



Office of Children and Family Services

Kathy Hochul
Governor

52 WASHINGTON STREET
RENSELAER, NY 12144

Suzanne Miles-Gustave, Esq.
Acting Commissioner

Informational Letter

Transmittal:	23-OCFS-INF-10
To:	Local Departments of Social Services Commissioners Voluntary Authorized Agencies Executive Directors
Issuing Division/Office:	Division of Child Welfare and Community Services
Date:	October 25, 2023
Subject:	Guidelines for Parent Advocate Programs
Suggested Distribution:	Local Departments of Social Services Directors Voluntary Authorized Agencies Executive Directors Child Welfare Supervisors Child Protective Services Supervisors Foster Care Supervisors Adoption Supervisors Staff Development Coordinators
Contact Person(s):	See section IV.
Attachments:	None

Filing References

Previous ADMs/INFs	Releases Cancelled	NYS Regs.	Soc. Serv. Law & Other Legal Ref.	Manual Ref.	Misc. Ref.
10-OCFS-INF-09 08-OCFS-INF14	10-OCFS-INF-09 08-OCFS-INF-14	18 NYCRR 441.2(o) and 441.21(b)			

I. Purpose

The purpose of this informational letter (INF) is to advise local departments of social services (LDSSs) and voluntary authorized agencies (VAs) of guidelines for operating a Parent Advocate Program. Parent Advocate Programs operate with parent advocates who are defined as persons who have been previously recipients of child welfare services; who have successfully addressed the issues that brought the family to the attention of child welfare; who have been reunified with their children, if applicable; and who have subsequently been successfully trained as a parent advocate to work within the child welfare system. Such person is either an employee or under contract with an LDSS or VA.¹

¹ 18 NYCRR 441.2(o).

II. Background

In November 2008, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) released 08-OCFS-INF-14 titled *Parent Advocate Programs*, which provided information to LDSSs and VAs regarding the use of parent advocates. This INF was followed in 2010 with 10-OCFS-INF-09, *Guidelines for Casework Contacts with Parents or Relatives by Parent Advocates*, which clarified that parent advocate contacts with parents or relatives of children can be considered “casework contacts” for meeting casework contact requirements with the parents or relatives of children in foster care for up to two out of the contacts required in a six-month period when the contacts are coordinated by the case planner.

This INF cancels and replaces the above INFs as the guidance document for Parent Advocate Programs. OCFS recognizes that operating a Parent Advocate Program may not be practicable for every LDSS or VA, and this INF is not a mandate to establish a Parent Advocate Program. However, OCFS does encourage LDSSs and VAs to explore the feasibility of operating a Parent Advocate Program and to utilize the guidance in this document to determine whether a Parent Advocate Program could be a positive addition to their array of child welfare services. OCFS further encourages LDSSs and VAs who operate a Parent Advocate Program to obtain feedback from parent advocates about the experiences of parents and relatives of children in foster care as part of their ongoing efforts to improve family engagement and provide positive outcomes for children and families. This INF also addresses the role of parent advocates, who are not mandated reporters, in addressing possible safety concerns.

III. Program Implications

Parent advocates may be helpful to families who have not responded to previous outreach, have expressed unwillingness to participate in planning, or have demonstrated ambivalence toward the planning process and the receipt of services. Parents and relatives of children in foster care may have been exposed to negative stereotypes about the child welfare system and may be fearful of allowing child welfare caseworkers into their family’s life. Conversely, parents and relatives of children in foster care may not have any knowledge of the child welfare system and may benefit from learning about the experiences of a parent advocate. For all these reasons, parent advocates are often able to engage families in the provision of services, including casework contacts, and may be able to help them have successful interactions within the child welfare system.

Parent advocates are not mandated reporters as their duty is to support parents/relatives and they do not meet independently with children in foster care without the case planner/manager present. However, if the parent advocate observes or is told of a circumstance which causes the advocate to have a reasonable cause to suspect that a child or children are in immediate danger of serious harm, the parent advocate is required to immediately provide such information to the case planner/manager. It is the responsibility of the case planner/manager to assess the information and determine whether the information rises to the level of a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or maltreatment, and, if so, the case manager/planner, who is a mandated reporter, must make a report to the New York Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR).

The functions of a parent advocate include providing support and advocacy to a parent or relative whose family is impacted by the child welfare system. Providing support and advocacy may occur through a variety of actions, including but not limited to the following:

- Engaging the parent or relatives.
- Assisting parents and relatives in navigating child welfare system.

- Assisting parents or relatives with understanding the family court process.
- Attending case conferences and family team meetings.
- Helping the family identify existing strengths and resources.
- Working with parents or relatives to plan for parenting or family time.
- Accompanying parents or relatives to school meetings, meetings with social services, and other appointments.
- Working as a liaison between parents or relatives and the caseworker.
- Helping the family build a strong support network.

Best Practice Guidelines

As reflected in this issuance, OCFS supports the use of parent advocates. In addition, we strongly recommend that LDSSs and VAs consider the best practice guidelines listed in the remainder of this policy document before parent advocates begin working in collaboration between the LDSS and/or VA and the parents or relatives of families impacted by the child welfare system.

Recruitment – LDSSs and VAs are advised to create a job description that clearly defines the role of the parent advocate, as well as any requirements the agency has in choosing advocates. Careful consideration should be given to the length of time since the applicant was last involved with the child welfare system, as well as any other background issues that may be deemed acceptable or not acceptable for an advocate. Applicants with active substance abuse issues or untreated significant mental health issues would not be good candidates for the advocate position. It may be helpful to develop a candidate checklist of what requirements the agency defines for the job, as well as what background checks will be completed. Parent advocates must go through the same pre-employment clearance process as other employees working at the agency. Part of the definition of parent advocate is that the individual has previous experience with the child welfare system, and therefore, in many cases, the individual may be the subject of an indicated report of child abuse or maltreatment, so a case-by-case determination must be made based on the child protective history and the progress the individual has made at the time of application for the advocate position.

Referrals – For most programs, the primary source of referrals will be child welfare workers who have families that graduate from the child welfare system successfully. In some cases, the agency receives self-referral applicants, and, eventually, an agency may have parents who have had a parent advocate themselves who graduate to the role of parent advocate. LDSSs and VAs may choose to consult with Families Together NY, which provides training and credentialing of parent advocates.

Training – Parent advocate training should include a baseline understanding of child protective and child welfare services (including safety and risk assessment), understanding and working on boundaries with families, understanding the role of the parent advocate and case planner/manager, communication and advocacy skills, understanding public assistance and public housing issues, understanding confidentiality, and knowledge of parent rights. In addition, parent advocates should receive training on separating their own personal experiences from those of the family's. The length and level of training that an advocate must undergo before being assigned responsibility to work with a parent or relative of a child in foster care and complete a subset of casework contacts is determined by the LDSS or VA. An LDSS or VA may provide this training, or it may be provided through an outside training program. The LDSS or VA must also train agency staff on what the role of the parent advocate entails. The parent advocate role is to assist the family and caseworker in strengthening the family, not replace the case planner/manager.

Support – It is crucial that parent advocates receive regular ongoing supervision and support within their role. A supervisor must be accessible to the parent advocate, and regular supervision meetings

must occur between the advocate and the supervisor. It is recommended that this supervision be tailored to the needs of the advocate based on experience in the job as well as personal strengths and weaknesses. In addition, peer support groups or mentoring by an experienced parent advocate can provide valuable support to an advocate when needed.

Communication – Regular meetings must be held between the parent advocate and the case planner/manager to communicate progress or any concerns on shared cases. Parent advocates need to be aware that families may try to split them and the case planner/manager, causing the parent advocate and the case planner to work toward opposing goals. Parent advocates should be encouraged to view themselves as part of a team working in conjunction with child welfare staff with each family and, as such, should be made to feel comfortable in giving the other workers updates on the family and communicating any concerns that arise. The case planner/manager makes the ultimate decisions in the case with input from the parent advocate, so communication is very important. If at any time an LDSS or a VA has any concerns regarding a parent advocate completing casework contacts with a particular family, the supervisor of the advocate, in conjunction with other agency staff, should assess whether continuing casework contacts is in the best interests of both the family and the advocate. In addition, advocates should not be put in the position of making case planning decisions; however, their input should be sought when the case planner/manager is making such decisions. It is recommended that parent advocates be included in general staff meetings and trainings that pertain to their role. Other LDSS and agency staff should be encouraged by supervisory staff to view the parent advocate as a partner and valuable resource in their child welfare cases.

Confidentiality/Client Privacy – Confidentiality requirements for parent advocates must be the same as for other child welfare staff. Information gathered by parent advocates may be shared within the agency only with those who “have a need to know,” such as child protective services staff and case planner/managers. In addition, information regarding the case should be shared with the advocate at the same level as it is shared with the caseworker/case planner. To maintain client privacy, careful consideration should be made when matching a parent advocate to a family that may reside in the same community.

Casework Contacts – 18 NYCRR 441.21(b) allows those persons who meet the definition of parent advocate to complete a limited number of casework contacts with the parents or relatives of children placed in foster care only for purposes of guiding the children’s parents toward a course of action aimed at resolving the reasons for the child(ren) placement in foster care as coordinated by the case planner. Parent advocates may not conduct safety assessments to determine whether the child would be safe if returned home or the potential risk for future abuse or maltreatment if the child were returned home.

Records – Casework contacts made by the parent advocate must be entered into CONNECTIONS. This must be done by another staff person, such as the caseworker or case planner, or whomever is designated to enter the advocate’s contacts. In addition, information from parent advocates on how the family is functioning and meeting their casework goals must be included in the Family Assessment Service Plan (FASP) and in reports to the family court.

IV. Contacts

Buffalo Regional Office - Amanda Darling (716) 847-3145

Amanda.Darling@ocfs.ny.gov

Rochester Regional Office - Christopher Bruno (585) 238-8201

Christopher.Bruno@ocfs.ny.gov

Syracuse Regional Office - Sara Simon (315) 423-1200

Sara.Simon@ocfs.ny.gov

Albany Regional Office - John Lockwood (518) 486-7078

John.Lockwood@ocfs.ny.gov

Westchester Regional Office - Sheletha Chang (845) 708-2498

Sheletha.Chang@ocfs.ny.gov

New York City Regional Office - Ronni Fuchs (212) 383-4873

Ronni.Fuchs@ocfs.ny.gov

Native American Services - Heather LaForme (716) 847-3123

Heather.LaForme@ocfs.ny.gov

/s/ Gail Geohagen-Pratt

Issued By:

Name: Gail Geohagen-Pratt

Title: Deputy Commissioner

Division/Office: Division of Child Welfare and Community Services