

# Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman

Fiscal Year 2021-2022

Agency Summary and Budget Request



Stephanie Villafuerte, Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman

# Agency Overview

## Background

The Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was established in June 2010, under Senate Bill 10-171. This legislation provided that the CPO would operate as a program through a contract with a local non-profit agency, issued and managed by the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS).

Senate Bill 10-171 was passed in response to the child abuse deaths of 12 children in Colorado all of whom were known to child protection services. The deaths of these children in 2007 sparked an outcry by the public that there be greater oversight, accountability and transparency of the child protection system in Colorado. The public demanded to know more about how the systems charged with protecting Colorado’s children were keeping them safe and working to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Years after the CPO’s creation, legislators determined that the CPO needed independence from the agencies it was designed to review. So, on June 2, 2015, Senate Bill 15-204, *Concerning the Independent Functioning of the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman*, was signed into law. This legislation transformed the original “program” into a distinct and independent state agency. The new, independent CPO opened in 2016.

The concept of an ombudsman dates back hundreds of years and is designed to provide citizens with an independent, unbiased and trusted intermediary between the public and an entity. In a similar fashion, the CPO works to provide a clear channel between the citizens of Colorado and the agencies and providers tasked with protecting children. The CPO is guided by standards set by organizations such as the United States Ombudsman Association and the American Bar Association. Using those standards, the CPO serves the public by independently gathering information, investigating complaints and providing recommendations to child protection agencies and providers.

To ensure the accountability and transparency of the CPO and the Ombudsman, the legislature also created the Child Protection Ombudsman Board (CPO Board) in 2015. The CPO Board was the first of its kind in the nation. By law, the CPO Board is required to oversee the Ombudsman’s performance and act as an advisory body on strategic direction and outreach decisions by the CPO.

The CPO is now housed within the Colorado State Judicial Branch and is located at the Ralph L. Carr Judicial Center in Denver. Colorado’s current Child Protection Ombudsman, Stephanie Villafuerte, was appointed in December 2015 by the CPO Board. Ombudsman Villafuerte took office in January 2016.

## **Mission**

Ensuring that the state's child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family, and community in Colorado.

## **Vision**

Ensuring safety for Colorado's children today and envisioning a stronger child protection system for the future.

## **Major Agency Functions**

### **Role of the CPO**

By design, the CPO serves as an independent, neutral problem solver that helps citizens navigate a complex child protection system in an expert and timely manner. The CPO has independent access to child protection records that are not otherwise available to the public. This allows the CPO to objectively assist citizens with concerns, investigate issues affecting the child protection system, deliver recommendations and drive systemic reform through research and education. Through objective study the CPO works to improve the delivery of services to children and families within the child protection system.

### **Responsibilities of the CPO**

The CPO was established pursuant to C.R.S. 19-3.3-101. The CPO receives complaints concerning actions or inactions by child protection agencies that may adversely impact the safety, permanency or well-being of a child. Child protection agencies are those that receive public funds to protect or care for children. This includes law enforcement, mental health agencies, child welfare services and the Division of Youth Services.

In addition to providing all citizens free and confidential services, the CPO provides citizens and stakeholders three primary services:

**Information and Resources Referral (IRR)** – The CPO provides citizens with information, resources and/or education to help resolve their questions regarding the child protection system. The CPO will speak with a citizen on the phone to learn more about their concern. CPO staff may personally connect the caller with a resource that is best suited to address their question.

**Assist** – This is the most common service provided by the CPO. The CPO works with citizens to clarify what is happening in their specific case, including processes and actions taken by an agency or provider. CPO staff will complete an independent review of relevant records, rule and law. Depending on the complexity and nature of the inquiry, the CPO may contact the agency/provider involved to gain a better understanding about a specific situation. In some instances, the CPO may facilitate communication between the caller and the agency involved in the case with the goal of resolving the problem.

**Investigation** – The CPO will open an investigation if it determines a case may result in recommendations for statutory, budgetary and/or administrative changes to improve the broader child protection system. A comprehensive, independent study of relevant facts, records, rules and law will be completed. The CPO will interview all relevant parties and may interview subject matter experts. For all investigations, the CPO will contact the relevant agency/provider and release a public investigation report. Since 2016, the CPO has issued four major investigative reports with recommendations to improve the child protection system. <sup>1</sup>

### **Jurisdiction and Environment**

The CPO receives *“complaints concerning child protection services made by, or on behalf of, a child relating to any action, inaction, or decision of any public agency or any provider that receives public moneys that may adversely affect the safety, permanency, or well-being of a child. The Ombudsman may, independently and impartially, investigate and seek resolution of such complaints, which resolution may include but need not be limited to, referring a complaint to the state department or appropriate agency or entity and making a recommendation for action relating to a complaint.”* See C.R.S. § 19-3.3-103(1)(a)(I)(A).

Some examples of agencies/providers the CPO has jurisdiction to review include human service agencies, youth corrections, law enforcement, educators, medical professionals and treatment providers.

Pursuant to C.R.S. § 19-3.3-101 to 110, the CPO does not have the authority to:

- Investigate allegations of abuse and/or neglect.
- Interfere or intervene in any criminal or civil court proceeding.
- Investigate complaints related to judges, magistrates, attorneys or guardians ad litem.
- Overturn any court order.
- Mandate the reversal of an agency/provider decision.
- Offer legal advice.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of CPO’s investigative work include the following: CPO Case #2016-2074, [Adoption Assistance in Colorado](#); CPO Issue Brief, [Colorado Division of Youth Services’ Rulemaking Process](#), August 2019; CPO Case #2018-3050, [Montezuma County Department of Social Services](#); CPO Case #2017-2736, [El Pueblo Boys and Girls Ranch](#).

## Recap of Fiscal Year 2019-2020

The CPO continued to expand its services and impact during Fiscal Year 2019-2020. The agency connected with hundreds of citizens to discuss their individual cases, while simultaneously expanding its larger public policy and communication initiatives.

Highlights from FY 2019-20 include:

- (1) Record Number of Cases** – FY 2019-20 was a record-breaking year as the CPO opened a total of 725 cases. This was 150 more cases than the previous fiscal year and a 19 percent increase from the agency’s previous record of 611 cases. The pandemic resulted in an increase in cases and the CPO worked diligently to monitor whether child welfare practices and services throughout the state were impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. In line with years prior, most cases concerned child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice agencies and/or service providers. Most calls were from parents and family members of children, however, the CPO was also contacted by medical professionals, law enforcement agencies, district attorneys’ offices, schools, the legislature and the child protection legal community.
  
- (2) Letters of Compliance Concern** – The CPO continued its practice of issuing letters of compliance concern to county human services departments when CPO analysts identified possible violations of state child protection rules and laws. During FY 2019-20 the CPO issued a total of 53 letters intended to initiate improvements to the state’s child protection system. The CDHS – which serves as the supervising entity for all the agencies that received a letter – confirmed 98 percent of the concerns submitted by the CPO.

Concerns routinely centered on compliance with requirements for caseworkers’ monthly contact with parents, incorrect use of the safety and risk tools, untimely or inadequate treatment plans and failure to involve and/or notice parents of assessments involving their children.

- (3) Communication and Outreach** – During FY 2019-20, the CPO continued its efforts to ensure that citizens, legislators and stakeholders have uninterrupted access to information about the CPO, its services and how it connects with clients. Below are some highlights from the agency’s communication and outreach efforts:

- a. Improved CPO Website – CPO launched its redesigned website in April 2020. The new website is easy for citizens to navigate, engages all communities and provides the public consistent and timely information. The new website centers on ensuring visitors have multiple ways to access information and clear guideposts throughout the site. The CPO’s website now includes:

- CPO General Information Video: This short video provides the public with a broad, engaging overview of the agency and the services the CPO provides. (Click [HERE](#) to view the video.)
  - CPO Special Initiatives Page: This page captures all the CPO’s Special Initiatives projects and serves as one-stop for those looking for reports or information about ongoing projects. (Click [HERE](#) to view the page.)
  - Spanish Complaint Form and Translation Services: To make it easier for all Coloradans to connect with the CPO, the agency added translation services to the website, as well as a Spanish complaint form. (Click [HERE](#) to view the Spanish complaint form.)
- b. Youth and Parent Outreach – The CPO developed one-pagers, posters and a webpage designed to communicate with youth and parents. Specifically, the CPO designed and printed one-pager flyers and posters for youth living in DYS youth centers, as well as youth living in out-of-home placements. These materials – which were designed with youth in mind – detail how the CPO may help them and how the agency will connect with them. Additionally, the CPO developed a one-page flyer specifically for parents of youth living in out-of-home placements or youth living in DYS youth centers. All these materials are also available in Spanish. The youth and parent one-page flyers are available for download on the CPO’s website.
- Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s youth one-page flyer. (English)
  - Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s youth one-page flyer. (Spanish)
  - Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s parent one-page flyer. (English)
  - Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s parent one-page flyer. (Spanish)
- c. New Outreach Collateral – The CPO also worked to develop and print updated collateral – including a new general one-page flyer and rack card – that details the CPO’s services and how the agency helps clients across Colorado resolve their questions and concerns about the child protection system.
- Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s general one-page flyer. (English)
  - Click [HERE](#) to access the CPO’s general one-page flyer. (Spanish)

**(4) Child Fatality Special Initiative** – In February 2020, the CPO announced its child fatality review special initiative. Between 2015 and 2018, 131 children died of abuse and/or neglect in Colorado. Since becoming an independent agency, the CPO has heard from a variety of agencies, including child welfare agencies, medical professionals and law enforcement. All are concerned that the current systems designed to reduce such fatalities are not doing enough. They’re concerned the systems charged with protecting children continue unchanged after a child dies of abuse or neglect. In fact, the average number of child deaths each year has remained largely consistent since 2015.

Additionally, under Colorado’s current legal framework, not all children who die of abuse or neglect have their deaths reviewed. Of the 131 deaths between 2015 and 2018, only 46 percent underwent a case-specific review.

There are multiple public entities charged with reviewing child fatalities in Colorado. There is not, however, a single entity responsible for reviewing all child abuse and neglect fatalities, implementing standard protocols for notifying agencies of lapses, issuing recommendations for improvements and ensuring those changes are made. The CPO’s goal is to create the framework necessary to create such a review and – ultimately – improve the effectiveness of child fatality reviews in Colorado.

The CPO has continued to study and review these reviews and will launch its first issue brief during the fall of 2020.<sup>2</sup>

**(5) Adoption Assistance Special Initiative** – After a months-long investigation, the CPO released a report regarding Colorado’s adoption assistance program.<sup>3</sup> The CPO found that the program was being administered inconsistently across Colorado and, as a result, not all children had equitable access and consideration for the services. Since the release of the CPO’s report, the CPO has continued to work with stakeholder partners to ensure that the 14 recommendations issued in the report are implemented. During the past fiscal year, the CPO worked with the CDHS to co-facilitate stakeholder meetings regarding the regulations that will guide caseworkers handling adoption assistance cases. The agency co-facilitated six teleconferences – attended by more than 80 stakeholders – and coordinated testimony at the State Board of Human Services. Ultimately, the CPO helped ensure that the new regulations accurately reflect the new state law and federal requirements. The agency will continue these efforts during the next fiscal year.

**(6) Responding to the Pandemic** – In addition to providing citizens one-on-one services during the pandemic, the CPO also engaged in several broader projects to ensure the ongoing safety and well-being of Colorado’s children. Those projects include:

Prioritizing Child Protection Workers During COVID-19 – Following the spread of COVID-19 throughout Colorado, the CPO quickly learned that child protection workers that respond to reports of child abuse and neglect were without personal protective equipment. Often entering families’ homes at their own risk due to state and federal mandates to provide services to children and their families, they have faced potential COVID-19 exposure. In an issue brief published in April 2020, the CPO made a call for these critical employees to be prioritized as first responders so they get the equipment they need to protect themselves, and thus, are able to

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<sup>2</sup> See [CPO’s 2020 Special Initiatives Agenda](#), February 2020

<sup>3</sup> See CPO Case #2016-2017, [Adoption Assistance in Colorado](#)

continue protecting Colorado's children.<sup>4</sup> The CPO also helped to locate and distribute hand sanitizer and face coverings to dozens of county departments across Colorado.

Toolkit for Educators – During April 2020, the CPO worked with teachers, education advocates, the Colorado Department of Education and the CDHS to develop a toolkit that helps teachers get a better sense of their students' safety during remote learning sessions. The toolkit provides educators information about the signs of child abuse and neglect, how to make reports to the hotline and provides educators examples of activities they can lead during remote learning sessions to assess the wellbeing of their students. The toolkit was published on the Colorado Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline's website and was shared broadly via social media.

These and many other accomplishments are highlighted in the CPO's FY 2019-20 Annual Report.<sup>5</sup>

## Going Forward

As is required under the Smart Measurement for Accountable, Responsive and Transparent Government Reports Act (SMART Act C.R.S. 2-7-204), the CPO submitted its Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Performance Plan (Plan) to Gov. Jared Polis on June 29, 2020, and the Plan was posted online on July 1, 2020.<sup>6</sup> The Plan contains the CPO's strategic goals for the upcoming year. These include expanding communication and engagement efforts, efficiently managing caseloads and research and establishing the CPO as a leader in respect to understanding child protection issues and best practices. Additionally, the Plan lists the specific strategies, processes, activities and metrics the CPO is using to help achieve these strategic goals. These efforts include monitoring demographic data to help expand services to youth populations that are overrepresented in the child protection system, including Black, Indigenous, Latino and youth of color.

## Budget Status FY 2020-2021

In June 2020, the CPO reverted \$47,332 to the General Fund from its program line. The factors that contributed to this were changes in staffing levels throughout the year which created vacancy savings. Specifically, the CPO was unable to fill two Child Protection System's Analyst positions for three months, February 2020 through April 2020. This is the amount of time that it took to recruit, post and hire for these positions. Additionally, the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus during this time slowed down what is normally a more expeditious process. This resulted in several months of vacancy savings for these positions.

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<sup>4</sup> See CPO Issue Brief, [Prioritizing Child Protection Workers](#), April 2020

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1, [Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman Annual Report 2019-2020](#)

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 2, [Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman Fiscal Year 2020-21 SMART Act Performance Plan](#)



## Budget Targets

### OSPb FY 2021-22 Budget Targets

On May 28, 2020, the Office of State Planning and Budget (OSPb) issued the FY 2021-22 Submission Manual for Operational, Capital and Information Technology Requests (Submission Manual). This FY 2021-22 Submission Manual is issued pursuant to C.R.S. § 24-37-302 and serves as the standard guideline for agencies in the executive, judicial and legislative branches for development of their FY 2021-22 budget requests.

This year, due to the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting economic disruption, economic forecasts show that the state budget will need to be significantly reduced for several years in order to balance the state budget while at the same time providing citizens with much needed services. As such, the Submission Manual recommends that all state agencies propose a 10 percent reduction in General Funds and Total Funds.

The CPO is an independent state agency housed in the Colorado State Judicial Department. Despite being legally separate from the other three branches of government, the CPO takes the guidance provided by the OSPb seriously and is committed to being part of the solution needed to balance the state budget. This document reflects the CPO's efforts to assist the state in reducing overall government expenditures while at the same time maintaining services that the agency is required to provide to Colorado citizens pursuant to the CPO's enabling statute C.R.S. § 19-3.3-101 to 103.

## Reductions, Proposed Reductions and Scenarios

### Reductions to the CPO's FY 2020-21 Budget

The CPO's budget for FY 2019-20 was \$990,918. For FY 2020-21 the CPO requested an additional \$77,749 in funding for employee salary increases, continuing education and communications efforts to promote the services of the agency statewide.<sup>7</sup> These increases were granted but were ultimately eliminated due to the economic downturn that resulted from the COVID-19 virus and the need for the Colorado Joint Budget Committee to cut all newly proposed spending. In addition to losing this funding, the CPO was asked in May 2020 to find additional money to cut from its budget. As such, the CPO reduced its budget by \$29,286 – 3 percent – reducing the total agency budget in FY 2020-21 from \$990,918 to \$961,637. To achieve this savings the CPO evaluated every contract and expenditure of the agency. The CPO was able to reduce its operating expenditures and personnel services line. The following is a breakdown of these reductions.

(1) FY 2020-21 Reduction ONE – Staff Reduction

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<sup>7</sup> See CPO [FY 2020-21 Agency Summary and Budget Request](#)

Total savings = \$19,000

Reduction: Client Services Analyst – Division of Youth Services will be filled at .8 FTE.

Rationale: The CPO has a total of 8 FTE. Five of the eight positions are required to respond directly to citizens who have concerns about the safety and well-being of children. This specific position is responsible for responding to all calls from citizens who are concerned about a child residing in a Division of Youth Services (DYS) youth center. This position was reduced because it currently handles fewer citizen complaints than the CPO's other analysts who handle concerns about children in the child welfare system.

(2) FY 2020-21 Reduction TWO – Operating Expenses

Total savings = \$10,000

a. Information Technology Contracts

Reduction: Eliminated unnecessary database subscriptions by requiring staff to share software licenses and negotiated a less expensive IT maintenance contract.

b. Office Supplies

Reduction: Reduced day-to-day costs by reducing printing and photocopy expenses and increased agency use of virtual technology.

c. Conferences and Continuing Education

Reduction: Eliminated all training for staff including new ombudsman training which is mandatory for all incoming members.

d. CPO Board Meeting Expenses

Reduction: Cut all expenses for board meetings and the one mandated out-of-town board meeting. Virtual meetings will allow the agency to continue to host all meetings with significantly lower expenses.

These reductions represent the funding decrease the CPO was able to cut from its operating budget without impacting the CPO's ability to serve the public. Any additional budget reductions would require the elimination of core operating expenses, including discontinuing our internet and phone service and reducing the licenses for the agency's web-based database – the CPO's only case management system. Any reduction in licenses will require the CPO to share licenses and impact the integrity of the agency's data. As a result, the only remaining area for the CPO to achieve savings is through its personnel line item.

**FY 2021-22 Decision Item**

**November 1, 2020**

**Department Priority: Decision Item #1**

**Request Title: Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman**

| Summary of Incremental Funding Change for FY22 | Total Funds        | General Fund       | Cash Funds  | General Fund FTE | Cash Fund FTE |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|
| <b>TOTAL REQUEST (All Lines)</b>               | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ -</b> | <b>0.0</b>       | <b>0.0</b>    |
| <b>Total Program:</b>                          | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ -</b> | <b>0.0</b>       | <b>0.0</b>    |
| Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman       |                    |                    |             |                  |               |
| Program Costs                                  | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ (18,000)</b> | <b>\$ -</b> | <b>0.0</b>       | <b>0.0</b>    |

**Proposed Reductions to the CPO’s FY 2021-22 Budget**

Operations and Caseloads

The CPO was established to serve as an oversight agency for all agencies that receive public funds to ensure the protection, permanency and well-being of Colorado’s children. To do this, the CPO must be responsive to citizens’ concerns, many of which involve a child’s immediate safety and well-being. At a minimum, the CPO’s duties include:

- Provide citizens free and confidential services.
- Help citizens navigate the child protection system and direct them towards needed services and resources.
- Objectively research, review and investigate individual and systemic concerns about the delivery of services to children and families within the child protection system.
- Illuminate the strengths and weaknesses within the child protection system that are directly impacting the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families.
- Make recommendations to the public, child protection agency/provider, the General Assembly and the Governor that help reform and improve outcomes for children and families.

Citizens’ concerns involve a variety of entities, including child welfare services, law enforcement, behavioral health and the DYS. The CPO may work with state and local entities to resolve a case. Analysts must collect all relevant information from a citizen and review third-party resources that may provide context for the case. These sources may include the statewide child welfare database, law enforcement records and the state court databases. Using this information, analysts will review the citizens concern

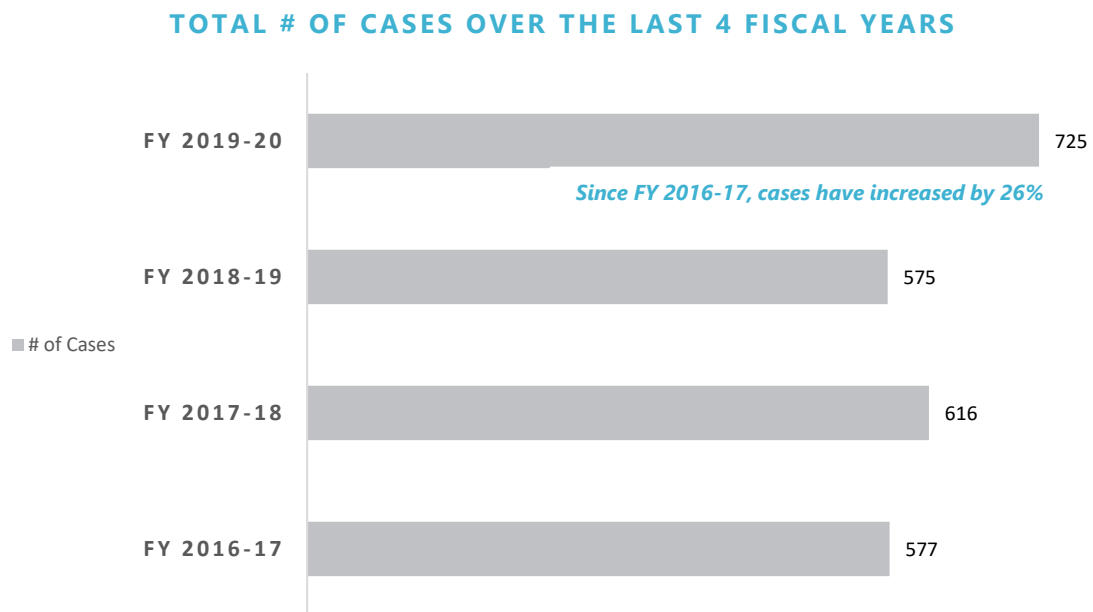
and determine which CPO services is most appropriate. This may include connecting citizens with needed resources, helping to resolve issues in communication and or notifying agencies when the CPO is concerned that law and rules were not followed.

### Current CPO Caseload

The CPO exists to serve the public and address their urgent concerns. Citizens typically call the CPO when they need to speak to someone immediately and have been unable to receive answers to their questions through traditional grievance mechanisms. When a citizen calls the CPO, they typically need someone to answer their questions about a child protection concern in a timely manner. The complaints brought to the CPO’s attention continue to increase in quantity and expand in complexity.

### Increase in CPO Cases

Since its inception, the CPO has seen a steady increase in the number of cases it receives. Citizens’ calls and complaints drive 100% of the CPO caseload. The below chart shows an increase in the CPO caseload over the past four fiscal years.



The COVID-19 pandemic brought – and continues to bring – innumerable changes to nearly every facet of everyday life, and child protection is no exception. Since March 2020, CPO caseloads went up 23%. At the onset of the pandemic, the CPO received calls from parents who were concerned that they were no longer able to visit their children in-person. Parents were understandably worried about the impact this would have on their bond with their children, as well as their ability to have their children returned to their care. Additionally, the CPO discovered that for about two to three weeks in March 2020, a large county human services department was not responding to all reports of child abuse/neglect in which the children were not considered to be in imminent danger, yet

were still at risk for abuse/neglect. This concern resulted in 113 CPO cases, each of which had to be reviewed in detail by an analyst to determine if there were any concerns about the child’s safety.

Other concerns the CPO has heard, and continues to hear, regarding COVID-19 include:

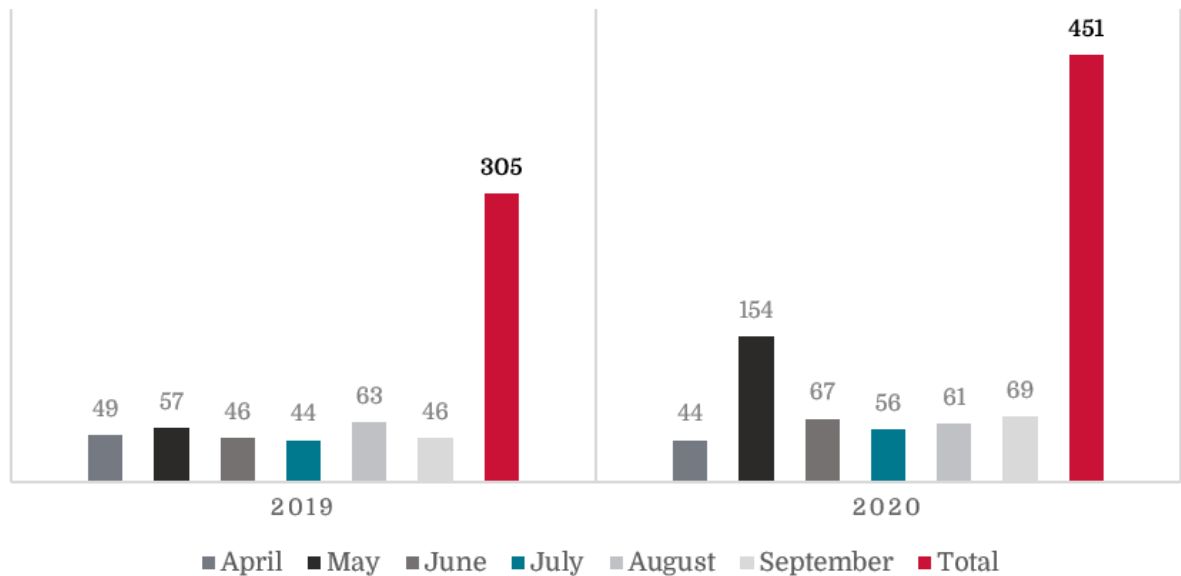
- Delays for mental health, substance abuse and other court-ordered treatment for both parents and children.
- Lack of visits for biological parents.
- Concerns regarding youth in the Division of Youth Services System, including lack of family contact and educational programming.

It has been important for the CPO to respond to these concerns quickly in order to help families and the public navigate the already complex child protection system during such an uncertain and trying time.

Additionally, the influx of cases does not show signs of slowing.

During the past six months, the CPO has seen a nearly 48% increase in the number of cases, compared to the same six months during the prior year. The below chart illustrates this increase in calls.

**2019 VS. 2020  
CALLS PER MONTH BETWEEN APRIL AND SEPTEMBER**



### Complexity of CPO Cases

In addition to the increased quantity of cases, there is an increase in the complexity of cases that the agency has received. This is evidenced by the CPO’s Client Services team

fielding a growing number of nuanced and intricate questions and concerns. After initially speaking with a client, it is common that the analyst will need to do immediate research into the concerns to see if further action needs to be taken right away.

For example, a concerned mother called the CPO stating that her son had been removed from her home by law enforcement and a caseworker, but they did not have court paperwork, and she had not been in contact with her son since he was removed from her home. Upon immediate research, the analyst did not see any record of the child being removed from the home or of any report called into the Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline. The analyst contacted the director of Human Services' who was able to provide context regarding the removal and ensure that the child was safe with his father.

Other examples of the CPO's complex and urgent cases include:

- A current county department caseworker who was concerned that other caseworkers in the agency were not completing timely or accurate assessments of child safety.
- Community members concerned that children were consistently running away from a residential child care facility which resulted in one fatality and injuries to other children.
- A grandmother who was concerned that her granddaughter's mother was using drugs, refusing to take a drug test and that the caseworker was allowing the child to stay in the mother's care.
- A mother who was concerned that the county department was allowing her young children to visit their father in a home where there were reports of alleged sex abuse.
- A youth who was concerned that she was being imminently moved from her potential adoptive home, and she did not understand why.

These complicated cases require CPO analysts to have years of child protection knowledge and expertise. The agency's analysts are also required to work quickly and thoroughly, in order to ensure child safety.

The complexity of CPO cases is best illustrated, however, by the increased number of compliance concern letters issued by the CPO to outside agencies. If during a review, a CPO analyst identifies that an agency is not practicing in compliance with state law or regulations, analysts will issue a compliance concern letter to notify the agency of the identified practice concerns. The goal of the letter is to inform agencies of concerns and that the agency will remedy their practices to ensure child safety. In FY 2018-19, the CPO wrote 11 compliance concern letters to county departments. In FY 2019-20, this number increased to 53 letters. These letters are labor intensive,

requiring analysts to spend nearly eight hours researching, drafting and submitting each letter.

Lastly, in addition, to the compliance concern letters, the CPO continues to investigate and make recommendations to improve large child protection systems.<sup>8</sup> Most recently the CPO has begun work on reform of Colorado's child fatality review system and will be producing an issue brief in the fall of 2020. The brief will outline the current inadequacies of how child maltreatment deaths are studied in Colorado and how that data could be used to prevent such deaths in the future.<sup>9</sup>

### Proposed Budget Reductions

It is against this backdrop that the CPO must analyze its budget to find additional savings that will meet the recommended 10% reduction guidelines contained in the Submission Manual.

As stated above on pages 8-10, the CPO cannot cut any additional operating expenses without eliminating the agency's infrastructure and tools that allows it to respond to Colorado citizens. The only remaining way the CPO can achieve additional budget savings is to initiate furlough days for its employees. In normal budget times, when the state budget is fiscally healthy, the CPO would be requesting additional money, not less, to address the agency's growing and complex caseloads. However, the state budget is not sound and, as such, the CPO must consider its ability to serve Colorado citizens' urgent concerns, while at the same time contribute to lessening Colorado's fiscal deficit.

#### (1) FY 2021-22 Reduction Proposal ONE – Reduction in Program Costs Line Item

Total Savings: \$18,000 (2%)

Reduction: Six furlough days per employee for FY 2021-22

Rationale: A thorough review of the CPO's caseloads reveals that the agency has no ability to meet a 10% reduction and still serve Colorado citizens effectively. As such the CPO has developed a proposed 2% cut to the agency's personnel services line. This would require each of the CPO's 8 employees to take 6 furlough days in FY 2021-22 and would achieve a savings of \$18,000.

This reduction would be in addition to the 3% reduction to the CPO's budget that occurred in FY 2020-21, resulting in a total of 5% – \$47,286 – decrease in the agency's total budget. This would leave the agency with a FY 2021-22 annual

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<sup>8</sup> See CPO Case #2016-2074, [Adoption Assistance in Colorado](#); CPO Case #2018-3050, [Montezuma County Department of Social Services](#); CPO Case #2017-2736, [El Pueblo Boys and Girls Ranch](#).

<sup>9</sup> See [CPO's 2020 Special Initiatives Agenda](#), February 2020

budget of \$943,637, excluding any common policy adjustments, as compared to its FY 2019-20 annual budget of \$990,918.

**Consequence of additional 2% Personnel Services Line Item Reduction:**

The CPO will have to expand or lengthen the amount of time it takes for the agency's Client Services Team to return citizen calls and process their complaints. The CPO currently responds to each citizen, personally, within 48 business hours. Once contact is made with a citizen, the CPO gives each citizen individualized attention, providing citizens with the time needed to assert their concerns and then assisting them to resolve their problems. The CPO will also have to institute a new response time and a new screening and intake process that will require the agency to triage and prioritize calls. This will ensure that the most egregious child safety concerns are heard first and that they are handled in a timely manner.

**Consequence of no additional budget reductions:**

The CPO will maintain its existing service levels and response times to citizens.

Total Budget Reduction: FY 2020-21 and FY 2021-22

The total reduction to the CPO's budget would look as follows:

- (1) FY 20-21 Budget Reduction in Staff and Operating Expenses (Completed)  
Savings: \$29,286 = 3%
  
- (2) FY 2021-22 Budget Reduction in Personnel Services Line Item (Pending)  
Savings: \$18,000 = 2%

**Conclusion**

The CPO respectfully submits this budget reduction proposal to assist the state in balancing the FY 2021-22 budget. We are proud to serve Colorado families and children and will continue to provide the highest level of service possible to help them navigate and receive quality services from the child protection system. Additionally, we will continue to fulfill our ongoing charge to educate and inform the community on system gaps and variances in Colorado's child protection system with the goal of improving the overall system for the better.