



NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



Office of Advocacy Annual Report



Allison Blake, Ph.D., L.S.W.

Commissioner

September 2010 - June 2011



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

CHRIS CHRISTIE
Governor

KIM GUADAGNO
Lt. Governor

ALLISON BLAKE, PH.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner

Dear Colleagues:

The opening of the Office of Advocacy (OOA) to all constituents and stakeholders with an interest, concern, or question about New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) marks a milestone in our efforts to be transparent, responsive to constituent issues and our commitment to partnering with those we serve and the community at large.

I am proud of the staff we have assembled. I am equally impressed that in such a short period of time they have been able to establish a strong infrastructure and streamlined approach to respond to constituent concerns and provide advocacy services as we implement our mission of strengthening families and achieving safety, well-being and permanency for New Jersey's children.

That is why I am pleased to provide you with the First Annual Report of the Office of Advocacy which is intended to give you a glimpse into the work of this office and the foundation built for continued growth and focused advocacy for children and families. An account of OOA activities from its inception in September 2010 through June 2011 with highlights of the successes, challenges, lessons learned and goals moving forward have been provided within.

I am a strong proponent of annual reports such as these which help us to take some time to reflect on past accomplishments as well as look forward to the work that remains. As you read this report, it is my sincere hope that you will learn about the integral role this office plays in DCF's child welfare efforts. Furthermore and lastly, I encourage you to bring awareness to this office and its services in your circles of influence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Allison Blake".

Allison Blake, Ph.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner



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MISSION AND HISTORY

In September 2010, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) established the Office of Advocacy (OOA) to support the Department's mission of ensuring safety, permanency and well-being of children and families in New Jersey by providing advocacy, information and referral services to families.



While OOA was established organizationally as a department level office within the Office of the DCF Commissioner, it has been given the unique role as an independent advocate for children and families. This independence allows for timely resolution of constituent issues and concerns through direct collaborative communication with liaisons in each DCF division and office, other State agencies as well as with community providers and stakeholders.

As the Office of Advocacy has grown, its reach has also expanded from working independently on behalf of children and families who are involved with DCF to providing information, addressing constituent concerns and providing advocacy services to all who request this assistance. All contacts to the office are responded to and given priority review. Ultimately, OOA seeks to enhance service provision, ensure timely resolution of constituent issues and concerns, and empower families throughout New Jersey.

ABOUT THE STAFF

OOA is staffed by a team of professionals including a Director, a Supervisor, several Constituent Relations Liaisons, and an Administrative Assistant. There is a wealth of experience and expertise within the staff of OOA whose strengths represent many years in a variety of child welfare backgrounds, such as child protective services, child behavioral health, prevention and addictions.

It takes an exceptional person to be an OOA Constituent Relations Liaison. On any given day, OOA staff will field calls and emails from citizens who are exhibiting a variety of human emotions as they seek help for their issues and concerns.



OUR SERVICES: HOW WE HELP CITIZENS

The Office of Advocacy's primary function is to meet the needs of DCF service recipients. However, OOA's services are available to any family in New Jersey who calls or writes seeking assistance. Some examples of how we help citizens include:



- ❖ Providing education about the services, processes, policies and procedures of the Department of Children and Families and its Divisions and Offices
- ❖ Receiving and researching complaints from citizens regarding the child welfare system
- ❖ Assisting families in finding appropriate services
- ❖ Providing advocacy support to families
- ❖ Making recommendations to DCF based on performance data with the intent of improving the system

Constituents can reach the Office of Advocacy by calling a toll free number, 1-877-543-7864, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Constituents may also correspond with the Department by emailing askDCF@dcf.state.nj.us and the Office of Advocacy will respond.

It is important to note that the DCF Office of Advocacy is not a first responder for suspected child abuse or neglect. In New Jersey, any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to abuse or neglect should immediately report this information to the Child Abuse Hotline 1-877 NJ ABUSE (1-877-652-2873). If the child is in immediate danger, call 911 as well as 1-877 NJ ABUSE. A concerned caller does not need proof to report an allegation of child abuse and neglect and may make the report anonymously.

PROCEDURES

The Office of Advocacy receives contacts, complaints and inquiries via phone and email that represent a wide variety of needs, ranging from a communication breakdown with a staff member in one of the DCF Divisions to a caller with no service linkage at the time of a family crisis. Some families that contact the Office of Advocacy may be receiving services from more than one division or multiple provider agencies and are overwhelmed with determining who to contact. As a result, OOA staff advocate for these families which largely involves communication on their behalf, helping a constituent sort out their most emergent needs and directing them to appropriate services.

HOW CONTACTS ARE MADE TO OOA

When a constituent calls the Office of Advocacy, the call will be answered by a Constituent Relations Liaison who begins the process of opening the review. When OOA receives a letter or email detailing the constituent's concerns, staff will send an acknowledgement letter or return email so the writer knows their correspondence has been received and is under review. Additionally, constituent concerns can also be routed to OOA from other sources of referral such as the Governor's Office, the Commissioner's Office, and individual legislators on behalf of their constituent(s).



PROCEDURES (cont'd)

PROCESSING THE CONTACT

Constituent Relations Liaisons spend a considerable amount of time discussing a constituent's concern and gathering sufficient information to determine the issues involved. Following the gathering of information from the constituent, Constituent Relations Liaisons cross reference the Department of Children and Families' NJ's statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS) known as NJ SPIRIT to avoid duplication of review efforts.

This new contact/case will then be handled in one of the following ways depending on the nature of the issue:

1. OOA staff will keep the case and work with established liaisons in all of the DCF Divisions and Offices to advocate, collaborate and bring about a resolution.
2. The case may be assigned to the Manager of the DCF Division or Office involved for review and resolution. OOA staff will monitor the case until closure.
3. If it is a non DCF issue OOA staff will refer the matter to the appropriate State office for assistance and facilitation of the appropriate resource(s) to assist the constituent.
4. All contacts/cases are tracked until a response is provided to the constituent.

Once a review is complete, the constituent is informed of the disposition of the case and the case is closed.



DATA

In addition to assisting with each constituent's concerns, OOA also has a core responsibility to provide feedback about trends and systemic matters. Since its inception, the Office of Advocacy has kept meticulous records of the contacts it receives and their outcomes. However, as with the launch and implementation of any office, program or project, establishing a cost-effective, reliable and fully operational, automated database system has presented several challenges. Database development has required, and continues to require, the assistance of IT professionals to coordinate a merging of previous records and new needs. Due to the challenges of developing this data tracking system, we are able to offer limited data analysis but are committed to continuing to enhance our data collection and reporting capability.

Refinements have been made that have established consistency and uniformity as of January 2011 of this reporting period that have yielded identification of contact issue types, divisions and offices involvement tracking, etc. As of January 2011, data analysis reveals that the Office of Advocacy received over 3,500 unduplicated contacts requesting assistance. The table below reflects the number of contacts received by month and by the method in which they were received.

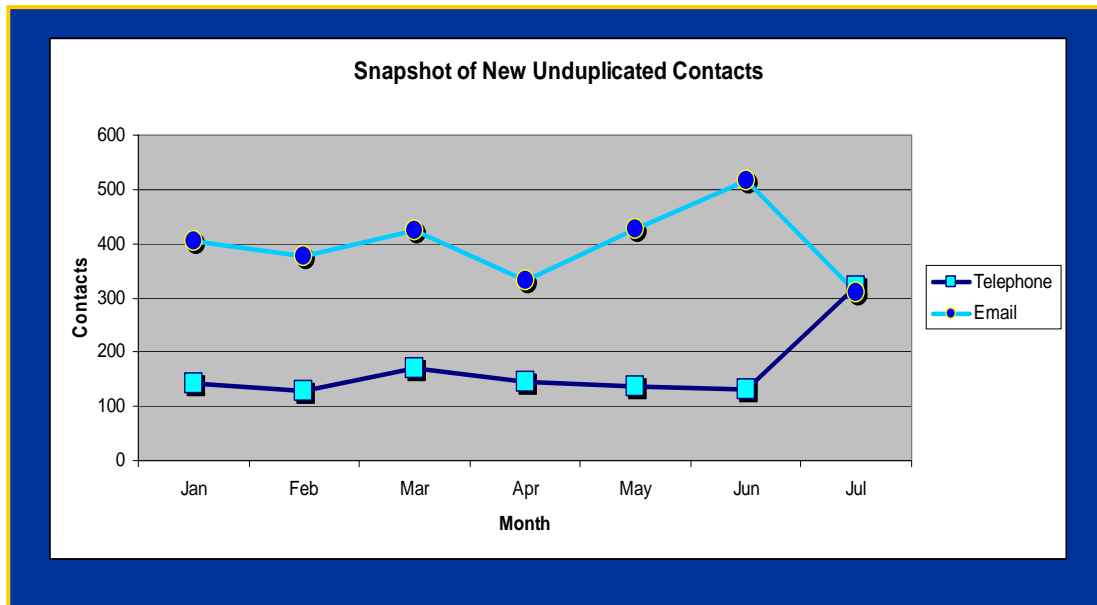
Snapshot of Total Number of Unduplicated Contacts Received

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Total
Telephone	143	127	169	145	138	130	322	1174
Email	404	376	423	333	426	516	309	2787
Total	547	503	592	478	564	646	631	3961

These numbers reflect initial contact/referrals on a new case. It does not include all of the "follow up calls" while the case is open in OOA.

DATA

In a cursory review of this data, as represented by the following chart, OOA has received a significant amount of email contacts with an upward trend. The number of telephone contacts has remained steady each month. While OOA believes it is premature to speculate reasons for such, continued monitoring of how the contacts are being made will help OOA understand the most effective means of communication with constituents which will be critical to the improvement of the Office's services and public education efforts .

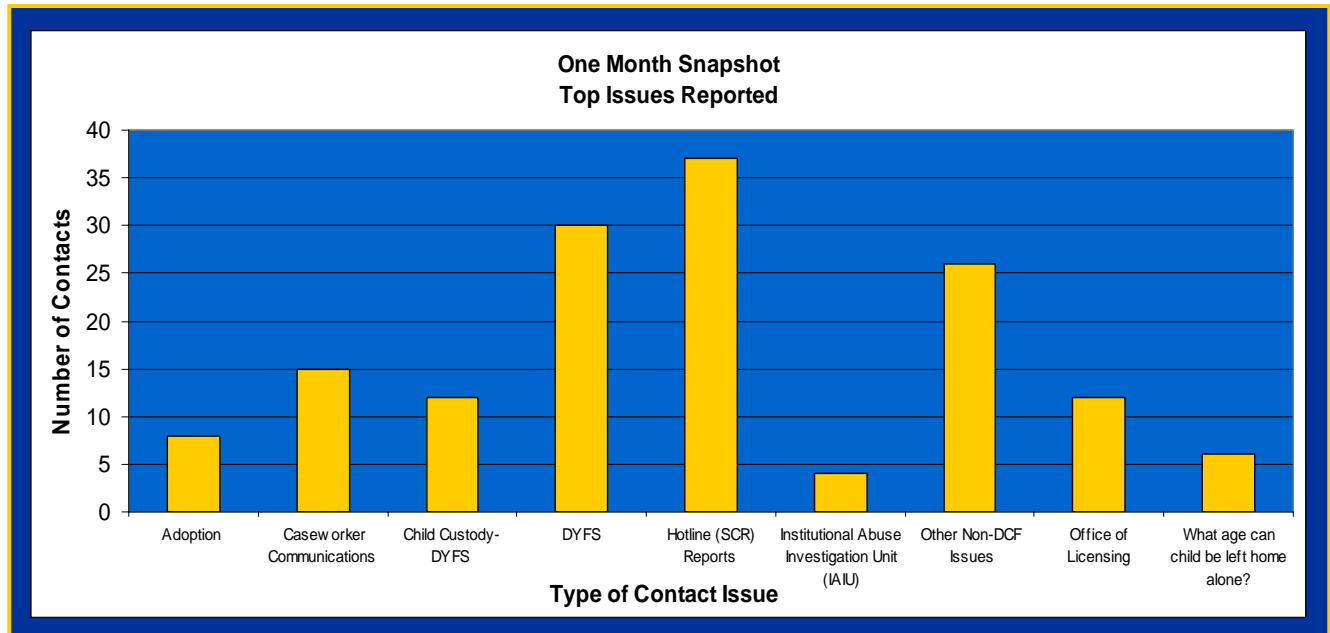


Furthermore, OOA will strive to continue to enhance their data collection and reporting capability but preliminary data analysis from the first 10 months of operation reveals that the majority of the contacts to OOA fell into the following areas:

1. Child Welfare Inquiries
2. Child Protective Services Questions and Concerns
3. Concerns on Open DYFS Cases
4. Child Behavioral Health Concerns
5. Requests for Information and Resources
6. Child abuse and/or neglect issues that required OOA staff to report them to the Departments State Centralized Registry office.

DATA

A snapshot of the month of June 2011 further evidences the types of contacts received as indicated in the following chart. While DYFS-related concerns seem to be the vast majority of contacts and cases handled, strikingly there are large amount of issues not related to DYFS or DCF services which are requests for information and resources.



CASE EXAMPLES

One of the roles of the Office of Advocacy is to share trend information and systemic data without compromising the confidentiality of those who contact us. The following case examples adhere to the tenets of this role and are representative of the types of contacts handled by Constituent Relations Liaisons.

TRANSITIONING ADOLESCENTS



OOA received a call from an 18 year old youth, seeking assistance when he could no longer remain with his adoptive parent and would be without housing and support. OOA staff facilitated a collaborative effort with two DCF offices, a DYFS Local Office and the Office of Adolescent Services to provide services to the youth. Many supports were put in place in a very short period of time by the Local Office staff and the youth is safe in a resource home with the goal of independent living.

In some cases, adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood have contacted OOA in search of information and referrals to assist them during this stage in their lives. Often they express concern with reference to their involvement in the child welfare system and need assistance navigating the problems they are experiencing.

FAMILY SUPPORT

During an extreme summer heat wave, parents contacted the Office of Advocacy advising that they, including their very young child, would in a day or two be homeless. They were being forced to leave the motel where they were staying and had no place to go. The family had no financial supports since their unemployment benefits were exhausted. In addition, they both suffered from medical issues needing attention and medication. OOA staff made numerous phone calls to the County Board of Social Services on the family's behalf and also reported the matter to the DCF State Central Registry for the purposes of a child welfare assessment. Upon review of the safety concerns due to the extreme heat wave the DYFS Local Office immediately assisted this family.



Economic issues have impacted a great number of citizens in the state. As a result, OOA has seen a significant number of cases like these that require coordination with other state agencies in order to help resolve a crisis for a family. However, sometimes there are mitigating circumstances that prevent agencies from offering support in a timely or complete fashion which can exacerbate the issue. Through ingenuity, tenacity and an established sense of urgency OOA staff, responsible for resolving this conflict, was able to communicate that this was an emergent need requiring DCF supports which were quickly mobilized.

CASE EXAMPLES (cont'd)



CHILD BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

A mother sent a very desperate email detailing her struggles with managing the behavior of her 7 year old son who is diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum disorder. She was completely overwhelmed trying to navigate her school district's special education system and feared that she would have to "institutionalize her son." OOA staff spoke with the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, NJ Parent Caucus, and ARC (Association for Retarded Citizens) of New Jersey to determine who could help meet her needs in a rapid and comprehensive way due to the desperate tone of her email. After much collaboration, appropriate services were identified through ARC of NJ Department of Parent Advocacy. This organization was able to open a case for the family, assess for in-home support and assign a parent advocate to mediate and assist with the school's special education process.

Often OOA Constituent Liaisons are required to use a sixth sense to understand the human struggle and spectrum of emotions. Doing so ensures that OOA staff are able to address concerns thoroughly. With this insight, OOA can make linkages to community partners who have expertise and experience in parent advocacy and empowerment. These partners serve as an invaluable resource because of their extensive knowledge of central issues of an inquiry or complaint on the local level. Additionally, connecting citizens to organizations and supports within their community helps promote safe and convenient environments to resolve their conflicts in which they can return should they require additional assistance in the future. Clearly, one of OOA's functions is to act as a resource for families as exemplified by this example.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The first year of the Office of Advocacy has been one of development and growth. First year objectives were very ambitious and resulted in many accomplishments that were extremely beneficial to the facilitation of the Office's assistance to the citizens of New Jersey.

❖ **Communications**

- OAA announced its existence to our community agency partners and stakeholders.
- OOA staff created lines of communication by establishing liaisons with all of the DCF divisions/offices and with other state departments in order to facilitate a prompt and efficient response to constituent concerns.
- OOA staff along with the DCF Office of Communications created a web page.
- Staff participated in Parent/Caregiver Forums to inform families of the existence of the office and services, and offered live, individualized assistance.
- OOA created and published a brochure in English and Spanish about the Office of Advocacy and distributed it all DCF offices, community partners, and the legislature.

❖ **Data Capture and Analysis**

- A database was created to allow for tracking OOA contacts and issues.
- OOA leadership has begun working with the DCF Office of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) to analyze the data that has been collected from constituent contacts during this first year in order to examine trends and patterns and then identify areas that need improvement in service delivery for children and families.

❖ **Operations**

- OAA leadership established policies and procedures for processing citizen's complaints and concerns.

GOALS FOR 2012

The Office of Advocacy's overall goals are to enhance service provision, ensure timely decisions and resolve constituent issues and concerns. More specifically, OOA has several goals for the coming year that will continue its work:

- OOA will continue to make enhancements to its data collection database and will work collaboratively with DCF's Office of Continuous Quality Improvement for support with data analysis. Doing so will allow OOA to continue to track citizen contacts and use this information as a tool to improve and assure the Department's quality of services.
- OOA will continue to review, analyze and establish internal operations and external activities that will support the office's commitment to being responsive to constituents effectively and efficiently.
- Advocacy for children and families requires the collaboration and assistance of many stakeholders, other state agencies and community partners. As a result, OOA will continue to establish regular lines of communication with agency officials and staff, state policy makers, and community stakeholders.
- OOA will seek to provide recommendations to DCF with the intent of improving the quality of state child welfare services through thorough analysis of issue trends that raise a level of concern or need further attention or research.
- OOA will continue to establish a statewide presence through public education and awareness efforts to build trust in our unique role as an independent advocate for children and families.

