



ISSUE SPOTTER

An afternoon with the Child Protection Ombudsman Board chairs

By Karen Nielsen, Director of CPO Administrative Services

The primary purpose of this exclusive interview is to share with you how the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman Board was created and to introduce you to Judge Kenneth Plotz who has served as our Board Chair since 2016 and to Ann Roan, our incoming Board Chair.

Through legislative action, the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was created in 2010 (Senate Bill 10-171) and became an independent state agency (Senate Bill 15-204) in 2016. The same statute that established the CPO as an independent agency, also established the first of its kind Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman Board (Board).

The Board is made up of twelve members: four appointed by the Chief Justice of the Colorado Supreme Court, four appointed by the Governor's Office and four appointed by the Colorado General Assembly. Each appointment is for a four-year term.

The main purpose of the Board is to appoint and evaluate the Child Protection Ombudsman and to promote the mission of the office. What also makes the Board unique is that it serves an advisory role to the Ombudsman and the agency. The Board can offer advice, fiscal oversight suggestions, recommendations or other assistance to the Ombudsman and CPO staff.

Outgoing Board Chair, Judge Kenneth Plotz

Our outgoing Board Chair, Judge Kenneth Plotz can attest to how the CPO Board was created and has changed since its inception. I had the opportunity to interview him about what he was most proud of, what he enjoyed about being the Board Chair and what advice he has for his successor.

These are the highlights of our conversation

Question: You have been on the CPO Board since its inception. Looking back at the past five years, what are you most proud of during the time you served as chair?

"I am most proud of the board work that was done to start the organization and to get an executive director on board. I happened to be the board president and we had no leadership for the agency when we started. All of us, as board members had, to collaborate and get the work done.

I cannot emphasize enough the help and guidance that we got from Sueanna Johnson, [former Senior Assistant Attorney General] who is now Judge Sueanna Johnson on the Colorado Court of the Appeals. Her work was just invaluable. I do not think we could have done it without her. The Board also needs to take a lot of credit because we worked together collaboratively to get everything done and hire an executive director."

Question: What did you enjoy most about serving as chair of the CPO Board?

"I think the startup was most challenging and, as I look back, the most enjoyable. And by that I do not mean just hiring the executive director. But after we hired Stephanie Villafuerte, I enjoyed working with her to hire staff, acquire basic things like office supplies and acquire the office space. We also had to work with the Colorado Department of Human Services and the Judicial Department so that they would recognize us and work with us. I think that was really exciting."

Question: Looking at the CPO today, does the agency resemble what you envisioned more than five years ago?

"No, it does not. I think it is much better than what I could have possibly imagined. I think that the way the organization works and has taken the initiative with regard to policy and with regard to collaboration, rather than just opposition, to various departments. It is working far better than I imagined."

Question: What is one piece of advice you would like to give to the new chair?

"I would like to see the Board more engaged in a way that the Board can be engaged. What I mean by that is that different board members should specialize in different topics and different areas and fields that the CPO is engaged in. For instance, some board members are interested in legislative policy, some board members are more interested in the way the organization works with various county agencies and some board members are interested in working with the way the CPO engages with different state agencies. I think giving the board members the opportunity to specialize in different areas that the Ombudsman covers would be a good idea going forward."

Question: Anything else you would like the public to know about you or any closing comments?

"When you leave a board or leadership of a board it's kind of a relief and in this case it really isn't. I have really enjoyed working with the staff, the executive director and board members. It has been a pleasure. There is a tinge of regret that I have but I am looking forward to sitting on the Board."

Incoming Board Chair, Ann Roan

Next, I had the opportunity to meet with the newly appointed Board Chair, Ann Roan, to talk to her about her interest in the board chair position, her experience and skill sets that make her a good board chair and some of her goals she would like to accomplish while in the position.

These are her responses to my questions.

Question: What experience and skill sets do you think will serve you best during your time as chair of the CPO Board?

"The primary skill set that I have as a board member is the vast breadth and depth of knowledge of the other board members. I feel so fortunate to be working with a group of people who, between all of us, have insight and experience with every facet of the issues that the CPO is tasked with addressing. My own background is in juvenile delinquency representation and criminal law generally."

Question: Why did you apply to sit on the CPO Board?

"Because for 27 years I have represented children who intersect in one fashion or another with state agencies that are responsible for stepping in to care for children when family systems aren't able to. The idea of the ombudsman when it was created was very exciting to me because I often felt that there was nowhere to turn when I had concerns about the children that I was responsible for as their lawyer, especially about placement conditions. When I heard there was an opening on the CPO Board it felt like a really important opportunity for me to participate in an agency that I think is critical to making sure that the children in Colorado aren't just kept out of harm's way but are cared for in ways that will help them to thrive."



Question: What are some of your goals for the CPO Board that you would like to accomplish during your time as chair?

"I am excited that the CPO has increased the attention that it pays to children in the Division of Youth Services (DYS). I think that is part of the conversation about children in Colorado that is not often included. I am glad there is a lot of focus on children who are in foster care placement. But especially after helping to research and write the "Bound and Broken" report that the ACLU published and the legislative overhaul that happened in the wake of that report, I continue to be deeply invested in making sure that the kids who are entrusted to the care of DHS actually receive the care and rehabilitation they need to make sure that the rehabilitative goal of the Children's Code is realized."

Question: If the CPO were the subject of a newspaper cover story tomorrow, what would you like the story to be about?

"I would like it to report that every state agency involved with children has prioritized the critical importance of sharing information so that the siloed records that have sometimes prevented life-saving interventions become a thing of the past. I would like that story to be about breaking down any communicative barriers that are currently in place that make it more difficult for the CPO to fulfill its central purpose. When state agencies share this kind of information, Coloradans can be confident that they are looking first and foremost at child safety and child well-being, rather than engaging in internecine turf wars. When it comes to children, political considerations should be completely extraneous."

Question: Is there anything else you would like the public to know about you?

"I would like them to know that I am a parent, although I know it is not a requirement for someone to care about children. For me, the amount of empathy that I gained not only for children, but for parents after I became one myself, cannot be overstated. I think it is really important that any discussion about what is necessary to help children to put and keep their best foot forward has to include a discussion about what parents also need to make that happen. Issues that have been overlooked by policy makers and politicians for far too long, such as paid family leave, excellent daycare that is not tied to economic circumstance, and making sure that no child in Colorado goes to bed hungry are really important to me. I hope that my work with the CPO Board will not just be focused on what Colorado children need but also focused on what Colorado families need. I want our policy makers to focus on giving families the tools to make sure children have a launching pad to go as far as their dreams and imaginations can take them."

We hope that this interview has given the public the opportunity to understand more about how the CPO Board was created, the role of the CPO Board and the thoughts and experiences of our incoming and outgoing board chairs. Having an active advisory board and a strong foundation allows us to collaborate with one another to have a positive impact on Colorado's children and families

