



Office of the Child Advocate Fiscal Year 2025 Strategic Plan

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.

The OCA's Vision for the Commonwealth's Children and their Families

The OCA believes that significant change is needed over the next several years to ensure the future of our children, and specifically our children in the care and/or custody of the state, deserve.

To that end, the OCA has identified eight key goals we believe must be achieved by the Commonwealth:

- ***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 need 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.

These goals are aspirational. We also know that all of us must work together towards this future for our children, even as we focus on the role the OCA seeks to play toward these aims in the coming 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.

How Does the OCA Execute its Mission to Achieve its Vision?

- Overseeing and monitoring the services delivered by child-serving state agencies
- Improving the collection, use, and transparency of state agency data
- Identifying gaps in, and concerns with, how state agencies and systems serve at-risk children, and recommending and advocating for solutions, including changes to improve coordination across agencies
- Advising on and leading efforts for systemic change in policies, programs, and practices affecting vulnerable and at-risk children
- Partnering with state agencies to improve service quality through the development and launch of innovation and incubation projects
- Offering training and technical assistance to child-serving agencies to support policies, programs, and a workforce that are trauma-responsive
- Serving as an ombudsperson, including providing information and referral support, for families who are receiving, or are eligible to receive, services from the Commonwealth
- Promoting child and family well-being

How Does OCA Determine its Projects and the Role it will Play to Drive this Change?

There are many areas which need to be addressed for this Vision to become a reality. The OCA uses the following criteria to decide the projects it will prioritize and to the roles it will play.

- **Statutory Mandate:** Is OCA required to do the work? And in the way proposed?
- **Target Population:** Will the work result in improved outcomes for the most vulnerable children and youth who are served by the state and/or are at risk because of their racial, ethnic or gender identity, their sexual orientation, and/or their disability?
- **Target Agencies:** Does the work involve more than one child- and youth-serving agency (i.e., systems-level)? Or, is the need for action so urgent that OCA involvement is necessary?
- **Readiness/Opportunity for Change:** Is the agency or system ready to make change? (If no, then the first phase of work may be laying the groundwork to create readiness.) And/or, would the OCA lose the opportunity to make change if it did not act now?
- **OCA's Unique Value:** Is the OCA the only or most appropriate agency to do the work? Are there others who could/should do it? Are there only certain functions within the project for which OCA is uniquely positioned? (i.e., planning or oversight vs operations.)
- **Capability:** Does OCA have (or can OCA secure) the right capacity, relationships and skill set to do the work well?

OCA's FY25 Strategic Plan

The OCA's FY25 Strategic Plan flows from our [FY24-FY26 Strategic Framework](#). Below is a list of projects the OCA intends to focus on in FY25. Some projects are continuations of work begun in FY24 (or earlier); other projects we aim to scope and launch over the course of the fiscal year. Not all work will necessarily be completed by the end of the fiscal year.

The projects are organized according to specific strategic goals, though we recognize that some projects could easily be categorized in alternative, overlapping goals.

As always, the OCA is nimble and flexible in response to changing circumstances. This means that new projects may be added, and other projects amended or paused throughout the year in response to arising needs and unexpected opportunities and challenges.

Goal: 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.

- **OCA's Quality Assurance Mechanisms** – Enhance the OCA's Quality Assurance mechanisms, which 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, DCF foster care review safety alerts, our investigations, and our role operating the state child fatality review program.

Key projects for FY25 include:

- **Critical Incident Reviews/Follow-Up** – Continue to ensure that relevant state agencies are appropriately reporting critical incidents to the OCA and continue to improve critical incident reviews through ongoing process enhancements that ensure equitable and robust oversight.
- **Analysis of Physical Abuse Institutional Reports** – Analyze the types and patterns of incidents and injuries occurring in residential programs with the goal of informing our work in the Residential Schools Interagency Group and Restraint and Seclusion groups and enhancing child safety and service effectiveness.
- **Institutional Process Mapping** – Identify gaps and recommendations for improvement in the interagency institutional investigation and information sharing process, which will lead to increased safety for children in out-of-home care.
- **Inventory/Assessment of Current State Trainings Related to Supporting Children and Families**– In partnership with the OCA-chaired **Childhood Trauma Task Force**, conduct a thorough review of existing state agency training offerings on a variety of topics related to supporting children and families to evaluate whether they meet current needs and standards, and make recommendations to enhance the state's ability to serve children and families effectively.
- **Congregate Care Youth Engagement** – Improve youth awareness of their rights and of the OCA Complaint Line, including by directly engaging with youth in congregate care settings to better understand their needs, concerns, and what they see as high priority areas for service and system improvement.
- **Residential Schools** – Continue facilitating ongoing collaboration between state agencies through the Residential Schools Interagency Group to ensure children in residential schools

receive appropriate and coordinated services. In FY25, examine how to replicate the interagency approach to include all congregate care settings.

- **Agency Contract Monitoring/Licensing Processes** – Increase our understanding of and organize information on various agency contract monitoring and licensing processes to strengthen our oversight work.
- **Effective Child Representation** – Advance discussions and partnerships to ensure an increased focus on child safety and well-being in Care & Protection proceedings, leading to better outcomes for children under state care.
- **Center on Child Wellbeing and Trauma Agency Trainings** – Partner with a variety of state agencies and external partners to provide training and technical assistance to ensure staff working with children are well-equipped with essential skills and knowledge. These include:
 - **EEC Trauma Informed and Responsive Training Plan** – Create a comprehensive training plan – including curriculum development and implementation of a train the trainer model – for Early Education and Care providers, licensors, investigators, and regional leadership, incorporating best practices and building a community of practice to enhance service quality.
 - **Training and Racial Equity Empowerment Academy** – Increase statewide capacity for trauma-informed and responsive training by partnering with DYS to develop a cadre of state employees who receive specialized training on trauma and racial equity for youth in the juvenile justice system.
 - **Assessing Current Trauma-Informed and Responsive Work in Schools** – Evaluate current trauma-informed practices in schools to identify needs and develop solutions that support children's well-being and safety.
 - **Training for First Responders** – Develop a trauma-informed response training program for first responders, improving their ability to serve children and families effectively.
 - **Assessing Community Training Needs** – Partner with DTA and DPH to assess and ultimately meet the trauma and resilience-related training needs of community-based providers of services for children and young adults.

Goal: Prevention & Breaking the Cycle

There is a comprehensive approach to supporting families in place state-wide with a goal 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 intergenerational involvement with our care and protection system.

- **Mandated Reporter Training** – Improve mandated reporting through profession-specific training, resulting in more accurate reporting and less bias in reporting. Expand on existing Mandated Reporter Training by developing a new profession-specific training. Issue a report memorializing the first year of the OCA-created Mandated Reporting Training and examining the impacts to help inform next steps.
- **Juvenile Justice System Improvements** – Continue to make recommendations for improvement to the juvenile justice system through our leadership of the **Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board**. In FY25 this will include:
 - **Pretrial** – Issue a report with recommendations for changes to help improve outcomes for youth in the pretrial phase of the juvenile justice system.
 - **Dually-Involved Youth Research** – Continue research on how and why DCF-involved youth become involved with the juvenile justice system, culminating in a report with recommendations for changes to reduce crossover from DCF to DYS.
- **Expand Diversion Services** – In partnership with DYS, continue to improve and expand the Massachusetts Youth Diversion Program statewide, including integrating – in partnership with the Attorney General’s Office – **additional supports for youth charged with sexting-related offenses**.
- **Family Resource Center Redesign** – In FY24, the OCA issued a report with recommendations for changes in the design and operation of Family Resource Centers. In FY25, continue to advocate for these recommendations with the Legislature and key state agencies and offer continued technical assistance to support advancement of these vital changes.
- **Support for Young Mothers at High Risk** – In partnership with Roca, Inc., continue to support the Roca “Young Mothers Program,” and use learnings from that program to identify systems-level barriers for young mothers with multiple state system involvement (e.g. criminal justice, Care & Protection) that could be addressed through policy and/or practice change.
- **Child Sexual Abuse Prevention** – Continue to co-chair the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Advisory Council, in partnership with the Children’s Trust. Lead efforts related to policy development, advocacy, data, and research.

Goal: Transition into Adulthood

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

- **Transition Age Youth** – Make recommendations for changes in policy and practice to ensure youth aging out of state services are stable and supported as they transition into adulthood. Identify potential opportunities to launch a new pilot project in this area, building on the previous success of the TAY Housing Stabilization and Support Program.
- **Improvement of Educational Outcomes for DCF Youth** – Conduct research and develop recommended strategies to improve educational outcomes for youth involved with DCF, ensuring they receive the support needed for academic success.

Goal: Addressing the Needs of Diverse Populations

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

- **Language Access** – Issue a report with recommendations for changes to improve access to state-funded child and family services for families with limited English proficiency.
- **Supporting New Arrivals** – Through the CCWT and in partnership with the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, provide a series of trainings and technical assistance to family shelter providers who are supporting new arrivals.
- **Promote CCWT Online Toolkits** – Develop additional outreach strategies to increase awareness and use of various toolkits on the CCWT website, including toolkits for educators on racial bias and trauma as well as toolkits for professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth.
- **Numerous Other FY25 Projects** – including but not limited to our work on pretrial reform, mandated reporting, diversion, CCWT trainings, dually-involved youth, transition age youth, educational outcomes for DCF youth, and child fatality review – have clear, distinct project goals and areas of focus related to addressing disparities and improving services for Black and Latino youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and/or youth who are immigrants.

Goal: 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.

- **Participate in Complex Case Resolution Process** – The OCA is a statutory member of the review team. We will review cases referred to the Complex Case Resolution process and advocate to ensure children receive services that will meet their unique needs.
- **Analysis of Services for Children with Problematic Sexual Behaviors** – Issue a report with recommendations for improving services for children and youth exhibiting Problematic Sexual Behaviors.
- **Child Fatality Review Report on Autism and Injury** – Improve awareness of services and identify areas of improvement with regards to injury prevention for children with autism.

Goal: Awareness of Services

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

- **Complaint Line Awareness** – Increase public awareness of OCA's Complaint Line and its role as an Ombudsperson for youth and families receiving/seeking services from the state.
- **Child, Youth and Family Services Website** – Identify opportunities for improving availability of accurate, easy-to-use information on state-funded services for children, youth, and families in a manner that is helpful to families and case managers working to help families navigate our complex systems.

Goal: High Quality Data

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

- **Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board** – Continue to manage the JJPAD, including requesting, analyzing, and reporting on juvenile justice data and operating and expanding the OCA's juvenile justice data website.
- **Child Fatality Review (CFR) Process** – Continue to report key data and improve the CFR system locally and statewide, including:
 - Improving local CFR Guidelines to enhance clarity and utility
 - Providing training and technical assistance to DCF to help create more consistent and robust DCF participation on local CFR teams
 - Convening a Local Team Collaborative Session for more consistent CFR meetings and higher quality problem statements.

- **DCF Annual Report Improvements** – Release report detailing the public feedback the OCA received on the DCF Annual Report and making recommendations for improvement.
- **Child, Youth & Family Services Mapping** – Document areas where state services for children, youth, and families could be better aligned across state agencies and make recommendations for improvements in service coordination and data reporting.
- **OCA Internal Data Systems** – Improve the OCA’s own internal data collection and analysis processes, including improvements to our internal Salesforce database. The OCA uses data collected through our Quality Assurance processes to identify areas requiring attention, inform OCA policy and project related work, and, through our Annual Report, provide information to key stakeholders and the public about risks to children receiving state services.

Goal: OCA Capacity

The Office of the Child Advocate has the expertise, reputation, relationships, capacity, and operational infrastructure in place to execute against its Mission.

- **Equity Framework** – Work with an external consultant to create and implement an Equity Framework for OCA and train staff.
- **Internal Communications** – Improve communication within the OCA regarding project milestones, legislative tracking, landscape assessment/changes, and other key items.
- **Communications and Legislative Strategy** – Craft a 2025-2026 Communications and Legislative strategy, including a full package of communications materials to distribute to key stakeholders about OCA priorities and initiatives.
- **Administrative Operations** – Improve OCA Administrative operations including finance, HR, IT, project tracking, and record keeping.