OFFICE OF THE COLORADO CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT

2024 - 2025 FISCAL YEAR

LISTEN INVESTIGATE RESOLVE IDENTIFY TRENDS LASTING CHANGE

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LETTER FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

Dear friends, colleagues and community partners,

It is my honor to present our Fiscal Year 2024-25 Annual Report. This year marks a milestone for our agency as we celebrate our 10-year anniversary as an independent state agency. Our charge requires us to not only help children, youth, families and community members impacted by the child protection system, but it also requires us to examine their concerns carefully so that we can make recommendations for systemic change when needed. To fulfill this mission, we must actively listen. Doing so allows us to hear how the child protection system actually operates versus how we might want to believe it does.

The Colorado child protection system is made up of a collective of individuals who are responsible for the care and well-being of Colorado children and their families. This includes state workers, attorneys, judges, caseworkers, law enforcement officers, schools and numerous service providers. As we examine problems in the child protection system, it is important to remember how each section impacts the whole.

The past three decades have ushered in a myriad of changes to our state's child protection system. In previous years child protection systems were more reactionary — responding to child maltreatment and other adverse childhood experiences with the primary intervention being the removal of children from their homes. There was little or no attention paid to the voices and experiences of children and families impacted by these systems. The result was a system that was not always responsive to children and families' needs and even caused harm.

In recent years, there has been greater acknowledgment by child protection systems that children and their families have rights and that their voices must be heard if we want to proactively address abuse and neglect concerns and to make policy that more effectively serves children and their families. Indeed, our agency was created to ensure that Coloradans impacted by the child protection system have a place to be heard and that those concerns once raised would be treated seriously.

This year, our annual report looks a bit different. In addition to reporting on our agency's work we also will include the voices of the 1,161 people who called us this year. This report is not an exhaustive list of the various struggles faced by families, children or the professionals who help them.

This report and future ones are designed to create greater awareness of how Colorado's child protection system functions and to discuss what is working as well as what is not. We want to shed light on a system that is complex and to make it more accessible to all.

I hope that this report gives you a glimpse into our child protection system and provides a greater understanding of the challenges facing our community. If we truly want to reform our systems the way we say, it will be essential that all responsible agencies, communities and individuals work together to ensure that every child and family are cared for in a responsive and caring manner.

Thank you for reading,

Stephanie Villafuerte

Stephanie Villafuerte
Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman

OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE OF THE COLORADO CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was created to ensure the state's complex child protection system consistently provides high quality services to every child, youth, young person, family and community in Colorado. The agency is charged with hearing the public's concerns and questions related to services administered by any public agency or provider that receives public money to support the safety, permanency and well-being of young people. It listens to the public about their experience with and concerns about child protection, researches and investigates those issues and determines the best way to resolve each concern. This important work also allows the CPO to identify trends, make public recommendations for system improvements, and collaborate with lawmakers, professionals, stakeholders and individuals with lived experience to advance policy changes that have a lasting, positive impact on children, youth and their families.

Anyone may contact the CPO with a concern or question about the child protection system. The agency's services are free and confidential. People do not need to be involved with the child protection system to open a case with the CPO. However, the majority of people who contact the agency are either involved with the child protection system or have professional connections.

Lookback to CPO Case Activity During Fiscal Year 2024 - 25

Colorado's child protection system is vast and complicated. It is common for a single child or family to be involved with multiple systems and programs – such as child welfare services, Medicaid and behavioral health services – by the time they contact the CPO. During Fiscal year 2024-25, the CPO was contacted by 1,161 people with questions or concerns about the child protection system. These individuals included family members of children or youth, professionals and others.

The CPO Case Process

Each case received by the CPO will go through one or more phases of review by the agency. The four phases are: Listen, Investigate, Resolve and Identify Trends.

CPO Case Review Phases

Listen
The CPO listens to every person who contacts the agency. At a minimum, each person who contacts the agency will speak with a live person who will take down information about the client's concern or question. During this intake phase, the person will have an opportunity to share important details and ask questions.

Investigate
The agency will conduct an in-depth review of each case. This includes reviewing relevant documentation in the case and the laws and regulations involved in that case. For some cases, the CPO may need to contact an outside agency to learn more about the services provided to a child, youth or family.

Resolve
After completing a review of the case, the CPO will determine the steps necessary to resolve and close the case. The CPO will inform the client of the steps taken to address the questions and concerns involved in the case. The CPO may also provide additional resources that will benefit the client.

Identify Trends
The CPO considers whether each case presents an issue impacting how child protection services are provided across systems and regions. If so, the CPO will seek to address these systemic issues.

The CPO works to understand the unique circumstances and information involved in each case brought to the agency. To accomplish this, the agency works to give each client the time they need to share their story and perspective. Often, by the time a client has contacted the CPO, they have tried to resolve their concerns directly with other agencies — with little to no success. It is not uncommon for the CPO to spend more than an hour with clients during their first call with the agency. This allows the CPO to understand each client's concerns at a deep level.

During FY 2024-25, the CPO closed 1,078 cases. The CPO determined that clients in 18% of the cases it closed would benefit from a referral to a different entity. In each of these cases, the CPO still worked to ensure it understood the questions and issues involved in the case. For example, the CPO often receives calls from people with concerns about the actions of their attorneys or people who are seeking assistance with their legal cases. The CPO does not have authority to review these cases. Instead, after learning the details of the concern, the CPO will help guide the person to the best resource. This often involves providing them the name and contact information for these services.

FY 2024-25 CPO Closed Case Dispositions

1,078 total cases closed

703 closed with support	**194** client provided an information and resource referral	**135** lack of information provided to CPO
39 client requested CPO close the case	**5** closed as duplicate case	**2** closed with concern

However, more than half of the questions and calls that come to the CPO turn into cases that receive a complete review. For each case that reaches this level, the CPO will spend an average of eight hours working on the review. This may include communicating with the client, reviewing years' worth of records and, in some cases, contacting outside agencies.

During FY 2024-25, the CPO completed 703 full case reviews. The CPO identified concerns with possible legal and regulatory violations in 32% of those cases – 226 cases total. The CPO contacted the relevant agencies in each of those 226 cases to problem solve on behalf of the CPO's clients. For the remaining 477 cases, the CPO did not identify issues that required action by outside agencies. However, the CPO still worked to educate clients in those cases regarding child welfare rules, regulations and practices to help support them as they navigate the child protection system.

When Concerns Are Identified

The CPO has no explicit authority to determine if an agency violated state law or regulation in the handling of a child protection case. What Colorado law does require is the CPO to inform agencies when it identifies concerns with how the agency – most commonly a county department of human services or Division of Youth Services' (DYS) youth center – handled a case. Those concerns often involve possible non-compliance with state law, regulation and/or best practice. During the past fiscal year, the CPO contacted agencies with such concerns in 226 cases. In each of these

cases, the CPO prepared detailed outlines of the identified concerns and met with the relevant agency to address these concerns. In all but 12 of the 226 cases, the agency agreed with the concerns presented by the CPO and took some form of affirmative action to address the identified issues. For example, the most common action by an outside agency, after being contacted by the CPO, was to provide staff additional training and education about how to better deliver services to children and families. This happened in 120 of the 226 cases.

Actions Taken by Outside Agencies After CPO Contact[1]

107 cases involved outside agencies amending or adding additional documentation in a child protection case.

EXAMPLE: The mother of an infant contacted the CPO with concerns after her infant was removed from her care and placed with kin. The mother reported to the CPO that she did not understand why the infant was removed or why she had not returned home. The CPO reviewed the case and found that the county department of human services removed the child due to illegal substance use by the mother. However, the CPO's review of the case found that the county department did not utilize the standard, required assessment tool to determine if the infant was safe before she was removed, nor did they utilize a similar tool for determining what additional risks were present in the home. The use of these tools are important as they are intended to provide an objective review of the safety of the child and they ensure that other professionals within the child protection system are aware of any risks or safety concerns. The CPO contacted the relevant county department who agreed that the tools were not used and the case file did not contain the required information. Following contact with the CPO, the county department added the required information to the case file. This was important as there were ongoing considerations by the county department and the courts as to where the infant should reside — both are required to weigh such information in their decisions. Additionally, after working with the CPO, the county department implemented agency-wide training on use of the tool[2].

76 contacts by the CPO resulted in the outside agency engaging the client and further discussing the case with them to address issues.

EXAMPLE: The CPO was contacted by a mother whose child was living in a foster home. The mother was concerned that child welfare employees did not assess concerns that her child was physically abused while living in the foster home. The CPO reviewed information in the case and found that child welfare workers had received allegations that the child was physically abused while residing at the foster home. Ultimately, the child did not disclose any physical abuse to child welfare workers and no other concerns were identified, according to documentation in the case. The case was closed, but the mother was not informed of the results. After the CPO informed the outside agency that the mother was not notified, the outside agency reached out to discuss the case with the mother. The client later told the CPO she was glad to know the county department received and reviewed the concerns. She appreciated the county department's willingness to discuss the issue with her and appreciated the CPO's assistance[3].

1 Please note that one or more of the listed actions by outside agencies may appear in a single case.
2 CPO Case 2024-9088
3 CPO Case 2024-9076

14 cases in which the CPO contacted an outside agency resulted in the outside agency reopening a case or a portion of a case for additional consideration and assessment.

The CPO reviewed a case in which the relevant county department of human services assessed a report of physical abuse and domestic violence in a home with multiple children. The children's mother, who was the CPO's client, stated concerns that the county department was not effectively communicating with her. The CPO reviewed the case and found that the county department had assessed these concerns, but did not find enough evidence to confirm that the children were being physically abused. However, the county also determined that the family was at high risk for such abuse to take place and experience further intervention with the county department. None of this information was communicated with the children's mother prior to the county department closing the assessment. Additionally, the county department did not hold a required meeting with the mother, during which they should have discussed these risks and reviewed possible services and action steps to avoid them -- including therapies, parenting classes and mental health services. The CPO contacted the county department about its review. The county department agreed that the meeting should have been held with the mother and that the case file was incomplete. Shortly after this contact, the CPO confirmed that the county department re-opened the assessment, entered the missing information in the case file and met with the mother. When the CPO followed up with the mother, she stated she was grateful for the CPO's assistance and that this outcome addressed many of her concerns about communication from the county department[4].

24 cases in which the CPO contacted an outside agency resulted in the outside agency revising or developing a policy to address an issue.

EXAMPLE: The CPO contacted a DYS youth center after it became concerned with how staff were documenting when youth were physically restrained. The CPO noted that staff were not filling out a form that required them to review whether they followed the required techniques. After contact with the CPO, the youth center implemented a weekly quality review process to ensure the forms were completed correctly[5]. These recurring reviews will ensure leadership at the youth center are able to remain informed regarding how staff are utilizing physical restraints and become aware sooner when physical restraints are not properly carried out or documented.

20 cases in which the CPO contacted an outside agency resulted in the outside agency taking steps to correct actions by personnel or taking disciplinary action.

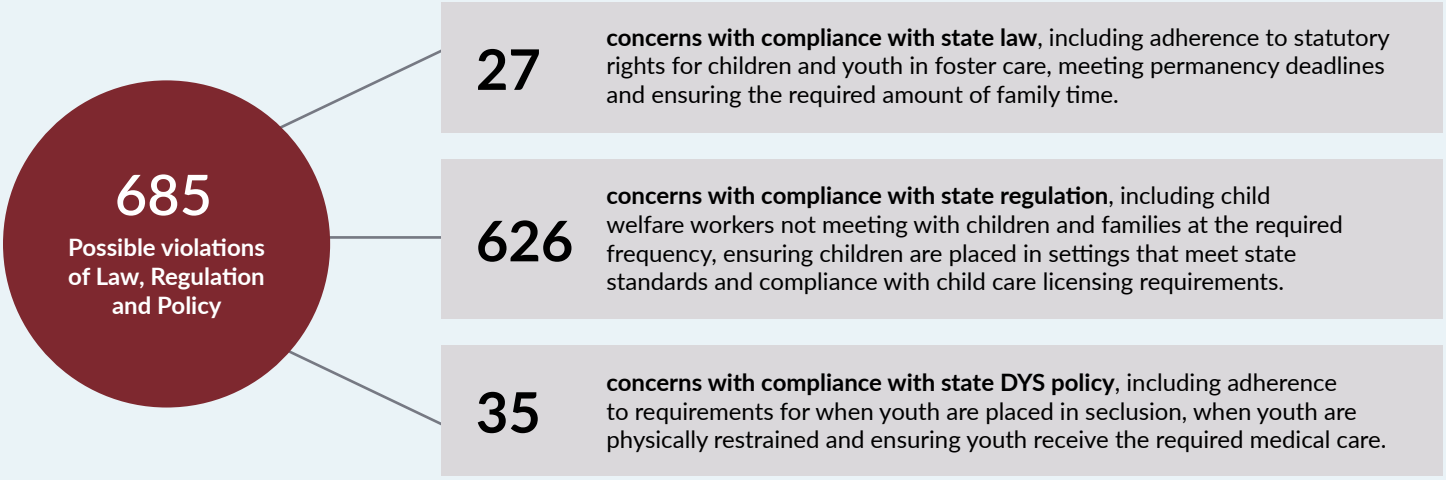
EXAMPLE: The CPO contacted a DYS youth center after it reviewed a case and found concerns that excessive force was used to physically restrain a youth. The CPO was also concerned that the circumstances preceding the event did not justify the use of physical restraint. Leadership at the youth center agreed and reported that the staff involved would go through a discipline process and receive additional training. Ensuring those who work within child protection systems are made aware of mistakes and provided training can help staff avoid making similar mistakes in the future[6].

4 CPO Case 2024-8741
5 CPO Case 2024-8112
6 CPO Case 2024-8885

Each of the actions described above, plus others, demonstrate the crucial utility that the CPO plays in the child protection system. Many of the issues identified in these cases would not have been identified but for the CPO's involvement. Each of the issues identified above are important as they have substantial impacts to the care and well-being of the children involved in these cases.

The CPO identified several common practice areas within the 226 cases that involved agency contact. For example, the CPO identified 35 concerns that staff at DYS youth centers did not follow guiding policy – including 27 incidents involving the use of physical restraints. Additionally, the CPO identified 626 instances in which the agency was concerned that state regulations guiding the delivery of child welfare services were not followed.

Identified Concerns[7]



Additional information about the possible violations identified by the CPO may be found in **Appendix A**.

What CPO Clients are Saying

Each fiscal year, the CPO hears back from clients with whom the agency has worked. The CPO works to respond to concerns about the agency's processes, and celebrates when clients feel the services they received from the CPO improved their experience with the child protection system. Below are a few of the positive comments the CPO received:

> "Thank you so much for helping out with this. Yes, we did get a new case manager and I'm pretty sure that's because of you! ... I'm saving your contact info in case I ever need to speak to you in the future. Thank you!"
>
> "I wanted to take the time to tell you how much I appreciate your concentrated efforts on my family's behalf. ... God bless you very much."
>
> "This is my second time contacting the CPO because you are so helpful. Thank you for providing education around child welfare language, without it, I would never have gotten the records I needed."

7 Figures pulled from the CPO database on August 18, 2025.

ELEVATING YOUTH VOICE TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND PROMOTE BETTER OUTCOMES

Each case brought to the CPO helps to inform the agency of the systemic issues impacting how child protection services are being administered in Colorado. In addition to reviewing each individual case, the CPO is legally required to also review systemic issues and concerns within the child protection system. The CPO works to bring attention to these issues by providing education about how the issue is impacting children and youth in Colorado and serving as a neutral and impartial facilitator to drive improvements and promote better outcomes for children and youth.

During the past fiscal year, the CPO continued its work to address several systemic issues, as well as initiating new projects. Details about this work are included below.

The CPO is committed to not only working toward the safety and well-being of children and youth impacted by the child protection system, but also to ensuring that their voices are heard. During FY 2024-25, the CPO advocated for youth rights and the inclusion of youth voice in policy initiatives. Additionally, the CPO was able to ensure that youth are able to have greater access to the services provided by the CPO.

Advocating for Youth Rights

In Colorado hundreds of youth each year are removed from their homes and placed into government care. Children and youth who are determined to live in unsafe homes will often be placed in foster care. Others with severe behavioral health needs will be admitted to residential care facilities and those involved in the juvenile justice system will be detained or committed to DYS youth centers. Once a youth enters any of these systems, they are completely dependent on strangers for their care and well-being 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Such settings serve an important role in helping to keep children and youth safe. However, they also create certain risks for these children and youth, who often report that living away from their communities has a dramatic impact on their well-being. Long-time research confirms that youth in these settings often have poorer life outcomes including lower graduation rates, an increased risk for homelessness, poverty, unemployment and an increased likelihood of involvement in the adult criminal justice system. Research also suggests that it is imperative to provide these youth with opportunities to grow and develop social and emotional skills needed for adulthood.

To address these concerns, approximately 15 states have developed a set of rights and protections for youth who live in foster care.

Stories from the CPO's Case Files

- In 2024, the CPO received a call from a youth's attorney who had concerns that their client's residential child care facility was violating their client's rights. Alleged violations included refusing to provide the youth with a confidential space to meet with legal professionals, seclusion, food deprivation and even denying the youth the ability to wear their glasses as a form of punishment for voicing their concerns. The CPO brought this case to the attention of the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), who reported that they had issued a corrective action plan to the facility. The youth has since been moved to another facility.
- In 2025, the CPO was contacted by a trnsgender youth who reported that she did not feel safe in her facility due to bullying from her peers. The CPO was able to help the youth contact her Counsel for Youth. This led to the youth being moved from the facility. The youth has since reported that conditions were improved.

During May 2021, the CPO published an issue brief, detailing how the then existing law failed to create any real protections for children and youth in foster care[8]. That brief was cited by the Colorado Office of the Child's Representative (OCR) as it spearheaded efforts during the 2024 General Assembly to pass House Bill 25-1017[9], which created the Bill of Rights for Foster Youth. Colorado now has not one but three different sets of legal and ethical guidelines that are designed to ensure the safety and well-being of youth in care. These laws include a Sibling Bill of Rights[10], a Foster Youth Bill of Rights[11], and for the first time ever a Division of Youth Services Bill of Rights for youth housed in the state's juvenile detention and commitment facilities[12]. These laws were drafted and advocated for by youth who were willing to share their experiences so as to improve the quality of care for all young people in these placements.

The CPO supported the passage of these three bills. The agency is also explicitly named in each of them as a resource for youth. During the coming years, the CPO will work to monitor compliance with these rights and ensure youth working to access the CPO's services – which they are entitled to – are able to do so.

Elevating Youth Voices

The CPO's Youth Collective (Collective) entered its second year during FY 2024-25. While still in its infancy, the Collective played an important role in bringing the perspectives of youth and young people with experience in the child protection system into the CPO's systemic work. The CPO was proud to partner with CDHS and OCR to host the second annual Foster Youth Voice Celebration. More than 100 people attended the event, during which 12 young people with Colorado foster care experience were recognized for using their voices to improve their own lives or the lives of other young people in foster care.

Additionally, the Collective hosted six feedback sessions with youth and young people across Colorado. During one session, youth talked about why it was important for youth in residential and DYS facilities to have greater access to the CPO and its services. Participants in these sessions stated that the CPO's services are key for youth living in 24-hour residential facilities. This is because they are often cut off from those who they feel advocate for their needs and perspectives. Many youth expressed that, had they known about the CPO, they would have contacted the agency multiple times for assistance.

YOUTH COLLECTIVE
a program of CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN of COLORADO

8 See CPO Issue Brief: Strengthening Colorado's Foster Youth Protection Laws, May 27, 2021.
9 See House Bill 24-1017. Foster Youth Bill of Rights, codified in C.R.S. 19-7-101. (This legislation marks the second piece of legislation aimed at protecting foster youth. The original legislation was enacted through Senate Bill 11-120. The goal is to improve the health, well-being and safety of children and youth in foster care. The legislation clarifies how youth are to be notified and how courts are to enforce these rights.)
10 See House Bill 19-1288, Sibling Bill of Rights, codified in C.R.S. 19-7-203. (This legislation is designed to foster sibling relationships when youth are in care and sustain family relationships.)
11 See House Bill 24-1017.
12 See House Bill 24-1170, Division of Youth Services Bill of Rights, codified in C.R.S. 19-2.5-1502.5.

The CPO used feedback from the Collective as a driving factor in the creation of House Bill 25-1200, Modifications to the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman[13]. The CPO was particularly excited for the opportunity to discuss the text of this bill with youth and young people. This bill – which was signed into law on May 28, 2025 – gives the CPO access to youth residing in residential child care facilities and DYS youth centers. The CPO is extremely grateful to the youth and young people who shared their experiences and expertise to help draft and pass this bill.

Working Directly with Youth Residing in DYS Youth Centers

During FY 2024-25, the CPO provided services to 52 youth who contacted the agency with concerns about their experience while residing in DYS youth centers. The CPO is committed to ensuring that youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system have their rights upheld and ensure these youth are able to access the services provided by the CPO.

Advocating for Better Protections for Youth in DYS Youth Centers

The use of physical force within DYS youth centers has been at the center of discussions in Colorado for more than a decade. During the two previous fiscal years, the CPO was contacted by 130 youth currently or formally residing in DYS facilities. In total, 25 percent of those cases concerned staff misconduct or the misuse of physical restraints – the majority of which were called in by youth themselves. Broken bones, chipped teeth, bruises and cuts. These are some of the injuries suffered by Colorado youth in secure facilities when staff use force to detain them. The CPO found that DYS reviews of these restraints are insufficient and fail to determine if the use of force was justified. The CPO independently reviewed case documentation, video surveillance footage and staff-generated incident reports detailing these incidents. However, the agency was not able to determine whether the staff's use of force was appropriate. This is because none of the current DYS surveillance systems capture audio of incidents inside facilities – a key element in making such a determination.

The CPO published an issue brief during July 2024, detailing how the existing surveillance systems in DYS youth centers fall short in monitoring and investigating the use of physical restraints on youth[14]. The brief included recommendations to address this issue, including the use of body worn cameras by DYS staff. Such methods have been employed widely in adult corrections and other states working to improve their youth systems.

During the 2025 legislative session, the CPO was asked to testify in front of the General Assembly regarding its findings. Legislators developed House Bill 25-1146, which includes a directive to launch a pilot program[15]. As part of the pilot program, staff at select DYS youth centers will be required to use body-worn cameras with audio capacity. The bill also requires the development of policies and procedures to address how cameras are to be activated and how footage is to be retained and accessed. After the conclusion of the pilot program, DYS will then make a recommendation on whether to expand the program in a January 2028 presentation. The CPO is heartened by the development of this pilot program as it signifies Colorado's continued investment in youth safety in facilities and increases transparency about how youth are receiving care.

13 See House Bill 25-1200, Modifications to the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman, codified in C.R.S. 19-3.3-103.
14 See "Surveillance Within the Division of Youth Services: How current efforts to monitor the use of physical restraints falls short."
15 See House Bill 25-1146, Juvenile Detention Bed Cap, codified in C.R.S. 19-2.5-1408.5.

ONGOING SYSTEMIC WORK

The CPO works with lawmakers, professionals, stakeholders and individuals with lived experience to address systemic issues impacting the child protection system. During the past fiscal year, a substantial portion of this work was focused on efforts to address issues first raised during the Child Welfare System Interim Committee (Interim Committee).

The Colorado General Assembly convened child protection professionals and those with lived experience during the summer of 2023. Those present were charged with advising the Interim Committee about the state's child welfare system and whether it effectively serves children and families in Colorado. The CPO was one of the stakeholders who presented to the Interim Committee on a number of pressing issues it had identified[16]. The CPO presented its findings regarding practice in several areas, including inconsistencies in the use of the Colorado Family Risk and Safety Assessment Tools and addressing caseworker misconduct.

Inconsistent and Inaccurate Use of the Colorado Family Risk and Safety Assessment Tools

The Colorado Family Safety Assessment Tool is the accepted safety tool for child welfare services in Colorado. Reviews by national and state professionals have found that the safety tool continues to be utilized inconsistently by child welfare services. The safety tool is a crucial step in assessing the initial needs of a family, the immediate safety of children and, in most cases, whether a child will be removed from their home. Continued use of this tool creates the potential for bias that may impact decisions made in child welfare cases. Concerns regarding the use of the safety tool have long been raised by the CPO, as well as others monitoring its use.

In response to the CPO's presentation, the Interim Committee advanced a bill – which the 2024 General Assembly passed – requiring a third-party audit of the tools. House Bill 24-1046 requires the CPO to select and contract with a third-party evaluator to conduct an audit of the safety tool, as well as the Colorado Family Risk Assessment Tool[17]. During early 2025, the CPO selected a vendor to conduct an evaluation and will submit a final report to the CPO on March 1, 2026. This report will address the 10 assessment components outlined in HB 24-1046, including the impacts of geography in the use of the tools, gaps and solutions that may assist child welfare workers in using the tools and the impacts of race and ethnicity when using the tools. The CPO will continue to share updates on this project on its website.

Addressing Caseworker Misconduct

Since 2015, the CPO has identified more than a dozen incidents in which child welfare workers have been accused of falsifying records in the state child welfare database. The majority of these false records indicated the employee had seen a child and/or assessed their safety when they had not. To be clear, these cases represent a small minority of child welfare employees in Colorado. And yet, the impacts of these cases permeate through the entire system and erode the public's trust in the very individuals charged with keeping them safe.

16 See "2023 Colorado Child Welfare System Interim Study Committee Issue Brief".
17 See House Bill 24-1046, Child Welfare System Tools, codified in C.R.S. 26-5-118.

At the time of the Interim Committee, Colorado had no law or regulation regarding adverse action against child welfare employee's certification and no requirements that clients or departments are notified of verified, gross misconduct. Nine years ago, the CPO first raised its concerns about the lack of clarity – and correlating law and regulation – regarding the certification of child welfare employees in Colorado. The impact of this gap is that, unless an employee is criminally charged, there is no way to know whether a child welfare employee has violated regulations or ethical standards. As such, their certification to work with children remains in place and they are able to move from county to county undetected.

Following the Interim Committee, there have been a number of efforts to address this issue, including the creation of a code of ethics and decertification process by CDHS. The CPO has continued to monitor these efforts closely and has weighed in at various stages. The agency will continue to engage with this work moving forward.

CPO Task Force Work

Much of the CPO's systemic reform initiatives span multiple years and include efforts to address issues at various levels. This includes the CPO's work to increase protections for children and youth residing in 24-hour facilities and addressing gaps and inconsistencies in Colorado's mandatory reporting law. During FY 2024-25, the CPO held the final meetings of two task forces entrusted to it by the General Assembly to address both issues. The agency published those task forces' final reports and recommendations and championed bills to implement some of those recommendations to improve systems for youth and their families.

Increasing Protections for Youth Running Away from Out-of-Home Care

In 2020, 12-year-old Timothy Montoya was hit and killed by a car shortly after running away from a 24-hour residential facility. In response to this tragedy – and in recognition of the dozens of other youth who run from out-of-home care every year[18] – the Colorado legislature established the Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children from Running Away from Out-of-Home Placement[19]. This task force, located within the CPO, met 23 times for 57 hours of discussion and released its final report on October 1, 2024[20].

In its final report, the task force issued recommendations for how the state can build a better system and prevent future tragedies through improved prevention, intervention and aftercare related to running incidents. Senate Bill 25-151[21] was introduced to implement some of these recommendations. The bill was enacted on April 10, 2025[22]. The CPO will have a continuing role in implementing this bill, including conducting a statewide inventory survey of the physical infrastructure that residential child care facilities have and need to deter children and youth from running.

Reforming Colorado's Child Abuse and Neglect Mandatory Reporting Law

Mandatory reporting is the requirement for people in certain occupations – such as teachers or nurses – to make a report if they have a suspicion that child abuse or neglect is taking place. As the CPO originally identified in a 2021 issue brief[23], although these laws may be well-intentioned, it has become clear that the state's mandatory reporting laws are in need of reform.

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18 See CDHS website, "Children Currently in Out of Home Placement" page for quarterly data on youth who run from care.
19 See CPO website, Timothy Montoya Task Force page for additional information.
20 See "Timothy Montoya Task Force Final Report", "Final Report Snapshot" and "Executive Summary".
21 See Senate Bill 25-151, Measures to Prevent Youth from Running Away, codified in C.R.S. 19-3.3-112 and 26-6-924.
22 Some recommendations that involved creating new systems were not included in this bill due to legislative fiscal constraints, but the CPO remains committed to seeking implementation of the remainder of the task force's recommendations. To learn more about the bill, see "Changes to Colorado's Mandatory Reporting Laws".
23 See "Issue Brief — Mandatory Reporters: How Colorado's mandatory reporter law lacks the necessary infrastructure to support those charged with reporting suspected child abuse."

These laws are both confusing to mandatory reporters and contribute to the overrepresentation of under-resourced communities, families of color and people with disabilities in the child protection system. During 2022, House Bill 22-1240 was enacted to form the Mandatory Reporting Task Force[24] within the CPO to create recommendations for improving these laws.

After 72 hours of discussion across 24 months and 31 meetings, the Mandatory Reporting Task Force released its final report on January 1, 2025[25]. The task force issued almost two dozen recommendations to address the state's mandatory reporting law. These recommendations focused on: (1) Recognizing and addressing the disproportionate impact of mandatory reporting law and policies; (2) Clarifying reporting processes and requirements in statute; (3) Creating and requiring mandatory reporting training; (4) Addressing requirements for specialized occupations; and (5) Reviewing and improving data and information systems. The CPO educated legislators regarding the task force and its recommendations, which resulted in House Bill 25-1188[26]. This bill sought to implement some of the task force's recommendations — specifically those aimed at clarifying reporting requirements in statute — and address requirements for certain occupations when reporting suspected abuse or neglect[27].

The bill was signed into law on May 31, 2025. The CPO will continue working to bring forward additional recommendations to legislators. Additionally, the CPO will continue to follow the Reimagining Colorado's Child Welfare System group's work to pilot a warmline system for families in need of assistance[28]. This work is aligned with the task force's recommendation to connect families in need of assistance to community-based and culturally relevant services when the concerns of a mandatory reporter do not rise to the threshold of suspected child abuse or neglect.

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24 See CPO website, Mandatory Reporting Task Force page for additional information.
25 See "Mandatory Reporting Task Force Final Report and "Final Report Snapshot".
26 See House Bill 25-1188, Mandatory Reporter Task Force Recommendations, codified in C.R.S. 19-3-304 and 19-3-307.
27 Legislative fiscal constraints prohibited the pursuit of more costly recommendations involving program building in this session, but the CPO remains committed to pursuing the implementation of the remainder of task force recommendations. To learn more about the content of the bill, see "Measures to Prevent Youth from Running from Out-of-Home Facilities".
28 See Colorado Department of Human Services website, Reimagining Colorado's Child Welfare System page for additional information. To view CPO research on warmlines, see "Alternative Processes and Services".

CPO ADVISORY BOARD

The CPO Advisory Board is an independent, nonpartisan board comprised of 12 members. Four members are appointed from each branch of government and all members serve for a period of four years. Each position on the Board requires a certain amount of experience or expertise. The Board was established to provide a mechanism of oversight for the Child Protection Ombudsman, however, its role is much broader. The CPO team routinely relies on the expertise of its Board to expand and guide its work. Members have decades of experience and include child welfare professionals, judges, doctors, attorneys, county commissioners, human service directors, foster parents and advocates. The CPO would like to thank its Advisory Board for helping it fulfill its mission to ensure that the state's child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family and community in Colorado.

Conclusion

Pursuant to C.R.S. §19-3.3-108, the CPO respectfully submits this Annual Report to Colorado's governor, chief justice, the CPO Board of Directors and the Colorado General Assembly.

Board Members

Chief Justice Appointments

Benjamin Rounsborg, *Board Chair*
Hon. Gail Meinster
Hannah Seigel Proff
Katy Saehler

Governor Appointments

Judith Martinez, *Vice Chair*
Valerie Brooks
Matthew Tulley
Connie Vigil

Senate President Appointment

Charles Tedesco

Senate Minority Appointment

Wendy Buxton Andrade

Speaker of the House Appointment

Dr. Coral Steffey

House Minority Leader Appointment

Brian Bernhard

APPENDIX A

Fiscal Year 2024-25 Possible Violations

During Fiscal Year 2024-25, the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) identified a total of 685 possible violations of Colorado law, regulation and policy. The CPO has no explicit authority to determine if an agency violated state law, regulation or policy in the handling of a child protection case. What Colorado law does require is the CPO to inform agencies when it identifies concerns with how the agency – most commonly a county department of human services or Division of Youth Services' (DYS) youth center – handled a case.

The charts below provide additional information regarding the identified possible violations.

CPO Identified Possible Violations of Colorado Revised Statute, Title 19 (Children's Code)

Citations	Number of Possible Violations
Colorado Revised Statute, Title 19, Article 1: General Provisions	2
Colorado Revised Statute, Title 19, Article 2: Colorado Juvenile Justice System	2
Colorado Revised Statute, Title 19, Article 3: Dependency and Neglect	17
Colorado Revised Statute, Title 19, Article 7: Youth in Foster Care	6
Total	**27**

CPO Identified Possible Violations of Colorado Code of Regulations (Volume 7)

Citations	Number of Possible Violations
12 CCR 2509-2, Referral and Assessment	234
12 CCR 2509-3, Program Areas, Case Contacts and Ongoing Case Requirements	202
12 CCR 2509-4, Child Welfare Services[1]	186
12 CCR 2509-5, Resources, Reimbursement, Reporting and Provider Requirements	1
12 CCR 2509-7, County Responsibility, Staff Training and Qualifications, Client Rights, Confidentiality	3
12 CCR 2509-8, Child Care Facility Licensing	8
Total	**626**

1 This section of Volume 7 contains regulations concerning family engagement, treatment planning and reviews, out-of-home placement requirements and other programs and services.

Division of Youth Services Policies

Citations	Number of Possible Violations
DYS Policies, Chapter 3: Personnel	3
DYS Policies, Chapter 5: Management Information and Resources	3
DYS Policies, Chapter 9: Security and Control	27
DYS Policies, Chapter 12: Medical and Health Care Services	1
DYS Policies, Chapter 13: Youth Rights	1
Total	**35**