



Child Welfare Ombudsman Offices Provide System Oversight That Can Lead to Policy and Practice Reforms

Administration for Children and Families: Alex J. Adams and Cody Inman

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation: Alayna Schreier, Deitra Scott, Emma Nye, and Amanda Benton

KEY POINTS

- State child welfare ombudsman offices serve as independent or semi-independent oversight mechanisms for or within state child welfare systems.
- As of April 2026, at least 45 states and the District of Columbia have some form of ombudsman or ombudsman-type program that addresses children’s services generally or child welfare specifically.
- Models vary widely in level of independence, authority, and scope of function. Their most common function is receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints or grievances. At the individual level, they also share information with families and members of the public.
- States report varying levels of detail on their child welfare ombudsman offices, but in addition to individual-level complaint investigation and information-sharing, they also typically facilitate transparency and system learning opportunities by elevating patterns and trends observed across cases, often offering system-level recommendations.
 - Anecdotal information suggests that such recommendations sometimes influence policy, procedural, and legislative reforms taken by other stakeholders.
 - Some states have launched promising innovations and collaborations to try to drive results in system learning, practice, and policy.
- Descriptive evidence suggests that state ombudsman offices demonstrate success at improving child welfare processes and procedures through greater transparency, problem resolution, and system learning.
- Ombudsman offices face limitations, including those related to authority, independence, resources, and enforcement power over implementation of recommendations.
- Ombudsman offices play an important role in the broader state and federal oversight ecosystem, which includes courts, inspectors general, the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), and citizen review panels. Ombudsmen offer the benefits of an independent avenue for complaints involving legal compliance, fairness, and administrative practice and are accessible to families without legal representation.
- States can benefit from considering how ombudsman functions can be leveraged to reduce burdens on other oversight systems.
- While federal oversight mechanisms such as child fatality reviews and citizen review panels may play a role in retrospective accountability, child welfare ombudsman offices offer a complementary function by identifying patterns in complaints, near misses, and administrative breakdowns in real time. This helps surface and address system risks earlier in the causal chain.

BACKGROUND

Child welfare ombudsman offices offer citizens involved with the child welfare system the opportunity to voice their concerns in a meaningful way and gain assistance in problem solving. The U.S. Ombudsman Association characterizes ombudsman offices by their independence, authority to investigate complaints, ability to criticize government agencies and recommend changes through public reports, and no enforcement or disciplinary authority.¹ The ombudsman concept originated in Sweden, was first adopted in the U.S. public sector by Hawaii in 1967, and began to specifically serve child welfare in Rhode Island in 1979.²

Some ombudsmen can investigate complaints across all state agencies, but many are sector-specific, for example in child welfare or long-term care. In child welfare systems, as with other state agency systems, ombudsman offices have often been created to address concerns about accountability, transparency, and access to complaint resolution. Ombudsman offices are often established by statute following system failures such as high-profile child deaths, litigation, or legislative concern about the treatment of children and families.³

NEARLY ALL STATES HAVE AN OMBUDSMAN OR OMBUDSMAN-TYPE ROLE, BUT THE ROLE IS ESTABLISHED AND STRUCTURED DIFFERENTLY ACROSS STATES

There are at least 68 child welfare or children’s services ombudsman offices or offices with ombudsman-type functions across 45 states and the District of Columbia, though systematic and consistent counts are difficult due to state variations in definitions and structures.

There is no comprehensive list of ombudsman offices across the country, so obtaining an exact count of all state ombudsman offices is difficult. This review found three other 50-state scans completed since 2021: one in Minnesota,⁴ one in Idaho,⁵ and one from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).⁶ Each scan identified a slightly different number of ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices across a different array of states.¹ These differences appear to be based on the constantly changing landscape of these offices and inclusion/exclusion decisions about type of office, type of activities, or population served. This review was broadly inclusive of ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices as of April 2026, so reflects a greater number of offices than other reviews. However, this review did not include complaint review or client services-type offices if they did not provide sufficient detail to indicate they were serving in an ombudsman-type role.

Ombudsman Best Practices

The U. S. Ombudsman Association established a set of best practices guidelines for ombudsman offices. They should:

1. Be independent: free from outside control or influence.
2. Be impartial: Receive and review each complaint in an objective and fair manner, free from bias, and treat all parties without favor or prejudice.
3. Control confidentiality: Have the privilege and discretion to keep confidential or release any information related to a complaint or investigation.
4. Create a credible review process of complaints: Perform his or her responsibilities in a manner that engenders respect and confidence and be accessible to all potential complainants.

ⁱ The Minnesota scan (2021) identified 51 ombudsman, ombudsman-type, or complaint offices across 49 states and Washington, D.C. Idaho’s Office of Performance Evaluations (2024) identified 49 distinct ombudsman or ombudsman-type agencies across 39 states and Washington, D.C. NCSL (2025) identified 45 ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices across 41 states, and did not include Washington D.C. All three scans identified states with multiple or overlapping offices.

As of this review in April 2026, there are at least 68 ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices across 45 states and the District of Columbia. See the Appendix for a list of identified ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices by state. In five states – Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming – our review did not identify any ombudsman or ombudsman-type office, though some of these states have ombudsman-type offices that function at the county or regional level. This is a frequently changing landscape, as evidenced by changes since these prior reviews, such as new offices, as well as offices that have been relocated or renamed.

In addition to ombudsman offices at the state level, many counties also have their own ombudsman office. As mentioned above, some states only have child welfare ombudsman-type functions at the county level due to the operational structure of their child welfare systems. In states with county-administered child welfare systems, primary responsibility for service delivery and case decision-making rests with county agencies, while state agencies set policy and provide oversight. As a result, complaint resolution and ombudsman-type functions may occur at the county level, with some states also maintaining a state-level office to provide broader oversight or handle escalated concerns. There is no single ombudsman structure, so jurisdictions develop systems that reflect their structure and needs.

Ombudsman offices sit as one part within a larger ecosystem of child welfare oversight, including executive and legislative branch oversight, judicial and legal involvement, audits and compliance efforts, review bodies, and external accountability.

Figure 1. Child Welfare Ombudsman Offices Exist Within the Child Welfare Oversight Ecosystem



Oversight is distributed across multiple layers of authority, with overlapping roles spanning policy, legal decision-making, investigation, and public accountability. Child welfare ombudsman offices operate across and between these layers, addressing issues that fall outside formal legal or compliance pathways.

Across states, most ombudsman offices are established by statute but placed in different parts of government depending on the states' needs and approach.

The majority of offices are established by statute. In a few cases, the ombudsman office was initially established by executive order and subsequently enshrined in statute. Ombudsman offices are generally public sector offices located in the executive branch, legislative branch, or as external commissions. In one instance (Maine), statute directs the Governor's office to contract with a non-profit. Placement can determine access to relevant data, records, and reports, which has significant impact on activities carried out by ombudsmen and thus their effectiveness.

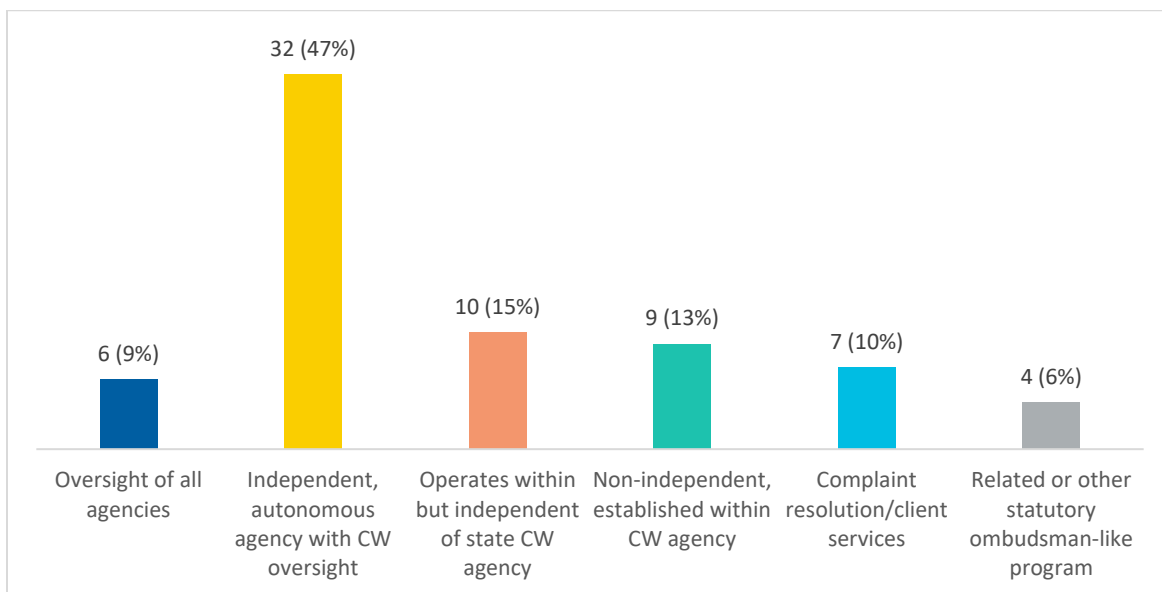
There are five common structural models that reflect varying degrees of independence.

Drawing from the NCSL⁷ and Idaho⁸ 50-state scans, child welfare ombudsman offices generally fall into five categories:

1. **Independent, autonomous agencies** with child welfare-specific oversight.
2. **Offices housed within but autonomous from** the state child welfare agency.
3. **General state ombudsman offices** that oversee all executive agencies, including child welfare.
4. **Non-independent offices embedded within** child welfare agencies.
5. **Related or ombudsman-like programs** serving specific populations or issue areas intersecting with child welfare (e.g., foster youth-specific offices).

Thus, the level of independence varies substantially across child welfare ombudsman offices. Child advocates have noted that independence is one of the most important characteristics of an office because it allows for authority and credibility.⁹ If an office is located in the organization it purports to oversee, this may interfere with the office's ability to effectively and transparently conduct reviews and respond to citizen complaints.¹⁰

Figure 2. Structural Models of Ombudsman Offices that Reflect Varying Degrees of Independence



While performing the same roles, office names may vary by state. Some offices use the term ombudsman, while others are called child advocates. A few states use the term inspector general, for example, the Illinois

Department of Children and Family Services Office of the Inspector General and the Office of the Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare.ⁱⁱ

In addition to – or in place of – a child welfare ombudsman office, a small number of states have constituent complaint or concern offices. For example, North Carolina has a Child Welfare Services Constituent Concerns Office and Vermont has a Department for Children and Families Consumer Concerns Team. In general, complaint or concern offices do not have the same authorities or scopes of function as an ombudsman office.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many states have multiple ombudsman offices with different structural models. For example, Arizona has a general state ombudsman office that oversees all executive agencies, and the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) has a DCS Office of the Ombudsman embedded within the agency.

The population served – and who can submit complaints – depends on the ombudsman model in each specific state.

The population served depends on the type of structural ombudsman model. General state ombudsman offices serve all citizens of the state – meaning any citizen can raise a concern about how the child welfare system, or any other agency, is functioning. General ombudsman offices may have dedicated staff for child welfare issues.

State ombudsman offices that focus specifically on child welfare often accept complaints from those involved in the child welfare system, such as parents, grandparents, foster parents, attorneys, child protection professionals, mental health providers, medical professionals, and/or youth in foster care. Complaints submitted to these offices that do not relate to the child welfare system may be considered out of jurisdiction and are usually referred to the appropriate office for information and/or assistance.

There are three states with offices designed to serve specific subpopulations within the child welfare system. In Florida, the Children’s Ombudsman serves youth or young adults in Florida’s child welfare system. New York’s Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Office of the Ombudsman (OOTO) works only with youth who have been adjudicated by Family Court or Criminal Court and who reside at various residential placement facilities or county detention and does not handle foster care cases. Nevada’s Children’s Advocate for Missing and Exploited Children focuses specifically on that population.

CHILD WELFARE OMBUDSMEN MOST COMMONLY INVESTIGATE COMPLAINTS AND ENGAGE IN RELATED ACTIVITIES SUCH AS INFORMATION-SHARING AND DEVELOPING RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE POLICY AND PRACTICE

One of the primary functions of a child welfare ombudsman is investigating and resolving complaints or grievances. In general, people can contact an ombudsman office to pursue complaints in multiple ways. Most states have online reporting mechanisms, and complaints are also accepted through phone calls, emails, or in-person visits.

ⁱⁱ This review only included Inspector General offices that explicitly perform the functions of a child welfare ombudsman. This review did not include all Inspector General offices.

ⁱⁱⁱ This review included complaint or concern offices if they included sufficient detail to indicate they provide the complaint review function of an ombudsman; we did not include offices if the available information was limited to how to contact the office.

Some ombudsmen’s offices have policies in place dictating time limits on case resolution from the time the complaint is received to closure. Usually 45, 60, or 90 days, the time frame includes checking eligibility, screening for relevance, review and/or investigation, findings, and case closure.

Ombudsman offices identify trends across complaints and use findings to share information with policymakers and other stakeholders, as well as to recommend policy or practice changes to improve services and address policy gaps or barriers. Ombudsman offices can also provide training and conduct public education with community partners, including schools, provider agencies, police departments, and foster parents to raise awareness of services.

A few state child welfare ombudsman offices have additional authorities that expand their scope and reach, but these activities are far less common.

Consistent with the U.S. Ombudsman Association guidelines, almost no state offices have direct enforcement power. Four offices (in Delaware, Nevada, Rhode Island, Virginia) provide legal services, such as filing lawsuits on behalf of children. Some offices (e.g., in Idaho and New Hampshire) have explicit authority to respond to complaints from youth in residential or congregate care facilities. Other offices can monitor licensed residential or congregate care facilities, and a few offices are statutorily required to conduct child fatality reviews.

Some offices provide training and technical assistance to build capacity, such as providing training to child welfare system professionals, and coordinate child welfare-related activities.¹¹ For example, Rhode Island’s Office of the Child Advocate provides training and technical assistance to Guardians ad Litem (GAL) and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and ombudsman offices in Alaska, West Virginia, and Washington D.C. present to citizen review panels.

ACROSS STATES, CHILD WELFARE OMBUDSMAN OFFICES REPORT VARYING LEVELS OF DETAIL, BUT GENERALLY REPORT INCREASING TRANSPARENCY, RESOLVING COMPLAINTS, SHARING INFORMATION WITH INDIVIDUALS, AND DEVELOPING SYSTEM-LEVEL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

State annual reports typically enhance transparency by reporting quantitative data, though not every state publishes a report, and reports vary widely in level of detail.

Most available quantitative data on ombudsman’s offices comes from state annual reports. In their annual reports, state ombudsman offices consistently report the number of complaints received. Across the most

Most Common Functions of Child Welfare Ombudsman Offices

1. Receiving, investigating, and attempting to resolve complaints or grievances
2. Providing information and referrals to individuals in need of assistance
3. Conducting trainings for government and community-based child welfare professionals and providing public education
4. Identifying issues and trends across complaints and advocating for system-level improvements
5. Making policy recommendations to agencies, legislatures, and governors

recent publicly available report reviewed (ranging from 2021 to 2026), state child welfare ombudsman offices received between 82 (Idaho) and 1,581 complaints (Ohio).^{iv}

Some states also report a broader number of overall contacts that include general inquiries or requests for referrals, while others do not distinguish between these types of contacts and complaints. This makes direct comparisons between state reports difficult. To some extent, number of complaints received reflects the overall jurisdiction of the ombudsman office. Offices that accept complaints from a more narrow range of complainants (e.g., foster youth only) might have fewer complaints than broader youth and family ombudsman offices or government-wide ombudsman offices.

There is wide variation in how states report the number of complaints received. Some states report only a total number of complaints received in a calendar or fiscal year. Other states provide additional but varying levels of detail. Detailed information can include complaints broken down by month in which the complaint is received, means by which the complaint is received (e.g., telephone, mail, email, fax, in-person visit), county of complainant, complainant role, type of concern, action taken, rate and type of closures/resolutions, length of time cases were open, and more.

In states reporting complainant data, parents are most commonly the complainants. Other relatives (particularly grandparents), foster parents, and child welfare professionals also frequently contact ombudsmen for assistance. Other details can include information about budget and other statutorily required functions, such as child fatality reviews or reviews of state or county residential care facilities.

This review did not locate a recent annual report in every state that has a child welfare ombudsman or ombudsman-type office, though some of these states share key information through alternatives to annual reports, such as quarterly reports or newsletters. Reports were not located for 11 states.^v

Qualitative findings from state annual reports and other assessments indicate that, at the individual level, ombudsman offices receive and resolve individual complaints and increase transparency and communication through information-sharing with families and the public.

Most states describe only a small subset of complaints, rather than a comprehensive or detailed list of all or most complaints received. For example, some feature success stories or quotes from foster parents, guardians, fictive kin, or others. Other states summarize the recommendations or actions taken in follow-up for each complaint listed.

Of state offices that publish annual reports, only a minority (14) report the number or percentage of complaints that are resolved. Some of these offices report which cases were resolved through referrals, mediation, or information provision. Some report on timeliness of closure or case duration. Some offer more detailed information on investigation outcomes, including the number of complaints

Transparency in Reporting

Massachusetts' Office of the Child Advocate developed an online [dashboard](#) to make report data more accessible and interactive.

Missouri's Office of the Child Advocate reports measures of timeliness not required by statute, such as initial response time, time frame for completing new reviews, and time allotment for completing unsubstantiated reviews.

^{iv} For the purposes of this brief, we focus on number of complaints, rather than number of overall inquiries, information requests, or requests for referrals. For states that have a general ombudsman office that oversees all executive branch agencies, we looked only at the reported number of complaints for the agency providing child welfare services.

^v Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Wisconsin, or Wyoming

that were substantiated, unsubstantiated, or inconclusive. Some go further and report the number of recommendations made and agency changes implemented based on complaints and investigations.

All complaints do not require investigations. Some are resolved at the individual level through information sharing, mediation, or referrals. For example, Arizona’s Citizens Aide Ombudsman provides coaching services that can include defining issues and rights, identifying options, referring people to the appropriate employee or department, redirecting citizens to other services, explaining agency policies, researching information, offering conflict management strategies, and setting reasonable expectations.¹² To demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches, Kansas’ Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) reports that 23 cases achieved a positive outcome through existing agency processes, noting that the “mere presence of an OCA inquiry encourages agencies to expedite their own solutions.”¹³

Barriers to accessing information and resource constraints can limit the office’s ability to fully investigate and resolve complaints. Arkansas Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman, for example, reports being unable to access court documents despite ombudsman legislation, making investigation much more difficult and time consuming.¹⁴ Case study interviews with child welfare ombudsmen indicated that some offices de-prioritize complaint investigation and management due to resource constraints, focusing their limited resources instead on the broader systemic initiatives that arise from the complaints received.¹⁵

Many ombudsmen’s offices have transparency and communication strategies to share information to ensure the public and foster-involved families are aware of and can benefit from their services. For example, Texas conducted outreach in every region and even in neighboring states where Texas youth were placed.¹⁶ Virginia supported legislation that amended the statutes governing the ombudsman to increase awareness of and access to ombudsman services for youth in foster care.¹⁷

In addition to individual-level work, state annual reports usually identify recurring policy and practice issues and outline recommendations that focus on systems-level opportunities or trends.

Some individual-level complaints result in formal findings or recommendations aimed at improving agency practice, strengthening accountability, or addressing policy gaps that affect children and families involved in the child welfare system. Recommendations from child welfare ombudsman offices usually fall into several broad categories aimed at strengthening agency practice, improving oversight, and addressing policy and practice challenges that affect children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Many recommendations focus on agency **policy and practice improvements**, such as revising policies and procedures, reinforcing safety planning protocols, and improving documentation and investigation practices.

Ombudsman offices frequently recommend enhanced **training and supervision** for child welfare staff, particularly in areas such as conducting investigations, documenting evidence, responding to emergencies, and addressing complex issues such as child-on-child harm or children with special needs.

Offices often call for **improvements to information systems and data access**, including modernizing case management systems, expanding staff access to relevant databases, and strengthening mechanisms for monitoring compliance with agency policies.

Common Types of Ombudsman Recommendations

- Policy and practice improvements
- Staff training and supervision enhancements
- Data system and documentation improvements
- Oversight and coordination reforms
- Youth and family engagement

Another common set of recommendations centers on **improving oversight, communication, and transparency** within child welfare systems. Ombudsman offices may recommend statutory or administrative changes to improve coordination among agencies (such as partnerships with law enforcement¹⁸ or other service providers), to clarify oversight authority, and to ensure more consistent standards across regions.

Many recommendations also seek to **improve youth and family engagement**, including ensuring that children in foster care are informed of their rights, encouraging child welfare agencies to provide contact information for ombudsman offices to families and caregivers, expanding supports for youth transitioning out of care, and strengthening policies related to visitation, confinement practices,¹⁹ and access to education.

These recommendations are aimed at a variety of decisionmakers, often including caseworkers and supervisors, as well as state staff, legislators, child welfare agency leadership, data managers, and others. For example, Oklahoma’s ombudsman office produces an Annual Legislative Report on Child Welfare Grievances,²⁰ Oregon’s ombudsman program has policies in place designating that significant recommendations of global importance will be shared with the Governor’s Office,²¹ and Rhode Island’s OCA has provided recommendations to the State Department of Education on attendance policies that cause unintended consequences for students in state care.²²

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIVITIES BY CHILD WELFARE OMBUDSMAN OFFICES MAY LEAD TO POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGES

Given that almost no states have enforcement authority, implementation of any recommendations depends on awareness, actionability, and buy-in by other stakeholders. Anecdotally, state annual reports often outline examples of the ombudsman office’s role in broader reforms, though more systematic or causal research is needed to evaluate legislative, policy, or administrative changes as a result of recommendations from state ombudsman offices.

Some state reports refer back to recommendations made in prior year reports and discuss progress toward those recommendations. For example, Illinois’ 2025 Annual Report details that the Department of Children and Families implemented 42 of the 61 recommendations made in Fiscal Year 2024 and has submitted an implementation plan for the pending 19 recommendations.²³ Similarly, Kansas’ 2025 Annual Report revisits three recommendations made in the 2024 report, provides a 2025 update on the actions taken in response to those recommendations, and identifies future steps in “2026 & Beyond.”²⁴

How Ombudsman Offices Drive System Change

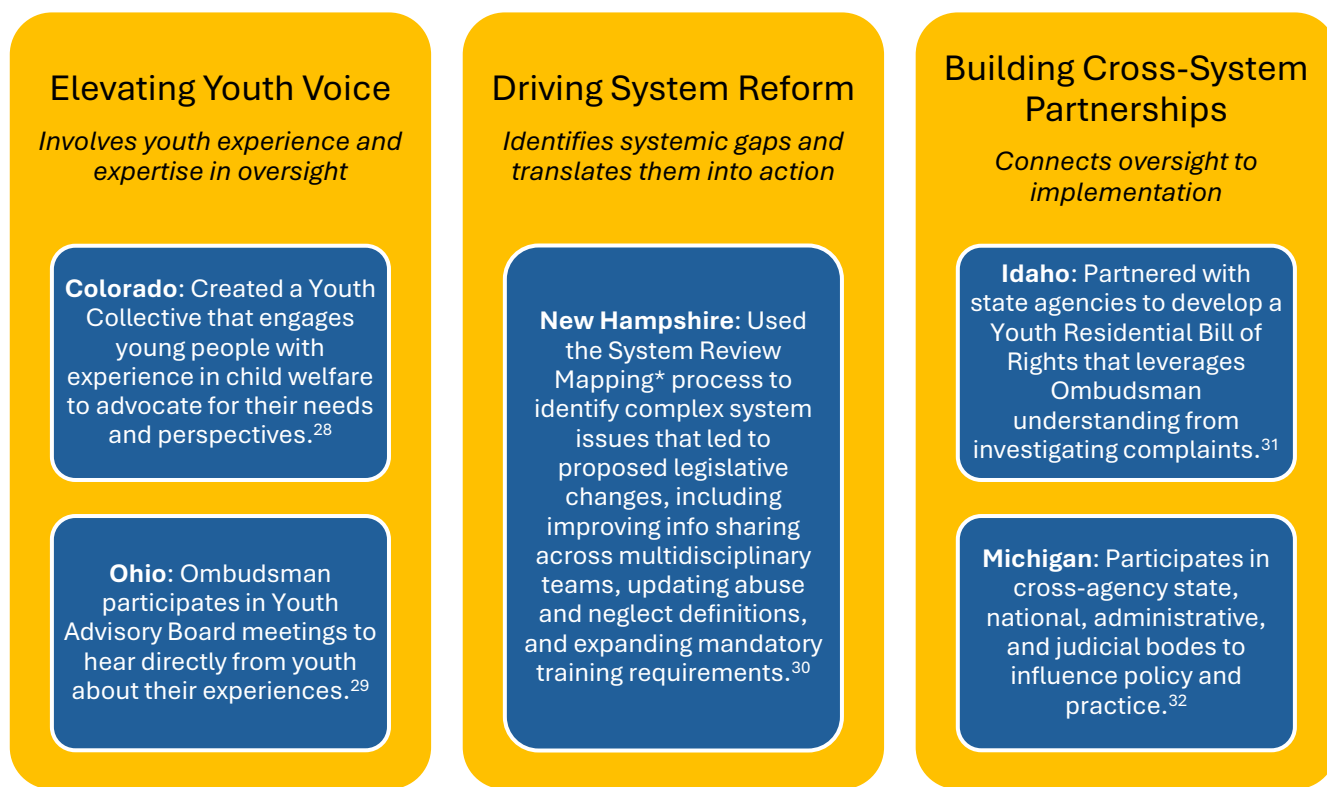
- Informing legislative reforms (youth bills of rights, mandatory reporting changes)
- Updating agency policy and practice guidelines
- Triggering independent audits or system reviews
- Elevating recurring issues across cases to policymakers
- Tracking and revisiting prior recommendations to monitor progress

Identified Limitations of Ombudsman Offices

- Limited or no enforcement authority
- Resource and staffing constraints
- Variable independence across models
- Inconsistent access to data and records
- Reliance on voluntary implementation of recommendations

In some cases, ombudsman investigations lead to broader legislative or system-level reforms, such as the development of youth bills of rights, changes to mandatory reporting laws, or independent reviews of safety assessment tools. In Colorado, the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) has contributed to the development and passage of two pieces of legislation: 1) working directly with youth, a bill that expanded CPO jurisdiction to include youth residing in residential care facilities and youth centers, and 2) a bill requiring third-party audits of safety and risk assessment tools used to determine whether a child will be removed from their home.²⁵ In Massachusetts, the Child Advocate supported legislation that prevented unnecessary child welfare investigations of newborns who were born substance-exposed, in situations where the parent was prescribed the medication by a physician to treat a mental health or substance use disorder, and when there was no additional cause for child abuse or neglect.²⁶ Utah’s Child Protection Ombudsman updated their practice guideline definition of emotional abuse to align with the definition in Utah’s policy code.²⁷

Figure 3. Some Innovations and Partnerships by Ombudsman Offices Show Promise for Better Engaging Young People and Other Partners and Driving System Responsiveness



**System Review Mapping uses a Safety Science review process that helps create change at the systems level without shame or judgment, promotes increased accountability and public trust, and cultivates a responsive system.*

OVERALL, EVALUATIONS OF CHILD WELFARE OMBUDSMAN OFFICES DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS AT IMPROVING CHILD WELFARE PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

This review found four publicly available program evaluation or audit reports that focused on ombudsman or ombudsman-type offices. These reports focused on process outcomes, or the extent to which the office met its statutory requirements.

Overall, audits in Massachusetts³³ and Connecticut³⁴ found total compliance with policies and procedures. In Connecticut, the audit described performance as “stellar,” noting the accomplishments achieved despite the mismatch between the breadth of statutory responsibilities and the resources the office has received from the state.

The audits both produced recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of the office. In Massachusetts, the audit recommended that the OCA be provided with more information regarding sexual abuse of children. In Connecticut, the audit recommended funding for additional positions to address the mismatch between resources and responsibilities described above. The audit also recommended amending the state law to assure OCA independence. Specifically, the audit described that OCA’s structure is different than other state government accountability offices that operate independently (e.g., Freedom of Information Act or FOIA) because it only has a bipartisan Advisory Committee with limited authority to ensure independence. The audit noted the importance of not only ensuring the office can operate independently, but that it is *viewed* as operating independently.

A program evaluation in Minnesota³⁵ found that few foster youth accessed the services of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Families (OBFF). The evaluation issued three recommendations for reform to better serve youth in foster care: 1) Establish a Foster Youth Ombudsperson within the Minnesota OBFF; 2) Establish a Foster Youth Ombudsperson within the Minnesota Governor’s Offices; and 3) Establish a Foster Youth Ombudsperson within a Non-Governmental Community Organization. Minnesota has since established an Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY).

In Ohio, the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB) conducted an evaluation of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.³⁶ The evaluation report commends the Ombudsman and Assistant Ombudsman for their approach to investigate youth-related concerns, and identifies ongoing issues with various parts of the system that are not responsive to youth needs or where progress has been slow.

Overall, key takeaways from these audits focus on constraints on staff resources, the importance of independence on perceived credibility, and how limitations in authority can interfere with the ability of an ombudsman office to function successfully. Specifically:

- Constraints on staff resources may limit the ability of an ombudsman office to focus on certain priority populations or topics, and instead direct offices to focus on a narrow set of core functions.
- Independence of the state ombudsman office affects perceived credibility and the weight and attention that external stakeholders like legislators and agency leadership place on recommendations the office develops.
- Limitations in authority, including access to information and data, limit the ability of ombudsman offices to fully understand an issue, resolve individual-level complaints, and develop system-level recommendations.

There are opportunities to enhance the research and evaluation of child welfare ombudsman effectiveness.

Most evidence of effectiveness of child welfare ombudsman offices is descriptive and process-oriented, and the ability to draw conclusions about effectiveness varies by state. In part, this may reflect the lack of a national, standardized evaluation framework. Not all states publish an annual report, and states that do publish annual reports present different information with a range of detail.

Implementation of recommendations is often voluntary, inconsistently tracked, and inconsistently reported within and across states. Many state reports describe the number of complaints resolved or the amount of time to case resolution, while a smaller number of states report individual case outcomes or broader systems-level outcomes.

There is very little peer-reviewed research on child welfare ombudsman overall, the majority of which comes from other countries. In the United States, this review found one article from 1999 on the initial establishment and implementation of an ombudsman's office in Michigan,³⁷ a 2007 paper on applying international approaches to ombudsman in the United States foster care system,³⁸ and a small body of work by O'Neill beginning with a dissertation in 2011.³⁹

Causally linking complaint resolution and recommendation identification to broader child welfare outcomes like child safety and permanency would be difficult methodologically, and it can also be challenging to assess the effectiveness of an ombudsman office when relying only on self-reported data.⁴⁰ However, results like learning, behavioral change, or other system changes could be assessed more rigorously. A more robust research and evaluation framework or a more consistent reporting structure would enable further demonstration of the effectiveness of the child welfare ombudsman.

As a comparison, the long-term care ombudsman program conducts similar functions but is administered at the national level, provides training and technical assistance through a national resource center, and requires standardized reporting of activities and performance.

The Long-Term Care (LTC) Ombudsman Program, is an independent, consumer protection service that directly serves individuals residing in LTC facilities, including nursing homes, board and care, and assisted living facilities.^{41,42} Unlike the array of state-driven child welfare ombudsman's offices, it is formally administered by the Administration for Community Living (ACL) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and operates in all states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam.⁴³

Each of the 53 participating states and territories operates an Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, directed statewide by a full-time State LTC Ombudsman. States have some flexibility in how they structure their programs, so there is some variation regarding centralization and where each office is housed; however, the majority of states (30 states) house the office within the State Unit on Aging or another state government agency (11 states).⁴⁴

The primary function of the Ombudsman is to respond to complaints lodged by LTC facility residents and their families or friends. In some instances, the Ombudsman may open a case as the complainant based on their own observations. LTC Ombudsmen represent the interests of involved residents by investigating and resolving complaints, including by providing information to residents and seeking administrative or legal remedies for the complaint. Additional responsibilities – similar to the role of most child welfare ombudsman's offices – of State LTC Ombudsman programs include: advocacy for laws, regulations, and policies that protect residents' health, safety, welfare, and rights; education of consumers and the public on LTC-related issues, concerns, and policies; and, promotion and support of citizen organizations and resident and family councils.^{45,46,47}

ACL administers the program through the Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs, which advocate at the federal level, provide funding to and evaluating state programs, approve relevant provisions in State Plans on Aging, and administer the National Ombudsman Resource Center (NORC), which primarily provides training and technical assistance to State LTC Ombudsman Programs.^{48,49}

Unlike the more state-specific reporting approaches of child welfare ombudsman's offices, ACL also administers the National Ombudsman Reporting System (NORS), to which Ombudsman programs report activities and outcomes such as complaints received, investigated, and resolved; education efforts; facility visits; and examples of systems issues.⁵⁰

In 2025, LTC Ombudsman programs received nearly 202,000 complaints, and Ombudsmen resolved or partially resolved 73%. They provided over 611,000 instances of information and assistance to residents and their

families and over 180,000 instances to LTC facility staff. LTC Ombudsman programs also conducted over 3,600 training sessions to facilities and participated in over 22,000 resident council meetings. They carried out facility visits at least quarterly to 72 percent of all nursing homes and 28 percent of all board and care homes.^{51,52}

There is also limited evidence of effectiveness in LTC Ombudsman programs, though there has been more research than on child welfare ombudsmen. An early formative evaluation found that overall, the LTC ombudsman program provides a vital service and improved the system of LTC services by supporting the health, safety, rights, and welfare of LTC residents.⁵³ One study found that increases in funding for LTC ombudsman programs were associated with improved nursing home resident care (just over a 1% decrease each in share of residents receiving antipsychotics and subjected to physical restraints).⁵⁴ Surveys indicate that LTC ombudsmen overwhelmingly report effective working relationships with key partners, with regular presence in LTC facilities and positive working relationships with facility staff as key contributing factors.⁵⁵ However, LTC ombudsmen frequently report difficulty meeting all of the federal mandates due to insufficient financial and staffing resources.

CONCLUSION

Child welfare ombudsman offices are now a common feature of state child welfare oversight in the majority of states but remain highly heterogeneous, with varying levels of independence, and statutorily defined functions and responsibilities. Overall, child welfare ombudsman offices' primary function is investigating and resolving individual-level complaints. For this function, they offer families and the public an avenue to have their voices heard and share information directly with individuals, increasing transparency and communication. Office resources and public awareness of the office help shape the ability to execute these functions.

Another critical value of child welfare ombudsman offices is to look across individual-level cases to identify trends and make system-level recommendations for external stakeholders aimed at improving practice and policy. The offices' independence and credibility may influence the attention and value such stakeholders place on these recommendations and the extent to which they follow through on them.

The few evaluations conducted of child welfare ombudsman offices have identified success at improving child welfare processes and functions. A more robust research and evaluation framework that goes beyond descriptive, self-reported data could enhance the ability to assess effectiveness, for example, through the use of standardized metrics and more consistent tracking of recommendation implementation across states.

There are opportunities to learn from how other sectors, like long-term care, have approached the ombudsman role. Through the National Ombudsman Reporting System (NORS), all state LTC ombudsman offices report the same performance metrics, which allows for direct comparison across states. In addition to the NORS, the LTC ombudsman program also created a state-to-state network and a resource center that provides training and technical assistance, helps to share best practices, and avoid redundancies in systems.

State child welfare ombudsman offices play an important role in the broader state and federal oversight ecosystem, which includes courts, inspectors general, the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), and citizen review panels, among others. Ombudsman's offices offer the benefits of an independent avenue for complaints outside the child welfare agency that can increase transparency and public reporting, and the ability to identify and surface systemic issues that may not be readily apparent in case-level oversight. Unlike courts and inspectors general, ombudsman's offices are accessible to families without legal representation, they address informal complaints and communication breakdowns, and they can focus on fairness and administrative practice, not just legal compliance. They also provide an opportunity to elevate youth and family perspectives in policy discussions.

The CFSR is a periodic review of state child welfare systems, designed to ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, determine what is actually happening to children and families when they engage in child welfare services, and assist states in helping children and families achieve positive safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes.⁵⁶ Coordination between the ombudsman office and the CFSR process could help to link ombudsman activities to child welfare outcomes, or could alleviate the need for certain CFSR processes.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires states who accept CAPTA funding to establish citizen review panels⁵⁷ that evaluate the extent to which each state is fulfilling its child protection responsibilities in accordance with its state plan. This involves examining the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies and reviewing specific cases where applicable. Each panel must prepare an annual report that makes recommendations to improve the child protection system at state and local levels. While some ombudsman offices participate in the state's citizen review panel, this is not a requirement across all states. Further research should explore where citizen review panels and ombudsman offices are duplicative and complimentary.

States can benefit from thinking further about how these functions can most efficiently and effectively complement each other. Intentional and proactive information-sharing and collaboration – for example the work done by the ombudsman's offices described above that present takeaways from their work to the state's citizen review panel, GAL, and/or CASA colleagues – could make processes both more efficient and more effective. The informal resolutions offered by ombudsman's offices can reduce burdens on formal systems like courts, inspectors general, CFSR, and citizen review panels by resolving issues through mediation or clarification and preventing escalation to litigation or formal appeals, potentially reducing duplication downstream by resolving issues early. Working together, these oversight mechanisms can offer resolution to families and improve policies and processes within the child welfare system.

As federal and state oversight systems continue to evolve, there is an opportunity to more intentionally leverage ombudsman offices as upstream complements to existing mechanisms by identifying and addressing systemic risks before they result in the most severe outcomes. Strengthening coordination between ombudsman offices and formal oversight processes may improve overall system responsiveness while reducing reliance on retrospective reviews.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Gottehrer, D. M., & Hostina, M. (n.d.) *Essential Characteristics of a Classical Ombudsman*. United States Ombudsman Association. Retrieved from <https://www.usombudsman.org/essential-characteristics-of-a-classical-ombudsman/>
- ² O'Neill, M. K., & Kennedy, H. M. (2023). Safety in oversight: A new approach for children's ombudsmen in critical incident review. *Child Welfare*, 101(1), 133-156.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Flax, S., Gomez, J., Vijayasathary, S., & Zaffiro, E. (2021). Watching the Watchers: An Examination of the Minnesota Office of Ombudsperson for Families and Recommended Reforms to Expand Ombudsperson Services for Minnesota Foster Youth. Retrieved from <https://conservancy.umn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/10b45079-2239-49e3-9002-67242ab5ab07/content>
- ⁵ Bartlett, A., Bailey, L., & Moss, M. (2024). Child Protection Ombuds: A 50 State Review. *Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations*. Retrieved from <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/OPE/Reports/r2400.pdf>
- ⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025). *Children's Ombudsman Offices: Office of the Child Advocate*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/childrens-ombudsman-offices-office-of-the-child-advocate>
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Bartlett, A., Bailey, L., & Moss, M. (2024). Child Protection Ombuds: A 50 State Review. *Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations*. Retrieved from <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/OPE/Reports/r2400.pdf>
- ⁹ Marzick, A. (2007). The foster care ombudsman: Applying an international concept to help prevent institutional abuse of America's foster youth. *Family Court Review*, 45(3), 506-523.
- ¹⁰ O'Neill, M. K. (2011). *Pulling Back the Curtain: State Children's Ombudsmen at Work* [Doctoral dissertation, Yale University]. ProQuest.
- ¹¹ Bartlett, A., Bailey, L., & Moss, M. (2024). Child Protection Ombuds: A 50 State Review. *Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations*. <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/OPE/Reports/r2400.pdf>
- ¹² Arizona Ombudsman-Citizens' Aide. (2025). *Arizona Ombudsman-Citizens' Aide Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.azoca.gov/2025-ombudsman-fiscal-year-report/>
- ¹³ Kansas Office of the Child Advocate. (2025). *Office of the Child Advocate Annual Report 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.childadvocate.ks.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/62/639045879270430000>
- ¹⁴ Office of the Arkansas Child Welfare Ombudsman. (2023). *2023 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://accardv.uams.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2025/09/CWO-Annual-Report-2023-.pdf>
- ¹⁵ O'Neill, M.K. (2011). *Pulling Back the Curtain: State Children's Ombudsmen at Work* [Doctoral dissertation, Yale University]. ProQuest.
- ¹⁶ Texas Health and Human Services. (2025). *Report of the HHS Ombudsman*. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/oo-annual-report-2025.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Office of the Children's Ombudsman. (2025). *2025 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.oco.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/oco/reports/annual-reports/2025-OCO-ANNUAL-REPORT.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Alaska Ombudsman. (2022). *Public Report: Ombudsman Investigation — Alaska Department of Family and Community Services, Office of Children's Services 2022-03-0400*. Retrieved from <https://ombud.alaska.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2022-03-0400-FINAL-PUBLIC-REPORT-OCS-12-5-24.pdf>
- ¹⁹ Office of Youth and Community Restoration. (2024). *2024 OYCR Report to the Legislature*. Retrieved from <https://oycr.ca.gov/ombudsperson/>
- ²⁰ Oklahoma State Department of Health and Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth. (2023). *Fiscal Year 2023 Oklahoma Foster Parent Voices & Foster Youth Matters Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://okfosterparentvoices.org/assets/pdfs/OJSO-OCA-Annual-2023-Annual-Report.pdf>
- ²¹ Governor's Advocacy Office. (2024). *Foster Care Ombuds Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.oregon.gov/odhs/about/gaofco/fco-2024-annual-report.pdf>
- ²² State of Rhode Island Office of the Child Advocate. (2025). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://childadvocate.ri.gov/reports>
- ²³ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Office of the Inspector General. (2025). *Annual Report to the Governor & General Assembly*. Retrieved from <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfs/documents/about-us/office-of-the-inspector-general/documents/oig-annual-report-2026.pdf>
- ²⁴ Kansas Office of the Child Advocate. (2025). *Office of the Child Advocate Annual Report 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.childadvocate.ks.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/62/639045879270430000>

- ²⁵ Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman. (2025). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from https://coloradocpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CPO-FY-2024-25-Annual-Report-Final_September-2-2025.pdf
- ²⁶ Massachusetts Office of the Child Advocate. (2025). *Office of the Child Advocate Annual Report Fiscal Year 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/doc/oca-annual-report-fiscal-year-2025/download>
- ²⁷ Utah Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *FY 2023 Child Protection Ombudsman Annual Report*. Retrieved from https://dhhs.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023-CPO-Report_final_8.30.2023.pdf
- ²⁸ Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman. (2025). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from https://coloradocpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CPO-FY-2024-25-Annual-Report-Final_September-2-2025.pdf
- ²⁹ Ohio Department of Job & Family Services. (2024). *Annual Report: Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office*. Retrieved from https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/youthandfamilyombudsmen.ohio.gov/pdf/2024YFOAnnualReport_9.4.25.pdf
- ³⁰ State of New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate. (2024). *7th Annual Report 2023-2024*. Retrieved from <https://mm.nh.gov/files/uploads/childadvocate/documents/2023-2024-annual-report.pdf>
- ³¹ Idaho Health and Social Services Ombudsman. (2025). *Annual Report: "The First Look Across the Bridge" 2025*. Retrieved from <https://hssso.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/HSSO-2025-Annual-Report-Final.pdf>
- ³² Michigan Office of the Child Advocate. (2025). *Office of the Child Advocate 2025 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.michigan.gov/oca/-/media/Project/Websites/oca/Annual-Reports/2025-OCA-Annual-Report.pdf>
- ³³ Office of the State Auditor. (2019). *Official Audit Report, Office of the Child Advocate*. Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/doc/audit-of-the-office-of-the-child-advocate/download>
- ³⁴ Office of the Child Advocate Advisory Committee. (2024). *Office of the Child Advocate Annual Evaluation by the OCA Advisory Committee*. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/oca/knowledge-base/articles/advisory-committee/oca-advisory-committee-and-report?language=en_US
- ³⁵ Flax, S., Gomez, J., Vijayarathy, S., & Zaffiro, E. (2021). *Watching the Watchers: An Examination of the Minnesota Office of Ombudsperson for Families and Recommended Reforms to Expand Ombudsperson Services for Minnesota Foster Youth*. Retrieved from <https://conservancy.umn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/10b45079-2239-49e3-9002-67242ab5ab07/content>
- ³⁶ Ohio Youth Advisory Board. (2024). *OHIO YAB Evaluation of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office Annual Report for Calendar Year 2024*. Retrieved from <https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/v1764086109/jfs.ohio.gov/YFO/ThirdOHIOYABEvaluationofOmbudsReport.pdf>
- ³⁷ Bearup R. S., & Palusci, V.J. (1999). Improving child welfare through a children's ombudsman. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(5), 449-457. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(99\)00018-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(99)00018-6)
- ³⁸ Marzick, A. (2007). The foster care ombudsman: Applying an international concept to help prevent institutional abuse of America's foster youth. *Family Court Review*, 45(3), 506-523.
- ³⁹ O'Neill, M.K. (2011). *Pulling Back the Curtain: State Children's Ombudsmen at Work* [Doctoral dissertation, Yale University]. ProQuest.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Administration for Community Living. (2019). *AoA/ACL Fact Sheet on the Ombudsman Program*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2019. Retrieved from https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2019-08/Long_Term_Care_Ombudsman_Program%202019.pdf
- ⁴² Administration for Community Living (2024). *Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://acl.gov/programs/Protecting-Rights-and-Preventing-Abuse/Long-term-Care-Ombudsman-Program>
- ⁴³ Government Accountability Office. (2024). *Long-Term Care: Information on the Ombudsman Program*. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-107209.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ Ibid
- ⁴⁵ Administration for Community Living. (2024). *Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://acl.gov/programs/Protecting-Rights-and-Preventing-Abuse/Long-term-Care-Ombudsman-Program>
- ⁴⁶ National Long-Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center. (2025). *State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program: 2025 Revised Primer for State Agencies*. Retrieved from https://ltcombudsman.org/uploads/files/support/SLTCO_2025_Revised_Primer.pdf
- ⁴⁷ *Older Americans Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. § 3058g (2020)*
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Older Americans Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. § 3011d (2020)*

⁵⁰ National Long-Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center. (2023). *About NORC*. Retrieved from <https://ltcombudsman.org/about>

⁵¹ Administration for Community Living. (2024). *Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://acl.gov/programs/Protecting-Rights-and-Preventing-Abuse/Long-term-Care-Ombudsman-Program>

⁵² Administration for Community Living. (2026). *Title VII National Ombudsman Reporting System (NORS)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://agid.acl.gov/data-set?name=TitleVII>

⁵³ Institute of Medicine Committee to Evaluate the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs. (1995). *Real People Real Problems: An Evaluation of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs of the Older Americans Act*. Harris-Wehling, J., Feasley, J. C. & Estes, C.L. (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25101383/>

⁵⁴ Hollister, B. A., & Estes, C. L. (2013). Local long-term care ombudsman program effectiveness and measurement of program resources. *Journal of Applied Gerontology, 32*(6), 702-728. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464811434144>

⁵⁵ Nguyen, K., White, E., Scolese, J., Downie, S., Neishi, K., Taylor, K., & Mulcahy, T. (2019). *Final Report: Process Evaluation of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP)*. Administration for Community Living. Retrieved from https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2020-10/LTCOPProcessEvaluationFinalReport_2.pdf

⁵⁶ Children's Bureau. (2022). *Child and Family Services Reviews*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://acf.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews>

⁵⁷ Children's Bureau. (2025). *Child Welfare Policy Manual*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://cwpm.acf.gov/citations/capta/capta-citizen-review-panels>

APPENDIX.

Table 1. State Ombudsman or Ombudsman-Type Offices, May 2026.

	Agency Name	NCSL Typology	Most Recent Annual Report
Alabama	Alabama Department of Human Resources, Administrative Hearings Division	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Alaska	Alaska Ombudsman	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	2024
	Department of Family and Community Services, Office of Children’s Services Complaint Process	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Arizona	Ombudsman Citizen’s Aide Office	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	2025
	Department of Child Safety Office of the Ombudsman	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
Arkansas	Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2023
	Office of the Juvenile Ombudsman	Related or other statutory ombudsman-like program	n/a
California	Foster Care Ombudsperson	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	2023
	Office of Youth and Community Restoration Ombudsperson	Related or other statutory ombudsman-like program	2024
Colorado	Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Connecticut	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Department of Children and Families Office of Community Relations	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Delaware	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
District of Columbia	Office of the Ombudsman for Children	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Florida	Children’s Ombudsman	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
	Department of Children and Families Office of the Inspector General	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	n/a
Georgia	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2026
Hawaii	Office of the Ombudsman	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	2025
Idaho	Health and Social Services Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025

Illinois	Department of Children and Family Services Office of the Inspector General	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	2025
	Department of Children and Family Services Advocacy Office	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
Indiana	Department of Child Services Ombudsman Bureau	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2024
Iowa	Office of Ombudsman	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	2025
Kansas	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Department for Children and Families Office of Client Services	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Kentucky	Commonwealth Office of the Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	n/a
Louisiana	Child Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2026
	Office of State Inspector General	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	n/a
Maine	Children’s Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Maryland	Resource Parent Ombudsman	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	n/a
	Department of Human Services Office of Constituent Experience	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Massachusetts	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Department of Children and Families Ombudsman	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	n/a
Michigan	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Minnesota	Office of the Ombudsperson for Families	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2023
	Ombudsperson for Youth	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Office of the Ombudsperson for American Indian Families	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2026 ^{vi}
Mississippi	--	--	
Missouri	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2023
Montana	Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Nebraska	Public Counsel	Oversight of all governmental agencies, including child welfare	2025
	Office of Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025

^{vi} No annual reports were available, but the Office publishes quarterly reports.

Nevada	Children’s Advocate for Missing or Exploited Children	Related or other statutory ombudsman-like program	n/a
	Division of Child and Family Services Systems Advocate	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
New Hampshire	Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Ombudsman	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	n/a
	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2024
New Jersey	Department of Children and Families Office of Advocacy	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
New Mexico	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	n/a
	Children, Youth, and Families Department Office of Constituent Affairs	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
New York	Office of Children and Family Services Office of the Ombudsman	Related or other statutory ombudsman-like program	n/a
North Carolina	Child Welfare Services Constituent Complaint Office	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
North Dakota	Health and Human Services Client Rights and Appeals	Complaint resolution/client services office	n/a
Ohio	Youth and Family Ombudsman Office	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	2024
Oklahoma^{vii}	Office of Client Advocacy	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2024
	Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2024
Oregon	Governor’s Advocacy Office/Oregon Department of Human Services Ombudsman Program	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	2024
	Governor’s Advocacy Office/Oregon Department of Human Services Foster Care Ombudsman	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	2024
Pennsylvania	--	--	--
Rhode Island	Office of the Child Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
South Carolina	Department of Children’s Advocacy	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2024
South Dakota	--	--	--
Tennessee	Commission on Children and Youth Ombudsman for Children and Families	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2021
Texas	Ombudsman for Children and Youth in Foster Care	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	2025

^{vii} The Oklahoma Office of Client Advocacy and the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth collaborate on annual reporting.

	Department of Family and Protective Services Office of Consumer Affairs	Operates within but autonomous of the state child welfare agency	n/a
Utah	Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2023
Vermont	Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Department for Children and Families Consumer Concerns Team	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
Virginia	Office of the Children's Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
Washington	Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
West Virginia	Foster Care Ombudsman	Independent, autonomous agency with child welfare oversight	2025
	Office of Constituent Services Client Services Unit	Non-independent, established within the child welfare agency	n/a
Wisconsin	--	--	--
Wyoming	--	--	--

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

200 Independence Avenue SW, Mailstop 447D
Washington, D.C. 20201

For more ASPE briefs and other publications, visit:
aspe.hhs.gov/reports



SUGGESTED CITATION

Adams, A.J., Inman, C., Schreier, A., Scott, D., Nye, E., & Benton, A. Child Welfare Ombudsman Offices Provide System Oversight That Can Lead to Policy and Practice Reforms. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. May 2026.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

All material appearing in this report is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission; citation as to source, however, is appreciated.

DISCLOSURE

This communication was printed, published, or produced and disseminated at U.S. taxpayer expense.

DISCLAIMER REGARDING WEB LINKS

Links and references to information from non-governmental organizations are provided for informational purposes and are not an HHS endorsement, recommendation, or preference for the non-governmental organizations.

Subscribe to the ASPE mailing list to receive email updates on new publications:

[Sign up for email updates \(hhs.gov\)](https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports)

For general questions or general information about ASPE:

aspe.hhs.gov/about