



OFFICE *of* COLORADO'S
**CHILD PROTECTION
OMBUDSMAN**

**FISCAL YEAR 2026-2027
PERFORMANCE PLAN**

July 1, 2026

**Jordan Steffen
Child Protection Ombudsman**

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Agency Overview

Background

The Office of the Colorado 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).

The program was created in response to the deaths of 12 children in Colorado who 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 Colorado's child protection system. The public demanded the state create a mechanism to examine the components of the state's child protection system, help the public navigate the complexity of the system and provide recommendations on how to improve the system overall.

Years after its creation, legislators determined that the CPO needed independence from the agencies it was designed to review. And on June 2, 2015, Senate Bill 15-204, Concerning the Independent Functioning of the Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman, was signed into law. The new, independent CPO opened in 2016.

Senate Bill 15-204 not only transformed the original "program" into a distinct and independent state agency, but it also created the first ever Child Protection Ombudsman Board (CPO Board). Designed to ensure the accountability and transparency of the CPO, the CPO Board is required to oversee the Child Protection Ombudsman's performance and act as an advisory body.

Since its independence, the CPO has worked consistently to keep its practices aligned with national standards. 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 works to provide a clear channel between Coloradans and the agencies and providers tasked with protecting children. Specifically, the CPO independently gathers information, investigates complaints and provides recommendations to child protection agencies, providers and the state's legislature.

Further aligning the CPO with national standards, House Bill 21-1272 was signed into law on June 24, 2021. The law allows the CPO to be more responsive to members of the public requesting a review of the circumstances surrounding a critical incident, such as a child fatality. Prior to its passage, the CPO was unable to complete such reviews in a timely or robust manner. Additionally, House Bill 21-1272 created additional protections for confidential information and documents reviewed by the CPO during a case.

In June 2021 and June 2022, the CPO's duties and powers were expanded with the passage of House Bill 21-1313 and House Bill 22-1319. Intended to help unaccompanied immigrant children placed

within Colorado's borders by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, these bills permit the CPO to initiate reviews of the safety and well-being of such youth who are placed in state-licensed residential child care facilities, as well as monitor their care. At the time of publication, Colorado does not have any licensed facilities that would fall under the purview of this program.

Also in June 2022, two task forces were established in the CPO through the passage of House Bill 22-1240 and House Bill 22-1375. Each was designed to objectively examine issues critical to improving the state's child protection system and were comprised of members with diverse experience and knowledge. The Mandatory Reporting Task Force, established by House Bill 22-1240, analyzed 19 directives concerning the procedures and effectiveness of Colorado's child abuse and neglect mandatory reporting system and possible improvements. The Mandatory Reporting Task Force issued its final report and recommendations on January 1, 2025. The Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children from Running Away from Out-Of-Home Placement (Timothy Montoya Task Force), established by House Bill 22-1375, analyzed nine directives aimed at improving safeguards for children in out-of-home placement who have runaway behaviors. The Timothy Montoya Task Force issued its final report and recommendations on October 1, 2024.

Finally, during the 2025 General Assembly, House Bill 25-1200 was passed. This bill amended the CPO's enabling statute to clarify its purview and access to records. Additionally, for the first time, the bill granted the CPO to enter DYS youth centers and residential child care facilities to receive complaints and provide education materials regarding the CPO's services.

The CPO, housed within the Colorado Judicial Branch, is located at the Ralph L. Carr Judicial Center in Denver. Colorado's current Child Protection Ombudsman is Jordan Steffen. Child Protection Ombudsman Steffen was appointed in May 2026 by the CPO Board and took office in June 2026.

Mission

We ensure Colorado child protection systems consistently, fairly and equitably deliver services to every child, youth and family across our state.

Case Support

- Guide youth, families and community members in navigating complex systems
- Review cases to ensure the highest attainable standards of care
- Work with people and agencies to help resolve concerns and disputes at the ground level

Systems Change

- Engage communities across Colorado in addressing local and statewide problems
- Collaborate with stakeholders and lawmakers to improve services, policies and laws

Vision

We work to ensure the child protection system provides consistent, high-quality services to children and youth in a manner that keeps them safe and healthy, while promoting their well-being.

Values

The CPO's values guide the office's decisions, interactions and service to children, youth, families and communities.

Integrity – The CPO is transparent, impartial and consistent.

Collaborative – The CPO creates change by sharing knowledge and working with others.

Equity – The CPO respects and values all experiences and strive to create systems that are responsive to unique and individual circumstances.

Curious – The CPO seeks to understand the impacts of child protection systems and explore opportunities for reform.

Independent – The CPO maintains its independence from other child protection agencies.

Major Agency Functions

Role of the CPO

The CPO was created to ensure the state's complex child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, family and community in Colorado. The agency:

- Listens to people about their experience with, and concerns about, the state's child protection system.
- Researches concerns reported by any individual or entity about service delivery within Colorado's child protection system.
- Resolves issues by determining the best way to assist people. This may mean bridging communication barriers or mediating conflicts based on misunderstandings.
- Identifies trends where the child protection system's funding, resources or practices are not keeping up with the needs of children, youth and families.
- Makes public recommendations for child protection system improvements. This may mean working with lawmakers, professionals and other stakeholders to advance legislation and policies that have a lasting, positive impact on children, youth and families.

Responsibilities of the CPO

The CPO is responsible for responding to the public's 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 but is not limited to law enforcement, mental health agencies, child welfare services and the Division of Youth Services (DYS).

The CPO may self-initiate an independent and impartial investigation and ongoing review of the safety and well-being of an unaccompanied immigrant child who lives in a state-licensed residential

child care facility and who is in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the federal Department of Health and Human Services as set forth in 8 U.S.C. sec. 1232 et seq. As part of this responsibility, the CPO may create and distribute outreach materials to state-licensed residential child care facilities and to individuals that have regular contact with unaccompanied immigrant children.

Additionally, the CPO is responsible for informing on systemic changes to promote better outcomes for, and improve the safety and well-being of, children, youth and families receiving child protection services in Colorado. Being uniquely situated to gather and share information with state and non-state entities, the CPO may issue recommendations to enhance the state's child protection system. The CPO shares this and other information with the public by publishing reports and other content at www.coloradocpo.org.

Jurisdiction and Environment

Each year, the CPO provides free and confidential services to hundreds of people who have questions and concerns about the state's child protection system. These clients include parents, grandparents, kin, youth, medical professionals, lawyers, social workers, police officers and many others.

Clients' questions and concerns often relate to specific program areas within the state's child protection system, including child welfare, juvenile justice and behavioral health. With access to child protection records that are not otherwise available to the public, the CPO is able to independently and objectively resolve clients' questions and concerns while concurrently identifying systemic issues afflicting the child protection system.

The agency's enabling statutes are C.R.S. § 19-3.3-101 – 19-3.3-113. Pursuant to C.R.S. § 19-3.3-103, the CPO has the authority to:

- Receive complaints concerning child protection services.
- Request, access, and review any information, records, or documents, including records of third parties, that the ombudsman deems necessary to conduct a thorough and independent review of a complaint.
- Independently and impartially investigate complaints.
- Seek resolution of complaints.
- Recommend changes and promote best practices to improve the state's child protection services.
- Educate the public concerning strengthening families and keeping children safe.
- Self-initiate an independent and impartial investigation and ongoing review of the safety and well-being of any unaccompanied immigrant child who lives in a state-licensed residential child care facility and is in federal custody.

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.

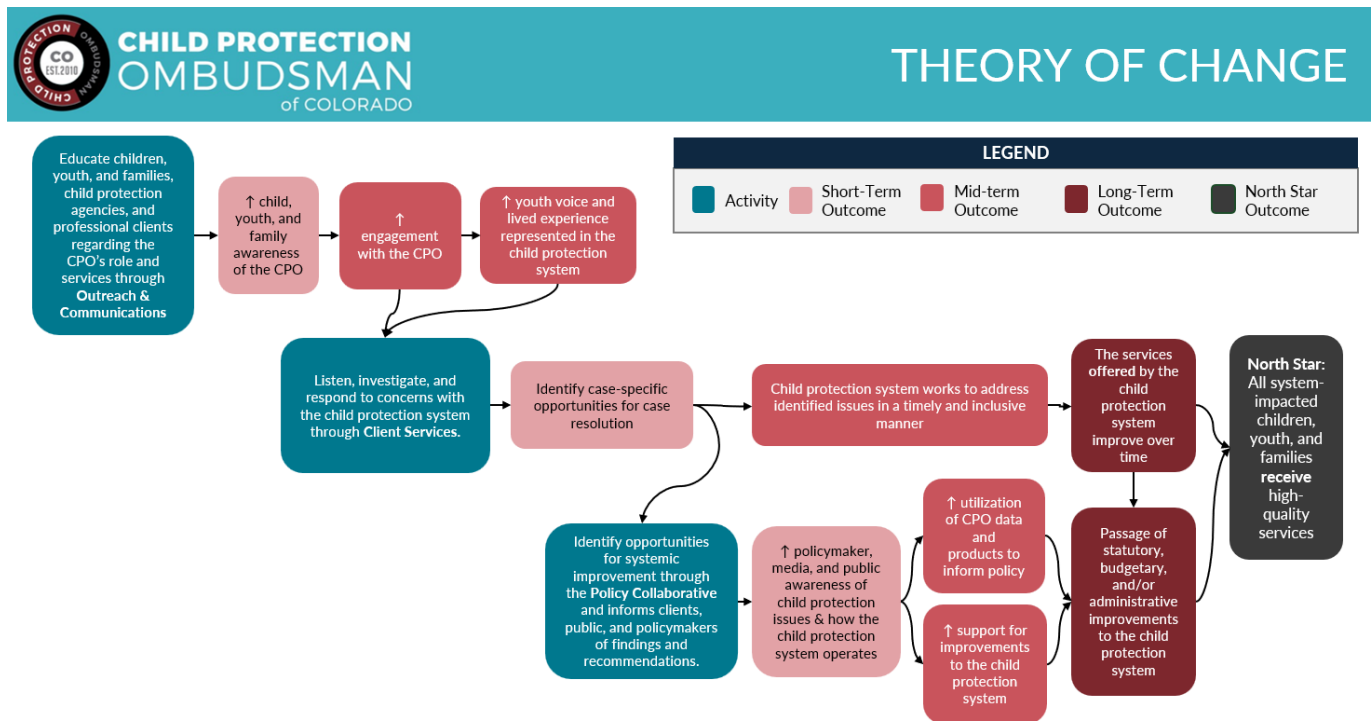
- Testify in a court proceeding in which the CPO is not a party.
- Provide third-party records/documents acquired in the course of a case.
- Investigate complaints related to judges, magistrates, attorneys or guardians ad litem.
- Overturn any court order.
- Mandate the reversal of an agency/provider decision.
- Offer legal advice.

To access the CPO's SMART Act reports, please click [here](#) or visit the website of the Colorado Governor's Office of State Planning and Budgeting.

Strategy Overview

Theory of Change Overview

To achieve the CPO's vision, the office developed a Theory of Change (TOC) that outlines how activities are expected to influence outcomes and the measures used to evaluate the process.



The TOC consists of three primary pathways to drive change:

Listen, investigate and respond to concerns with the child protection system.

CPO Client Services Analysts (CSAs) receive and review concerns, making case-specific

recommendations designed to improve the outcomes in specific cases and the child protection system as a whole. This work also generates case data that helps the CPO identify broader trends and issues.

Identify the opportunities for systemic improvement through the CPO's Public Policy Collaborative for Children and Families (Collaborative).

The Policy Collaborative analyses case data, state policy comparisons and issues flagged by CSAs or partner agencies. Findings are shared with the public, policymakers and the media to build awareness and support for systems change.

Educate children, youth and families, child protection agencies and professionals regarding the CPO's role and services.

The CPO conducts outreach across Colorado to help children, youth, families child protection agencies and professionals understand and use CPO resources – with a particular focus on increasing engagement from youth.

The Strategic Policy Initiatives within the CPO's SMART Act Performance Plan outline efforts to continuously improve the quality of these activities.

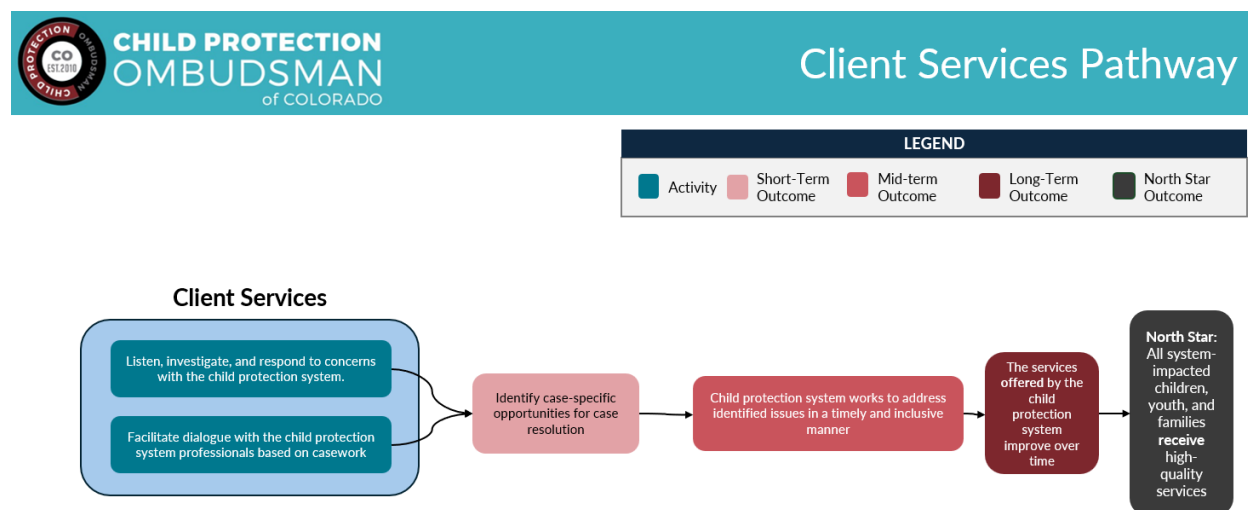
Fiscal Year 2026-27 Performance Plan

Strategic Policy Initiatives

SPI 1: SERVICES AND PROGRAMS: Continue to develop and strengthen efficient and effective CPO practices to better serve children, youth and families receiving child protection services in Colorado.

The CPO is statutorily required to receive and conduct independent and impartial investigations of complaints concerning the action, inaction or decision of a public agency or provider that receives public money that may adversely affect the safety, permanency or well-being of a child or youth. (See C.R.S. § 19-3.3-103(1)(a) and § 19-3.3-101.5(2).)

The CPO delivers a wide variety of services under this authority, including one-on-one services for clients with concerns or questions about the child protection system.



When functioning well, the CPO provides timely responses to clients, case managements consistently meets quality standards, cases are prioritized in alignment with CPO values and clients feel heard and confident their concerns have been thoroughly explored.

Fiscal Year 2026-27 will focus on pilot programs to assess case review consistency and quality, prioritize incoming cases and establish clear standards for case practices. The CPO will also work to

improve processes and systems for regular reporting and analysis of case management data to support the Policy Collaborative.

Strategy One: Pilot Case Intake Process

Critical Process: Establish a structured intake process to categorize cases by urgency, complexity and alignment with the CPO's mandate. Cases outside the CPO's scope will be redirected to appropriate resources, allowing the CPO to focus on cases in which the CPO may have the greatest impact.

Key Activities

FY 2026-27

- Implement a plan to eliminate case backlogs and mitigate circumstances that would allow for future backlogs to form.
- Pilot case intake criteria and a waitlist system.
- Monitor how clients respond to process changes.

FY 2027-28

- Review pilot program data and implement permanent waitlist system and monitoring.
- Implement standard processes and systems for client input surveys.
- Implement quality assurance program to ensure continued monitoring and opportunities for improvement.
- Ensure quality assurance program addresses the CPO's compliance with enabling authority mandates and jurisdictions.

FY 2028-29

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Eliminate any backlog of cases.
- Establish a baseline for time from the point a client contacts the CPO to when the CPO provides the client referral to appropriate resources and a target for the upcoming fiscal year.
- Establish a baseline to monitor the time cases spend on the waitlist and targets for reducing waitlist time in the future years.
- Develop a clear understanding of client expectations and responses to case practices and processes.

Strategy Two: Case Management Standards

Critical Process: Evaluate current case management processes and develop standard for ongoing quality assurance assessments, including standards for timeliness, documentation and client communication. Provide training and ongoing support to ensure consistent implementation.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Carryout third-party review of the CPO's case management standards by the University of Denver's Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab.
- Measure and establish a baseline for timeliness and targets for upcoming year.
- Evaluate current practices and identify areas for improvement.
- Establish case management standards and data quality standards and processes.

FY 2027-2028

- Using data and feedback gained during the previous fiscal year, implement standard timelines and procedures to address any areas of the CPO's case management process.
- Implement quality assurance processes to ensure the agency is continually monitoring cases for timeliness, documentation standards and client communication standards.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Established baseline and targets for future timeliness measures.
- Establish clear case management and data quality standards.
- Establish data entry quality baseline measures and target for future improvement in the upcoming year.

Strategy Three: Case Data Standards

Critical Process: Modernize CPO's data infrastructure and establish consistent practices for data extraction, analysis and reporting. Efforts will enable more efficient, accurate and actionable use of case management data to support continuous improvement.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Complete the redesign of the CPO's internal case management system.
- Develop policies and procedures for consistent data extraction from the case management system to help inform systemic analysis.
- Establish a regular cadence and process for data extraction, analysis and reporting.

FY 2027-2028

- Complete one-year review of internal case management system to check for system and data integrity.
- Make any system adjustments needed to address findings of the review and adherence to the quality assurance program implemented by the agency

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Establish an improved process for regular data extraction and reporting.
- CPO case data is used in four to six proactive publications per fiscal year.
- Establish consistent practices in using agency data to direct communication and education efforts.

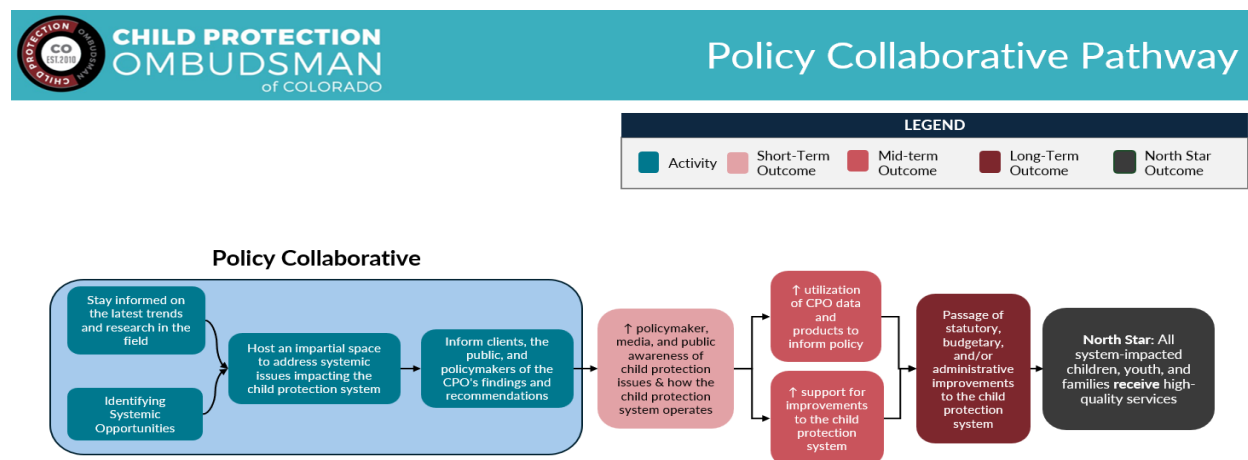
SPI 2 – SYSTEMS CHANGE: Collaborate with children, youth, caregivers, community partners and policymakers to advance improvements to child protection services, policies and laws for every community in Colorado.

The CPO is charged with serving the public through its review of systemic issues impacting the child protection system and, in many circumstances, recommending systemic changes to “*improve the safety of and promote better outcomes for children and families receiving child protection services in Colorado.*” (See C.R.S. § 19-3.3- 103(3)(i).) To support this work, the CPO established the Policy Collaborative.

Connecting to the TOC:

The Policy Collaborative is the CPO’s primary vehicle for translating casework patterns into systemic recommendations. It supports the following TOC activities:

1. Informing clients, the public and policymakers of CPO findings and recommendations.
2. Facilitating dialogue with child protection professionals based on CPO casework.
3. Hosting an impartial space to address systemic issues in the child protection system.



When functioning well, the Policy Collaborative consistently produces findings and recommendations that raise awareness of issues within the child protection system and drive meaningful improvement in systems through changes in law, regulation, policy and practice. During FY 2025-26, the CPO created

formal policies, processes and staff guides for this work. During FY 2026-27, the focus will shift to operationalizing the Policy Collaborative.

By the end of FY 2026-27, the CPO aims to establish and improve Policy Collaborative processes, including developing a regular cadence for issue briefs and policy products, and strengthening relationships with the Division of Youth Services (DYS), residential child care facilities and behavioral health services to support outreach and future policy work.

Strategy One: Implement Policy Collaborative Procedures.

Critical Process: Ensure the Policy Collaborative operates effectively to allow for the timely and thorough review of systemic issues.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Identify barriers that may limit issues brought to the Policy Collaborative and continuing ongoing initiatives
- Implement policies developed during FY 2025-26 regarding guidance for how identified issues move through the Policy Collaborative and become formal projects.
- Launch a regular Policy Collaborative meeting cadence and work.
- Identify and address potential barriers that limit issue identification and progression through the Policy Collaborative.

FY 2027-2028

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Increased proposals and issues flagged by internal sources and partner agencies.
- Consistently using CPO data to inform Policy Collaborative work.
- At least three new projects onboarded within two years.

Strategy Two: Monitor and Implement Recommendations.

Critical Process: Continue implementing recommendations and monitor progress of ongoing Policy Collaborative initiatives and projects.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Implement recommendations from the third-party audit of Colorado's Risk and Safety Assessment Tools.

- Continue to monitor and contribute to the implementation of requirements set in Senate Bill 25-151.
- Continue looking for opportunities to implement recommendations of the Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children and Youth from Running Away from Care and the Mandatory Reporting Task Force.

FY 2027-2028

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Establish working group to address and implement recommendations issued in the third-party audit of Colorado's Risk And Safety Assessment Tool.
- Ensure the survey report required SB 25-151 is submitted and distributed accordingly and create additional opportunities for community partner engagement.
- Continue to monitor additional requirements of SB 25-151 regarding the implementation of policies to advise caregivers and parents of practices to deter and respond to young people who run away from care and additional reporting requirements for facilities.

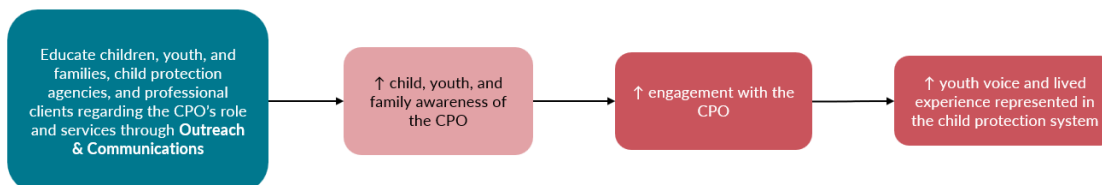
SPI 3 – COMMUNITY OUTREACH: Raise awareness of the CPO and provide reliable forms of communication to ensure every child, youth and family receiving services in Colorado has equitable access to the CPO's services and resources.

The CPO is statutorily required to *"help educate the public concerning issues and recommendations the ombudsman identifies, including on child maltreatment and the role of the community in strengthening families and keeping children safe."* (See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(3)(g).)

When children, youth and families are more aware of the CPO and its services, they are more likely to use it as a resource. Through better outreach – particularly to those who may not currently engage with the CPO – the office receives cases more representative of the issues facing Colorado's children, youth and families.



Outreach & Education



By the end of FY 2026-27, the CPO aims to strengthen its community outreach infrastructure and establish a plan to expand equitable access to its services across Colorado. This includes implementing stronger internal processes for to track and evaluate communications activity, bolstering the office's communication department to ensure a regular cadence of newsletters and social media and developing a communications plan for increased outreach to rural communities, DYS youth centers and residential child care facilities – including establishing MOUs and initial education sessions.

Strategy One: Monitor and Evaluate Office Touchpoints and Impact.

Critical Process: Develop data collection and analysis plans for future evaluation of communication activities.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Develop internal data collection systems and analysis to track communication work and effectiveness.
- Ensure the third-party review conducted by The Lab addresses how the office may better extract case data to inform the public, community partners, the media and the General Assembly of issues identified by the CPO.

FY 2027-2028

- Review the third-party review to determine best standard practices to carry out this critical process.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Successfully implement data collection system and procedures for use in Policy

- Collaborative and communications strategies.
- Identify communications measures and reports to prioritize over time.

Strategy Two: Expand knowledge and use of CPO services through strategic engagement and education.

Critical Process: Create consistent communication engagement with youth and communities underrepresented in CPO case data.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Establish a communications plan for more regular and frequent outreach and education in communities outside of the metro area.
- Establish MOUs and hold education sessions furthering the implementation of HB 25-1200. This includes the creation of consistent lines of communication with all DYS youth centers and state-licensed residential child care facilities.
- Establish outreach efforts to connect with community-based non-profits that provide applicable services to children and families in Colorado.

FY 2027-2028

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- Plan developed and implemented to establish more regular and frequent outreach and education in communities outside of the metro area. CPO holds three outreach or education events outside the metro area during FY 2026-27.
- Plan developed and implemented to hold educational and outreach sessions compliant with HB 25-1200. This includes at least four education sessions held within applicable facilities during FY 2026-27.

Strategy Three: Maintain Consistent Cadence of Proactive Communications Regarding Casework and Policy Collaborative Initiatives.

Critical Process: Provide the public, policymakers and community partners with consistent information regarding findings and identified concerns.

Key Activities

FY 2026-2027

- Produce consistent proactive reports to detail agency work and priorities, including newsletters and social media engagement.
- Promote CPO engagement events through active and passive outreach efforts.

- Ensure consistent communication to the Colorado General Assembly through statutory reports and other proactive efforts.

FY 2027-2028

- Key activities are completed yearly.

FY 2028-2029

- Assess critical process and amend key activities as needed.

Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- The CPO provides the public, policymakers and community partners with timely information concerning the agency's findings and identified concerns.
- Established and recurring outreach tours within and outside the Metro area.
- Established and recurring outreach and education that ensure the agency is meeting the requirements of HB 25-1200.

Conclusion

The Child Protection Ombudsman respectfully submits this report to the Joint Budget Committee and the General Assembly, as is required under C.R.S. § 2-7-204. The CPO will comply with its requirements under the statute and will submit the required reports and evaluations.