



NJ DEPARTMENT OF
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OFFICE OF ADVOCACY
ANNUAL REPORT
JULY 2011 - JUNE 2012

ALLISON BLAKE, PH.D., L.S.W. - DCF COMMISSIONER





State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
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CHRIS CHRISTIE
Governor

KIM GUADAGNO
Lt. Governor

ALLISON BLAKE, Ph.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner

Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to provide you with the Second Annual Report of the Office of Advocacy (OOA), which is intended to give you an updated glimpse into the work of this office during the past year as well as its' continued growth and focused advocacy for children and families. This report provides an account of OOA's activities from July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012 with highlights of its mission, procedures, data collection, challenges, accomplishments and goals for moving forward.

Although OOA's establishment was prior to the launch of our 2012-2014 Strategic Plan, it is a shining beacon of the five strategic priorities that guide our work now, and in the future, in action: seamless system of care, performance management and accountability, partnerships, communication and organizational development.

Remarkably, over the last year, the OOA has seen an increase in requests in search of general information, resources, and services offered by the State of New Jersey. However, given this trend, we are ever more committed to our mission of partnering with New Jersey's communities to ensure the safety, well-being and success of New Jersey's children and families. Through OOA, we are resolute in appropriately responding to all the requests we receive, and whenever possible, linking constituents to necessary services.

Additionally, OOA has made great strides to improve its data collection efforts and continues to review areas for improvement that will translate data collection to the implementation of system-wide improvements based on constituent and stakeholder feedback.

I am a strong proponent of annual reports such as these which help us to take some time to reflect on our accomplishments, assess our strengths, and explore opportunities for continued improvements. As you read this report, it is my sincere hope that you will learn about the integral role this office plays in DCF's efforts. Furthermore, I encourage you to bring awareness to this office and its services to your circles of influence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allison Blake".

Allison Blake, Ph.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner

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Mission and History

The Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Office of Advocacy (OOA) has been supporting the Department's mission of ensuring safety, well-being, and success of New Jersey's children and families since 2010. The OOA provides information, referral services and advocacy support to a variety of constituents across the state.

The OOA has the unique role as an independent advocate for children and families. This independence allows for timely resolution of constituent issues and concerns through direct collaborative communication with liaisons in each DCF division and office, other state agencies, as well as with community providers and stakeholders.

About the Staff

OOA is staffed by a team of professionals including a Director, a Supervisor, several Constituent Relations Liaisons, and an Administrative Assistant. There is a wealth of experience and expertise within the staff of OOA whose strengths represent many years in a variety of child welfare backgrounds, such as child protective services, child behavioral health, prevention and addictions.

On any given day, OOA staff will field calls and emails from citizens who are exhibiting a variety of human emotions as they seek help for their issues and concerns. OOA staff advocate for these families which largely involves communication on their behalf, helping a constituent sort out their most emergent needs and directing them to appropriate services. All contacts to the office are responded to and given priority review. Ultimately, the staff of OOA seeks to enhance service provision, ensure timely resolution of constituent issues and concerns, and empower families throughout New Jersey.

Our Services: How We Help Citizens

The OOA's primary function is to meet the needs of DCF service recipients. However, OOA's services are available to any individual in New Jersey who calls or writes seeking assistance. Some examples of how we help citizens include:

- Providing education about the services, processes, policies and procedures of the Department of Children and Families and its Divisions and Offices
- Receiving and researching concerns and complaints from citizens regarding the department
- Assisting those in need in finding appropriate services
- Providing advocacy support to service recipients
- Making recommendations to DCF based on performance data with the intent of improving the system

Constituents can reach the Office of Advocacy by calling a toll free number, 1-877-543-7864, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Constituents may also correspond with the Department by emailing askDCF@dcf.state.nj.us and the Office of Advocacy will respond.

It is important to note that the DCF Office of Advocacy is not a first responder for suspected child abuse or neglect. In New Jersey, any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to abuse or neglect should immediately report this information to the Child Abuse Hotline: 1-877 NJ ABUSE (1-877-652-2873). If the child is in immediate danger, call 911 as well as 1-877 NJ ABUSE. A concerned caller does not need proof to report an allegation of child abuse and neglect and may make the report anonymously.

Data

In addition to assisting with each constituent's concerns, OOA also has a core responsibility to provide feedback about trends and systemic matters through data collection and reporting.

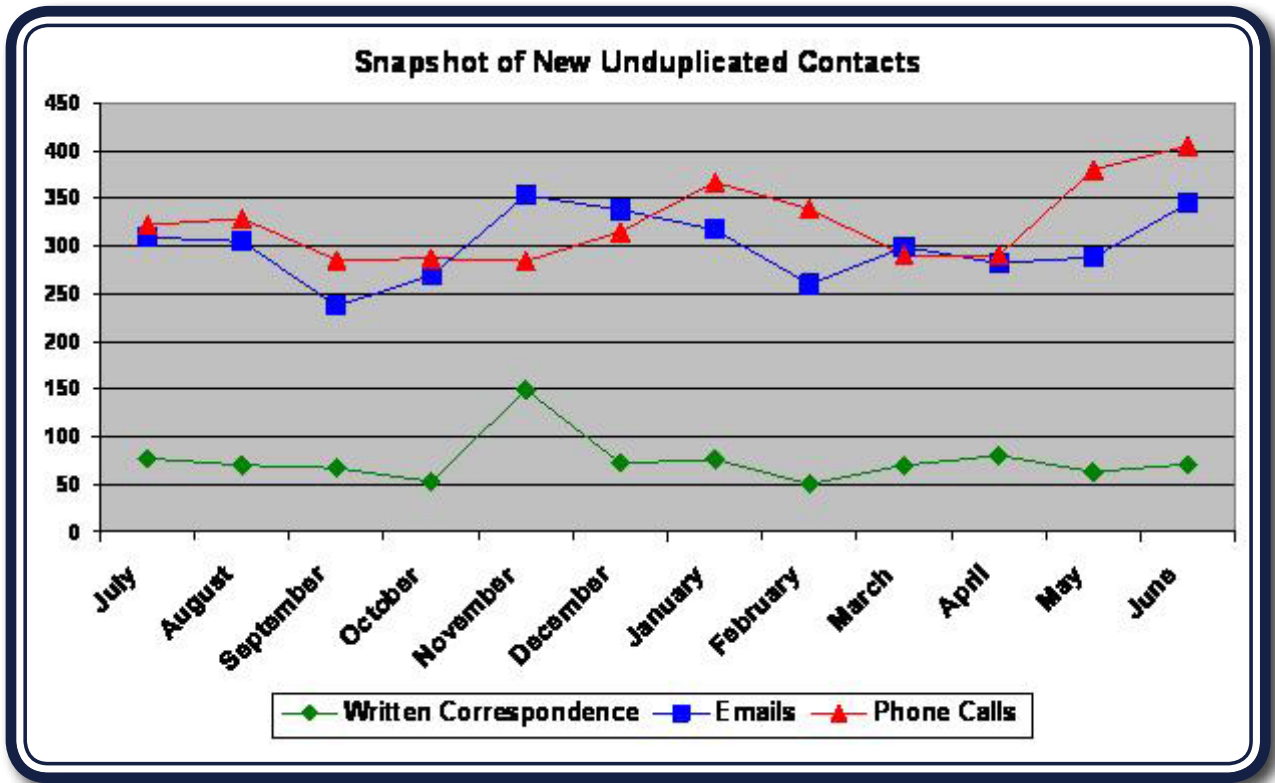
Refinements to the database have been made to ensure established consistency and uniformity. As of July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012 data analysis reveals that the OOA received nearly 8,400 unduplicated contacts requesting assistance. The table below reflects the number of contacts received by month and by the method in which they were received.

7/1/2011- 6/30/2012 Snapshot of Total Number of Unduplicated Contacts Received

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	TOTAL
Telephone	322	329	285	287	284	315	367	339	290	295	380	405	3898
Email	309	305	237	269	353	338	317	260	299	282	288	345	3602
Written Correspondence	77	70	67	53	149	72	76	50	70	80	63	71	898
TOTAL	708	704	589	609	786	725	760	649	659	657	731	821	8398

These numbers reflect initial contact/referrals on a new case. It does not include all of the "follow up contacts" while the case is open in OOA.

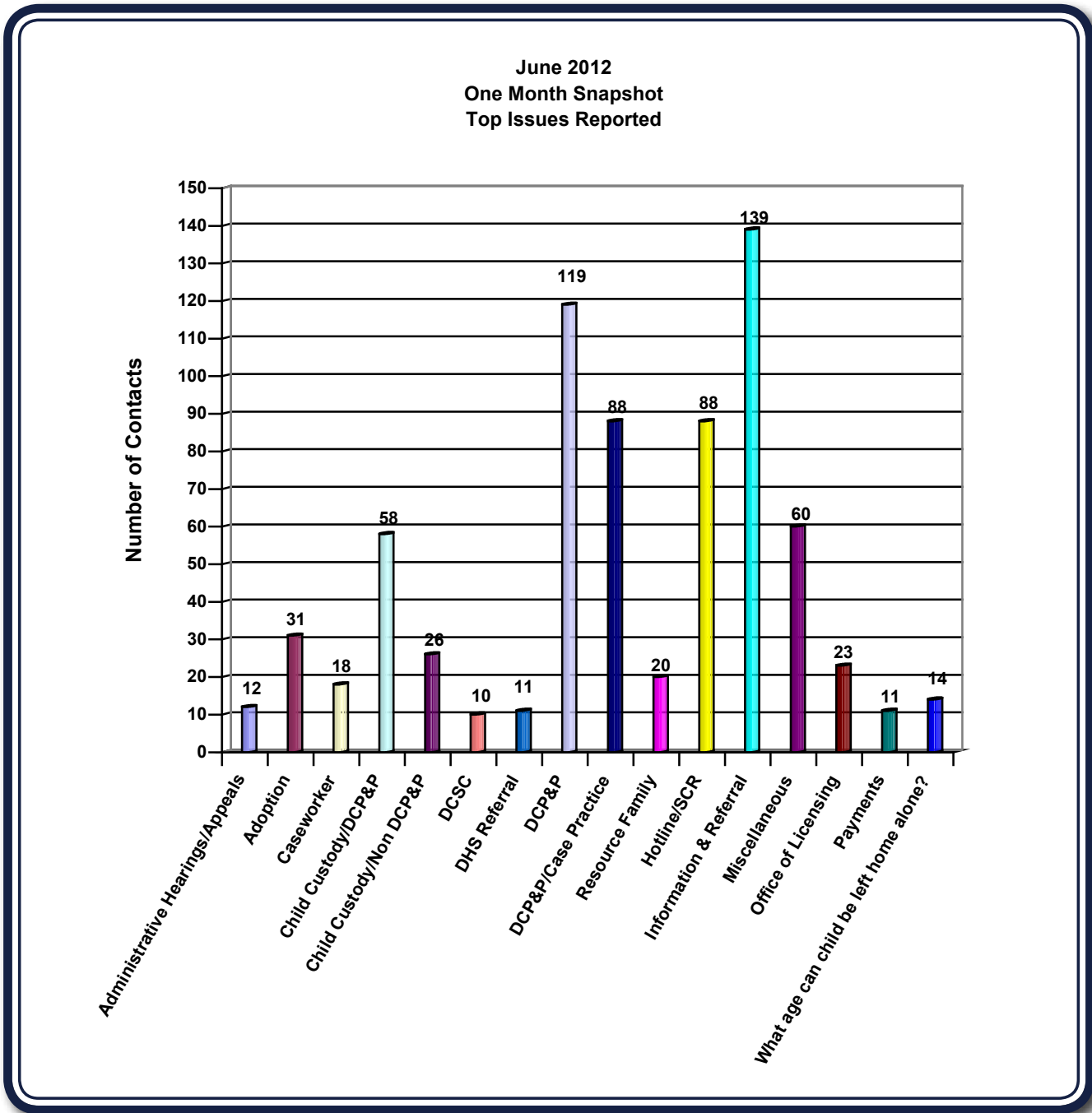
Phone contact is the primary means of communication with OOA, followed by email and written correspondence.



Data analysis from July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012 reveals that the majority of the contacts to OOA fell into the following areas:

1. Child Welfare Inquiries
2. Child Protective Services Questions and Concerns
3. Concerns regarding Open DCP&P Cases
4. Children’s System of Care Concerns
5. Requests for Information and Resources
6. Child abuse and/or neglect issues that required OOA staff to report them to the Department’s State Centralized Registry (SCR).

A snapshot for the month of June 2012 further evidences the types of contacts received as indicated in the following chart. While Child Protection and Permanency-related concerns seem to be the vast majority of contacts and cases handled, strikingly there are also several issues not related to DCP&P or DCF services which OOA addresses.



Case Examples

One of the roles of the OOA is to share trend information and systemic data without compromising the confidentiality of those who contact us. The following case examples adhere to the tenets of this role and are representative of the types of contacts handled by OOA Constituent Relations Liaisons.

TRANSITIONING ADOLESCENTS

OOA staff assisted a 19-year-old who felt she needed to leave CP&P supervision when she began contact with her birth parent. Things did not work out for this young adult and her birth parent so she contacted OOA for assistance. OOA staff worked with this young woman and provided guidance on how to contact SCR to request her case be re-opened. OOA staff facilitated a collaborative effort with the CP&P Local Office and the Office of Adolescent Services to provide services to the youth. Many supports were put in place in a very short period of time by the DCF Offices, and as a result, the youth is now safe with the goal of independent living.

In some cases, adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood have contacted OOA in search of information and referrals to assist them during this stage in their lives. Often they express concern with reference to their involvement in the child welfare system and need assistance navigating the problems they are experiencing.

FAMILY SUPPORT

The OOA's toll-free phone line recorded three calls over a weekend from a distraught parent who left no identifying or contact information, but did state that his children were removed from his care. A few days later, this parent called during the day and confirmed he had called over the weekend. He revealed he suffered from mental health challenges and was suspicious, embarrassed and afraid to talk with the CP&P caseworker about his children. OOA staff spent a great deal of time on the phone with this parent who wanted help but was unable to initiate it. OOA staff was then able to reach out to the CP&P Local Office staff involved in the case and the Division of Mental Health Office for Adult Integrated Case Management Services in the identified county. Since the parent had established trust with the OOA, staff participated in a conference call to help ease the parent into the Mental Health Intake process. The parent did follow through with mental health treatment.

Often OOA Constituent Liaisons are required to use a sixth sense to understand the human struggle and spectrum of emotions. Doing so ensures that OOA staff are able to address concerns thoroughly. With this insight, OOA can make linkages to community partners who have expertise and experience in parent advocacy and empowerment. These partners serve as an invaluable resource because of their extensive knowledge of central issues of an inquiry or complaint on the local level. Additionally, connecting citizens to organizations and supports within their community helps promote safe and convenient environments to resolve their conflicts. Clearly, one of OOA's functions is to act as a resource for families as exemplified by the following example.

FAMILY CRISIS

A mother of two children, ages 3 and 5, who was also five months pregnant, contacted DCF's OOA for assistance with housing. She explained that she was residing in a motel, but she was only able to stay in the motel for two more days because the social service provider was unable to pay for a longer period. The mother had not been involved with DCF in the past. Her housing situation was caused by a domestic violence incident involving the children's father. OOA provided the mother with many housing and domestic violence resources, including the Family Success Center (FSC) near her. The FSC staff contacted the mother and was able to have her motel stay extended. The FSC continued to work with and monitor the mother's housing. A representative from OOA contacted the mother a short time after her housing had been resolved and she said that the FSC was extremely helpful and sensitive to her situation. She was very thankful for their assistance.

Economic issues have impacted a great number of citizens in the state. As a result, OOA has seen a significant number of cases like these that require coordination with other state agencies in order to help resolve a crisis for a family. However, sometimes there are mitigating circumstances that prevent agencies from offering support in a timely or complete fashion which can exacerbate the issue. Through ingenuity, tenacity and an established sense of urgency, OOA staff, responsible for resolving this conflict, was able to communicate that this was an emergent need requiring DCF supports which were quickly mobilized.

Accomplishments

The second year of the OOA has been one of growth and enhancements to established processes and systems. During its second year, OOA increased its efforts to inform the public and community partners of its existence and ability to respond to the needs of citizens.

Communications

- OOA continued to establish a statewide presence through public education and awareness efforts to build trust in our unique role as an independent advocate for children and families.
- OOA staff continued to create lines of communication by establishing liaisons with all of the DCF divisions/offices and with other state departments in order to facilitate a prompt and efficient response to constituent concerns.
- Staff participated in statewide presentations to inform constituents of the existence of the OOA and our ability to offer individualized assistance.
- OOA continues to distribute a brochure in English and Spanish about its services.

Data Capture and Analysis

- OOA made enhancements to its data collection database. This effort allowed OOA to continue to track citizen contacts and use this information as a tool to improve and assure the Department's quality of services.

Operations

- Identified appropriate staff to manage OOA inquiries and requests in a timely manner.
- OOA leadership was able to advise the DCF Commissioner and Executive Management of identified noted issues, concerns and trends.

Goals for 2013

The Office of Advocacy's overall goals are to enhance service provision, ensure timely decisions and resolve constituent issues and concerns. More specifically, OOA has several goals for the coming year that will continue its work:

- OOA will continue to be responsive to constituents in an efficient and timely manner through refined internal operations and external activities.
- Refine relationships and communication channels with internal and external staff and stakeholders, state agencies and community partners.
- Conduct thorough analysis of issues and trends to identify concerns that DCF management need to be aware of.
- OOA leadership will work with the DCF Office of Performance Management and Accountability (OPM) to analyze the data that has been collected from constituent contacts during the first two years in order to continue to examine trends and patterns and then identify areas that need improvement in service delivery for children and families.

