

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE STRATEGIC PLAN

FISCAL YEAR 2026



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THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

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[HTTPS://WWW.MASS.GOV/ORGs/OFFICE-OF-THE-CHILD-ADVOCATE](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-the-child-advocate)

Introduction

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) works to ensure that children receiving state services receive timely, appropriate, and high-quality services, with special attention to those most vulnerable and at risk. As an independent oversight agency, we work to strengthen state services for children by identifying gaps, promoting effective solutions, and partnering with public and private stakeholders to drive systemic change.

This document outlines the OCA's FY26 Strategic Plan, which builds upon our [FY24–26 Strategic Framework](#). It is grounded in our mission, guided by our vision, and shaped by the eight key goals we believe the Commonwealth must achieve for children and families. The plan reflects our dual role: addressing urgent needs today while advancing long-term improvements that will benefit future generations.

In the pages that follow, we detail our goals for our final year under this strategic framework, the strategies we will use to achieve those goals, and the criteria we apply in selecting our projects. Some initiatives are new, while others continue the momentum of ongoing efforts. Together, they represent our commitment to safeguarding children, supporting families, and building a stronger and more equitable system of care in Massachusetts.

As of this writing, we note that Child Advocate Maria Mossaides's term is drawing to a close, and the next Child Advocate has yet to be appointed.¹ As a result, this plan recognizes that FY26 will inevitably be a year of transition and change and anticipates the possibility of shifting priorities or areas of focus under new leadership.

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.

¹ Under MGL Chapter 18C, a child advocate is appointed to no more than two five-year terms.

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

The OCA believes that significant change is needed in the coming years to ensure the future 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 FY26 Strategic Plan

The OCA's FY26 Strategic Plan flows from our [FY24-26 Strategic Framework](#). Below is a list of projects the OCA intends to focus on during FY26. Note that some projects are a continuation of work begun in FY25 or earlier, while other projects will launch over the course of the next fiscal year. Not all work will necessarily be completed by the end of the fiscal year. That said, project goals and timelines are more heavily weighted toward the beginning of the FY26 cycle to leave room and flexibility for any additional initiatives a new Child Advocate may want to add to this plan.

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

This plan is built on the premise that 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 in our agency and throughout the state system.

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** – Continue to perform and enhance the OCA's Quality Assurance mechanisms, which include our Complaint Line and our review of reports of critical incidents, Department of Children and Families (DCF) supported reports of abuse and/or neglect in out-of-home settings, and DCF Foster Care Review safety alerts.

- **Investigation(s):** Continue to conduct investigations on an as-needed basis when a child receiving state services has suffered a fatality or other serious incident, and the actions or inactions of a state entity over which the OCA has oversight authority were egregious and significantly contributed to the harm of the child.
- **Background Checks for Educators** – Provide best-practice guidance for child protective history background checks for educators.
- **Effective Child Representation** – Advance discussions to ensure an increased focus on child safety and well-being in Care & Protection proceedings, leading to better outcomes for children under state care.
- **Residential Schools** – Continue facilitating ongoing collaboration between state agencies through the Residential Schools Interagency Working Group to ensure children in residential schools receive appropriate and coordinated services and residential schools are overseen in a comprehensive manner.
- **Training and Learning Collaborative** – Launch an interagency working group focused on aligning efforts across child-serving agencies in three Secretariats and improving quality and accessibility of training on core competencies for child-serving professionals
- **Trauma-Informed and Responsive Department of Early Education and Care** – Partner with the Department of Early Education & Care (EEC) to ensure all leaders and staff across functions have the tools, knowledge, and skills to implement trauma-informed and responsive EEC services that lead to child well-being.
- **Supporting Early Education Providers** – Promote sustainability of trainings on child trauma and wellbeing launched in FY25 by providing a “train the trainer” program for an additional cohort of educators and early education and care providers.
- **Executive Office of Education Trauma, Equity & Wellbeing Framework** – Work with senior leaders at the Executive Office of Education to develop a common framework and language on trauma, equity, and child well-being for the Secretariat and identify high priority opportunities for improved practices.

- **Trauma, Resilience & Equity Training with DCF** – In partnership with DCF’s Child Welfare Institute (CWI), identify high priority areas of need for staff training on trauma, resilience and equity. Co-develop curriculum and facilitate a train the trainer process to ensure CWI can reach all DCF staff.

Goal: Prevention and 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 two years of the OCA-created Mandated Reporting Training and examining the impacts to help inform next steps.
- **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.
- **Family Resource Center Redesign** – Building off the OCA’s 2024 report with recommendations for changes in the design and operation of Family Resource Centers, participate in the development of the upcoming re-procurement of the FRC network.
- **Expand Diversion Services** – In partnership with DYS, continue to improve and expand the Massachusetts Youth Diversion Program. In partnership with the Attorney General’s Office and DYS, continue to support integration of the new “sexting” diversion program into the MYDP, including supporting enhancing the educational program curriculum and delivery.
- **Municipal Police Training Committee** – Support development of portions of an MPTC online training for School Resource Officers focused on child development, the impacts of trauma on behavior, and alternatives to arrest. In partnership with MPTC, launch an online training on Secondary Traumatic Stress available for all law enforcement officers.

- **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 FY26 this will include continuing 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.
- **Childhood Trauma Task Force (CTTF)** – Continue to identify how the Commonwealth provides services to children who have experienced trauma, with the goal of preventing future juvenile justice system involvement. Develop understanding of the landscape of trauma-responsive services for children and families and create recommendations to improve the Commonwealth’s systems of support toward building more resilience.

Goal: Transition into Adulthood

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

- **Transition Age Youth Conversations** – Conduct a series of one-on-one structured conversations with young adults who have aged out of state services to better understand their experiences, identify opportunities for systems improvement, and inform the OCA’s next steps in this area.
- **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.

- **Trauma and Racial Equity Empowerment Academy (TREE):** Building on a successful “TREE” training series launched in partnership with the Department of Youth services in FY25, continue offering the TREE model, including new iterations:
 - **DYS:** Increase statewide capacity for trauma-informed and responsive training by partnering with DYS and Massachusetts Probation Service to develop a new cadre of

state employees who receive specialized training on trauma and racial equity tailored to address the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system.

- **DTA:** In partnership with the Department of Transitional Assistance, design and implement a new version of the “TREE” academy focused on the intersection between poverty, trauma, and child well-being for DTA staff.
- **CPCS:** In partnership with the Youth Advocacy Division of the Committee for Public Counsel Services, launch a regional training series on trauma, equity, and resilience.
- **Language Access** – Make recommendations for changes to improve access to state-funded child and family services for families with limited English proficiency.

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 Interagency Review Team Process** – As a statutory member of the interagency review team, continue to review cases referred to this team and advocate to ensure children receive services that will meet their unique needs.
- **Problematic Sexual Behavior** – In partnership with the Children’s Trust, issue a guide for caregivers and professionals on Problematic Sexual Behaviors and continue to work on a series of issue briefs with recommendations for ways to increase access to services for children and youth exhibiting Problematic Sexual Behaviors.

Goal: Awareness of Services

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

- **Youth Engagement Initiative** – Continue to work to ensure that youth, especially in congregate care settings, are aware of the OCA Complaint Line and their rights. Continue to visit congregate care settings to meet with youth, give them information about how the OCA Complaint Line can help, and hear directly from them about their experiences.

- **Child, Youth and Family Services Website** – Identify opportunities for improving the 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, managing the statewide team. As part of the FY26 CFR report, identify areas of improvement to reduce injuries and fatalities amongst young drivers.

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.

- **CQI Data Collection** – Continue to refine our data collection system to streamline reporting on areas that we have determined are of concern, to streamline findings from OCA case reviews, to track the OCA's follow-up and outreach to state agencies, and to identify emerging and ongoing trends across the child-serving system.
- **Organizational Capacity** – Advance a range of initiatives aimed at strengthening the OCA's internal operations and external impact. This includes:
 - Efforts to improve workforce support, streamline administrative processes, and enhance organizational systems.
 - Continuing to improve the accessibility of information about the OCA's work to the public.
 - Refining the tools and systems that support the OCA's oversight and quality assurance work.