

STATE OF NEW YORK

6269

2021-2022 Regular Sessions

IN ASSEMBLY

March 12, 2021

Introduced by M. of A. FRONTUS -- read once and referred to the Committee on Children and Families

AN ACT to amend the executive law, in relation to establishing the office of the foster care ombudsman

The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

Section 1. Title 3 of article 19-G of the executive law is amended by adding a new subtitle C to read as follows:

SUBTITLE C

OFFICE OF THE FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN

Section 524. Purpose.

524-a. Definitions.

524-b. Office of the foster care ombudsman.

524-c. Duties of the office of the foster care ombudsman.

524-d. Access to the office of the foster care ombudsman.

524-e. Duties of the director.

524-f. Conduct and scope of mediation and problem-solving.

524-g. Confidentiality of reports.

524-h. Foster care ombudsman independent review board.

524-i. Access to records.

§ 524. Purpose. The purpose of this subtitle is to support foster parents, including kinship families, as well as relatives or fictive kin, in providing family-based foster care to children at risk for or removed from their homes pursuant to article ten of the family court act, by codifying the office of the foster care ombudsman.

§ 524-a. Definitions. As used in this subtitle:

1. "Commissioner" means the commissioner of the office of children and family services.

2. "Director" means the director of the office of the foster care ombudsman.

3. "Office" means the office of children and family services.

EXPLANATION--Matter in italics (underscored) is new; matter in brackets [-] is old law to be omitted.

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1 4. "Foster parents" means all adults providing out of home care to
2 children at risk for or who have been removed from their home pursuant
3 to article ten of the family court act. This includes relatives and
4 non-relatives.

5 5. "Anti-bias training" means instruction on implicit bias, discrimi-
6 nation, cultural competency and structural inequity, including with
7 respect to gender, race and sexual orientation, and on how these factors
8 impact the work of the office of the foster care ombudsman.

9 § 524-b. Office of the foster care ombudsman. There is hereby estab-
10 lished the office of the foster care ombudsman in the office of children
11 and family services. The independent review board described in section
12 five hundred twenty-four-h of this subtitle shall appoint the director
13 of the office of the foster care ombudsman, who shall report to the
14 commissioner. The director shall have expertise in the areas of child
15 welfare, foster care, dispute resolution and system improvement, specif-
16 ically in the state of New York, as evidenced by at least ten years of
17 relevant experience in the field. A two-thirds majority vote of the
18 independent review board shall be required to appoint or remove the
19 director. Persons employed by the office of the foster care ombudsman
20 to act as "ombudsmen" shall have a comprehensive knowledge of the
21 state's foster care system and expertise in the fields of child welfare,
22 foster care, and dispute resolution, specifically in the state of New
23 York, as evidenced by demonstrated professional and personal experience,
24 or by academic background, the level and sufficiency of which shall be
25 determined by the director.

26 § 524-c. Duties of the office of the foster care ombudsman. 1. The
27 office of the foster care ombudsman shall:

28 (a) receive, document and respond to inquiries, grievances and
29 complaints raised by foster parents, biological parents, relatives, and
30 youth in care;

31 (b) investigate and seek resolution of inquiries, grievances, and
32 complaints;

33 (c) make referrals, where appropriate, to additional information,
34 services and resources;

35 (d) ensure that any resolution or response does not result in retali-
36 ation against the person contacting the foster care ombudsman;

37 (e) provide information to foster parents, biological parents, rela-
38 tives, and youth in care about applicable law, regulation and policy;

39 (f) work with the local department of social services, voluntary agen-
40 cies, foster parents, biological parents, relatives, and youth in care
41 to resolve conflicts concerning application of applicable law, regu-
42 lation and policy with regard to the provision of foster care;

43 (g) monitor the implementation of applicable law, regulation and poli-
44 cy concerning the provision of foster care through the process of
45 receiving, documenting, tracking and responding to inquiries, grievances
46 and complaints;

47 (h) recommend policies, regulations, and legislation designed to
48 promote and improve family-based foster care;

49 (i) prepare an annual report to the commissioner and the legislature,
50 which shall be publicly posted on the office's website, with aggregate
51 data on the total number and types of concerns raised to the foster care
52 ombudsman, the number of parties serviced, the number of disputes
53 resolved and responses provided, the nature of the resolution, the
54 trends and issues that arose while responding to the concerns, by
55 region, and recommendations for changes to applicable law, rules, regu-
56 lations and policy concerning the provision of foster care; and

1 (j) present quarterly reports containing information regarding major
2 inquiries, grievances, and complaints received by the office of the
3 foster care ombudsman, and the status of the responses to such
4 inquiries, grievances and complaints, to the commissioner and the inde-
5 pendent foster care ombudsman review board.

6 2. Nothing in this section shall permit the office of the foster care
7 ombudsman to participate in any pending child welfare investigation or
8 family court proceeding.

9 § 524-d. Access to the office of the foster care ombudsman. The
10 office of the foster care ombudsman shall provide information to any
11 person who contacts it, including, but not limited to: 1. foster
12 parents; 2. biological parents; 3. relatives; 4. youth in care; 5. coun-
13 ty officials; and 6. private agencies, through telephone and internet-
14 based communication.

15 § 524-e. Duties of the director. The director shall:

16 1. provide administrative supervision and oversight to the ombudsmen;

17 2. establish procedures to ensure that the office of the foster care
18 ombudsman services are made available to foster parents, biological
19 parents, relatives, and youth in care;

20 3. participate in the policy development process of the office;

21 4. conduct annual anti-bias training for ombudsmen; and

22 5. oversee the preparation of the reports required under paragraphs
23 (h) and (i) of subdivision one of section five hundred twenty-four-c of
24 this subtitle.

25 § 524-f. Conduct and scope of mediation and problem-solving. 1. The
26 office of the foster care ombudsman shall provide relevant information
27 about applicable law and policy, and provide a means to resolve issues
28 among and between foster parents, biological parents, relatives, and
29 youth in care, involving the local department of social services and the
30 voluntary agency when necessary.

31 2. The office of the foster care ombudsman shall develop and apply a
32 process for receiving, documenting, investigating, and resolving or
33 answering inquiries, grievances and complaints raised by foster parents,
34 biological parents, relatives, and youth in care orally or in written
35 form.

36 3. The office of the foster care ombudsman shall review and evaluate
37 the effectiveness and efficiency of resolution procedures, and make
38 recommendations to the independent review board described in section
39 five hundred twenty-four-h for the improvement of such procedures.

40 4. The office of the foster care ombudsman shall develop and apply a
41 process for protecting those bringing inquiries, grievances and
42 complaints from retaliation.

43 § 524-g. Confidentiality of reports. Office of the foster care
44 ombudsman reports created in response to individual inquiries, griev-
45 ances and complaints raised by foster parents, biological parents, rela-
46 tives, and youth in care are confidential and shall be safeguarded from
47 coming to the knowledge of, and from inspection or examination by, any
48 person other than the commissioner, their designee or members of the
49 independent review board established pursuant to section five hundred
50 twenty-four-h of this subtitle. Authorized persons receiving such
51 reports shall not divulge information contained therein without the
52 written consent of the commissioner. The authorized disclosure of any
53 such information shall not contain any individually identifiable infor-
54 mation. Nothing in this section shall prevent the office from preparing
55 and disseminating the reports required under paragraphs (h) and (i) of
56 subdivision one of section five hundred twenty-four-c of this subtitle.

1 § 524-h. Foster care ombudsman independent review board. 1. There is
2 hereby established an independent foster care ombudsman review board,
3 hereby referred to as the "board". The board shall be composed of twelve
4 board members, and shall consist of persons who are not employed by the
5 office. The board shall be composed of a diverse group of persons with
6 either child welfare policy expertise or child welfare system experi-
7 ence. The board members shall be appointed by April first, two thousand
8 twenty-two, as follows:

9 (a) The chief judge of the New York court of appeals shall appoint
10 three board members which shall be:

11 (i) an individual with experience representing children in family
12 court;

13 (ii) an individual with experience representing parents in family
14 court; and

15 (iii) an individual with experience as a family court judge.

16 (b) The governor shall appoint three board members which shall be:

17 (i) an individual with previous professional experience as a child
18 welfare case worker;

19 (ii) an individual with experience in primary or secondary education;
20 and

21 (iii) an individual with previous professional experience with a human
22 or social services agency or a private child welfare agency.

23 (c) The senate shall appoint three board members which shall be:

24 (i) an individual who was formerly a child in the foster care system;

25 (ii) a current or former foster parent, relative caregiver, or adop-
26 tive parent; and

27 (iii) an individual with professional or volunteer experience as a
28 court appointed special advocate.

29 (d) The assembly shall appoint three board members which shall be:

30 (i) a current or former foster parent, relative caregiver, or adoptive
31 parent;

32 (ii) a health care professional or psychologist with previous experi-
33 ence with child abuse and neglect cases; and

34 (iii) a licensed clinical social worker with previous experience with
35 child abuse and neglect cases.

36 2. Board members shall serve for terms of three years. Board members
37 shall be reimbursed for actual and reasonable expenses incurred in the
38 conduct of their duties. The board shall meet at least quarterly with
39 the director, the ombudsmen, and other appropriate officials to discuss
40 and review reports submitted by the office of the foster care ombudsman.
41 The board shall have the authority to:

42 (a) appoint the director of the office of the foster care ombudsman;

43 (b) meet with the director and ombudsmen quarterly;

44 (c) review reports submitted by the office of the foster care ombuds-
45 man;

46 (d) advise the office of the ombudsman on matters concerning
47 complaints and grievances, dispute resolution, and recommendations for
48 changes to applicable law, rules, regulations and policy concerning the
49 foster care system;

50 (e) evaluate the effectiveness and performance of the office of the
51 ombudsman and provide any necessary feedback in order to promote the
52 improvement of the foster care system; and

53 (f) take steps to advise the public of the services offered by the
54 foster care ombudsman and promote the use of and access to the office of
55 the foster care ombudsman.

1 § 524-i. Access to records. In the conduct of his or her duties
2 pursuant to this subtitle, the ombudsman shall have access to all books,
3 records, logs, reports, memoranda and any and all other materials or
4 documents in the possession of a local department of social services,
5 the office, and facilities or programs of the office, including files
6 maintained in the New York State Child Welfare Information System. The
7 ombudsman may copy or make reference to any such report, document, memo-
8 randum, log entry or other material or document and, where appropriate,
9 may include a copy in his or her report. Consistent with applicable
10 laws and regulations, the confidentiality of records and documents
11 obtained by the ombudsmen shall be maintained by the ombudsmen.

12 § 2. This act shall take effect immediately.