



OHIO YAB Evaluation

of the Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office

Annual Report for Calendar Year 2025

The **Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB)** is a statewide organization of young people (aged 14-24) who have experienced foster care. The mission of the OHIO YAB is **to serve as the knowledgeable, statewide voice influencing policies and practices that impact youth in out-of-home care**, including foster care, kinship care, adoption, group homes, and residential facilities.

Under **Section 5101.892 of the Ohio Revised Code** the OHIO YAB must submit an evaluation to Governor Mike DeWine and Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts within 60 days of this information's release. The OHIO YAB's evaluation will also be shared with state leadership, including:

- House Speaker Matt Huffman
- Senate President Rob McColley
- House Minority Leader Dani Isaacsohn
- Senate Minority Leader Nickie J. Antonio
- ODJFS Director Matt Damschroder
- DCY Director Kara Wentz

Message of Urgency

Youth Rights in Ohio from 1966 to 2026:

Did you know Ohio rights for foster youth have existed on paper for 60 years?

- [Rule 5101:2-5-35](#) was established on December 30, 1966.
- This administrative rule, originally titled “Children’s Rights” provided the legal baseline of rights for children placed in the care of state agencies.
- In November 2021, the state updated the wording and expanded the protections.
- In January 2025, the rule was renumbered from 5101:2-5-35 to 5180:2-5-35.

Rights On Paper Vs. Rights in Reality:

Rights on paper are merely abstract principles, unless they are enforced and upheld. For youth to truly be protected, there must be mechanisms to share their rights, conduits to convey youth concerns and methods to measure how systems are succeeding or failing.

It is for this reason that Ohio foster care youth, alumni and allies advocated for the establishment of a Youth Ombudsman Office. The Youth Ombudsman is authorized by Ohio Revised Code to review and investigate concerns submitted by or on behalf of youth involved in the children services system. Their role is to gather and review evidence and outline areas for improvement.

Appreciation for the Youth Ombudsman and Urgent Request from the State

The OHIO YAB remains deeply grateful for this Office’s creation, continued progress. and for the ongoing communication and collaboration that this Office maintains with Ohio foster care youth and alumni.

The Youth Ombudsman is fulfilling their mandate to identify gaps, but the responsibility for reform and action rests with the state, including Ohio legislators.

As youth leaders read over this year’s report, the unanimous response was a desire to elevate and escalate the concerns and recommendations we’ve previously made.

The following questions came up during our review:

- *“Why are county child abuse hotlines permitted to screen out safety referrals sent directly by the Youth Ombudsman?”*
- *“Why does the state not mandate the county public children service agencies include information about the Youth Ombudsman on their websites, backed by financial penalties for noncompliance?”*
- *“Should we reach out to the Attorney General and request a centralized youth-specific safety hotline that bypasses county-level roadblocks?”*

Youth Recommendations

1. Concerns About County Screening Decisions
2. County Websites and Grievance Materials
3. Mandated Reporting Forms for Police Officers
4. Independent Workers and Departments
5. Safety Concerns in Congregate Care Settings
6. SACWIS Inconsistencies
7. Agency Communication Procedures
8. Retaliation Concerns
9. Sibling Connections Matter
10. Youth-Centered Outreach (*including Youth Rights Materials*)

1. Concerns about County Screening Decisions

The Problem: Ohio YAB Youth Ambassadors remain concerned about disparate and dismissive responses from county child abuse hotlines when youth reach out directly with safety concerns.

Ohio has a severe gap in the state's child protection framework:

- Youth lack a direct, independent pathway to self-report abuse.
- Screening decisions are left entirely to the local Public Children Service Agency (PCSA).
- There is no other resource for youth to contact to self-report abuse to authorities.
- Both [ChildHelp](#), a national resource, and [Ohio's 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline](#) redirect them back to their county child abuse hotline.

Without a centralized, youth-specific mechanism, vulnerable young people remain exposed to dismissive screenings and dangerous bureaucratic delays across Ohio's 88 counties. Even safety referrals sent directly from the Youth Ombudsman and Assistant Youth Ombudsman are often screened out:

First Youth and Family Ombudsman Report	Nearly 20% of the complaints received by the Youth Ombudsman in 2022 included concerns about agency screening decisions. 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 screened out.	Quote from the first report, which remains true today: <i>"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."</i>
Second Report	The Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman submitted 18 referrals of abuse or neglect to local authorities in 2023. At least six of these referrals were screened out.	
Third Report	The Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman submitted 13 referrals of abuse or neglect to local authorities in 2024. Of those, only 7 were screened in and investigated by the PCSA.	
Fourth Report	The Youth Ombudsman and the Assistant Youth Ombudsman submitted 14 referrals of abuse or neglect to local authorities. All 14 referrals were screened out.	

The Solution:

OHIO YAB Ask #1: The OHIO YAB proposes the establishment of a **Centralized Statewide Screening Unit within the Ohio Attorney General's Office** for youth who self-report abuse. This unit would be staffed by trauma-informed, youth-centered professionals. It would provide state-level oversight, and ensure that county agencies cannot quietly dismiss or 'screen out' a youth's report without proper review.

2. County Websites and Grievance Materials

The Problem: The state created the Ohio Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, but has not yet created rules **requiring counties to update their websites and grievance forms to reflect the existence of this statewide resource**. The OHIO YAB would like to assist in drafting future language to address this need.

As the table below demonstrates, progress by PCSAs has been slow when it comes to making grievance materials accessible on their website, and even more sluggish when it comes to providing information about the Youth and Family Ombudsman Office.

PCSA Grievance Accessibility	2022	2023	2024	2025
Grievance materials are accessible on the county children's services agency's website.	10	16	19	20
Grievance materials provide information about the Youth and Family Ombudsman Office.	0	6	6	7
Constituents are required to first request the policy or form from PCSA staff.	83	70	70	66

The fact that **only 7 out of Ohio's 88 counties** provide information about the Youth and Family Ombudsman Office in their grievance materials is deeply concerning.

By omitting the Ombudsman's hotline from their websites and grievance materials, local PCSAs effectively block a vital escalation pathway, keeping youth dependent on local leadership who may have already dismissed their concerns.

Unless a specific Ohio Administrative Code (OAC) rule mandates this, backed by regular state audits and penalties, the majority of Ohio's county agencies are unlikely to comply, and will continue to treat promotion of the Youth Ombudsman as optional. Omitting the Youth Ombudsman's contact information from public web pages allows counties to control the narrative and handle complaints entirely internally.

Another form of bureaucratic gatekeeping is that many counties require youth to personally request grievance forms from the very caseworkers/agencies they wish to complain about. These barriers keep vulnerable youth isolated and unaware that a free, independent, statewide resource, the Youth Ombudsman, exists to protect them.

The Solution:

OHIO YAB Ask #2: The OHIO YAB recommends that Ohio Administrative Code (OAC) be amended to **mandate that all 88 Public Children Services Agencies (PCSAs) prominently feature the Youth and Family Ombudsman Office's contact information** on their website homepages and public grievance materials.

3. Mandated Reporting Forms for Police Officers:

OHIO YAB Ask #3: The OHIO YAB recommends that the state of Ohio develop and require **statewide form and procedure for law enforcement to use when they suspect abuse or neglect**. We would like to assist in the design of this future process and form.

The Problem:

- Ohio was [the last state in the nation](#) to make police officers mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect. As first responders, police officers are uniquely positioned to observe potential indicators of abuse or neglect.
- When [HB 137](#) was signed into law in 2019, it partially addressed that oversight.
- However, due to the lack of a statewide form and process, officers might include observations of suspected abuse in their police reports, but there is no reliable mechanism to ensure that these reports consistently reach child protective services.

The Solution:

- The OHIO YAB recommends that the state of Ohio create a [statewide form and process for police as mandated reporters](#).
- In our research, we have explored examples from three other states, and [mapped out how to combine the strengths of each of them](#) to create a future Ohio tool.

The OHIO YAB has been exploring examples from other states and made the following recommendations:

- To utilization the succinct nature of [California's Suspected Child Abuse Report](#), and focus on checkboxes, out of respect for police officer's busy schedules.
- To follow [Arkansas example](#) of including one or more police logos on top of the page so that law enforcement officials know this form is meant for them.
- To follow [Massachusetts' example](#) of including the procedure that the top of the page, to make an oral report and to send the written report within 48 hours.

Establishing a future form and process will:

- Ensure timely and direct transmission of abuse reports to children services.
- Establish a clear record of compliance with mandatory reporting laws.
- Reduce litigation risk by protecting officers and departments acting in good faith.

4. Independent Living Workers and Departments:

The OHIO YAB has repeatedly recommended that Independent Living Caseworkers and Independent Living Departments be prioritized, supported and maintained in every county.

The Problem: Legal Mandate Vs. Local Reality:

- [Ohio Administrative Code 5180:2-42-19](#) requires independent living services for every foster youth in public or private custody starting no later than age 14. These services are vital to prepare youth to transition into young adulthood.
- Ohio's child welfare system is county-administered, and individual Public Children Service Agencies (PCSAs) operate with a high degree of independence: **There is extreme variability and inconsistency throughout Ohio's 88 counties regarding the provision of pre- and post-emancipation supports.**
- The prevalence of **caseworker turnover and large caseloads** underscores the need for specialized workers who are knowledgeable about resources to help youth succeed.
- The Youth Ombudsman's findings mirror concerns that Ohio foster care youth and alumni have raised for years: **Ohio foster youth experience inconsistent life skills preparation.**

Most Recent Youth Ombudsman Report	• As detailed in previous annual reports, the Youth Ombudsman observed significant variability in the ways PCSAs approach their role in preparing young people for adulthood. The Youth Ombudsman also observed inconsistencies in the way post-emancipation support is offered.
Last Year's Report	• Some counties are apparently well-versed in the array of services and supports for youth transitioning into adulthood, while others appear to be less familiar. For example, some PCSAs have detailed protocols for informing 17-year-olds about the opportunities available through the Bridges program. In other counties, however, youth are given inaccurate or incomplete information.

The Solution:

OHIO YAB Ask #4: The OHIO YAB recommends amending the Ohio Administrative Code to **mandate Independent Living Staff/Departments** in every county.

The OHIO YAB continues to explore and seek to build upon Youth Navigator pilots and Peer Mentorship opportunities in various areas of our state. As foster youth ourselves, we maintain a sense of urgency when it comes to equipping today's youth with life skills, supporting them during transitions and informing them of resources that can support them during young adulthood.

5. Safety Concerns in Congregate Care Settings

Once again, the Youth Ombudsman's findings mirror ongoing concerns expressed by members of the OHIO YAB:

Most Recent Youth Ombudsman Report	• In 2025, the Youth Ombudsman investigated 58 complaints involving congregate care settings, including group homes and certain residential facilities. • Investigations revealed variability in the training and supervision of congregate staff across Ohio. • The Youth Ombudsman's investigative observations support efforts to standardize the quality of training for group home staff across Ohio
Last Year's Report	• The Youth Ombudsman has observed variability regarding the training and skill-level of direct service staff in congregate care facilities. • In some facilities, staff demonstrated high levels of competence to effectively de-escalate and diffuse critical incidents. In other facilities, the behavior of staff appeared to directly escalate the situation, often resulting in higher levels of intervention, including physical restraints.

The OHIO YAB recently held a virtual meeting with Director Moretti of the Ohio Department of Behavioral Health and Director Wentz of the Department of Children and Youth to discuss **safety concerns for youth entrusted to congregate care facilities.**

We echoed Disability Rights' Recommendations that the state of Ohio should:

- **Create a statewide registry** to prevent the re-hiring of abusive employees.
- **Provide public information** about facilities that fail to meet minimum standards.
- **Require state licensing agencies** to take swift action when a facility fails to meet minimum standards, including removing youth from that unsafe facility.
- **Increase ongoing training** for facility staff.
- **Raise the minimum standards** to ensure better care and outcomes.

The OHIO YAB also made two additional recommendations:

a.) Create a public database of all licensed Class 1 residential facilities, including inspection reports and any licensing actions taken against an agency such as suspending admissions or revoking their license.
b.) Explicitly ban supine restraint: No restraints should be used to press a young person up against any hard surface that impairs breathing, including walls or floors. Furthermore, strict enforcement is needed when facilities use other forms of restraint.

6. SACWIS Inconsistencies

The Tool: The Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) is a centralized case management tool designed to manage Ohio's child welfare cases. It tracks incidents of child neglect, abuse, and abandonment while streamlining data sharing and caseload management.

The Importance: As Ohio's primary record-keeping mechanism, SACWIS provides critical data for statewide decision-making and federal reporting. Ultimately, it supports service delivery aimed at ensuring the safety, permanence, and well-being of vulnerable youth.

The Problem: Progress has not been made in addressing inconsistent use of SACWIS throughout the state. A statewide case management tool is only as valuable as its consistent use. Ohio must prioritize and enforce consistent statewide use of the system.

2023 Youth Ombudsman Report	• The Youth Ombudsman discovered numerous instances of reported physical abuse or neglect in out-of-home-care settings being categorized as “Information and/or Referral” or as “Additional Non-CA/N Information on an Open CPS Case.” • Other times, reports of abuse or neglect in out-of-home-care settings were screened out as a “Rules Violation.” • In one complaint investigation, a child reported abuse by a foster parent during a placement exit interview. The ongoing caseworker appropriately reported the issue to the PCSA intake department; however, the referral was categorized as “Information Only,” citing that the child was no longer living in the foster home and (that particular child was) no longer in danger.
2024 Youth Ombudsman Report	• The Youth Ombudsman previously cited observations regarding inconsistent categorization of intake reports and duplications in SACWIS. This issue remained a key observation throughout 2024.
2025 Youth Ombudsman Report	• As previously reported, the Youth Ombudsman continues to observe inconsistency in the documentation of case records across Ohio's PCSAs. The use of the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) varies across counties.

The state of Ohio must work towards consistent utilization of SACWIS when it comes to the cause of child protection, with a focus on safeguarding and supporting children and teens. Inconsistent use of SACWIS poses significant risks, directly compromising the safety of children and youth. When abuse happens, it needs to be accurately categorized. Listing abuse as “information only” and/or as a “rules violation” is insufficient. It sweeps the abuse under the rug, and leaves the young person at risk of further harm.

7. Agency Communication Procedures

The Problem: Multiple years of Youth Ombudsman data show a persistent, systemic breakdown in agency communication. A lack of clear response guidelines directly harms caseworker-youth relationships and leaves foster youth feeling excluded from critical decisions about their lives.

Why It Matters: Caseworkers serve as the primary line of contact for youth seeking services and support. Foster youth place high value on trust and open communication with their caseworkers, relying on them for safety, stability, and support.

The Negative Impact: When youth feel ignored by their primary line of contact, it negatively impacts their immediate safety and long-term well-being. Communication delays and lack of youth input create a barrier of mistrust. Caseworker availability and responsiveness have a direct impact on the immediate and long-term experiences of foster youth.

Without clear, written standards for timely responses, youth are left without a voice in their own placement, services, and care plans.

2022 Youth Ombudsman Report	• The Youth Ombudsman recommended developing written staff guidelines to return phone calls or emails in a timely manner between the parties.
2023 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Agency communication was a factor in 35% of youth complaints, including both the frequency and quality of communication.
2024 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Youth Complainants also frequently reported issues regarding services and agency communication, including concerns about a lack of youth input in decision-making.
2025 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Agency communication was a factor in 98 complaints, and intersected with other concerns, such as case plan issues, placement decisions and service delivery.

The OHIO YAB would like to reiterate the offer we made in 2024 and in 2025.

Ohio youth leaders are eager to assist with the following:

1. **Policy Review:** Youth review of existing agency policies regarding the estimated amount of time before returning client's phone calls.
2. **State Guidelines:** Youth voice in developing written statewide staff communication guidelines.
3. **Response Protocols:** Youth voice in developing protocols to ensure timely response by caseworkers when youth reach out to them.

8. Retaliation Concerns

The Problem: Neither the Ohio Revised Code, nor the Ohio Administrative Code provide legal safeguards to protect Ohioans against retaliation stemming from their decision to file a formal complaint at the state level.

2022 Youth Ombudsman Report	• A complainant's self-reported fear of retaliation is a known barrier to complaint investigation or effective conflict resolution. • 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.
2023 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Retaliation continued to be cited as a major deterrent to timely reporting of unresolved case-specific issues. • More than 36 formal complaints alleged past retaliation. Many said they did not submit a formal complaint out of fear of future retaliation by local authorities.
2024 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Retaliation remained a common concern reported by those who reached out to the Youth Ombudsman team: For example, a private agency administrator filed a complaint on behalf of a youth resident, raising questions about a children services caseworker's conduct. • The complainant expressed concern that if the PCSA learned they had filed the complaint on behalf of the youth, it might impact the PCSA's willingness to utilize the private agency for future placements.
2025 Youth Ombudsman Report	• Reported fear of retaliation remains a significant barrier to the complaint process.

The Solution: Ohio could learn from other states in this regard:

• Under California law, retaliation against anyone filing a complaint with the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) Ombuds is explicitly codified as unlawful. • Colorado and Indiana have embedded anti-retaliation language directly into their state statutes governing the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman. • Oregon's administrative rules and statutes regarding foster care and residential placements explicitly forbid punishment and intimidation of residents, employees or witnesses who file complaints or speak with investigators. • In West Virginia, anyone found guilty of retaliating against a whistleblower or willfully interfering with the Foster Care Ombudsman's investigation can be charged and face monetary fines for doing so.
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9. Sibling Connections Matter

The Problem: Federal Mandate Vs. Daily Reality:

- Section 206 of the federal [Fostering Connections Act](#) requires states to make reasonable efforts to place siblings in the same foster, kinship or adoptive placement. If siblings are not placed together, the state is required to provide frequent visitation and other ongoing interaction between them.
- Unfortunately, this federal policy does not translate into consistent practice.
- Current and former foster youth throughout the state of Ohio have submitted [written and video testimonies](#) about being separated from siblings, and the emotional impact that sibling separation has had on them.

Lack of prioritization of sibling visitation is reflected in the Youth Ombudsman's findings:

Most Recent Youth Ombudsman Report	• While sibling visitation is addressed in administrative rule, the Youth Ombudsman rarely observed sibling visitation plans documented within the case record. • These continued observations support the need for an increased focus on intentional efforts to strengthen and support sibling connections, particularly when siblings are separated and do not have opportunities to be together during court-ordered parental visits.
Last Year's Report	• Across Ohio PCSAs, visitation is primarily focused on interactions between a parent and their child. In many instances, if the parent is not participating in visitation, the youth is left without any visitation, even with siblings or other important relatives. • The Youth Ombudsman's observations support an increased focus on sibling visitation and communication, particularly when siblings are separated, when siblings do not have an opportunity to interact during parent-child visitation, and when there are no known safety issues that would contraindicate sibling contact.

The Solution: **Ohio could learn from other states in this regard:**

- The state of [Washington](#) requires that formal Sibling Visitation Plans be developed within 14 days of placement.
- [Illinois](#) requires that a Sibling Visitation and Contact Plan be filed with the juvenile court within 10 days of temporary custody.

10. Youth-Centered Outreach & Youth Rights Materials

Appreciation for Ongoing Progress by the Youth Ombudsman Office

The OHIO YAB recognizes and deeply appreciates the Youth Ombudsman's dedication to:

- Conduct investigations
- Make recommendations
- Collaborate with public and private agencies
- Make referrals to outside agencies as needed

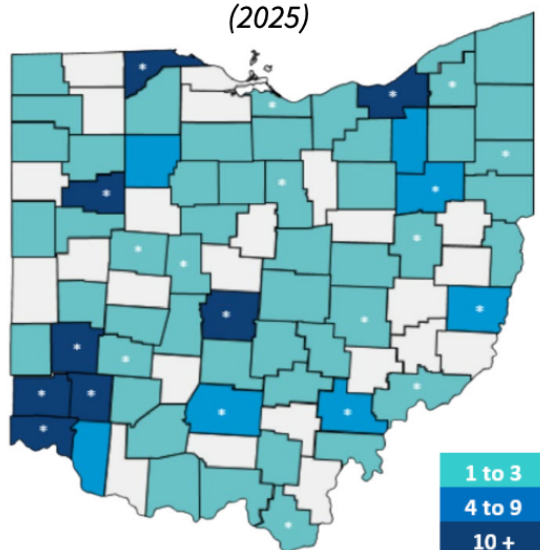
This includes their dedication to youth-centered outreach and the promotion of youth rights materials. Many thanks to the Youth Ombudsman for:

- Attending OHIO YAB statewide quarterly meetings
- Manning a resource table during the annual Leadership and Life Skills Summit
- Participating in the SE Ohio Youth Leadership Retreat
- Presenting on the Care to Conquer podcast

The number of concerns received directly from youth doubled in 2024, and continues to grow. Youth throughout the state of Ohio are becoming aware of their rights and that they can reach out to the Youth Ombudsman's Office for support:

Youth Complaints in Ohio

(2025)



• indicates that complaints involving both public and private agencies in the county were reviewed

Promotion of Youth Rights Materials

The promotion of Youth Rights materials is an ongoing task that will continue to require each of our efforts and dedication:

- **Ohio Administrative Code 5180:2-5-35(B)** states that:
“The custodial agency is to ensure the foster youth bill of rights and/or a copy of the JFS 01677 “Foster Youth Rights Handbook” pursuant to rule 5101:2-42-90 of the Administrative Code, along with the agency’s complaint procedure, pursuant to rule 5101:2-33-20 of the Administrative Code, are explained to each child as developmentally appropriate and provided to all children in custody.”
- **Ohio Administrative Code 5180:2-5-35(C)** states that:
“The A residential facility is to include the foster youth bill of rights in the handbook for residents and their families required pursuant to rule 5101:2-9-15 of the Administrative Code. The residential agency is to ensure (that) children in the care of the agency have ongoing access to the handbook for residents and youth aged fourteen and older have ongoing access to the JFS 0167, (and that) the list of the foster youth bill of rights along with the facility’s complaint procedure pursuant to rule 5101:2-9-24 of the Administrative Code is to be clearly posted in each facility so that it may be easily seen by all children.

For Ohio foster youth to be adequately informed about their rights, they need to receive a physical copy, be able to keep that information, and steps must be taken to ensure that they understand their rights.

The Youth Ombudsman’s dedication to this effort is demonstrated by:

- Providing Foster Youth Bill of Rights sessions to group homes and residential treatment centers.
- Empowering their intern to design a simplified version for younger youth.
- **Recommending routinely reviewing the Foster Youth Bill of Rights with throughout the life of the case, including during case reviews and placement visits.**

Having PCSAs document receipt of a young person receiving a copy of the Youth Rights Handbook when they first enter care is an important first step – but it is **only the first step**. Belongings can be lost during placement changes. Ongoing conversations about youth rights and resources are vitally important. **The OHIO YAB recommends that emancipating foster youth each receive a binder that includes their rights, along with other resource materials, and that future videos be created to inform foster youth about their rights and resources.**