

1 TO THE HONORABLE SENATE:

2 The Committee on Health and Welfare to which was referred House Bill
3 No. 265 entitled “An act relating to the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family
4 Advocate” respectfully reports that it has considered the same and
5 recommends that the Senate propose to the House that the bill be amended by
6 striking out all after the enacting clause and inserting in lieu thereof the
7 following:

8 Sec. 1. 33 V.S.A. chapter 32 is added to read:

9 CHAPTER 32. OFFICE OF THE CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY

10 ADVOCATE

11 § 3201. DEFINITIONS

12 As used in this chapter:

13 (1) “Child, Youth, and Family Advocate” or “Advocate” means an
14 individual who leads the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate.

15 (2) “Department” means the Department for Children and Families.

16 (3) “Office” means the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family
17 Advocate.

18 (4) “State agency” means any office, department, board, bureau,
19 division, agency, or instrumentality of the State.

1 § 3202. OFFICE OF THE CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY ADVOCATE

2 (a) There is established the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family
3 Advocate for the purpose of advancing the interests and welfare of Vermont’s
4 children and youths. The Office shall advocate for the best interests of the
5 children and youths receiving services from the Department and those involved
6 in a manner that addresses racial and social equity, including providing
7 transparent and impartial oversight of the child protection and juvenile justice
8 systems. and promoting The Office shall promote reforms necessary to better
9 serve Vermont’s children, youths, and families in a manner that addresses
10 racial and social equity. The Office shall act independently of any State
11 agency in the performance of its duties.

12 § 3203. DUTIES AND AUTHORITY

13 (a) The Office shall:
14 (1) work in collaboration with relevant parties to strengthen the
15 Department’s services for children, youths, and families;
16 (2) analyze and monitor the development and implementation of federal,
17 State, and local laws, regulations, and policies relating to child, youth, and
18 family welfare and recommend changes when appropriate;
19 (3) review systemic issues in the Department’s provision of services to
20 children and youths that may exist and complaints concerning the actions of
21 the Department and of any entity that provides services to children, youths, and

1 families through funds provided by the Department; make appropriate
2 referrals; and investigate those complaints where the Advocate determines that
3 a child, youth, or family may be in need of assistance from the Office;

4 (4)(3) support children, youths, and families by providing information
5 about recipients' rights and responsibilities related to Departmental services;

6 (5) review current systems to determine to what extent children and
7 youths placed in the custody of the Department or who are receiving services
8 under the supervision of the Department receive humane and dignified
9 treatment at all times, including consideration by the Advocate as to what
10 extent the system protects and enhances the child's or youth's personal dignity,
11 right to privacy, and right to appropriate health care and education in
12 accordance with State and federal law;

13 (6)(4) provide systemic information concerning child, youth, and family
14 welfare to the public; the Governor; State agencies, legislators; and others, as
15 necessary; and

16 (7)(5) notwithstanding 2 V.S.A. § 20(d), submit to the General
17 Assembly and the Governor on or before December 1 of each year a report
18 addressing services provided by the Department, including:

19 (A) the quality of services provided to children, youths, and families;

20 (B) the conditions of placements for Vermont's children and youths;

1 ~~(C)~~(B) systemic findings related to services for and assistance to
2 children, youths, and families within the child protection and juvenile justice
3 systems;

4 ~~(D)~~(C) recommendations related to improving services for children,
5 youths, and families; and

6 ~~(E)~~(D) data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, geographic
7 location, disability status, and any other categories that the Advocate deems
8 necessary; and

9 ~~(8) address any challenges accessing information or records that are~~
10 ~~necessary for carrying out the provisions of this chapter.~~

11 (b) The Office may:

12 (1) ~~analyze and~~ monitor the development and implementation of federal,
13 State, and local laws, regulations, and policies relating to child, youth, and
14 family welfare and recommend changes when appropriate;

15 (2) review current systems to determine assess to what extent children
16 and youths placed in the custody of the Department or who are receiving
17 services under the supervision of the Department receive humane and dignified
18 treatment at all times, including consideration by the Advocate as to what
19 extent the system protects and enhances the child’s or youth’s personal dignity,
20 right to privacy, and right to appropriate health care and education in
21 accordance with State and federal law; and

1 (3) address any challenges accessing information or records that are
2 necessary for carrying out the provisions of this chapter.

3 § 3204. CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY ADVOCATE

4 (a) The Office shall be directed by the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate,
5 an individual who shall be qualified by reason of education, expertise, and
6 experience and who may have a professional degree in law, social work, public
7 health, or a related field. The Child, Youth, and Family Advocate shall serve
8 on a full-time basis and shall be exempt from classified service.

9 (b)(1) The Oversight Commission on Children, Youths, and Families
10 established pursuant to section 3211 of this chapter shall recommend qualified
11 applicants for the position of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate to the
12 Governor for consideration. Subject to confirmation by the Senate, the
13 Governor shall appoint an Advocate from among those applicants
14 recommended by the Oversight Commission for a term of four years. The
15 appointment for Advocate shall be made without regard to political affiliation
16 and on the basis of integrity and demonstrated ability. The Advocate shall
17 hold office until reappointed or until a successor is appointed.

18 (2) The Governor, upon a majority vote of the Oversight Commission,
19 may remove the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate for cause, which includes
20 only neglect of duty, gross misconduct, conviction of a crime, or inability to
21 perform the responsibilities of the Office. The Governor's reason for

1 removing the Advocate shall be published electronically on the website of the
2 Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate, and the Speaker of the
3 House and President Pro Tempore shall simultaneously receive notification
4 from the Governor of the Advocate's removal. Any vacancy shall be filled by
5 the appointment process set forth in subdivision (1) of this subsection for the
6 remainder of the unexpired term.

7 (c) The Child, Youth, and Family Advocate shall appoint a Deputy Child,
8 Youth, and Family Advocate, whose duties shall be performed at the direction
9 of the Advocate.

10 (d) Upon any vacancy in the position of the Advocate, and until such time
11 as a replacement is appointed and confirmed, the Deputy Child, Youth, and
12 Family Advocate shall serve as the acting Child, Youth, and Family Advocate.
13 The acting Child, Youth, and Family Advocate shall have the full
14 responsibilities of the Advocate and shall be entitled to the same compensation
15 as the outgoing Child, Youth, and Family Advocate.

16 **§ 3205. CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY ADVISORY COUNCIL**

17 (a) Purpose and membership. The Child, Youth, and Family Advocate
18 shall appoint and convene an Advisory Council composed of nine stakeholders
19 who have been impacted by child welfare services provided by the Department
20 for Children and Families. The Advisory Council's membership shall reflect
21 the growing diversity of Vermont's children and families, including

1 individuals who are Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color, as well as with
2 regard to socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, sexual identity,
3 and disability status. Members shall provide advice and guidance to the Office
4 of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate regarding the routine administration
5 and operation of the Office, including providing advice and guidance to the
6 Advocate upon request.

7 (b) Meetings.

8 (1) The Advocate shall call the first meeting of the Advisory Council to
9 occur on or before March 15, 2023.

10 (2) The Advisory Council shall select a chair from among its members
11 at the first meeting.

12 (3) A majority of the membership shall constitute a quorum.

13 (4) The Advisory Council shall cease to exist on July 1, 2028.

14 (c) Confidentiality. In seeking the advice and guidance of the Advisory
15 Council, the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate shall not disclose to the
16 Advisory Council, or any member thereof, individually identifiable
17 information about a child or youth unless the information is already known to
18 the public.

19 (d) Compensation. Members of the Advisory Council shall be entitled
20 to per diem compensation and reimbursement of expenses as permitted under

1 32 V.S.A. § 1010 for not more than eight meetings annually. These payments
2 shall be made from monies appropriated to the Office.

3 § 3206. INCIDENTS AND FATALITIES

4 (a) The Department shall provide the Office with a copy of all reports
5 related to actual physical injury to children or youths in the custody of the
6 Commissioner or at significant risk of such harm.

7 (b) The Department shall provide the Office with a written report within
8 48 hours of:

9 (1) any fatality of a child or youth in its custody; and

10 (2) the restraint or seclusion of any child or youth in its custody.

11 § 3207. ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND FACILITIES

12 (a) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Child, Youth, and
13 Family Advocate and the Deputy Advocate shall, upon request, have timely
14 access, including the right to inspect and copy, to any records necessary to
15 carry out the provisions of this chapter, including relevant records produced
16 and held by State entities and third parties. As used in this subsection, “third
17 parties” does not include Vermont’s Statistical Analysis Center.

18 (b) If the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate determines that doing so is in
19 the best interests of a child or youth, the Advocate and Deputy Advocate may:

20 (1) communicate privately and visit with any child or youth who is in
21 the custody of the Department; and

1 (2) The Advocate or Deputy Advocate shall obtain the consent of a
2 parent or guardian prior to communicating or visiting upon first obtaining the
3 consent of a child or youth’s parent or guardian, communicate privately and
4 visit with a child or youth who is not in the custody of the Department.

5 (c) Facilities and providers delivering services to children and youths shall
6 permit the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate or the Deputy Advocate to
7 access their facilities and to communicate privately and visit with children and
8 youths for whom they provide services.

9 § 3208. COOPERATION OF STATE AGENCIES

10 All State agencies shall comply with reasonable requests of the Child,
11 Youth, and Family Advocate and Deputy Advocate for information and
12 assistance.

13 § 3209. CONFIDENTIALITY

14 (a) The Office shall maintain the confidentiality of all case records, third-
15 party records, and court records, as well as any information gathered in the
16 course of investigations and systems monitoring duties. These records are
17 exempt from public inspection and copying under the Public Records Act and
18 shall be kept confidential except as provided in subsections (b) and (c) of this
19 section.

20 (b) In the course of carrying out the provisions of this chapter, if the Child,
21 Youth, and Family Advocate or Deputy Advocate reasonably believes that the

1 health, safety, or welfare of a child or youth is at imminent risk, the Advocate
2 or Deputy Advocate may disclose relevant documents or information to any of
3 the individuals or entities listed in subdivision 4921(e)(1) of this title.

4 Determinations of relevancy shall be made by the Advocate.

5 (c) Notwithstanding subsection (a) of this section, the Child, Youth, and
6 Family Advocate or Deputy Advocate may publicly disclose any patterns of
7 conduct or repeated incidents identified by the Advocate or Deputy Advocate
8 in carrying out the provisions of this chapter if the Advocate or Deputy
9 Advocate reasonably believes that public disclosure is likely to mitigate a risk
10 posed to the health, safety, and welfare of a child or youth, except the
11 Advocate or Deputy Advocate shall not publicly disclose either of the
12 following:

13 (1) individually identifiable information about a child or youth unless
14 the information is already known to the public; and

15 (2) investigation findings where there is a pending law enforcement
16 investigation or prosecution.

17 **§ 3210. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

18 The Child, Youth, and Family Advocate, the Advocate's employees,
19 contractors, and members of the Oversight Commission on Children, Youths,
20 and Families shall not have any conflict of interest with the Department or with
21 any entity that provides services to children, youths, and families through

1 funds provided by the Department relating to the performance of their
2 responsibilities under this chapter. For the purposes of this section, a conflict
3 of interest exists whenever the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate, ~~or~~ the
4 Advocate’s employees or contractors, **or a member of the Oversight**

5 **Commission on Children, Youths, and Families:**

6 (1) has direct involvement in the licensing, certification, or accreditation
7 of a provider or facility delivering services to children, youths, and families;

8 (2) has a direct ownership interest in a provider or facility delivering
9 services to children, youths, and families;

10 (3) is employed by or participates in the management of a provider or
11 facility delivering services to children, youths, and families; or

12 (4) receives or has the right to receive, directly or indirectly,
13 remuneration under a compensation arrangement with a provider or facility
14 delivering services to children, youths, and families.

15 **§ 3211. OVERSIGHT COMMISSION ON CHILDREN, YOUTHS, AND**

16 **FAMILIES**

17 (a) Creation. There is created the Oversight Commission on Children,
18 Youths, and Families to provide guidance and recommendations to the Office
19 of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate.

1 (b) Membership. The Commission shall be composed of the following
2 members who shall not have a conflict of interest with the Department for
3 Children and Families:

4 (1) one current member of the House of Representatives who serves on
5 the House Committee on Human Services, who shall be appointed by the
6 Speaker of the House;

7 (2) one current member of the Senate who serves on the Senate
8 Committee on Health and Welfare, who shall be appointed by the Committee
9 on Committees;

10 (3) a member with professional expertise in childhood trauma, adverse
11 childhood experiences, or child welfare, who shall be appointed by the
12 Governor;

13 (4) the Executive Director of Racial Equity established pursuant to
14 3 V.S.A. § 5001 or designee;

15 (5) one member of a child advocacy group, board, or commission, who
16 shall be appointed by the Speaker of the House;

17 (6) one member of a child advocacy group, board, or commission, who
18 shall be appointed by the Committee on Committees;

19 (7) one member of a child advocacy group, board, or commission, who
20 shall be appointed by the Governor;

1 (8) an adult who was in the custody of the Department for Children and
2 Families within the past five years, who shall be appointed by the Vermont
3 Foster and Adoptive Family Association; and

4 (9) the relative caregiver of a child or youth involved in the child
5 protection system, who shall be appointed by Vermont Kin as Parents.

6 (c) Powers and duties. The Commission shall:

7 (1) recommend qualified applicants for the position of the Child, Youth,
8 and Family Advocate to the Governor for consideration pursuant to section
9 3204 of this chapter; and

10 (2) provide oversight of the Office in its efforts to support an equitable,
11 comprehensive, and coordinated system of services and programs for children,
12 youths, and families.

13 (d) Assistance. The Commission shall have the administrative assistance
14 of the Agency of Administration.

15 (e) Meetings.

16 (1) The member representing the House Committee on Human Services
17 shall call the first meeting of the Commission to occur on or before August 1,
18 2022.

19 (2) The Commission shall select a chair from among its members at the
20 first meeting.

21 (3) A majority of the membership shall constitute a quorum.

1 ~~Sec. 5. OFFICE OF THE CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY ADVOCATE;~~
2 ~~DUTIES; TEMPORARY LIMITATION~~

3 ~~Notwithstanding 33 V.S.A. § 3202(b), the Office of the Child, Youth, and~~
4 ~~Family Advocate shall only assume responsibility for the duties listed in~~
5 ~~subdivisions (1) and (2) of subsection (b) through June 30, 2022. The Office~~
6 ~~of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate shall assume full responsibility of~~
7 ~~all duties listed in 33 V.S.A. § 3202(b) beginning on July 1, 2022. [Deleted.]~~

8 Sec. 6. TRANSITION

9 The initial term of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate established
10 pursuant to 33 V.S.A. chapter 32 shall begin on January 1, 2023.

11 Sec. 7. APPROPRIATION

12 The sum of \$120,000.00 is appropriated to the Office of the Child, Youth,
13 and Family Advocate from the General Fund in fiscal year 2023 for carrying
14 out the purposes of this act.

15 Sec. 8. ~~REPEAL; JOINT LEGISLATIVE CHILD PROTECTION~~

16 ~~OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE~~

17 ~~2015 Acts and Resolves No. 60, Sec. 23 as amended by 2018 Acts and~~
18 ~~Resolves No. 207, Sec. 2 is repealed. [Deleted.]~~

19 Sec. 9. EFFECTIVE DATES

20 This act shall take effect on July 1, 2022, except that Secs. 2 (reporting
21 child abuse and neglect; remedial action), 3 (Department's records of abuse

1 and neglect), 4 (records of juvenile judicial proceedings), 5 (Office of the
2 Child, Youth, and Family Advocate; duties; temporary limitation), and
3 7 (appropriation) shall take effect on January 1, 2023.

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11 (Committee vote: _____)

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Senator _____

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FOR THE COMMITTEE