

CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN

FISCAL YEAR 2027-2028

AGENCY SUMMARY & BUDGET REQUEST

November 1, 2026

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Child Protection Ombudsman

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OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE OF THE COLORADO CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (OCPO) was created to ensure the state's complex child protection system consistently provides high-quality services to every child, youth, young person, family and community in Colorado. The office 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 children, youth and families. 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 OCPO 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 OCPO with a concern or question about the child protection system. The office's services are free and confidential. People do not need to be involved with the child protection system to open a case with the OCPO. However, the majority of people who contact the office are either involved with the child protection system or have professional connections.

To ensure the office can continue to effectively fulfill its statutory charge to provide direct services to children, youth and families, the OCPO respectfully submits its Agency Summary and Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2027-28.

Summary of Request

The OCPO is requesting $231,865 General Fund and 2.0 FTE for two additional Client Services Analysts (CSA). These additional positions are necessary to ensure the OCPO is able to effectively fulfill its statutory mandate to review complaints and questions brought to the office, reduce the amount of time children and families are required to wait for resolution of their case and improve retention within the Client Services Team.

Office Overview

ESTABLISHMENT AND STRUCTURE

The OCPO was established in June 2010, under Senate Bill 10-171. This legislation provided that the OCPO 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 members of 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 OCPO 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 OCPO 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 (OCPO Board). Designed to ensure the accountability and transparency of the office, the OCPO Board is required to oversee the Child Protection Ombudsman's performance and act as an advisory body.

Since its independence, the OCPO has worked consistently to keep its practices aligned with national standards. The OCPO is guided by standards set by organizations such as the United States Ombudsman Association and the American Bar Association. Using those standards, the OCPO works to provide a clear channel between children and families and the agencies and providers tasked with protecting children in Colorado. Specifically, the OCPO independently gathers information, investigates complaints and provides recommendations to child protection agencies, providers and the Colorado General Assembly.

Further aligning the OCPO with national standards, House Bill 21-1272 was signed into law on June 24, 2021. The law allows the OCPO to be more responsive to an individual requesting a review of the circumstances surrounding a critical incident, such as a child fatality. Prior to its passage, the OCPO 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 OCPO during a case.

In June 2021 and June 2022, the OCPO'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 OCPO 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 of this request, 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 OCPO 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 HB 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 HB 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 legislative session, House Bill 25-1200 was passed. This bill amended the OCPO's enabling statute to clarify its purview and access to records. Additionally, for the first time, the bill granted the OCPO the authority to enter the Division of Youth Services' (DYS) youth centers and residential child care facilities to receive complaints directly from youth residing in those facilities and provide education materials regarding the OCPO's services.

The OCPO is housed within the Colorado Judicial Branch. Its offices are 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 April 2026 by the OCPO Board.

MISSION, VISION AND VALUES

Mision: The OCPO works to ensure Colorado's child protection system consistently, fairly and equitably delivers services to every child, youth and family across Colorado.

Vision: The OCPO works 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 OCPO's values guide the office's decisions, interactions and service to children, youth, families and communities. The OCPO's values are:

Integrity – The OCPO is transparent, impartial and consistent.

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

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

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

JURISDICTION AND CHARGE

The OCPO is required to respond to the public's complaints and questions concerning the actions or inactions of child protection agencies that may adversely impact the safety, permanency or well-being of a child.[1] 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 and behavioral health agencies, child welfare services and DYS.[2]

Some of the provisions contained in the OCPO's enabling statute require the OCPO to:

- Receive and conduct independent investigations of complaints concerning the child protection system.
- 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.[3]
- Issue recommendations for changes to the child protection system.[4]
- Educate the public, General Assembly and system partners about issues identified by the OCPO.[5]

The OCPO does not have the authority to:

- Investigate allegations of abuse or neglect.
- Interfere or intervene in any criminal or civil court proceeding.[6]
- Provide third-party records/documents acquired in the course of an investigation.
- Investigate complaints related to judges, magistrates, attorneys or guardians ad litem and counsels for youth.[7]
- Overturn any court order.

[1] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(1)(a)
[2] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-101.5(2)
[3] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(2)(a)(I)
[4] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(3)(i)
[5] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(3)(g)
[6] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(4)
[7] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(2)(a)(III)

- Mandate the reversal of an agency/provider action.
- Offer legal advice.

The OCPO 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 the refugee Resettlement of the federal Department of Health and Human Services as set forth in 8 U.S.C. sec, 1232 et seq.[8] As part of this charge, the OCPO may create and distribute outreach materials to state-licensed residential child care facilities and to individuals that have regular contact with unaccompanied immigrant children.[9]

Additionally, the OCPO is responsible for informing the public, the General Assembly and system partners about systemic issues within the child protection system.[10] The OCPO is uniquely situated to gather and share information with state and non-state entities, and is required to issue recommendations to improve the safety of and promote better outcomes for children and families receiving child protection services in Colorado.[11]

Primary Services and Functions

The OCPO's services are unique and provide an unmatched utility in Colorado's state government. Primarily, the OCPO's services fall within two categories:

Individual Case Investigations – The OCPO's largest department is its Client Services Team which includes 8.0 FTE. This team is comprised of the Director of Client Services (1.0 FTE), two Senior Client Services Analysts (2.0 FTE) and five Client Services Analysts (5.0 FTE). Of the 8 FTE on the team, 7.0 FTE carry full caseloads.[12]

The OCPO works to understand the unique circumstances and information involved in each case brought to the office. To accomplish this the OCPO works to give each client the time they need to share their story and experience. Often, by the time a client has contacted the OCPO, 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 were made. It is not uncommon for the OCPO to spend more than an hour with clients during their intake call with the office. This allows the OCPO to understand each client's concerns at a deep level.

Each complaint or question received by the OCPO goes through one or more phases of review. The four phases of review are: Listen, Investigate, Resolve and Identify Trends.

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[8] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(1)(b)
[9] At the time of publication of this request, Colorado does not have any licensed facilities that would fall under the purview of this program.
[10] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(3)(i)
[11] See C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(3)(g)
[12] The Director of Client Services does not carry a full caseload

Each case opened by the OCPO will be closed with one of eight dispositions:

- ***Case Reviewed Without Outside Agency Contact:*** The OCPO will assign this disposition to a case when the OCPO completed a full case review of the issues and determined that the issues were able to be resolved or explained without contact to an agency or provider.
- ***Case Reviewed with Outside Agency Contact:*** The OCPO will assign this disposition to a case when the OCPO completed a full case 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 guidance, regulation, statute or practice.
- ***Case Closed with Concern:*** The OCPO may assign this disposition to a case when, through its review of a case, the OCPO identifies one or more of the following circumstances: (1) There is a possible breach of criminal or civil statute; (2) There is a possible violation of legal rights; (3) Physical injury has resulted to an individual; (4) Instances of possible agency misconduct are identified; (5) Systemic concerns are identified; (6) A pattern of concerning practice or possible regulatory violations are identified; or (7) When an action was not in the best interested of a child or youth. This list is not exhaustive. The Ombudsman maintains the sole discretion to assign this disposition.
- ***Client Provided an Information and Resource Referral:*** The OCPO will assign this disposition when it provides a client with any information or resources to external entities that may aid the client in addressing their concerns or questions.
- ***Closed Due to Lack of Information Provided to the OCPO:*** The OCPO will assign this disposition to a case when a client did not complete the case intake and/or did not provide the OCPO with sufficient information to proceed with a review of their case.
- ***Client Requested the OCPO to Close the Case:*** The OCPO will assign this disposition to a case when a client requests the OCPO close the case and take no further action to review their questions/concerns.
- ***Case Closed Per Ombudsman Discretion:*** The Ombudsman, or their designee, has the authority to decline to review a question or complaint or close a case. The reasons for such decisions shall be documented in the OCPO's database.
- ***Closed as a Duplicate Case***

The OCPO may take a number of actions when an investigation reveals concerns with how child protection services were provided to children, youth and families. The OCPO 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 OCPO to

inform agencies when it identifies concerns with how the agency – most commonly a county department of human services or the DYS – handle a case. Such concerns often involve possible non-compliance with state law, regulation and/or best practice. The majority of agencies contacted by the OCPO in this circumstance agree with the OCPO's findings and take some form of corrective action. Corrective action may include agencies or providers taking the following one or more actions:

- Providing staff with additional training and education.
- Amending or adding additional documentation in a child protection case.
- Engaging the client and further discussing the case with them to address issues.
- Revising or developing a policy to address an issue.
- Taking steps to correct actions by personnel or taking disciplinary action.

Addressing Systemic Concerns

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

To accomplish this work, the OCPO established the Policy Collaborative for Children & Families (Collaborative).[13] 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 OCPO engagement with external committees, task forces and work groups. Through these engagements, the OCPO contributes expertise, elevates systemic concerns and facilitates coordination across agencies.
2. ***Legislative Work*** – All OCPO interactions with the General Assembly. This includes analysis of proposed legislation, engagement with legislators and staff, preparation of testimony and development of policy recommendations.

[13] See Appendix A, Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Policy Collaborative for Children & Families Fact Sheet.

3. ***Initiatives*** – All OCPO-led efforts to independently address systemic issues, including the production of public-facing products to educate or inform the public about such issues. The OCPO 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 OCPO has the necessary capacity and resources to address the issue and if the OCPO believes it has the ability to foster potential points of agreement among community partners.

Review of Fiscal Year 2025-26

LOOKBACK TO OCPO 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. For the fourth consecutive fiscal year, the OCPO opened more than 1,000 cases during FY 2025-26 – totaling 1,254 cases. The OCPO was contacted by family members of children or youth, professionals and others with concerns or questions about the child protection system.

During FY 2025-26, the OCPO closed 1,320 cases. In 22 percent of those cases, the OCPO determined that clients would benefit from a referral to a different entity. In each of these cases, the OCPO still worked to ensure it understood the questions and issues involved in the case. For example, the OCPO often receives calls from people with concerns about the actions of their attorneys or people who are seeking assistance with their legal cases. The OCPO does not have authority to review these cases. Instead, after learning the details of the concern, the OCPO will help guide the person to the best resource near them.

The OCPO completed 641 full case reviews during the past fiscal year. In approximately 60 percent of those cases, the OCPO 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 OCPO did identify concerns with possible violations of law, regulation or guidance, and contacted the agency involved to get more information.

ELEVATING YOUTH VOICE AND EXPERIENCE

The OCPO'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 OCPO's systemic work. The OCPO 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 OCPO 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 OCPO with feedback and insights for the development of its survey of residential child care facilities' physical infrastructure needs and posters the CPO developed for DYS youth centers and 24-hour care facilities.[14]

Supporting Youth Residing in 24-Hour Care

During FY 2025-26, 92 youth residing in DYS youth centers contacted the OCPO directly with concerns, up significantly from 52 reports during the previous fiscal year. Overall, the OCPO received 147 cases concerning the treatment of youth residing in DYS youth centers. The office received 22 cases concerning the use of physical force inside youth centers – 18 less than the previous fiscal year. However, the OCPO experienced a significant increase in the number of cases reported to the office involving alleged violations of youth rights within the youth centers. In total, the OCPO received 83 such cases during FY 2025-26, compared to 19 cases received the previous fiscal year.

SYSTEMIC PRIORITIES AND IMPACT

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 families. These assessments also inform how information is communicated to, understood, and relied upon, by other system actors, including legal professionals and others with authority to make decisions that have profound and lasting impacts on families' lives.

The OCPO first communicated its concerns regarding the use of these tools in 2023, particularly the inconsistent results of the tools.[15] Subsequently, the General Assembly passed House Bill 24-1046, which required the OCPO 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 during March 2026. It contained several key findings and approximately 60 recommendations to address identified issues.[16]

[14] See Senate Bill 25-151

[15] See Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman's Issue Brief to the 2023 Colorado Child Welfare System Interim Study Committee, June 27, 2023.

[16] See Colorado Safety and Risk Assessment Tools Audit, February 27, 2026.

Treatment of 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.[17] 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 regulations regarding what is contained in those policies. To assist in the development of those regulations, the OCPO drafted a set of proposed regulations to ensure that meaningful facility polices are developed.

Additionally, the bill required the OCPO 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 OCPO published a report detailing the results of the survey during July 2026.[18] 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.

Additional details about the cases received by the OCPO, public policy initiatives and youth engagements are contained in the office's Fiscal Year 2025-26 Annual Report. The full report is provided in Appendix B.[19]

Strategic Priorities for Fiscal Year 2026-27

As is required under the Smart Measurement for Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent Government Reports Act (SMART Act C.R.S. § 2-7-204), the OCPO submitted its Fiscal Year 2026-27 Performance Plan to Gov. Jared Polis on July 1, 2026, and the Performance Plan was posted on the OCPO's website.[20] The OCPO's Performance Plan contains the office's strategic goals for Fiscal Year 2026-27.

These include expanding communication and engagement efforts, efficiently managing caseloads and research and establishing the OCPO as a leader with respect to

[17] See Timothy Montoya Task Force Final Report, October 1, 2024.
[18] See Office of the Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Final Report, Senate Bill 25-151 Residential Child Care Facility Survey Results: Physical Infrastructure to Prevent Young People from Running Away from Care, July 1, 2026.
[19] See Appendix B, Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2024-25.
[20] See Appendix C, Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman's Fiscal Year 2026-27 SMART Act Performance Plan, July 1, 2026.

understanding child protection issues and best practices. Additionally, the plan lists the specific strategies, processes, activities and metrics the OCPO is using to help achieve these strategic goals. These efforts include promoting awareness of the office's services, engaging youth, the public and stakeholders to address systemic issues and providing education about the OCPO's work and findings.

Fiscal Year 2027-28 Funding Request Summary

Decision Item R1: Additional 2.0 FTE for Client Services Analyst Position

The OCPO's FY 2027-28 request includes continuation funding and statewide common-policy adjustments. The OCPO's single decision item totals $231,865 General Fund and 2.0 FTE. The FTE effects and supporting calculations are presented in the section below.

Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman
OCPO R01 Client Services Analyst FTE
Schedule 13 - Change Request FY 2027-28

		FY 2026-27	FY 2027-28	FY 2027-28	FY 2028-29
	Fund	**Initial Appropriation**	**Base Request**	**Change Request**	**Continuation**
TOTAL ALL LINE ITEMS	Total	$2,420,690	$2,586,229	$231,865	$237,307
	FTE	14.5	14.5	2.0	2.0
	GF	$2,420,690	$2,586,229	$231,865	$237,307
	CF	-	-	-	-
	RF	-	-	-	-
	FF	-	-	-	-
(09) Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman Program Costs	Total	$2,420,690	$2,586,229	$231,865	$237,307
	FTE	14.5	14.5	2.0	2.0
	GF	$2,420,690	$2,586,229	$231,865	$237,307
	CF	-	-	-	-
	RF	-	-	-	-
	FF	-	-	-	-
Type of Request:		Judicial Branch Prioritized Request			
CF Letternote Text Revision Required?	Yes		No	X	
RF Letternote Text Revision Required?	Yes		No	X	
FF Letternote Text Revision Required?	Yes		No	X	
Footnote Required?	Yes		No	X	
Requires Legislation?	Yes		No	X	

Request

The OCPO is requesting $231,865 and 2.0 FTE for two additional Client Services Analysts (CSA). These additional positions are necessary to ensure the OCPO is able to effectively fulfill its statutory mandate to review complaints and questions brought to the office, reduce the amount of time children and families are required to wait for resolution of their case and improve retention within the Client Services Team.

The OCPO is requesting $115,932.5 per 1.0 FTE (including Medicare, AED/SAED and STD). The office is requesting an annual salary of $80,000, which is the standard starting salary for the CSA position.[21]

Without these additional positions, the children, youth and families who contact the OCPO for assistance with their concerns about the child protection system will continue to experience delays as the OCPO works to review their case.

Background and Demonstrated Need

Need for Timely Services

During the past four fiscal years, the OCPO has opened more than a thousand cases each year. These cases are brought to the OCPO by children, youth, families and members of the community concerned about the delivery and impact of child protection services in Colorado. The OCPO provides free and confidential services to each person who contacts the agency.

OCPO FY Case Totals	
Fiscal Year	**Total Cases Received**
FY 2022-23	**1,119**
FY 2023-24	**1,250**
FY 2024-25	**1,161**
FY 2025-26	**1,254**

The people who contact the OCPO include parents, grandparents, kin, medical professionals, attorneys, social workers, police officers and many others. They also include children and youth themselves – many who are residing in 24-hour treatment facilities. The majority of clients who contact the OCPO identify as being in crisis, often after having attempted to maneuver various other grievance processes. Often, by the time people contact the OCPO their concerns require

[21] The requested annual salary is the current starting salary for the Client Services Analyst position and is in alignment with the consolidated compensation schedule completed by the Office of Administrative Services for Independent Agencies during October of 2026.

timely review, and delays may have a significant impact on their lives. As such, people are often frustrated, upset and overwhelmed when they call.

As stated above, the OCPO employs a total of seven CSAs and Senior CSAs, which are responsible for receiving the concerns and complaints from people and conducting independent investigations of each case.[22] Each of these employees is required to obtain and maintain their caseworker certification, which requires a minimum of 40 hours of continual education each fiscal year. Additionally, many of the office's CSAs are specially trained in mediation and de-escalation techniques so they can work more effectively with clients in crisis.

Each case brought to the OCPO is unique and may involve a review of multiple state systems, services, laws and regulations. These cases are complicated and involve systems that span a broad spectrum of specialties – such as child welfare services, Medicaid, behavioral and mental health services, residential treatment facilities and the DYS. This spectrum of services requires CSAs to review not only what each system requires, but how each of these systems interacts with the other. Additionally, these cases often involve evolving circumstances that require the CSAs to adjust their review to new information and developments.

The OCPO prioritizes high-quality customer service in all cases. It is not unusual for a CSA to spend several hours on the phone with a client to learn about their concerns and help them find solutions to their problems. It is the goal of the OCPO to resolve most cases that require a full case review within 90 calendar days.[23] This timeframe was established after the OCPO determined that clients whose cases remain open for longer than 90 days become less willing to continue their engagement with the office and more likely to lose trust in the resolutions provided by the OCPO. Clients' engagement with the OCPO is – by law – voluntary. However, the OCPO is dependent on the cases brought to the office to effectively identify issues impacting how children, youth and families are provided child protection services in Colorado – both individually and systemically. Effectively, if clients stop engaging with the OCPO, the agency is less able to advise individual agencies, the public, General Assembly and partner agencies, about practice concerns and systemic issues.

The past four fiscal years have confirmed that, if left unaddressed, the OCPO's current staffing level will increasingly prohibit the office from effectively engaging clients to address their concerns and questions. And as a result, the OCPO will struggle to fulfill its statutory charge of advising others of when child protection

[22] The Director of Client Services does not carry a full caseload.
[23] All timelines and projections are done utilizing calendar days.

services are failing to provide for the safety, well-being and permanency of children and youth in Colorado.

Compounding Issues and Calculations

The OCPO has long demonstrated its efforts to address the timeliness of its case reviews. During Fiscal Year 2023-24, the OCPO requested and was granted an additional CSA position,[24] and during Fiscal year 2024-25, the OCPO requested and was granted an additional Senior CSA position.[25] Both positions were requested to address concerning caseloads and delays in providing clients with resolutions to their concerns and questions. These requests were part of an incremental approach by the OCPO to address case timeliness and staff retention on the CSA Team.

However, the OCPO suspended these efforts during the past two fiscal years in response to the ongoing budget deficit. The OCPO sought continuation budgets for Fiscal Year 2025-26 and Fiscal Year 2026-27. The OCPO has attempted to address case timeliness and caseloads internally. Such efforts have included amending intake practices, regionalizing CSA assignments and updating the OCPO's internal case database. Ultimately, these efforts have been ineffective at decreasing the amount of time clients must wait for the OCPO to complete reviews of their cases.

During the past four fiscal years, the average time it takes CSAs to complete a full case review increased by as much as 67 days. During FY 2025-26, the OCPO averaged 121 days to resolve standard full case reviews.

OCPO Annual Average for Completion of Full Case Review	
Fiscal Year	**Average Days to Complete Review**
FY 2022-23	**98.02 Days**
FY 2023-24	**97.18 Days**
FY 2024-25	**150.37 Days**
FY 2025-26	**121.38 to 165.25 Days**

The two most common services the OCPO provides for people who contact the office are full case reviews and information and resource referrals (IRR). During FY 2025-26, the CPO closed 291 cases after providing the client with an IRR. For each case closed with an IRR, the OCPO will work to determine the best resource and service for the client and work to provide the client with accurate contact

[24] See Request Item 2, Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman's FY 2023-24 Agency Summary and Budget Request, November 1, 2023.
[25] See Request Item 2, Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman's FY 2024-25 Agency Summary and Budget Request, November 1, 2024.

information for that resource, as well as additional materials and information that may aid the client in resolving the concern or question.

For the same time period, the OCPO closed 641 cases after completing a full case review – approximately 51 percent of the total cases opened for the same year. Any time the OCPO conducts a full case review, a CSA will – at a minimum – complete the following:

- Request from the client and/or third-party agencies any information, records or documents necessary to conduct a thorough and independent review of the concern or question.
- Review all applicable materials provided in a case.
- Review all relevant guidance, regulation and law to determine if there are any compliance concerns present.
- If necessary, coordinate with applicable agencies to resolve questions and obtain additional information about how child protection services were provided.
- If compliance or practice concerns are identified, advise the involved agencies and consider whether such findings are indicative of systemic issues.
- Communicate findings and resolutions to clients.

A review of case data from the past four fiscal years shows that, on average, the OCPO opens approximately 60 cases each month that requires CSAs to conduct a full case review. Based on the same data set, the average time it takes to complete an independent and thorough review is approximately 113 days – 23 days longer than the office's target timeframe.[26]

An analysis of the same four-year data set shows that a CSA team comprised of 9 case-caring employees will allow the OCPO to reach its needed timeframe for full case reviews. Based on the past four fiscal years, the OCPO does not anticipate a sharp increase in the number of cases received each fiscal year. As such, the OCPO based its calculations on the assumption the office will continue to receive between 1,000 and 1,300 cases annually.

With its current 7.0 FTE case-carrying CSAs, the OCPO closes full case reviews in approximately 113.53 days. If the OCPO is granted its request to raise its case-carrying CSAs to 9.0 FTE, the projected average time it will take the office to complete a full case review is 87.9 days. As these projections show, an additional

[26] The average time to complete a full case review during FY 2025-26 was 121.25 days. To get a more accurate average of the OCPO's time to complete a full case review, the OCPO calculated the average time to complete a full case review over the past four fiscal years. During fiscal years 2022-23, 2023-24, 2024-25, 2025-26, the average time to complete a full case review was 113 days.

2.0 FTE is the minimum number of staff the OCPO may request to align its staff size with the necessary case closure timelines.

Projected Average Case Length Based on Staff Size	
Number of Case-Carrying CSAs	**Average Number of Days to Close Full Review**
7 CSAs	**113 Days to Close a Full Review**
8 CSAs	**98.9 Days to Close a Full Review**
9 CSAs	**87.9 Days to Close a Full Review**

Without the additional 2.0 FTE, the OCPO will continue to see compounding impacts to its direct services in the following two areas.

Limiting the OCPO's Ability to Effectively Fulfill Its Statutory Charge

Pursuant to C.R.S. §19-3.3-103(1)(a), the OCPO is required to receive and conduct an independent and impartial investigation of complaints concerning child protection services, including:

- Complaints made on or on behalf of a child;
- Complaints made by or on behalf of a child's or youth's family, caregiver, or other concerned individual;
- Complaints about an incident of egregious abuse or neglect, near fatality or fatality of a child;
- Complaints concerning systemic issues, including but not limited to statutory, budgetary, regulatory and administrative issues affecting the safety of and outcomes for children, youth and families receiving child protection services in Colorado; and
- Complaints raised by members of the community relating to child protection policies or procedures.

The OCPO is also required to recommend to the General Assembly, CDHS and any appropriate agency or entity statutory, budgetary, regulatory, and administrative changes, including systemic changes, to improve the safety of and promote better outcomes for children and families receiving child protection services in Colorado.

Despite the issues detailed in this request, the OCPO continues to provide clients with thorough and independent reviews of their cases. During the past two fiscal years the OCPO has identified concerns of agencies' possible non-compliance with state law, regulations and best practice in 438 cases. The OCPO has also led half a dozen efforts to reform systemic issues within the child protection system, including:

- Amending Colorado's mandatory reporting law for clarity and equity.[27]
- Improving systems and regulations that dictate the care of children and youth who run away from residential care and how their caregivers are notified of their circumstances.[28]
- Addressing inconsistency in the utilization of the Colorado Risk and Safety Assessment tools and establishing pathways to reduce disparate impacts of these evaluations on children and families.[29]

The OCPO works to communicate current timelines and possible case outcomes with clients. This is done to provide clients with realistic expectations about the OCPO's ability to provide timely services. No advisement, however, can lessen the urgency and fear most clients feel when they contact the OCPO. For most clients who call the OCPO, their concern centers on whether the actions of another will prevent or cause harm to a child or children. Each day they wait for a resolution from this office is a day that such questions go unanswered.

However, without the requested 2.0 FTE, the OCPO will continue to struggle to provide timely information to the people who contact the office, and those who could benefit from the findings made during those cases. The OCPO is already seeing the effects of its staffing shortage.

For the first time since its inception, the OCPO was forced to close more than 100 cases during FY 2025-26, after the OCPO determined the clients involved in the case was either no longer interested in receiving – or would no longer benefit from – the OCPO's services.[30] In total, the OCPO closed 148 cases without completing a full case review. Each of those cases was open for an average of 165 days. These cases involved concerns that included multiple systems and diverse circumstances, including:

- A mother with concerns that her child was not receiving proper care while residing in foster care. The same mother also stated she was not receiving consistent updates about the care and well-being of the child.
- A child welfare professional who reported that a child with substantial medical needs was not receiving adequate services or monitoring by the local child welfare department.

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[27] See Office of the Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Issue Brief, Mandatory Reporters: How Colorado's mandatory reporter law lacks the necessary infrastructure to support those charged with reporting suspected child abuse, September 15, 2021.
[28] See Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children from Running Away from Out-of-home Placement.
[29] See Independent Audit of Colorado's Family Safety and Risk Assessment Tools and Subsequent Workgroup.
[30] These cases were assigned the closure disposition of Closed Per Ombudsman Discretion

- A mental health professional who was worried that a 2-year-old was unable to effectively go through a forensic interview after concerns of sexual assault were raised.

The OCPO completed intake in each of the 148 cases to ensure there were no immediate safety concerns that needed to be addressed or reported. However, high caseloads had effectively resulted in a backlog, and CSAs were unable to conduct full review of the cases two to five months after the OCPO received them. By the time the OCPO was able to revisit these cases, clients either reported their issues would no longer benefit from a review by the office, or they no longer felt as though the OCPO could provide the services they needed.

The OCPO relies on its review of multiple individual cases to identify trends and patterns and fulfill its statutory mandate to investigate and address such issues. These patterns provide the office with a unique perspective of emerging and long-standing issues impacting the child protection system. Examples of this work include a series of cases that involved youth residing in DYS youth centers. Those individual cases allowed the OCPO to identify significant gaps in how DYS youth centers monitor and evaluate when youth are physically restrained by staff.[31] A similar series of individual cases led the OCPO to find that DYS' use of invasive full searches – commonly referred to as strip searches – were consistently ineffective at locating contraband and poorly tracked by administrators.[32] Additionally, a series of more than two dozen cases received by the OCPO revealed a lack of equity in families ability to access adoption assistance subsidies.[33] In each of these instances, and in nearly a dozen more, the OCPO published its concerns and findings and that information was relied on by legislators and agency partners to drive reforms.

But the OCPO's ability to review individual cases not only fulfills its statutory mandate, but it also provides individual agencies with information – in real time – about concerning practices and or missteps in handling cases. During FY 2025-26, the OCPO contacted child protection agencies with concerns of possible non-compliance with law, regulation and/or best practice in 212 cases. In all but 10 of those 212 cases – 95 percent of cases – the agency(s) agreed with the concerns presented by the OCPO and took some form of affirmative action to address the

[31] See Office of the Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Issue Brief, Surveillance Within the Division of Youth Services: How Current efforts to monitor the use of physical restraints fall short, July 30, 2024.
[32] See Office of the Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Issue Brief, Strip Search Procedures and Outcomes in the Division of Youth Services: Persistent use of strip searches reveal little contraband and lack effective oversight, September 30, 2025.
[33] See Office of the Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman's Issue Brief, Adoption Assistance: Improving consistency and fair consideration in determining adoption assistance subsidy rates in Colorado, December 13, 2017.

identified issues. For example, the most common action taken by an agency after being contacted by the OCPO was to provide staff with additional training and education about how to better deliver services to children and families. This happened in 181 of the 212 cases. The OCPO's review of individual cases also resulted in agencies taking the following actions:[34]

- 181 cases involved agencies amending or adding additional documentation in a child protection case.
- 101 cases resulted in agencies engaging the client and further discussing the case with them to address issues.
- 53 cases resulted in the agency revising or developing a policy to address identified issues.
- 12 cases resulted in the agency taking steps to correct actions by personnel or taking disciplinary actions.

These cases demonstrate the crucial utility the OCPO plays in the child protection system. Many of the issues identified in these cases would not have been identified and brought to the public but for the OCPO'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. But, if the OCPO lacks the staffing necessary to effectively review all cases it receives, the office – and the system – has no way of knowing what issues were missed and which issues will compound into costly systemic impacts.

Recurring and Compounding Impacts on Staff Retention

The OCPO employs more CSAs than any other position within the agency. This is because this position is crucial in providing direct services to people who contact the agency with concerns or questions about the child protection system. Even with manageable caseloads, the CSA position is demanding. In addition to taking the necessary steps to complete an intake and independently and thoroughly review a case, CSAs are also required to navigate high tensions and complex relationships.

Despite these demands, CSAs most frequently cite high caseloads and the resulting impact on their ability to effectively serve clients as the most stressful element of the position. During the past four fiscal years, 13 employees in the CSA position have left the office. The most consistent reason provided for leaving the office is the requirement to balance overwhelming caseloads.

[34] Please note that one or more of the listed actions by outside agencies may appear in a single case.

CSA Vacancies by Fiscal Year	
Fiscal Year	**Number of CSA Vacancies**
FY 2022-23	**2 FTE**
FY 2023-34	**3 FTE**
FY 2024-25	**4 FTE**
FY 2025-26	**4 FTE**

The current staff level does not accommodate vacancies or extended leave. When the OCPO experiences a single vacancy in one of the seven CSA positions, it can raise the caseload of remaining CSAs. This is because when a CSA leaves the agency, the open cases on their caseload must be redistributed to the remaining CSAs. In some circumstances, the consecutive departure of CSAs has resulted in remaining CSAs handling caseloads of more than 100 cases each.

The increase in caseload directly correlates to the CSAs ability to provide direct services to the client whose case was transferred. The new CSA must conduct a secondary intake, re-review any obtained information and documentation and often hold additional conversations with clients and agencies to gain clarity on the case. This work is necessary to ensure that the CSA is able to conduct a thorough, accurate and independent review. However, this also results in the case remaining open one to three months longer. In addition to delays in receiving resolution to their cases, clients also express frustration at being assigned to multiple CSAs and a diminished trust in the office's ability to effectively review their concerns. Many of the cases closed without a full review during FY 2025-26 had been reassigned to a new CSA after the original CSA left the office.

Impact if Request is Not Granted

The OCPO recognizes the realities and constraints of Colorado's current fiscal climate. The office does not make this request lightly and appreciates that any funding spent on the OCPO, is funding that is withheld from other agencies and programs. The office has attempted to address these issues with existing resources and staff. However, it has become clear that continuing with the current staff level is untenable for the office. Without additional FTE for the CSA position, the OCPO will continue to see delays in providing direct services to clients and, which will ultimately impact the office's ability to identify issues and trends in the systemic delivery of services.

PERSONAL SERVICES		Client Services Analyst	FY28 Total	Year 2 Total (FY29)
Number of FTE per class title		**2.00**	**2.00**	**2.00**
Monthly base salary		$6,800	$6,800	$6,800
Number of months charged in FY26-27		**11**	**11**	**12**
Salary		$149,600	$149,600	$163,200
PERA (Staff, GF)	11.7%	$17,428	$17,428	$19,012
Medicare (Staff, GF)	1.45%	$2,169	$2,169	$2,366
Subtotal Base Salary/PERA/Medicare		$169,197	$169,197	$184,579
SUBTOTAL PERSONAL SERVICES **FTE**		**$169,197** **2.0**	**$169,197** **2.0**	**$184,579** **2.0**
OPERATING	**Per FTE**			
Phone (staff)	$450	$825	$825	$900
Supplies (staff)	$500	$917	$917	$1,000
Software	$330	$605	$605	$660
Annual professional development *Continuing education and certification expenses. Includes cost of travel and lodging.*	$2,000	$4,000	$4,000	$4,000
SUBTOTAL OPERATING		**$6,347**	**$6,347**	**$6,560**
CAPITAL OUTLAY (one-time cost only)	**Per FTE**			
Office Furniture (staff)*	$5,000	$10,000	$10,000	$0
Computer	$2,000	$4,000	$4,000	$0
SUBTOTAL CAPITAL OUTLAY:		**$14,000**	**$14,000**	$0
TOTAL REQUEST (non-central appropriations):		**$189,544**	**$189,544**	**$191,139**
CENTRAL APPROPRIATIONS				
Health/Life/Dental	*$14,500*	*$26,583*	*$26,583*	*$29,000*
Short-Term Disability	*0.07%*	*$105*	*$105*	*$114*
Family Medical Leave	*0.45%*	*$673*	*$673*	*$734*
ULAED	*10.00%*	*$14,960*	*$14,960*	*$16,320*
Central Appropriations Subtotal:		*$42,321*	*$42,321*	*$46,169*
GRAND TOTAL ALL COSTS:		***$231,865***	***$231,865***	***$237,307***

Additional Considerations

Additionally, pursuant to the Office of Administrative Services for Independent Agencies' (OASIA) Request Item 01, Compensation Schedule Adjustments, the OCPO is requesting $261,835 General Fund for its portion of the compensation schedule adjustments.

Conclusion

Pursuant to C.R.S. §19-3.3-110, the OCPO respectfully submits its agency summary and budget request to the Joint Budget Committee.

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Schedule 00 - Reconciliation Detail

FY 2027-28 Child Protection Ombudsman	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop Funds	Federal Funds
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	2,420,690	14.5	2,420,690	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**2,420,690**	**14.5**	**2,420,690**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OCPO TA-02 FY28 Statewide Total Compensation Request	165,539	-	165,539	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Base Request	**$2,586,229**	**14.5**	**$2,586,229**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OASIA R01 - OCPO's Portion of OASIA's Compensation Study	$261,835	-	$261,835	-	-	-
OCPO R01 Client Services Analyst FTE	$231,865	2.0	$231,865	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Elected Official Request - Nov 1	**$3,079,929**	**16.5**	**$3,079,929**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Legal Services						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	$76,833	-	$76,833	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$76,833**	**-**	**$76,833**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OCPO TA-01 FY27-28 Legal Services Allocation Adjustment	$1,405	-	$1,405	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Base Request	**$78,238**	**-**	**$78,238**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2027-28 Elected Official Request - Nov 1	**$78,238**	**-**	**$78,238**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total For: 09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	$2,497,523	14.5	$2,497,523	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$2,497,523**	**14.5**	**$2,497,523**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OCPO TA-01 FY27-28 Legal Services Allocation Adjustment	$1,405	-	$1,405	-	-	-
OCPO TA-02 FY28 Statewide Total Compensation Request	$165,539	-	$165,539	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Base Request	**$2,664,467**	**14.5**	**$2,664,467**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OASIA R01 - OCPO's Portion of OASIA's Compensation Study	$261,835	-	$261,835	-	-	-
OCPO R01 Client Services Analyst FTE	$231,865	2.0	$231,865	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Elected Official Request - Nov 1	**$3,158,167**	**16.5**	**$3,158,167**	**-**	**-**	**-**

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Schedule 00 - Reconciliation Summary

FY 2027-28 Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop Funds	Federal Funds
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	$2,497,523	14.5	$2,497,523	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$2,497,523**	**14.5**	**$2,497,523**	**-**	**-**	**-**
OCPO TA-01 FY27-28 Legal Services Allocation Adjustment	$1,405	-	$1,405	-	-	-
OCPO TA-02 FY28 Statewide Total Compensation Request	$165,539	-	$165,539	-	-	-
FY 2027-28 Base Request	**$2,664,467**	**14.5**	**$2,664,467**	-	-	-
OASIA R01 - OCPO's Portion of OASIA's Compensation Study	$261,835	-	$261,835	-	-	-
OCPO R01 Client Services Analyst FTE	$231,865	2.0	$231,865	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2027-28 Elected Official Request - Nov 1	**$3,158,167**	**16.5**	**$3,158,167**	**-**	**-**	**-**

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Schedule 3A

FY 2024-25 - Child Protection Ombudsman	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop Funds	Federal Funds
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman,						
Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB24-1430 FY 2024-25 Long Bill	$2,415,993	14.3	$2,415,993	-	-	-
HB24-1046 Child Welfare System Tools	$109,392	0.5	$109,392	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Final Appropriation	**$2,525,385**	**14.8**	**$2,525,385**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Final Expenditure Authority	**$2,525,385**	**14.8**	**$2,525,385**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Actual Expenditures	$2,250,218	14.8	$2,250,218	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	**$275,167**	**-**	**$275,167**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Personal Services Allocation	***$1,923,907***	***14.8***	***$1,923,907***	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Total All Other Operating Allocation	***$326,311***	**-**	***$326,311***	**-**	**-**	**-**
Legal Services						
HB24-1430 FY 2024-25 Long Bill	$48,697	-	$48,697	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Final Appropriation	**$48,697**	**-**	**$48,697**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Final Expenditure Authority	**$48,697**	**-**	**$48,697**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Actual Expenditures	$48,697	-	$48,697	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2024-25 Total All Other Operating Allocation	***$48,697***	**-**	***$48,697***	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total For: 09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
FY 2024-25 Final Expenditure Authority	$2,574,082	14.8	$2,574,082	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Actual Expenditures	$2,298,915	14.8	$2,298,915	-	-	-
FY 2024-25 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	$275,167	-	$275,167	-	-	-

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Schedule 3B

FY 2025-26 - Child Protection Ombudsman	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop Funds	Federal Funds
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman,						
Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
SB 25-206 FY 2025-26 Long Bill	$2,565,680	15.0	$2,565,680	-	-	-
HB26-1158 Judicial Department Supplemental	($62,108)	0	($62,108)	-	-	-
FY 2025-26 Final Appropriation	**$2,503,572**	**15.0**	**$2,503,572**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Final Expenditure Authority	**$2,503,572**	**15.0**	**$2,503,572**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Actual Expenditures	$2,425,773	15.0	$2,425,773	-	-	-
FY 2025-26 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	**$77,799**	**-**	**$77,799**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Personal Services Allocation	***$2,223,564***	***15.0***	***$2,223,564***	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Total All Other Operating Allocation	***$202,210***	**-**	***$202,210***	**-**	**-**	**-**
Legal Services						
SB 25-206 FY 2025-26 Long Bill	$37,525	-	$37,525	-	-	-
FY 2025-26 Final Appropriation	**$37,525**	**-**	**$37,525**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Final Expenditure Authority	**$37,525**	**-**	**$37,525**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Actual Expenditures	$37,525	-	$37,525	-	-	-
FY 2025-26 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Total All Other Operating Allocation	***$37,525***	**-**	***$37,525***	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total For: 09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
FY 2025-26 Final Expenditure Authority	**$2,541,097**	**15.0**	**$2,541,097**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Actual Expenditures	**$2,463,298**	**15.0**	**$2,463,298**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2025-26 Reversion (Overexpenditure)	**$77,799**	**-**	**$77,799**	**-**	**-**	**-**

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Schedule 3C

FY 2026-27 - Child Protection Ombudsman	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop Funds	Federal Funds
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman,						
Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	$2,420,690	14.5	$2,420,690	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$2,420,690**	**14.5**	**$2,420,690**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Personal Services Allocation	**$1,960,759**	**14.5**	**$1,960,759**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total All Other Operating Allocation	**$459,931**	**-**	**$459,931**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Legal Services						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	$76,833	-	$76,833	-	-	-
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$76,833**	**-**	**$76,833**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total All Other Operating Allocation	**$76,833**	**-**	**$76,833**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total For: 09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman						
HB26-1410 2026-27 Long Appropriations Bill	**$2,497,523**	**14.5**	**$2,497,523**	**-**	**-**	**-**
FY 2026-27 Initial Appropriation	**$2,497,523**	**14.5**	**$2,497,523**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Personal Services Allocation	**$1,960,759**	**14.5**	**$1,960,759**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total All Other Operating Allocation	**$536,764**	**-**	**$536,764**	**-**	**-**	**-**

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FY 2027-28 Summary of Change Requests

Schedule 10

Request Name	Interagency Review	Requires Legislation	Total Funds	FTE	General Fund	Cash Funds	Reappr	Federal
Non-Prioritized Request								
OASIA R01 - OCPO's Portion of OASIA's Compensation Study	n/a	n/a	$261,835	-	$261,835	-	-	-
Subtotal Non-Prioritized Request			**$261,835**	**-**	**$261,835**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Prioritized Request								
OCPO R01 Client Services Analyst FTE	n/a	n/a	**$231,865**	**2.0**	**$231,865**	**-**	**-**	**-**
Total For: Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman			**$493,700**	**2.0**	**$493,700**	**-**	**-**	**-**

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Schedule 14A

Job Class #	Job Class Name	FY25 FTE	FY25 Wages	FY26 FTE2	FY26 Wages2
850000	Child Protection Ombudsman	1.0	$192,988	1.0	$202,851
850001	Deputy Child Protection Ombudsman	0.9	$145,152	1.0	$165,289
850002	Intake & Admin Coordinator	1.0	$94,848	1.0	$97,219
850003	Client Services Analyst	4.7	$386,514	5.0	$413,632
850005	Chief Analyst	1.0	$121,163	1.0	$135,688
850006	Public Policy Analyst	1.0	$86,230	1.0	$93,228
850007	Public Information Coordinator	0.3	$27,065	-	-
850008	Sr. Client Services Analyst	1.2	$104,072	0.9	$81,393
850009	Adminiatrative Assitant	0.3	$20,625	0.5	$32,885
Total Wages		**11.5**	**$1,178,656**	**11.4**	**$1,222,185**

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Child Protection Ombudsman

Schedule 14B

Line Item Object Code Detail	Object Group Name	FY 24-25 Actual Exp	FY25 FTE	FY 25-26 Actual Exp2	FY26 FTE2	FY 26-27 Approp Budget	FY27 FTE	FY 27-28 EO Request Budget	FY 27-28 FTE
09. Office of the Child Protection Ombudsman									
Personal Services - Employees									
Object Group	**Object Group Name**								
FTE	Total FTE		14.8		15.0		14.5		16.5
1000	Total Employee Wages and Benefits	$1,669,077		$1,742,578		$1,960,759		$2,619,998	
Object Code	**Object Name**								
1000	Personal Services	-		-		$1,960,759		$2,619,998	
1121	Temporary Part-Time Wages	$26,700		$14,760		-		-	
1210	Contractual Employee Regular Full-Time Wages	$1,139,320		$1,175,123		-		-	
1211	Contractual Employee Regular Part-Time Wages	$17,951		$32,818		-		-	
1240	Contractual Employee Annual Leave Payments	$19,298		$23,284		-		-	
1340	Employee Cash Incentive Awards	$14,000		$3,000		-		-	
1510	Dental Insurance	$7,298		$7,760		-		-	
1511	Health Insurance	$155,437		$182,146		-		-	
1512	Life Insurance	$1,225		$1,280		-		-	
1513	Short-Term Disability	$1,701		$910		-		-	
1514	Statutory Personnel & Payroll System Vision Insurance	$742		$794		-		-	
1515	Statutory Personnel & Payroll System - FAMLI	4,959.89		$5,193		-		-	
1520	FICA-Medicare Contribution	$17,451		$17,771		-		-	
1522	PERA	$139,438		$143,380		-		-	
1524	PERA - AED	$60,008		$61,597		-		-	
1525	PERA - SAED	$60,008		$61,597		-		-	
1532	Unemployment Compensation	$2,940		$10,514		-		-	
1630	Contractual Employee Other Employee Benefits	$600		$650		-		-	
Personal Services - Contract Services									
Object Group	**Object Group Name**								
1100	Total Contract Services (Purchased Personal Services)	$254,830		$480,986		-		-	

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Child Protection Ombudsman

Schedule 14B

Line Item Object Code Detail	Object Group Name	FY 24-25 Actual Exp	FY25 FTE	FY 25-26 Actual Exp2	FY26 FTE2	FY 26-27 Approp Budget	FY27 FTE	FY 27-28 EO Request Budget	FY 27-28 FTE
Object Code	**Object Name**								
1920	Personal Services - Professional	$228,679		$466,685		-		-	
1935	Personal Services - Legal Services	$4,534		-		-		-	
1960	Personal Services - Information Technology	$21,617		$14,301		-		-	
Subtotal All Personal Services		**$1,923,907**	**14.8**	**$2,223,564**	**15.0**	**$1,960,759**	**14.5**	**$2,619,998**	**16.5**
All Other Operating Expenditures									
Object Group	**Object Group Name**								
2000	Total Operating Expenses	$310,155		$174,639		$459,931		$459,931	
3000	Total Travel Expenses	$16,156		$27,571		-		-	
6000	Total Capitalized Property Purchases	$8,267		-		-		-	
Object Code	**Object Name**								
2000	Operating Expense	-		-		$459,931		$459,931	
2253	Rental of Equipment	$261		-		-		-	
2255	Rental of Buildings	-		$1,552		-		-	
2258	Parking Fees	$3,565		-		-		-	
2510	In-State Travel	457.67		$14,159		-		-	
2511	In-State Common Carrier Fares	$58		-		-		-	
2512	In-State Personal Travel Per Diem	$199		$2,439		-		-	
2513	In-State Personal Vehicle Reimbursement	$2,233		$2,060		-		-	
2520	In-State Travel/Non-Employee	-		$1,783		-		-	
2522	In-State/Non-Employee - Personal Per Diem	-		179.00		-		-	
2523	In-State/Non-Employee - Personal Vehicle Reimbursement	$259		699.26		-		-	
2530	Out-Of-State Travel	$9,603		$6,042		-		-	
2531	Out-Of-State Common Carrier Fares	$1,569		-		-		-	
2532	Out-Of-State Personal Travel Per Diem	$1,730		$200		-		-	
2533	Out-Of-State Personal Vehicle Reimbursement	$47		$8		-		-	
2610	Advertising And Marketing	$4,025		$4,982		-		-	
2631	Communication Charges - Office Of Information Technolog	$2,814		$9,872		-		-	
2641	Other Automated Data Processing Billings-Purchased Servi	$7,250		-		-		-	

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Child Protection Ombudsman

Schedule 14B

Line Item Object Code Detail	Object Group Name	FY 24-25 Actual Exp	FY25 FTE	FY 25-26 Actual Exp2	FY26 FTE2	FY 26-27 Approp Budget	FY27 FTE	FY 27-28 EO Request Budget	FY 27-28 FTE
2650	Office of Information Technology Purchased Services	-		$147		-		-	
2660	Insurance For Other Than Employee Benefits	112.00		-		-		-	
2680	Printing And Reproduction Services	$8,179		$905		-		-	
2820	Purchased Services	$205,826		$54,320		-		-	
3110	Supplies & Materials	$1,306		-		-		-	
3118	Food and Food Service Supplies	$3,359		$5,557		-		-	
3120	Books/Periodicals/Subscriptions	$11,433		$774		-		-	
3121	Office Supplies	$5,756		$4,432		-		-	
3123	Postage	$461		$729		-		-	
3132	Noncapitalizable Furniture And Office Systems	$441		-		-		-	
3140	Noncapitalizable Information Technology	$11,099		$12,705		-		-	
3145	Software Subscription	$26,938		$55,719		-		-	
4100	Other Operating Expenses	$1,798		-		-		-	
4140	Dues And Memberships	$4,405		$2,769		-		-	
4180	Official Functions	-		$4,432		-		-	
4220	Registration Fees	$11,128		$15,745		-		-	
4256	Other Benefit Plan Expense	$260		-		-		-	
6211	Information Technology - Direct Purchase	$8,267		-		-		-	
Subtotal All Other Operating		**$326,311**		**$202,210**		**$459,931**		**$459,931**	
Total Line Item Expenditures		**$2,250,218**	**14.8**	**$2,425,773**	**15.0**	**$2,420,690**	**14.5**	**$3,079,929**	**16.5**

Legal Services

All Other Operating Expenditures

Object Group	Object Group Name				
2000	Total Operating Expenses	$48,697	$37,525	$76,833	$78,238
Object Code	**Object Name**				
2000	Operating Expense	-	-	$76,833	$78,238
2690	Legal Services	$48,697	$37,525	-	-
Subtotal All Other Operating		**$48,697**	**$37,525**	**$76,833**	**$78,238**
Total Line Item Expenditures		**$48,697** -	**$37,525** -	**$76,833** -	**$78,238** -

	TOTAL FUNDS/FTE FY 2027-28	GENERAL FUND	CASH FUNDS	REAPPROP FUNDS	FEDERAL FUNDS
I. Continuation Salary Base		FUND SPLITS - From Position-by-Position Tab			
Sum of Filled FTE as of July 31, 2026	14.50	$1	-	-	-
Salary X 12	$1,478,766	$1,478,766	-	-	-
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	$173,016	$173,016	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	$21,442	$21,442	-	-	-
Subtotal Continuation Salary Base =	$1,673,224	$1,673,224	-	-	-
II. Salary Survey Adjustments					
System Maintenance Studies	$0	$0	-	-	-
Cost of Living Adjustment - Base Building	$18,485	$18,485	-	-	-
Cost of Living Adjustment - Non-Base Building	$0	$0	-	-	-
Movement to Statewide Minimum Wage - Base Adjustment	$0	$0	-	-	-
Subtotal - Salary Survey Adjustments	***$18,485***	***$18,485***	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	$2,163	$2,163	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	$268	$268	-	-	-
Request Subtotal =	***$20,916***	***$20,916***	**-**	**-**	**-**
III. Step Pay Adjustments					
Step Increase - Base Adjustment - Classified, Step Eligible	-	-	-	-	-
Step-Like Increase - Base Adjustment - Step-Ineligible	$29,945	$29,945	-	-	-
Subtotal - Step Pay Adjustments	***$29,945***	***$29,945***	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	$3,504	$3,504	**-**	**-**	**-**
Medicare @ 1.45%	$434	$434	**-**	**-**	**-**
Request Subtotal =	***$33,883***	***$33,883***	**-**	**-**	**-**
III. Total State Service Awards - non base (BNS not PERA includable)					
TSS Awards - non base building - all employees	$2,000	$2,000	-	-	-
Subtotal - Awards	***$2,000***	***$2,000***	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	-	-	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	$29	$29	-	-	-
Request Subtotal =	***$2,029***	***$2,029***	**-**	**-**	**-**
V. Revised Salary Basis for Remaining Request Subtotals					
Total Continuation Salary Base, Adjustments, & Shift (PERA Includable)	$1,527,196	$1,527,196	-	-	-
Total Continuation Salary Base, Adjustments, TSS Awards & Shift (PERA Includable and non)	$1,529,196	$1,529,196	-	-	-
VI. Unfunded Liability Amortization Payments					
Revised Salary Basis * 10.00%	$152,720	$152,720	-	-	-
VII. Short-term Disability					
Revised Salary Basis * 0.15%	$1,070	$1,070	-	-	-
VIII. Health, Life, and Dental (with Vision)					
Funding Request	$325,460	$325,460	-	-	-
IX. Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program Premiums	$6,881	$6,881	-	-	-

OCPO - Pots Summary

Common Policy Line Item	FY 2026-27 Appropriation	GF	CF	RF	FF
Salary Survey	-	-	-	-	-
Step Pay	$14,872	$14,872	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	$23,904	$23,904	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	$6,126	$6,126	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	$136,138	$136,138	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	$953	$953	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	$233,516	$233,516	-	-	-
TOTAL	$415,509	$415,509	-	-	-
Common Policy Line Item	**FY 2027-28 Total Request**	**GF**	**CF**	**RF**	**FF**
Salary Survey	$22,945	$22,945	-	-	-
Step Pay	$33,883	$33,883	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	$23,217	$23,217	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	$6,881	$6,881	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	$152,720	$152,720	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	$1,070	$1,070	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	$325,460	$325,460	-	-	-
TOTAL	$566,176	$566,176	-	-	-
Common Policy Line Item	**FY 2027-28 Incremental**	**GF**	**CF**	**RF**	**FF**
Salary Survey	$22,945	$22,945	-	-	-
Step Pay	$33,883	$33,883	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	($687)	($687)	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	$755	$755	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	$16,582	$16,582	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	$117	$117	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	$91,944	$91,944	-	-	-
TOTAL	$165,539	$165,539	-	-	-

	TOTAL FUNDS/FTE FY 2027-28	GENERAL FUND	CASH FUNDS	REAPPROP FUNDS	FED FUNDS
I. Continuation Salary Base		FUND SPLITS - From Position-by-Position Tab			
Sum of Filled FTE as of July 31, 2026	14.50	$1	-	-	-
Salary X 12	-	-	-	-	-
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	-	-	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal Continuation Salary Base =	-	-	-	-	-
II. Salary Survey Adjustments					
System Maintenance Studies	$211,738	$211,738	-	-	-
Cost of Living Adjustment - Base Building	-	-	-	-	-
Cost of Living Adjustment - Non-Base Building	-	-	-	-	-
Movement to Statewide Minimum Wage - Base Adjustment	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal - Salary Survey Adjustments	***$211,738***	***$211,738***	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	$24,773	$24,773	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	$3,070	$3,070	-	-	-
Request Subtotal =	***$239,581***	***$239,581***	**-**	**-**	**-**
III. Step Pay Adjustments					
Step Increase - Base Adjustment - Classified, Step Eligible	-	-	-	-	-
Step-Like Increase - Base Adjustment - Step-Ineligible	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal - Step Pay Adjustments	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	-	-	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	-	-	-	-	-
Request Subtotal =	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
III. Total State Service Awards - non base (BNS not PERA includable)					
TSS Awards - non base building - all employees	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal - Awards	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
PERA (Standard, Trooper, and Judicial Rates) at FY 2027-28 PERA Rates	-	-	-	-	-
Medicare @ 1.45%	-	-	-	-	-
Request Subtotal =	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
V. Revised Salary Basis for Remaining Request Subtotals					
Total Continuation Salary Base, Adjustments, & Shift (PERA Includable)	$211,738	$211,738	-	-	-
Total Continuation Salary Base, Adjustments, TSS Awards & Shift (PERA Includable and non)	$211,738	$211,738	-	-	-
VI. Unfunded Liability Amortization Payments					
Revised Salary Basis * 10.00%	$21,174	$21,174	-	-	-
VII. Short-term Disability					
Revised Salary Basis * 0.15%	$148	$148	-	-	-
VIII. Health, Life, and Dental (with Vision)					
Funding Request	-	-	-	-	-
IX. Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program Premiums	$932	$932	-	-	-

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Common Policy Line Item	FY 2026-27 Appropriation	GF	CF	RF	FF
Salary Survey	-	-	-	-	-
Step Pay	-	-	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	-	-	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	-	-	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	-	-	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	-	-	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	-	-	-	-	-

Common Policy Line Item	FY 2027-28 Total Request	GF	CF	RF	FF
Salary Survey	$239,581	$239,581	-	-	-
Step Pay	-	-	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	-	-	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	$932	$932	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	$21,174	$21,174	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	$148	$148	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	$261,835	$261,835	-	-	-

Common Policy Line Item	FY 2027-28 Incremental	GF	CF	RF	FF
Salary Survey	$239,581	$239,581	-	-	-
Step Pay	-	-	-	-	-
PERA Direct Distribution	-	-	-	-	-
Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program	$932	$932	-	-	-
Shift	-	-	-	-	-
ULAED	$21,174	$21,174	-	-	-
Short-term Disability	$148	$148	-	-	-
Health, Life and Dental	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	$261,835	$261,835	-	-	-

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POLICY COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

About the Collaborative

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) serves as an independent, impartial problem solver that helps the public navigate a complex child protection system in an expert and timely manner. The CPO is charged with receiving the public's questions and concerns regarding services administered by any public agency or provider that receives public money for the safety, permanency or well-being of children. The CPO is also 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. To accomplish this work, the CPO established the Policy Collaborative for Children & Families (the Collaborative).

By design, the CPO exists independent of other government entities that comprise the child protection system. The CPO does not represent the interest of any one entity or individual. Because of this, the CPO is able to impartially review and research issues impacting the child protection system and create neutral spaces for community partners and the public to engage in the conversation. Equally important, state law requires the CPO to publicly discuss the issues it identifies and provide recommendations on how to address these issues.

OUR GOAL

To address systemic issues impacting the child protection system to ensure all system-impacted children, youth and families receive high-quality services.

Deliverables & Public Accountability

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. Examples of how the Collaborative may address systemic issues and inform the public, General Assembly and community partners include:

- **Issue briefs and recommendations**
- **Task forces and workgroups**
- **Third-party evaluations**
- **Data collection, analysis and dissemination**
- **Newsletters, reports and other updates**
- **Media engagement regarding findings and recommendations**

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Core Areas of Work

1

Committee Engagement

The Collaborative serves as the home for all CPO engagement with external committees, task forces and workgroups. 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 occur within the Collaborative. This includes analysis of proposed legislation, engagement with legislators and staff, preparation of testimony and development of policy recommendations.

3

Initiatives

This category includes 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.

For More Information

Learn more and stay up to date on the Collaborative's work at

coloradocpo.org/policy

CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN of COLORADO

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2025-2026 Fiscal Year

ANNUAL REPORT

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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,





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	283	291	199	32	5	4	148
Cases Reviewed Without Outside Agency Contact[2]	Cases Reviewed With Outside Agency Contact[3]	Client Provided an Information and Resource Referral[4]	Lack of Information Provided to CPO[5]	Client Requested CPO Close the Case[6]	Closed as Duplicate Case	Closed with Concern[7]	Closed per Ombudsman Discretion[8]

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.

Actions Taken by Outside Agencies After CPO Contact[1]

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**.

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.

Identified Concerns

186	26	62
Concerns with compliance of state law	Concerns with compliance of state regulation	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.





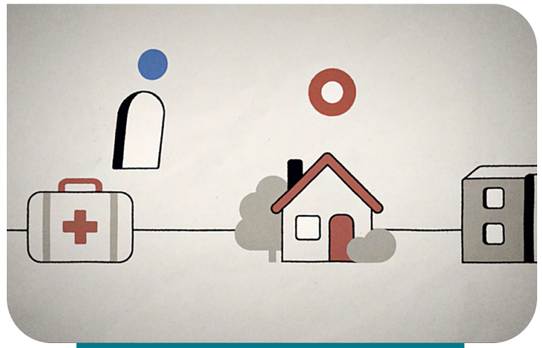
Celebration of Educational Excellence

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.



Watch the Video

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

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 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.

> **"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**

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 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 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:



Read the Audit

- 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 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.

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

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.

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CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN of COLORADO

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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 sharking 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.

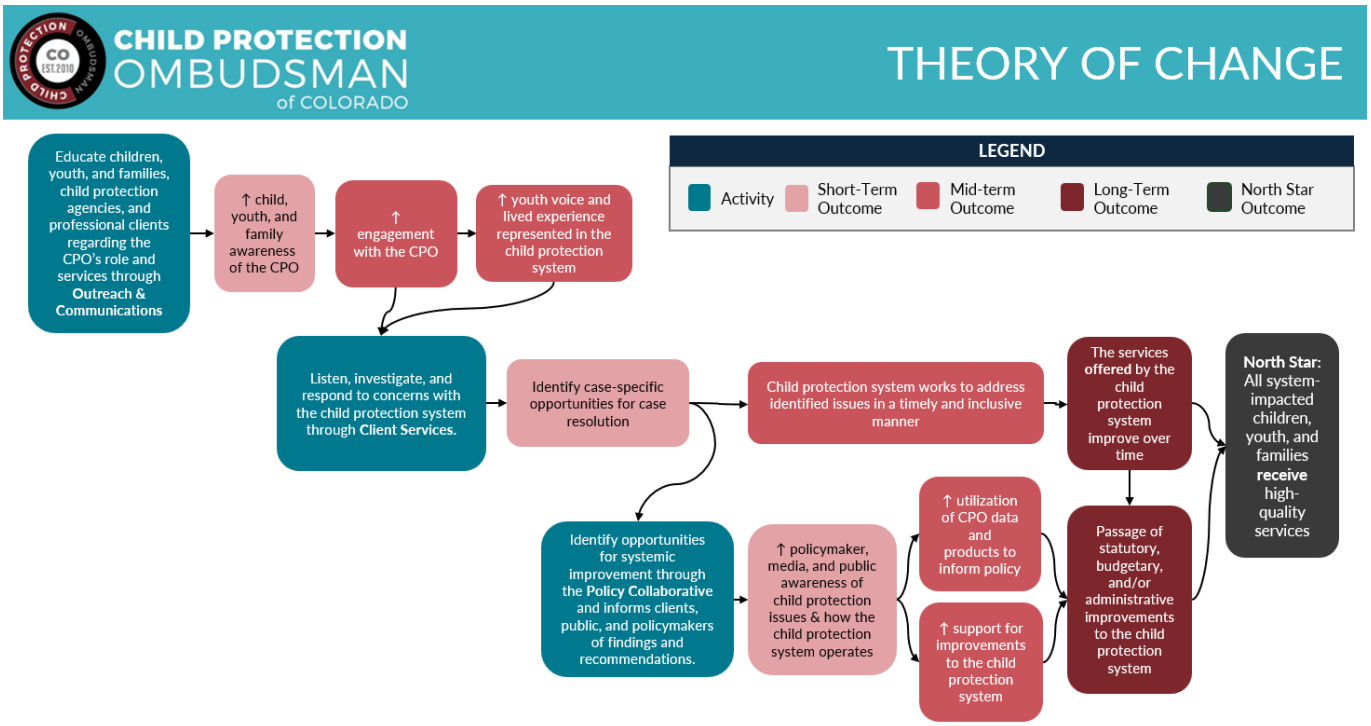
- Testify in a court proceeding in which the CPO is not a party.
- Provide third-party records/documents acquired in the course of a case.
- Investigate complaints related to judges, magistrates, attorneys or guardians ad litem.
- Overturn any court order.
- Mandate the reversal of an agency/provider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

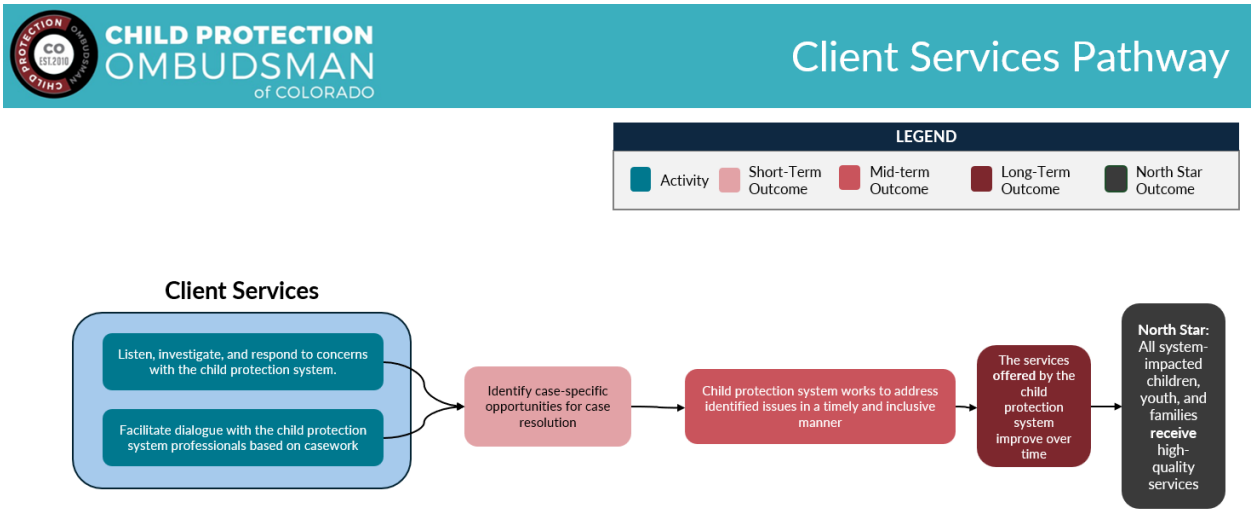
Fiscal Year 2026-27 Performance Plan

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.

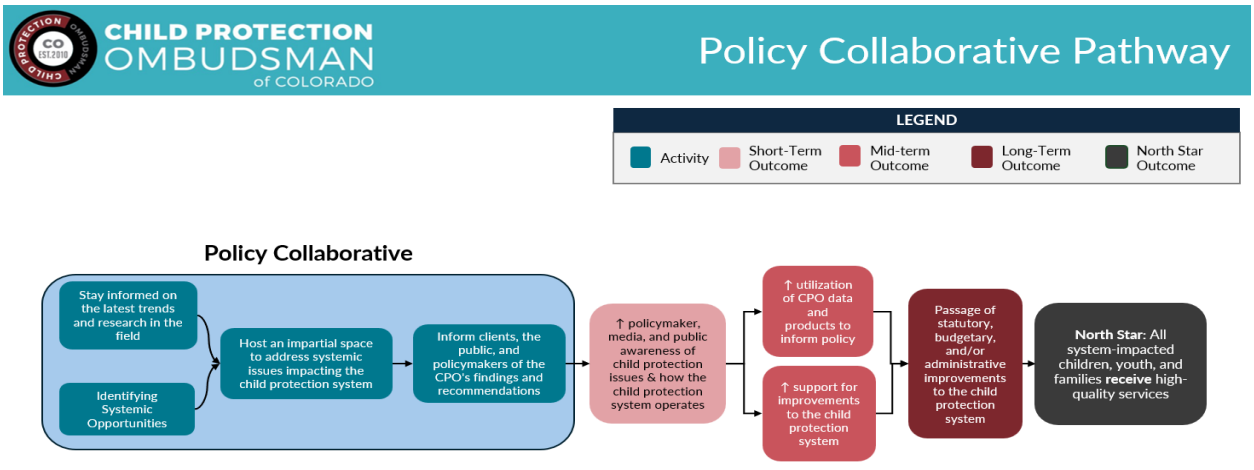
SPI 2 – SYSTEMS CHANGE: Collaborate with children, youth, caregivers, community partners and policymakers to advance improvements to child protection services, policies and laws for every community in Colorado.

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.

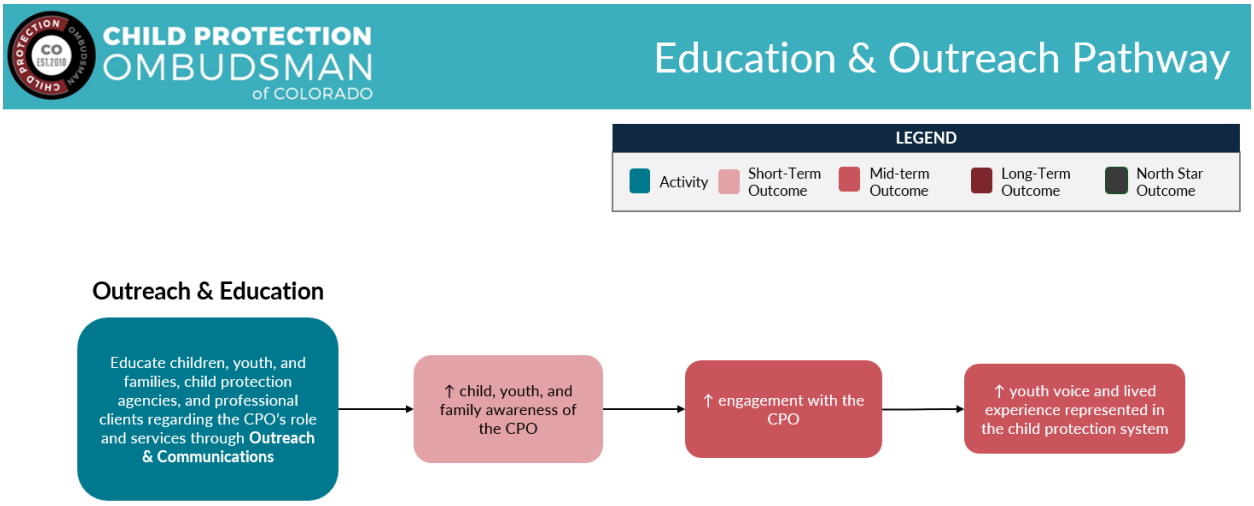
Key Outcome(s) and Metrics

- 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.



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.