



Youth and Family
Ombudsmen Office

Calendar Year
2022



Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office **Annual Report**

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Message from the Ombudsmen

It is our privilege to collectively present this inaugural annual report summarizing our newly prescribed statutory duties and highlighting the work of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office between our operational launch on May 31, 2022, and December 31, 2022. The following data compilation also offers various “complaint profiles” to illustrate the broad scope of our jurisdiction and over-arching mission to study and improve the entire children services system. Significantly, during this initial seven-month reporting timeframe, our team supplied direct assistance to concerned Ohio youth and families on at least 622 documented occasions.

We have found our state ombudsmen roles to be multi-faceted. Along with investigating complaints alleging a wide variety of concerns, we have also reviewed policies and procedures within the children services system and when necessary, have issued recommendations to better protect youth and assist families. Fortunately, we have had many opportunities to learn from other statewide ombudsmen offices and actively incorporate best practices from across the United States into our unique work on behalf of Ohioans.

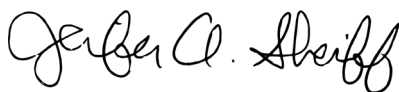
Without a doubt, personnel and other resource shortages have continued to impact everyone involved in Ohio’s children services system. Agency caseworkers, resource families, service providers, local judicial systems, and most importantly, the children and families we strive to support have continued to encounter new or enduring challenges. Like our many Ohio colleagues, we are committed to continuous improvement and progress.

We are two appointed ombudsmen, but one unified grievance outlet. We wish to acknowledge and give thanks to our colleagues within the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office who work tirelessly on behalf of Ohioans. Constituents have frequently shared with us how grateful they were to be treated with respect and patience during their every interaction with our office. We also wish to extend our sincere gratitude to every individual who brought concerns to our immediate attention during these early months of our public service as Ohio’s very first state ombudsmen tasked with examining the children services system. Without their proactive courage to share unique lived experiences with total strangers, our office would very likely have never had any opportunity to learn of specific case outcomes or benefit from receiving so many invaluable personal perspectives. Recognizing our responsibility to review such a vast array of concerns involving the children services system, we look forward to strengthening community partnerships, continuing to amplify the voices of youth, and exploring ways to improve the lives of all who seek our help.

Sincerely,



Jenny R. Stotts
Youth Ombudsman



Jennifer A. Sheriff
Family Ombudsman

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office was created 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 For the first time in Ohio history, anyone seeking to report concerns about the children services system can confidentially confer with a team of ombudsmen dedicated to protecting Ohio’s children and elevating the needs of families. Every voice has value and every case counts.

To effectively promote the “core values” of accessibility and transparency, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office plans to widely share this annual report and other future noteworthy data. [Section 5101.892 of the Ohio Revised Code](#) also requires that an annual report be provided directly 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 (OHIOYAB).

Within sixty days of release of this information, OHIOYAB is required by law to provide an evaluation to both Governor DeWine and Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts.²

¹ See 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.”).

² See 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.”).

History

Foster youth and foster alumni began publicly advocating for creation of a new “ombudsman” office in 2018. Those initial efforts included formation of a dynamic statewide coalition and many testimonial presentations delivered during listening sessions hosted by the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council. The establishment of a state-level ombudsman appeared among the Council’s 37 recommendations announced in their final report on November 20, 2020. Many foster alumni later came forward to testify before Ohio lawmakers in continued support of a long-standing public movement to elevate personal perspectives and improve delivery of services across multiple systems of government.

In response to early versions of the proposed legislation, youth leaders and foster alumni successfully advocated for key changes that would ultimately shape the future framework of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office—including the creation of a co-led operational model implemented by a Youth Ombudsman and a Family Ombudsman working together as one united grievance outlet.³ Approximately 90 days after Governor Mike DeWine signed [Amended House Bill 4](#) into law, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office opened to the public on May 31, 2022, coinciding with the “effective date” of the landmark legislation offering all Ohioans a new complaint review method.

Organizational Structure and Administration

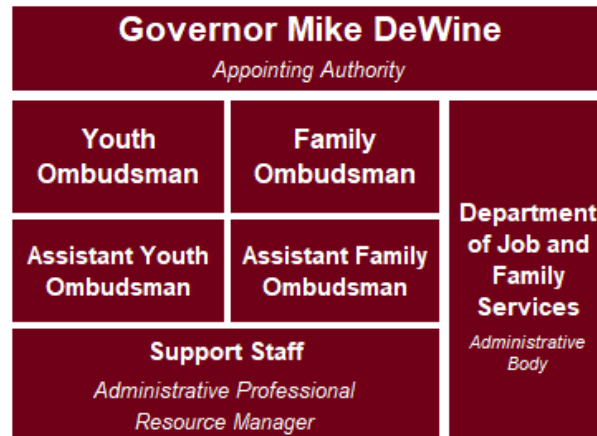
The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is currently led by Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts and Family Ombudsman Jennifer Sheriff, both of whom were appointed by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine. As the table below illustrates, both respective teams (“Youth” and “Family”) employ designated Assistant Ombudsmen. However, many internal resources are necessarily combined, such as the confidential record management system. Both teams are also supported by a shared Administrative Professional in addition to a Resource Manager, a newly created position approved by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) in early 2023 and designed to directly assist people seeking more preliminary guidance.

Pursuant to [Section 5101.895 of the Ohio Revised Code](#), the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is administratively housed within ODJFS.⁴ Significantly, ODJFS also houses several other government offices tasked with carrying out a variety of vital functions to assist Ohioans. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office operates independently of the Office of Families and Children, which oversees children services in Ohio. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is committed to serving the public in a fair and impartial manner while also collaborating as needed among colleagues within the established state government structure for the purpose of offering well-informed recommendations which will benefit youth and families.

³ Also notably, in the months preceding creation of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, then Lucas County Child Protection Ombudsman Jennifer Sheriff was contacted by many Ohioans who were seeking a neutral “third party” review of children services cases arising out of nearly a dozen other Ohio counties.

⁴ See ORC § 5101.895 (“The department of job and family services shall be responsible for all administrative undertakings for the youth and family ombudsman office, including the provision of offices, equipment, and supplies, as necessary.”).

While the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is co-led with many internal resources routinely shared, written complaints are separately reviewed by each respective team. Although investigative assignments will typically hinge upon which pathway (“Youth” or “Family”) an individual chooses when filing a complaint, there are also situations where both the Youth Ombudsman and the Family Ombudsman agree that complaint transfer is appropriate.



Confidentiality and Investigative Independence

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is committed to protecting the privacy of all interested parties connected to every grievance, as well as maintaining strict adherence to all confidentiality requirements under Ohio law.⁵ Files maintained by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen are not “public records”⁶ subject to inspection or copying under existing Ohio law. Internal records are shared only at the discretion of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen or if disclosure is otherwise required by a court order.⁷

⁵ See, e.g., Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-33-21 (“(A) Each referral, assessment/investigation and provision of services related to reports of child abuse, neglect, dependency, or family in need of services (FINS) is confidential. Information contained in the statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS) is confidential pursuant to section 5101.131 of the Revised Code. This information may be shared only when dissemination is authorized by this rule.”).

⁶ See 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.”).

⁷ See 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.”).

Pursuant to [Section 5101.899 of the Ohio Revised Code](#), the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office has access to otherwise confidential children services agency case records stored in the State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) database, in addition to all materials logged in a separate government agency record management system known as “Traverse” and records maintained in the Ohio Certification and Licensing Management system (OCALM). With respect to case information stored elsewhere yet still within the control of a PCSA, a Title IV-E agency, or a private provider or placement agency, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office has developed various procedures to pursue and timely resolve supplemental investigative requests.⁸ All children services agency records are confidential, regardless of where they are stored, or which government office is seeking to review them.⁹

Mission, Vision, and Values

Core Values

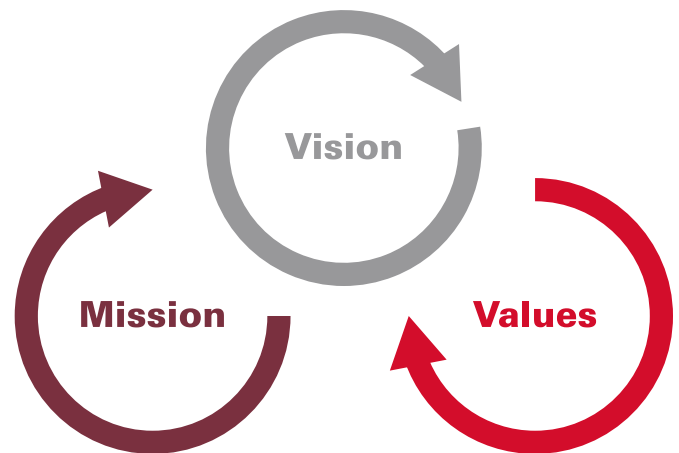
We approach everyone with **compassion**.
 We are **accessible** to youth and families.
 We promote **honesty** and **transparency**.
 We respect **privacy** and **confidentiality**.
 We complete **objective** and **fair** investigations.
 We are partners in **transformation**.

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**.



⁸ See ORC § 5101.899 (“(A) The youth and family ombudsman office shall have access to only the records of the department of job and family services that are necessary for the administration of sections 5101.89 to 5101.899 of the Revised Code and in the performance of its official duties, including any records maintained in the uniform statewide automated child welfare information system under section 5101.13 of the Revised Code. The office has the right to request of the director of job and family services necessary information from any work unit of the department having information... (B) The office shall have access to any necessary records in the control of a public children services agency, a Title IV-E agency, or a private provider agency that administers or oversees foster care or placement services for the children services system.”).

⁹ Notably, however, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is not able to independently review Juvenile Court docket entries, which forces reliance on self-reporting of potentially relevant legal rulings. If a primary objective shared by all interested stakeholders is offering aggrieved Ohioans the most thorough and neutral complaint review method possible, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office would benefit from having direct access to other government databases, upon request with good cause shown.

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office provided numerous outreach and community education assistance in 2022. Building effective working relationships with stakeholders is a key element of many ongoing strategic efforts to better serve Ohioans and pursue children services transformation. Notable presentations and engagement activities throughout 2022 included:

- Ohio Long-Term Care Ombudsman Office
- Ohio Family Care Association (OFCA)
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO)
- Ohio Court Appointed Special Advocate Association (Ohio CASA)
- Adopt America Network (AAN)
- Ohio Grandparent Kinship Coalition (OGKC)
- The Ohio Bar Association
- Supreme Court of Ohio

Youth Specific Outreach

Self-advocacy is an important independent living skill for adolescents and teenagers. Reporting concerns and filing complaints with the Youth Ombudsman is one way in which a foster youth might advocate for themselves, however they must first have occasion to learn of and have reasonable access to the Youth Ombudsman in Ohio. The Youth Ombudsman's early outreach strategy has focused on professionals who work with youth, such as service providers and mandated reporters, as well as spaces where youth might live and learn, including libraries or schools. Expanding direct outreach to youth is a critical priority as the office moves into the next calendar year. Key collaborations include:

- Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIOYAB)
- Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio)
- Adoption Network Cleveland
- Nationwide Children's Hospital Fostering Connections Program
- Ohio Department of Education
- Ohio RISE
- Kinnect: Youth Navigator Network (YNN), Ohio Youth Centered Permanency Roundtable (YC-PRT) and Ohio Kinship and Adoption Network (Ohio KAN)
- National Association of Social Workers-Ohio
- Justice for Children Clinic, Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University

Youth Ombudsman Outreach Materials and Resources

In 2022, the Youth Ombudsman released four print resources, two digital resources, and collaborated with ODJFS on two resources.

- The Foster Youth Rights Handbook was revised by ODJFS to include a page dedicated to information about assistance from the Youth Ombudsman.¹⁰ The Youth Ombudsman has distributed additional copies of the handbook to medical offices, public libraries, and juvenile courts. A link to the updated handbook is also included on the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office website.
- A colorful, plain-language resource detailing Foster Youth Bill of Rights was developed by ODJFS with input from the Youth Ombudsman.¹¹ This resource has been distributed to PCSAs, public libraries, professional organizations, mandated reporters, placement agencies, residential facilities, juvenile courts, and medical offices.
- The Youth Ombudsman released four print resources including a large promotional poster with a QR code, a small promotional poster, a rack card, and a brochure.¹² These items have been distributed throughout Ohio. The Youth Ombudsman and Assistant Youth Ombudsman have personally delivered these items to PCSAs, public libraries, courthouses, residential treatment programs, group homes, and community centers.
- The Youth Ombudsman developed two digital “What to Expect” resources. One is written for youth complainants, and one is written for agency staff who are involved in an investigation with the Youth Ombudsman.¹³

¹⁰ JFS Form 01677. Foster Youth Rights Handbook.

¹¹ JFS Form 08069. Youth-Friendly Foster Youth Bill of Rights.

¹² See Appendices: Sample Youth Ombudsman Promotional Materials.

¹³ See Appendices: Youth Ombudsman “What to Expect” Resources.

Public Accessibility

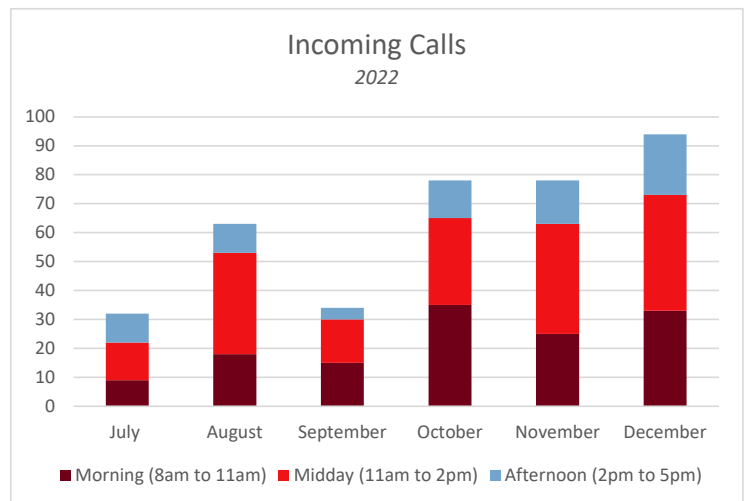
The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office offers two primary methods to contact the office including a public website and a public unrecorded phone line. Individuals may submit inquiries or written complaints online at www.YouthAndFamilyOmbudsmen.ohio.gov.

Individuals may also seek 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. Staff at the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office are trained to provide practical and compassionate guidance to all individuals.

In 2022, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office received **379** separate phone calls from individuals with a variety of concerns or questions. Callers frequently contact the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office's public phone line to discuss:

- Specific concerns about Ohio's children services system,
- Questions about how the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office operates and/or the preferred complaint submission process,
- Requests for future scheduled presentations or trainings, or
- Reported issues unrelated to Ohio's children services system, such as Medicaid, SNAP, or unemployment.



General Inquiries

A "general inquiry" record is created whenever an individual reaches out directly to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office either through the website or the phone system, or when another government office or agency refers someone to the office to receive direct assistance. During this reporting period, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office resolved **245** general inquiries involving **79** different Ohio counties. On average, general inquiries were resolved within **37** hours of submission. Proper management of incoming general inquiries, which do not constitute complaints, is and will remain vital to maintaining efficient statewide operations. In many instances, individuals who choose to utilize the website "Contact Us" feature will be provided with meaningful guidance to resolve preliminary questions without the need to file a formal grievance.



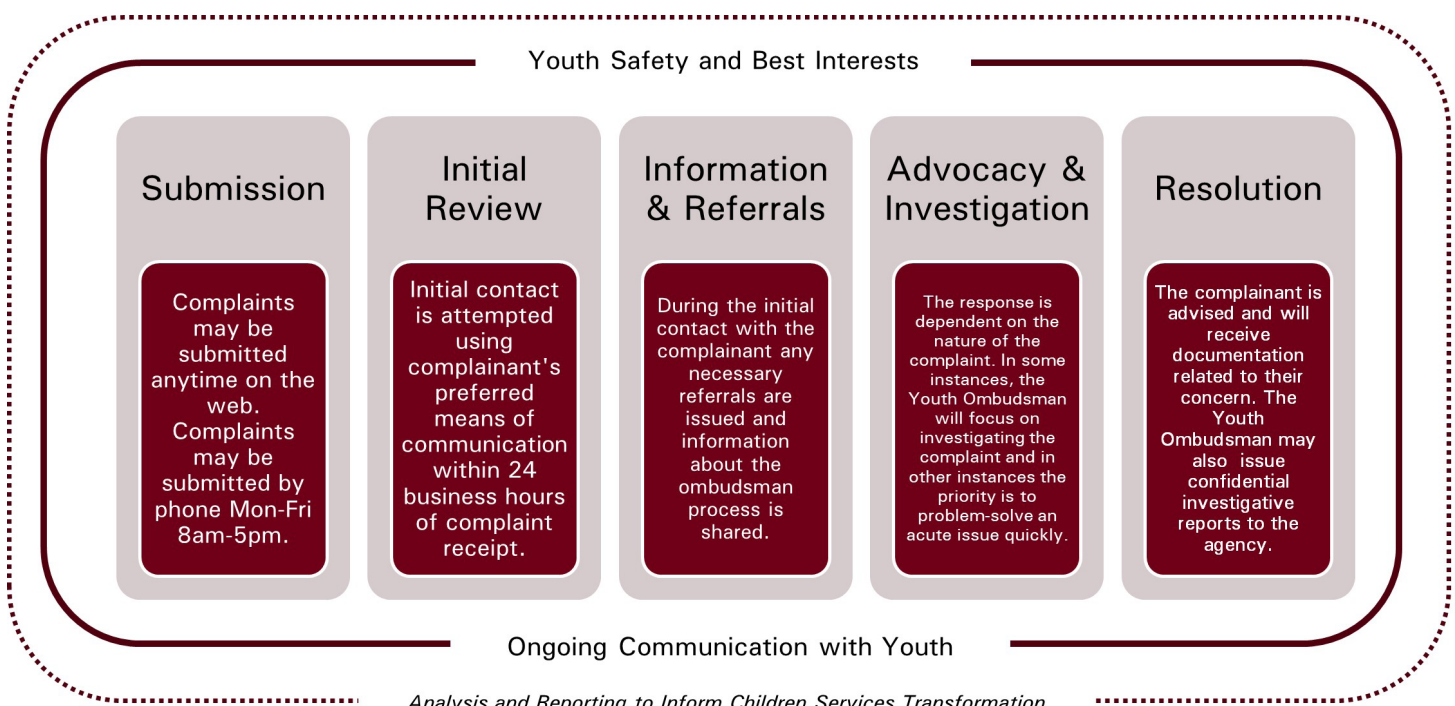
Operations and Complaint Review

A key component of general inquiry resolution is providing prospective complainants with reliable guidance regarding how to navigate any known local county grievance procedure. Not only does this effort support an individual's self-advocacy skillset, but it also affords the government agency involved in the reported conflict a fair opportunity to investigate issues prior to escalation of concerns at the state level. To promote conflict resolution at the local county level, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office reached out to all Ohio PCSAs in 2022 to request courtesy copies of their formal grievance policies and/or procedures. A total of **80** government agencies participated. In reviewing the available policies, only **10** PCSAs have their grievance procedures and policies posted on their public websites. A total of **4** PCSAs provide blank complaint forms online to assist individuals with presenting their concerns in writing while **83** require concerned individuals to first contact the government to proactively request the form. None of Ohio's PCSAs reported having youth-specific grievance policies or procedures.

General Inquiry Origin	
Phone	143
Web	78
Governor's Office Referral	9
ODJFS Referral	6
Legislator Referral	1
	245

General Inquiry Resolution	
Complaint Filed	86
Speaking Request	6
Media Inquiry	1
Information & Referral	33
Other	119
	245

Youth Ombudsman Complaint Overview



Youth Complaints - Submission

The Youth Ombudsman reviews complaints about the children services system from youth, young adults including Bridges participants, and adults who wish to file a complaint on behalf of a youth. Currently, youth complaints are submitted by phone or through the website, however, there have been occasions where an adult alerts the Youth Ombudsman to a prospective youth complainant who may be unable to submit via traditional channels. Under such circumstances, alternative arrangements are made, such as the Youth Ombudsman or Assistant Youth Ombudsman traveling to a residential facility to personally take a complaint from a youth resident.

Youth Complaints - Initial Review

The Youth Ombudsman aims to preliminarily review complaint submissions within 24 business hours of receipt. The preliminary review includes an assessment of jurisdiction and a determination regarding emergent safety issues that might require an immediate referral to a local public children services agency or law enforcement.

Initial Contact

After preliminary review, the Youth Ombudsman attempts to establish contact with the complainant using their preferred means of communication. Most frequently, the Youth Ombudsman will schedule an initial meeting with the complainant to review the complaint submission. These meetings typically occur by phone or virtual meeting, but arrangements may also be made for in-person meetings and/or text messaging. Youth safety and preference are driving factors when determining how meetings with youth will occur. For example, some youth do not have a safe or private place to talk by phone, so text messaging or emailing might be preferred. Or a youth might only be able to talk using the phone at school, perhaps with a trusted teacher or guidance counselor.

The initial meeting is individualized to the youth's circumstances, developmental level, and comfort. The primary purpose of the initial meeting is to learn more about the youth's complaint and determine their requested remedy. The Foster Youth Bill of Rights is reviewed with the youth complainants and, based on feedback from the OHIO Youth Advisory Board, youth are asked if they've received a copy of the Foster Youth Rights Handbook. In December, a series of enhancements and upgrades to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office's confidential record management program were completed, including new fields to track self-reported information about the Foster Youth Rights Handbook. This data will be available in future reports. A portion of the initial meeting focuses on the scope of the Youth Ombudsman's authority, including limitations in the role. For example, the Youth Ombudsman does not investigate abuse or neglect and cannot intervene in pending litigation. Other standard discussion points during the initial meeting include a discussion about retaliation; partnering with the youth to develop a plan for ongoing communication during the pendency of the complaint; confidentiality issues; and youth safety.

¹⁴ See OAC § 5101:2-5-35. Foster youth bill of rights.

¹⁵ JFS Form 01677. Foster Youth Rights Handbook.

Information and Referral

The Youth Ombudsman's scope is limited to Ohio's children services system. Examples of complaints that fall outside of the Youth Ombudsman's scope might include complaints about community service providers or requests to change court orders. The Youth Ombudsman discusses these limitations with the youth and provides guidance and support to connect the youth with the appropriate grievance outlet or supervising office to seek remedy. In some instances, the Youth Ombudsman might facilitate dialogue with the youth's caseworker to collaborate on a resolution with the youth.

The Youth Ombudsman does not investigate abuse or neglect. In situations where the Youth Ombudsman has occasion to learn of suspected child maltreatment or violations of policy or law, the Youth Ombudsman may issue referrals to law enforcement, PCSAs, or licensing authorities.

Youth Complaints - Facilitation, Advocacy, and Investigation

Complaints that do fall within the scope and jurisdiction of the Youth Ombudsman are individually assessed to determine the best course of action. Youth safety is the north star of complaint responses.

Facilitation and Advocacy

In many complaints, there are issues that must be addressed immediately. In these circumstances, the Youth Ombudsman takes on an advocacy and facilitation role to resolve concerns quickly. For example, a Bridges participant files a complaint alleging that a SACWIS error has resulted in a delayed housing payment. In this instance, the focus of the Youth Ombudsman's work is a quick resolution to the funding delay through collaboration with other state offices.¹⁶ Depending on the situation, the Youth Ombudsman may follow up later to investigate why and how the delay occurred, perhaps issuing recommendations for improvement.

Investigation

Other times, the Youth Ombudsman's activities center heavily around the investigation. In those complaints, the Youth Ombudsman may interview youth and staff, review policies, procedures, and confidential case records, and consult with licensing authorities.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Youth Complaint Profile A.

¹⁷ See Youth Complaint Profile B.

Youth Complaints - Resolution

Resolution of youth complaints is responsive to the individual and the nature of the complaint. In some instances, the Youth Ombudsman may decide, after discussion with the youth, to keep a complaint file open for a short period of time past the initial resolution to ensure that progress continues. For example, in a complaint alleging that the youth's input was not considered when reviewing permanency options, the accepted remedy was for the PCSA to hold a series of team meetings including the youth and to request the appointment of a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) from juvenile court. The Youth Ombudsman held the complaint file open for approximately 30 days post-resolution to ensure that the team meetings were running smoothly. Once a complaint has been resolved, the complaint file is procedurally closed. The resolution and closure of the complaint file is an independent, records management function within the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office and does not impact the status of a pending case with a public children services agency or a local court. Moreover, the resolution and closure of a complaint file does not prevent the youth from re-establishing contact with the Youth Ombudsman again in the future nor does it prevent them from filing a new complaint.

The Youth Ombudsman may issue a confidential investigative report to the involved agency which includes a summary of investigative activities, investigative observations, and recommendations for corrective action issued by the Youth Ombudsman. Confidential investigative reports are also shared with the Director of ODJFS and the Governor's Office. As the investigative report may necessarily contain references to confidential case records, these investigative reports are not shared with the complainant.¹⁸

Alternatively, the Youth Ombudsman may determine that a lengthy investigative report is not necessary and will, instead, issue a confidential summary and notice of recommendations to the agency. Oftentimes, the Youth Ombudsman will conduct a series of meetings or phone calls with agency leadership to review investigative observations and share recommendations, giving agencies an opportunity to respond in writing or to provide details about barriers to implementing ombudsman recommendations.

In addition to ongoing personal updates while they await the outcome of the complaint review and/or investigation, the Youth Ombudsman provides youth complainants with a summary letter including information about investigative and advocacy activities along with a summary of recommendations issued to the agency. Prior to resolution, the Youth Ombudsman reviews supports and safety issues with the youth complainant and may make referrals to helpful resources.

¹⁸ See ORC § 5101.133 ("No person shall disclose information obtained from the information system established and maintained under section 5101.13 of the Revised Code in a manner not specified by rules authorized by section 5101.134 of the Revised Code.").

Youth Complaints - Summary

The Youth Ombudsman team is committed to the impartial and fair review of submitted complaints, while centering the needs of youth. Accessibility and responsiveness are key elements of this approach, ensuring that youth's perspective and experiences are considered during each step of the process. Youth safety and best interests remain critical priorities during individual complaint investigations, but also in the Youth Ombudsman's review of system-wide data and trends. While the processes and procedures described above are standardized to a degree, they include a great deal of flexibility, so the Youth Ombudsman team remains responsive to individual youth needs.

Family Ombudsman Complaint Overview

The over-arching goal of the Family Ombudsman is to optimize the effectiveness of Ohio's entire children services system by first receiving written grievances directly from concerned individuals or families. Next, the Family Ombudsman asks questions to determine whether and how any unresolved concerns may have already been reviewed by the government agency involved in the reported conflict. In situations where no formal complaint has ever been pursued at the local county level, the Family Ombudsman will further explore and carefully consider all known circumstances, including any communication barriers or fear of future retaliation, to identify realistic next steps.

The Family Ombudsman strives to ensure that all Ohio children services agencies are effectively responding to both children in need of protection as well as families under government supervision due to allegations and/or "findings" of child abuse or neglect. This primary objective also promotes community awareness of the proper function of a neutral "third party" investigator and if facts present a need, the Family Ombudsman may issue confidential recommendations to promote fair resolution of reported concerns.

During every confidential meeting convened by the Family Ombudsman team, complainants are always free to share as much (or as little) case information and personal insight as they desire. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office cannot issue subpoenas or compel sworn testimony. Likewise, during all stages of investigative review, complainants enjoy discretion to withdraw a request or even cease all further communication with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. Permitting concerned individuals, including alleged perpetrators of child abuse or neglect, to exercise some degree of control over their conflict resolution process will often provide positive momentum where and when it is needed the most.

What is the nature of concerns reported to the Family Ombudsman?

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).

When and why does the Family Ombudsman take investigative action?

The Family Ombudsman has statutory authority to independently investigate reported concerns involving Ohio's children services system. In the spirit of conflict resolution, aggrieved individuals who vaguely accuse the government of violating Ohio law or trampling on unspecified constitutional rights will always be invited to offer contextual or supporting details. However, adult complainants are also advised that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is required to allocate investigative resources based upon all known circumstances. With every complaint, one key consideration is whether the reporting party has already attempted to resolve all case-specific issues by communicating directly with case decision-makers at the local county level. Some complainants have reported their reluctance to pursue a multi-step formal grievance process directly with the other party to the conflict. Very often, mounting distrust stems from miscommunication or some perpetual misunderstanding. In such circumstances, the Family Ombudsman continually strives to foster a productive working relationship with and between everyone involved in the conflict.

How long does the Family Ombudsman need to investigate a complaint?

Timely resolution of any complaint is crucial to facilitating an effective conflict resolution process; however, it is not uncommon for more complex concerns to require lengthier investigations and double or even triple the number of scheduled meetings. Accordingly, the Family Ombudsman's response to a particular complaint might range from immediate dismissal of a meritless allegation to issuance of a comprehensive formal investigative report presenting recommendations supported by documented case details.

When and why does the Family Ombudsman take corrective action?

If the Family Ombudsman decides that investigative action is warranted, the next step is to gather and review as many relevant facts as possible. Whenever it becomes necessary to issue evidence-based recommendations, the Family Ombudsman acts as an independent investigator and not as an adversarial agent working on behalf of any one party. Above all, the scope of any advocacy must be limited to optimizing the effectiveness of the children services system to improve future service delivery and outcomes. The Family Ombudsman cannot "undo" past events or compel closed cases to be re-opened.

As a "third party" investigator, the Family Ombudsman also cannot serve as any individual's personal advocate or legal representative. Notwithstanding this practical reality, some individuals may still report dissatisfaction at the time of complaint closure, especially if the Family Ombudsman is unable to issue a recommendation which advances a desired legal outcome. The primary objective of the Family Ombudsman's conflict resolution approach is not the pursuit of justice by any means necessary; rather, the paramount value is the neutrality of the investigator tasked with considering the totality of known circumstances.

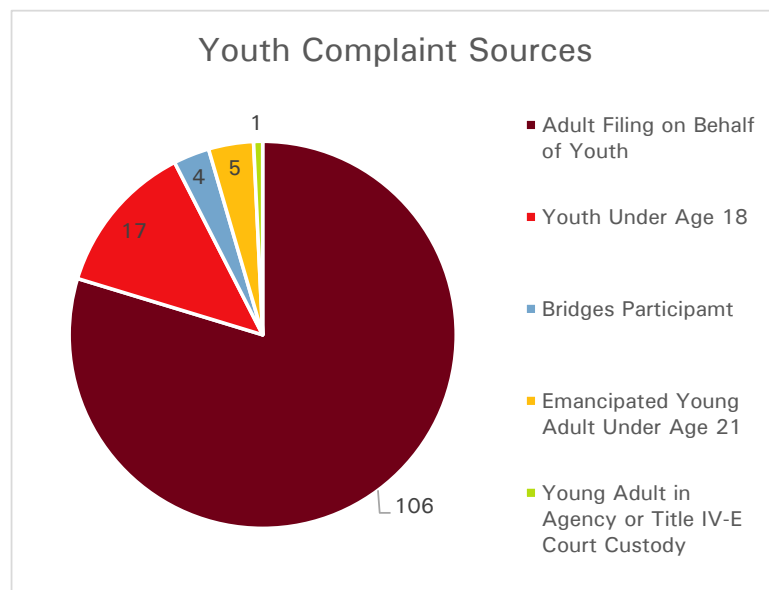
Where past attempts to resolve a conflict have failed, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office can offer an impartial lens. And, where remedial measures are still possible, forward-thinking and fact-driven recommendations can be issued to the proper authorities. The Family Ombudsman team is regularly invited during confidential investigative meetings held with PCSA leadership to offer insight and ask questions about ongoing efforts to improve case management practices. Issuing a formal investigative report will remain the Family Ombudsman's last resort to conflict resolution.

Youth Ombudsman Complaint Data

This section includes data related to **133** complaints received by the Youth Ombudsman between May 31, 2022, and December 31, 2022. Of those, **111** were resolved prior to December 31, 2022.

Youth Complaint Source

The Youth Ombudsman accepts complaints directly from youth or from adults on behalf of youth. Of the **133** complaints received by the Youth Ombudsman, **27** of them were submitted directly by the individual with whom the complaint concerned. Adults submitted complaints on behalf of youth **106** times during the reporting period. In many of those complaints, the youth was aware of the complaint submission and subsequently had contact with the Youth Ombudsman or Assistant Youth Ombudsman.¹⁹ Other times, the complainant was a parent or caregiver reporting concerns on behalf of their young children.



Of the complaints that were submitted directly by youth or emancipated young adults, **17** were submitted by individuals under the age of eighteen;²⁰ four were submitted by Bridges participants, five were submitted by emancipated young adults under age 21,²¹ and one was submitted a young adult still in agency custody.

Youth Complaint Demographics

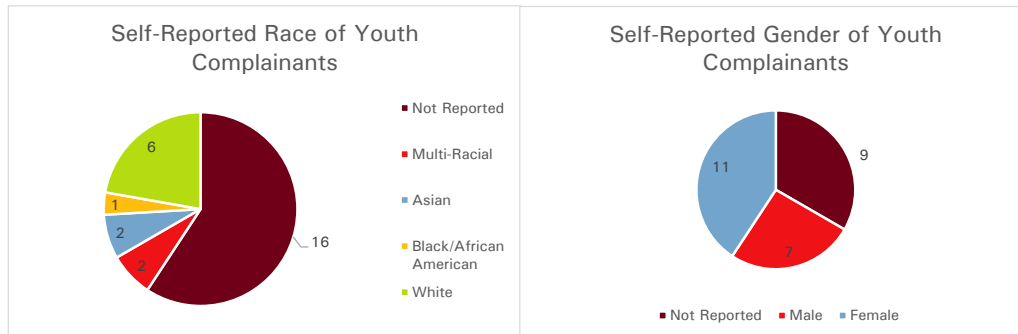
This section reports complainant demographics for the **27** complaints that were submitted directly by youth or emancipated young adults. There are limitations to this data set as it relies on self-disclosed and self-reported information. In many instances, the youth complainant elected not to share this information. This data is further limited by the initial design of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office's confidential record management system which did not differentiate demographics on complaints submitted directly by youth or by adults on behalf of youth. This issue was corrected during an upgrade to the system in December 2022 and additional data on LGBTQ+ status, gender, race, and ethnicity is expected in future reports.

¹⁹ See Youth Complaint Profile C.

²⁰ See Youth Complaint Profile D.

²¹ See Youth Complaint Profile E.

This early data, while incomplete, raises necessary questions about awareness and accessibility of the Youth Ombudsman to traditionally marginalized populations, particularly those who are over-represented in Ohio's foster care system and are living in highly restrictive placement settings with fewer opportunities to contact the Youth Ombudsman directly. Resultingly, expanding awareness and access to all youth involved in the children services system is a key priority in 2023.

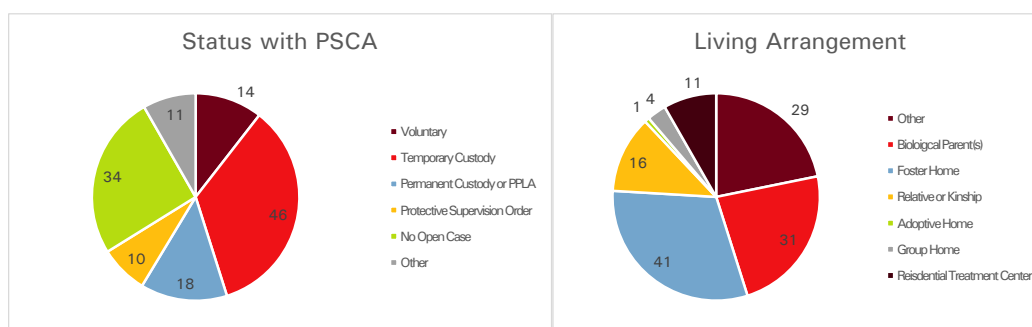


Agency Type, Status, and Living Arrangement

The Youth Ombudsman receives and investigates complaints about the children services system, including PCSAs, private non-custodial placement agencies such as group homes or qualified residential treatment programs (QRTPs), post-emancipation services including Bridges, and Title IV-E agencies or courts. Most youth complaints received in 2022 were regarding PCSAs.

The Youth Ombudsman received complaints from and about youth living in a variety of settings. Towards the end of the year, the Youth Ombudsman began receiving more complaints regarding youth in congregate care settings, likely the result of efforts to increase awareness. Living arrangements categorized as "other" include young adults who are living independently or in acute medical settings. Nearly half of the complaints involved youth who are in the custody of a PCSA. In complaints that do not involve a legal status or open case with a PCSA, the chief concern often involves an agency screening decision. In some instances, these fact patterns include youth who are not currently involved with a PCSA but have self-reported abuse or neglect to a local agency.

Agency Type	
PCSA	112
Private Placement Agency	8
Bridges	5
Other	8
	133

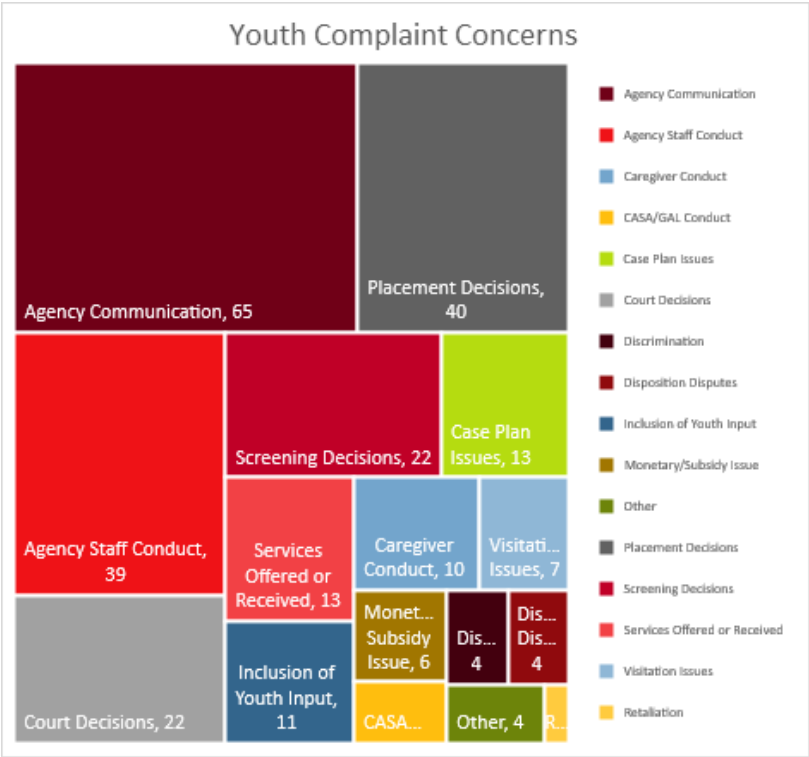


Youth Complaint Concerns

Many complaints submitted to the Youth Ombudsman do not report singular concerns. The Youth Ombudsman resolved **111** complaints in 2022. Across those complaints, the Youth Ombudsman reviewed **265** complaint concerns and allegations. Occasionally, as in the four complaints where the youth reported concerns about their guardian ad litem, the Youth Ombudsman lacks jurisdiction to conduct a review or investigation into a particular issue. As a result, the Youth Ombudsman provides information and guidance on appropriate avenues to address concerns that fall outside of the scope of the Youth Ombudsman.

Placement decisions comprise a large section of the complaint concerns reviewed in 2022, although individual circumstances were largely varied.²²

There are times when the complainant is requesting assistance or remedy regarding least restrictive placement settings or youth input in placement decisions, however the Youth Ombudsman might also take on an educational role to assist complainants in understanding the various factors that contribute to placement decisions such as necessary home study requirements or placements made or denied as the result of a court order. Largely, agency communication was a critical element in the majority of complaints submitted to the Youth Ombudsman in 2022. Every complaint that involved concerns about agency staff conduct, case plan issues, or inclusion of youth input also included co-occurring concerns related to agency communication.²³ In many complaints involving reported concerns about agency communication, the Youth Ombudsman issued recommendations while the complaint was pending or upon closure to improve communication including developing written staff guidelines to return phone calls or emails in a timely manner or implementing facilitated family team meetings to encourage ongoing collaborative communication between the parties. If the reported communication issues were behavioral in nature, such as staff rudeness or unprofessional conduct, the Youth Ombudsman addressed those concerns directly with agency leadership.



²² See Youth Complaint Profile G.

²³ See Youth Complaint Profile H.

In complaints involving concerns of agency communication and the inclusion of youth input, the Youth Ombudsman sometimes facilitated critical conversations between the youth and the casework staff to open channels of communication. Other times, the Youth Ombudsman recommended the use of Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables or recommended that the PCSA request appointment of legal counsel or a CASA/GAL to ensure youth input moving forward.

In complaints reporting concerns about agency screening decisions, the fact pattern is most frequently a youth who is not currently involved with a PCSA, although in some instances they had previous open cases or reports. These complaints typically involve a youth who has self-reported abuse or neglect directly to a PCSA or to a mandated reporter, however the reports were screened out by the PCSA.

Youth Complaint Resolutions and Outcomes

The Youth Ombudsman team works towards a meaningful resolution in each complaint. Once a complaint is resolved, the complaint file is procedurally closed. The resolution and closure of a complaint with the Youth Ombudsman does not impact the status of a pending case with a PCSA or juvenile court. Complainants may initiate additional contact with the Youth Ombudsman or file a new complaint in the future.

In 2022, the Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman made 19 referrals of suspected abuse or neglect to local PCSAs in response to information learned during complaint investigations. The office also referred youth complainants to their local PCSA, local court, CASA program, Bridges or other Independent Living Services, the Youth Navigator Program, ODJFS, the Bureau of Civil Rights, and legal aid or attorney services.

Each complaint to the Youth Ombudsman is unique and the team strives to be responsive and sensitive to each complainant's needs.²⁴ The Youth Ombudsman reviews and analyzes the facts of each complaint and each case to arrive at evidence-based recommendations that effectively resolve the complaint. The average time to resolve a youth complaint in 2022 was 42 days. However, complaint resolution ranged from 1 to 151 days. In working to resolve complaints, the Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman completed 1,377 personal contacts on complaint matters in 2022.

²⁴ See Youth Complaint Profile I.

Agency response to recommendations issued by the Youth Ombudsman was varied. Overall, the Youth Ombudsman's recommendations were incorporated by the involved agency, at least partially. In 18 of the 111 resolved complaints in 2022, the agency reviewed and/or overturned a previous decision. For example, one PCSA had previously not permitted a foster teen to obtain their driver's license due to an agency policy. The agency was very receptive during the complaint investigation and ultimately agreed to review and revise their policy on driver's licenses, overturning their previous decision.²⁵

Complaint Outcomes and Resolutions	
Agency Reviewed and/or Overturned a Previous Decision	18
Agency Reviewed and/or Revised a Policy or Procedure	7
Agency Addressed a Personnel Matter (staff discipline, case reassignment, etc.)	6
Agency Incorporated a Case-Related Change (placement, services, communication, etc.)	15
Other	9
Agency Partially Implemented Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	36
Agency Fully Implemented Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	9
Agency Did Not Implement Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	4
Agency Did Not Respond to Youth Ombudsman Recommendations	6
Youth Ombudsman Did Not Issue Recommendations	29
Other	27

On 10 occasions, agencies did not implement or, in some cases did not respond to Youth Ombudsman recommendations. More frequently, agencies were responsive and fully or partially incorporated the Youth Ombudsman's recommendations.

Youth Ombudsman Complaint Summary

The youth complaint data presented in this report is limited by a few factors. Due to the opening of the office on May 31, 2022, this report effectively presents only seven months of data and analysis. It is fair to assume that many youth and adults who support them do not yet know about the Youth Ombudsman, further limiting the sample size reflected in this report. However, there are some emerging trends and observations that will guide the Youth Ombudsman's work in 2023 and beyond. Early observations are discussed in a later section of this report.

Family Ombudsman Complaint Data

Who reported concerns to the Family Ombudsman in 2022?

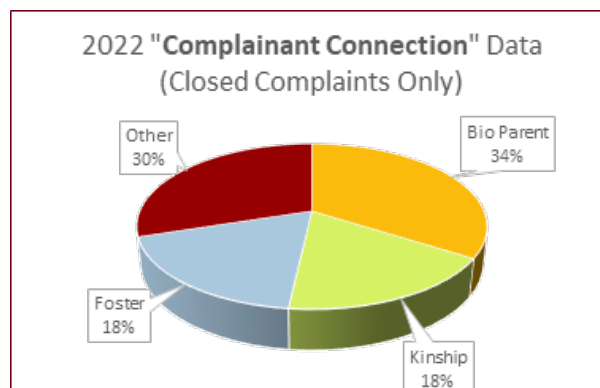
During this seven-month reporting period, the Family Ombudsman received and reviewed a total of **248** written grievances submitted by adult complainants, **28** of which were categorized as "carry-over" complaints to signify that the Family Ombudsman was unable to finish the full review process prior to January 1, 2023. In the few instances where the same person submitted more than one website complaint form (in the same calendar year) in connection with the same child(ren) or PCSA case, each individual complainant has been counted only once.

²⁵ See Youth Complaint Profile D.

In total, the Family Ombudsman team directly assisted **197** different adult complainants in 2022, many of whom unilaterally chose to present a single written grievance on behalf of an entire household or extended family seeking to elevate concerns involving the children services system.²⁶ The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office has also observed that some complainants prefer to simultaneously submit separate written grievances presenting distinct issues, which may or may not be suitable for complaint consolidation. Every grievance matter is as unique as the individual choosing to report specific issues for possible investigation at the state level.

In so reporting, the Family Ombudsman also encourages widespread recognition of the reality that some concerned individuals or family units may choose to report new or recurring concerns in the future, perhaps weeks or even months after a complaint form is procedurally closed. In fact, the Family Ombudsman team regularly encourages complainants to share pertinent future developments at their convenience, which may present the only realistic opportunity for a statewide grievance outlet to learn how any recommendations (or lack thereof) may have directly impacted a children services case outcome or mitigated any recurring concerns.

In addition to documenting how many separate website complaint forms are received and subsequently processed, the Family Ombudsman also tracks every adult complainant's "connection" to the children services agency involved in the grievance matter. As the chart below illustrates, **34%** of all individuals who submitted complaints to the Family Ombudsman (which were closed during this reporting period) presented issues involving their own biological children. By comparison, well over half of all complaints resolved by the Family Ombudsman in 2022 were submitted by foster parents, relatives, or miscellaneous "other" third parties. "Alleged perpetrators"²⁷ of reported child abuse or neglect represented **34%** of the Family Ombudsman's entire active investigative caseload in 2022.



²⁶ As previously discussed, "complainant" refers to any individual who submits a written grievance to the Family Ombudsman. Across all data categories presented in this section, only individuals who submitted (or otherwise initiated) website complaint forms have been counted. For instance, the Family Ombudsman team frequently met with or received requests from concerned spouses, significant others, or other supportive networks invested in the outcome of a particular case; however, those many other individuals assisted were not categorized as complainants unless, on rare occasion, they filed their own separate written grievances.

²⁷ "Alleged perpetrator" refers to any adult complainant who has been documented in the SACWIS database as an alleged perpetrator of child abuse or neglect. Regrettably, the Family Ombudsman does not currently have the capability to review any criminal or civil courthouse dockets to track any corresponding legal case outcomes.

Along with identifying every adult complainant's connection to the children services agency decision-making at issue, the Family Ombudsman also studies every concerned individual's eligibility for potential relief under Ohio's relatively new "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."²⁸

Absent from this legal definition determining eligibility are prospective caregivers, previous caregivers and biological parents or legal guardians engaged in family reunification case plan services which may require months or even years of ongoing communication with children services agency staff. The express wording of the "rights" themselves limits practical application of this landmark legislation to current caregivers.²⁹ 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. These and many other public policy considerations are directly relevant to the Family Ombudsman's mandate which is to facilitate fair resolution of reported conflicts within Ohio's children services system.

How many Family Ombudsman "contacts" were documented in 2022?

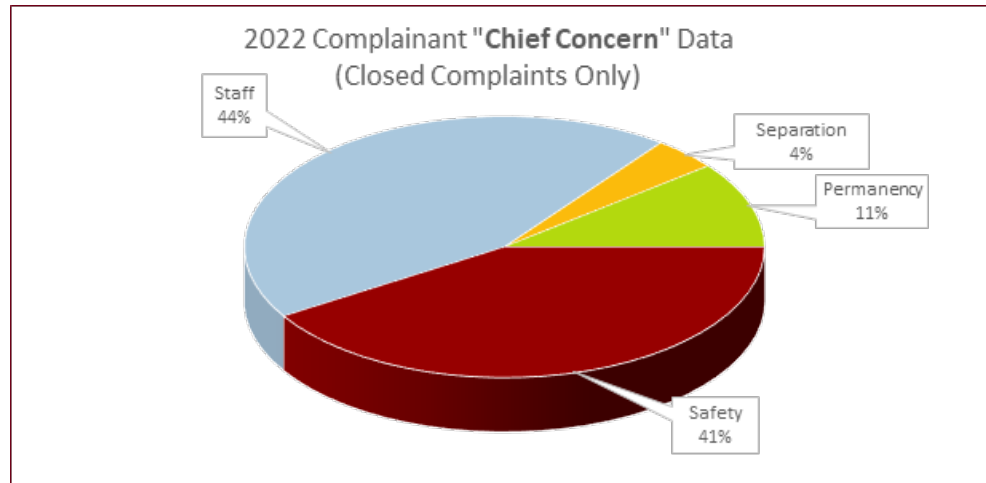
During this reporting period, a total of **1,991** "contacts" were logged to document direct interactions between the Family Ombudsman team and complainants along with various others (e.g. children services agency staff) directly involved in a reported conflict. For data tracking purposes, "contact" refers to any external meeting completed, or substantive written communication sent by, the Family Ombudsman team. Predictably, more complex concerns required, on average, more than double the number of external interactions between website complaint form submission and procedural closure.

What was the nature of the most frequently reported concerns in 2022?

Complaints stemming from the children services system tend to present numerous inter-related allegations potentially involving multiple individuals and/or tiers of agency management. Although all concerns involving the safety and well-being of children deserve thoughtful exploration and require careful analysis, adult complainants are often asked to identify their chief concerns to facilitate more timely resolution of potentially urgent issues. As the chart below illustrates, issues pertaining to government agency staff conduct and child safety in general were the most frequently reported concerns presented for neutral "third party" review in 2022.

²⁸ See ORC § 5103.02 ("(J) 'Resource family' means a foster home or the kinship caregiver family."). See also ORC § 5101.85 ("As used in sections 5101.851 to 5101.856 of the Revised Code, 'kinship caregiver' means any of the following who is eighteen years of age or older and is caring for a child in place of the child's parents[.]").

²⁹ For example, Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-42-20 provides in pertinent part: "The right to be treated with dignity and respect as the resource family providing the day to day care for children in the children services system."



Identifying a complainant's primary focus becomes especially critical in instances where the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is being asked to independently examine an entire children services agency case from beginning to end. During this reporting period, **41%** of all investigations completed by the Family Ombudsman team required a "full case" review. In stark contrast, only **6%** encompassed a contested case disposition that had already been entered in the SACWIS database while **13%** of investigations finished in 2022 involved complainants seeking to challenge a PCSA "screening" decision or response to reported child safety concerns. All complainants are advised, and reminded as often as necessary, that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office is not authorized to investigate alleged child abuse or neglect.

When did the Family Ombudsman take investigative action in 2022?

In the seven months following creation of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, the Family Ombudsman team was able to work together to complete a total of **84** investigations. Only **11%** of all complaints submitted to the Family Ombudsman were unable to be resolved prior to end of the calendar year. Notably, between just Thanksgiving Day (November 24, 2022) and Martin Luther King Day (January 16, 2023), the Family Ombudsman received **50** new grievance matters to process and independently review.

Nearly all new intakes resolved by the Family Ombudsman team during this reporting period involved individuals or families seeking to elevate concerns involving Ohio's children services system. However, as discussed throughout various earlier sections of this data report, not every issue presented in a complaint can or should be immediately investigated by a state ombudsman. In 2022, Information and Referral (non-investigative) guidance was provided to concerned adults to resolve approximately **57%** of all complaints submitted directly to the Family Ombudsman.

Additionally, for data tracking purposes, of the **197** complainants directly assisted by the Family Ombudsman team in 2022, only **11** were categorized as "repeat complainants" to document that they had submitted more than one written grievance in the same calendar year. Further, **8** government grievances were voluntarily withdrawn by complainants while a total of **22** complaints were, by agreement, transferred to the Youth Ombudsman. Accordingly, in those instances, the Family Ombudsman did not take any investigative action. To date, no concerns reported by youth have been transferred to the Family Ombudsman for processing or review.

While this report reflects only seven months of operations and serves as an introduction to the potential of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office to inform and support children services transformation, there are early observations that should be noted.

Local Grievance Policy Accessibility

During the seven months that the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office was operational in 2022, there were some patterns and themes that were evident across all parts of the office. Most notable was the impact of the local grievance process on the eventual state-level complaint. PCSAs are required to maintain written policies for receiving, reviewing, and resolving complaints, and disposition appeals.³⁰ The PCSAs are not, however, required to post their written policies and procedures on their website or in any other public forum. Likewise, they are not required to provide these policies to all individuals who find themselves involved with agencies, rather they are required to provide them, upon request, within three working days of the request.

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office provides initial guidance to prospective complaints to support their self-advocacy efforts. Frequently, adults contact the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office before bringing their complaint to the attention of the local agency or before attempting a local remedy or resolution. In closely examining this issue, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen determined that self-advocacy is often impeded by the lack of accessibility to local grievance information.

Only 10 of Ohio's PCSAs have their grievance procedures and policies posted and easily accessible on their public websites. The lack of accessibility to the grievance process frequently results in an unfortunate dynamic where a prospective complainant finds themselves in a situation where they don't feel they can even consider filing a local complaint or grievance as they must ask their assigned caseworkers for a copy of the policy, thereby notifying their assigned worker of their intent to complain.

³⁰ See OAC Rule 5101:2-33-20 (A) ("The public children services agency shall develop and implement written policies for receiving, reviewing and resolving both of the following: (1) Complaints concerning the provision of services from parents, custodians, legal guardians, foster caregivers, kinship caretakers, applicants or providers of approved adult-supervised living arrangements, and children.").

Retaliation Fears

In certain circumstances, a complainant's self-reported fear of retaliation is a known barrier to complaint investigation or effective conflict resolution. Coupled with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office's limited authority to require agency cooperation, this situation often stalls a complaint investigation and prevents meaningful fact-based recommendations from being presented to possibly improve specific case outcomes or agency-wide case management practices. No matter the intent of the agency or the professionals involved, even the perception of retaliation can have a profoundly negative impact on an individual's experience within the children services system.

"After I confronted my foster dad, he sent me mocking messages asking why I felt like I was so abused."

"They have unlimited power with no checks. They can very clearly retaliate and then say they made the decision because of best interests or something else and nobody questions it."

When combined with breakdowns in communication, a fear of retaliation can silence youth and adults alike from proactively coming forward to elevate concerns. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office has and will continue to explore opportunities to establish protections against retaliation, including collaboration on amendments to law or rule.

Youth Ombudsman Observations

Agency Screening Decisions: Self-Reported Abuse and Neglect

Nearly 20% of the complaints received by the Youth Ombudsman in 2022 reported concerns about agency screening decisions. In many of these complaints, youth had self-reported abuse directly to the PCSA or to mandated reporters who subsequently made referrals to the local PCSA. On 19 occasions, the Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman had reason to suspect maltreatment based on information gathered during intake or subsequent meetings with the complainants, electing to make additional referrals to the local PCSA, many of which were also screened out. Youth who take proactive steps to report maltreatment are often fearful of continued abuse and feel reaching out to the Youth Ombudsman is their final opportunity to find safety. One youth wrote to the Youth Ombudsman,

"I don't know what to do, if the children services people can't help me I don't know what I'm gonna do. This is my last chance and I'm panicking. I'll pray nonstop. You're all I have left."³¹

³¹ See Youth Complaint Profile F.

These complaints are particularly challenging to resolve because screening decisions are largely left to the discretion of the local PCSA, as Ohio's children services system is county administered.³² Some PCSAs overturned previous screening decisions during the complaint investigation, however most affirmed their previous decisions. While ODJFS provides a detailed supplemental screening guideline for local PCSAs, complaints investigated by the Youth Ombudsman point to inconsistencies in how screening decisions are made across Ohio's 88 counties.

Agency Screening Decisions: Out-of-Home-Care Referrals

A growing number of youth complaints involve screening decisions related to out-of-home-care settings. For example, a referral is made to the local PCSA alleging that a youth was given another youth's prescription psychotropic medication while in the care of a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP). The PCSA screened out the referral, classifying it as "Information Only – Licensing Violation." While the improper and incorrect dispensing of medication certainly merits a review by the licensing authority, it is also alleged abuse and neglect as defined in Ohio law, and is specifically used as a "screen in example" in the screening guideline resource provided to PCSAs by ODJFS.³³ The classifying of a referral as a prospective licensing violation does not relieve the PCSA of their responsibilities to consider allegations of abuse or neglect. The inconsistencies in documenting and screening referrals involving out-of-home-care settings contribute to a variety of concerns including the possibility that a referral goes unaddressed altogether, impacts the ability of PCSAs in other counties to thoroughly consider a prospective placement, and, most seriously, may leave youth exposed to abusive or neglectful behavior.

³² See OAC Rule 5101:2-36-01. Intake and screening procedures for child abuse, neglect, dependency, and family in need of services reports; and information and/or referral intakes.

³³ See ORC § 2151.03 Neglected child defined. and ORC § 2151.031 Abused child defined. See also ORC § 2919.22 Endangering Children.

Agency Communication

More than half of the complaints investigated by the Youth Ombudsman in 2022 included concerns stemming from agency communication.³⁴ In some instances, the issue was the frequency of communication. Other times, the concerns stemmed from the quality of the communications. During youth complaint investigations where casework staff and supervisory staff were interviewed, limited capacity and high caseloads were often cited as reasons for the minimal or sometimes absent communication. In some cases, the impact of high workforce turnover was a clear factor, with some youth having five or more assigned caseworkers throughout their time in agency custody. These youth reported issues surrounding the transfer of cases between caseworkers during times of turnover, citing disruptions in permanency planning and communication. These assertions were largely supported during the Youth Ombudsman's review of agency records, which sometimes included limited or missing documentation. Some youth reported strain in their communication with caseworkers, either because there hadn't been opportunity to build a strong rapport and relationship or because the youth felt let down or ignored by the caseworker. While there are clear mandates that establish minimum standards for communication with youth,³⁵ Ohio faces a higher rate of caseworker turnover than the national average.³⁶ As a result, workforce capacity and turnover have proven to be critical barriers to effective casework, which ultimately impacts the experiences of youth entrusted to the care of Ohio's children services system. In complaints where communication was more frequent, including regular phone and face-to-face contact, youth described their relationships with caseworkers as trusting, dependable, and safe. For teenagers in particular, the assignment of a specialized Independent Living caseworker seemed to have a positive impact on communication, based on the cases reviewed and investigated by the Youth Ombudsman. Because the use of regular family team meetings also seems to have a positive impact on communication during an active case, the Youth Ombudsman frequently recommended them as well as other youth-centered communication tools such as permanency roundtables in 2022.

³⁴ See Ohio Child Protective Services Screening Guidelines, "Substance Use Ingestion Example," pg. 23, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

³⁵ See OAC Rule 5101:2-42-65. Caseworker visits and contacts with children in substitute care.

³⁶ Rebecca Phillips, Alicia Bunger, Sarah Parmenter. "Building a 21st Century Children Services Workforce," The Ohio State University College of Social Work on behalf of Public Children Services Association of Ohio. 2022.

Family Ombudsman Observations

Whenever any child enters the child protection system due to allegations of child abuse or neglect, the primary case objectives are to remedy any proven caregiver deficiencies and reunite the family. To accomplish this goal, children services agencies must offer reasonable services to parents or legal guardians which will enable them to safely resume the responsibility of caring for their children. However, laws intended to protect children and corresponding public policy considerations also recognize that children need and deserve stability. For this reason, if safe family reunification is not accomplished within a reasonable timeframe, an alternative plan can and should be pursued.

Although this first reporting period comprises mere months of statewide data, the sheer volume of Ohioans who immediately came forward to share their perspectives informs the following guidance:

Community Education

Even in cases in which legal counsel is reportedly appointed or retained to provide advocacy and ongoing guidance, many adult complainants who contact the Family Ombudsman do not appear to understand applicable Ohio law. It is also true that some complainants may never be able or willing to accept various legal realities; for example, not every child safety concern constitutes “abuse” or “neglect” as defined by Ohio law. Nevertheless, the Family Ombudsman continues to observe that more 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.

Case Disposition Appeals

Furthermore, alleged 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. For this reason alone, it seems prudent to educate the public as early and as often as possible, and certainly before a complaint is referred elsewhere for any “third party” review.

Improving the Accessibility of Local Grievance Procedures

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.

Strengthening Referral Intake and Screening

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office recommends that ODJFS take a proactive approach in reviewing and strengthening the referral intake and screening process across Ohio's PCSAs.

Additionally, the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office recommends a systemic review and evaluation of self-reported abuse across all Ohio counties, with consideration of a potential review and revision of screening guidelines to specifically address self-reported abuse from youth.

Strengthening Agency Communication

The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office recommends that current efforts by Governor Mike DeWine's administration to increase and innovate support for the children services workforce continue. The following are offered as supplemental observations informed by early data compiled by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

- While data is limited due to the brief tenure of this office, the use of specialized caseworkers, especially Independent Living caseworkers, seems to have a positive impact on the "customer service" aspect of casework, particularly when teenagers are involved. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office respectfully recommends that ODJFS continue efforts to explore and strengthen these casework specializations.
- The use of structured family team meetings, with a skilled facilitator, appear to be an efficient and effective way to improve case-level communication. Opportunities to expand the use of these tools should be explored.
- The transition from one caseworker to the next appears to be a critical time in the life of a children services case. ODJFS and all Ohio PCSAs are encouraged to closely examine this area of practice and develop safeguards to ensure that these transitions occur smoothly, and that documentation is timely, thorough, and accurate.
- Caseworkers who are afforded opportunity to build meaningful relationships with youth and families seem to be more effective. Early data analyzed by the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office supports robust ongoing efforts to expand the workforce and reduce caseload sizes.

This report marks the successful launch and early months of Ohio's first statewide grievance outlet for individuals involved in the children services system. The Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office remains committed to children services transformation through the compassionate and efficient resolution of complaints brought forward by youth and families. In 2023 and beyond, the office will focus on increasing accessibility to conflict resolution resources for all constituents, strengthening collaboration, and sharing critical data with statewide stakeholders to inform future system-wide decisions.

Glossary of Key Terms and Acronyms

Agency – The PCSA or private placement agency involved in a complaint or general inquiry with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Complaint – A formal grievance submitted to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Complainant – Any individual who submits a complaint directly to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Emancipated Young Adult – A person over the age of 18 who was previously in the temporary or permanent custody of a public children services agency, a planned permanent living arrangement, or in the care of a Title IV-E agency and whose custody, care, or placement was terminated on or after the person's 18th birthday.

Family Complaint – A formal grievance under review or investigation by the Family Ombudsman team. A family complaint may be filed by any adult seeking to report unresolved concerns directly involving Ohio's children services system, including but not limited to: biological parents or legal guardians, foster or kinship caregivers, and extended family relatives or professionals working in the children services system.

General Inquiry – An individual's documented interaction with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office other than through a formally submitted complaint.

ODJFS – Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

PCSA – Public children services agency in Ohio.

Prospective Complainant – Any individual who has reported a concern which directly involves Ohio's children services system, but who has not submitted a complaint directly to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Referral – Any concern reported elsewhere and subsequently forwarded (by someone other than the reporting party) to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office.

Resolution – The outcome and or closure of a complaint.

Resource Family – Substitute caregivers including foster parents and approved kinship caregivers.

SACWIS – Ohio's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System.

Youth – A person under the age of 18 or an emancipated young adult, including those in the temporary or permanent custody of a public children services agency, a planned permanent living arrangement, or in the care of a Title IV-E agency.

Youth Complaint – A formal grievance under review or investigation by the Youth Ombudsman team. A youth complaint may be filed by a youth, an emancipated young adult, or by an adult on behalf of a youth or emancipated young adult.

Youth Complaint Profiles

Youth Complaint Profile A

Young Adult Complainant contacted the Youth Ombudsman to report concerns about their experiences with Bridges. Young Adult Complainant alleged that they were facing eviction due to a delayed maintenance payment. The Youth Ombudsman team reviewed the record and conducted a brief interview with the direct services staff, determining that the delay was due to a SACWIS issue. The Bridges Liaison had submitted a ticket approximately 40 days prior. The Youth Ombudsman team contacted the Office of Families and Children at ODJFS for assistance in resolving the SACWIS issue, which was completed within a few days. The Youth Ombudsman team also recommended that the Bridges Liaison have direct contact with Young Adult Complainant's leasing office to confirm that payment was underway. The Youth Ombudsman held the complaint open until payment had been confirmed.

Youth Complaint Profile B

A complaint submitted by an adult on behalf of a youth, alleges that the youth in the care of a Qualified Residential Treatment Program was injured by a staff member during an improper restraint and physical altercation. While the incident had been reported to the PCSA, it was screened out as "Information Only" rather than a physical abuse referral. The Youth Ombudsman team reviewed agency and facility records and interviewed agency staff. The PCSA accepted recommendations to review the prior screening decision. The referral was screened in as physical abuse and the agency investigated, substantiating physical abuse. The alleged perpetrator was terminated from employment at the facility and the youth moved to a different placement.

Youth Complaint Profile C

A resource parent assisted Youth Complainant in reporting suspected discrimination to the Youth Ombudsman. Youth Complainant is nonbinary. The complaint alleged a violation of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights "...*The right to protection against being discriminated against or harassed on the basis of race, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, color or national origin...*" due to the assigned caseworker's alleged rudeness and disrespect of the youth's gender identity and mental health issues. A complaint investigation was opened and the PCSA initiated steps to address the concerns, incorporating recommendations from the Youth Ombudsman team. The case was re-assigned to a different caseworker, the agency required the original caseworker to write a letter of apology to the youth, and the casework staff were required to complete additional training.

Youth Complaint Profile D

A teenager in the custody of a PCSA filed a complaint with the assistance of their foster parent. The complaint alleged that because of a PCSA policy prohibiting teens in agency custody from obtaining driver's licenses, Youth Complainant was deprived of normalcy. There were teens from other counties placed in the foster home who were permitted to obtain their licenses, which further exacerbated Youth Complainant's concerns. The Youth Ombudsman team opened a dialogue with the PCSA and other stakeholders to determine what barriers prevented the agency from extending this typical teenage experience to youth in their custody. As a result, the PCSA re-evaluated their internal policies. At the time of complaint closure, Youth Complainant had successfully obtained their driver's permit.

Youth Complaint Profile E

Young Adult Complainant recently emancipated but had younger siblings still in foster care. The complainant reported they felt unheard and discounted as it related to placement options and the case in general. The complainant felt that because they were vocal about their concerns and tried to advocate for their siblings, the PCSA abruptly ended their involvement in the case once they were no longer a legal party. Young Adult Complainant was not referred to post-emancipation services, such as Bridges. Recommendations regarding casework practice, transition planning, emancipated youth services, and communication were issued. The Assistant Youth Ombudsman personally helped the Young Adult Complainant with a referral to Bridges.

Youth Complaint Profile F

Youth Complainant contacted the Youth Ombudsman for assistance regarding reports of abuse and neglect. Youth Complainant had been involved in a recently closed case which was opened following multiple reports of physical abuse and emotional maltreatment. Youth Complainant was not aware that the case had been closed. The complaint alleged that the PCSA did not consider evidence that supported the youth's claims of abuse, although the youth had email communications to the caseworker documenting the existence of the evidence. Upon initial review, these email communications were not reflected in the agency's confidential record. The agency later advised that the caseworker received the emails but could not open attachments. The caseworker did not follow up with Youth Complainant to request they be sent again. The Youth Ombudsman team reviewed the information provided by Youth Complainant and reported the alleged physical abuse and emotional maltreatment to the PCSA intake department. The PCSA screened out the new referral and upheld their previous decision to close the recent case. The PCSA declined to implement recommendations to examine previous case decisions considering the new evidence. The Youth Ombudsman team also issued recommendations to the PCSA regarding their communication with the youth; the lack of planning for continuity of services; and the agency's handling of the evidence. The Youth Ombudsman team assisted Youth Complainant with information about mandated reporters; information about mental health supports; and introductions with members of the legal community to provide further assistance.

Youth Complaint Profile G

Youth Complainant, with the assistance of an adult support person, contacted the Youth Ombudsman with concerns about being in a temporary foster care placement and not enrolled in school. Youth Complainant also alleged that a kinship placement was available. Youth Complainant was concerned that they would be moved to a more restrictive placement. The PCSA was responsive and cooperative. Youth Complainant moved to the approved kinship placement the following day and was quickly enrolled in school. At the time of the complaint resolution and closure, Youth Complainant had remained in the kinship placement and had since obtained employment and a driver's permit.

Youth Complaint Profile H

A young adult filed a complaint citing historical concerns regarding the reunification and case closure that occurred when they were a teenager. Young Adult Complainant was coming forward because of concerns about a relative sibling group currently involved with the PCSA and was worried the younger children's abuse in a kinship placement with her biological family could have been prevented if the historical concerns had been more thoroughly evaluated. Young Adult Complainant reports that they felt unheard as a teenager and that reunification occurred prematurely, leading to further trauma. Young Adult Complainant shared that if they had been interviewed alone during the historical case, they would've felt more comfortable and safer disclosing the continued abuse. The PCSA was very receptive to this feedback and agreed to meet with the Assistant Youth Ombudsman and the young adult complainant to learn more about Young Adult Complainant's experiences. The involvement with the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office also led to a discovery that Young Adult Complainant qualified for the Ohio Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) to assist with college tuition.

Youth Complaint Profile I

A youth submitted a complaint through the Family Ombudsman web form with concerns that a PCSA had recently discontinued an out-of-home safety plan and closed their alternative response case. The Family Ombudsman, recognizing that the complaint was submitted by a youth, contacted the Youth Ombudsman to discuss the complaint matter, ultimately determining that a transfer was the most appropriate course of action. Youth Complainant alleged that safety concerns that led to the agency's involvement had not been fully resolved. Youth Complainant reported fear that the abuse will re-occur. The Youth Ombudsman team maintained contact with Youth Complainant through a school email address as they did not feel safe talking by phone.

Sample Youth Ombudsman Promotional Materials



Ohio | Youth Ombudsman

**WE
PROTECT
YOUR
RIGHTS.**

**TELL US
YOUR STORY.**

The Youth Ombudsman listens to your concerns and advocates for your rights to be protected while in foster care. The Youth Ombudsman's office conducts investigations in a fair and neutral way. If you have already reached out to your local children services or placement agency and you feel your complaint has not been resolved,

**CALL:
1-877-OHYOUTH**
Or scan the QR Code



YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov

Ohio | Department of Job and Family Services
Youth Ombudsman
Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
100 East Town Street
Columbus, OH 43218
614-644-3333
This brochure is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



**Ohio | Youth and Family
Ombudsmen Office**

Children and youth in Ohio's children services system have rights. The Youth Ombudsman reviews complaints from youth concerned about their rights, their placement, or their care.

What we **CAN** do:

- Receive complaints from any youth involved in the children services system online: **YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov** or by calling **1-877-OH-YOUTH**.
- Review complaints and discuss concerns with youth regarding services they are receiving or should be receiving, if they believe their rights are being violated or ignored, or if they have concerns about their living conditions.
- Investigate and work to resolve the complaint. We may even make recommendations on how the system can change to make the situation better for everyone.

What we **CAN'T** do:

We can't provide legal advice; investigate abuse or neglect; investigate complaints against attorneys, judges, guardians ad litem, or magistrates; change court-ordered decisions; or respond to emergencies. If we can't help with your concern, we will help you get connected to the right place for assistance.

Children and Youth are encouraged to reach out to the Youth Ombudsman team.

Youth Ombudsman
PO Box 182133
Columbus, OH 43218
1-877-OH-YOUTH
YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov

Youth Ombudsman “What to Expect” Resources



What to Expect

The Youth Ombudsman is here to listen to your concerns and complete an independent investigation in situations where your complaint falls within the scope of the Youth Ombudsman's office. If a complaint is accepted by the Youth Ombudsman and opened for investigation, the Youth Ombudsman will attempt to assist in resolving the complaint. It's important for you to know that there are laws governing what the Youth Ombudsman can and cannot do.

The Youth Ombudsman MAY:

- Investigate and review complaints that involve public children services agencies, Title IV-E agencies, or private agencies that oversee foster care placements for youth in the children services system.
- Ask you for more information or details in order to better understand your complaint and determine if an investigation or review can be opened.
- Request to meet with you by phone, virtual meeting, or in-person.
- Interview other parties who have important information about complaint or situation.
- Obtain records from public children services agencies, Title IV-E agencies, or private agencies that oversee foster care placements.
- Make reports to the appropriate authorities if there are suspected violations of law by any party.
- Issue recommendations to the involved agency to resolve your complaint.
- Advise you of other ways to address your complaint or seek help in the event it does not fall within the scope of the Youth Ombudsman's office.

The Youth Ombudsman CANNOT:

- Investigate allegations of abuse and neglect. Reports of abuse and neglect are investigated by public children services agencies and/or law enforcement.
- Investigate criminal matters.
- Require an agency to overturn a finding or decision or change court orders.
- Share complaint records except in instances where it is necessary to continue an investigation or in instances where the Youth Ombudsman has been court ordered to release records.
- Serve as your agent or legal representative.

The Youth Ombudsman WILL:

- Treat you with dignity and respect.
- Keep you informed of the status of your complaint and let you know the outcome.
- Tell you if a complaint cannot be opened for investigation and explain why.
- Attempt to refer and connect you to other resources as necessary.
- Tell you if information regarding your complaint needs to be released.
- Remain available to hear continued concerns and feedback from you.

Helpful Resources

[Ohio Administrative Code 5101:2-5-35 Foster Youth Bill of Rights](#)
[Ohio Revised Code 5101.891 Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office](#)
[Ohio Foster Youth Handbook](#)

1-877-OHYOUTH
 PO Box 18133
 Columbus, OH 43218
YouthOmbudsman.ohio.gov



What to Expect

An Overview for Agencies

The Youth Ombudsman receives complaints from youth who have concerns about their experiences in the children services system. The Youth Ombudsman also receives complaints from adults on behalf of youth. The Youth Ombudsman listens to concerns and completes an independent investigation in situations where the complaint falls within the scope of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. If a complaint is accepted by the Youth Ombudsman and opened for investigation, the Youth Ombudsman will attempt to help resolve the complaint. There are laws governing what the Youth Ombudsman can and cannot do.

The Youth Ombudsman MAY:

- Investigate and review complaints that involve public children services agencies, Title IV-E agencies, or private agencies that oversee foster care placements for youth in the children services system.
- Request to meet with agency staff by phone, virtual meeting, or in-person.
- Interview other parties who have important information about complaint or situation.
- Review records from public children services agencies, Title IV-E agencies, or private agencies that oversee foster care placements.
- Make reports to the appropriate authorities if there are suspected violations of law by any party.
- Facilitate meaningful discussions aimed at supporting and protecting the youth's best interest.
- Issue recommendations or a confidential investigative report to the agency leadership. Copies of those reports may be shared with ODJFS leadership and/or the governor's office.

The Youth Ombudsman CANNOT:

- Investigate allegations of abuse and neglect. Reports of abuse and neglect are investigated by public children services agencies and/or law enforcement.
- Investigate criminal matters.
- Require an agency to overturn a finding or decision or change court orders.

The Youth Ombudsman WILL:

- Treat you with dignity and respect.
- Discuss recommendations or findings with agency leadership.
- Provide agency leadership the opportunity to respond in writing to concerns or recommendations.
- Maintain the confidentiality of records and sensitive information.
- Protect the privacy of complainants whenever possible.
- Remain available to hear continued feedback from you.

Helpful Resources

[Ohio Revised Code 5101.891 Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office](#)
[Ohio Administrative Code 5101:2-5-35 Foster Youth Bill of Rights](#)
[Ohio Foster Youth Handbook](#)

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Family Ombudsman “What to Expect” Resource



Mike DeWine, Governor
Jon Husted, Lt. Governor

Jennifer Sherff, Family Ombudsman
Christine Pater, Assistant Family Ombudsman

Ohio Family Ombudsman

Family Ombudsman Overview

What to expect when you file a complaint

The Family Ombudsman team assists anyone who is concerned about Ohio's children services system. We independently review complaints submitted by individuals or families, document concerns, and investigate as appropriate. Read below to learn more about what we can do to help.

What we are able to do

After you file a complaint, the Family Ombudsman team *will*:

- Review and attempt to resolve concerns directly involving Ohio's public children services system.
- Provide you with written confirmation of our receipt of every new complaint submitted.
- Help you understand what we can and cannot legally do during our review of your complaint.
- Ask you to present specific allegations or additional details to help us better understand concerns.
- Meet with you, as requested, to answer any questions you may have about our office.
- Provide periodic written status updates to keep you informed of important developments.
- Offer practical guidance, whenever possible, based on known circumstances surrounding a case.
- Notify you in advance if we issue any confidential investigative report related to your complaint.
- Supply you with written confirmation when your complaint is procedurally closed.
- Invite you to contact us again to discuss any remaining questions and/or closure concerns.

Additional steps we may take

Depending on the nature of your complaint, the Family Ombudsman team *may*:

- Independently examine confidential children services agency records in the SACWIS database.
- Review additional documentation presented to our office by you or others who may be involved.
- Schedule confidential meetings directly with you or other witnesses to verify key facts.
- Issue confidential reports to agency leadership to present noteworthy investigative observations.
- Confer with agency leadership to present case-specific and/or agency-wide recommendations.
- Advise you of our recommendations, as permitted by Ohio law, presented to agency leadership.
- Encourage you to proactively pursue a formal written grievance at the local county level.
- Refer you to other grievance outlets, depending on the nature of your reported concerns.
- Report suspected violations of law to the appropriate authorities and document any related issues.
- Alert other state government officials to recurring investigative barriers or system-wide concerns.

1-877-649-6884
PO Box 182133
Columbus, OH 43218
FamilyOmbudsman.ohio.gov

What we are not able to do

Under current Ohio law, the Family Ombudsman team *cannot*:

- Review concerns that do not directly involve Ohio's public children services system.
- Assess or otherwise investigate suspected or reported child abuse or neglect.*
- Provide legal services of any kind to any complainant in any grievance matter.
- Investigate alleged criminal conduct of any kind.
- Attempt to interfere with pending child custody litigation or review any contested legal rulings.
- Investigate overly broad complaints where no specific allegations are presented for our review.
- Issue case-specific recommendations without verifiable facts.
- Divulge confidential complaint or agency case information to anyone in violation of Ohio law.

***NOTE: If you suspect child abuse or neglect, we urge you to immediately call 855-O-H-CHILD (855-642-4453), an automated telephone directory that will link callers directly to a children services or law enforcement agency in their county.**

Additional Resources:

[Ohio Revised Code Section 5101.891 \(Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office\)](#)
[Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-33-23 \(Confidentiality Requirement\)](#)
[Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-42-20 \(Resource Family Bill of Rights\)](#)
[Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-5-35 \(Foster Youth Bill of Rights\)](#)
[Youth Ombudsman Webpage](#)

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