STATE OF NEW YORK

4392

2025-2026 Regular Sessions

IN ASSEMBLY

February 4, 2025

Introduced by M. of A. O'PHARROW -- 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-J to read as follows:

ARTICLE 19-J

INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

Section 535. Independent office of the child advocate; creation.
535-a. Definitions.
535-b. The child advocate.
535-c. Duties of the child advocate.
535-d. Cooperation of other agencies.
535-e. Duty to maintain confidentiality.
535-f. Additional provisions.

§ 535. 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.

§ 535-a. 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.

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(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-b of this article to direct and oversee the activities of the independent office of the child advocate.

§ 535-b. 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.

§ 535-c. 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

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

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

(h) provide administrative supervision and oversight to the independent office of the child advocate and devote full-time to the duties of their office; and

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

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

(A) information concerning the number and types of reviews and evaluations conducted by the independent office of the child advocate; and

(B) any recommendations by the child advocate for legislative, regulatory, or public policy changes.

2. If after examination pursuant to subdivision one of this section, the child advocate identifies a systemic problem in how services are provided to children in the care, custody, or guardianship of a state agency that has custody of children or a local social services district, by a state agency that has custody of children, or a local social services district, or any public or private entity which contracts with the office of children and family services or a local social services district to provide services to such children, the child advocate shall provide such office, district, agency or entity a written report outlining the findings and recommendations of the child advocate.

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

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

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

§ 535-d. Cooperation of other agencies. To effectuate the purposes of this article, the independent office of the child advocate may request

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

§ 535-e. Duty to maintain confidentiality. All records of the independent office of the child advocate pertaining to the fulfillment of the child advocate's rights, powers and duties pursuant to this article, and all records obtained by the child advocate shall be kept confidential.

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

2. No state or local agency, department, office, or entity shall discharge, or in any manner discriminate or retaliate against, any person who in good faith makes a complaint to, or cooperates with, the child advocate in a review or evaluation conducted by the child advocate. No employee of any state or local department or office or of any private entity shall retaliate against any person who makes a complaint to, or who cooperates with the independent office of the child advocate in a review, investigation or evaluation conducted by the independent office of the child advocate.

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

4. All youth residing in a juvenile justice facility shall be permitted reasonable access to a telephone to make a toll free call or shall be supplied writing materials in order to write letters to the independent office of the child advocate upon the youth's request. Any communications between such youth and the independent office of the child advocate shall remain confidential and shall not be monitored by any member of the facility's staff.

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

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

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

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