

STATE OF NEW YORK

5212

2021-2022 Regular Sessions

IN SENATE

February 26, 2021

Introduced by Sens. PARKER, BAILEY, KENNEDY, SEPULVEDA -- read twice and ordered printed, and when printed to be committed 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 Assembly, 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

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

4 534. Definitions.

5 535. The child advocate.

6 536. Duties of the child advocate.

7 537. Cooperation of other agencies.

8 538. Duty to maintain confidentiality.

9 539. Additional provisions.

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

13 1. examine, evaluate and report to the governor and the legislature
14 on:

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

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

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

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

25 1. "Child" or "children" means:
26
27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

54 (e) recommend changes in state policies, statutes and regulations
55 concerning children in the care, custody or guardianship of a state

1 agency that has custody of children or a local social services district,
2 and the families of such children; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

51 § 2. This act shall take effect on the first of April next succeeding
52 the date on which it shall have become a law. Effective immediately, the
53 addition, amendment and/or repeal of any rule or regulation necessary
54 for the implementation of this act on its effective date are authorized
55 to be made and completed on or before such effective date.