

STATE OF NEW YORK

7188

2019-2020 Regular Sessions

IN ASSEMBLY

April 11, 2019

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

AN ACT to amend the executive law, in relation to the establishment of
the independent office of the child advocate

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

1 Section 1. The executive law is amended by adding a new article 19-I
2 to read as follows:

ARTICLE 19-I

INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

5 Section 533. Independent office of the child advocate; creation.

6 534. Definitions.

7 535. The child advocate.

8 536. Duties of the child advocate.

9 537. Cooperation of other agencies.

10 538. Duty to maintain confidentiality.

11 539. Additional provisions.

12 § 533. Independent office of the child advocate; creation. There is
13 hereby created in the executive department, an independent office of the
14 child advocate, which shall:

15 1. examine, evaluate and report to the governor and the legislature
16 on:

17 (a) particular and systemic issues in publicly funded programs over-
18 seen by any executive agency with custody of children; and

19 (b) multi-systemic issues that children in the care, custody or guar-
20 dianship of any state agency that has custody of children or a local
21 social services district, and the families of such children experience
22 in accessing needed services across systems; and

23 2. advocate for, and report to the governor and the legislature on
24 suggested statutory, regulatory or policy changes aimed at improving
25 outcomes and services for children and their families in New York state.

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

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1 § 534. Definitions. As used in this article:

2 1. "Child" or "children" means:

3 (a) a person, or persons under the age of eighteen; or

4 (b) a person or persons under the age of twenty-one who has been
5 placed into the care, custody, or guardianship of any state agency that
6 has custody of children or a local social services district pursuant to
7 article three, seven, ten, ten-A, ten-B or ten-C of the family court act
8 or section three hundred fifty-eight-a, three hundred eighty-three-c,
9 three hundred eighty-four-a or three hundred eighty-four-b of the social
10 services law; or

11 (c) a person or persons under the age of twenty-one who is placed in
12 residential care as defined in section four hundred twelve of the social
13 services law.

14 2. "Child advocate" means the person appointed pursuant to subdivision
15 one of section five hundred thirty-five of this article to direct and
16 oversee the activities of the independent office of the child advocate.

17 § 535. The child advocate. 1. The child advocate shall be an individ-
18 ual with at least five years experience in the general subject area of
19 either child welfare, juvenile justice or childhood behavioral health,
20 who shall be appointed by the governor.

21 2. The child advocate may hire or appoint persons as may be deemed
22 necessary to carry out the duties of the independent office of the child
23 advocate. The duties of persons employed or appointed by the child advo-
24 cate shall be performed under the advice and supervision of the child
25 advocate. Persons employed or appointed by the independent office of the
26 child advocate shall be individuals with expertise in the areas of child
27 welfare, juvenile justice, childhood behavioral health, foster care,
28 preventive services, or child care, as evidenced by expertise in the
29 field, practice, advocacy or by academic background, the level and
30 sufficiency of which shall be determined by the child advocate. The
31 child advocate shall fix the compensation of persons employed or
32 appointed by the independent office of the child advocate within amounts
33 appropriated therefor.

34 § 536. Duties of the child advocate. 1. The child advocate shall:

35 (a) examine, evaluate, investigate and report to the governor and the
36 legislature on particular and systemic issues in publicly funded
37 programs overseen by a state agency that has custody of children and
38 local social services districts, including but not limited to child
39 welfare, juvenile justice, foster care, child protective, child care and
40 preventative services; and

41 (b) examine, evaluate, investigate and report to the governor and the
42 legislature on multi-systemic issues that children in the care, custody
43 or guardianship of a state agency that has custody of children or a
44 local social services district, and the families of such children, expe-
45 rience in accessing needed services across systems; and

46 (c) monitor the implementation of the policies, regulations and stat-
47 utes of state agencies which may be applicable to the legal rights of
48 children in the care, custody or guardianship of a state agency that has
49 custody of children or a local social services district, or the families
50 of such children; and

51 (d) monitor the implementation of policies, regulations and statutes
52 which may have an impact on publicly funded programs overseen by the
53 office of children and family services, including but not limited to
54 child welfare, juvenile justice, foster care, child protective, child
55 care and preventative services; and

1 (e) recommend changes in state policies, statutes and regulations
2 concerning children in the care, custody or guardianship of a state
3 agency that has custody of children or a local social services district,
4 and the families of such children; and

5 (f) recommend changes in state policies, statutes, and regulations
6 concerning publicly funded programs that service children and families,
7 including but not limited to child welfare, juvenile justice, foster
8 care, child protective, child care and preventative services, adminis-
9 tered by a state agency that has custody of children or local social
10 services districts; and

11 (g) take appropriate actions aimed at promotion of the rights, safety,
12 well-being, and best interests of children in New York state, including,
13 but not limited to, undertaking legislative advocacy, conducting public
14 hearings and making proposals for administrative or systemic reform; and

15 (h) provide administrative supervision and oversight to the independ-
16 ent office of the child advocate and devote full-time to the duties of
17 his or her office; and

18 (i) work collaboratively with state agencies and local social services
19 districts having custody of children to arrange for the visitation of
20 programs and facilities operated by or contracting with such state agen-
21 cies or local social services districts; and

22 (j) report to the governor, the speaker of the assembly and the tempo-
23 rary president of the senate as needed, but not less than twice per
24 year. Such report shall be made available to the public, unless such
25 materials are confidential pursuant to statute, and shall include but
26 not be limited to:

27 (A) information concerning the number and types of reviews and evalu-
28 ations conducted by the independent office of the child advocate; and

29 (B) any recommendations by the child advocate for legislative, regula-
30 tory, or public policy changes.

31 2. If after examination pursuant to subdivision one of this section,
32 the child advocate identifies a systemic problem in how services are
33 provided to children in the care, custody, or guardianship of a state
34 agency that has custody of children or a local social services district,
35 by a state agency that has custody of children, or a local social
36 services district, or any public or private entity which contracts with
37 the office of children and family services or a local social services
38 district to provide services to such children, the child advocate shall
39 provide such office, district, agency or entity a written report outlin-
40 ing the findings and recommendations of the child advocate.

41 (a) An office, district, agency or entity named in a report by the
42 child advocate as described in this subdivision shall have the option to
43 respond in writing to the child advocate's findings, provided however
44 that such written response must be issued within ninety days of such
45 office, district, agency or entity's receipt of the applicable report by
46 the child advocate.

47 (b) Within thirty days after the receipt of a response from an office,
48 district, agency or entity as described in this subdivision, the child
49 advocate shall issue such response, and the report issued by the child
50 advocate pursuant to this subdivision, to the governor, the speaker of
51 the assembly and the temporary president of the senate.

52 (c) If a response or a written request for an additional thirty days
53 with an explanation is not received by the child advocate within ninety
54 days from the date that the child advocate sent such report to such
55 office, district, agency or entity, the child advocate shall provide
56 such report to the governor and the legislature with a notice stating

1 that such office, district, agency or entity failed to issue a timely
2 written response to the report by the child advocate.

3 § 537. Cooperation of other agencies. To effectuate the purposes of
4 this article, the independent office of the child advocate may request
5 from state agencies and local social services districts having custody
6 of children such assistance and data as is necessary to fulfill the
7 child advocate's duties. Such information shall be provided to the inde-
8 pendent office of the child advocate unless otherwise protected by law.

9 § 538. Duty to maintain confidentiality. All records of the independ-
10 ent office of the child advocate pertaining to the fulfillment of the
11 child advocate's rights, powers and duties pursuant to this article, and
12 all records obtained by the child advocate shall be kept confidential.

13 § 539. Additional provisions. 1. The state shall protect and hold
14 harmless any person employed or appointed by the child advocate, from
15 financial loss and expense, including legal fees and costs, if any,
16 arising out of any claim, demand or suit for damages resulting from acts
17 or omissions committed in the discharge of his or her rights, powers and
18 duties within the scope of his or her employment or appointment which
19 may constitute negligence but which acts are not wanton, malicious or
20 grossly negligent as determined by a court of competent jurisdiction.

21 2. No state or local agency, department, office, or entity shall
22 discharge, or in any manner discriminate or retaliate against, any
23 person who in good faith makes a complaint to, or cooperates with, the
24 child advocate in a review or evaluation conducted by the child advo-
25 cate. No employee of any state or local department or office or of any
26 private entity shall retaliate against any person who makes a complaint
27 to, or who cooperates with the independent office of the child advocate
28 in a review, investigation or evaluation conducted by the independent
29 office of the child advocate.

30 3. All communications to the independent office of the child advocate
31 shall remain confidential. Any complaint filed by any person with the
32 independent office of the child advocate shall remain confidential.

33 4. All youth residing in a juvenile justice facility shall be permit-
34 ted reasonable access to a telephone to make a toll free call or shall
35 be supplied writing materials in order to write letters to the independ-
36 ent office of the child advocate upon the youth's request. Any communi-
37 cations between such youth and the independent office of the child advo-
38 cate shall remain confidential and shall not be monitored by any member
39 of the facility's staff.

40 5. The independent office of the child advocate may apply for and
41 accept grants, gifts and bequests of funds from private individuals and
42 foundations for the purpose of carrying out studies under this article.
43 The funds shall be expended in accordance with the provisions of such
44 grant, gift or bequest.

45 6. The child advocate shall take all possible actions including, but
46 not limited to, conducting programs of public education, undertaking
47 legislative advocacy and making proposals for administrative correction
48 or reform, in order to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special
49 rights of children.

50 7. The child advocate shall take the appropriate steps to make the
51 existence and availability of the child advocate widely known, by appro-
52 priate and active means, to children and adults.

53 § 2. This act shall take effect April 1, 2020. Effective immediately,
54 the addition, amendment and/or repeal of any rule or regulation neces-
55 sary for the implementation of this act on its effective date are
56 authorized to be made and completed on or before such effective date.