



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

ANNUAL REPORT
FISCAL YEAR 2019–2020

LETTER FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

This year has been a hard one for Colorado's children and families. COVID-19 has swept the world, leaving death and economic despair in its midst. If not previously apparent, it should be now – Colorado children are not equally prepared to absorb the economic and health consequences associated with this deadly virus. Food insecurity, housing instability and unstable school systems have left many of Colorado's children reeling – leading many to the poverty line and deepening the hole for those already living at that threshold. Isolation and quarantine have also expanded holes in the child protection system.

This year the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) heard from more than 700 citizens. This is a 19% increase in calls compared to the previous fiscal year. The increase in calls was in large part due to the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus. The calls we received exposed both strengths and weaknesses in our state's child protection system. Here is what we learned.

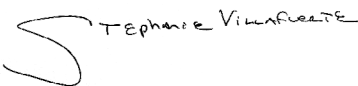
The strengths of the system are rooted in its workforce and the responsiveness of child protection workers across the state. In the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic, human service workers unfailingly responded to child abuse and neglect calls, often without the benefit of protective gear. Human service agencies also worked quickly to respond to the surge of requests from families for food, medical and other economic assistance – ensuring that Colorado families were fed, housed and received critical medical care.

The virus also exposed weaknesses in the system. The state's system for detecting abuse and neglect of children, which is heavily dependent on reports by teachers, doctors and other professionals, has been rendered ineffective – as in-person visits between children and professionals are strongly discouraged by public health concerns and stay-at-home orders. At the same time, other vital parts of the child welfare system that are designed to safely and timely re-unite foster children with their families, including child-parent visits, mandatory court appearances and home-based parenting programs, are at a near standstill. These failures mean that child abuse and neglect cases are going undetected and many of our foster children cannot go home, creating yet another layer of stress, hardship and uncertainty for our youngest citizens.

Our agency listened and learned a great deal from those who called us. We worked closely with our colleagues at human service agencies across the state to help families navigate the child protection system during this crisis. Our agency charge requires us to identify community needs and to collaborate with lawmakers, professionals and other stakeholders to advance legislation and policies that will have a lasting, positive impact on our children and families. To be sure, the COVID-19 virus will continue to illuminate that work and provide opportunities for us to re-think our child protection system and how we can all do better.

The following report is intended to showcase how we've worked during 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,



Stephanie Villafuerte
Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman



FISCAL YEAR HIGHLIGHTS

CPO TOTAL CASE ACTIVITY IN FY 2019-2020

Fiscal Year 2019-20 was a record-breaking year as we received a total of 725 calls from Colorado citizens. This was 150 more calls than the previous fiscal year and a 19 percent increase from our previous record of 611 calls. The pandemic certainly impacted the number of calls we received and we have worked diligently since the start of the pandemic to monitor whether child welfare practices and services throughout the state are being impacted by the outbreak. In line with years prior, the majority of calls concerned child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice agencies and/or service providers. Most calls were from parents and family members of children, however, we also received several calls from medical professionals, law enforcement agencies, district attorneys' offices, schools, the legislature and the child protection legal community.

As needed, we issued letters of compliance concern to county departments citing possible violations of state child protection rules and laws in the handling of child welfare cases. During Fiscal Year 2019-20 we issued a total of 53 letters intended to initiate improvements to the state's child protection system.

CPO SERVICE	# OF CASES
Information/Resource Referrals	95
Assists	512
Investigation	0
Closed per contact	30
Closed per lack of information	80
Duplicate case	8
Closed per CPO discretion	0
Total Number Of CPO Cases	725

Case Highlights



CASE #1

The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously heightened the need for our services, while also creating new barriers to reaching children, youth and families who need our help. In one case, we received a call directly from a young man living in a Division of Youth Services' (DYS) youth center. The young man was confused and upset by the fact that DYS was not allowing him to undergo an elective medical procedure. The young man stated that he felt this decision was punitive and DYS staff were making him "earn" the treatment with good behavior. We were not able to visit the youth in-person, however, we were able to quickly arrange to speak directly with the young man via video chat. This was the first time the CPO utilized this tool to connect with youth living in a DYS youth center and the method proved to be an effective and timely way to connect with our clients living in DYS. Using this tool, we were able to quickly connect with the young man and DYS staff. Ultimately, we were able to help the young man understand that he was not being punished. The CPO helped explain that staff at the youth facility had advocated for the procedure, however, Medicaid would not cover the cost. This information helped the young man and his family consider alternatives for paying for the procedure.



CASE #2

We had the opportunity to work directly with a young woman in foster care during the past fiscal year. She contacted the CPO with concerns that she was going to be removed from her current foster home without any notice from the county department handling her case. She expressed fear and frustration and stated that she felt like she was not being included in the decision-making process. She even stated that she worried the county department was moving her to retaliate against her foster parents. Ultimately, we were able to work with the county department to explain their reasons for the move and the young woman agreed and felt comfortable with the decision. She was also able to share her frustrations and desires with the county department. During the upcoming fiscal year, we will continue our efforts to connect directly with youth in the child welfare system. The ability to speak to young clients directly – as we did in this case – allows us to reach better outcomes for youth who contact our agency.



CASE #3

Within a span of six weeks, we received two calls about cases involving the use of excessive force by staff at a DYS youth center. In one case, a young man’s wrist was broken, and he was monitored for a possible concussion after youth center staff physically restrained him. Staff at the same youth center tackled a young man, ultimately breaking the young man’s collar bone. The break was so significant it could be seen through the young man’s sweatshirt. The staff member in that case was placed on administrative leave before resigning. Law enforcement and child welfare services are reviewing that case. In both cases, we closely monitored the immediate safety of both young men and worked closely with the youth center, attorneys and child welfare services to ensure these incidents were reviewed and addressed by DYS leadership.

Connecting with the Community

Each year we work to connect with the child protection community.

This includes working collaboratively with child protection partners to learn more about child-serving practices and programs throughout our state. These efforts allow us to better understand what is occurring and, if needed, work to improve policies, funding and resources for systems that serve Colorado children and their families. Additionally, we continually work to improve how we share information and resources with citizens to ensure they have access to our services.



Community Outreach and Education

Our Client Services Team took a very active role in educating citizens and stakeholders about the CPO. In addition to presenting at several large conferences hosted in the metro area, the Client Services Team traveled to western and southern Colorado to share helpful information about the CPO’s role and services. These presentations detailed everything from the CPO’s history, to its current role within the child protection community, to explanations for how our analysts review questions or concerns from clients. Presentations were made to a diverse range of stakeholders and agencies, including the Mesa County Foster Care Advisory Council, the Colorado State Foster Parent Association, the Pueblo County Department of Human Services, Office of the Respondent Parents’ Counsel and the Colorado Juvenile Defender Center. The Client Services Team also launched its quarterly town halls. These town halls are an open invitation to staff from the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and county departments to meet with CPO analysts to discuss our policies, ask questions and brainstorm about how we may improve communication and coordination.



Improved Website and Expanded Access

During the past year, we continued our efforts to ensure our website is easy for citizens to navigate, engages all communities and provides the public consistent and timely information. In April 2020, we launched our redesigned website. While the website contains the same information as before, the new website centers on ensuring visitors have multiple ways to access information and clear guideposts throughout the site. We've also created more interactive elements, including a new informational video on the CPO's homepage. The video provides a short, engaging overview of the CPO and the services we provide. Visitors also have easier access to our Special Initiative work, including large reports and issue briefs. Additionally, we added a Spanish-language complaint form and translation services to the website. We hope this makes it easier for all Colorado citizens to connect with us.



Expanded Presence and Leadership

During the past two years, we have worked hard to extend our outreach and education efforts across Colorado and beyond. Child Protection Ombudsman Villafuerte has led many of these efforts and, today, she serves as a leader on several state and national organizations working to prevent child abuse and neglect, expand the role of ombudsman offices across the country and improve the relationships of ombudsmen with other national organizations. For example, Ombudsman Villafuerte was appointed to chair the Colorado Children's Trust Fund (CCTF) Board in 2019. This position and the work of the CCTF has increased our engagement with community partners who are dedicated to child maltreatment prevention efforts. Ombudsman Villafuerte also serves as co-chair of the Children and Families Chapter of the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA). In this position, she has led monthly meetings of the nation's 30 child protection ombudsman. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, Ombudsman Villafuerte led weekly meetings of this group so members could discuss how to adapt their practice in response to the virus. Additionally, Ombudsman Villafuerte also serves as the liaison between the USOA and the American Bar Association's Alternative Dispute Resolution Sub-Committee. In this role, she works to educate the broader legal community about the role of ombudsmen generally and child protection ombudsman work specifically.



Adoption Assistance

We continued our work to improve Colorado's adoption assistance program. Since the release of our [investigation report in 2017](#), we have continued to work with stakeholder partners to ensure that the 14 recommendations issued in the report are implemented. During Fiscal Year 2018-19, we led the effort to overhaul the state's law regarding the adoption assistance program. During the past fiscal year, we worked with the CDHS to co-facilitate stakeholder meetings regarding the regulations that will guide caseworkers handling adoption assistance cases. We co-facilitated six teleconferences – attended by more than 80 stakeholders – and coordinated testimony at the State Board of Human Services. Ultimately, we ensured that the new regulations accurately reflect the new state law and federal requirements. We will continue these efforts during the next fiscal year.



Juvenile Facilities Roundtable

We hosted 12 meetings with the juvenile justice community in order to address issues faced by children and families who intersect with the DYS. Meetings provide a neutral, objective forum to discuss the DYS' policies and practices, along with the experiences of youth, families and their advocates, with the goal of addressing concerns with DYS leadership. A main topic throughout Fiscal Year 2019-20 was the pandemic and its potential impacts on youth residing in DYS youth centers. Additionally, we continued our efforts to address the DYS' rulemaking process. In August 2019, we released an issue brief, detailing our concerns about the lack of transparency and community engagement in the current process for developing and implementing regulations for DYS youth centers. Several members of the juvenile justice community support the changes proposed by the CPO and we are currently evaluating options for how to implement such changes.

Responding During the Pandemic

The child protection community is responding to new challenges presented by the pandemic. During the fiscal year, we worked to support those who look after Colorado's children by identifying and fulfilling needs. Below are highlights from several of our efforts.



Masks distributed to child protection workers in Colorado



Prioritizing Child Protection Workers During COVID-19

Following the spread of COVID-19 throughout Colorado, we quickly learned that child protection workers that respond to reports of child abuse and neglect were without personal protective equipment. Often entering families' homes at their own risk due to state and federal mandates to provide services to children and their families, they have faced potential COVID-19 exposure. In an [issue brief we published in April 2020](#), we made a call for these critical employees to be prioritized as first responders so they get the equipment they need to protect themselves, and thus, are able to continue protecting Colorado's children.



Hand Sanitizer for Child Protection Workers

In March 2020, we partnered with Spring 44 Distilling and Arapahoe County Human Services to help obtain and deliver more than 1,000 individual bottles of hand sanitizer to human services staff across Colorado. We helped to deliver hand sanitizer to almost all 52 county departments in Colorado.



Face Coverings for County Human Services Departments

In April 2020, we worked to help county departments obtain more than 1,300 cloth face masks for child protection workers in 17 counties. We partnered with HI Denver, Parker Tailor and the Colorado Human Services Directors Association to produce and distribute the masks. Additionally, Denver Human Services helped ship masks, covering shipping fees to mail the masks across the state, including 14 rural county departments.



Toolkit for Educators

In April 2020, we worked with teachers, education advocates, the Colorado Department of Education and the CDHS to develop a toolkit that helps teachers get a better sense of their students' safety during remote learning sessions. The toolkit provides educators information about the signs of child abuse and neglect, how to make reports to the hotline and provides educators examples of activities they can lead during remote learning sessions to assess the wellbeing of their students. The toolkit was published on the Colorado Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline's website and was shared broadly via social media.

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

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Amanda Pennington, Director of Client Services

Claire Hooker, Client Services Analyst

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Pax Moultrie

Governor Appointments

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Eldridge Greer

Jerene Peterson

Karen Beye

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Victoria Shuler

Senate Minority Appointment

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