



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS**  
**OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE**  
ONE ASHBURTON PLACE, 11<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR • BOSTON, MA 02108  
MAIN: (617) 979-8374 • WWW.MASS.GOV/CHILDAVOCATE

**MARIA Z. MOSSAIDES**  
DIRECTOR

June 23, 2022

The Honorable Michael Finn  
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
Massachusetts State House  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

The Honorable Adam Gomez  
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
Massachusetts State House  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

**RE: Foster Care Review**

Dear Chair Finn and Chair Gomez:

This letter outlines the work that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) have done to improve the Foster Care Review process over the past three and a half years as well as the steps that the OCA will undertake as part of its proposed FY23 oversight of the Foster Care Review process at DCF.

In December 2018, at the request of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities, DCF and OCA agreed to collaborate to improve the FCR program. Three main areas of concern were identified: adequate and timely notice for all required attendees; ensuring that all foster care reviews have the three-member panel of reviewers with a special need for volunteer reviewers and second party (i.e., area office) reviewers; and improvements to the substance and quality of the review.

When OCA became involved, DCF was already planning for needed policy changes and i-FamilyNet application updates. The i-FamilyNet application changes were designed to improve the capacity for more extensive information gathering and reporting, as well as to address the problem of meeting notices. The new i-FamilyNet application was piloted in January 2019 and full implementation of the first round of changes was completed by the end of FY19. Additional improvements to notice and scheduling processes are ongoing. The policy changes included requirements that Foster Care review panel members comply with a new series of questions that are required to be answered in accordance with federal law.

While the policy and i-FamilyNet application changes were undertaken, the Foster Care Review Unit focused on recruiting and training additional volunteer panel members. The number of FCRs with a volunteer reviewer increased from 49% in the quarter ending Mar-2017 to 94% in the

quarter ending Mar-2022. Due to the pandemic, foster care reviews are now conducted virtually, which has led to an increased level of participation across all required participant cohorts.

Due to new data and information that can be produced by DCF following the changes to i-Family Net, DCF (in collaboration with the OCA and the Data Working Group), was able to issue a re-designed, and significantly more informative, Foster Care Review report. The first new report was released for FY20, followed by a more comprehensive report in FY21.

The OCA and DCF have met monthly to monitor progress on all of the above and continue to do so.

The OCA had also agreed to conduct surveys of participants and/or to sit-in on a sampling of foster care reviews once the changes were implemented to confirm that the desired outcomes of improved reviews was achieved. The OCA and DCF were discussing whether to proceed with surveys or sitting-in on the actual reviews when the pandemic struck, putting this project on pause. In March and April of 2022, the OCA's former legal counsel (who was retained by the OCA as a consultant on this project) attended a sampling of 51 FCRs selected to include all area offices and FCR Unit case reviewers who convene and facilitate the review meetings. The OCA found that the foster care reviews were thorough and not pro-forma as alleged, and that the facilitator case reviewer was well-prepared, and took steps to ensure that all participants, including the volunteer reviewer, were included. The summary of her findings is attached.

As we move into the next phase of work, incorporating feedback received from the Legislature and in partnership with DCF, the OCA has prepared the following proposal for next steps:

1. The OCA will conduct an additional round of in-person reviews. This round will include the 8 cases that the OCA flagged as concerning in the FY22 round in the FY23 sampling, assuming that an additional FCR is held in the case. If there are no changes in quality or new concerns identified in this next round of reviews, the OCA will not conduct additional reviews in FY23. However, if there are any concerns, the OCA intends to conduct an additional round of in-person reviews in the spring 2023.
2. Approximately 1400 foster care reviews are conducted monthly. In 7-8% of these reviews, memoranda that identify a need for additional follow-up are submitted to the area office for further action. The OCA proposes to conduct an initial examination of a stratified sampling of these cases by memo type, area office, and other criteria. Depending on the results of this initial examination, the OCA will propose appropriate next steps for the Committee's consideration.
3. Of the 1400 reviews each month, 1-2 reviews result in a safety alert that requires immediate attention. The OCA will review each safety alert every month to determine the nature of the need for emergency response and to confirm an appropriate response was provided.
3. OCA staff will also participate in the training of new volunteer reviewers. It is expected that two groups of volunteers will be trained monthly. OCA staff will meet with the new volunteers, without DCF trainers present, and will emphasize the unique role that the volunteer reviewers play to urge their active participation in the FCRs.

The OCA believes that the issues that were raised originally in discussions between the Committee, DCF, and OCA that led to the OCA's active monitoring have been satisfactorily addressed. The i-Family Net application improvements now provide DCF with the improved ability to collect and report data. The new public facing reports provide a tool to monitor the foster care review process. The OCA agrees to maintain an increased level of monitoring as described above, to address the continued concerns about the effectiveness of the foster care review process. The OCA also continues to encourage that individual concerns be brought to our attention through the OCA complaint line. We also welcome suggestions for improvement to the FCR annual report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria Mossaides", followed by a long horizontal line that ends in an arrowhead pointing to the right.

Maria Mossaides

Director, Office of the Child Advocate