



**Department of
Job & Family
Services**

Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office



Youth & Family Ombudsmen Office

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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Message from the Ombudsmen

We are honored to present this second annual report of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. This summarizes our work completed between January 1 and December 31, 2023. As a brief introduction to more detailed observations to follow, **6** dedicated professionals collectively resolved **636** new formal complaints, **307** of which required a full investigation. This was in addition to **625** separate general inquiries. All specific data, along with our various recommendations, are respectfully offered both to supplement current efforts by local and state authorities, as well as to inform future decisions impacting Ohio youth and families.

During this second and longer reporting period, we were able to reflect upon both the benefits and the continued potential of our independent statewide grievance outlet dedicated to improving Ohio's children services system. We were also encouraged by the positive feedback offered by numerous stakeholders, across both public and private sectors, who view our inaugural roles to be an integral part of the necessary system-wide transformation happening in Ohio. We plan to expand and build upon our collaborative work with colleagues and community members in this new year, including the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB) whose members believe in and constantly prove the power of youth voice.

Whatever upcoming challenges await our mission to improve service delivery and outcomes, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office will continue to appreciate our unique opportunity to receive so many different perspectives daily. Hearing directly from youth and families adds tremendous value to our work and will continue to inform our future recommendations. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office offers special thanks to Governor Mike DeWine and his administration for their commitment to prioritizing the safety, well-being, and needs of Ohio's children. We are especially inspired by the bravery and determination of the youth who reach out to us for help.

We also want to take this opportunity to commend our colleagues in state government who work tirelessly to strengthen Ohio's children services system, along with the many public and private local agencies who have embraced our neutral involvement with a collaborative and problem-solving mindset. Furthermore, we are equally grateful for every family member, resource caregiver, service provider, and community member who came forward to share their stories and concerns. The collective wisdom of Ohioans is invaluable. Finally, we want to publicly thank our team. We are reminded daily by their professional excellence and ongoing patience how compassion and courtesy can make a difference.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jenny Stotts".

Jenny R. Stotts
Youth Ombudsman



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer A. Sheriff".

Jennifer A. Sheriff
Family Ombudsman

Introduction

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office was created in 2022 to independently review and impartially resolve case-specific concerns reported by individuals, “including children in the custody of a public children services agency or in the care and placement of a Title IV-E agency, related to government services regarding child protective services, foster care, and adoption.”¹ The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is co-led by Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts and Family Ombudsman Jennifer Sheriff, both of whom were appointed in 2022 by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine.

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is housed administratively within the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS); therefore, all investigative operations will continue to remain independent from Ohio’s new Department of Children and Youth (DCY) created in 2023. Files maintained by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen are not “public records,”² which are otherwise subject to inspection or copying under Ohio law. Rather, they are internal records shared only at the discretion of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen, or if disclosure is required by a court order.³

[Section 5101.892 of the Ohio Revised Code](#) requires this annual report to be provided to the following recipients:

Ohio Governor (Mike DeWine),
Ohio House of Representatives Speaker (Jason Stephens),
Ohio Senate President (Matt Huffman),
Ohio House of Representatives Minority Leader (C. Allison Russo),
Ohio Senate Minority Leader (Nickie Antonio),
Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Director (Matt Damschroder), and
Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB).

Within 60 days of release of this annual report, OHIO YAB is required by law to provide an evaluation to both Governor DeWine and Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts.⁴

¹See ORC § 5101.892 (“The youth and family ombudsman office shall perform all of the following duties: (A) Receive, investigate, and attempt to resolve complaints from citizens, including children in the custody of a public children services agency or in the care and placement of a Title IV-E agency, related to government services regarding child protective services, foster care, and adoption.”).

²See ORC § 149.43 (“(A) As used in this section: (1) ‘Public record’ means records kept by any public office, including, but not limited to, state, county, city, village, township, and school district units, and records pertaining to the delivery of educational services by an alternative school in this state kept by the nonprofit or for-profit entity operating the alternative school pursuant to section 3313.533 of the Revised Code.”).

³See ORC § 5101.899 (C) (“Files of the office and any records contained in those files are not public records subject to inspection or copying under section 149.43 of the Revised Code. Information contained in investigative and other files maintained by the office shall be disclosed only at the discretion of the office or if disclosure is required by a court order.”).

⁴See ORC § 5101.893 (“Not later than sixty days after release of the annual report described under section 5101.892 of the Revised Code, the overcoming hurdles in Ohio youth advisory board shall provide an evaluation of the report to the governor and the youth ombudsman of the youth and family ombudsman office.”).

Mission, Vision, and Values

Core Values

We approach everyone with **compassion**.
We are **accessible** to youth and families.
We promote **honesty** and **transparency**.
We respect **privacy** and **confidentiality**.
We complete **objective** and **fair** investigations.
We are partners in **transformation**.

Mission

We receive, review, and resolve complaints to **improve** service delivery and outcomes for Ohio youth and families involved with the children services system.

Vision

We imagine an Ohio where youth voices are **amplified**, where people are **respected**, and where the needs of all families are **met**.



Community Education and Outreach

Building effective working relationships with stakeholders is and will remain a key component of strategic efforts to better serve Ohioans and pursue children services transformation. Notable presentations and community outreach activities pursued throughout 2023 included:

- Children’s Defense Fund of Ohio
- Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development (COAD)
- Ohio Children’s Alliance
- Ohio Community Response Guide Core Team
- Ohio Court Appointed Special Advocate Association (Ohio CASA)
- Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY)
- Ohio Department of Education and Workforce
- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (MHAS)
- Ohio Family Care Association (OFCA)
- Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB)
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO)
- The Ohio Bar Association
- The Supreme Court of Ohio
- United States Ombudsmen Association (USOA)

The Youth Ombudsman has and will continue to prioritize youth-focused outreach. Efforts include attendance at OHIO YAB’s quarterly meetings and special events; the development of additional youth outreach materials, including cards designed by youth; the development of an Educator Toolkit;⁵ and the rollout of Foster Youth Bill of Rights sessions offered to group homes and residential treatment centers around Ohio. The Youth Ombudsman also collected survey data from youth and young adults about their communication preferences, which informed the development and circulation of several new outreach resources in 2023.⁶

⁵See <https://youthandfamilyombudsmen.ohio.gov/resources/resource/Educator-Toolkit>

⁶See, for example, Youth Ombudsman Outreach Materials (*Appendices*)

2022 Annual Report Recommendations Update

Early Recommendations

After analyzing data compiled during the previous reporting period, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office offered many observations and three distinct recommendations in the 2022 Annual Report. Ohio agency responses to those initial recommendations are shared below.

Improving the Accessibility of Local Grievances

The 2022 Annual Report recommended that all written grievance policies and procedures be made available on PCSA websites.⁷

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office invited every Ohio PCSA and private placement agency to designate a point of contact and supply courtesy copies of pertinent local grievance policies and procedures. As of the date of the 2023 Annual Report, **50** private agencies, **12** Title IV-E Courts, and **88** public agencies had responded. At least one Ohio agency (Clark County Job and Family Services) now uses a simplified submission process for emancipated youth, with a plain-language policy explaining all procedural steps.⁹ Notably, **3** agencies confirmed having no formal grievance procedure.

PCSA Grievance Accessibility ⁸	2022	2023
Grievance materials are accessible on public website	10	16
Grievance materials provide information about YFO	0	6
Grievance materials include a blank complaint form	4	32
Constituents are required to first request the policy or form from PCSA staff	83	70

Strengthening Referral and Intake

In response to the 2022 annual report, the ODJFS Office of Families and Children (OFC), which is now fully transitioned into Ohio's new Department of Children and Youth (DCY), confirmed that the recommendations to strengthen referral and intake practices aligned with transformation work already underway in Ohio. Ongoing statewide initiatives have included reviewing and revising rules associated with intake, screening, assessment/investigation, jurisdiction, and cross-reporting, as outlined in [Rule 5101:2-36 of the Ohio Administrative Code](#), and the pilot of a mandated reporting portal.

Strengthening Agency Communication

In response to the 2022 annual report, OFC also shared their ongoing efforts to offer workforce supports for caseworker recruitment, training, and PCSA staff retention. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office met regularly with OFC leadership to review case-level issues. This presented many opportunities to discuss possible new or improved ways to strengthen practice.

⁷See 2022 Annual Report, Page 32 ("The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office recommends that all PCSAs post their written policies for receiving, reviewing, and resolving complaints and disposition appeals to their public websites. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office advises a review of Rule 5101:2-33- 20 in consideration of this recommendation.")

⁸Combined JFS agencies were counted as individual PCSAs for the purposes of this table presenting grievance accessibility data.

⁹Another PCSA (Allen County Children Services) has developed a substantially revised formal grievance procedure that expressly provides contact information for the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. That updated policy also offers prospective complainants a blank complaint submission form available on their website. Furthermore, several additional Ohio agencies have posted formal grievance resources on their public websites thereby reducing the need for individuals to request procedural guidance before concerns are presented.

Ongoing Retaliation Concerns

In the 2022 annual report, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office shared observations related to retaliation fears. In 2023, retaliation remained a common concern. More than **36** formal complaints alleged past retaliation. Many said they did not submit a formal complaint out of fear of future retaliation by local authorities. Of equal concern, retaliation has also continued to be cited as a major deterrent to timely reporting of unresolved case-specific issues. On numerous occasions, retaliation concerns were shared by prospective complainants who called to ask preliminary questions. At present, neither the Ohio Revised Code nor the Ohio Administrative Code provides any legal safeguards to protect Ohioans against retaliation stemming from their decision to file a formal complaint at the state level.

“Don’t talk to the agency until I move to my new placement. If they know that I complained, they might not let me move.”

(Youth Complaint)

“I have not filed any type of formal complaint or grievance with [PCSA] as we now fear that our foster son will be removed from us in retaliation, and I do not want to cause him any harm.”

(Resource Family Complaint)



General Inquiries

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office currently offers two primary options to submit information: a public website and a public unrecorded phone line. Any individual can submit questions or formal written complaints online at yfo.ohio.gov. Individuals are also able to request and receive direct assistance by calling **(877) OH-YOUTH** or **(877) 649-6884** during business hours (Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm). If an individual does not speak English, has limited English proficiency, or otherwise requires direct assistance with the phone system or website, interpreter services and other accommodations are available. All Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office staff are trained to provide practical and compassionate guidance to every individual.

During this reporting period, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office resolved **625** separate general inquiries involving **87** different Ohio counties and **9** state jurisdictions.¹⁰ Those non-complaint activities included **1,632** phone calls initiated by individuals seeking support.

As previously reported, a “general inquiry” record is created whenever any individual reaches out directly to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office (either through the website or by phone), or if another state government office asks the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office to independently review a written complaint that was originally submitted elsewhere. Neither the Youth Ombudsman nor the Family Ombudsman views or counts any general inquiry as a formal complaint, although many individuals who reach out to ask preliminary questions will file future formal complaints. General inquiries are typically resolved very quickly as all staff are trained to refer constituents to other services, whenever appropriate, and offer detailed guidance regarding all complaint submission and review protocols. In fact, **81%** of all 2023 general inquiries were resolved within **24** hours.

General Inquiry Origin	
Phone	430
Web	103
Governor’s Office Referral	30
ODJFS Referral	29
Legislator Referral	10
Other	23
	625

General Inquiry Resolution	
Complaint Filed	224
Information Request Only	121
Referred to another ODJFS office	47
Referred to another entity	80
Other	153
	625

¹⁰During this 2023 reporting period, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office supplied Information and Referral (I&R) guidance to individuals associated with the following states: Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and Texas.

Youth Ombudsman Complaint Data

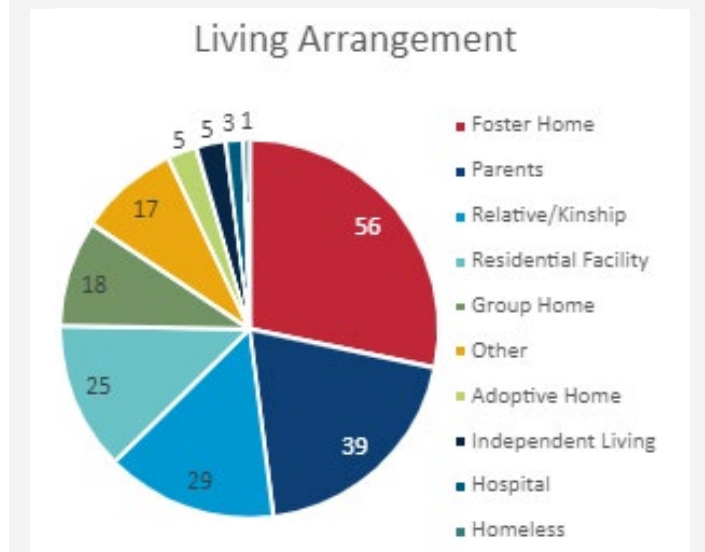
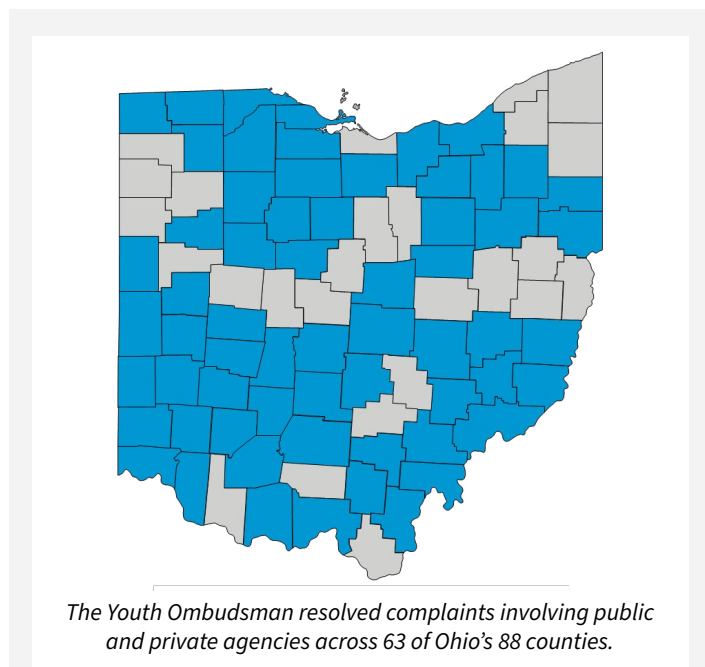
This section includes data related to the **198** complaints resolved by the Youth Ombudsman between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023. During this time, the Youth Ombudsman and Assistant Youth Ombudsman completed **2,769** individual contacts related to complaints.

Youth Complaint Overview

The Youth Ombudsman accepts complaints directly from youth and from adults on behalf of youth. Of the **198** youth complaints resolved during this reporting period, **24** were submitted directly by youth or recently emancipated young adults. Adults submitted **174** complaints on behalf of youth. Of those, **88** of the involved youth were aware that a complaint was submitted on their behalf. In most instances, they had direct contact with the Youth Ombudsman or Assistant Youth Ombudsman during the investigation.¹¹ Complaints submitted on behalf of youth were commonly provided by adult siblings, other relatives, teachers, and medical providers.

Gathering reliable demographic data for the youth involved in youth complaints remains challenging because youth complaints are frequently submitted on their behalf, and the current complaint form on the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office website collects demographic data only from the complaint source. This issue has been reported to ODJFS to be addressed in future upgrades to the case record management system. Even so, most youth involved in complaints declined to provide demographic information.

Of the **198** complaints resolved by the Youth Ombudsman in 2023, most were regarding public children services agencies (PCSAs) and involved youth who were living in foster homes. Most youth were in the temporary custody of a PCSA at the time of complaint submission.



Current PCSA Involvement	
Permanent Custody (or PPLA)	31
Temporary Custody	79
Court-Ordered Protective Supervision	5
Voluntary Case	23
No Open Case	60

Agency Type	
PCSA	156
PCPA/PNA	28
Bridges	3
Other	11

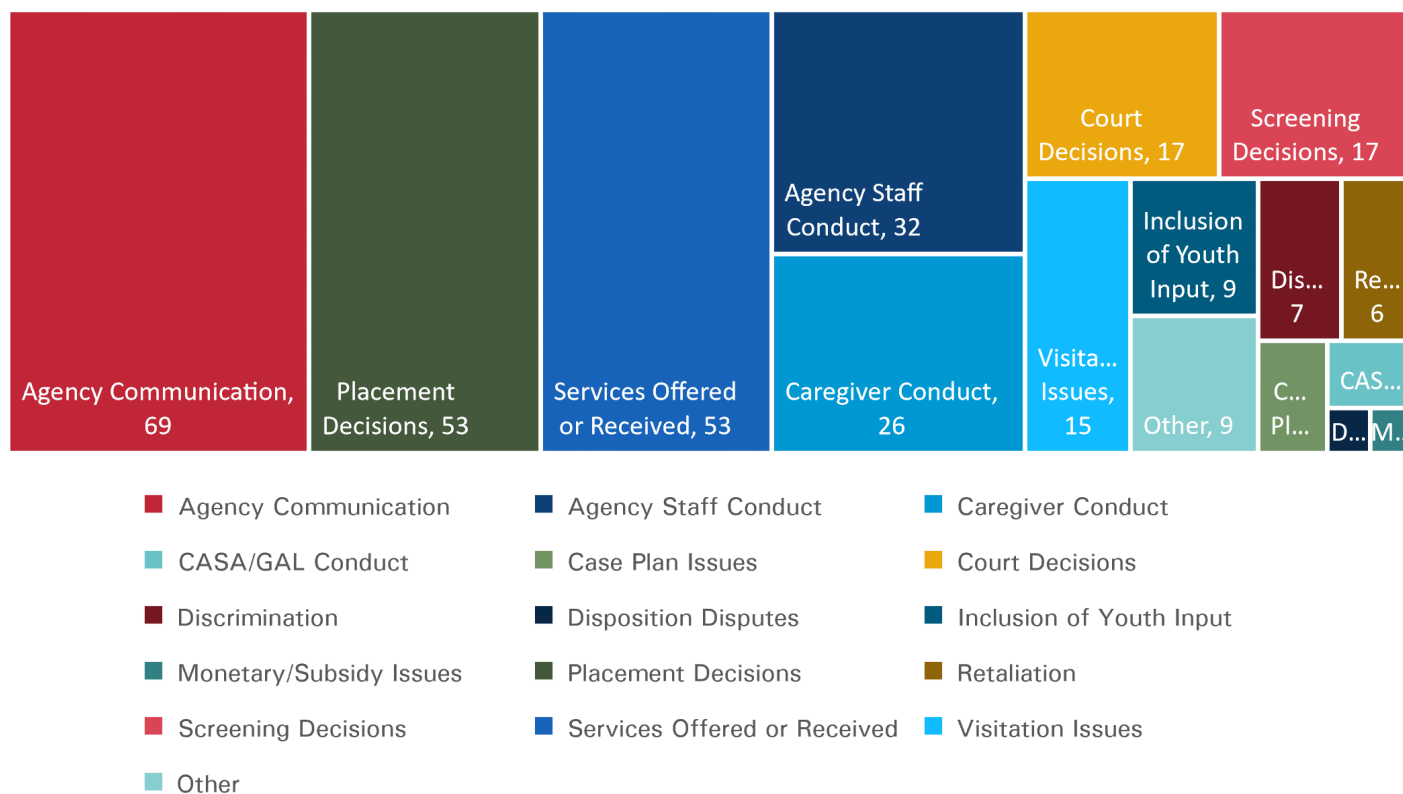
¹¹See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile A (Appendices).

Youth Complaint Concerns

Across all complaints resolved in 2023, the Youth Ombudsman reviewed **322** separate concerns. Multiple concerns were reported in **124** complaints; **14** complaints involved five or more separate concerns. Agency communication was a factor in **35%** of youth complaints, including both the frequency and quality of communication. Concerns about agency communication and agency staff conduct were frequently reported together. Consequently, the Youth Ombudsman often recommended Family Team Meetings and Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables¹² during complaint investigations. Concerns regarding case plan services were reviewed in **53** youth complaints. Of the complaints involving older teens, independent living services¹³ were often the focus of recommendations issued to the PCSA.¹⁴

In response to a recommendation from OHIO YAB, the Youth Ombudsman began tracking self-reported information regarding youths’ receipt of the Foster Youth Handbook.¹⁵ Of the youth who had direct contact with the Youth Ombudsman or Assistant Youth Ombudsman regarding their complaints or complaints submitted on their behalf, **75%** reported that they did not receive the handbook or did not remember receiving the handbook.

Youth Complaint Concerns



¹²“Youth Centered Permanency Round Tables (YCPRT) are professional case consultations that provide support to the caseworkers while taking a compressive look at the youth’s situation, seeking to bust barriers to attain legal and relational permanence.” Kinnect. <http://www.ycprt.org>

¹³See OAC Rule 5101:2-42-19 Requirements for the provision of independent living services to youth in custody.

¹⁴See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile B (Appendices).

¹⁵See OAC Rule 5101.2-5-35(B) (“The custodial agency is to ensure the foster youth bill of rights and/or a copy of the JFS 01677 “Foster Youth Rights Handbook” pursuant to rule 5101:2-42-90 of the Administrative Code, along with the agency’s complaint procedure, pursuant to rule 5101:2-33-20 of the Administrative Code, are explained to each child as developmentally appropriate and provided to all children in custody.”)

Youth Complaint Outcomes

The investigation and resolution of a youth complaint is a complex process. It often involves multiple interviews and other communication with the youth, agency staff, and other parties, as well as a review of confidential records or other submitted information. A youth complainant may be referred to another office or agency if a particular complaint concern does not fall within the Youth Ombudsman’s scope or jurisdiction. Most frequently, the Youth Ombudsman refers individuals to PCSAs or local courts. During this reporting period, the Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman submitted **18** referrals of abuse or neglect to local authorities.

Of the complaints resolved in 2023, **135** involved formal investigations. The Youth Ombudsman issued one or more recommendations for corrective action at the conclusion of **47** of those investigations.¹⁶ The Youth Ombudsman frequently shared investigative observations with local agency leadership regardless of the issuance of formal recommendations for corrective action. Agencies indicated that they had partially or fully implemented the Youth Ombudsman’s recommendations **74%** of the time.¹⁷ Other times, agencies either disagreed with the Youth Ombudsman’s investigative observations and/or recommendations or were unable to implement the recommendations due to resources and/or local policy issues. In **6** instances, the implementation status is unknown because the agencies did not provide an update once the Youth Ombudsman’s recommendations were issued.

Referrals Issued by Youth Ombudsman	
PCSA	125
Court (incl. attorney or CASA/GAL)	70
ODJFS/DCY	32
CA/N Referral	18
Law Enforcement	11
Bridges/IL	5
Youth Navigator	2
Other	15
	278

Agency Response to Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	
Agency Fully Implemented Recommendations	21
Agency Partially Implemented Recommendations	14
Agency Did Not Implement Recommendations	6
Agency Did Not Respond to Recommendations	6
Youth Ombudsman Did Not Issue Recommendations	88
N/A (complaint withdrawn, non-jurisdiction, info & referral only, etc.)	63

Actions Taken by Agency in Response to Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	
Agency Reviewed and/or Overturned a Previous Decision	7
Agency Reviewed and/or Revised a Policy or Procedure	15
Agency Addressed a Personnel Matter (staff discipline, case reassignment, staff training, etc.)	11
Agency Incorporated a Case-Level Change (placement, services, communication, etc.)	28
Other	5

¹⁶See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile E (*Appendices*).

¹⁷Agencies that fully or partially implemented Youth Ombudsman recommendations on one or more occasions in 2023 include: Allen County C.S.; Belmont Pines Hospital; Butler County C.S.; Columbiana County J.F.S.; Cuyahoga County C.F.S.; Darke County C.S.; Franklin County C.S.; Hamilton County J.F.S.; Huron County J.F.S.; Licking County J.F.S.; Lorain County C.S.; Mahoning County C.S.; Montgomery County C.S.; Ohio Mentor; Ohio Teaching Family Association; Pickaway County J.F.S.; Preble County C.S.; Seneca County J.F.S.; South Central J.F.S. (Ross County); Wayne County C.S.; Williams County C.S.

Youth Ombudsman Observations and Recommendations

While the Youth Ombudsman addresses each complaint individually and works to resolve case-level concerns, the Youth Ombudsman's unique view of Ohio's children services system offers an opportunity to observe and analyze recurring themes across a variety of complaint profiles and jurisdictions. The Youth Ombudsman respectfully offers the following observations and recommendations.

Youth Ombudsman Observations

Specialized Investigations

A carefully executed out-of-home-care investigation is an integral part of the children services system safety net. Complaints investigated and resolved by the Youth Ombudsman revealed inconsistencies with out-of-home-care investigations across Ohio. This issue is exacerbated by the varying use of Ohio SACWIS to document investigative activities. A specialized investigation is required whenever a PCSA screens in an abuse or neglect referral involving a licensed home or facility.¹⁸

In some instances, the issues investigated in 2023 began with the initial screening and intake process. The Youth Ombudsman discovered numerous instances of reported physical abuse or neglect in out-of-home-care settings categorized as "Information and/or Referral" or "Additional Non-CA/N Information on an Open CPS Case" within Ohio SACWIS. Other times, reports of abuse or neglect in out-of-home-care settings were screened out as a "Rules Violation." While abuse or neglect is certainly a violation of licensing rules and should be reported to the appropriate authority, the PCSA is still required to issue a screening decision related to the reported abuse or neglect. In one complaint investigation, a child reported abuse by a foster parent during a placement exit interview. The ongoing caseworker appropriately reported the issue to the PCSA intake department; however, the referral was categorized as "Information Only," citing that the child was no longer living in the foster home and no longer in danger.¹⁹ In specialized investigations, PCSAs are required to identify the licensing authority; in some instances, this triggers an automatic alert to the ODJFS Bureau of Licensing (now DCY).²⁰ This is another area of inconsistency. During one complaint investigation involving a licensed facility, the Youth Ombudsman discovered that 45 separate referrals of suspected child maltreatment were submitted to 12 different PCSAs, and the PCSAs correctly identified ODJFS as the licensing authority only 10 times. Because many of these referrals did not rise to the level of abuse or neglect, but may have included prospective licensing rules violations, the inconsistencies are troubling.

Another related factor that further complicates the consistency of specialized investigations across Ohio is the existence within Ohio SACWIS of multiple identification numbers for both individuals and licensed providers. ODJFS/DCY has procedural safeguards to merge identification numbers; however, they must rely on others to bring duplicates to their attention. Historical information may inform future abuse and neglect investigations, particularly if there are identifiable patterns, so this issue of data scattered across multiple records in the statewide system has the potential to create a cascade of concerns. This is especially true when abuse or neglect is reported at a facility because the investigative responsibility falls to the custodial agency.

¹⁸See OAC Rule 5101:2-36-04 PCSA requirements for conducting a specialized assessment/investigation.

¹⁹See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile C (*Appendices*).

²⁰See OAC Rule 5101:2-36-12(D)(6) and OAC Rule 5101:2-36-01(J).

²¹See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile D (*Appendices*).

Many times, youth disclose abuse or neglect once they've left a particular placement during an "exit interview," as part of the required completion of the JFS 01678 form.²² Leaders from OHIO YAB have suggested that youth may benefit from being asked similar questions during routine monthly home visits completed by caseworkers. This is a practical suggestion to strengthen ongoing casework practice and should be considered by PCSAs as an opportunity to train and empower caseworkers to proactively monitor safety, even when the youth is in a substitute care setting. Cross-training the mandated reporter community, including teachers and mental health providers, about the Foster Youth Bill of Rights adds an additional layer of safety for foster youth.

Placement Challenges in Ohio

Youth experiences with Ohio's children services system are markedly impacted by the shortage of available placements that are appropriate to the youth's level of care and unique needs. This issue is universally acknowledged across the system and often cited as a limitation during complaint investigations. While this critical issue certainly affects PCSAs, caseworkers, courts, and other service providers who support children services cases, the most profound impact is on the youth themselves. They may be left in placements that don't fully meet their needs or more restrictive placements than necessary; they may be living miles away from their families and communities; or in temporary placement situations that don't support their healing. This issue is complex and requires a variety of solutions, many of which are already underway. While DCY, ODJFS, PCSAs, and other stakeholders work diligently toward long-term sustainable solutions to resolve this placement crisis, insights from complaints to the Youth Ombudsman reveal several opportunities to strengthen practice and improve conditions for youth in the interim.

The Youth Ombudsman has reviewed complaints involving youth who were required to sleep in PCSA offices due to the unavailability of appropriate placements that could meet their needs. During a visit to an office space where youth were being held, the Assistant Youth Ombudsman observed damage to walls, including holes, graffiti, and unfinished patchwork; minimal furniture; and no obviously available items for entertainment. Even though youth sometimes spend the night, office spaces in PCSA buildings are not subject to the requirements set forth for licensed facilities.²³ These spaces often lack personal privacy, with youth being required to sleep on temporary beds in a communal area. While the concept of youth sleeping in offices is a temporary, emergency solution – and, according to ODJFS/DCY, most children who must stay overnight in an office spend less than 24 hours there – one particular complaint in 2023 involved a youth who had spent more than two weeks in a PCSA office.²⁴ During an OHIO YAB meeting, youth leaders recounted their own overnight experiences in agency offices. Several youth remarked that the conditions of the spaces are important, and care should be taken to improve the spaces to promote respect, dignity, and healing. Suggestions included painting the walls, providing comfortable furniture, quickly repairing damage if it occurs, and offering enrichment and/or entertainment for youth to pass the time. Youth have also reported that it is crucial to communicate with them about efforts being made to locate more suitable placements.

On five separate occasions in 2023, the Youth Ombudsman received complaints submitted on behalf of youth by providers at medical hospital systems. While individual circumstances vary, these complaints involved situations in which a youth in a PCSA's custody was medically ready for discharge but had remained at the hospital due to the unavailability of a suitable placement. In these situations, the Youth Ombudsman found that the PCSAs were working to locate placements that could meet the youths' individual needs but were denied by multiple providers.²⁵

²²See OAC Rule 5101:2-42-65.1 Exit interviews when a child in custody leaves an out of home placement.

²³See OAC Rule 5101:2-9 Children's Residential Centers, Group Homes, and Residential Parenting Facilities.

²⁴See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile A (*Appendices*).

²⁵See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile F (*Appendices*).

Case-Level Communication and Collaboration

Communication challenges were commonly reported in youth complaints in 2023. Sometimes the concern was the frequency of communication; other times it was the quality of communication. Agency staff cited high caseloads and distance to placements as barriers to maintaining quality communication with youth. Interestingly, for complaints in which the primary concerns were case-level decisions or normalcy, but communication was not a primary issue, the Youth Ombudsman observed that casework teams were collaborative and focused on problem-solving. This was often the key to a meaningful and mutually beneficial resolution to the complaint.²⁶ Caseworkers need time, support, and training to build effective relationships with youth, their caregivers, and their families. As in 2022, the Youth Ombudsman frequently recommended family team meetings throughout this reporting period. These types of case planning tools should be further explored to determine their potential to strengthen casework, reduce placement disruptions, and advance permanency.

Youth Engagement

The [Foster Youth Handbook](#) is a valuable tool to support and inform youth when they enter care. Many youth who filed complaints reported that they did not receive the handbook or did not remember receiving it. In many of those instances, the PCSA had documented that the handbook was distributed, and many had signed acknowledgments from the youth. It is entirely possible that youth may not remember receiving the handbook when they enter foster care as that is often a chaotic and traumatic time. It is also possible that youth may misplace it as they change placements. It may be useful for caseworkers and resource caregivers to verify that youth still have the handbook when they move to new placements. Additionally, the [Foster Youth Bill of Rights](#) and other information in the handbook may be a useful “conversation starter” for caseworkers, CASA/GALs, and others in their ongoing communication with youth.

Ohio FOSTER YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS
A Guide to Your Rights in Foster Care

- Personal Rights**
 - You have the right to be free from physical verbal and emotional abuse and inhumane treatment.
 - You have the right to be protected from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.
 - You have the right to have your own money:
 - Earn your own money.
 - Have a bank account.
 - Be provided with guidance on how to save and spend money.
 - You have the right to receive guidance, support, and supervision from adults in your lives, including parents, resource caregivers, agency staff, mentors, youth advisory boards, and others.
 - You have the right to participate in age-appropriate extracurricular, enrichment and social activities.
 - You have the right to protection from discrimination or harassment based on race, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, color, or national origin.
 - You have the right to privacy and personal belongings.
 - You have the right to receive timely and consistent access to:
 - Housing that is clean and safe.
 - Food, including special food considerations.
 - Clothing appropriate for your age and gender identity, including the right to choose your own clothes.
- Communication Rights**
 - The phone numbers for CASA, GAL, attorney, custodial agency worker, custodial agency hotline, probation officer and any other professionals involved must be available to you.
 - You have the right to visit and communicate with your parents, siblings, other family members, non-related kin, friends, and significant others that you are not living with, in accordance with your plan.
- Religious Rights**
 - You have the right to enjoy freedom of thought, conscience, and religion including the right to not practice religion.
- Medical Rights**
 - You have the right to receive:
 - Medical care.
 - Dental care.
 - Vision care.
 - Mental Health Services.
 - You have the right to schedule appointments or have appointments scheduled for you.
 - You have the right to be taken to these appointments.
- Legal Rights**
 - You have the right to contact your attorney, CASA, GAL within 24 hours of the request.
 - You have the right to have your opinions heard and be included when any decisions are being made affecting your life.
 - You have the right to be invited to and prepared for meetings and court hearings and provided with information about your permanency options.
- Educational Rights**
 - You have the right to go to school.
 - You have the right to have input in selecting the school you attend.
 - You have the right to participate in educational and school-related activities.
 - Youth ages 14 and over have the right to access information about vocational and college education classes and financial aid to pay for those.

There are times when an agency can temporarily restrict these rights, for your or others' health and safety. If you feel your rights have been violated unfairly, you can talk to your foster parent, your caseworker, your GAL or CASA, or another trusted adult. **You can also reach out to the Youth Ombudsman by calling 1-877-649-6884 (OH-YOUTH) or completing the online complaint form at: youthombudsman.ohio.gov.** They cannot change court-ordered decisions, respond to emergencies, provide legal advice or investigate allegations of child abuse or neglect. The Youth Ombudsman will work with you to resolve complaints and advocate for your rights to be protected while in foster care.

Complaint investigations revealed variability in the delivery of independent living services across Ohio. There were instances in which transition plans were not properly developed or documented, leaving youth with minimal support as they entered adulthood. Notably, with complaints in which this issue was examined, the oversight was not due to apathy, but rather an overwhelmed workforce, a lack of specially trained independent living caseworkers, and, in some cases, a lack of awareness about independent living requirements due to the PCSAs' self-reported infrequency of managing cases with older teens.

There are active Youth Advisory Boards in **14** counties, including one serving a three-county region. Three other counties do not have active boards, but regularly bring local youth to statewide meetings. While youth certainly benefit from opportunities to engage with the empowering and supportive YAB community, PCSAs also benefit by establishing a working dialogue with young people who are willing to share their experiences and feedback to strengthen various areas of practice.

²⁶See, for example, Youth Complaint Profile G (*Appendices*).

Youth Ombudsman Recommendations

Improving Emergency Placement Conditions

The Youth Ombudsman respectfully offers the following recommendations to inform and supplement the multifaceted work already underway to address the placement shortage and the resulting crisis across Ohio:

- If a youth is required to stay in an agency office, they should be informed of progress to locate an appropriate placement at least once per day. Youth should also be advised of the plan for their nighttime sleeping arrangements daily
- Accommodations should be made to provide youth with a private sleeping space and a space for personal belongings. The spaces occupied by youth should be in good repair, clean, and comfortably furnished. Youth should have ongoing access to enrichment and entertainment activities.
- PCSAs are strongly encouraged to collaborate with their local Youth Advisory Boards to improve office spaces for the unfortunate times when youth must spend the night.
- Efforts to improve and maintain these temporary spaces should be ongoing and concurrent to the efforts to develop and implement long-term solutions to Ohio's ongoing placement challenges.

Specialized Investigations

Specialized investigations are critical to the safety of children. ODJFS/DCY provides a variety of training resources and guides that further explain the framework laid out in Ohio Revised Code and Ohio Administrative Code to address referrals involving licensed providers. All PCSAs are urged to ensure their intake and assessment caseworkers are thoroughly trained in requirements and best practices for out-of-home-care referrals involving suspected abuse or neglect and specialized investigations. PCSAs are encouraged to consult their Technical Assistance Specialists as needed to further strengthen this area of practice at the local level.

Addressing SACWIS Duplications

The ODJFS/DCY Bureaus of Automated Systems and Practice Advancement have been tremendously responsive and collaborative in addressing SACWIS duplications discovered during complaint investigations. However, the complaints the Youth Ombudsman reviews represent only a fraction of the cases that PCSAs manage each year. Given the impact that these duplications and data entry errors can potentially have on the safety of youth across Ohio, the Youth Ombudsman recommends that the development and implementation of a permanent solution be prioritized.



Family Ombudsman Complaint Data

Family Complaint Overview

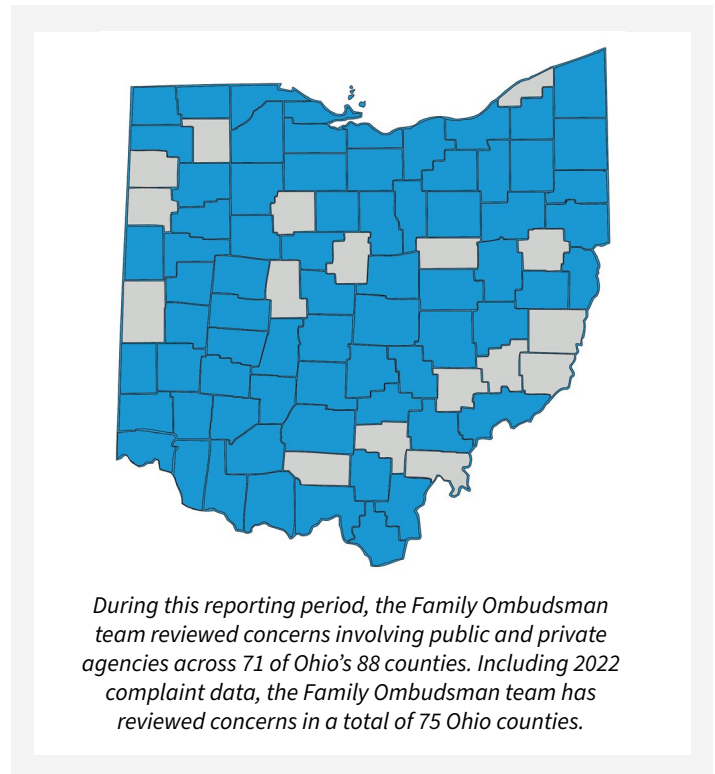
Who reported concerns to the Family Ombudsman in 2023?

During 2023, the Family Ombudsman received **472** formal written complaints. Of those, **34** were promptly transferred²⁷ to the Youth Ombudsman for further review.²⁸ Only **2** formal complaints received in 2023 could not be resolved before the end of the calendar year.²⁹

Of all the adult complainants assisted by the Family Ombudsman team in 2023, at least **75** individuals had previously submitted (but not necessarily during the same calendar year) one or more formal complaints to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Some adult complainants came forward again in the new calendar year, or more than once during 2023, to ask the Family Ombudsman team to evaluate new allegations stemming from more recent PCSA case developments. Others proactively reached out to renew previously reported concerns related to specific PCSA staff conduct issues and/or ongoing case management disputes. Far less frequently, some adult complainants asked the Family Ombudsman to independently examine issues simultaneously or previously reported to the Youth Ombudsman. These formal complaints were often connected to ongoing safety concerns surrounding child custody litigation.³⁰

Significantly, of the several hundred new formal complaints submitted in 2023, only **14** were voluntarily withdrawn by complainants during or shortly after the Family Ombudsman's standard intake process. The intake process involves offering detailed guidance about established investigative practices at the state level. That preliminary guidance is also almost always accompanied by a written invitation to share more specific details and/or supporting documentation related to any unsuccessful local conflict resolution attempt. Of the relatively few 2023 withdrawals, **11** complainants voluntarily shared their decision rationale without any prompting from the Family Ombudsman team. While **2** of those adults specifically cited their fear of possible future retaliation by local authorities, **4** others withdrew their formal complaints after confirming that all requested remedies were granted at the local level.



²⁷By comparison, **22** formal complaints submitted to the Family Ombudsman in 2022 were transferred to the Youth Ombudsman team. Of the **34** total website submission transfers in 2023, nearly every formal complaint concerned child safety and sought more governmental intervention at the local county level. Moreover, with respect to each adult's association with the PCSA possibly involved, **12** aggrieved parties self-reported their "biological parent" status while **8** transfers were categorized as "kinship" complainants.

²⁸Of those **472** separate website submissions, **10** formal complaints were *originally* submitted to the Youth Ombudsman's queue.

²⁹In stark contrast, **11%** of all 2022 website submissions reviewed by the Family Ombudsman were unable to be resolved prior to January 1, 2023. However, the majority of those 2022 "carry-over" complaints (**21** of which were submitted during the month of December) were resolved in January 2023.

³⁰At the outset of every reported grievance matter, complainants are advised of the Family Ombudsman's investigative preference to thoroughly review PCSA cases after the proper local authorities have had a fair opportunity to attempt to resolve issues related to their own policies or employees. After all, Ohio is a *county-administered* jurisdiction and government employees are necessarily supervised and held accountable by their employers. However, in supplying this realistic guidance, complainants are also assured that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is willing to offer further support if a person does not know how to pursue a local remedy, or if anyone needs assistance with confirming a particular county grievance policy or local complaint submission process.

In addition to documenting the number of new separate formal complaints received and processed each calendar year, the Family Ombudsman also tracks every adult complainant’s connection to the PCSA (or other Ohio government office or private agency) potentially impacted by each unique grievance matter. Interestingly, “alleged perpetrators” of reported child abuse or neglect initiated **62%** of all formal complaints reviewed by the Family Ombudsman team in 2023. In 2022, alleged perpetrators initiated only **34%** of all Family Ombudsman investigations resolved.³²

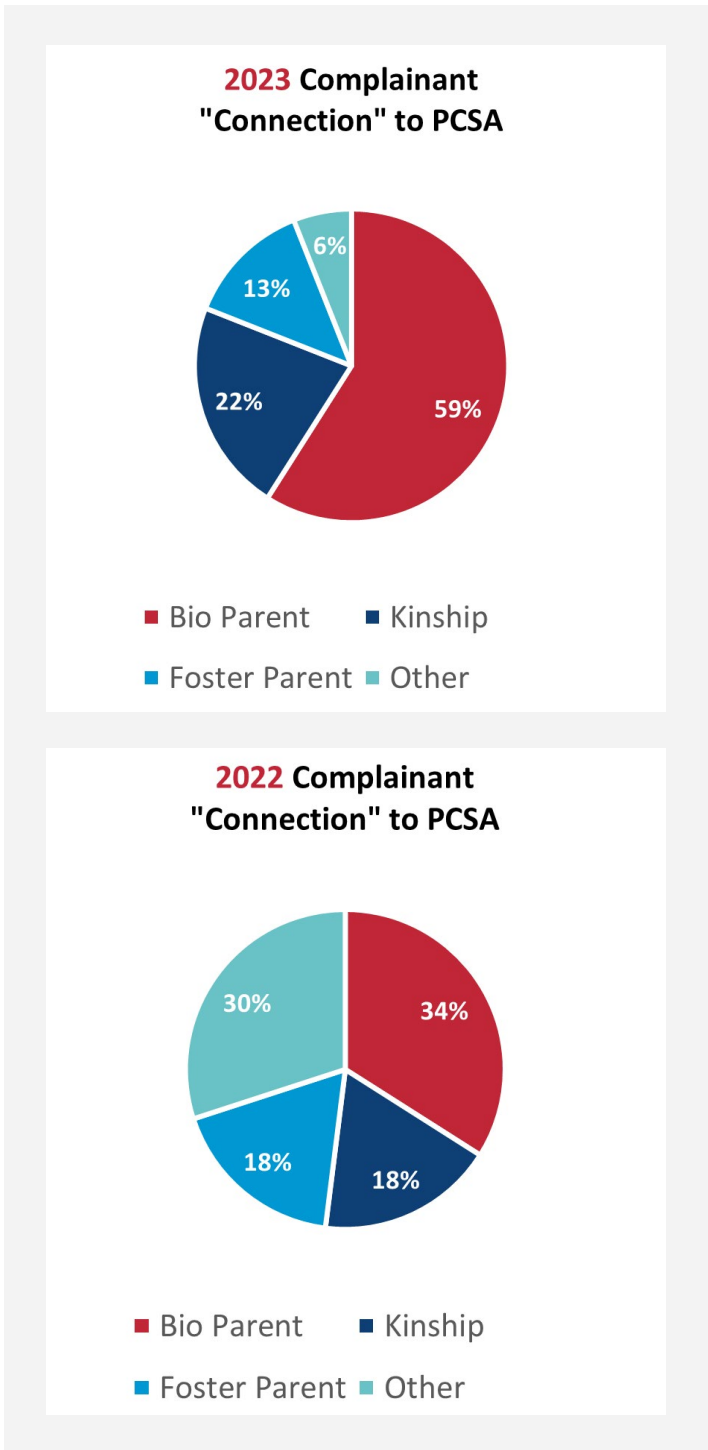
The Family Ombudsman also analyzes every adult’s eligibility for potential relief under Ohio’s [Resource Family Bill of Rights. Section 5103.02 of the Ohio Revised Code](#) defines “resource family” as “a foster home or the kinship caregiver family.” Still absent from this legal definition determining eligibility are *prospective* and *previous* caregivers, as well as biological parents or legal guardians engaged in family reunification case plan services. Adults with their parental/legal guardian rights still intact frequently request (but do not receive) legal guidance from the Family Ombudsman team regarding what types of remedies are available to them during their requisite ongoing interactions with PCSA staff. However, the plain language of the Bill of Rights legislation limits practical application of this legal protection to *current* caregivers.

During this second reporting period, relatively few Ohio households providing the day-to-day care for children involved in the children services system came forward to pursue a formal complaint at the state level. In fact, only **18%** of all formal complaints resolved by the Family Ombudsman team in 2023 involved concerns with potential Resource Family Bill of Rights application. If the Family Ombudsman’s role was designed to focus on the unmet needs of resource families providing daily care for children at the center of custody cases, this particular data category should be continually analyzed.³³

³¹“Alleged perpetrator” refers to any adult complainant who has been documented in the SACWIS database as an alleged perpetrator of reported child abuse or neglect. Regrettably, the Family Ombudsman still does not have access to review any Ohio courthouse dockets to independently verify potentially relevant child custody rulings or efficiently monitor corresponding PCSA case developments or “competing” permanency recommendations currently under judicial review.

³²See 2022 Annual Report, Page 24 (“Alleged perpetrators’ of reported child abuse or neglect represented **34%** of the Family Ombudsman’s entire active investigative caseload in 2022.”).

³³See also 2022 Annual Report, Page 25 (“Yet only **22%** of all adult complainants assisted by the Family Ombudsman team in 2022 represented households presently providing the day-to-day care for the child(ren) at the center of the grievance matter.”).



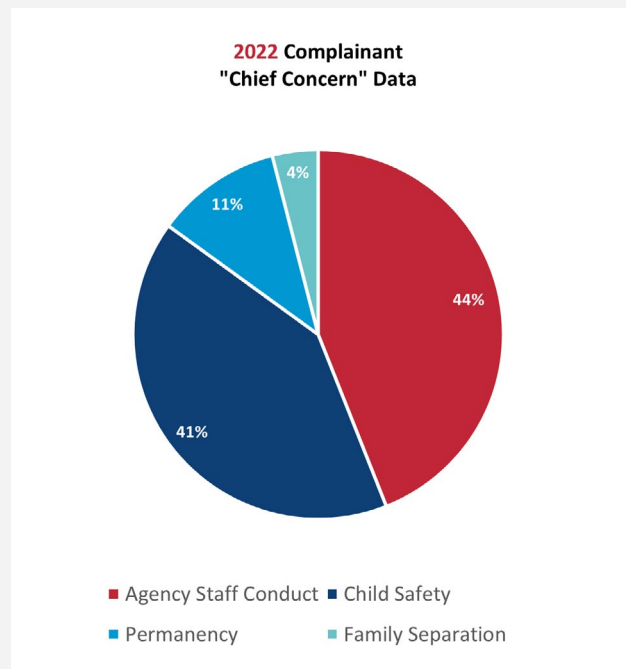
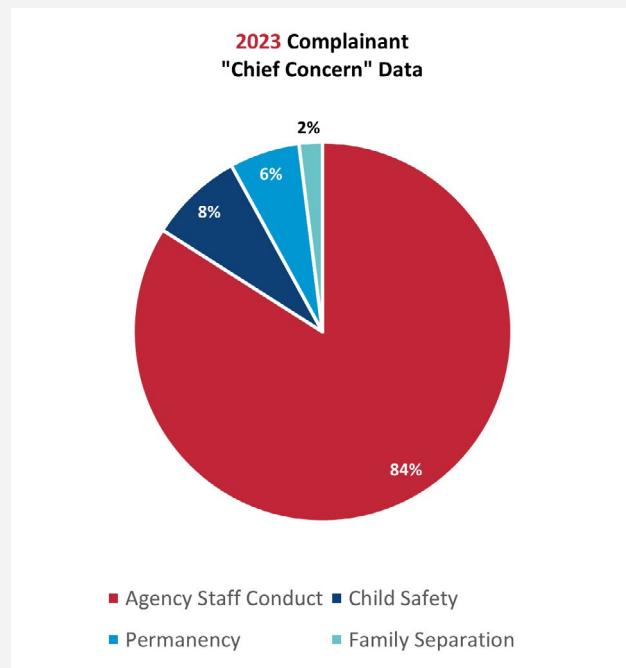
Of the 2023 complainants presenting issues associated with the Resource Family Bill of Rights, it must be noted that no Ohio caregivers elevating case-specific concerns were fully aware of their legal rights. In fact, many complainants reported having no prior knowledge that a Bill of Rights existed even though approximately **75%** of all formal complaints reviewed by the Family Ombudsman in 2023 were categorized as “party” complaints (signifying either a confirmed PCSA case affiliation or an individual’s past interaction with assigned PCSA staff). Thus, available statewide complaint data reveals that while most adults who contact the Family Ombudsman do have some direct participation in the PCSA case at issue, *current* caregivers are presenting far fewer formal complaints to the Family Ombudsman.

Family Complaint Concerns

What types of concerns were reported to the Family Ombudsman in 2023?

As previously reported in 2022, each unique grievance matter will almost always present a *chief* concern or primary objective.³⁴ Accordingly, every formal written complaint presented to the Family Ombudsman is documented as one of the following four major categories for data-tracking purposes: (1) agency staff conduct; (2) child safety; (3) separation of children from their parents or legal guardians; and (4) permanency or future “best interests” considerations. As the top right chart illustrates, allegations linked to the conduct of particular agency staff once again comprised the largest category of case-specific concerns reported in 2023.

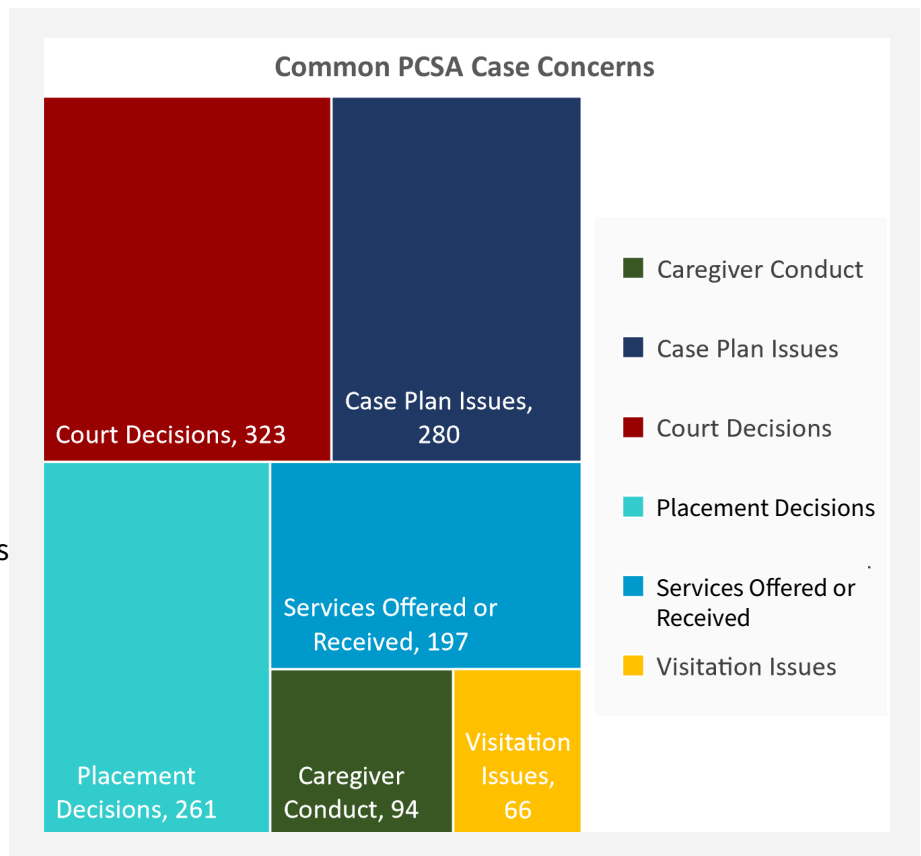
More specifically, during this reporting period, **91** of all investigations completed by the Family Ombudsman team centered on specific allegations related to the conduct and/or communication styles of named PCSA staff (as opposed to general disapproval of a particular PCSA case decision). Additionally, the Family Ombudsman team completed **49** separate “full case review” investigations in 2023 and examined **27** contested case dispositions spanning multiple Ohio counties. Of all Family Ombudsman investigations completed in 2023, only **7** formal complaints challenged a particular past PCSA screening decision or essentially requested an independent state-level examination of all PCSA intake history linked to a particular child or sibling group. All complainants are advised that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is not authorized to investigate suspected child abuse or neglect under any circumstances.



³⁴See also 2022 Annual Report, Page 17 (“Complaints involving the children services system will almost always be multi-faceted; yet each unique grievance tends to present a chief concern from one of four major categories: (1) child safety (when a complainant is primarily focused on child protection), (2) staff conduct (when a complainant is primarily focused on reporting

alleged agency staff misconduct or ongoing unprofessionalism), (3) separation (when a complainant is primarily focused on family reunification), and/or (4) permanency (when a complainant is primarily focused on long-term planning and/or “best interests” advocacy.”).

As the chart to the right illustrates, the Family Ombudsman was asked to investigate hundreds of concerns connected to Ohio PCSA cases in 2023. However, this chart does not depict the two most common categories of PCSA case concerns: agency communication and agency staff conduct.³⁵ Those two categories alone encompassed more than **800** reported concerns, all of which clearly fell within the jurisdiction of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. Notably, many allegations presented at the state level were currently being reviewed by local judges or magistrates. In fact, very often, courthouse rulings or custody orders preventing a complainant’s requested remedy had already been issued. All complainants are advised that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is not authorized to challenge judicial decisions under any circumstances.



How long does the Family Ombudsman need to review reported concerns?

Timely resolution of any grievance matter is crucial to preventing future conflict escalation; however, it is not uncommon for more complex concerns to require lengthier timeframes and double or even triple the number of investigative meetings. During this reporting period, on average (and excluding weekends and government holidays), formal complaints submitted to the Family Ombudsman were resolved in fewer than **30** days. By comparison, more complex investigations required an average of **48** business days (calculated from the date of a new formal complaint to the date a written closure notice was issued).

Additionally, with respect to the Family Ombudsman’s established complaint review process, a total of **3,779** separate contacts were logged in 2023 to document direct interactions between the Family Ombudsman team and complainants or various other external constituents (e.g., PCSA staff) connected to formal complaints.³⁶ For annual report data-tracking purposes, “contact” refers to any external meeting completed or substantive written communication sent by any member of the Family Ombudsman team.

³⁵As previously reported, most if not all formal complaints submitted to the Family Ombudsman tend to encompass multiple different allegations for possible investigation at the state level. Also excluded from this 2023 Annual Report chart are the **44** separate instances of alleged discrimination—most frequently, on the basis of race—in addition to the **34** website submissions presenting concerns related to the conduct of appointed GAL and/or CASA professionals. GAL/CASA issues cannot be realistically investigated or resolved by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office since those parties are appointed and held accountable by the judicial branch of government.

³⁶By comparison, during the seven-month reporting period in 2022, **1,991** contacts were logged by the Family Ombudsman team. Predictably, more complex grievance matters have continued to require at least twice as many contacts as their less complicated counterparts. Complexity factors impacting the Family Ombudsman caseload included, but were not limited to: allegations spanning more than one county jurisdiction, formal complaints presenting many different allegations or involving multiple interested parties reporting potential competing interests, adults using aliases or exhibiting prolonged refusal to further pursue a local remedy, contested dispositions linked to PCSA cases that were closed months or years ago, and parallel investigation scenarios wherein the same adult has simultaneously asked the Youth Ombudsman to review separate child-focused issues. As more complaint data becomes available for analysis at the state level, the Family Ombudsman plans to share more detailed insight regarding how concerns stemming from an inherently complex system of government are cataloged and cross-referenced with other available statewide data.

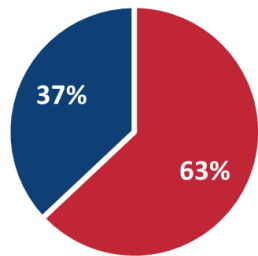
Family Complaint Outcomes

When did the Family Ombudsman take investigative action in 2023?

During this reporting period, the Family Ombudsman team worked together to complete **174** separate investigations, each of which involved at least one PCSA. Nearly all formal complaints involved multiple allegations associated with named agency employees and/or prior local complaint outcomes. By comparison, during the previous seven-month reporting period in 2022, the Family Ombudsman team finished a total of **84** investigations in response to formal complaints. Consistent with past data reports published by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, the number of county-specific complaints is not presented in this report. However, aggregate data confirms that only **3** Ohio counties had more than **30** formal complaints linked to them in 2023.

Nearly all new formal complaints resolved by the Family Ombudsman team in 2023 involved individuals or entire family networks seeking to elevate concerns involving Ohio’s children services system. However, approximately **63%** of all formal complaints resolved in 2023 required only information and referral guidance, as opposed to any comprehensive review of a particular children services agency case.

2023 Family Ombudsman Action



■ Information & Referral (I&R) ■ Investigative Action

2023 REFERRAL DATA	
PCSA	266
Law Enforcement	4
Legal Aid	10
Other	6
ODJFS	3
Bureau of Civil Rights	27
Child Support	1
Local Court	7
Total Referrals	324

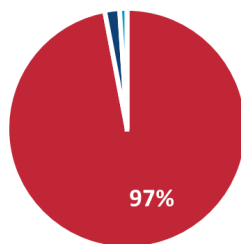
Not all Family Ombudsman communication with interested authorities requires investigative action at the state level. For instance, the Family Ombudsman team often proactively reaches out to a designated agency point of contact if an adult complainant is unwilling or unable to confirm the status or outcome of a local grievance matter. Understandably, some allegations require more preliminary steps than others.³⁷

³⁷By comparison, in 2022 the Family Ombudsman team provided information and referral guidance to resolve approximately **57%** of all formal complaints reviewed.

When did the Family Ombudsman take corrective action in 2023?

Every investigation completed by the Family Ombudsman team in 2023 was documented as one (and only one) of the following closure categories: **no basis for corrective action, resolved without corrective action, or resolved with corrective action.**³⁸ As the graph below illustrates, only **2** formal complaints resolved in 2023 warranted corrective action³⁹ at the state level. Both instances involved “case disposition review” investigations that resulted in SACWIS findings being amended by PCSA management at the recommendation of the Family Ombudsman.⁴⁰ Additionally, at least **4** other adult complainants successfully achieved solutions prior to closure of their formal complaints without the need for any corresponding corrective by the Family Ombudsman.⁴¹

2023 Complaint Investigation Outcomes



- No Basis For Corrective Action
- Resolved Without Corrective Action
- Resolved With Corrective Action
- Unresolved With Corrective Action

“Your guidance has helped me in a coordination role spread knowledge and expectations both up to leadership and down to the frontlines in a way I haven’t experienced before.

I experience a shared teaming between the state and the county and I know our staff have an increased understanding in areas where before they may have been frustrated because they didn’t know what they didn’t know. I think sometimes when that happens we make assumptions that we’re not expected to reach out and find out more, to coordinate with others, and to close the loop with our clients.”

(PCSA Management, 2023)

A closed Family Ombudsman investigation categorized as having **no basis for corrective action** should not be interpreted as having frivolous or unsupported claims. Although **97%** of investigated⁴² grievance matters did not compel the Family Ombudsman to pursue any further action at the state level, at least **60** formal complaints were closed only after it was confirmed that (1) PCSA management was fully aware of a complainant’s concerns and (2) appropriate action was already being taken to remedy errors or resolve case-specific issues. Several sample fact patterns demonstrating this predominant closure data category are available for further review in an appendix to this Annual Report (“*Family Ombudsman Complaint Profiles*”).

⁴⁰See, for example, Family Complaint Profile C (Appendices).

⁴¹This data category does not include remedies achieved (post-submission) for withdrawn formal complaints that never compelled the Family Ombudsman to take any investigative action in the first place.

⁴²As this complaint closure category data is further analyzed, the Family Ombudsman urges consideration of the fact that at least 6 out of 10 formal complaints resolved in 2023 were not actually investigated; therefore, it is unknown if any of those other 2023 grievance matters would have compelled the Family Ombudsman to pursue any corrective action as a next step.

Additionally, corrective action pursued by a state ombudsman should not be construed as the sole accounting measure of effective conflict resolution. For example, simply alerting PCSA management to an apparent communication barrier between parties may itself produce positive results without the need for investigative reporting or any formal written recommendations. Similarly, posing a series of thought-provoking questions during a confidential investigative meeting (while simultaneously presenting a complainant’s perspective) is not the same as issuing an investigative opinion at the conclusion of a lengthy fact-finding mission. Yet, while neither of these two very common scenarios would be categorized as “corrective action” closures under current Family Ombudsman reporting practices, such remedial measures sought in the spirit of conflict resolution should continue to facilitate more timely and/or improved future case outcomes.

Regardless of the nature of any reported concern, the Family Ombudsman must make all decisions based on the *known* circumstances surrounding each request for assistance at the state level. Moreover, whenever any investigative action appears warranted, the Family Ombudsman team must remain mindful of the practical limitations surrounding any out-of-court examination of issues linked to legal rights. For good reason, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office was not designed to operate as either a courthouse or a law firm. Therefore, any remedial measures pursued by the Family Ombudsman team must be realistic and always rooted in supporting case evidence.

Finally, recognizing the dual realities that Ohio child protective services are administered locally and that the Family Ombudsman cannot issue “best interests” recommendations, corrective action will remain the exception and not the rule. Above all, since the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office cannot erase or prosecute any harm, all corrective action pursued at the state level shall reflect the Family Ombudsman’s ongoing commitment to improve future service delivery and outcomes for youth and families involved with Ohio’s children services system.

Family Ombudsman Observations and Recommendations

Case Disposition Appeals, Revisited

After analyzing available 2022 data, the Family Ombudsman previously observed as follows:

“[A]lleged perpetrators would benefit from receiving a more detailed written invitation from public children services agencies to meaningfully participate in whatever ‘appeal’ mechanism may be available to them at the local county level. Even though a fair appeal process may potentially require critical analysis of legal issues or major factual discrepancies, many individuals simply cannot afford to hire private legal counsel to efficiently explore their unanswered questions. It is also a fact that every SACWIS ‘finding’ entered by a public children services agency may carry potentially adverse and long-lasting consequences for individuals and future households, even years after a particular government case or investigation is closed.”⁴³

In so recommending, the Family Ombudsman also expressly encouraged appropriate local and state authorities to “educate the public as early and as often as possible, and certainly before a complaint is referred elsewhere for any ‘third party’ review.” As of the date of this second annual report, no PCSA has offered the Family Ombudsman any direct feedback in response to this concern. Nevertheless, consistent with 2022 observations, aggregate 2023 data has driven the following more specific recommendations related to PCSA case disposition appeal procedures:

⁴³2022 Annual Report, Family Ombudsman Observations, Page 31.

- Implement a more consistent method of informing alleged perpetrators (and other concerned parties) of whether any new PCSA case is being opened as a *Traditional Response* or an *Alternative Response*. For *Traditional Response* cases, all concerned parties should be consistently and promptly informed in writing that assigned PCSA staff are required by law to enter one of three available case dispositions in the SACWIS database following any PCSA investigation of reported child abuse or neglect. This written notice should also define and explain the key differences between **substantiated**, **indicated**, and **unsubstantiated** dispositions. Alleged perpetrators must understand this legal framework before any appeal stage.
- More consistently provide advance notice to alleged perpetrators and other concerned parties that written confirmation of any future PCSA case dispositions will be mailed to their current address of record. Moreover, in view of the legal rights at stake and other potential future consequences impacting children and caregivers, alleged perpetrators should be afforded a fair opportunity to affirm and/or update their current mailing address at the beginning of every PCSA investigation of new screened-in cases of child abuse or neglect.
- Provide advance written notice to alleged perpetrators of screened-in child abuse or neglect that any future **substantiated** or **indicated** dispositions can be formally appealed, and that PCSA staff have the authority to enforce a disclosed appeal deadline. This early invitation to offer future supplemental evidence (that may never otherwise be discovered or considered by an assigned agency investigator) can be efficiently included in the same agency letter offering other preliminary guidance to families. Parents or legal guardians seeking to challenge an **unsubstantiated** case disposition (linked to their children) should likewise receive transparent written guidance regarding what formal appeal mechanism, if any, is available to them at the local level.
- Ensure that all necessary case closure steps are documented timely in post-investigation activity logs in the SACWIS database. For example, note that a particular letter was mailed to a particular address on a particular date. Additionally, ensure that signed copies of mailed disposition letters are scanned into databases.⁴⁴
- More consistently educate alleged perpetrators and their families about the Central Registry and any foreseeable consequences linked to any **substantiated** or **indicated** PCSA case dispositions. For example, many young adults involved in the children services system may become parents who are eager and capable of raising their grandchildren. Other alleged perpetrators may one day pursue careers or community endeavors that require employers (or licensing authorities) to conduct SACWIS searches during applicant background checks. If a contested case disposition comports with applicable law and is clearly supported by PCSA records, local appeals processes will run their proper courses. Just as indicted defendants have rights, alleged perpetrators deserve due process.

Local Complaint Procedures

More than half of all formal complaints submitted to the Family Ombudsman in 2023 were not ready for state-level investigation. Some of those unresolved issues were presented by non-parties who were improperly seeking confidential PCSA case details or more participation in a pending courthouse dispute. However, as discussed throughout this report, an overwhelming majority of unresolved grievance matters have involved communication barriers. Alleged unprofessionalism or incompetency, as well as perceived discrimination and other major barriers to conflict resolution, are precisely the types of issues that should be investigated at the county level first and thoroughly.

⁴⁴See, for example, Family Complaint Profiles A and B (*Appendices*).

Furthermore, fewer than half of all complainants who reached out to the Family Ombudsman in 2023 proposed realistic solutions to reported problems.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the Family Ombudsman recommends the following:

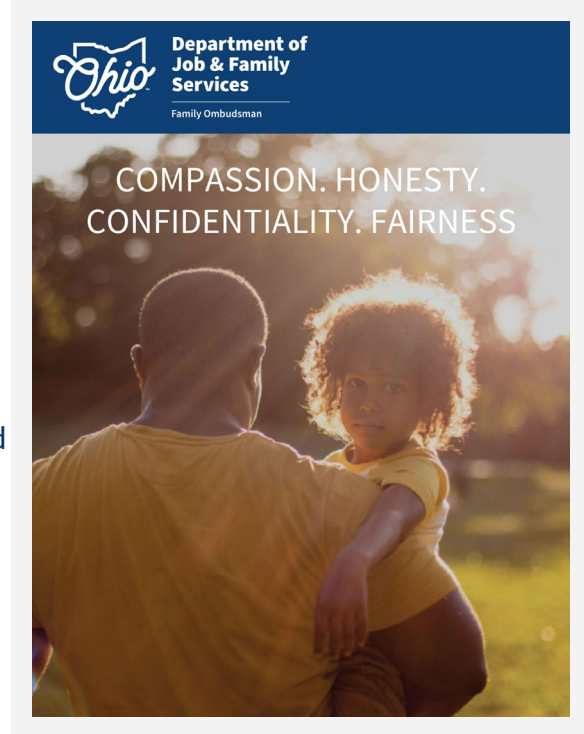
- Ohio children services agencies (including private agencies that license Ohio caregivers and contract providers who directly support county government custodians) should work together to develop or ensure a more consistent approach to educating the public about (1) existing formal complaint procedures and the rationale behind appeal deadlines and (2) which types of disputes cannot be resolved outside of the legal system (e.g., conflicting “best interests” perspectives).

The Family Ombudsman recognizes that any formal grievance procedure—local or state—will be effective only if all individuals involved fully understand and are willing to follow all protocols. If a particular agency requires every prospective adult complainant to first request a meeting with an assigned caseworker’s supervisor, both the caseworker and the supervisor must be able to discern and effectively explain the difference between a *formal* complaint and an individual’s voiced disagreement with an out-of-court case decision. If a particular supervisor has already approved the decision at issue, a prospective complainant should be promptly advised of that reality and offered clear written guidance regarding appropriate next steps to elevate any unresolved concerns.⁴⁶

To help clarify the types of allegations or case-specific issues that are eligible for possible further review outside the legal system, the Family Ombudsman further recommends the following:

- All children services agencies should consider offering two complaint forms: one for party case affiliates and another for concerned family relatives or third-party child advocates. Both should be easily accessible on public websites. Website forms could also provide relevant definitions (e.g., “resource” caregiver, “party” to a child custody case, etc.) and attach reader-friendly resources to help concerned adults more effectively frame their case-specific concerns. Reasonable accommodations should also be provided, upon request, to assist any complainant who reports difficulty with reading or understanding the written questions (or preliminary guidance) appearing on any form required to initiate a formal complaint review process at the local level.

As a possible first step to future implementation, the Family Ombudsman encourages PCSA directors, together with their respective legal advisors, to reach out to one another in 2024 to collectively brainstorm new (or more consistent) website resources to help guide Ohio youth and families through existing local complaint protocols. In so recommending, the Family Ombudsman also invites all interested authorities to share their pertinent observations or any related 2023 Annual Report feedback directly with the Family Ombudsman, preferably in writing, prior to December 31, 2024.



⁴⁵See Family Complaint Profile D presenting examples of conflict resolution barriers and unrealistic proposals (Appendices).

⁴⁶Indeed, Family Ombudsman complaint data compiled during two consecutive reporting periods has revealed that many “local” grievance matters are incessantly renewed or elevated elsewhere because a human being seeking resolution does not (or cannot) understand “the why” behind an agency’s decision rationale. Admittedly, however, some complainants cannot (or will not) accept the reality that a contested decision is lawful and final insofar as no out-of-court “appeal” mechanism exists to validate their concerns.

Resource Family Bill of Rights Enforcement

Even though party constituents comprised approximately 75% of the Family Ombudsman's 2023 caseload, only 17% of formal complaints were submitted by current caregivers. To mitigate this widening gap in available statewide data driving future system transformation, the Family Ombudsman recommends the following:

- All children services agencies are encouraged to share their own aggregate local complaint data directly with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office at least once per calendar year. Ideally, this new data-sharing endeavor will present the number of formal complaints and/or observed themes related to (1) agency-approved resource caregivers providing the day-to-day care for children and (2) non-party concerns presented by previous caregivers who recently had children removed (by the agency) from their care and prospective caregivers seeking to uproot children from their current agency-approved placements.

Admittedly, implementation of this recommendation may increase local workloads. However, it will also alert state authorities to the need for additional support and, in so doing, permit the Family Ombudsman to cross-reference recurrent concerns and identify potential systemic issues. Self-directed future participation across numerous counties will likewise facilitate improved collaboration among local and state authorities as they communicate in response to this relevant statewide data impacting Ohio youth and families.

- **OAC Rule 5101:2-42-20(A)(8)** *The right to receive notification prior to court hearings and scheduled meetings concerning a child in their care and to be encouraged to share information during those opportunities.* In response to concerns reported by current caregivers and parents separated from their children, the Family Ombudsman recommends that Ohio children services agencies take all necessary steps to ensure that all appropriate parties receive timely written notice of scheduled courthouse proceedings and Semiannual Administrative Reviews (SARs). That notice should also be timely documented.
- **OAC Rule 5101:2-42-20(A)(11)** *The right to be informed of the processes available to submit grievances and/or complaints including with regards to these rights and to make their concerns known without fear of reprisal.* In response to concerns reported by previous resource caregivers (following unrequested placement disruptions), the Family Ombudsman further recommends that all Ohio agencies responsible for conducting rule violation investigations offer detailed written guidance – at the time of removal – regarding when and how licensed foster parents can submit a formal complaint to report any corresponding concerns.

In so recommending, the Family Ombudsman acknowledges that mere objection to an agency's decision to investigate a possible violation is different than presenting an evidence-based allegation that an out-of-court investigation was conducted in a prejudicial or incompetent manner. Moreover, if no formal appeal mechanism is available to challenge an announced rule violation or corresponding corrective action plan, caregivers should be promptly informed of that legal reality in writing at the time that final decision is supplied for their records. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is not an Ohio licensing authority; thus, the Family Ombudsman is neither equipped nor permitted to resolve grievance matters initiated by licensed foster parents seeking to prevent future revocation or challenge removal of foster children from their care.

PCSA Case Management

Statewide complaint data analyzed by the Family Ombudsman team supports the following recommendations in response to PCSA case management concerns reported within Ohio's county-administered children services system:

- **Home Visits**

Home visits are designed to accomplish two equally vital objectives: (1) ensure the safety of a child and (2) assess whether a living environment is meeting the child's known needs.⁴⁷ Achieving more consistency in how home visits are conducted and documented across all 88 Ohio counties will promote increased PCSA case plan engagement and facilitate more productive local communication channels. Improved communication methods will permit critical information to be exchanged among the parties responsible for meeting a child's needs and, in many instances, may also promote more rapid progress on case plan goals (e.g., reunification).

- **Relative Placement Searches**

As discussed throughout this report, most caregivers who came forward in 2023 to submit formal complaints were not then providing day-to-day care for the children at the center of the grievance. Many argued they should be, and some alleged that PCSA staff were moving too slow in response to kinship placement requests, to the detriment of Ohio children.

Accordingly, the Family Ombudsman encourages local and state authorities to partner in 2024 and beyond to collectively pursue a comprehensive examination of how assigned PCSA staff are trained to search for possible relative placement options *at the onset* of the government's need to secure safe and stable homes for children separated from their parents or legal guardians. It is further recommended that this examination also objectively assess how PCSA supervisors ensure the integrity of ongoing placement searches and/or internally elevate negative case consequences (e.g., undue delay) resulting from confirmed agency policy violations or other case management errors.

- **ICPC Home Studies**

The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) is a national law enacted to ensure the safety and well-being of children placed by government custodians across state lines. In response to concerns from caregiver complainants, the Family Ombudsman recommends that assigned PCSA staff inquire if receiving states will require a prospective caregiver to become a licensed foster parent *before* initiating a laborious ICPC home study process. Since different states have different requirements, identifying procedural barriers early should prevent or mitigate future delay.⁴⁹

- **Case Plan Development**

PCSA supervisors should regularly and carefully examine case plans, especially those requiring an extended period of family separation, to ensure that parents/legal guardians are properly consulted and engaged in case plan development. A child safety concern identified at the time of removal may not warrant identical government scrutiny 12 months later. Similarly, the needs of children and caregivers alike might naturally evolve over time. Accordingly, the Family Ombudsman recommends that assigned PCSA staff take proactive steps, as often as needed, to ensure that all approved case plan participants understand (1) the purpose of a required (court-approved) case plan, and (2) the agency's expectations surrounding all recommended services, including participation beyond mere attendance at appointments and modified behavior that demonstrates an adult's commitment to change.

⁴⁷See, e.g., OAC Rule 5101:2-42-65(A) ("The public children services agency (PCSA) or private child placing agency (PCPA) that holds custody of a child shall comply with the provisions set forth in this rule regarding caseworker visits and contacts with the child and the substitute caregivers to ensure the child's safety and well-being, and to assess whether the placement and services continue to meet the child's needs in accordance with the case plan.").

⁴⁹See also Family Complaint Profile D presenting other ICPC case management concerns related to KGAP (*Appendices*).

- **Case Plan Transparency**

Offering candid feedback to any party about any perceived case plan regression (or potential violation of law) is no easy endeavor; however, providing polite and honest guidance to alert involved parties to case plan difficulties or delays *at each home visit* will facilitate need-based case plan development. Furthermore, regular contact with service providers will help case decision-makers gain and maintain proper insight regarding progress or unrealistic case plan goals.

Any future efforts to improve case plan engagement through increased transparency between agencies and parties should include ongoing training to teach inexperienced PCSA staff how to have difficult conversations with parents about case outcomes they may not want. All resource families, including and especially temporary caregivers, should be empowered and openly invited to provide information related to any unmet needs. Case plan transparency may also require PCSA staff to frequently remind temporary caregivers – including foster parents hoping to expand their own families and relatives concerned about longer-term household needs – that PCSA case parties with parental rights still intact must be apprised of a child’s health and routines during reunification efforts.

PCSA Case Prevention

Statewide complaint data compiled by the Family Ombudsman team continues to inform the following recommendation to increase collaboration between local and state authorities as a PCSA case prevention strategy:

- **Community Education, Revisited**

After analyzing available 2022 data, the Family Ombudsman previously observed as follows: *“[M]ore Ohioans—especially more caregivers—would benefit from receiving additional free educational opportunities that more fully explain the proper role of a public children services agency, in particular the vital role of ‘screening’ and assessment departments tasked with responding to reported child safety concerns.”*⁵⁰ As noted earlier in this report, the majority of formal complaints focusing on PCSA staff responses to reported abuse or neglect were promptly transferred to the Youth Ombudsman for further review. However, the Family Ombudsman team will continue to track and analyze elevated child safety concerns.

The Family Ombudsman commends the many statewide efforts already underway to expand public awareness and proper reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect (as defined by Ohio law). The Family Ombudsman further encourages all Ohio children services agencies to regularly re-assess whether additional future outreach steps can and should be taken to implement new or improved educational opportunities for families at the local level. In so recommending, all interested authorities are invited to share any related 2023 Annual Report feedback or region-specific observations directly with the Family Ombudsman, preferably in writing, prior to December 31, 2024.

⁵⁰2022 Annual Report, Family Ombudsman Observations, Page 31.

Conclusion

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is uniquely positioned to examine the children services system through the lens of every constituent who comes forward to report concerns or share experiences. The specific statewide data and corresponding analyses and recommendations presented in this second annual report are offered to inform and support the transformative work already underway in Ohio.

As Ohio agencies continue ongoing collaborative efforts to better serve Ohio youth and families, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office respectfully renews the first recommendation inspired by statewide complaint data: improvement of the accessibility of local grievance procedures. As an effective first step to future implementation across all Ohio counties, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office encourages all public children services agencies to post on their public websites and agency offices their current written policies for receiving, reviewing, and resolving formal complaints and/or case disposition appeals. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office shares these insights to inform and support the scheduled review of [Rule 5101:2-33-20](#).

Appendices

Youth Ombudsman Complaint Profiles

Youth Complaint Profile A

The Youth Ombudsman received a complaint regarding a youth who had been living in a PCSA office building for a few weeks. The youth frequently left the building, and there were concerns for their safety whenever their whereabouts were unknown. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman visited the agency and interviewed the youth and staff. The PCSA advised of daily attempts to locate a suitable placement and wider efforts to resolve the placement crisis in their county. The youth reported that they left sometimes because they “didn’t feel like being there.” The Assistant Youth Ombudsman observed the living space to be sparsely furnished, with visible damage to the walls, and no obvious signs of enrichment or entertainment activities for youth. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman issued recommendations for corrective action to the PCSA, including insights gleaned from a 2023 OHIO YAB statewide meeting regarding the conditions of office spaces where youth are temporarily housed. The PCSA was receptive, agreeing to incorporate the suggestions into their ongoing efforts.

Youth Complaint Profile B

The Youth Ombudsman received a complaint from a recently emancipated young adult. Notably, this complaint was received via telephone as the complainant did not have access to a computer. The complainant reported, “I didn’t know what else to do, so I called you.” The complainant was dropped off at a homeless shelter following their 18th birthday. The complainant reported that their previous foster parents were willing to let them stay there, but they were advised it would be a licensing rules violation to have another adult in their home. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman collaborated with the Bureau of Multi-Systems Support at ODJFS/DCY. The complainant moved to an apartment with support from the Bridges program. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman issued recommendations for corrective action to the PCSA and provided information related to independent living requirements.

Youth Complaint Profile C

A parent submitted a complaint on behalf of their children alleging that they were mistreated in their previous foster homes. The complainant alleged that the PCSA did not take action to address the abuse in the foster homes. The Youth Ombudsman completed a review of the confidential children services record, confirming that the abuse was reported, but that the PCSA did not follow appropriate procedures related to screening and specialized investigations. The Youth Ombudsman issued an investigative summary to the PCSA with recommendations for corrective action to strengthen intake and referral practices. The Youth Ombudsman also shared investigative observations and recommendations for corrective action with the PCSA’s assigned technical assistance specialist at ODJFS/DCY.

Youth Complaint Profile D

The Youth Ombudsman received a series of complaints alleging numerous violations of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights at an ODJFS-certified facility. The Youth Ombudsman and Assistant Youth Ombudsman completed multiple site visits and several interviews with youth directly involved with the complaints, other youth residents at the facility, involved services providers, facility staff, and placing PCSAs. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman completed an exhaustive review of agency records and communicated regularly with the ODJFS Bureau of Licensing. The Youth Ombudsman also made numerous reports of child maltreatment and consulted with law enforcement on the matter. The Youth Ombudsman issued an investigative report with recommendations for corrective action to the facility and a summary with investigative observations to leadership at ODJFS/DCY. To mitigate the risk of retaliation, the investigative report to the facility intentionally excluded identifiable information about the involved youth.

Youth Complaint Profile E

The Youth Ombudsman received several complaints from concerned community members regarding the ongoing safety of a young child placed with a relative. The complaints alleged that the PCSA did not properly investigate the abuse. The Youth Ombudsman completed an exhaustive review of confidential agency records; reviewed available court files; conducted interviews with PCSA staff; interviewed the complainant(s); reviewed hundreds of photos, videos, and screenshots submitted by the complainants; and consulted with the Bureau of Systems and Practice Advancement at ODJFS/DCY. The Youth Ombudsman determined that while the PCSA did complete the required investigative activities, they did not complete the safety assessment tool on time. The PCSA acknowledged this error and advised that the required contact with the child occurred within required timeframes, but the tool was not completed timely due to staffing shortages. The Youth Ombudsman also noted inconsistencies in the way incoming referrals from non-mandated reporters are handled and issued recommendations to strengthen that area of practice. The agency was responsive to recommendations for corrective action and reported immediate steps to implement the Youth Ombudsman's suggestions.

Youth Complaint Profile F

The Youth Ombudsman received a complaint from a medical provider on behalf of a teenager who was recently treated in their emergency department. The youth was ready for discharge on the same day of emergency treatment. The custodial agency, a PCSA, reportedly refused to pick up the child from the emergency department because they did not have a suitable placement identified for the youth. The youth remained in the emergency department for 11 days post-discharge without adult support other than hospital emergency department staff. The PCSA was engaged with the Bureau of Multi-System Supports at ODJFS/DCY to locate placement. During the pendency of the complaint, the youth moved to a local group home.

Youth Complaint Profile G

A teen mother submitted a complaint reporting that she was turning 18, but that her children were still in PCSA custody. Reportedly, the PCSA was considering terminating the teen's parental rights, due to the length of time the children had been in care. The youth complainant reported that she wanted to reunify with her children once she emancipated from foster care. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman met with the PCSA to discuss alternatives. The PCSA advised that they had not frequently encountered situations like this and that they were open to other ideas. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman shared information about a similar precedent-setting case and facilitated an introduction between the involved PCSA and an agency attorney from another county with relevant expertise. The youth complainant was enrolled in Bridges and remained in the foster home with her children until she graduated high school. With the support of Bridges, she and her children later moved out on their own.

Family Ombudsman Complaint Profiles

Family Complaint Profile A

Case Disposition Appeal Procedures

A biological parent, who was not an alleged perpetrator, presented a concern that PCSA staff who investigated screened-in sexual abuse (reportedly committed in the home of an extended family relative nearly five years ago) had never provided notice of the corresponding case disposition linked to the complainant's child, the alleged victim. Since available PCSA case records did not confirm that any case disposition letter was ever mailed to this parent, the Family Ombudsman team presented all pertinent investigative observations to PCSA management in order to facilitate any appropriate internal agency corrective action. Ultimately, PCSA management confirmed their willingness to meet directly with the complainant without further delay to transparently discuss unresolved concerns and/or confirmed errors by PCSA staff. Consequently, this formal complaint was categorized as having ***no basis for corrective action***.

Family Complaint Profile B

Case Disposition Appeal Procedures

A former resource caregiver, whose foster home had recently been the focus of a physical abuse investigation, presented many unresolved concerns related to permanency planning. This formal complaint also specifically alleged that the PCSA investigation in question had been launched in retaliation for past local grievances. During a confidential meeting with PCSA management, the Family Ombudsman team mentioned that no corresponding case disposition letter was found in SACWIS or Traverse. In response to this shared observation, PCSA management advised that they would internally investigate the issue and remedy any discovered errors. Ultimately, the Family Ombudsman team confirmed that a case disposition letter was generated in SAWCIS less than two weeks later, and the complainant was permitted to appeal that PCSA case outcome at the county level. As a result, this formal complaint was categorized as having ***no basis for corrective action***.

Family Complaint Profile C

Family Ombudsman Corrective Action

An adoptive parent, who had made several unsuccessful local attempts to contest the outcome of a PCSA investigation involving an alleged child victim with well-documented mental health issues, came forward again in 2023 to renew various continuing concerns, including a future career goal. After an exhaustive inspection of available PCSA case records, in addition to several confidential interviews with professional third-party witnesses who had firsthand knowledge of the case in question, the Family Ombudsman team met with PCSA management to recommend an "unsubstantiated" case disposition. To the complainant's relief, PCSA management agreed with the Family Ombudsman, and this formal complaint was categorized as ***resolved with corrective action***.

Family Complaint Profile D

PCSA Case Management

Licensed foster parents, who had already met with PCSA management, presented several complex concerns related to case management issues involving an ICPC placement. Specific allegations included their belief that ongoing PCSA staff negligence had deprived their children of years of future needed financial support. This resource family also claimed that PCSA staff had failed to inform the receiving state that the children were initially placed with them. Furthermore, according to the complainants, PCSA staff did not realize they were working with already licensed caregivers until after a request for permanent custody had been filed in Ohio. At that time, the complainants were asked to submit to Ohio licensing protocols. During a confidential meeting convened by the Family Ombudsman team, PCSA management transparently conceded that certain past decisions were made based on inaccurate assumptions that would have been avoided if PCSA staff had verified relevant facts and received more training on Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP) eligibility requirements. During this same discussion, PCSA management also shared that a foster care per diem payment had been mailed to the complainants that very day. Regarding the KGAP eligibility concern, PCSA leadership further advised that internal agency corrective action was pursued as soon as they discovered that the complainants should have been processed as licensed foster parents at the outset of the ICPC home study request. By the time PCSA management discovered this error, the only viable remedy was an apology as KGAP authorities had already verified that the children would not be receiving KGAP funding due to a fixed case date entered in SACWIS. Since the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office cannot realistically change any caregiver's eligibility (or lack thereof) to receive any financial assistance, this formal complaint was categorized as ***no basis for corrective action***.

Family Complaint Profile E

PCSA Case Management

A biological parent engaged in reunification services presented numerous unresolved concerns related to ongoing case management. These included perceived racial discrimination. During a confidential meeting convened by the Family Ombudsman team, PCSA management advised that internal agency corrective action had already been initiated to address caseworker communication issues recently verified by a section chief. PCSA management further shared that county commissioners were independently reviewing this alleged perpetrator's local discrimination complaint. During this same meeting, the Family Ombudsman team also alerted PCSA management to an overturned finding that had not yet been updated in the SACWIS database; consequently, this additional error was corrected. Accordingly, this formal complaint was categorized as ***no basis for corrective action***.

Youth Ombudsman Outreach Materials

These materials were developed and circulated by the Youth Ombudsman throughout 2023 to expand outreach to youth and supportive adults across Ohio.

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman

ARE THERE PARTS OF YOUR FOSTER CARE STORY THAT YOU WISH WERE DIFFERENT?

There are people who can help. Talk to an adult you trust about calling **1-877-OH-YOUTH** or scan the **QR Code**.

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman
1-877-OH-YOUTH
www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman

IF YOU'RE IN FOSTER CARE, YOU HAVE RIGHTS.

Have you heard of the Foster Youth Rights Handbook? If you don't have one, ask your caseworker for a copy. If you think someone is violating one of your rights and you feel no one else is listening, scan the **QR code** or call **1-877-OH-YOUTH** and share your story with Ohio's Youth Ombudsman.

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman
1-877-OH-YOUTH
www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

WHAT IS THE FOSTER YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS?
In 2021, Ohio codified 13 basic rights for youth in foster care and other substitute care settings. The Foster Youth Bill of Rights outlines protections related to abuse and neglect, visitation, privacy, education, and much more. Learn more by visiting [YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov/resources](https://www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov/resources).

WHAT DOES THE YOUTH OMBUDSMAN DO?
The Youth Ombudsman receives, reviews, and investigates complaints made by or on behalf of youth involved in the children services system, including instances when youth's rights may have been violated. The Youth Ombudsman may facilitate and advocate collaboratively with the youth and the involved agency to reach a resolution. In more serious circumstances, the Youth Ombudsman may conduct a formal investigation into a complaint and issue a comprehensive report with findings and recommendations to improve practice.

WHO CAN THE YOUTH OMBUDSMAN HELP?
The Youth Ombudsman is authorized by the Ohio Revised Code (Section 1512.891) to receive complaints from citizens, including children in the custody of a public children services agency, or in the care and placement of a Title IV-E agency, regarding child protective services, foster care, adoption, and post-emanicipation services. The Youth Ombudsman reviews complaints submitted directly by youth or by adults who submit complaints on behalf of youth.

ARE COMPLAINTS CONFIDENTIAL?
The Youth Ombudsman's records are confidential; however, the Youth Ombudsman is required under statute to release identifying information in certain situations.

CONTACT
Complaints may be initiated directly by youth or by adults, including school personnel or mental health professionals, on behalf of youth.
(877) OH-YOUTH
www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov

HELPING A STUDENT REPORT CONCERNS

1. If the student is comfortable submitting the complaint on their own, direct them to [YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov](https://www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov).
2. Or you can submit the complaint on their behalf.
3. Not ready or not sure? Call 877-OH-YOUTH.

STOP The Youth Ombudsman does not investigate abuse or neglect. Call 855-OH-CHILD to report child abuse or neglect. Call 9-1-1 for emergencies.

Nika Dethlefs, Governor, State of Ohio; Matt Demetricher, Director, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services; JFS 89125 (12/2023)
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Ohio's Youth Ombudsman wants youth involved with children services to understand their rights.

Call now to schedule the free presentation:
Understanding the Foster Youth Bill of Rights: An Interactive Session for Teens

- Boost understanding of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights
- Empower youth to ask for help when they need it
- Expand accessibility of the Youth Ombudsman's office to youth across Ohio

Schedule a Presentation Today!
1-877-OH-YOUTH
[YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov](https://www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov)

Department of Job & Family Services
Youth Ombudsman



Ohio Youth Ombudsman
PO Box 18125
Columbus, OH 43218

Foster youth have rights. The Youth Ombudsman helps protect those rights. If you have concerns about your rights, your placement, or your care, the Youth Ombudsman may be able to help.

The artwork on this card was designed by youth for youth.

1-877-OH-YOUTH | [YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov](https://www.YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov)



**Department of
Job & Family
Services**

Youth & Family Ombudsmen Office

1-877-649-6884

PO Box 182133

Columbus, OH 43218

YouthAndFamilyOmbudsmen.ohio.gov

Mike DeWine, Governor, State of Ohio

Matt Damschroder, Director, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

JFS 08153 (6/2024)

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