

Office of the Child Advocate

Strategic Framework: Fiscal Year 24-26

OCA's Mission

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) provides independent oversight of state services for children to ensure that children receive appropriate, timely and quality services, with a particular focus on ensuring that the Commonwealth's most vulnerable and at-risk children have the opportunity to thrive. Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, the OCA identifies gaps in state services and recommends improvements in policy and practice. The OCA also serves as a resource for families who are receiving, or are eligible to receive, services from the Commonwealth.

What is the OCA's Vision for the Commonwealth's Children and their Families?

The OCA envisions a future where all our Commonwealth's children, and their families, have the opportunity to thrive. OCA believes that significant change is needed over the next several years to ensure the future our children, and specifically our children in the care and/or custody of the state, deserve.

The OCA has identified eight key goals we believe must be achieved by the Commonwealth to reach this future. *(Next page)* We know these goals are aspirational. We also know that *all of us* must work together towards this future for our children, even as we focus in this document on the role the OCA seeks to play toward these aims in the coming years.

For each of these goals, we have identified the priorities the OCA will focus on during FY24-26, with a particular focus on FY24 as we know that changing circumstances may lead us to add or modify priorities in subsequent years. These goals will serve as a guiding light as we make decisions about new projects to take on, or existing projects to build on, in future years.

Safety, High Quality Services & Continuous Quality Improvement

Children in the care and/or custody of the Commonwealth are safe and receiving the services they need, and the state agencies serving them are continuously improving with well-functioning quality assurance mechanisms in place.

Prevention & Breaking the Cycle

There is a comprehensive, coordinated statewide approach to supporting families with the aim of reducing child protective service and juvenile justice system involvement, particularly for those families for whom persistent disparities in supports exist and for families with multi-generational involvement.

Transition into Adulthood

Youth receiving state services transition into adulthood with the supports they need to succeed.

Addressing the Needs of Diverse Populations

Our state child-serving systems are addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations, including racially and ethnically diverse populations, LGBTQIA+ youth, and newcomer families.

High/Complex Behavioral Health Needs

The needs of children and youth with high and/or complex behavioral health needs are met, including their needs for timely delivery of and navigation to appropriate support.

Awareness of Services

Families and youth, and those who serve them, are aware of the supports and services available to them.

High Quality Data

Our state agencies serving children and families use high quality data to inform decision making and continuous quality improvement.

OCA Capacity

The Office of the Child Advocate has the expertise, reputation, relationships, capacity, and operational infrastructure to execute its mission.

OCA's Priority Initiatives for FY24-26

OCA's priority initiatives for FY24-26 include continuous improvement of our statutory functions, projects that are a continuation of work begun over the last three years, and new projects. Additional projects may be added in subsequent years. We organized these projects under one of the eight goals we have for the future, recognizing that many will – and should – cut across several of the goals.

GOAL: Children in the care and/or custody of the Commonwealth are safe and receiving the services they need, and the state agencies serving them are continuously improving with well-functioning quality assurance mechanisms in place.

- 1. Continue to improve the OCA's own quality assurance mechanisms.** These mechanisms include our [Complaint Line](#), our review of reports of critical incidents and Department of Children and Families (DCF) supported reports of abuse and/or neglect in out-of-home settings, our independent investigations, and our role operating the state child fatality review program.
- 2. Continue to oversee and monitor the services provided by the Commonwealth's child-serving agencies** and recommend/track implementation of short- and long-term recommendations to address the concerns that the OCA identifies.
- 3. Support other child-serving state agencies** in the continuous improvement of their own quality assurance mechanisms.
- 4. Participate in the operation of the new [Complex Case Resolution](#) process** designed to improve the timeliness and quality of services for children with multiple needs that must be addressed by several agencies and school(s).
- 5. Recommend improvements in DCF-funded congregate care services for youth** and engage youth in the identification of those improvements.
- 6. Continue to convene agencies which contract for and regulate residential schools** and residential programs to improve the oversight, and quality, of the programs.
- 7. Engage with both DCF and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to gather data on, and map challenges with, the educational outcomes for children in DCF care and custody.**

GOAL: There is a comprehensive, coordinated statewide approach to supporting families with the aim of reducing child protective service and juvenile justice system involvement, particularly for those families for whom persistent disparities in supports exist and for families with multigenerational involvement.

- 1. Improve mandated reporting through profession-specific training**, resulting in more accurate reporting and less bias in reporting. Advocate for [changes to mandated reporting requirements for infants born exposed to substances](#) to reduce stigma while building up alternative support systems for these families.

2. **Review the design and operation of the [Family Resource Centers](#)**, including what services are provided, how FRCs are connected to other state services systems, and any barriers to families in accessing FRC services.
3. **Continue to evaluate and expand the [Massachusetts Youth Diversion Program](#)**, manage its transition to Department of Youth Services (DYS), and continue to support DHS in its implementation of the program.
4. Assess and make recommendations to reduce the **crossover of youth from DCF to DHS**.
5. Complete study and make recommendations for improvements in **pre-trial supports** that can help improve youth outcomes and reduce further juvenile justice system involvement.
6. Work with partners across branches of government to implement policy recommendations in reports from the OCA-chaired [Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board](#), including advocating for specific **statutory and budget changes to [improve the Children Requiring Assistance](#) system**.
7. In partnership with Roca, fund, solidify, and evaluate a **pilot project for young mothers**, with the goal of reducing multi-generational cycles of child protective service involvement.

GOAL: Youth receiving state services transition into adulthood with the supports they need to succeed.

1. **Complete evaluation of the [Transition Age Youth Housing Support & Stabilization model](#)**, which helps youth who are transitioning out of DCF care in finding and maintaining housing.
2. **Launch a multi-agency effort to design and implement policy and program changes to ensure youth aging out of state services are stable** and supported as they become adults.

GOAL: Our state child-serving systems are addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations, including racially and ethnically diverse populations, LGBTQIA+ youth, and newcomer families.

1. Improve access to state services for families for whom **English is not their first language**.
2. Assess state training requirements and implementation for staff working with **LGBTQIA+ youth**.
3. Assess the state's response to the needs of **newcomer families** and make recommendations for improvements in the supports provided to these children and their families.
4. Ensure that **all OCA projects** and programs consider **the unique needs of traditionally underserved populations** (by demographics, socioeconomic status, and/or geography) as part of the project or program design, research methodology, development of recommendations and/or implementation.

GOAL: The needs of children and youth with high and/or complex behavioral health needs are met, including their needs for timely delivery of, and navigation to, appropriate state support and services.

1. Continue to convene, staff, and report on progress made by the [Childhood Trauma Task Force](#).

2. Continue to **improve and expand the operations of the [Center on Child Wellbeing and Trauma](#)**, including transferring responsibility for the operation of the Center to the OCA.
3. Work in partnership with DCF on program design, implementation, convening of state agency partners, and evaluation of new program models for **children with acute needs**.
4. Identify gaps and opportunities and make recommendations to **improve intervention with and services for children/youth exhibiting problematic sexual behaviors**.

GOAL: Families and youth, and those who serve them, are aware of the state supports and services available to them.

1. **Increase public awareness of OCA's Complaint Line** and its role as an Ombudsperson for families receiving/seeking services from the state for their children.
2. Work to ensure that **youth in congregate care settings** are **aware of the OCA Complaint Line**.

GOAL: Our state agencies serving children and families use high quality data to inform decision making and continuous quality improvement.

1. **Continue to chair and staff the Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board (JJPAD)**—including operating and expanding its juvenile justice data website and issuing mandated annual reports.
2. **Complete the analysis of feedback on DCF's Annual Report** and make recommendations for improvements.
3. **Map the data collected on services provided by child-serving state agencies** to identify what is collected, whether improvements are needed, and what the OCA should be regularly reviewing.

GOAL: The Office of the Child Advocate has the expertise, reputation, relationships, capacity, and operational infrastructure to execute its mission.

1. Implement a **Diversity Equity Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) Framework** to guide both internal and external work of the OCA.
2. Enhance **professional development** for OCA staff.
3. **Identify and add the staff/consultant capacity** needed.
4. Develop a plan for improving and systematizing the way the OCA receives and incorporates the **perspective of impacted individuals and communities** in its work.
5. Develop and implement communications, external relations, and legislative plans to **increase public understanding** of the OCA, and **enhance relationships with legislators and advocates**.
6. **Identify/recommend legislation as necessary** to advance the OCA's Vision and priorities.
7. Improve the OCA's **internal data collection and reporting**.
8. Improve **OCA administrative functions**.