

# 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

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## Foster Care Ombudsman

July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025  
State Fiscal Year 2025



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# MESSAGE FROM THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

Dear Citizens of West Virginia:

I am proud to present our Office of Inspector General's State Fiscal Year 2025 Annual Report which covers the Foster Care Ombudsman Division's activities for the period of July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025. This report summarizes our major efforts to uphold its mission to receive and investigate complaints from foster children, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and other stakeholders regarding the child welfare and juvenile justice systems by impartially evaluating the situation and working with the parties to come up with satisfactory resolution and recommendations for systemic reform. Whether it's a complaint of action/inaction by the West Virginia Department of Human Services or an employee, lack of communication, or assistance needed with financial reimbursement issues, the Foster Care Ombudsman Division is committed to fostering trust, credibility, and providing problem solving resources in a safe, consistent, respectful manner.

Some of our most significant accomplishments include:

- **Helping Vulnerable West Virginians Navigate a Complex CPS System:** Our Foster Care Ombudsman Division assisted with 1,038 complaints during State Fiscal Year 2025, of which 371 were substantiated (concerns were reviewed and supported by verifiable information) and these individuals' concerns were investigated and they were promptly assisted; not brushed off, dismissed or ignored. This enhances accountability.
- **Education and Explanation:** We provide direction to 213 individuals (often in moments of crisis) with complex, technical, frequently misunderstood foster care policy and procedures, and referred valuable resources.
- **Benefits Recovered to Complainants:** Through our efforts, we assisted 65 individuals and families in receiving \$122,178.06 funds due to them in a timely manner.
- **Making Government Better:** We made regular recommendations to help the West Virginia Department of of Human Services identify systemic areas for program improvement to facilitate clarity, support, or resolution.

I want to thank the Foster Care Ombudsman Division's staff for their passion for helping others, their commitment to excellence and specialized knowledge in serving the citizens of West Virginia. This annual report reflects their great work. We are also looking forward to expanding this Division's efforts to be more proactive and complete systemic and other reviews and investigations based upon trending data and identified areas of risk and concern.

The Office of Inspector General and each of our nine divisions is here to serve as your independent watchdog to promote the good government you deserve. Public support and input is critical to our mission success.

Please feel free to contact us at anytime at [oig.wv.gov](http://oig.wv.gov).

Sincerely,



Ann Urling, Inspector General



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The West Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman Division, housed within the Office of Inspector General, provides independent, confidential, and impartial oversight of the foster care system. The Ombudsman serves as a neutral resources for children, youth, foster parents, kinship caregivers, biological families, and concerned stakeholders who need help navigating foster care policies, procedures, and decisions.

## OUR ROLE

The Ombudsman Division exists to:

- **Listen and assist** when individuals have concerns or questions about foster care and child welfare services.
- **Explain policies and procedures** that are often complex, technical, and difficult to understand.
- **Review complaints** related to safety, investigations, placements, visitation, permanency, and access to services.
- **Identify systemic issues and recommend improvements** to strengthen accountability and outcomes for children
- **Promote fairness and transparency** without replacing courts, attorneys, or child welfare agencies

## WHY THE OMBUDSMAN MATTERS

Foster care is one of the most complex and emotionally challenging systems a family or child can encounter. Policies and procedures are extensive, frequently changing, and not always clearly communicated. Children and caregivers may feel overwhelmed, unheard, and uncertain about their rights and options.

Seeking help can feel intimidating especially when families fear retaliation, confusion, or worsening outcomes. The Ombudsman provides a safe, independent avenue for questions, concerns, and guidance when navigating this system feels impossible to do so alone.

## KEY CHALLENGES IN FOSTER CARE

- Complex policies and procedures that are difficult for families and youth to understand
- Inconsistent application of policy across cases and regions
- Communication gaps that leave caregivers and youth unsure of expectations or next steps
- Emotional and legal stressors impacting children, families, and caregivers simultaneously
- Systemic issues that can persist even after corrective actions are identified

## HOW WE HELP

The Foster Care Ombudsman Division helps individuals:

- **Understand** what policies require and what options exist
- **Clarify** rights and responsibilities within foster care
- **Seek** informational resolution when possible
- **Elevate** concerns when issues appear systemic or unresolved
- **Navigate** the system with greater clarity, confidence, and support

## OUR COMMITMENT

The Foster Care Ombudsman Division is committed to ensuring that no child, youth, or caregiver must navigate foster care or child welfare alone. By providing independent oversight, clear guidance, and a trusted voice, the Ombudsman strengthens accountability, transparency, and understanding so the system better serves West Virginia's children and families.



# COMPLAINT CASES INVESTIGATED



The complaint data reflected in this report represents real people navigating a complex, high-stakes child welfare system, often during moments of crisis. Each contact to the Foster Care Ombudsman Division reflects a need for clarity, support, accountability, or resolution within a system that can be difficult to understand and emotionally overwhelming.

Complainant Count by Month and Quarter SFY 2025												
2024						2025						
Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	SFY End Running Total
81	95	65	114	89	83	70	94	67	84	94	102	1038
Quarter 1			Quarter 2			Quarter 3			Quarter 4			Total
241			286			231			280			1038

### Volume Does Not Equal Failure

A high number of complaints or contacts does not automatically indicate systemic failure. In many cases, families, youth, and caregivers reach out because they are unsure how policies apply to their specific situation or how to resolve concerns within existing agency processes. The Ombudsman Division serves as a trusted, independent access point when individuals do not know where else to turn.

### Education Is A Core Function

The data shows 213 cases where education was provided regarding policy, procedures, and available resources. This underscores a critical reality:

- Foster care policies are complex, technical, and frequently misunderstood
- Many concerns can be reduced or resolved when individuals receive clear explanations and guidance
- Early education helps prevent escalation, placement disruptions, and unnecessary conflict

Education and explanation are not secondary functions - they are **essential** system-stabilizing services.

### Substantiated Complaints Reflect Accountability

The 371 substantiated complaints do not simply reflect error; they demonstrate the Ombudsman's role in independent verification and accountability. Substantiation means concerns were reviewed and supported by available information - not assumed, dismissed, or ignored.

# COMPLAINT CASES INVESTIGATED



## Complaint Categories Reflect System Pressures

Action or inaction of an agency (378 complaints) highlights the complexity of decision-making in child welfare and the impact of timeliness, follow-through, and communication. Placement-related complaints (151 complaints) reflect the challenges of maintaining stability while meeting safety, permanency, and well-being needs. Financial and reimbursement complaints (164 complaints) point to strain on foster and kinship caregivers who rely on timely and accurate support. Communication complaints (168 complaints) reinforce that even when decisions are appropriate. Lack of clarity can create distress and mistrust.

## Child Protective Services, Guardianship, and Home Finding Concerns

Complaints involving Child Protective Services (785 complaints), legal guardianship (34 complaints), and home finding (38 complaints) illustrate how interconnected systems impact children and families simultaneously. These cases often involve overlapping policies, court involvement, and multiple agencies - making independent guidance essential.

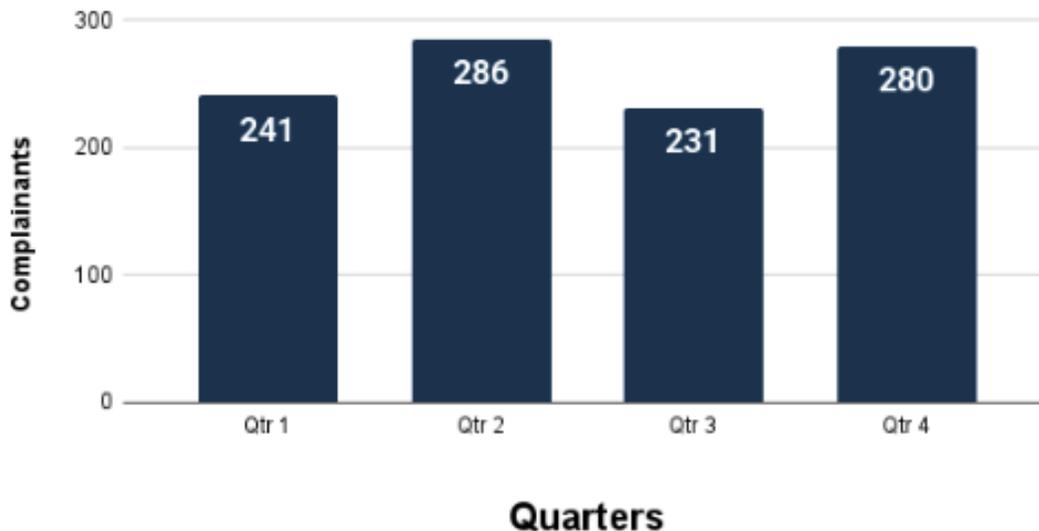
## County Data Requires Careful Interpretation

Counties with higher numbers of contacts - such as Kanawha, Marion, and Cabell - often reflect:

- Larger populations
- Higher numbers of child abuse and neglect filings
- Greater system utilization

These figures do not automatically indicate poorer performance but rather higher interaction with the child welfare system.

## SFY 2025



# UNDERSTANDING THE DATA



During the State Fiscal Year 2025, the Foster Care Ombudsman Division received 1,038 individual contacts from children, families, caregivers, providers, attorneys, and community stakeholders across West Virginia.

This volume reflects more than numbers - it reflects trust.

- Families and professionals are reaching out because they need:
  - Help navigating complex foster care policies
  - Timely answers when concerns feel urgent
  - An independent voice when communication breaks down
  - Guidance during moments of frustration, confusion, or crisis
- What the trends show:
  - Contacts remained consistently high across all quarters, demonstrating year-round demand for independent assistance.
  - Quarter to quarter stability reflects the Ombudsman's role as an ongoing resource, not a crisis-only service.
  - Year-over-year growth shows increased awareness of the Division and confidence in its ability to help resolve issues constructively.

## What These Contacts Represent

- Each contact may include:
  - Explaining policies and procedures in plain language
  - Helping caregivers understand expectations and next steps
  - Clarifying communication between families and agencies
  - Identifying patterns that warrant system-level review

Many issues are resolved without formal complaints, through education, clarification, and early problem-solving - often preventing escalation, placement disruption, or further system involvement.

## Why Volume Matters

High contact volume does not indicate system failure. Instead, it demonstrates:

- Increased access to oversight
- Willingness of families and providers to seek help early
- Confidence that concerns will be heard and addressed fairly

The Foster Care Ombudsman Division serves as a bridge, helping families and agencies work through issues before they become crises. The Ombudsman's role is not to replace agencies or courts, but to cut through confusion, explain options and help move issues forward in a timely and respectful way.

**In State Fiscal Year 2025, the Foster Care Ombudsman Division served 1,038 individuals - providing guidance, resolving concerns, and strengthening understanding across West Virginia's foster care system.**

# OUTREACH EFFORTS



## **Why Outreach Matters**

West Virginia law requires the Foster Care Ombudsman to actively inform the public about the Ombudsman's role, services and how individuals can seek help. Outreach is essential to ensuring that children, families, caregivers, providers, and community partners know where to turn when questions or concerns arise.

Outreach also helps prevent misunderstandings, encourages early problems - solving and strengthens trust in the foster care system.

The Foster Care Ombudsman conducts both formal and informal outreach to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- Children and youth
- Foster and kinship caregivers
- Child placing agencies
- Department of Human Services staff
- Biological parents
- Youth resident facilities
- Community advocates
- School personnel
- Faith-based organizations
- Juvenile detention centers
- Managed care partners

These efforts ensure that information reaches people where they are, not only in formal settings.

## **State Fiscal Year 2025 Outreach Activities**

Formal Outreach: In State Fiscal Year 2025, the Foster Care Ombudsman conducted 243 formal outreach sessions. Formal outreach includes:

- Speaking engagements and presentations;
- Exhibits and community events;
- Participation on National Training and Development Curriculum panels;
- Collaborative stakeholder meetings; and
- Approved trainings or presentations requiring advance authorization and documentation.

These efforts focus on education, system understanding, and relationship-building across agencies and communities.

Informal Outreach: Informal outreach includes brief, direct interactions with the public that expand awareness of the ombudsman's role, such as:

- Providing brochures, flyers, and handouts;
- Answering questions during everyday community interactions; and
- Educating individuals in non-traditional settings such as grocery stores, medical offices, or community events.

While informal in nature, these interactions often serve as the first point of contact for individuals who later seek assistance.

# OUTREACH EFFORTS



## Training and Professional Development

In addition to outreach, the Foster Care Ombudsman Division participated in 64 National Training and Development Curriculum certifications, strengthening expertise and ensuring outreach and oversight efforts remain informed, current, and effective. The National Training and Development Curriculum is a research-based, free training program for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents. These trainings represent an opportunity for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents to learn that the Foster Care Ombudsman exists and the services and supports that we are able to provide.

### Why This Matters:

Outreach is not separate from oversight - it is a critical part of it. When people understand their rights, responsibilities, and available resources:

- Issues are raised earlier;
- Concerns are resolved more efficiently; and
- Children experience greater stability and protection.

Through sustained outreach in State Fiscal Year 2025, the Foster Care Ombudsman Division expanded access, increased awareness, and strengthened connections statewide.



# RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



The following recommendations are being made based upon the trends and the work of the Foster Care Ombudsman Division during State Fiscal Year 2025.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Prioritize Early Family Identification When a Parent is Incarcerated**

When a parent is incarcerated, children are at heightened risk of unnecessary separation from family due to delayed identification and outreach to relatives. Early recognition of parental incarceration and timely family-finding efforts are essential to reduce trauma, preserve family connections, and promote stability. Children experience better outcomes when they are cared for by relatives or kin they know and trust. The foster care system should consistently identify incarceration early, engage incarcerated parents in identifying relatives, and prioritize safe kinship placements whenever possible. Success should be measured through early case identification, timely completion of documented family searches, prompt contact with identified relatives, increased kinship placements, reduced placement disruptions, and meaningful inclusion of incarcerated parents' voices in planning.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Strengthened Concurrent Planning When a Parent is Incarcerated**

Children with incarcerated parents often remain in foster care longer due to delayed permanency planning and late initiation of steps such as Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) requests. Concurrent planning - working toward reunification while simultaneously preparing alternate permanency options - should begin early and be applied consistently. This approach reduces unnecessary delays, minimizes reliance on temporary placements, and ensures permanency options are available if circumstances change. Early identification of relatives, prompt initiation of ICPC processes for out-of-state kin, and parallel planning for reunification, guardianship, or adoption should be standard practice to ensure children do not remain in limbo due to late planning.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Ensure All Background Reviews and Required Approvals Are Timely Completed**

When children are removed from their homes, placement decisions must be made promptly; however, safety and stability must remain the primary consideration. Prior to placement, preliminary background checks and all required registry checks should be completed to ensure there are no immediate disqualifying concerns. Following placement, full background checks and any required variance requests should be submitted within two business days to initiate the approval process without delay. This approach balances the need for timely placement with essential safety safeguards, reduces the risk of later unnecessary disruptions, and helps prevent unnecessary delays that can prolong instability for children.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Establish Standardized Training and Tiered Foster Care Placement Requirements Statewide**

Inconsistent foster parent training and agency-specific tier definitions create confusion, inequity, and placement instability. A uniform, statewide training framework should be implemented to ensure foster

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



parents receive consistent preparation aligned with clearly defined tiered placement expectations. Standardized criteria for tier approval, aligned training requirements, and shared definitions across all agencies will promote fairness, reduce caregiver burnout, and support better placement matching for children with varying levels of need.

- **Define Tier One - Standard Foster Care Placements:** Tier One placements should serve children with basic care needs who require a safe and stable home environment. These children may need routine supervision, assistance with school and activities, support adjusting to foster care, and help maintaining family visitation. Caregivers should meet core foster parent certification requirements, demonstrate basic trauma-informed care knowledge, and understand foster care policies and expectations.
- **Define Tier Two - Moderate Needs Foster Care Placements:** Tier Two placements should support children requiring additional structure or services due to behavioral, emotional, or developmental challenges. These children may need enhanced supervision, coordination with counseling or therapeutic services, and support for developmental delays. Caregivers should complete all Tier One training, receive additional instruction in trauma, behavioral supports, and de-escalation, and demonstrate the ability to collaborate closely with service providers and schools.
- **Define Tier Three - Specialized or High-Risk Needs Foster Care Placements:** Tier Three should be reserved for children with complex, intensive needs, including significant trauma histories, serious behavioral or mental health challenges, or medical and developmental complexity. These placements require caregivers with advanced, specialized training, demonstrated capacity to manage high-acuity needs, and access to ongoing coaching and support services to prevent placement disruption.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Strengthen Policies Governing Temporary Lodging for Children in Foster Care**

Temporary lodging, such as hotels, should remain a short-term, structured, and child-focused intervention used only when no immediate placement is available. Clear safeguards are needed to protect children's health, safety, education, and well-being during these stays. Policies should address supervision standards, medication management, nutrition, school continuity, access to age-appropriate activities, daily living needs, communication with caseworkers, documentation requirements, and financial clarity to ensure children's needs are met without unnecessary disruption.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Reduce and Establish an Exit Strategy for the Use of Hotels and Short-Term Rentals**

The use of hotels and short-term rentals to house children in foster care reflects system strain and should not become normalized. These settings are not designed to meet children's developmental, emotional, or educational needs and can exacerbate trauma. A structured exit strategy is necessary, including defining hotels as a true last resort, limiting length of stay, expanding kinship and emergency foster placements, addressing approval delays, strengthening placement matching, and using data to inform recruitment and resource allocation. Each child placed in such settings should have a documented exit plan with clear timelines and identified permanency goals.

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



## **RECOMMENDATION: Improve Communication, Contact Access, and Caregiver Information**

Effective communication is critical to child safety, placement stability, and system trust. Caregivers and families must have reliable access to accurate contact information, clear guidance on who to call, and meaningful after-hours support. Improvements are needed in county phone systems, CPS worker contact practices, reassignment notifications, access to Guardian ad Litem information, placement packets provided at placement, and enforcement of 24/7 emergency contact rights. Strengthening communication reduces frustration, prevents escalation, and supports caregivers in meeting children's needs.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Strengthen Participation, Notice, and Accountability in MDT Meetings**

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meetings are a cornerstone of informed, child-centered decision-making, yet concerns persist regarding insufficient notice, inconsistent attendance, and limited youth participation. Meetings should be scheduled with adequate advance notice, include all required and relevant participants, and document attendance and engagement. Youth aged 10 and older should be supported to participate when appropriate, as required by law. Improved transparency and accountability in MDT processes strengthen decision-making and reinforce shared responsibility.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Ensure Timely and Complete Implementation of the SAFE Model**

The Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE) model is intended to support balanced, informed child safety decisions by assessing not only threats but also parenting capacity, family strengths, and available supports. To achieve its intended impact, the SAFE model must be implemented statewide without prolonged transition periods and supported by comprehensive training. Proper implementation promotes thoughtful, preventative decision-making, reduces unnecessary removals, and helps keep children safely with their families whenever appropriate.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Provide Caregiver Guides with Signed Acknowledgement at Initial Referral**

Families and caregivers often enter the child welfare system during moments of crisis. Providing clear, written guidance at the initial referral stage - and documenting receipt - promotes understanding, sets shared expectations, and helps prevent misunderstandings that can escalate into additional reports. Caregivers should receive a Guide to Working with CPS, a county or regional resource guide, and a signed acknowledgement form confirming receipt. Early education strengthens transparency, accountability, and informed participation, shifting system practice toward prevention and stability.

## **RECOMMENDATION: Reinstate Conflict of Interest Screening and Management in CPS Policy**

The CPS Policy Manual should reinstate a clear section addressing the identification, screening, and management of conflicts of interest involving CPS staff at all levels. This policy should define conflicts of interest based on staff roles and relationships, require early disclosure and supervisory review, and establish a standardized process for reassignment when conflicts are identified. Reinstating this guidance - previously included in policy prior to 2022 - will strengthen ethical practice, protect the integrity of case decision-making, promote transparency, and reinforce public trust in the child welfare system.

# THANK YOU



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