

# STATE OF NEW YORK

2120

2023-2024 Regular Sessions

## IN ASSEMBLY

January 23, 2023

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 Assembly, do enact as follows:

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

### ARTICLE 19-I

#### INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

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

534. Definitions.

535. The child advocate.

536. Duties of the child advocate.

537. Cooperation of other agencies.

538. Duty to maintain confidentiality.

539. Additional provisions.

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

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

(a) particular and systemic issues in publicly funded programs overseen by any executive agency with custody of children; and

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

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

§ 534. Definitions. As used in this article:

1. "Child" or "children" means:

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

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

LBD02935-01-3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

55 § 537. Cooperation of other agencies. To effectuate the purposes of  
56 this article, the independent office of the child advocate may request

1 from state agencies and local social services districts having custody  
2 of children such assistance and data as is necessary to fulfill the  
3 child advocate's duties. Such information shall be provided to the inde-  
4 pendent office of the child advocate unless otherwise protected by law.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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