



CHILD PROTECTION
OMBUDSMAN
of COLORADO

2025-2026 Fiscal Year

ANNUAL REPORT

Table of Contents

Letter from the Ombudsman 3

Overview of the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman 4

Lookback to CPO Case Activity During Fiscal Year 2025 - 26

 The CPO Case Process

 When Concerns Are Identified

 Actions Taken by Outside Agencies After CPO Contact

 What Clients are Saying

Elevating Youth Voice and Experience..... 8

 Making Connections and Celebrating Advocacy

 Foster Youth Voice Celebration

 Celebration of Educational Excellence

 Connecting with Youth

 Supporting Youth Residing in 24-Hour Care

 Implementing House Bill 25-1200

 Strip Searches Within the Division of Youth Services

 Monitoring Improvements to Protections for Youth in DYS Youth Centers

CPO Policy Collaborative for Children & Families..... 11

 Audit of Colorado’s Risk and Safety Assessment Tools

 Focusing on Children and Youth in Residential Treatment Facilities

 Addressing Gaps in Food Access Programs

CPO Advisory Board 14

Conclusion 15

Letter from the Ombudsman

Dear friends, colleagues and community partners,

It is with great pride that I present our Fiscal year 2025-26 Annual Report. The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) has marked the past year with ingenuity, growth and transition.

We have seen an increase in the number of young people connecting with our agency. We continue to see a steady demand for our impartial perspective and neutral charge. We answered calls from our community partners to convene conversations and address systemic issues impacting child protection services in our state. No matter the setting, the caller or the concern – we listened. That is because we know that by listening to every story without judgment – without expectation – we can chart a different course together. This is the core charge of the CPO and of children and family serving ombudsmen across the country.

During the past decade, this agency benefited from the leadership and vision of Stephanie Villafuerte. During her tenure with the agency – and with extreme clarity regarding the potential of this office – Child Protection Ombudsman Villafuerte not only established and grew the CPO, but she also shaped it into a leader in child protection reform in Colorado and a leader in ombudsman practice nationally.

It is an honor to be selected as the next Child Protection Ombudsman for Colorado and to be provided the opportunity to continue building an agency that is responsive and impactful. Alongside the CPO’s dedicated and innovative team, I will continue this work and we will ensure the CPO continues to serve children and families with empathy, curiosity and passion.

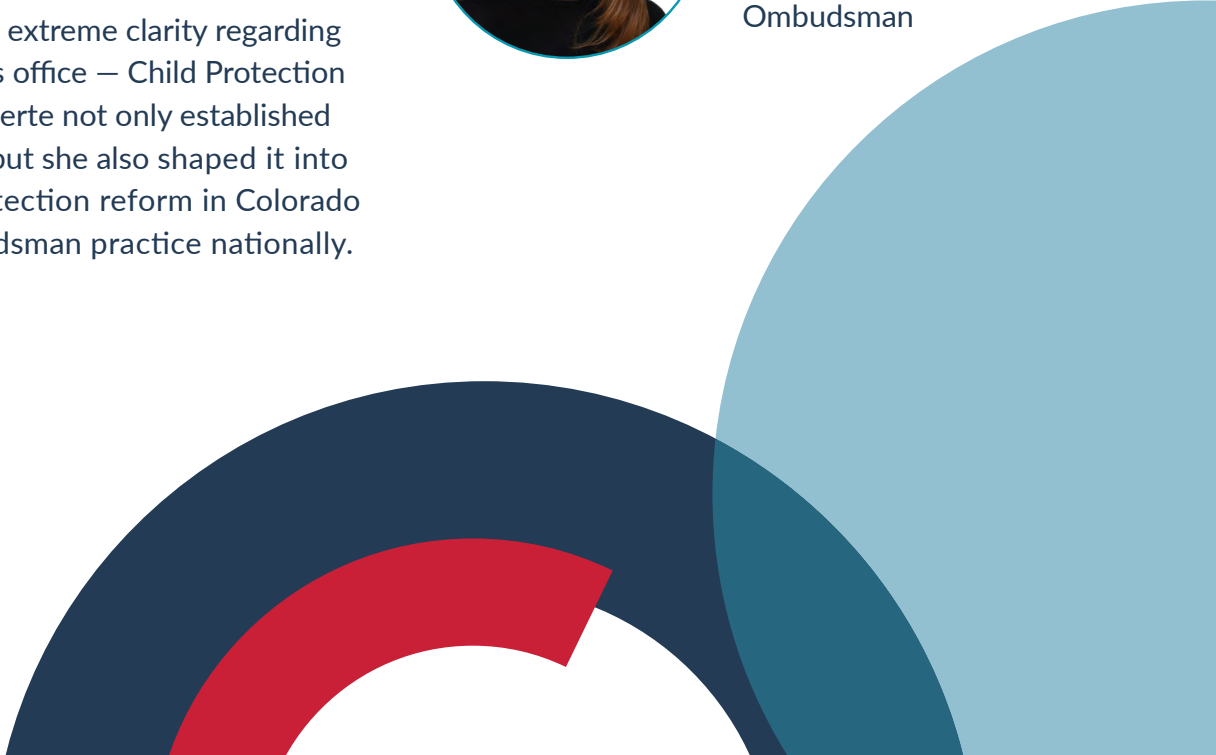
This report continues the CPO’s efforts to inform you of how Colorado’s child protection system functions, including what works well and what does not. It captures the agency’s reach and impact from the past fiscal year, while also providing a glimpse into the priorities for the next fiscal year.

Thank you for reading,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jordan Steffen".

Jordan Steffen
Colorado Child Protection
Ombudsman



Overview of the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was created to ensure the state’s complex child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, young person, family and community in Colorado. The agency is charged with hearing the public’s concerns and questions related to services administered by any public agency or provider that receives public money to support the safety, permanency and well-being of young people. It listens to the public about their experience with and concerns about child protection, researches and investigates those issues and determines the best way to resolve each concern. This important work also allows the CPO to identify trends, make public recommendations for system improvements, and collaborate with lawmakers, professionals, stakeholders and individuals with lived experience to advance policy changes that have a lasting, positive impact on children, youth and their families.

Anyone may contact the CPO with a concern or question about the child protection system. The

agency’s services are free and confidential. People do not need to be involved with the child protection system to open a case with the CPO. However, the majority of people who contact the agency are either involved with the child protection system or have professional connections.

Lookback to CPO Case Activity During Fiscal Year 2025-26

Colorado’s child protection system is vast and complicated. It is common for a single child or family to be involved with multiple systems and programs – such as child welfare services, Medicaid and behavioral health services – by the time they contact the CPO. For the fourth consecutive fiscal year, the CPO opened more than 1,000 cases during Fiscal Year 2025-26 – totaling 1,254. The CPO was contacted by family members of children or youth, professionals and others with concerns and questions about the child protection system.

The CPO Case Process

Each case received by the CPO will go through one or more phases of review. The four phases are: Listen, Investigate, Resolve and Identify Trends.

The CPO works to understand the unique circumstances and information involved in each case brought to the agency. To accomplish this, the agency works to give each client the time they need to share their story and perspective. Often, by the time a client has contacted the CPO, they have already experienced one to two internal grievance processes – often without getting a personalized explanation of what is happening in their case or why certain decisions have been made. It is not uncommon for the CPO to spend more than an hour with clients during their first call with the agency. This allows the CPO to understand each client’s concerns at a deep level.

During FY 2025-26, the CPO closed 1,320. In 22 percent of those cases, the CPO determined that clients would benefit from a referral to a different entity. In each of these cases, the CPO still worked to ensure it understood the questions and issues involved in the case. For example, the CPO often receives calls from people with concerns about the actions of their attorneys or people who are seeking

assistance with their legal cases. The CPO does not have authority to review these cases. Instead, after learning the details of the concern, the CPO will help guide the person to the best resource near them.

The CPO completed 641 full case reviews during the past fiscal year. In approximately 60 percent of those cases, the CPO did not identify any concerns that an outside agency did not comply with law or regulation in providing child protection services. However, in 192 cases, the CPO did identify concerns with possible violations and contacted the agency involved to get more information.

When Concerns Are Identified

The CPO has no explicit authority to determine if an agency violated state law or regulation in the handling of a child protection case. What Colorado law does require is the CPO to inform agencies when it identifies concerns with how the agency – most commonly a county department of human services or Division of Youth Services’ (DYS) youth center – handled a case. Those concerns often involve possible non-compliance with state law, regulation and/or best practice. During the past fiscal year, the CPO contacted agencies with such concerns in 212 cases. In each of these cases, the

CPO Case Review Phases



Listen

The CPO works to listen to every person who contacts the agency. At a minimum, each person who contacts the agency will speak with a live person who will take down information about the client’s concern or question. During this preliminary intake phase, the person will have an opportunity to share important details and ask questions.



Investigate

The agency will conduct an in-depth review of each case. This includes reviewing relevant documentation in the case and the laws and regulations involved in that case. For some cases, the CPO may need to contact an outside agency to learn more about the services provided to a child, youth or family.



Resolve

After completing a review of the case, the CPO will close the case. The CPO will inform the client of the steps taken to address the questions and concerns involved in the case. The CPO may also provide additional resources that will benefit the client.



Identify Trends

The CPO considers whether each case presents an issue impacting how child protection services are provided across systems and regions. If so, the CPO will seek to address these systemic issues.

FY 2025-26 CPO Closed Case Dispositions

358

Cases Reviewed Without Outside Agency Contact²

283

Cases Reviewed With Outside Agency Contact³

291

Client Provided an Information and Resource Referral⁴

199

Lack of Information Provided to CPO⁵

32

Client Requested CPO Close the Case⁶

5

Closed as Duplicate Case

4

Closed with Concern⁷

148

Closed per Ombudsman Discretion⁸

CPO prepared detailed outlines of the identified concerns and met with the relevant agency(s) to address these concerns. In all but 10 of the 212 cases, the agency(s) agreed with the concerns presented by the CPO and took some form of affirmative action to address the identified issues.

For example, the most common action by an outside agency, after being contacted by the CPO, was to provide staff additional training and education about how to better deliver services to children and families. This happened in 181 of the 212 cases.

These cases demonstrate the crucial utility that the CPO plays in the child protection system. Many of the issues identified in these cases would not have been identified but for the CPO’s involvement. Each of the issues identified above has the potential to substantially impact the direction of how a case progresses, or stalls, within the child protection system.

Actions Taken by Outside Agencies After CPO Contact¹

181

cases involved outside agencies **providing staff additional training and education.**

88

cases involved outside agencies **amending or adding additional documentation** in a child protection case.

101

cases resulted in the outside agency **engaging the client and further discussing the case** with them to address issues.

53

cases resulted in the outside agency **revising or developing a policy** to address an issue.

23

cases involved an outside agency **taking steps to correct actions by personnel or taking disciplinary action.**

Identified Concerns

186

Concerns with compliance of state law

26

Concerns with compliance of state regulation

62

Concerns with compliance of with state DYS policy

Possible Violations of Law, Regulation and Policy

The CPO also identified 5 instances in which the outside agency may not have utilized best practice guides. All of the data and information the CPO has learned from its cases during the past year have informed its systemic policy work.

What CPO Clients are Saying

Each fiscal year, the CPO hears back from clients with whom the agency has worked. The CPO works to respond to concerns about the agency’s processes and celebrates when clients feel the services they received from the CPO improved their experience with the child protection system. Below is an example of the positive comments the CPO received:

“The work you do is significant and critical, especially when there aren’t too many potential advocates for parents in related circumstances such as us.”

Elevating Youth Voice and Experience



The CPO’s Youth Collective (Collective) entered its third year during FY 2025-26. The Collective played an important role in bringing the perspectives of youth and young people with experience in the child protection system into the CPO’s systemic work. The CPO coordinated with members of the Collective during the past fiscal year to gather insight regarding youth experience with child protection systems and to receive feedback

regarding how the CPO can improve its outreach materials to better connect with children and youth receiving services. Specifically, lived experts participated in the audit of Colorado’s risk and safety assessment tools to provide their experience about how use of the tools impacted their family, their trajectory in the child protection system, as well as suggested improvements. Members of the Collective also provided the CPO with feedback and insights for the development of its survey of residential child care facilities’ physical infrastructure needs and posters the CPO developed DYS youth centers and 24-hour care facilities.

Making Connections and Celebrating Advocacy

Below are some additional examples of the CPO’s connections and work with youth and lived experts in Colorado.



Foster Youth Voice Celebration

The CPO was proud to partner with Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Office of the Child’s Representative, Elevating Connections and the Colorado Supreme Court’s Court Improvement Program to host the third annual Foster Youth Voice Celebration. More than 100 people attended the event, during which 12 young people with Colorado foster care experience were recognized for using their voices to improve their own lives or the lives of other young people in foster care.



Celebration of Educational Excellence

The CPO was honored to be present for 2026 Celebration of Educational Excellence. Members of the CPO team joined representatives from multiple state agencies and community partners to recognize young people involved in foster care or youth services who graduated from high school, received a GED or obtained a college degree during the school year. Graduates were able to learn more about the CPO and its services, as well as how they can engage with the Collective and efforts to address systemic issues in the state.

Connecting with Youth

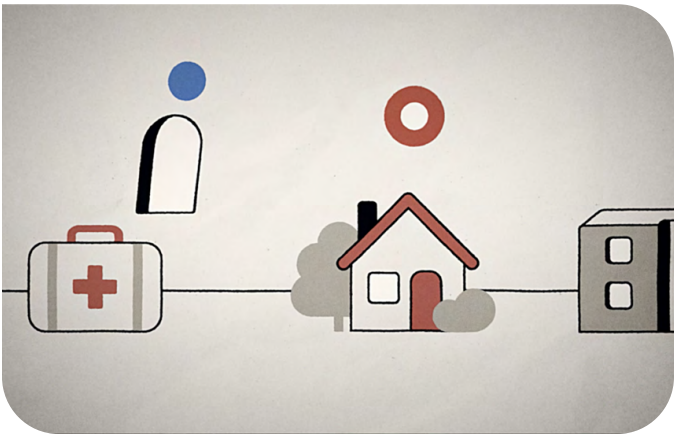
During the past fiscal year, the CPO produced an original short video describing its services for children and youth in the state. This video – narrated by Child Protection Ombudsman Stephanie Villafuerte – was designed specifically for young people who may benefit from the CPO’s services. The video, featured on the CPO’s website, has been recognized nationally among children and family serving ombudsman offices.



Supporting Youth Residing in 24-Hour Care

During FY 2025-26, 92 youth residing in DYS youth centers contacted the CPO directly with concerns, up significantly from 52 reports during the previous fiscal year. The agency is excited to see this growth and continues to welcome and value its direct interactions with youth experiencing DYS youth centers.

Overall, the CPO received 147 cases concerning the treatment of youth residing in DYS youth centers. The agency received 22 cases concerning the use of physical force inside youth centers – 18 less than the previous fiscal year. However, the CPO saw a significant increase in the number of cases reported to the agency involving alleged violations of youth rights within the youth centers. In total the CPO received 83 such cases during FY 2025-26, compared to 19 cases received the previous fiscal year. The CPO is committed to ensuring that youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system have



Watch the Video

Colorado CPO

their rights upheld and ensure these youth are able to access the services provided by the CPO.

Implementing House Bill 25-1200

During the 2025 legislative session, the General Assembly enacted House Bill 25-1200. This bill gave the CPO access to youth residing in residential child care facilities and DYS youth centers. The bill also required the CPO to create and distribute outreach materials for DYS youth centers. These materials must include information about the CPO’s services and how to contact the CPO if a youth wants to file a case with the agency. During March 2026, the CPO designed, printed and distributed new posters with this information to all 12 youth centers.



Strip Searches Within the Division of Youth Services

On September 30, 2025, the CPO published an issue brief examining the use of strip searches in DYS youth centers. The review of 1,009 searches conducted between 2023 and 2025 found that searches identified contraband in approximately 10 percent of the searches, one of the primary reasons cited for conducting the invasive search. However, review of these searches also revealed widespread violation of DYS policy, including concerns with a lack of proper authorization, staffing and documentation practices. The DYS revised its

“
Given the invasive nature of these searches, and their likelihood to have negative impacts on the youth, and the low rate in which these searches actually produce suspected contraband, the CPO is recommending additional oversight and transparency regarding how searches are performed and the results they yield.”
Read the Brief

strip-search policies in 2024, however, the CPO found ongoing concerns regarding policy adherence and the lack of effective oversight mechanisms to ensure searches are appropriately authorized, conducted and documented.

In its brief, the CPO made recommendations aimed at increasing transparency, strengthening oversight, and improving accountability surrounding the use of strip searches. Since the publication of the brief, DYS has implemented the CPO’s recommendation of utilizing electronic record keeping of youth searches. The CPO will continue to monitor the recommendations and communicate with the DYS regarding this topic throughout the next fiscal year.

Monitoring Improvements to Protections for Youth in DYS Youth Centers

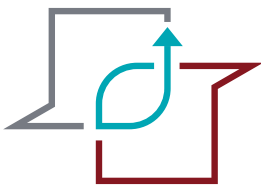
During July 2024, the CPO published an issue brief detailing how surveillance systems in DYS youth centers fell short in monitoring and investigating the use of physical restraints on youth. The brief included recommendations to address this issue, including the use of body worn cameras by DYS staff. During the 2025 legislative session, the CPO supported the inclusion of a body-worn camera

Annual Report 2025-26

pilot program to be used in two youth centers.⁹ At the conclusion of the pilot program, DYS will issue recommendations on whether to expand the program in a January 2028 presentation. This pilot program is now in operation, and the CPO has been an active participant in ongoing conversations about the development of appropriate regulations to guide the program. The agency also participated in a demonstration of body-worn cameras at a DYS facility in order to more fully understand how it is being utilized in youth centers. The CPO will continue to monitor developments in this area and highlight the concerns voiced in the 2024 issue brief to ensure the young people and families served by DYS are receiving high-quality services.

“
Given these long-standing and escalating concerns, the CPO is recommending an overhaul of the existing surveillance systems to provide audio surveillance in addition to video surveillance as a means of improving facility security and the well-being of youth.”
Read the Brief

Policy Collaborative for Children & Families



POLICY COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Each case brought to the CPO helps to inform the agency of the systemic issues impacting how child protection services are being administered in Colorado. In addition to reviewing each individual case, the CPO is legally required to also review systemic issues and concerns within the child protection system. The CPO works to bring attention to these issues by providing education about how the issue is impacting children and youth in Colorado and serving as a neutral and impartial facilitator to drive improvements and promote better outcomes for children and youth.

To accomplish this work, the CPO established the Policy Collaborative for Children & Families (Collaborative). The Collaborative serves Colorado by facilitating lasting and thoughtful solutions to address systemic issues impacting the child

protection system. It does this by providing a neutral, independent, impartial and collaborative space for professionals, those with lived experience and members of the community, to come together and invest in Colorado’s children and families. The Collaborative is not restricted to any one methodology in fulfilling its duty to address systemic issues. However, the Collaborative houses three general areas of work:

- 1. Committee Engagement – All CPO engagement with external committees, task forces and work groups. Through these engagements, the CPO contributes expertise, elevates systemic concerns and facilitates coordination across agencies and partners.

- 2. Legislative Work – All CPO interactions with the Colorado General Assembly. This includes analysis of proposed legislation, engagement with legislators and staff, preparation of testimony and development of policy recommendations.
- 3. Initiatives – All CPO-led efforts to independently address systemic issues, including the production of public-facing products to educate or inform the public about such issues. The CPO weighs several factors in deciding what to open as an initiative, including whether the issue could impact the safety, well-being or permanency of children or youth, whether an alternative entity is currently addressing the same issue, if the CPO has the necessary capacity and resources to address the issue and if the CPO believes it has the ability to foster potential points of agreement among community partners.

Below are summaries of the CPO’s systemic priorities for FY 2025-26.



Audit of Colorado’s Risk and Safety Assessment Tools

Colorado’s Family Safety Assessment tool and Family Risk Assessment tool are designed to support child welfare caseworkers in making consistent, informed decisions to protect child safety, assess risk, and guide service planning for children and

February 27, 2026

→ **Colorado Safety and Risk Assessment Tools Audit**

Read the Audit

families. These assessments also inform how information is communicated to, understood by, and relied upon by other system actors, including legal professionals, as they make decisions that have profound and lasting impacts on families’ lives. The CPO first communicated its concerns regarding the use of these tools in 2023, particularly the inconsistent results of the tools. Subsequently, the General Assembly passed House Bill 24-1046, which required the CPO to contract with a third-party reviewer to audit the tools based on nine criteria provided in the bill. The multi-method, holistic audit was published in Marcy 2026. It contained several key findings and approximately 50 recommendations to address identified issues. Key findings included:

- A lack of clarity surrounding key components of the tools allow for the introduction of bias and prevent the tools from fully supporting complex family situations, situations involving domestic violence and/or intimate partner violence or address cultural considerations.
- The tools are not implemented consistently across the state.

- The tools and practices surrounding the tools lack cultural responsiveness and contribute to inequitable outcomes for families, particularly for families of color, tribal communities and marginalized populations.
- Results of the tools are inconsistently shared with families and legal professionals involved in the families’ cases.
- While training on use of the tool is delivered, it does not effectively translate into practice.
- Inconsistent documentation in use of the tools weakens their reliability and leads to uneven decisions and reduced family trust.

During the upcoming fiscal year, the CPO will continue its work with community partners to prioritize recommendations and begin implementing reforms.

Focusing on Children and Youth in Residential Treatment Facilities

Senate Bill 25-151 was the first installment of recommendations issued by the Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children and Youth from Running Away from Out-of-Home Placement. The bill requires residential child care facilities to adopt trauma-informed policies outlining how they will respond to a child or youth who threatens or attempts to run away from care. In tandem, CDHS must develop rules regarding what is contained in those policies. To assist in the development of those rules, the CPO drafted a set of proposed rules to ensure that meaningful facility polices are developed. The CPO will continue to be an active partner in the rules promulgation space to ensure facilities are developing efficient, well-structured and trauma-informed policies that will ultimately reduce the number of young people who run from care.

Additionally, the bill required the CPO to survey facility leaders throughout the state on the types of infrastructure their facilities currently have in place,

their assessment of whether that infrastructure is effective at preventing runs and their perspectives on additional infrastructure needs. The CPO published a report detailing the results of the survey during July 2026. Results did not show any single type of physical infrastructure to be either universally utilized, praised or desired by facility leaders. Instead, common themes emerged demonstrating that facility leaders want to create therapeutic environments for the young people in their care while also ensuring their safety, and take a range of steps to accomplish both of those goals.

...task force members often voiced concerns about not wanting to create a prison-like environment for the young people in the care of these facilities who are there through no fault of their own, while also acknowledging the potential dangers that exist if they were to run from care.”

Timothy Montoya Task Force

Addressing Gaps in Food Access Programs

During July 2025, the U.S. Congress enacted H.R. 1, which made permanent reductions and changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). CDHS estimates that these changes will lead to more than 44,000 households – or more than 79,000 Coloradans – losing access to this crucial program. In response to these troubling developments, on November 24, 2025, the CPO released an issue brief highlighting the growing

body of research showing that access to food assistance programs increases child safety. As it did in this brief, the CPO will continue to urge the public and policymakers to carefully consider the

harmful impacts that reductions to services like food assistance programs can have on the safety and well-being of the state’s youth and families.



However, the impacts and harms of a reduction in SNAP supports remain a stark reality as new – permanent – reductions in federal funding and changes to the program are enacted. Under these new parameters, an estimated 79,000 Coloradans will lose access to SNAP benefits. These cuts are set to take place during the next three years.”

Read the Brief

CPO Advisory Board

The CPO Advisory Board is an independent, nonpartisan board comprised of 12 members. Four members are appointed from each branch

of government and The CPO Advisory Board is an independent, nonpartisan board comprised of 12 members. Four members are appointed from

Chief Justice Appointments

- Hon. Gail Meinster, Board Chair
- Hannah Seigel Proff
- Katy Saehler
- Vacant

Governor Appointments

- Matthew Tulley, Vice Chair
- Connie Vigil
- Vacant
- Vacant

Senate President Appointment

- Charles Tedesco

Senate Minority Appointment

- Wendy Buxton Andrade

Speaker of the House Appointment

- Dr. Coral Steffey

House Minority Leader Appointment

- Brian Bernhard

each branch of government and all members serve for a period of four years. Each position on the Board requires a certain amount of experience or expertise. The Board was established to provide a mechanism of oversight for the Child Protection Ombudsman, however, its role is much broader. The CPO team routinely relies on the expertise of its Board to expand and guide its work. Members have

decades of experience and include child welfare professionals, judges, doctors, attorneys, county commissioners, human service directors, foster parents and advocates. The CPO would like to thank its Advisory Board for helping it fulfill its mission to ensure that the state’s child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family and community in Colorado.

Conclusion

Pursuant to C.R.S. §19-3.3-108, the CPO respectfully submits this Annual Report to Colorado’s governor, chief justice, the CPO Board of Directors and the Colorado General Assembly.

End Notes

- 1 Please note that one or more of the listed actions by outside agencies may appear in a single case.
- 2 The CPO will assign this disposition to a case when the CPO completed a case review of the issues and determined that the issues were able to be resolved or explained without contact to an agency or provider.
- 3 The CPO will assign this disposition to a case when the CPO completed a review of the issues and determined the need to contact an agency or provider related to the resolution of the complaint. This may include issues related to documentation, client contact/engagement, implementation or provision of rule, regulation, statute, or practice.
- 4 The CPO will assign this disposition when it provides a client with any information or resources to entities that may aid the client in addressing their concerns or questions.
- 5 The CPO will assign this disposition to a case when a client did not complete the case intake and/or did not provide the CPO with sufficient information to proceed with a review of their case.
- 6 The CPO will assign this disposition to a case when a client requests the CPO close the case and take no further action to review their question/complaint.
- 7 The CPO may assign this disposition to a case when, through its review of a case, the CPO identifies one or more of the following circumstances: (1) There is a possible breach of criminal or civil statute; (2) There is a violation of legal rights; (3) Physical injury has resulted to an individual; (3) Instances of agency misconduct are identified; (4) Systemic concerns are identified; (5) A pattern of concerning practice or possible regulatory violations are identified; or (6) When an action was not in the best interest of a child or youth. This list is not exhaustive. The Ombudsman maintains the discretion to assign this disposition to other.
- 8 The Ombudsman, or their designee, has the authority to decline to review a question/complaint or close a case. The reasons for such decisions shall be documented in the agency’s database.
- 9 See [House Bill 25-1146](#), Juvenile Detention Bed Cap, with pilot program section codified in C.R.S. 19-2.5-1408.5.



CHILD PROTECTION
OMBUDSMAN
of COLORADO