



## West Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman/Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: What is an ombudsman?**

A: The term “ombudsman” (pronounced om-budz-man) is a Swedish term that means “representative.” An ombudsman is someone who assists individuals and groups in the resolution of conflicts or concerns. Ombudsmen work in all types of organizations, including government agencies, universities, corporations, hospitals, and news organizations. An ombudsman is an independent, impartial, and confidential resource for individuals to voice their concerns and have assistance to resolve complaints.

### **Q: What is the West Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman?**

A: The Foster Care Ombudsman is a unit within the West Virginia Department of Health (DH), Office of Inspector General that advocates for the rights of foster children and foster/kinship parents investigates and resolves complaints, and makes recommendations for child welfare reform. In short, the Foster Care Ombudsman provides assistance and resources to people who are served or affected by the child welfare system. People contact the Foster Care Ombudsman when they have a complaint or concern and a) don’t know where to go with it, b) have tried to address it through existing systems but were dissatisfied, or c) are afraid.

### **Q: What types of complaints does the Foster Care Ombudsman investigate?**

A: The Foster Care Ombudsman investigates complaints related to the West Virginia foster care system. Complaints often involve, but are not limited to, the action or inaction of state agencies, unfair or unjust treatment, and/or alleged violations of the Foster Children and Foster/Kinship Parent Bills of Rights. Although the nature and level of assistance may vary, the Foster Care Ombudsman will always attempt to provide education and resources as applicable to the complaint.

### **Q: Who can contact the Foster Care Ombudsman?**

A: Anyone with a complaint, concern, or issue relating to the foster care system can contact the Foster Care Ombudsman.

### **Q: How can someone contact the Foster Care Ombudsman?**

A: The Foster Care Ombudsman unit is headquartered at the West Virginia State Capitol Complex in Charleston, West Virginia, and its workforce is positioned throughout the state and can be reached by telephone at (304) 558-1117 or by email at [fostercareombudsman@wv.gov](mailto:fostercareombudsman@wv.gov). A Request for Assistance form is available online at <https://services.fcovv.com/assistance-request>.

**Q: Are complaints to the Foster Care Ombudsman confidential?**

A: Yes. Information provided to the Foster Care Ombudsman is confidential, and the release of one's identity outside of the ombudsman unit is prohibited, with only specific exceptions. To provide the most comprehensive level of service, the Foster Care Ombudsman may ask for the complainant's consent to release their identity as it may be necessary to research the complaint. It is important that people feel safe to share information freely.

**Q: What happens once a complaint is submitted?**

A: When an individual contacts the Foster Care Ombudsman, a representative from the unit will reach out within the next business day to gather more information regarding the complaint. Once this information is received, the Foster Care Ombudsman will follow up with the complainant promptly to gather consent and discuss the process. Please note, that the Foster Care Ombudsman is not an emergency service. Timeframes will vary depending on the nature and intensity of the complaint.

**Q: What can the Foster Care Ombudsman do about a complaint?**

A: The Foster Care Ombudsman explores and compares child welfare casework to applicable policy, procedure, and law. If a discrepancy is discovered, the Foster Care Ombudsman will typically discuss the observation with a worker, supervisor, or manager to correct the situation and prevent the likelihood of its recurrence. The Foster Care Ombudsman does not have the authority to direct casework decisions or provide legal advice. However, each complaint provides a means by which individuals can provide candid input to leaders, lawmakers, and stakeholders regarding their experiences within the child welfare system.

**Q: When should someone contact the Foster Care Ombudsman?**

A: It is important to make reasonable attempts to use existing problem-solving mechanisms, such as contacting an agency supervisor or the Office of Constituent Services. However, if a complaint is not addressed sufficiently or an individual does not feel comfortable using these channels, the Foster Care Ombudsman may be of service.

**Q: What is the difference between the Office of Constituent Services and the Foster Care Ombudsman?**

A: Both the Office of Constituent Services and the Foster Care Ombudsman facilitate the proper resolution of concerns and complaints. However, Constituent Services deals with issues relating to many of the Department of Human Services (DoHS), Department of Health (DH), and Department of Health Facilities (DHF). Both entities can provide competent conflict resolution services. The Office of Constituent Services can be reached by telephone at 800-642-8589 and by email at [osaclientservices@wv.gov](mailto:osaclientservices@wv.gov).