



Youth Ombudsman

Mike DeWine, Governor
Jon Husted, Lt. Governor

Jenny Stotts, Youth Ombudsman

October 10, 2023

Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB)
c/o Lisa Dickson

re: Response to OHIO YAB Evaluation

Dear Youth Ambassadors and Leaders,

Thank you for your thoughtful response and evaluation to the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office's 2022 Annual Report. I admire your willingness to share your lived *experiences* and lived *expertise* to make our work stronger and more responsive. Our team has carefully reviewed your evaluation and communicated with key stakeholders to compile this response. Please view this letter as the beginning of a conversation, rather than the end of the discussion. I invite ongoing and regular collaboration.

Future Youth Outreach

Thank you for offering to collaborate in this regard. Jeff Phillips and I appreciated the opportunity to join you for a breakout discussion at July's quarterly meeting. The conversation was lively, and we walked away with several new ideas for our team. We are actively working to incorporate your suggestions. We are preparing to publish a package of online resources for school personnel who regularly interact with foster youth. Our original strategy was to target primarily school guidance counselors, which we adapted based on your excellent feedback to also include school nurses.

We recently began an effort to schedule presentations about the Foster Youth Bill of Rights with youth living in residential treatment centers and group homes. We look forward to sharing our progress in future reports.

County Screening Decisions

As you learned from our annual report, this is an area of concern. At the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, we are continuing to review this issue and are collecting data to inform future systemwide recommendations. I also shared your feedback and ideas with the Office of Families and Children (OFC) at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). Members of the leadership team at OFC indicated that they recently held a meeting with representatives from OHIO YAB to discuss screening guidelines. I plan to further address this issue in future reports, as well.

Developing a Youth-Specific Grievance Form

We appreciate your suggestions regarding local grievance procedures at public children services agencies (PCSAs). We know that many complaints and grievances can be resolved locally without a state-level review, but all the involved parties, including youth, must understand how the process works. I also consulted with OFC on this topic, and they similarly expressed an interest in collaboration to develop youth grievance forms. I am interested in hosting a virtual forum with youth leaders to learn more about your recommendations and ideas on this topic.

Improving Agency Communication

As described in our annual report, we observed several instances where breakdowns in communication may have contributed to the development of the eventual complaint. We are continuing to examine this fact pattern during complaint investigations to identify patterns or potential gaps that may need to be addressed in future annual reports. Likewise, I have shared our observations and your feedback with OFC. They reported that in December 2022, they had released a “Strengthening Relationships Toolbox” for PCSAs. Like you, I believe this to be a complex issue that will require multiple creative solutions. I hope that we can further discuss your ideas regarding communication expectations at future meetings.

Importance of Independent Living Workers

Thank you for offering your insights regarding the status of independent living models across Ohio. I have shared your feedback with the leadership team at OFC. It seems we all agree that Independent Living workers bring incredible value to children services cases involving teens and older youth. As you may already know, proposed funding to enhance best practices in Independent Living were not included in the most recent state budget. Currently, there is an Independent Living toolkit available to PCSAs. I have also been advised of plans to include youth voice in training development, which I hope will further strengthen this area. During complaint investigations, if we learn that a PCSA does not have a dedicated Independent Living worker, we address how the agency is meeting the Independent Living needs of that youth and regularly connect PCSA staff with resources to support this area of practice. I encourage OHIO YAB to continue your advocacy in this area.

Improving Communication with GALs

As you may already know, our office does not review complaints about guardians ad litem, however when youth reach out regarding concerns that fall outside of our jurisdiction, we try to meaningfully refer them to the appropriate place to get help. I have shared the information and feedback you provided regarding GAL communications with the Children and Families Section at the Ohio Supreme Court.

Ensuring Responses to Youth Ombudsman

I am pleased to share that many PCSAs and private agencies have approached our involvement with a collaborative and problem-solving spirit. Like you, I am disappointed that some agencies elected not to respond to our recommendations. In your evaluation, you posed several questions, which I hope to answer. Under Ohio law, we do not have the authority to compel an agency to respond to or implement our recommendations, nor do we have the authority to impose sanctions or fines. Regarding your question about the “chain of command” here at the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, our office is administratively housed within the Director’s Office at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Our investigations occur independently of the Office of Families and Children, which oversees Ohio’s children services system. Finally, Ohio’s children services system is county-administered, and management of agency leadership is held at the local level. Earlier this year, we hired a Resource Manager and part of her responsibilities include building effective working relationships with stakeholders, including PCSAs. We hope that through these efforts and our continued commitment to resolving complaints fairly, we can bridge communication with agencies across Ohio.

Suggestions for Future Reports

We currently track county-level data and regularly communicate with colleagues in the Office of Families and Children to share our observations or to recommend technical assistance. As our sample size at the close of 2022 was relatively small, we elected not to publish county-specific data as it would be difficult to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from limited data. Please know that we are considering including this type of data analysis in future publications.

Your evaluation suggested that we also track sibling separations and overmedication. We are currently tracking visitation concerns. Based on this feedback, we are working on modifying our data management system to specifically track sibling separation concerns in addition to and separate from visitation concerns. Medication related issues are captured in our “services provided” category when identifying and reporting on complaint concerns. We are exploring additional ways to examine and understand the prevalence of this particular issue across our complaint profiles.

Thank you, again, for your thorough and considerate evaluation of our first annual report. Your input remains an irreplaceable part of our office’s history and future. To further promote your feedback and your ideas, I kindly request your permission to publish your evaluation on our website alongside the 2022 Annual Report.

I am eager to continue these conversations and hope to regularly attend OHIO YAB statewide meetings.

With Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jenny Stotts". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jenny" and last name "Stotts" clearly visible.

Jenny R. Stotts
Youth Ombudsman