

Partnership

Independent Oversight and Public Trust

Child protection systems should support independent oversight and mechanisms that broaden public understanding of system operations and decision making.

Child protection is a shared responsibility and moral obligation. While governmental child welfare agencies take the lead, community-based service providers, the legal system and an array of other stakeholders also play vital roles. A high degree of trust is needed to ensure that these partnerships are strong and effective. Independent oversight enhances trust by equipping stakeholders with objective information and mechanisms for addressing complaints.

When it comes to oversight, states have a high degree of autonomy in crafting an approach that works for them.



Spotlight on Ombudsmen:

Independent state child welfare ombudsman offices can increase transparency and public trust, identify systemic failures that would otherwise be missed, resolve complaints and influence policy and practice changes. Importantly, ombudsmen also help protect due process and resolve individual complaints.



Washington

[Washington State Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds](#)

The Director-Ombuds is appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. OFCO acts as an impartial, neutral fact-finder and has unrestricted access to information and records held by the Department of Children, Youth and Families.

As evidence of OFCO's unique vantage point and role, in 2025 the office identified concerning trends regarding fatalities and near-fatalities in the state. They conducted a deep-dive analysis, resulting in the following comprehensive report and associated recommendations: [Child Fatalities and Near Fatalities in Washington State](#).



Colorado

[Child Protection Ombudsman of Colorado](#)

Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) was made fully independent in 2016 to ensure impartiality. Colorado is a county-administered state and the CPO has served citizens in all 64 counties.

Innovation: In 2025 CPO began a partnership with [the Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab at the University of Denver](#). This partnership is focused on things like CPO's data collection and analysis processes to improve outcomes for children and families in Colorado.



Michigan

[Office of the Child Advocate](#)

As part of legislative change in 2023, the office was renamed the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) and its scope was expanded to include residential facilities providing juvenile justice services.

In addition to the more typical oversight functions, OCA actively engages youth and their families in advocating for systemic change and seeks to equip them with resources. In 2025 in partnership with the Council of State Governments (CSG), OCA conducted a statewide assessment of Michigan's foster care system, leveraging stakeholder listening sessions to complement data. This is expected to culminate in a final report with findings and recommendations in 2026.

CAUTION:

Several states have or are moving toward expanding the scope of ombudsmen beyond child protection to include child welfare more broadly and additional child serving systems including juvenile justice. While the desire to extend oversight and transparency to more child-serving systems is laudable, ***there's risk that an expanded scope will dilute the focus on the core work of child protection: safety and stability.***

Opportunity

As the field increasingly embraces sophisticated data and analytics, those same tools may offer new opportunities to strengthen independent oversight. Ombudsmen often have access to an array of data from multiple sources that uniquely allows for identifying systemic trends, emerging risks and opportunities for improvement that might otherwise go unnoticed.

