



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

March 5, 2024

Thank you, Chair Donovan and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of House Bill 7824 which will require the Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) to place a locked suggestion box in its youth facilities and create a digitally secured suggestion box into which residents may place comments and/or concerns to be addressed by the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

My name is Katelyn Medeiros, and I am the Acting Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight agency to DCYF. As part of our role as the oversight agency, we monitor the case of each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met.

The OCA is supportive of this concept which centers youth voice and provides a tangible mechanism for feedback from our youth. Upon review of the bill as written, the OCA has some recommendations for consideration. While the OCA is supportive of this concept, we anticipate challenges in our office's ability to fulfill this mandate.

The OCA is currently comprised of a total of 10 full time equivalent (FTE) positions and our current census is 9 FTE due to one vacancy. Of the 10 FTE, there are only 3 staff members who would be expected to fulfill this additional responsibility based on their job role. The OCA has a broad statutory mandate and has experienced an ever-increasing workload. OCA staff are stretched thin and as part of our budget request, we have requested additional staffing to meet our current statutory mandate. Therefore, we would respectfully request an increase in staffing to support coordination of this additional statutory responsibility. Additional staff would be necessary to ensure it is feasible for the OCA to fulfill this added role while continuing to fulfill our current mandate.

As of today, there are 15 provider agencies, providing placements at more than 85 physical sites throughout Rhode Island and 27 out-of-state placements as far as Alabama, Tennessee, and Florida. Due to the large number of physical locations that would host a locked suggestion box, it would be a significant challenge for the three OCA staff who would be responsible to visit each site every 14 days, in addition to their current job duties. Adding this statutory responsibility would be a significant undertaking for our small number of staff and would not be feasible at our current FTE capacity.

Additionally, this statutory change may require some additional conversations between DCYF Contract and Compliance and both in-state and out-of-state placements to make the in-person locked suggestion boxes a contractual requirement.

While the OCA would recommend increasing the timeline to respond to perhaps 30 days, the OCA weighs this with the concern for a timely response. The OCA has concerns about timely response to more urgent information that may be reported via the locked suggestion box system, particularly youth placed in other states expressing acute concerns. We would want to ensure that children are educated to access first responding agencies through the DCYF Hotline or law enforcement if there is an emergent issue. While a secure digital

suggestion box would also require some additional resources, this would be much more manageable for our staff and might alleviate some of the issues mentioned earlier.

The OCA believes that all children in out-of-home placement should be able to access this mechanism, including children and youth in foster family placements. While a physical locked suggestion box would not be feasible for children and youth in family-based placements, we must ensure that every child in foster care be provided with the information to access a digital suggestion box.

Lastly, if the OCA will be responsible for this new process, we respectfully ask that the link for the digital suggestion box be located on our website and the signage be developed by the OCA to ensure that it is clear to youth that their concerns would be going directly to our office.

The OCA supports the intent of House Bill 7824, and our staff stand ready to assist in the development of an accessible mechanism for children and youth to provide direct feedback and concerns to our office. We thank you for your continued support of children and families involved with the child welfare system in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katelyn Medeiros". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.
Acting Child Advocate