Letter to DOB

KANSAS OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

The Office of the Child Advocate acts as a neutral, independent agency to ensure Kansas children and families receive adequate coordination of services for child safety and wellbeing.

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) receives and responds to complaints regarding state agencies, service providers, and juvenile courts that adversely affect the health, safety, and wellbeing of children. Through case and systemic recommendations, OCA seeks impact for best practices, polices, and law.

PROGRAM STATUTORY HISTORY:

The Office of the Child Advocate was passed into law via Senate Bill 115, April 2024 and codified in Kansas Statutes Annotated Chapter 75, Article 76. The purpose of OCA is to ensure that children and families receive adequate coordination of child welfare services for child protection and care through services offered by the Department for Children and Families or the department's contracting entities, the Department for Aging and Disability Services, the Department of Corrections, the Department of Health and Environment and juvenile courts. The passage of SB 115 established OCA as its own state agency ensuring its independence and more clearly delineating its duties and authorities.

In October 2021, the Kansas Governor created the Division of the Child Advocate within the Office of Public Advocates under Executive Orders 21-27 and 21-28. The Division of the Child Advocate (KDCA) merged with the Office of the Child Advocate, July 1, 2024.

A number of directives have culminated in the area of child and family wellbeing. In 2017, House Sub. for SB 126 (2017) directed the Secretary for Children and Families to establish a Child Welfare System Task Force (Task Force) to study the Kansas child welfare system. The Task Force convened working groups, tasked with submitting a preliminary report in 2018, focusing on the following areas: the general administration of child welfare by DCF; protective services; family preservation; reintegration; foster care; and permanency placement. A final report was issued in January 2019 that included recommendations, organized by priority into three tiers. Additionally, the Kansas Legislature has comprised a Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight tasked with reviewing data on child maltreatment and demographic trends impacting the child welfare system. This includes reviewing the duties, responsibilities and contributions of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), the Department of Corrections, law enforcement, and the judicial branch that comprise the child welfare system; as well as reviewing programs, services, and benefits

offered directly or through grants or contracts by DCF, KDADS, KDHE, and the judicial branch that impact children and families at risk of becoming involved or who are involved in the child welfare system.

In November 2018, a class action lawsuit was filed against the state on behalf of foster youth alleging that they had been deprived of critical mental health assessments and services and experienced extreme placement instability. A settlement agreement was entered and approved by the Court in January 2021, including the monitoring of outcomes over three or four, one-year periods with an emphasis on accountability reporting, practice improvements, and outcomes. Kansas remains subject to the terms of the lawsuit settlement and continued monitoring of outcomes.

Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is a critical component in providing an independent, neutral mechanism, giving process solutions and voice to address the concerns of Kansas children and families.

Current Year:
OCA was codified as an independent state agency in April 2024, effective July 1, 2024. Since codification, OCA has been working diligently to develop foundation as a stand-alone state agency, including infrastructure, policy, and practice. OCA is in "stage 2" of its internal process evaluation, amending practices within its case management database system and policy handbook development.

OCA has 7 FTE. In Fall 2025, OCA experienced a change in staff at the same time as it was working to fill already open positions. Currently, OCA has 4 team members with less than one year's experience with the agency. Through times of transition, OCA remains committed to developing and growing a strong cohesive team.

OCA submitted an enhancement request of $99,701 last budget cycle to meet the needs of the 2 additional FTE, increased costs associated with the case management system, and more importantly the need to expand OCA's physical footprint to adequately accommodate the needs of the team. OCA received an approved adjustment of $75,000. OCA is excited to share that the office is officially moving to the new space the week of September 14, 2026, moving from a space of 486 square feet to approximately 1900 square feet. OCA is extremely appreciative for the support of the Legislature. OCA is also thankful that the previous tenant donated existing desks as well as the generosity of other state agencies in donating bookshelves and other furniture items.

OCA maintains a website (https://childadvocate.ks.gov), which includes an online complaint form submission, information and resources. OCA maintains a contract for its case management system, specifically structured for Government based ombudsman and child advocate programs,

continuing to work closely with the application customer service team to troubleshoot and improve workflow processes and maximize efficiency. OCA is working complaints, triaging issues, working towards achieving resolution, providing resource information, education, advocacy, and issuing final findings reports, including recommendations. Additionally, OCA is developing a system to track recommendation implementation.

OCA will issue its third Annual Report as an independent state agency in January 2027.

In accordance with the Division of the Budget instructions, OCA has submitted a budget within the amounts approved for FY 2027 by the 2026 Legislature.

PROGRAM GOAL: Independently and without bias investigate and strive to resolve, whenever possible, the complaints made by or on behalf of children in the custody of the Secretary for the Department for Children and Families (DCF) or alleged to be a child in need of care or currently or were receiving services or treatment from the Department of Corrections.

OBJECTIVE #1:

Kansans are aware of the role, work, and value of OCA.

Strategies for Objective #1:

1. Provide outreach brochures, posters, and other print material to child welfare service providers and other key child and family wellbeing stakeholders.
2. Provide DCF with a notice of availability that described OCA procedures for contacting the office and ensure such notice is prominently posted in department offices and facilities receiving public moneys for the care and placement of children.
3. Host information and outreach booths.
4. Provide informational presentations to child welfare service providers, child and family wellbeing stakeholders, and other public forum groups.
5. Provide on-site outreach in at least one rural community annually.
6. Provide updates on website and other online forums.
7. Maintain social media presence.

Performance Measures for Objective #1:

	Actual FY 2025	Actual FY 2026	Projected FY 2027	Projected FY 2028
Kansas stakeholders, including organizations, entities, and individual representatives receiving information about OCA through outreach efforts, attending or participating in a meeting at least 1x per quarter.	100%	100%	100%	100%
Contacts from Kansans seeking information and assistance.	278	408	489	587
Maintain public website & social media presence with at least 1x month minimum new post on social media (FB, Twitter).	42%	8%	75%	80%

OBJECTIVE #2:

OCA investigations are conducted and reported in a timely fashion.

Strategies for Objective #2:

1. Utilize case management system that supports efficient investigative processes and management workflow.
2. Maximize use of office technologies to increase efficiency of processes.
3. Utilize reporting methods designed to communicate clearly and succinctly.
4. Ensure OCA team attends and participates in local, state, and national level trainings in line with a professional development plan.

Performance Measures for Objective #2:

	Actual FY 2025	Actual FY 2026	Projected FY 2027	Projected FY 2028
At least 85% of initial contacts processed will receive first contact within 2 business days. **Beginning FY27, at least 90% of initial contacts process will receive first contact within 2 business days.*	90%	107%	95%	100%
Cases closed per fiscal year.	244	395	474	568

At least 50% of written summary letters will be issued within 160 days from initial contact. **Beginning FY27, at least 60% of written summary letters will be issued within 160 days from initial contact.*	75%	108%	100%	100% *Increase to 75% to be issued within 160 days
Training hours attended by OCA staff.	100%-- Min.20hours	100%	100%	100%

OBJECTIVE #3:
OCA recommendations are tracked for implementation and evaluated for effectiveness.

Strategies for Objective #3:

1. Implement process to track agency responses.
2. Implement a timeline and procedure to track implementation of recommendations accepted by the agency.
3. Provide support to agencies within OCA capacity to implement accepted recommendations.
4. Implement evaluation process in collaboration with agencies to monitor impact of adopted recommendations over a designated period of time.
5. Meet collaboratively with agencies and stakeholders' leadership regarding systemic issues identified within OCA complaints.
6. Meet collaboratively with agencies and stakeholders during the course of an investigation to identify and implement possible remedies to resolve the reported concern, prior to the completion of the investigation and/or formal recommendations issued.
7. Identify and articulate the needs of families and children as needs relate to family preservation and reunification, child protection, wellbeing, and permanency.
8. Analyze effect of laws, policies, and practices having an adverse impact on family preservation and reunification, child protection, wellbeing, and permanency.
9. Advocate for change to laws, polices, and practices having an adverse impact on family preservation and reunification, child protection, wellbeing, and permanency.
    a. Participate in multidisciplinary teams, statewide taskforce and panels focused on accountability, transparency, and systems transformation.
    b. Monitor proposed legislation, laws, and policies impacting children and families impacted by child and family wellbeing systems.

c. Provide testimony and advocacy as appropriate on proposed laws and regulations.

10. Publish an annual report with information and recommendations to the Governor, Legislature, and Judiciary.

Performance Measures for Objective #3:

	Actual FY 2025	Actual FY 2026	Projected FY 2027	Projected FY 2028
Collaborative agency and stakeholder meetings, once per quarter.	100%	100%	100%	100%
Agency responses received to recommendations.	88%	75%	85%	95%
Agency responses to OCA recommendations that include implementation plans within one year. **Beginning FY26, OCA counted Agency actions as a result of OCA recommendations that include implementation plans within one year.*	73%	236%	200%	200%

EXPENDITURE JUSTIFICATION

Total Current Year FY 2027 - $848,662

Includes: 1.5 Percent SGF Operating Reduction/lapse ($11,275) and SGF unused salaries/wages lapse ($99,957)

Reappropriation: $30,469

Total Budget Year FY 2028 - $865,640

Object Code 100: Salaries & Wages

The Office of the Child Advocate has a total of seven FTE, which includes the Child Advocate, Office Administrator, Intake Investigative Specialist, Lead Case Investigative Analyst, and three Case Investigative Analysts. OCA has all seven positions presently filled as of June 21, 2026.

Total Current Year FY 2027 - $695,451

Total Budget Year FY 2028 - $731,399

Object Codes 200-299: Contractual Services

The Office of the Child Advocate requests the following for contractual services. Expenditures for contractual services primarily include communications, printing costs for outreach materials, professional services, and rent. Due to two new FTE and restrictions in current building space, OCA will be moving in FY 2026 with an anticipated increase in annual rent and monumental surcharge from $13,608 to $57,400. This is more than originally estimated. The contractual service for a case management system is the second most significant contractual expenditure.

Total Current Year FY 2027 - $150,884

Total Budget Year FY 2028 - $131,991

Object Codes 300-399: Commodities

The Office of the Child Advocate requests the following for commodities. Expenditures in this area primarily consist of office and data supplies.

Total Current Year FY 2027 - $1,327

Total Budget Year FY 2028 - $1,250

Object Codes 400-499: Capital Outlay

The Office of the Child Advocate requests the following for capital outlay. Expenditures in this area consist of microcomputer hardware support equipment.

Total Current Year FY 2027 - $1,000
Total Budget Year FY 2028 - $1,000

Enhancement Package – FY 2028:

OCA is requesting one enhancement package for consideration by the Governor and Legislature. Listed below is a brief description.

OCA was granted approval for two additional FTE in FY25. OCA had underestimated the associated costs to meet the needs for two new FTE, most significantly, the need and costs associated to expand its physical footprint. Additionally, OCA experienced incremental increases in numerous contractual related services and operational costs. In FY26 OCA requested an enhancement package of $99,701, receiving an overall approval of $75,000. With the increased operational costs, as well as the significant impact the 1.5% lapse has on a small agency, OCA finds that the original estimated request in FY26 was accurate to meet the overall needs of the agency. Therefore, OCA respectfully requests an enhancement in FY28 of $34,360. Without the additional $34,360, OCA will have to make significant adjustments, including prohibitions on all in state and out of state travel, trainings, staff development, outreach, and printing of materials which impacts OCA's ability to meet the mandates of the Child Advocate Act. This will also have a significant impact on staff morale and retention.

Enhancement Object Codes 200-299: Contractual Services

OCA requests an increase in the areas of communications and rents.
Budget Year FY 2028 - $34,360

Enhancement Budget Year FY 2027 - $34,360
FY 2028 With Enhancement Total - $900,000