTENING SESSION

Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment on the search and qualifications for the OCA position. My perspective is informed by my career as a courtroom advocate and a juvenile court judge. At the time of my judicial retirement, I was the First Justice of the Middlesex Division of the Massachusetts Juvenile Court. I have since served as the interim Executive Director of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and currently hold teaching positions at Harvard Law School (Trial Advocacy), Northeastern University School of Law (Juvenile Courts), Boston College Law School (Cradle To Prison Pipeline), New England Boston Law School (Children & The Law), and William James School of Psychology (Children, Family & The Law). I consult on systemic juvenile and child protection issues and cases and work with late teen and emerging adult programs which include UTEC-Lowell and More Than Words (MTW) in Boston. Many of the young people involved in these initiatives have been dually involved in our child welfare and juvenile justice legal systems. I am also a faculty member of the Center for Law, Brain & Behavior (CLBB-Massachusetts General Hospital & Harvard Medical School). CLBB focuses on applying science and evidenced based practices to the law.

The breadth of the OCA's portfolio is daunting. While the public's focus is often on the Department of Children and Families or the juvenile court in the aftermath of a tragic case such as Harmony Montgomery, the scope of the OCA's responsibilities includes consideration of all child-serving agencies and an understanding of the complexities of the service delivery system. The Child Advocate should be a person with vision and an understanding of the larger frames and systems that affect children and families and the need to address issues proactively. This includes promoting a culture of transparency and accountability for all child serving agencies.

Harvard historian's New Yorker article, Baby Doe: A Political History of Tragedy (NEW YORKER, Feb. 2016) is a must read for anyone seriously considering child protection reform and for anyone applying to become the next OCA. The article illuminates how we respond to protecting children in the aftermath of tragedy by discussing the death of Baby Bond in 2015 and other cases. Responses are generally retributive in nature. As Lepore notes, tragic cases often have tragic outcomes and further negative tropes about poor families which date to the era of Oliver Twist. More children are removed from homes and the danger of conflating poverty with neglect is exacerbated. Most of the children removed from home are black and brown. Sadly, children do not fare well in the foster care system. Educational continuity is disrupted which creates a foster care to prison pipeline as youth fail to graduate high school and are likely to enter our juvenile justice and criminal legal systems. Nationally the rates of P.T.S.D of youth in foster care are as high as 25%, which is twice the rate of returning war veterans from Afghanistan, Iraq. The P.T.S.D rate of Vietnam veterans is around 15%. As Lepore warns, removing poor children from poor families in lieu of thinking of how to support children and families in their homes and communities is not the answer. Adopting a more public health-oriented model is necessary.

Many individuals are discussing the importance of listening to and empowering people with lived experience during this process. I join this growing chorus. Bryan Stevenson, a highly regarded civil rights attorney, has written and lectured about the importance of "getting proximate." When I was a public defender, I quickly learned that to gain the trust of my clients it was important to meet them in their homes and communities. As a judge I kept a sign on my desk which read "A judge should not be judgmental." I always tried to understand the circumstances and realities facing families I was being asked to judge. The voices of young people who spent years in the diaspora of foster care and are now adults need to be heard. Mothers who have had their children removed from their custody due to their struggles as humans, not because of malice, should have a seat at the table. Learning through the lens of their perspective furthers the goals of prevention and protection.

Respectfully,
First Justice Jay Blitzman (Middlesex Juvenile Court Division, Ret.)

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Kate Nemens

Testimony

Nominating Committee for Director, Office of the Child Advocate

Good evening. My name is Kate Nemens, I am a Senior Attorney and the Legislative Advocacy Director at the Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee, a committee of the judiciary that advances and protects the rights of individuals with mental health conditions and psychiatric disabilities throughout the Commonwealth. I am also a member of the Massachusetts Child Welfare Coalition, a coalition of independent advocates seeking meaningful change to our family policing system. I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony regarding the selection of the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 18C, establishes the OCA with a clear mission: to ensure that Massachusetts state agencies provide children with quality services and that children receiving state services are protected from harm. The OCA is the oversight body intended to hold agencies — particularly the Department of Children and Families — accountable for outcomes that directly affect the safety, well-being, and long-term success of children in our Commonwealth. And according to its website, the office focuses on those who are most vulnerable, as are the children and families who are most frequently the subject of surveillance and policing by the department.

Unfortunately, the current process and the composition of this nominating committee fall short of that statutory purpose. While it may technically comply with the enabling law, it continues to exclude the perspectives of those with lived experience who are most affected by state systems. The committee is comprised primarily of administration and child protection representatives, with only limited perspectives from outside the system. The statute itself contemplates broad oversight across agencies, yet the committee charged with nominating the Director lacks the diversity of perspectives that the job demands. Critically missing are voices from lived experts, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and those from my client population, people with disabilities. One listening session cannot address this structural deficiency. If the OCA is to uphold its oversight role, the process by which the Director is chosen must reflect the many voices impacted by the system.

The need for bold, independent, and accountable leadership could not be clearer. For over twenty years, federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) have shown that Massachusetts persistently fails to meet national standards in multiple key areas of child welfare — from safety and permanency to well-being. Children in DCF care continue to face high rates of placement instability, overuse of congregate care, educational disruption, and racial and LGBTQ+ disparities. More than 87% of children in state custody are there due to allegations of neglect — which is most often a reflection of poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, and limited child-care, mental-health and substance-use supports — not parental unfitness.

Given decades of these documented poor outcomes for children and youth under DCF involvement, it is imperative that the next Director possess not just operational experience but a deep understanding of oversight: how to monitor, critique, and partner with agencies to shift culture and practice. The Director must be someone who will hold the system—including DCF—accountable, leveraging the OCA's authority to investigate critical incidents (in foster care as well as at home with parents), review patterns of harm, and drive system reform. Without such leadership, the oversight mandate risks being ceremonial.

And, despite public acknowledgment of these disparities, meaningful change has been slow. Independent reports — including the current OCA's own findings, the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth, and the Boston Globe's "Failing Our Kids" series — paint a picture of a system that too often causes additional

trauma rather than healing.

This is precisely why the statutory mission of the OCA — to examine the care and services that executive branch agencies provide to children, and to recommend systemic improvements — is so vital. The next Director must be someone willing to use that authority vigorously and transparently.

To that end, the search for our next Child Advocate must be broad — ideally a national search that does not just rely on internal candidates, intentional, and inclusive of candidates with both professional expertise and lived experience. Beyond the statutory responsibilities, the next Director must bring:

- A comprehensive understanding of the harms of multiple placements, aging out of care, and system-driven trauma.
- Knowledge of federal funding and family-preservation supports, including the initiatives under the Family First Prevention Services Act and how states have used such funds to reduce removals and promote community-based supports.
- A track record of addressing racial, LGBTQ+, disability, and immigrant disproportionalities within child welfare systems.
- Demonstrated experience partnering with impacted individuals and communities, not simply serving over them.
- A bold vision for oversight: turning the OCA from a reactive body (responding to fatalities and near-fatalities) into a proactive catalyst for systemic change.

The next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate must fully embrace the statute's dual mission: ensuring each child receives timely, quality services, and holding the system accountable when it fails.

The next Child Advocate must be someone prepared to confront the inequities already identified heard-on, and to push for policy and practice that keep children safe by supporting and keeping families strong.

The Office of the Child Advocate has grown exponentially — from six employees and a \$600,000 budget in FY2016 to approximately 30 employees and \$9.8 million in FY2026. That growth brings an even greater responsibility to demonstrate measurable impact and accountability.

At a time when federal cuts threaten the social and economic safety nets for poor, immigrant, LGBTQ+, and disabled families, this appointment is not just administrative. The choice you make to recommend the next Child Advocate will not only shape this office, but the lives of countless children and families across this Commonwealth. I urge you to ensure that the process — and the person ultimately chosen — reflect the diversity, experience and courage this moment requires, and I ask you all to rise to that responsibility.

Thank you for your time and for the seriousness with which you approach this decision.

Sincerely,

Kate Nemens, Esq.

Senior Attorney/Legislative Advocacy Director and Supervising Attorney, Family Law Project at the Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee

knemens@mhlac.org

857-301-7949

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Julia Segovia

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November 7th, 2025

Nominating Committee for the Child Advocate Executive Office of Health and Human Services One Ashburton Place, 5th Floor Boston, MA 02108

Dear Nominating Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide insight and perspective in support of the search process for the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA). I am submitting these comments on behalf of HopeWell and the over 1,500 children, youth, and families we support annually, as well as on behalf of myself, an executive leader at the largest non-profit provider of comprehensive foster care in the Commonwealth and a person with lived experience in the Massachusetts child welfare system, including aging out of foster care. While there are countless qualities and attributes that will be key for the next OCA Director to possess, this testimony will focus on the three that are paramount at this time. To meet the current moment and be successful in this role, the next OCA Director must:

1. Be deeply invested in reimagining and operationalizing meaningful inclusion of those closest to the problem
2. Center prevention as the foundation for child and family well-being
3. Drive a culture of data collection, analysis, and transparent reporting for all child-serving agency stakeholders

Be deeply invested in reimagining and operationalizing meaningful inclusion of those closest to the problem

A transformational leader stepping into the OCA Director role must know that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. The meaningful inclusion of those who have, as children or young adults, involuntarily experienced the involvement of the child welfare system in their lives are well-positioned to speak to what would have made those experiences better. As we continue to drive progress at the systemic level, these voices must be supported, respected, and centered. Alongside young people currently experiencing the system and those who previously experienced child welfare involvement are other populations of system-impacted people whose perspectives are important, including:

- Birth/Bio/Family of origin parents/caregivers
- Foster parents
- “Intersectional Professionals” who have both personal lived experience and professional experience working in the child welfare system

Centering these voices in systems change efforts ensures that systems change solutions are:

- A match for the problems children, youth, and families are experiencing
- Accessible to the children, youth, and families intended to receive the support
- Rooted in real life experiences alongside professional expertise

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- Likely to be effective and scalable

The thoughtful inclusion and centering of individuals with lived experience must be implemented at every level of decision making within the work of the OCA, and this begins with the decision of who will step into the role of OCA Director. That there is a statute specifically designating each member of the nominating committee that fails to include a person with lived experience of foster care is unacceptable. Individuals with lived expertise bring a uniquely valuable perspective and should be centered in all decisions that impact the systems they experienced. As the search process for the next OCA Director moves forward, we urge you to ensure that lived experience voices are not only included but prioritized in thought partnership and decision making, including adding a dedicated seat for a lived expert on the nominating committee. It is high time for child-serving state agencies to intentionally and authentically share power with those directly impacted by their work.

Center prevention as the foundation for child and family well-being The child welfare system in Massachusetts too often conflates poverty and neglect, resulting in bringing too many families into the system who would better be served elsewhere (as their needs have more to do with the impacts of poverty, disinvestment, and toxic stress than with child abuse and neglect). The next OCA Director must have a deep understanding of this current context and demonstrate a commitment to challenging the status quo and centering the needs and well-being of families above that of the system. The right candidate for this role will understand that children's and family's needs are best met by trusted community-based providers who prioritize building relationships with families and understand that children are most likely to grow, learn, and thrive when they are rooted in family. The right candidate to be the next OCA Director will understand that our child protective system cannot and must not be a front door for families to receive services. Instead, our state systems must work collaboratively to ensure all families have the resources and supports they need to thrive in their communities without having to be needlessly connected to our child welfare system. The future and sustainability of our child welfare system is rooted in going back to the original purpose of the system – a child protection system - and ensuring that it only intervenes in families' lives and separates children from their caregivers when immediate safety concerns are present. The next OCA Director must know that this radical reshaping of the system can only occur with bold policy reforms and significant prevention-focused funding realignment, and they must embody the courage, compassion, and collaborative capacity to take on this transformational change.

Drive a culture of data collection, analysis, and transparent reporting for all child-serving agency stakeholders

The next OCA Director must possess a deep commitment to data collection and timely and transparent reporting in service of children, youth, and families supported by our child-serving state agencies. The only way to ensure better experiences and outcomes for children and families experiencing involvement in our child-serving state agencies is to understand which services and supports are working, under what conditions, and for which populations. Without comprehensive, thoughtful data collection and timely, transparent reporting agreements, state agencies and community-based providers stand in the dark, stuck in the current way of doing things simply because that is how they've always been done. This is not working for families. The next best step is building significant data, impact, and reporting infrastructure that will allow us to understand what is and is not working while revealing actionable insights that drive meaningful innovation and reform – shifting to supporting families in

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ways that have a demonstrated positive impact and operationalizing a system that takes accountability for the children, youth, and families it serves. The right leader will deeply understand the power and importance of data collection and reporting as the foundation upon which the work of the system must be built and be committed to leading sweeping change towards a transparent, intentional data collection and reporting culture – a culture where data is accurate,

timely, and provides useful insight to a variety of stakeholders, including:

- The child-serving state agencies providing services and support to children, youth, and families
- The community-based non-profit providers supporting children, youth, and families
- The children, youth, and families supported by the system

The right leader will not only possess the concrete skills to establish this data collection and reporting culture but will also possess the courage and willingness to utilize data to challenge the status quo in service of better supporting children, youth, and families served by our state systems.

Additionally, the next OCA Director must understand that the OCA is uniquely positioned to bring agency and community stakeholders to the table to rethink how data is collected, analyzed, and shared at the system level to better serve the children, youth, and families entangled in the system. As it stands, data collection and reporting practices are siloed, with every state agency doing something different. The lack of collaboration, information sharing, and alignment between state agencies is a detriment to families. The next OCA Director must have the collaborative capacity, people skills, and bravery to take on the challenge of aligning state systems that have operated in siloes for decades.

In a moment where we are seeing consistent threats to our social safety net and the well-being of our children and families, the work of the Office of the Child Advocate has never been more important. We look forward to continued partnership with the Nominating Committee to ensure that the leader stepping into this role is ready and able to meet this unmistakably crucial moment.

Sincerely,

Julie Segovia, Ph.D. Chief Policy and Impact Officer HopeWell, Inc.

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Patience Crozier & Hannah Hussey

GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders | 18 Tremont St, STE 950 Boston, MA 02108 gladlaw.org

November 7, 2025

OCA Nominating Committee

EHS-OCAListeningsession@mass.gov

Dear OCA Nominating Committee:

The Child Advocate has the potential to play a transformative role in the lives of children in the Commonwealth. Thank you for your work to select the next Child Advocate.

As you may know, GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders works to promote equality for LGBTQ people in New England and nationally. As part of that work, GLAD Law litigates, advocates, and educates to support LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ parents impacted by child welfare systems. For example, in Massachusetts, we co-convene an Alliance for DCF-involved LGBTQ youth to provide advocacy, support, and community building for this vulnerable population.

For decades, Massachusetts has struggled to support and keep safe LGBTQ young people in DCF care and custody. See Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth, *LGBTQ Youth in the Massachusetts Child Welfare System: A Report on Pervasive Threats to Safety, Wellbeing, and Permanency* (2021),

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/commission-report-on-dcf/download>. GLAD Law has represented some of these youth and worked on education and policy to support progress. We have seen this crisis for LGBTQ young people first hand, and it is ongoing.

More recently, the full power of the federal government, including the Administration of Children and Families, has been weaponized against LGBTQ young people, particularly transgender young people, who are facing a sustained crisis of well-being, attacks in schools, attacks on their access to health care, and beyond. These attacks will fall heavily on some of the state's most vulnerable children, including those involved with DCF and other child-serving agencies. Never before have LGBTQ young people needed more support and protection – and never before has the role of state entities in standing up for them been more important.

Unfortunately, our experience with the OCA in terms of protection for LGBTQ youth has been, despite good intentions, lackluster at best. An office that could work to ensure that congregate care facilities are housing transgender children appropriately and providing access to health care and support in school has failed to follow up on a timely or systemic manner to ensure they are safe. Many in this population are, in fact, deeply unsafe, as explored in the recent Boston Globe article. Tricia Nadolny, Jason Laughlin & Scotty Nickerson, 600 Kids Go Missing from State Care a Year. These Are the Lost Children of Mass., Boston Globe, 9 Oct. 2025, <https://apps.bostonglobe.com/2025/10/metro/investigations/missing-kids/>. An office that could be a cheerleader for children thriving as their authentic selves cannot manage to make a social media post celebrating Pride month.

GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders | 18 Tremont St, STE 950 Boston, MA 02108 gladlaw.org

Now more than ever, we need a Child Advocate who is a tenacious advocate for children and who holds DCF accountable. Children in need include LGBTQ children who make up approximately 25 percent of the Commonwealth's youth. See Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth, Report and Recommendations: Fiscal Year 2026, 22 (2025), <https://www.mass.gov/doc/mcglbtqy-annual-recommendations-fy-2026/download> (describing percent of high school students identifying as LGBTQ). We have worked with Child Advocate offices in other states, and we have witnessed the power of an office that sees and anticipates the harms and who can step into the fray to protect children.

We respectfully request that this Committee (1) look across the nation for a leader who will actively support LGBTQ young people in DCF care and custody to ensure their well-being alongside other young people and (2) pause its work until an LGBTQ representative, ideally the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth, has a seat on the committee.

We look forward to hearing from you, and we look forward to supporting this work.

Sincerely yours,

Patience Crozier, Director of Family Advocacy

Hannah Hussey, Staff Attorney

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Jane Lyons

Written Testimony to the EOHHS Nominating Committee Listening Session on the Selection of the Next Massachusetts Child Advocate

I appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments as part of the EOHHS Nominating Committee's "Listening Session" regarding the selection of candidates for the next Child Advocate of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

As a multi-decade independent child advocate working across both the public and private sectors, I have had the privilege of walking beside countless young people, families, and service providers navigating our state's complex web of child-serving agencies. In that role, I have often directed families and professionals

to the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) for assistance through its ombudsman function and have engaged directly with OCA staff on policy issues designed to protect and support our most vulnerable children. My most frequent and significant interface has been with matters involving the Commonwealth's child protection system.

Having listened to thoughtful oral testimony shared during this process, I believe the Nominating Committee has been given passionate and fact-filled accounts underscoring one essential point: the next Child Advocate must serve children—not the bureaucracy.

The OCA's Evolving Scope and Budget

Over the past decade, the OCA's budget has increased from approximately \$700,000 in FY2015 to nearly \$8.9 million in FY2025—a growth of more than 1,100 percent. This expansion reflects an evolution in its responsibilities, including the creation of the Center on Child Well-Being and Trauma.

Yet, as its budget and staff have grown, the office's core purpose has been diluted. The OCA was established to be an independent watchdog and oversight body, ensuring that state agencies tasked with serving children do so in ways that are humane, coordinated, and effective. Growth in funding must strengthen—not blur—that accountability function. What has this huge growth produced for at-risk children in the Commonwealth's care? Where is evidence that this exponential growth has increased the oversight needed to protect children and improved outcomes?

Oversight Before Innovation

The next Child Advocate must ensure that the office fulfills its legislative mandate to provide rigorous oversight of all child-serving agencies before endorsing or participating in new pilot programs or initiatives. The Commonwealth does not need more disconnected pilots; it needs coordinated, evidence-driven, and transparent systems that work for children and families. Oversight must precede innovation, not follow it.

A Collaborative Watchdog Role

Of course, the OCA's independence should be paired with collaboration, not isolation. The most effective “watchdog” is one that listens, convenes, and collaborates across agencies, community organizations, and lived experts to identify systemic failures and ensure corrective action. The next Child Advocate should rebuild this collaborative watchdog identity, standing both with families and outside the bureaucracy that too often loses sight of them.

Conclusion

Massachusetts deserves a Child Advocate who embodies integrity, independence, and courage—someone who will speak truth to power while fostering constructive partnerships to improve outcomes for children and families. The next leader of the OCA should return the office to its statutory and moral roots: serving as a fearless, collaborative watchdog ensuring that every child in the Commonwealth is safe, supported, and seen.

That person must be willing to follow through on recommendations and to use the full powers of the office—including subpoena powers—when necessary to effectuate the change that children need and deserve. It is the Nominating Committee's tall task to make certain this happens as part of the selection process of a child advocate leader who will be in office for many years.

Respectfully submitted,

Jane Lyons

Co-Founder, ChildThrive Initiative

Child Advocate

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Gail Garinger

OCA TESTIMONY – NOVEMBER 5, 2025

Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to speak.

My name is Gail Garinger. For over 50 years, I have worked to improve services for children and families in my various roles: as an attorney, volunteer coordinator at the Somerville Homeless Coalition, juvenile court judge, the first Massachusetts Child Advocate, initial Director of the Attorney General's Child & Youth Protection Unit, and as a Board member of More Than Words. While I do not have personal lived experience, I have family members who have.

We are at a critical time — for our world, for our country, for Massachusetts, and for the OCA.

It is easy for those of us in Massachusetts to feel fortunate that we live here, and we indeed are fortunate for many reasons. But not everyone in the Commonwealth benefits from what Massachusetts offers or could offer. I'm speaking of those who are not part of the mainstream — those living in poverty, or those who are marginalized because of their race, religion, immigration status, disability, sexual orientation, or other factors.

If we look at child welfare benchmarks, for example, we find that Massachusetts has made far too little progress in supporting families within their communities. The state continues to remove far too many children from their homes, often with poor outcomes. More than 87% of children in state custody are there due to allegations of neglect, frequently related to poverty.

We are now at an important juncture for the future of the OCA. In its 17-year history, the office has accomplished many things. However, I am concerned that it has strayed from its intended mission and from the role it was envisioned to play. When it was established in 2008, there was a strong belief that an independent office was needed to assess how the

state's child-serving agencies were performing, to identify gaps in services, to propose improvements, to hold the agencies' feet to the fire, and to act as a watchdog to help ensure the agencies fulfill their responsibilities.

Our collective responsibility today is to ensure that the OCA remains true to its founding values while also adapting to meet the changing needs of our most vulnerable communities.

We now have a great opportunity to give serious attention to how we recruit and select the next Director of the OCA. Certainly, this listening session is a step in that direction, but it is a small step, and I fear it is too little and coming too late in the process.

Now is the time for the Nominating Committee to engage in wide, robust, and transparent outreach and dialogue about both the proper mission of the OCA and the qualifications needed for the person best suited to lead it. The Committee should not limit its search to Massachusetts candidates. It should make every effort to ensure that the next Director has a deep understanding of, and experience with, the complex issues facing all our children and families.

In addition to tonight's listening session, we should offer many other opportunities for all voices — especially those with lived experience — to be heard.

Now, more than ever in recent history, it is critical that the OCA reassert itself as an independent entity. While collaboration is important, the OCA must not simply fall in lockstep with the child- and family-serving agencies. Only through its steadfast independence can the OCA truly help to safeguard the well-being of all children and families in the Commonwealth.

Thank you.

Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to speak.

My name is Gail Garinger. For over 50 years, I have worked to improve services for children and families in my various roles: as an attorney, volunteer coordinator at the Somerville Homeless Coalition, juvenile court judge, the first Massachusetts Child Advocate, initial Director of the Attorney General's Child & Youth Protection Unit, and as a Board member of More Than Words. While I do not have personal lived experience, I have family members who have.

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Thank you.

Date Submitted: 11/7/2025

Submitted by: Rachel Gwaltney

361 Newbury Street, 5th Floor | Boston MA 02115 | p. 617-695-1991 | www.childrensleague.org

November 7, 2025

To: Secretary Kiame Mahaniah, Executive Office of Health and Human Services

From: Children's League of Massachusetts

Re: CLM Priorities for the Office of the Child Advocate Director Appointment

Dear Secretary Mahaniah,

On behalf of the Children's League of Massachusetts and our 60 service provider member organizations, I submit this testimony sharing our view on the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate. This testimony is independent of my service on the Child Advocate Nominating Committee. CLM and our members have had the privilege of working closely with OCA Director Maria Mossaides, and we believe that under her leadership our sector has improved services and protections for youth and families, while also setting a standard of research-based, data-driven, and stakeholder-informed continuous improvement. We know there is still much to be done, and we look forward to continuing this progress together. In this spirit, we share our perspective on key qualities needed in the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate.

A bold and thoughtful leader

The Child Advocate must be a bold leader with credibility and standing not only in the child welfare and adjacent sectors, but with the Legislature and Judicial branches of government that also play vital roles in setting and executing child welfare policy. One of the great powers of the Office of the Child Advocate is the ability to collect information, convene stakeholders, and recommend policy across agencies and Secretariats, and we believe this provides a unique opportunity to center the

multisystemic, complex needs of families and children.

The Child Advocate must be willing to tackle the big challenges of child welfare with courage, bold vision, and innovative thinking for:

- Centering the voices of and giving agency to families, children, youth, and young adults in the work of the OCA.
 - Keeping children and families out of the child welfare system or in-home whenever possible.
 - Supporting families at risk of deeper systems involvement.
 - Using data to drive change and achieve rapid, positive and permanent outcomes for youth in state care.
 - Ensuring that youth who age out of state systems are set up for success.
- 361 Newbury Street, 5th Floor | Boston MA 02115 | p. 617-695-1991 | www.childrensleague.org
- Implementing solution-oriented diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that tackle head-on the impacts of systemic racism in and around child welfare.
 - Supporting academic research and pilot programs that cultivate new evidence-based innovations.
 - Considering how technological innovation can positively impact the sector.

We believe the approach by the current Child Advocate to ground the work in data and research is critically important. The Child Advocate must prioritize defining, tracking, and reporting the critical outcomes that reflect child safety and family well-being, in order to best understand the opportunities to protect and support children and reduce harm, including the harms of system involvement itself.

Respect for lived experience voices

A foundational mindset of the Child Advocate must be to acknowledge the value of lived experience in understanding child welfare's deepest problems, and the opportunities for reform. The Child Advocate is well-positioned to create a child welfare system that not just "taps into" lived experience perspectives, but authentically and meaningfully incorporates the voices and expertise of youth, young adults, families, and intersectional professionals who have lived through the toughest challenges and brightest practices of our child welfare system. These experts must have equal seats at the research and policy-making tables convened by the Child Advocate – the same as any other stakeholder, agency, or expert.

A collaborative approach

Transformational change also requires commitment to meaningful, ongoing partnership and

collaboration with community-based providers who are working side-by-side with our state agencies, and in many cases are leading the way in innovation. Successful models in the field – including in fields adjacent to child welfare such as substance-use disorder treatment and recovery, mental and behavioral healthcare, poverty reduction and economic supports, and domestic violence victim assistance – can and must be incorporated into our thinking about child welfare transformation. Providers bring valuable expertise from their daily work on the complex needs of children and families, and can offer innovative, concrete ideas for policies and practices that impact child welfare outcomes.

Practical experience

The Child Advocate should also be leader with advocacy victories who also understands how to operationalize policy on the ground will be critical to driving real change. The next Child Advocate should be able to translate data and research into state laws and agency policies and into practical 361 Newbury Street, 5th Floor | Boston MA 02115 | p. 617-695-1991 | www.childrensleague.org child and youth services that will improve outcomes. We would expect the Child Advocate to bring to the role:

- Deep understanding of the history, landscape, and current trends and issues in child welfare, and Massachusetts’ position within those issues, in order to build on the strengths of our statewide systems.
- Understanding of where Massachusetts needs to improve its child welfare outcomes, with a plan for doing so.
- An array of past cross-sectional professional experiences in child welfare issues.
- Experience with the children’s services landscape in Massachusetts and a commitment to leveraging cross-agency collaboration to holistically support child safety and well-being.

As always, CLM remains a committed partner to the Administration wherever we can contribute knowledge and support. We appreciate your attention to this issue and look forward to continuing our work together.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gwaltney

Executive Director

Children’s League of Massachusetts

Cc: Mary McGeown, Undersecretary for Human Services

