



OFFICE *of* COLORADO'S  
**CHILD PROTECTION  
OMBUDSMAN**



**ANNUAL REPORT**  
FISCAL YEAR 2018-2019

NAVIGATE

INVESTIGATE

ILLUMINATE

REFORM

# LETTER FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

Colorado has made many investments to ensure children are able to reach their full potential. Child protection is a key part of that investment. Colorado's child protection system is vast. Across the state's 64 counties, the system serves families of all types: parents, biological kin, foster and adoptive families. It also consists of a variety of government systems including law enforcement agencies, schools, human service departments, behavioral health providers, and the division of youth services. All these agencies play a role in protecting our children from abuse and neglect. Our job is to improve accountability and transparency of these systems.

The Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was created to ensure the state's complex child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family, and community in Colorado. We are independent from the state and county agencies that work on behalf of children and families, reporting to an appointed board of directors. Our office is accessible to any member of the public, and to any of the professionals who work in the system and desire to improve how it works for children and families.



Every week we receive dozens of phone calls from people who voice concerns regarding the child protection system and who have an expectation that those concerns, once voiced, will be heard and addressed in a timely manner. We do exactly that. Our job is to listen and learn from each caller. Coloradans who come in contact with the child protection system are important eyes and ears, helping us to understand how the system serves its children and families.

We serve as objective, neutral problem solvers. We cut through government bureaucracies by giving individualized attention to each person who calls. We work with parents to explain how human service agencies work, mandatory reporters who are concerned that a child's safety is being neglected and caretakers who are trying to get much needed mental health services for their children. We serve by helping people find answers to their questions and solutions to their problems.

Our work also puts us in the unique position to identify trends where the community's needs have changed, and the system hasn't had the funding, resources or practices to keep up with it. We collaborate with lawmakers, professionals, and other stakeholders to advance legislation and policies that will have a lasting, positive impact on our children and families. We are proud to serve in this role. Over the years, we have helped thousands of Coloradans who encounter the child protection system to feel more connected to and have confidence in this important government service.

The following report is intended to showcase what we've worked on over the past year to keep children safe and to promote healthy families. We look forward to continuing to serve the state's child protection community so that we can ensure a better future for all Coloradans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephanie Villafuerte". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'S'.

**Stephanie Villafuerte**  
Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman

# FISCAL YEAR HIGHLIGHTS

## CPO TOTAL CASE ACTIVITY IN FY 2018-2019

In FY 2018-2019 we received a total of 575 calls from Colorado citizens. As in prior years, we continued to receive increasingly complex cases involving multiple systems within the child protection system. The majority of calls we received were concerning child welfare service agencies, but an increasing number of cases involve mental health agencies and the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS). While most callers were parents and family members of children, we did receive calls from professionals including hospitals, state and federal law enforcement, district attorneys, educators, legislators and members of the child protection legal community.

CPO SERVICE	# OF CASES
Information/Resource Referrals	102
Assists	356
Investigation	5
Closed per contact	41
Closed per lack of information	57
Duplicate case	11
Closed per CPO discretion	3
<b>Total Number Of CPO Cases</b>	<b>575</b>

## Case Highlights



### CASE #1

A mother called us because she was unable to secure appropriate mental health services for her child. The child exhibited unsafe behaviors and had co-occurring mental health disorders, making it difficult to treat him. Because of the child's complex mental health needs, he was unable to continue treatment in a local inpatient mental health hospital. The mother was frustrated because she was receiving conflicting information from various mental health providers about who could help her find an appropriate placement for the child and who was legally responsible for paying for his care. We worked with the mother for several weeks and assisted her by explaining the roles and responsibilities of all the professionals involved and by facilitating better communication between all the parties. Ultimately, multiple state and local agencies came together and helped the mother get her son the treatment and services that he needed.



### CASE #2

Juvenile justice advocates contacted us because they were struggling with accessing their juvenile clients' records from the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS). Advocates requested the records so that they could provide quality legal representation for their clients in court and to ensure that their clients received appropriate assessments and services once they were committed to the DHS system. We facilitated conversations between the advocates and DHS staff to discuss the barriers that were preventing the advocates from gaining access to these reports and records. Ultimately, the parties were able to come to an agreement that allowed advocates to access the records while ensuring that the records were handled in a confidential manner.



### CASE #3

A young girl from rural Colorado ran away from her foster care placement. She was lost and had no way to take care of herself. She called us to help her contact her caseworker so that she could get housing, food and medical care. We were able to speak with this young girl immediately, discuss her needs and facilitate a conversation between her and the appropriate child welfare agency so that she could quickly obtain the services and resources she needed.



### CASE #4

A mother had been involved in the child welfare system for over a year and stated that she believed the delay in reunifying with her children was, in part, due to a lack of communication between her and her caseworker. We reached out to the child welfare agency to communicate the mother's concerns and were able to gain clarity for the mother about what was expected of her in her treatment plan. A follow-up review of the family's case shows there has been significant improvement by the mother and that she is closer to reunification with her children.

## Community Forums

Each year the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman works collaboratively with child protection partners to learn more about child-serving practices and programs throughout our state.

Community forums allow our agency to learn firsthand from professionals in the field about whether existing laws, regulations, policies and practices are as effective as possible in helping children and families. These meetings allow us to understand what is occurring and if needed, to advocate for improved policies, funding and resources for Colorado children and their families.



### #1 Alamosa, Colorado

In July 2018, we hosted a community forum in Alamosa, Colorado with child protection professionals including human services staff, forensic interviewers, judges, county attorneys, guardians ad litem and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). This meeting allowed participants the opportunity to learn more about the CPO and allowed ombudsman staff the opportunity to learn more about the best practices and challenges faced by child protection community members in rural Colorado.



### #2 Municipal Court Records

Over the past year, we hosted a series of meetings to improve information sharing of municipal court records with child protection stakeholders. The goal was to ensure that all child-serving agencies have complete and accurate information when making decisions related to child safety. This group of over thirty stakeholders—including law enforcement, medical professionals, victim's advocates, judges and others—is now exploring a pilot project to test and implement data-sharing solutions. The goal is to develop a system and protocols to share municipal court data across the state.



### #3 Ridgeway, Colorado

In October 2018, the Ombudsman and Deputy Ombudsman met with the southwest human service directors in Ridgeway, Colorado. The parties discussed the challenges associated with delivering child welfare services in rural Colorado and the collaborative efforts by directors to maximize mental health and treatment resources for children and families in their communities.



#### #4 Juvenile Facilities Roundtable

We hosted six meetings with the juvenile justice community in order to address issues faced by children and families who intersect with the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS). Monthly roundtable discussions included members from the Colorado Criminal Defense Bar, Colorado Public Defender’s Office, Disability Law Colorado and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). These meetings provide a neutral, objective forum to have conversations about important issues such as the impact of restraint, seclusion and strip search policies on youth. Guests speakers included family members of juveniles, DYS staff and leadership, and legislators.



#### #5 Adoption Subsidy Stakeholder Meetings

For over seven months, we hosted nine stakeholder meetings to draft legislation that would improve Colorado’s adoption assistance statute. Approximately 30 stakeholders attended the meetings including county human service directors, county attorneys, adoption agencies, adoptive parents and many others. As a result of the group’s work, SB19-178 was born. This bill was sponsored by Sen. Mike Foote and Rep. Jonathan Singer and signed into law by Governor Polis in May 2019. The new law updates Colorado’s adoption assistance program to ensure there is equitable access to the program and that qualifying children get consistent consideration for subsidies and services. We are thankful for the collaborative efforts of Colorado’s human service directors, county attorneys, adoption experts, the public, the General Assembly and other stakeholders for helping us to advance legislation that improves outcomes for all of Colorado’s adopted children and their families.



*Our Adoption Subsidy Stakeholder Team*

## Report Highlights



#### A Call for Public and Transparent DYS Rulemaking

Following a 2017 report by juvenile advocates on a culture of violence inside Colorado’s Division of Youth Services (DYS), a series of promising reforms were passed by the state legislature. Despite these reforms, we received numerous inquiries from citizens regarding how these new laws and requirements were implemented within the DYS. After months of research, we released a detailed issue brief to the DYS outlining concerns about the lack of transparency in the DYS when making policies that impact staff and youth safety. We issued a series of recommendations for how DYS can develop an open and participatory policymaking rulemaking process that is consistent with the best practices of other state agencies.



#### The Safety of Children in Colorado’s Residential Child Care Facilities

In 2018, we were asked by concerned citizens to open an investigation into the closure of the El Pueblo Boys and Girls Ranch to find out how conditions became so unsafe at a facility that was entrusted with caring for some of Colorado’s most vulnerable children. Through this investigation, we identified a lack of coherent state regulations and a strained state regulatory system that fostered delays in addressing child safety. The report made recommendations to the Colorado Department of Human Services to improve state oversight mechanisms so that youth in the state’s other residential care facilities are assured to have their safety needs addressed in a timely and effective manner.



## County Child Protection Services: A review of child welfare service delivery in Montezuma County

In 2018, we were contacted by multiple community members in Montezuma County regarding the delivery of child protection services to children and families. Our investigation revealed 67 violations of state laws and regulations by one local child protection agency. The violations demonstrated concerning gaps in the agency’s case practices that impacted the safety of at least a dozen children and their families. We issued a report outlining these violations and made recommendations to both the local agency and state oversight body on ways that practice and operating systems could be more responsive to child safety.

These and other reports can be read in full on our website at [www.coloradocpo.org](http://www.coloradocpo.org).

# ABOUT

## OUR MISSION

Ensuring that the state’s child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family, and community in Colorado.

## CPO STAFF

**Stephanie Villafuerte**, Child Protection Ombudsman  
**Jordan Steffen**, Deputy Ombudsman  
**Sara Embrey**, Chief Analyst – Child Welfare Services  
**Karen Nielsen**, Director of Administrative Services  
**Amanda Pennington**, Child Protection Systems Analyst

## CPO BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**Chief Justice Appointments**  
**Hon. Kenneth Plotz**, Board Chair  
**Simone Jones**, Board Vice Chair  
**Pax Moultrie**  
**Judge Charles Greenacre**

**Governor Appointments**  
**Dee Martinez**  
**Eldridge Greer**  
**Karen Beye**  
**Connie Linn**

**Senate President Appointment**  
**Victoria Shuler**  
**Senate Minority Appointment**  
**Peg Rudden**

**Speaker of the House Appointment**  
**Dr. Richard Krugman**

**House Minority Leader Appointment**  
**Kyle Forti**



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