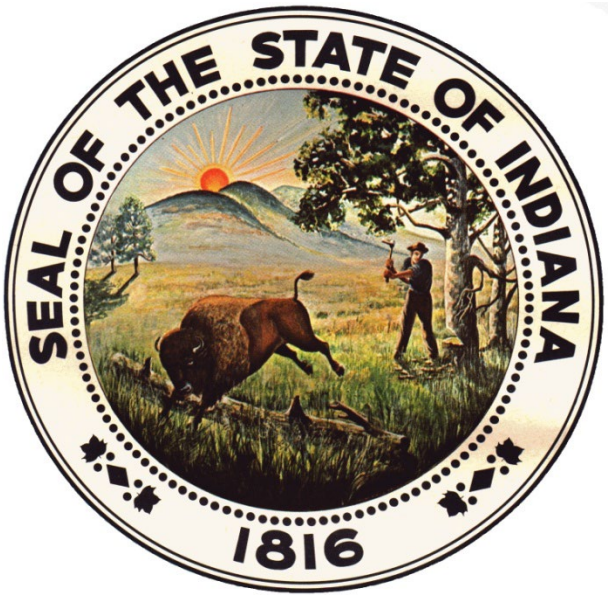
State of Indiana

Department of Child Services
Ombudsman Bureau



2024 Annual Report

Mission

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau effectively responds to complaints concerning DCS actions or omissions by providing problem resolution services and independent case reviews. The Bureau also provides recommendations to improve DCS service delivery and promote public confidence.

Guiding Principles

- A healthy family and supportive community serve the best interest of every child.
- Independence and impartiality characterize all Bureau practices and procedures.
- All Bureau operations reflect respect for parents' interest in being good parents and DCS professionals' interest in implementing best practice.

Report prepared by: Shoshanna Everhart, Director, DCS Ombudsman Bureau

Contributors:

Jessica Stier, Assistant Ombudsman – Data Analysis, Graphics

Chandler Meyer, Assistant Ombudsman – Editing

Amanda Fassnacht, Assistant Ombudsman – Editing

STATE OF INDIANA

Governor Mike Braun

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINSTRATION
Department of Child Services Ombudsman Bureau

402 West Washington St. Rm 479
Indianapolis, IN 46204
317-234-7361

March 19, 2025

The Honorable Mike Braun, Governor
The Honorable Speaker and President Pro Tempore
Brandon Clifton, Commissioner, Indiana Department of Administration
Adam Krupp, Director, Indiana Department of Child Services

I am honored to fulfill my statutory responsibility as the Director of the Department of Child Services Ombudsman Bureau by presenting the 2024 Annual Report for our office. This report reviews the activities conducted by our office from January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024, providing a comprehensive overview of our program administration, case activity, and outcomes. It also offers in-depth analysis of the complaints received, the recommendations forwarded to the Department of Child Services, and the agency's subsequent responses.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Governor, DCS executive team and the IDOA Commissioner, and the members of the Indiana State Legislature for their unwavering support and leadership. It is truly a privilege to serve in a state that consistently prioritizes the welfare of its citizens.

My appreciation also extends to the dedicated staff of the Department of Child Services. Their relentless commitment not only advances their agency's mission but has also supported the work of the Ombudsman Bureau through 2024.

We are acutely aware that the children and families of Indiana continue to face significant challenges. It is essential to acknowledge the resilience of the children, families, and professionals who work tirelessly to serve our communities. Their dedication is commendable and inspiring.

Furthermore, I recognize the persistent challenges related to staff recruitment and retention within DCS, as well as the ongoing need to enhance mental health and addiction services for families. Addressing these issues remains at the forefront of our collective efforts as we strive to better our community.

It is my distinct honor to continue serving the citizens of Indiana as the Director of the Department of Child Services Ombudsman Bureau and I look forward to continued progress in 2025.

Respectfully,

Shoshanna Everhart

Shoshanna Everhart, MSW LCSW

Director, DCS Ombudsman Bureau

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Bureau Background

Introduction

Shoshanna Everhart continues as the Director of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. The bureau has three Assistant Ombudsman with a wealth of experience among them. With experienced staff we can provide quality professional Ombudsman services to our constituents.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau focused efforts on ensuring the continued stability of the agency's goals of:

- effectively responding to constituent complaints in a timely manner,
- enhancing and developing program practices and guidelines,
- increasing the number of constituent responses, and
- expanding outreach initiatives.

Authority

The Department of Child Services (DCS) Ombudsman Bureau was established in 2009 by the Indiana Legislature to provide DCS oversight. IC 4-13-19 gives the Department of Child Services Ombudsman the authority "to receive, investigate, and attempt to resolve a complaint alleging that the Department of Child Services, by an action or omission occurring on or after January 11, 2005, failed to protect the physical or mental health or safety of any child or failed to follow specific laws, rules, or written policies." The law also provides the DCS Ombudsman Bureau with the authority to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and procedures in general and provide recommendations.

Activity Overview

During 2024, the primary activity of the office was to fulfill its duty to objectively respond to complaints, determine findings, provide case-specific and systemic recommendations, and monitor DCS responses. When case findings were determined to have systemic implications, policies and procedures were reviewed and general recommendations were provided. This year the DCS Ombudsman Bureau responded to 2627 Information and Referral (I & R) inquiries, conducted 229 Assists, 125 Cases were active with 118 opened and 111 closed during the year. These activities are further explained on page 5.

Administration

Location: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau is an independent state agency housed in the Indiana Department of Administration (IDOA). IDOA provides office space, furnishings, equipment, and utilities. During 2024 the work was completed by staff working with a hybrid schedule of in-office work and remote work. Staff rotated time in the office to allow for continued workflow, response to constituents in a timely manner, and coordination and supervision.

Staff/Resources: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau consists of the Director and three full-time Assistant Ombudsman (Appendix A – Staff Biographies). Legal consultation is provided as needed by the Indiana Department of Administration (IDOA) General Counsel. Technical assistance is provided by the IDOA Management Information Systems Director.

Budget: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau was appropriated $404,715 for the 2023-2024 fiscal year, which is allocated from the general fund. Most of the expenditure is on personnel, with the remainder allocated to supportive services, outreach, and supplies.

Program Development

Policies and Procedures: The *Procedures and Practices Guidelines* for the DCS Ombudsman Bureau are posted on the agency's website. The manual continues to be a viable resource for sharing information regarding the policies and practices of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. The manual serves as an important mechanism for guiding the operations of the Bureau pursuant to statute (Indiana Code (IC) 4-13-19) and informing constituents of the agency's policies and practices.

Website Enhancements: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau continues to monitor the website to ensure it is functioning properly and the information provided remains relevant to meet the needs of Indiana constituents. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau's information is also linked to the Indiana DCS website (www.dcs.in.gov). An Ombudsman website launched in 2016 by the State of Indiana also provides an additional opportunity for constituents to access ombudsman services and support across the state (www.ombudsman.in.gov). Information regarding the DCS Ombudsman Bureau can be found on this page in English and Spanish.

Tracking and Reporting: This office continues to compile quarterly reports to document complaint/case activity each quarter and track responses to recommendations. This information is provided to DCS leadership each quarter. The information from the quarterly reports is used to compile summary information for the Annual Report. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau utilizes an electronic case management and data tracking system to support the agency's continued growth.

Outreach: In an effort to increase public awareness of the office pursuant to IC 4-13-19-5 (b)(1), the DCS Ombudsman Bureau developed several strategies. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau staff presented workshops and presentations. Additionally, as a member of the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA), the DCS Ombudsman Bureau participated in national ombudsman best practices member-sponsored surveys/queries and provided a presentation regarding Indiana's program to the group. The Ombudsman Director is an active member of the USOA and has assisted in national efforts to improve the group.

In 2024 a specific targeted education effort was made to inform Court Appointed Special Advocates and Guardians ad Litem personnel across the state about our services. It was coordinated through the Indiana State Office of Guardians ad Litem/Court

Appointed Special Advocates and was well received by the members. These groups advocate for the best interests of children in Court.

DCS Ombudsman Bureau brochures and posters are available to all local DCS offices and the public. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau Director serves as a statutory member of Indiana's Statewide Child Fatality Review Team, a multidisciplinary team charged with reviewing child fatalities. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau will continue to develop strategies designed to reach constituents, specifically those individuals that are least likely to access DCS Ombudsman Bureau services. These include, but are not limited to, parents, grandparents, other relatives, and service providers.

Training: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau continues to participate in educational programs specific to the Ombudsman role and child welfare practice. The agency is a member of the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA). The USOA provides opportunities for consultation, support, and education to all members. The training offered through this group is of high quality and staff often participate in these opportunities. Throughout the years the DCS Ombudsman Bureau staff have also participated in trainings at conferences hosted by DCS, Indiana Youth Institute, Indiana Association of Resources and Child Advocacy (IARCA), Indiana Statewide Child Fatality Review Committee, Kids Count Indiana, Resource and Adoptive Parent Training (RAPT) Conferences, Marion County DCS Trauma Informed Care Symposium, and a variety of webinars, books, and articles with information of interest to the agency.

Metrics: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau continues to track the turnaround time for responses to complaints, completions of reviews, and investigations. The metrics indicate the DCS Ombudsman Bureau continues to exceed the goals established in response to constituents and case review, following best practices. Investigations are often complex and require a great deal of time and coordination to complete and they were completed within reasonable time frames.

Identified Task	**Goal**	**2022 Metric (Average)**	**2023 Metric (Average)**	**2024 Metric (Average)**
Days from Inquiry to Response	1 day	.84 day	.69 day	.62 day
Days Case Open	30-60 days	29.8 days	29.1 days	31.34 days
Days Investigation Open	60-90 days	82.5 days(2 investigations)	0 days (0 investigations)	112 days (1 investigation)

Collaboration with DCS

Communication: Communication between the DCS Ombudsman Bureau (DCSO) and DCS management primarily occurs via email as well as regular meetings with the Field Staff throughout the year. Lines of communication with new DCS leadership were developed quickly after Inauguration Day. All specific case reviews and/or investigations are initiated by contacting the Local Office Director (LOD), Regional Manager, and/or other involved DCS department(s) who ensures the DCS Ombudsman Bureau is provided with all requested information and/or facilitates staff interviews. Requests by DCSO for information in specific cases are responded to within appropriate time frames and the exchanges are respectful and informative.

Information Access: DCS has provided the DCS Ombudsman Bureau with access to all records on the MaGIK Casebook and MaGIK Intake systems, in addition to the DCS reports available on the DCS intranet. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau also reviews case files and interviews DCS staff, as necessary.

Fatalities/Near Fatalities: To ensure this office is aware of child fatalities/near fatalities with DCS history, the DCS Hotline forwards all such reports to the DCS Ombudsman Bureau to track and/or assess for further review.

The DCS Ombudsman Director continues to actively participate on the Indiana Department of Health Statewide Fatality Committee.

Other: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau is unable to draw any conclusions about the general status of children in Indiana pursuant to IC 4-13-19-10(b)(2), as the focus of the Bureau has been on the complaint process. It is noted, however, that the Indiana Youth Institute annually publishes Kids Count in Indiana, a profile in child well-being data book, which provides data on the general status of children in Indiana. The current *Kids Count in Indiana Data Book Executive Summary* is available in the office of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau, and the full Indiana Data Book is available at no cost at www.iyi.org/databook.

Complaints

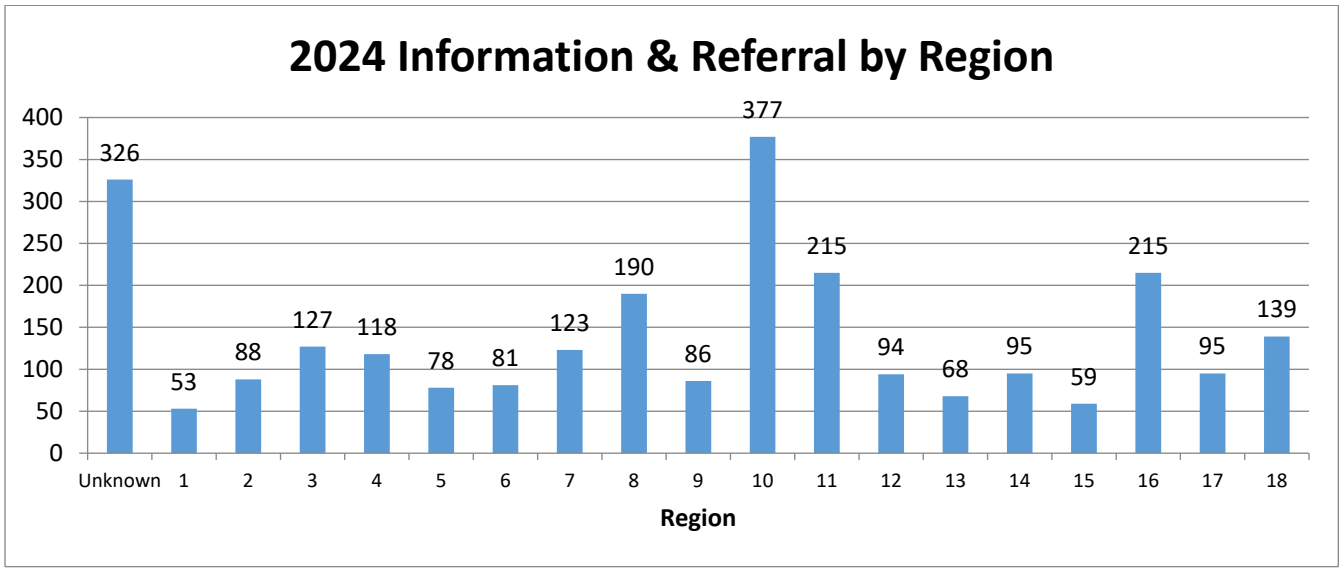
Process Overview

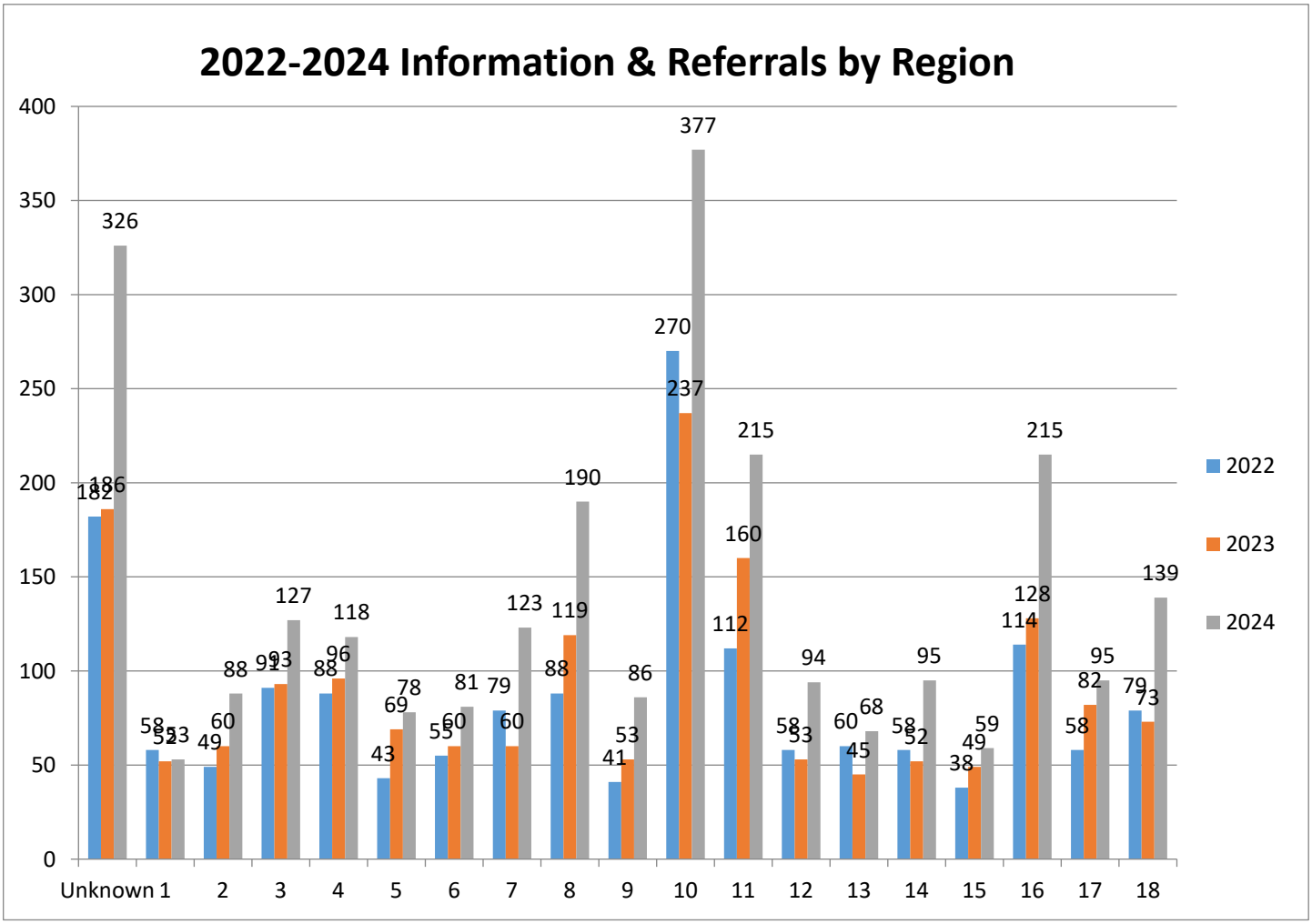
The DCS Ombudsman Bureau receives many telephone and email inquiries that do not result in an open case but require an information and/or referral response. To track this service, pertinent information about the contact is recorded in the Information and Referral (I & R) contact log database. Some inquiries require assistance with a resolution but do not necessitate opening a case file. This level of response is referred to as an Assist; the pertinent information about the Assist is tracked and recorded in the Assist database. A case is opened when a complaint form is received, and all required steps have been completed by the complainant. The complainant is notified of the receipt of the complaint, and an intake process is initiated to determine the appropriate response. DCS is notified of the complaint following the intake assessment, after which

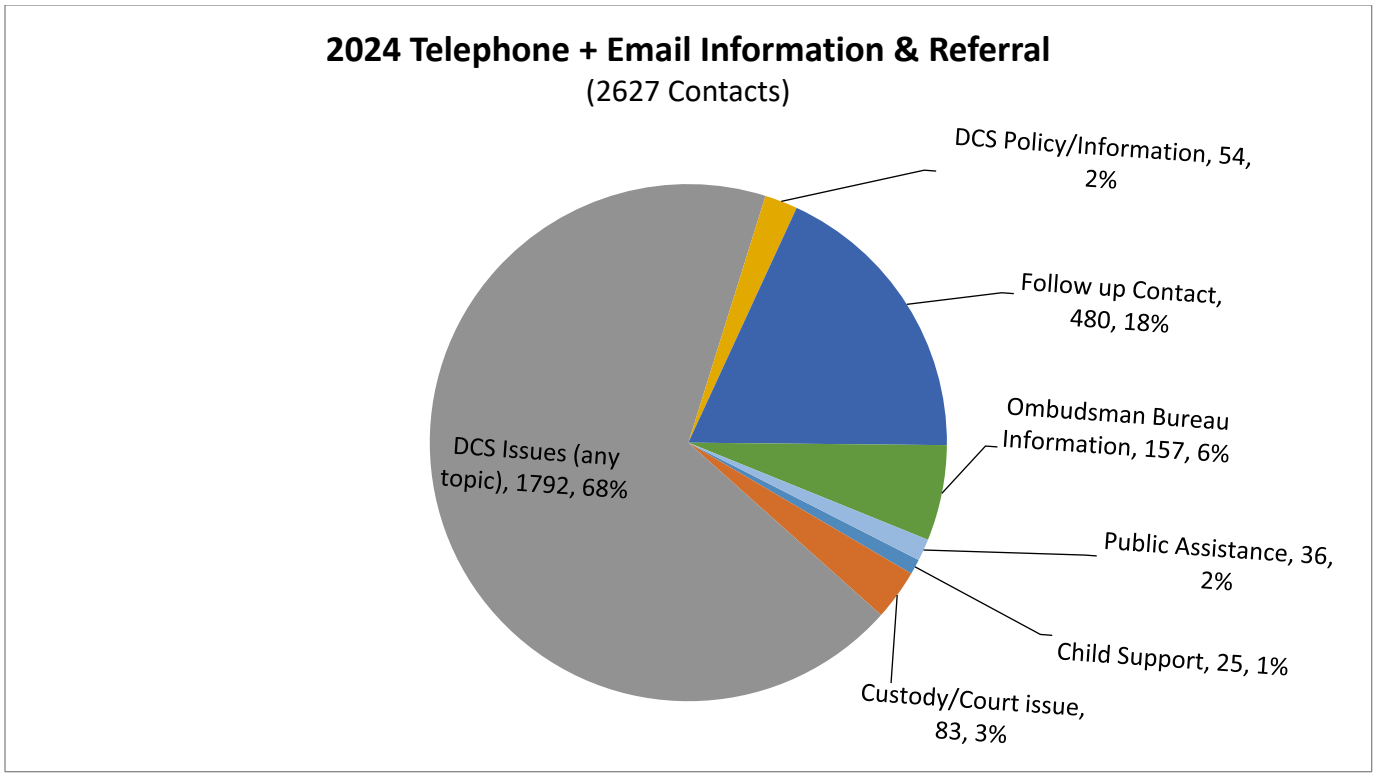
a variety of responses are possible. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau may initiate an investigation, resolve and/or refer after a thorough review, refer the case back to DCS, refer to Child Protection Team (CPT), file a Child Abuse/Neglect Report, decline to take further action, or close the case if the complainant requests to withdraw the complaint. Following a review, the complainant and DCS are informed in writing of the outcome. If the case is investigated, a detailed report is completed and sent to DCS and the complainant if they are a parent, guardian, custodian, Court, or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)/Guardian ad Litem (GAL). Other complainants receive a general summary of the findings. If a complaint is determined to have merit, recommendations are provided to address the issue, and DCS provides a response to the recommendations within 60 days. The flowchart in Appendix C illustrates this process.

Information and Referral Inquiries (I & R)

The office received 2,627 I & R Inquiries during 2024, which is an increase of 900 contacts over the 1,727 I & R Inquiries received by the DCS Ombudsman Bureau in 2023. The graphs below illustrate the origin by DCS region, topics of inquiry and comparison to previous years.



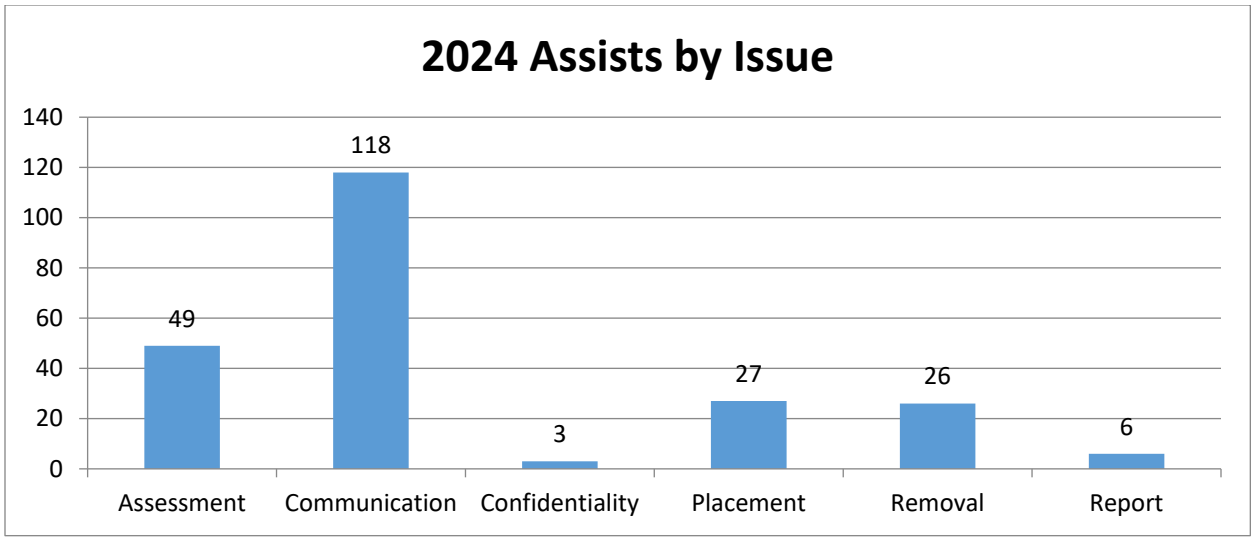

2022-2024 Information & Referrals by Region
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
Unknown 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
2022
2023
2024
182 186 326
58 52 53
49 60 88
91 93 127
88 96 118
43 69 78
55 60 81
79 60 123
88 119 190
41 53 86
270 237 377
112 160 215
58 53 94
60 45 68
58 52 95
38 49 59
114 128 215
58 82 95
79 73 139

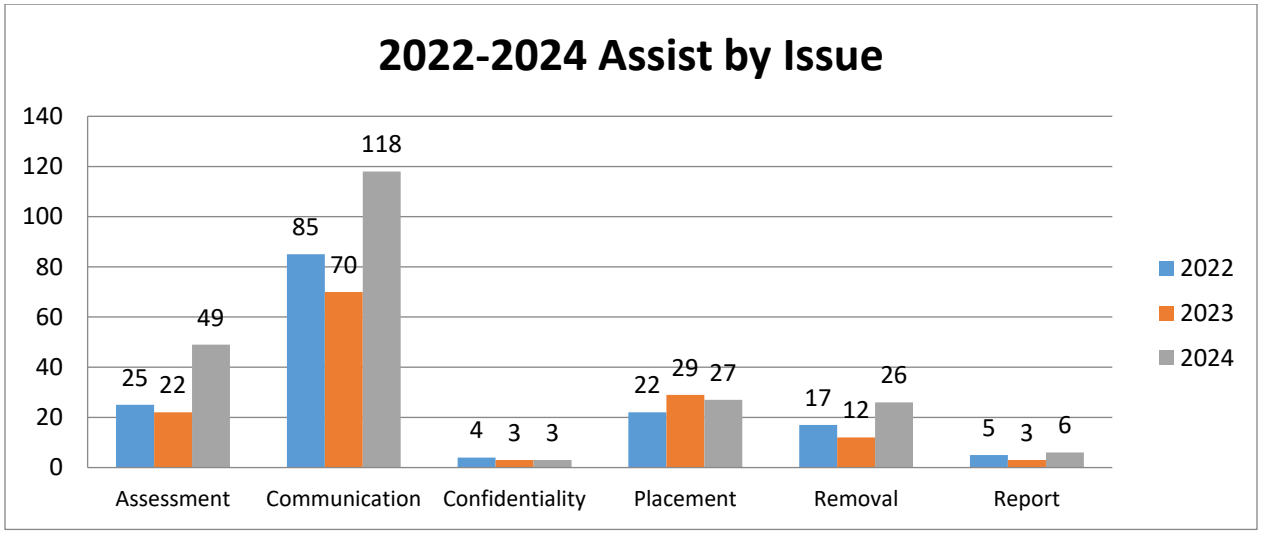


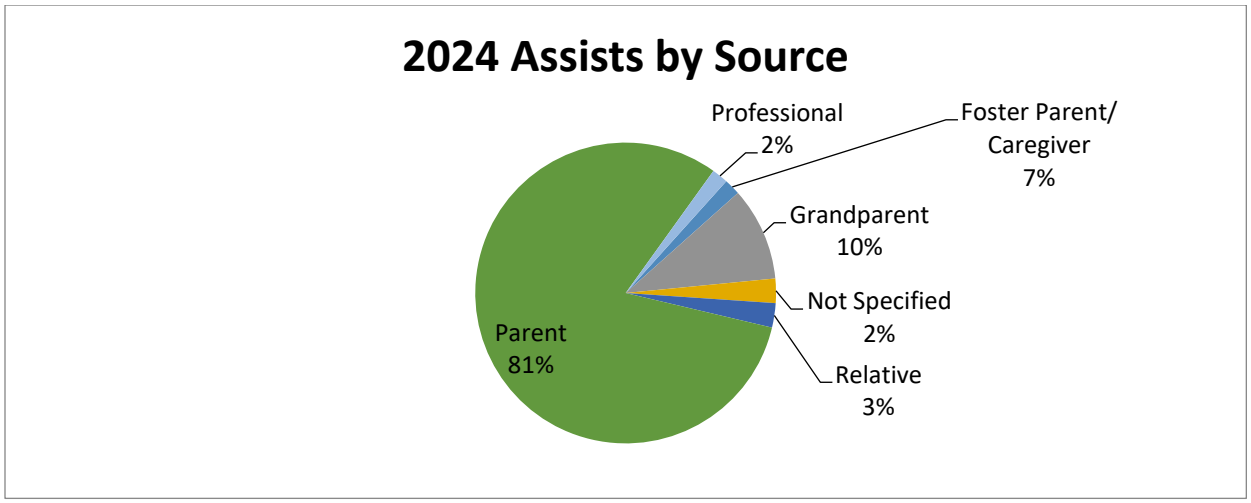
The I & R function has proven to be a valued service for constituents. Providing potential complainants with education regarding the DCS process and/or contact information for DCS staff is often the first step to a successful resolution. See Appendix D for a regional map.

Assists

Assists occur when a formal complaint is not necessary but a higher level of involvement than an I & R response is required. Assists are appropriate when communication and/or clarity of specific aspects of a case are the main concerns. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau completed 229 Assists in 2024, a significant increase of 90 over the previous year. The use of the Assist category continues to demonstrate that communication between complainants and DCS is key to resolving differences between stakeholders. The following graphs illustrate additional details about the Assists.


2024 Assists by Issue
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
49
118
3
27
26
6
Assessment
Communication
Confidentiality
Placement
Removal
Report


2022-2024 Assist by Issue
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
25 22 49
85 70 118
4 3 3
22 29 27
17 12 26
5 3 6
Assessment
Communication
Confidentiality
Placement
Removal
Report
2022
2023
2024

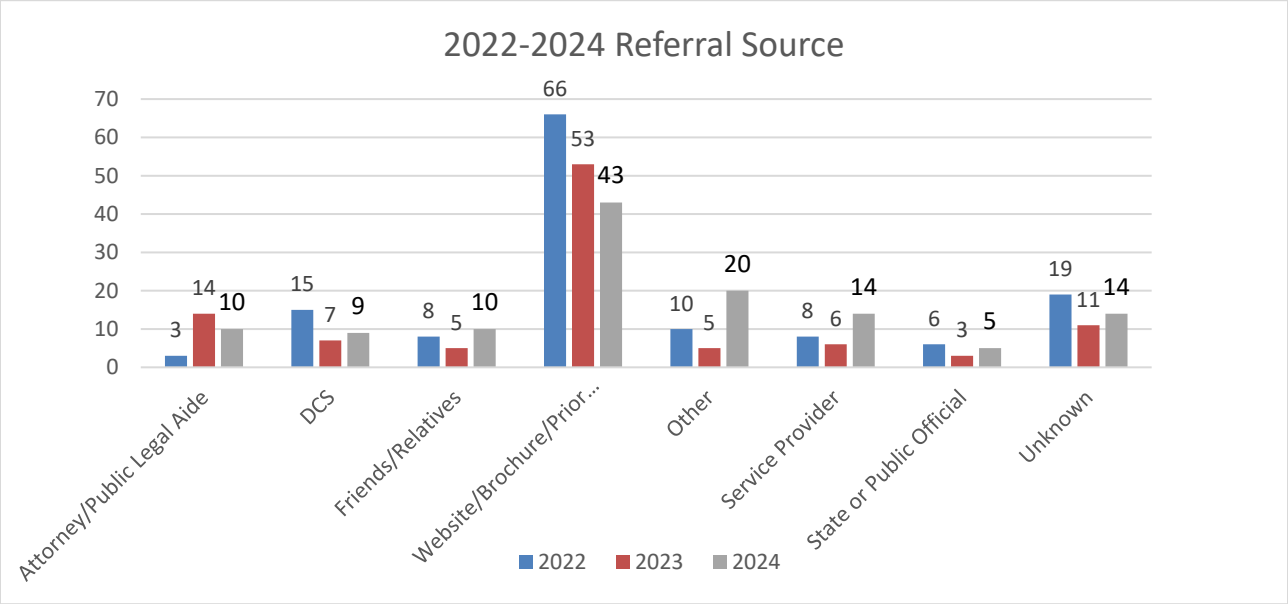

2024 Assists by Source
Professional 2%
Foster Parent/ Caregiver 7%
Grandparent 10%
Not Specified 2%
Relative 3%
Parent 81%

Cases

During 2024, 118 cases were opened, and 111 cases were closed. The cases were generated following the receipt of a formal complaint. A total of 125 active cases were reviewed during 2024, which included cases carried over from the last quarter of 2023. The significant number of Assists (229) suggests the DCS Ombudsman Bureau was able to foster greater problem resolution by actively encouraging communication between the DCS local offices and DCS Ombudsman Bureau complainants at the onset of the inquiries. As a result, DCS Ombudsman Bureau staff were able to actively focus on case reviews and investigations that were more complex in nature. It should also be noted that Information and Referrals contacts increased from 1,727 to 2,627 in 2024, and active cases had a significant increase (104 to 125) in 2024. These differences can be attributed to specific intake procedures that support communication between the complainant and DCS central and local offices for problem resolution before formal complaints are accepted by the DCS Ombudsman Bureau as well as greater knowledge of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau due to informing the public about our services.

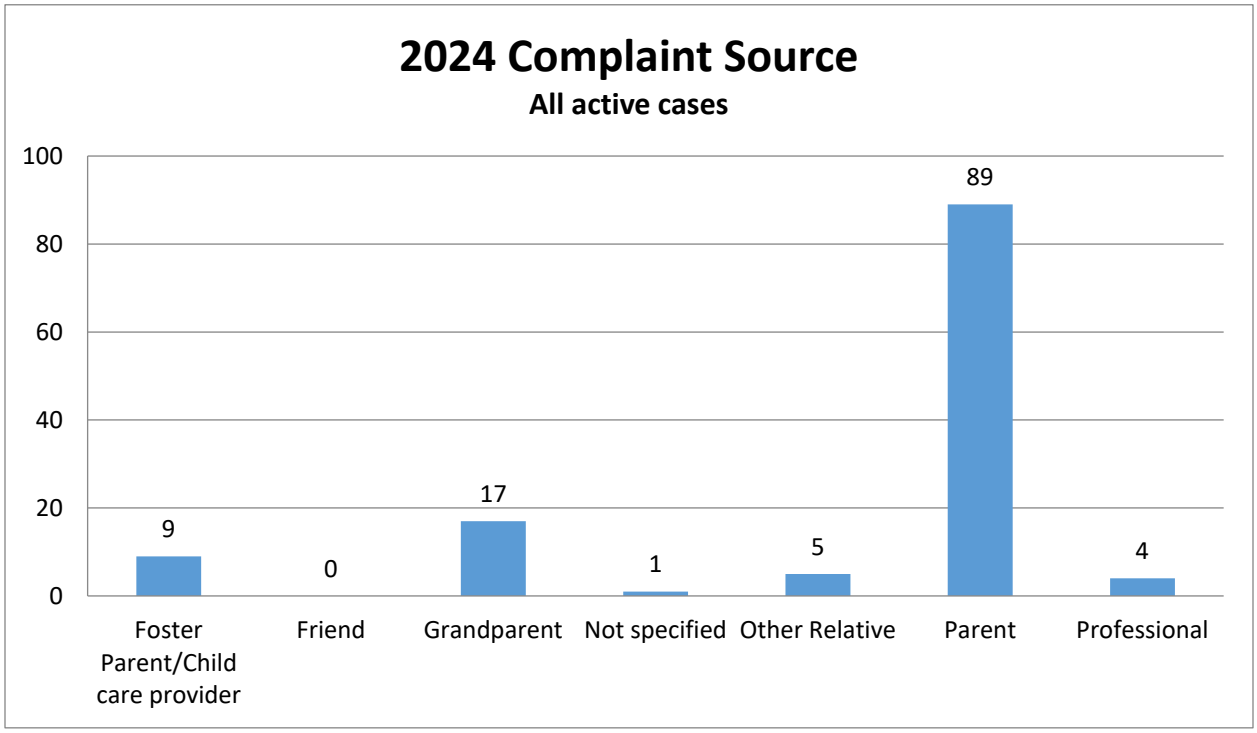
Referral Source

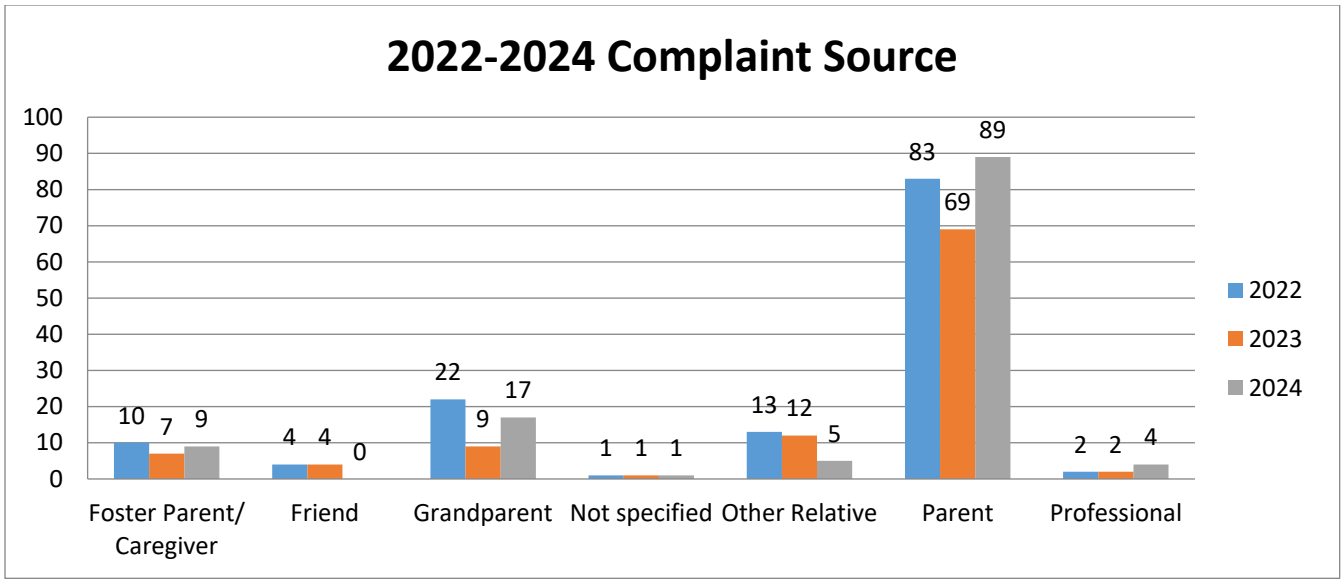
Data suggests *Website/Brochure/Prior Contact* continues to be the largest source of referrals with *Friends and Relatives* and *Service Providers* each increasing by at least fifty percent. Other referral sources have remained constant within one to ten points. The *Unknown* category reflects those individuals that chose not to identify a referral source during intake discussions with the DCS Ombudsman Bureau or on complaint forms.



Complaint Source

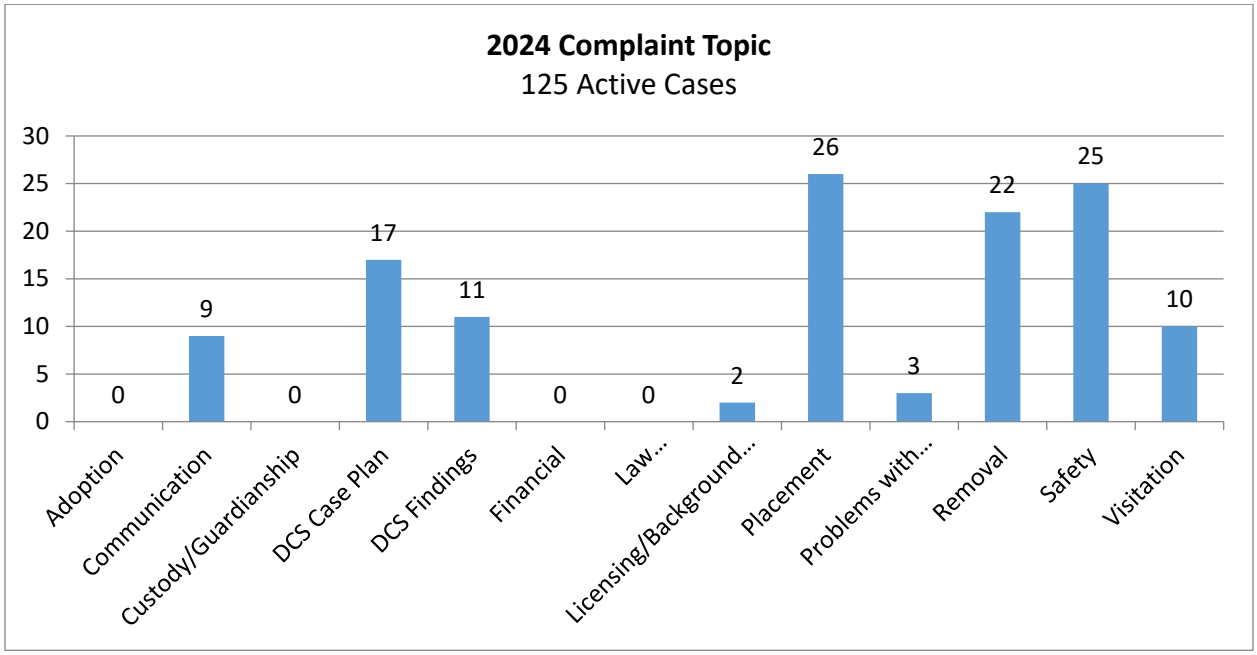
Except as necessary to investigate and resolve a complaint, the complainant's identity is confidential without the complainant's written consent. The complainant is given the opportunity to provide written consent on the complaint form or indicate consent on the online complaint form. During 2024, parents continued to account for the greatest share of complainants followed by grandparents, other relatives, and foster/adoptive parents. See graphs below to see historical information from 2022-2024.





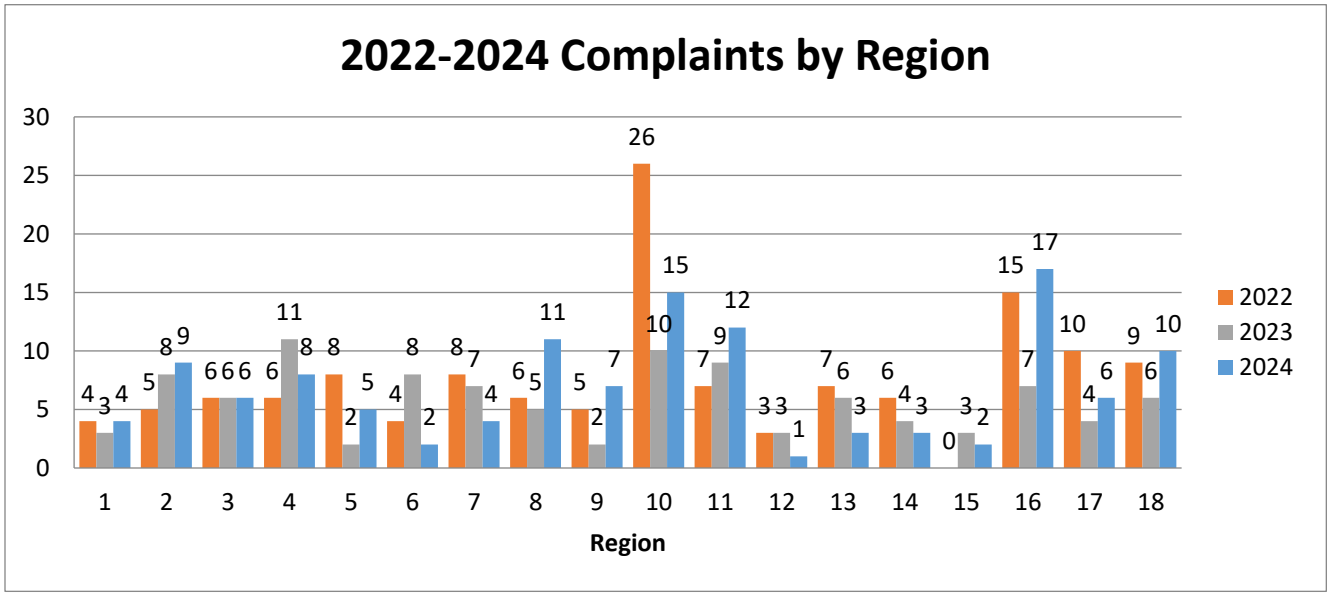
Complaint Topics

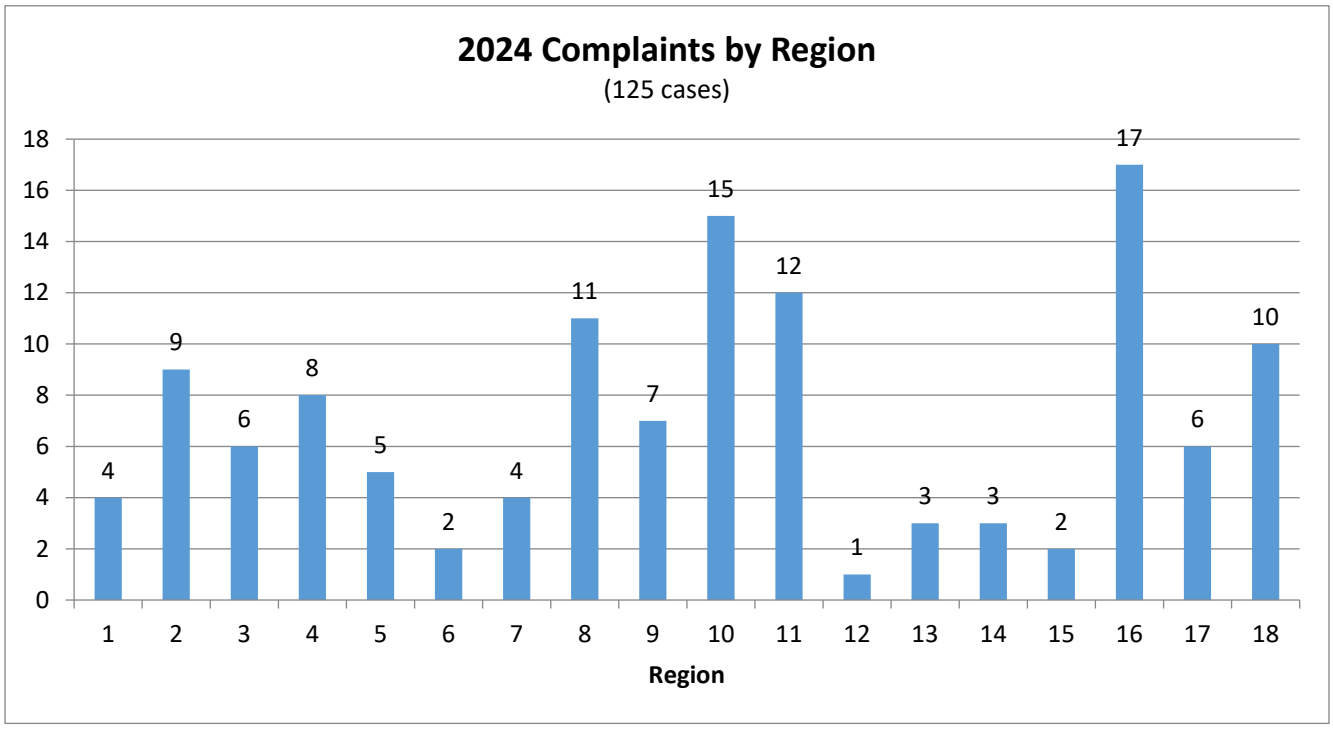
During 2024, the four major complaint topics included *Removal*, *Child Safety*, *Placement*, and *Case Plans*. Numbers are illustrated in the 2024 graph below.



Complaints by Region

As DCS is organized in regions, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau tracks contacts and cases accordingly. The graph below illustrates the complaint activity in each of the eighteen regions for 2022-2024, followed by a graph for 2024.





Response Categories

When a complaint is filed with the office, a case is opened, and a preliminary review is completed to determine the appropriate response. A variety of responses are possible depending on case specifics. Following is a description of each type of response.

Review/Refer or Resolve: This type of response involves a comprehensive review of the case file and documentation provided by the complainant. The local office provides additional documentation requested and responds to questions from the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. Other professionals are contacted for information as needed. While the review is thorough, the focus is on providing a resolution or a strategy that can assist with a resolution. Depending on the circumstances in each case, some cases that are reviewed receive a validity determination and others do not. In either case, the complainant and DCS are notified of the findings in writing. A major portion of the complaints received fall into this category.

Investigate: An investigation also involves a review of the case files and documentation provided by the complainant. As needed, DCS staff involved with the case, in addition to the CASA/GAL and service providers, are interviewed. Case-specific laws, rules, and written policies are researched. Experts are consulted, if needed. Complaints that result in an investigation tend to have multiple allegations with little indication that a resolution is likely. Upon the completion of an investigation, an investigation report is submitted describing in detail the findings of fact regarding each allegation and a determination of the merit of each allegation in the complaint. The report is provided to DCS and the complainant if they are a parent, guardian, custodian, GAL/CASA, or Court. If the complainant is not one of the above, they are provided with a summary of the findings in general terms.

Refer Back to the Local DCS: Pursuant to statute, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau requires the complainants to attempt to resolve their issues with the local DCS office through the DCS internal complaint process prior to filing a complaint with the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. On occasion, it is discovered during the intake assessment that the complainant overlooked this step and failed to address his/her concerns with the local office before filing the complaint. These cases are referred to the local office. Appropriate contact information is provided. The complainant may reactivate the complaint if a resolution is not reached.

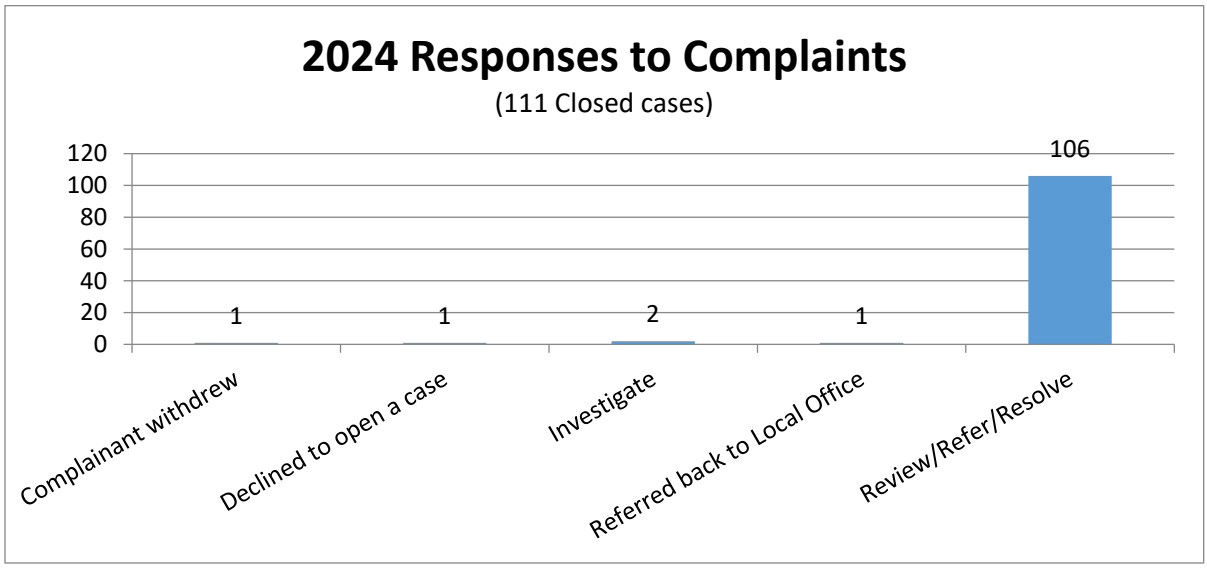
Close Due to Complainant Withdrawal: Some cases have been closed prior to completion because the complainant decides to withdraw the complaint during the process.

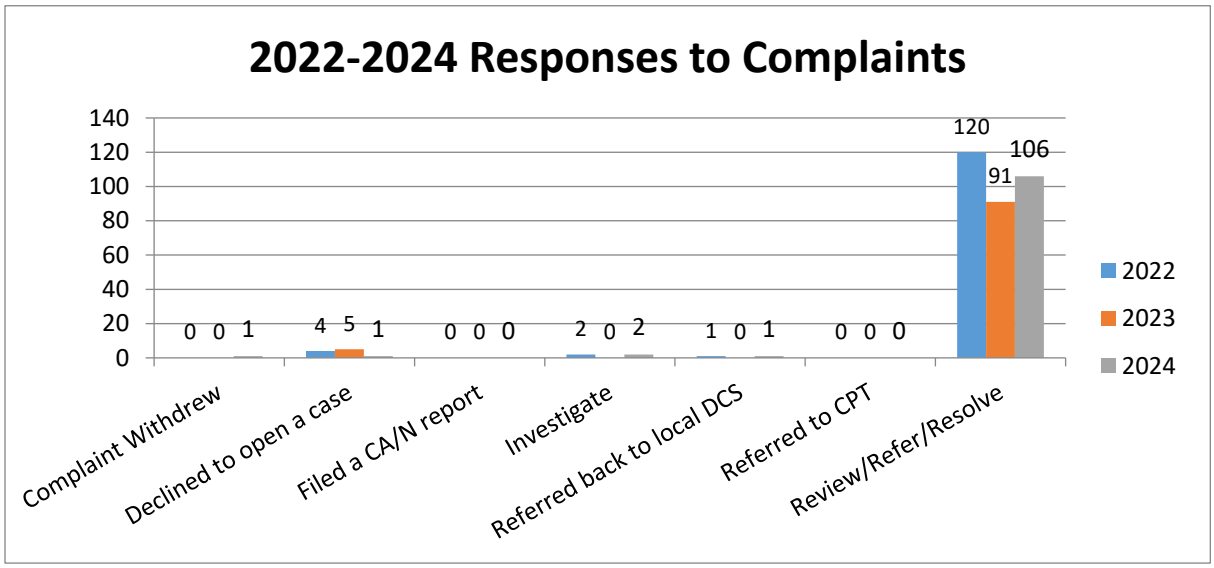
Decline: Cases that are not within the Ombudsman's jurisdiction or do not otherwise meet the criteria established in the procedural manual for screening out will be declined.

Refer to Child Protection Team: The Ombudsman has the option of seeking assistance from the local Child Protection Team and may refer cases to the team for review.

File a Child Abuse Neglect (CA/N) Report: In the event the information disclosed in the complaint to the Ombudsman contains unreported CA/N, a report is made to the child abuse hotline. This is not a frequent occurrence.

The graph below illustrates the 111 responses for this year and the following graph illustrates the comparison for frequency of each type of response in 2022-2024.





Complaint Validity

The standard for determining the validity of the complaint is outlined in the statute. If it is determined DCS failed "to protect the physical or mental health or safety of any child or failed to follow specific, laws, rules, or written policies," a complaint is considered valid. All investigations generate a validity finding, but all reviewed cases do not – depending

on the specific case circumstances. When determining the merit of a complaint, the following designations are applied.

Merit: When the primary allegation in the complaint is determined to be valid following a review or an investigation, the complaint is said to have merit.

Non-Merit: When the primary allegation in the complaint is determined not to be valid following a review or investigation, the complaint is said not to have merit.

Both Merit and Non-Merit: When there are multiple allegations, each allegation is given a separate finding. This designation is applied when some allegations have merit and others do not.

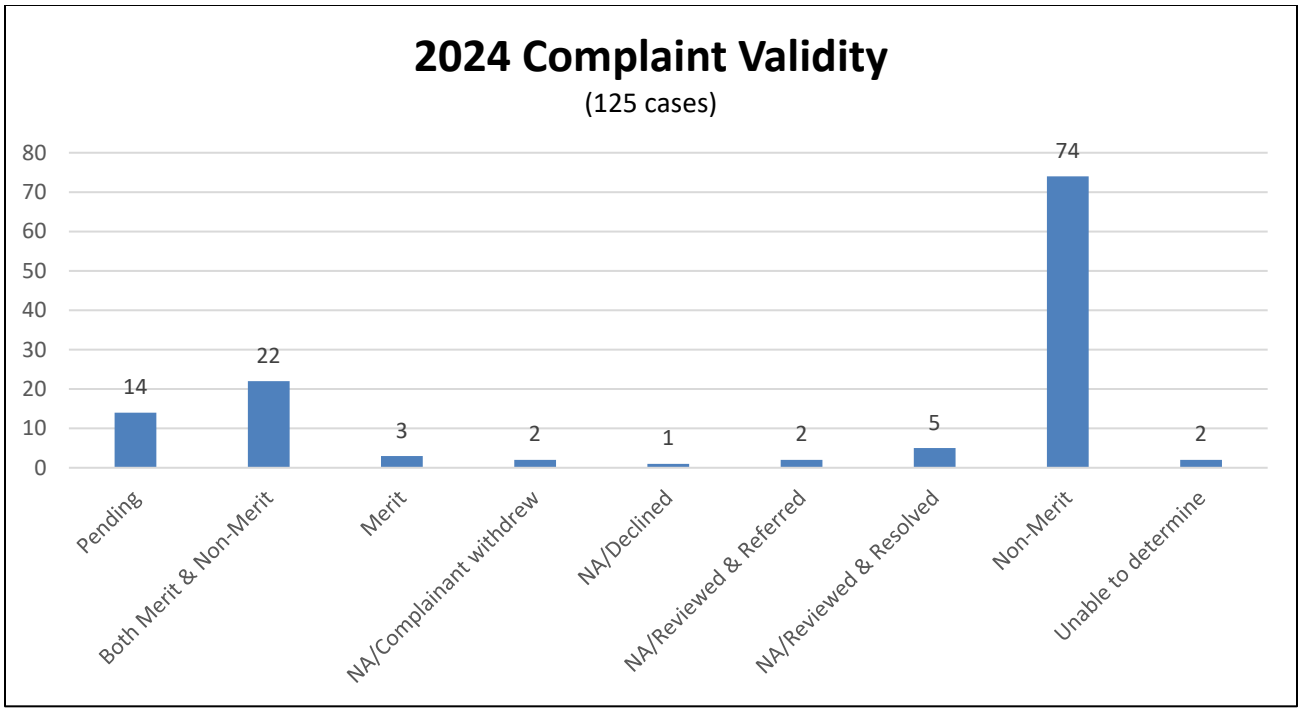
Not Applicable (NA): Some cases that are opened for a review reach closure without receiving a validity determination. In these instances, the findings fall into one of the categories below.

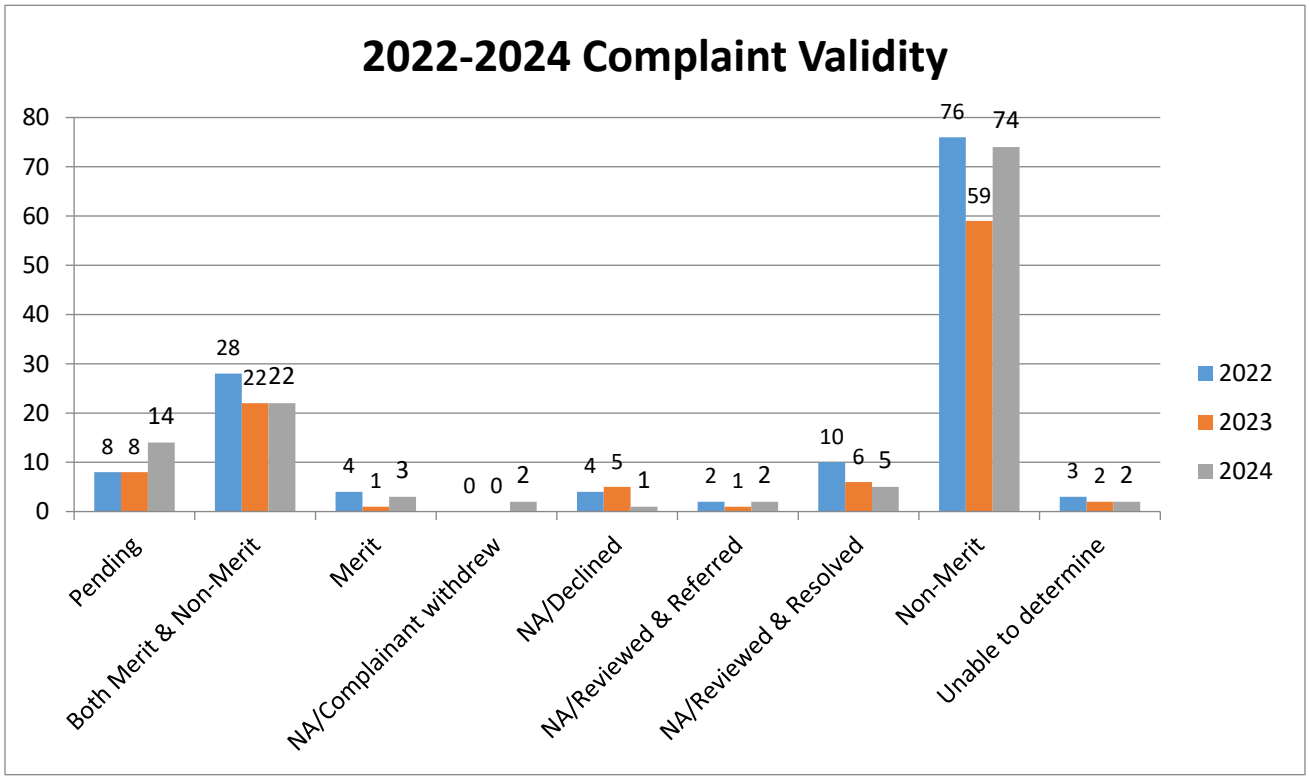
- NA/Complainant Withdrew
- NA/Case Declined
- NA/Reviewed & Referred
- NA/Reviewed & Resolved

Unable to Determine: Occasionally the information uncovered is so conflicting and/or the unavailability of significant documentation renders it impossible to determine a finding.

Outcomes

During 2024, validity designations were determined in 99 cases. Of these cases 3 were found to have merit, 22 had allegations that were both merit and non-merit, and 74 were determined not to have merit. The remaining 12 cases fell into other categories. Fourteen cases were pending determination at year end. The following graph provides an illustration of the validity outcomes for 2024, as well as a graph for the historical data 2022-2024.


2024 Complaint Validity
(125 cases)
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
14
22
3
2
1
2
5
74
2
Pending
Both Merit & Non-Merit
Merit
NA/Complainant withdrew
NA/Declined
NA/Reviewed & Referred
NA/Reviewed & Resolved
Non-Merit
Unable to determine


2022-2024 Complaint Validity
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
8 8 14
28 22 22
4 1 3
0 0 2
4 5 1
2 1 2
10 6 5
76 59 74
3 2 2
Pending
Both Merit & Non-Merit
Merit
NA/Complainant withdrew
NA/Declined
NA/Reviewed & Referred
NA/Reviewed & Resolved
Non-Merit
Unable to determine
2022
2023
2024

DCS Ombudsman Bureau
Recommendations and DCS Responses

During 2024, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau offered case-specific recommendations on 23 cases following a review or an investigation. Pursuant to IC 4-13-19-5(f), "If after reviewing a complaint or conducting an investigation, and considering the response of an agency, facility, or program and any other pertinent material, the office of the Department of Child Services Ombudsman determines that the complaint has merit or the investigation reveals a problem, the Ombudsman may recommend that the agency, facility, or program:

(1) consider the matter further;
(2) modify or cancel its actions;
(3) alter a rule, order, DCS policy or internal policy; or
(4) explain more fully the action in question."

DCS is required to respond to the recommendations within a reasonable time, and the DCS Ombudsman Bureau has established sixty days for the response timeframe. The following case examples include a sample of case reviews and investigations completed in 2024 in which the allegations were determined to have merit or both merit and non-merit; DCS Ombudsman recommendations and DCS responses are also included.

Staffing shortages in the Department of Child Services and provider agencies continue to be a major challenge to the work. The shortage of qualified staff can impact the quality of services provided to children and families, as well as the workload stress levels of existing staff. This can lead to burnout and turnover, further exacerbating the problem. It is important to address this issue through recruitment, retention, and support strategies to ensure that children and families receive the care and services they need. DCS has implemented several strategies as they grapple with these issues.

CASE-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

These examples are provided to depict the wide range of issues brought to the attention of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau and the types of recommendations offered. ***The DCS Ombudsman Bureau affirms the actions of DCS reviewed in most cases, and it is important to maintain this perspective when reviewing cases in which concerns are identified***.

Case Review 2023-16805

Region 2/Laporte County - Removal

The complainant alleged DCS wrongly removed the child from the parents for injuries to the child, caused by the babysitter. The complainant states that DCS removed the child

stating that the child had a rib fracture, but a follow up x-ray showed that the rib was never fractured.

Findings: Department of Child Services (DCS) was advised by medical professionals at the local hospital and PEDS that there was concern for a rib fracture on the x-rays, but a follow up x-ray would be needed to confirm. In addition to the concern that the child may have a rib fracture, DCS had concerns that the parents' timeline of events was not consistent and changed often. For this reason, it is difficult to find merit to the allegation that DCS was wrong to remove the child, as they made the decision to remove based on safety concerns and the information available at the time. However, merit was found to the complaint because the information in the Child In Need Of Services (CHINS) petition did not match the information in the Preliminary Inquiry (PI). The PI made it clear that there was *concern* for a rib fracture and accurately reflected the medical records. The CHINS petition on the other hand was not as accurate and made it appear as if there was no question that the child's rib was fractured; even stating that the child was diagnosed with a rib fracture.

Recommendation 1: It was recommended that DCS address with the FCMs that they are responsible in making sure that the CHINS petition is accurate before it is filed with the court because they are signing their name, swearing that the information in the CHINS petition is accurate.

DCS Response: The local office addressed this with all staff and the need for there to be a direct correlation between the information in the PI and CHINS petition.

Case Review 2024-17131 and 2024-17146

Region 10/Marion West - Visitation/Removal Notification

The complainant alleged DCS failed to schedule visitation between the maternal relatives and the child. The complainant alleged DCS failed to notify relatives of the child's removal. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau had concern that case information was not entered into the case management system.

Findings: No merit to the allegation DCS has failed to provide visitation to the maternal relatives. Visitation has been provided pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 13: Implementing the Visitation Plan*. The relatives were able to see the child at placement's home and attended the mother's supervised visits prior to her incarceration. The Local Office has now scheduled supervised visits with the relatives.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the allegation DCS failed to notify relatives of the child's removal pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians* and *IC 31-34-3-4.5*. Per ICWP 4.28, "When it is determined an involuntary removal of a child is necessary, the Family Case Manager (FCM) will: …13. Complete and send the Notice to Relatives to

the following adult relatives within 30 days of a child being removed from his or her parent, guardian, or custodian: a. Paternal and maternal grandparents, b. Aunts and uncles…"

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern face-to-face contacts and pertinent contacts were not entered in the case management system pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 2: Gathering Case Information* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 10: Minimum Contact.* A face-to-face contact occurred was not entered in the case management system until 25 days later. The contact note only shows pictures of the child and does not include what was discussed or observed during the visit. Per the Local Office, an incident concerning the child's safety occurred at placements home, but the pertinent information was not documented in the case management system. Per ICWP 5.2: "The Family Case Manager (FCM) will: 3. Record all pertinent contacts and information gathered pertaining to the assessment and case in the case management system within three (3) business days of the contact or receipt of the information."

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians*,

Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 2: Gathering Case Information, and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 10: Minimum Contact* as a reminder to ensure these policies are understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: The Local Office Director (LOD) reported the requested policies were sent to and reviewed with all staff.

Case Review 2024-17444

Region 14/Johnson - Exigent Circumstances

The complainant alleged DCS wrongfully used exigent circumstances to interview the child. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau had concern that DCS failed to document the use of exigent circumstances in the case management system.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation DCS wrongfully used exigent circumstances to interview the child. Exigent circumstances were used pursuant to *IC 31-9-2-44.1* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 6: Exigent Circumstances for Interviewing Alleged Child Victims*.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern DCS failed to document the use of exigent circumstances in the case management system pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 6: Exigent Circumstances for Interviewing Alleged Child Victims.* Per ICWP 4.6, "The Family Case Manager (FCM) will: 5.

Document in the case management system if the FCM has determined exigent circumstances exist, including the written statement provided to the child's school (if the interview occurs at the child's school), and the rationale for the decision." Neither the written statement provided to the school, nor the rationale were documented in the case management system.

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 6: Exigent Circumstances for Interviewing Alleged Child Victims* as a reminder to ensure this policy is understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: LOD reviewed the policy with all staff during an all-staff meeting.

Case Review 2024-17706

Region 11/ Hancock County - Visitation

The complainant alleged DCS did not address allegations of domestic violence (DV) in a timely manner; DCS did not consider recommendations from the team who were in favor of case closure; and DCS did not provide the father with adequate visitation after removal.

Findings: No merit to the allegations that DCS did not follow up on concerns of DV. An on-call worker went to the home to ask the mother about the injury to her face. She denied the injury was from DV. There was no merit to the allegation that DCS did not consider recommendations from team members. Team members were contacted, and they denied recommending case closure. The allegation that the father was not provided adequate visitation with the child after removal was found to have merit. The father went 18 days without seeing the child. There were multiple reasons for this; mainly, the father was approved by the court to have three visits supervised by relatives, but it appears that they were unable to work together to schedule any visits. DCS was aware after a week that the father had not seen the child, but failed to step in and help facilitate a visit. The court also ordered one visit a week to be supervised by a provider. The visitation referral was not sent in a timely manner.

Recommendation: It was recommended DCS review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 12: Developing the Visitation Plan policy 8.12 Developing the Visitation Plan,* as it is the supervisor's role to ensure that there is a written visitation plan.

DCS Response: LOD reported that all staff met and reviewed the policy.

Case Review 2024-17576

Region 2/Porter - Removal

The complainant alleged DCS should not have removed the child based on a positive drug screening. The complainant alleged DCS failed to place the child with relatives.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau found no merit to the allegation concerning removal as the child was removed pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians*. The mother continued to test positive for methamphetamine and amphetamines while on an In-Home CHINS. The child's safety and well-being could not be ensured due to the mother's substance use. The removal was ordered by the Court.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the allegation regarding placement with relatives. The FCM did not send Notice to Relative Forms until mid-April, when the child was removed from the parents the first week of January. Relatives were not identified through a diligent search or notified pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 23: Diligent Search for Relatives/Kin and Case Participants*. Per ICWP 4.28, "The FCM will: 13. Complete and send the Notice to Relatives to the following adult relatives within 30 days of a child being removed from his or her parent, guardian, or custodian…"

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 23: Diligent Search for Relatives/Kin and Case Participants* as a reminder to ensure these policies are understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: Regional Manager (RM) has scheduled this to be reviewed during a regional staff meeting.

Case Review 2024 - 17859

Region 11/Hancock - Removal

The complainant alleged DCS improperly removed children and placed them in a home that was unready to receive them. The complainant alleged the children were made to sleep on the floor and that the complainant's daughter had not been to school for the last few weeks.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation that DCS improperly removed children and placed them in a home with conditions not conducive to child safety. The children were removed due to ongoing concerns of substance use and concerns regarding domestic violence in the home. Concerns regarding domestic violence were made more prevalent due to there being a known unsecured firearm in the home. Although placement needed beds for the children when they were originally placed, this issue was quickly remedied by DCS. DCS met with kinship to be sure that

placement understood their role and a meeting was held on 5/16 to further discuss what was required of placement. The removal and subsequent placement were in accordance with *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians and Chapter 8 Section 1: Selecting a Placement Option.*

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern that the oldest child missed several days of school following removal from the parents. The documentation shows that due to the location of the placement, the school was unable to provide transportation. The school was also unable to do virtual schooling or send work home, leaving the only solution to be transferring schools. This was recommended by the educational liaison as well as the school's principal. Despite this, the decision was made to allow the child to stay home for the remaining days of school.

Recommendation: It was recommended that the local office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 20: Educational Services* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 22: School Notifications and Legal Settlement* to ensure that these policies be understood and implemented in the future.

DCS Response: LOD covered policies 8.20 and 8.22 in an all staff meeting.

Case Review 2024-18002

Region 18/Clark - Placement

The complainant alleged DCS failed to submit an expedited Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) request pursuant to Regulation No. 7. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau was concerned that the eligibility documents were not submitted pursuant to policy.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau found no merit to the allegation DCS failed to submit an expedited ICPC request pursuant to Regulation No. 7. DCS was unable to file an expedite request due to not having all the required information such as birth certificates, SS cards, and eligibility to complete the ICPC Referral. The ICPC request was submitted once all the required documents were received.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern the eligibility documents were not completed pursuant to the *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 15 Section 1: Title IV-E Eligibility Overview for Field and Legal Staff*. Per ICWP 15.1, "The Family Case Manager (FCM) will: 2. Upload documentation that supports the eligibility criteria to the case management system within 30 days of the removal for a Child in Need of Services (CHINS) placed in out-of-home care;" The eligibility documents were not completed until after the children had been removed for over 30 days.

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 15 Section 1: Title IV-E Eligibility Overview for Field and Legal Staff* as a

reminder to ensure this policy is understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: LOD reviewed 15.1 with all staff and policy acknowledgments were signed.

Case Review 2024-18138

Region 8/Sullivan - DCS Case Plan

The complainant alleged DCS failed to place the child with the noncustodial parent throughout the case. The complainant alleged DCS failed to ensure the child's safety by placing the child back in the mother's home.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation DCS failed to consider placement with the noncustodial parent. Placement was considered; however, the father had not seen the child in a few years and stated he did not think he could take on the responsibility at the time. The father has received services through the case i.e. visitation and home-based case management. There was a lapse in visits due to scheduling between the father and provider. Per the FCM they attempted to contact the father after they were made aware the visits had been canceled. These attempts were not located in the case management system pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 2: Gathering Case Information*.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern DCS failed to complete proper steps prior to the THV pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 39: Trial Home Visit*. The Reunification Assessment, CANS Assessment, and Safety Plan were not completed prior to submitting a recommendation for THV to the court. The CANS has now been completed and is in the case management system. A Safety Plan for the child was not located in the case management system. There was a Safety Plan uploaded in November 2023, but it is not for the child involved. Per ICWP 8.39, "Prior to the THV, the Family Case Manager (FCM) will: 5. Review and update the Safety Plan…to address and include…6. Obtain approval from the FCM Supervisor of the Safety Plan…and a recommendation for THV to submit to the court 8. Document all actions and outcomes in the case management system." Despite these steps not being completed, the court had ordered the THV. DCS must abide by the Court Order.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern the CFTM notes were not uploaded into the case management system pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 7: Child and Family Team (CFT) Meetings*. Per ICWP 5.7, The FCM will: 12. Ensure the CFT Meeting Notes are distributed to all appropriate parties, including the CASA/GAL if not present at the meeting, and entered in the case management system within seven (7) calendar days of the CFT Meeting."

Recommendation: It was recommended the Reunification Assessment and Safety Plan be completed/updated and uploaded into the case management system. It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 39: Trial Home Visit* as a reminder to ensure this policy is understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike. It was recommended that the notes from the CFTM's in February, March, and April be uploaded into the case management system.

DCS Response: LOD addressed the concerns for Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) notes being uploaded timely into the case management system. LOD states clerical have been trained in CFTM notes training and will assist with entering CFTM notes. LOD states all staff completed the safety training regarding ICWP 8.39.

Safety Plan and Reunification Assessment have been completed and uploaded into the case management system.

Case Review 2024 - 18314

Region 2/Starke County - Removal & Visitation

The complainant alleged that DCS removed the children after the mother missed a call-in for random drug screens. The complainant states that the mother's rights were violated, as a detention hearing was never held. The complainant also alleged that DCS did not hold visitation in a timely manner, as is required by policy.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau ultimately found no merit to the allegation that DCS did not hold a detention hearing. The family was already involved in an in-home CHINS and the mother was warned by the Court that any missed or positive drug screens would result in removal. The Court ordered that if the mother tested positive or missed a screen or there were any safety concerns, DCS was to consult with the Guardian ad Litem (GAL). DCS advised that they did consult with the GAL, and it was agreed that the children should be moved. DCS handled the removal by filing a Motion for a Change of Placement. No merit was found because the court granted DCS's motion and denied the mother's motion for a detention hearing.

Merit was found regarding the allegation that DCS did not hold visitation in a timely manner. This judge in the county has a standing rule that when the removal is the result of substance use, the parent must provide three clean drug screens before visits can begin. In this case, the mother provided her third clean screen 16 days after removal. A visit was not held until 24 days post-removal and it was supervised by a provider. This does not align with the policy that DCS is to hold a visit within 48 hours of removal with the FCM as the facilitator for the first visit.

Recommendation: It was recommended that if the court orders three clean screens prior to visitation occurring, DCS should hold a visit within 48 hours of receipt of the third clean screen.

DCS Response: DCS reminded staff each week at staffing that if there is a delay in starting visits due to the Judge's three clean rule, they are to supervise a visit between the parent and child(ren) within 48 hours of getting the clean screen. DCS also reminded staff that they need to facilitate a visit within 48 hours of the removal if the judge does not specifically order 3 clean screens or within 48 hours of the removal if the hearing has not yet occurred (due to weekends and holidays). DCS also reviewed policy and research on the importance of timely visitation.

Note: DCS advised during the complaint process that they planned to address with the judge the three clean screens rule, as it does not align with DCS policy or best practice. The DCS attorney and Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) also spoke to the judge about the rule involving three clean screens before visits take place and the judge stated that it does not always need to be in place. The judge also advised that no action to change placement should occur due to a missed screen/call-in or positive screen until the Child and Family Team (CFT) is consulted. DCS stated that moving forward they will file for detention when removal occurs during an in-home CHINS.

Case Review 2024 - 18624

Region 16/Gibson - Removal/Visitation

The complainant alleged DCS wrongfully removed the children from the home. The complainant also alleged there was no visitation plan or visits completed in the week following removal.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation that DCS unlawfully removed the children. The children were removed due to concerns of methamphetamine use in the home, lack of compliance to drug screen for methamphetamine, and lack of supervision as child was found outside away from the home without either parent's knowledge. The removal was ordered by the court. DCS acted in accordance with *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Section 04 Chapter 28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians.*

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit regarding no visitation plan following removal and a lack of visits in the first week. Our office found that the visitation plan was created eight days after removal, which is not within the five day mark stated in policy. There were no visits during this eight day period.

Recommendation: It was recommended that the local office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 12: Developing the Visitation Plan* to ensure the plan and visitations are completed timely following removal.

DCS Response: Staff completed policy review of 8.12 on 9/30/24.

Case Review 2024- 18844

Region 18/Scott County - Placement

The complainant alleged that DCS did not notify all relatives of the removal and placed the children with a previous babysitter that was fired for trying to buy the baby.

Findings: DCS engaged with maternal relatives. The maternal relatives were either excluded due to background check or never sought placement. DCS conducted a background check on the paternal grandmother, who was excluded due to the background check. DCS advised that they are familiar with the other paternal relatives due to recent and historical involvement with DCS and extensive criminal history, which would bar them from becoming placement. However, DCS is still required to provide grandparents, aunts/uncles to the child, adult cousins of the child, and parents of the child's half siblings with notice of the removal pursuant to DCS policy and IC 31-34-3-4.5. For this reason, merit was found to the allegation that DCS failed to notify relatives of the removal. The allegation that DCS placed the child with a former babysitter who was fired for trying to buy the baby was found to be without merit. The babysitter was the primary caregiver for the infant prior to removal and asked that the mother sign power of attorney for the infant so that the babysitter could take the child to receive medical care. The child was born with medical issues that were not being addressed by the mother. There was no evidence that the babysitter was trying to buy the baby. Given that the babysitter had an established relationship with one of the children, she is considered kinship, making her eligible for placement.

Recommendation: It was recommended DCS review policy regarding notification of relatives following removal in *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Manual 4.28: Removals from Parents, Guardians, or Custodians*.

DCS Response: LOD reported that this policy was reviewed in an all-staff meeting and a policy acknowledgement was signed by staff.

Case Review 2024- 17548

Region 5 /Tippecanoe - Safety

The complainant alleged that DCS failed to thoroughly assess the allegations of sexual abuse against the mother's previous boyfriend.

Findings: No merit was found to the allegation that DCS failed to thoroughly assess the allegation. This was a joint assessment with law enforcement. DCS investigated the allegations to the extent that they could. DCS closed the assessment as unsubstantiated due to lack of evidence; however, law enforcement was advised to make a new report if any further evidence came to light. There was some merit to the case, however, because the assessment narrative was missing pertinent information,

such as evidence found and results of the polygraph that the alleged perpetrator participated in.

Recommendation: It was recommended DCS reopen the assessment and add the information that had been omitted. The Local Office Director (LOD) stated that she planned to address with the management team what is considered pertinent information and is required to be included in the assessment narrative. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau asked to be notified when this was done.

DCS Response: The assessment was reopened and the information that was missing was added. The LOD advised that she addressed the issue of pertinent information with the assessment management team.

Case Review 2024-18317

Region 8/Vigo – DCS Findings

The complainant alleged DCS should not have substantiated neglect against the father and the youngest child because the father did not live in the home.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau is finding no merit to the allegation concerning the substantiation of neglect against the father. Per the assessment documentation, the father was a caregiver for the child and was aware of the living conditions and formula concerns. Additionally, this matter has been addressed through the Fact Finding hearing with the Court.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau is finding merit to the concern that the 311 narrative did not provide explanation as to how the father neglected the child. Per *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 22: Making an Assessment Finding,* "b. For allegations determined to be "substantiated": i. Include in the assessment finding a description of the credible evidence supporting the conclusion that the allegation is true and that this evidence outweighs any contrary evidence;"

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 22: Making an Assessment Finding* and *4.B Tool: Assessment Narrative* as a reminder to ensure this policy and tool are understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: LOD reviewed the policy and tool with all staff and policy acknowledgments were signed.

Case Review 2024-18000

Region 11/Madison County – DCS Findings

The initial complaint was that DCS was filing a CHINS because the father refused to take a drug screen, noting that the allegations had nothing to do with substance use and DCS entered false information in the Preliminary Inquiry that was filed with the court. A subsequent complaint was received with additional allegations that DCS failed to follow policy by failing to hold timely visitation and DCS failed to put services in place timely.

Findings: Merit was found to all the allegations. DCS did not show any connection to the allegations of lack of supervision being caused by substance abuse. DCS stated that they cannot rule it out, but there was no evidence to suggest that he was using or that his use was the reason that the children were left unsupervised. DCS's requirement for drug screens was based on assessed risk from 10 years ago and had no actual link to current safety of the children, especially considering that the safety assessment determined that the children were safe.

DCS admitted that they made an error in the assessment report and the Preliminary Inquiry by stating that there had been "multiple reports in the last year of drug use and guns being pulled on the father." DCS advised that they meant to write that there were reports over the last few years.

A visit between the parent and children was not held within the 48 hours required by DCS policy. The children spent 32 days without a visit with their father, and no visitation plan was put in place.

The need for substance abuse treatment was known and discussed; however, a referral for substance use assessment was not made for over a month. Additionally, no CFTM had been held to discuss services, even though the children had been removed, which would qualify as a critical case juncture.

Recommendation: It was recommended that DCS explore and discuss other ways to assess and address risk when the risk does not seem relevant to safety concerns.

It was recommended that DCS correct the Preliminary Inquiry and the assessment report.

It was recommended that the local office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 12: Developing the Visitation Plan* and discuss with staff how the lack of visitation affects children. DCS was provided with research on this and published by the US Department of Health and Human Services

It was recommended that DCS schedule a CFTM and that the parent be encouraged to invite providers and any of supports of their choosing. It was also recommended that DCS review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 7: Child & Family Team Meetings (CFTM) and Chapter 5 Section 7: Family Services*.

DCS Response: LOD responded to the recommendation, advising that the following had been completed:

1. The PI was corrected.

2. The assessment report/311 was corrected.
3. The polices were reviewed and a demonstration was provided to all staff about the visitation plan along with how to access it in MaGIK.
4. A CFTM was conducted and documented in MaGIK.
5. Held a regional safety planning training that included a discussion about risk factors and ways to mitigate risk.

Case Review 2024-18611

Region 16/Vanderburgh – Placement

The complainant alleged DCS failed to maintain communication between the child and prior placement. The complainant alleged DCS failed to place the child in an inpatient facility after the therapist recommended the placement. The complainant alleged DCS failed to reevaluate the child's CANS Assessments. The complainant alleged DCS has failed to transfer the child's school. The complainant alleged DCS has failed to assess sexual abuse allegations.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau found no merit to the allegation concerning communication between the prior placement and child. This matter has been addressed with the placement and the child has stated they do not want to maintain contact.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation DCS has failed to consider the therapist recommendation for inpatient stay. Prior to the recent Child-Focused Treatment Review (CFTR), the therapist had recommended an inpatient stay at a facility which was pending an available bed. The child's treatment has been and continues to be reviewed pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 8 Section 25: Health Care Services (Overview)*. Per the local office, the child's therapist and the Child and Family Team (CFT) do not feel an inpatient stay is appropriate for her currently. The child's behaviors have been decreasing since a change of placement occurred at the end of May.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation concerning the CANS not being done pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 19: Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Assessment*. The CANS was reevaluated within 30 days of placement and within six months of placement and not within five calendar days of each case juncture. Per *ICWP Chapter 5 Section 19: Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Assessment*, "Throughout DCS involvement, a new CANS Assessment will be completed prior to the development of the Informal Adjustment (IA)/Prevention Plan or Case Plan/Prevention Plan; prior to any placement change; and within five (5) calendar days of each case juncture which may impact the Case Plan/Prevention Plan, Safety Plan, and/or Plan of Safe Care."

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation concerning the child transferring schools. Per case documentation, the child has stated they are having

minimal concerns at school and DCS has addressed any concerns with the school. The child's placement is pending a review hearing with the Court.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation concerning sexual abuse allegations not being assessed as there is an open assessment. The child had a forensic interview scheduled and the concerns are still being assessed.

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 19: Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Assessment* as a reminder to ensure this policy is understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: LOD reviewed the policy with all staff and made sure it was provided for those not in attendance of the meeting.

Case Review 2024-19191

Region 8/Sullivan – Findings/Visitation

The complainant alleged DCS has no reason to have the youngest child in the CHINS case because there were no allegations against the child. The complainant alleged DCS has failed to provide visitation.

Findings: The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the allegation the assessment was not completed pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 22: Making an Assessment Finding*. The 311 was completed 123 days after the 310 was received. Per *ICWP 4.22, "*DCS will make an assessment finding no later than 40 calendar days from the date the Preliminary Report of Alleged Child Abuse or Neglect (310) was received." It is understood that parents were informed of the allegations in the court case, however, without this being completed they have been unable to have the option of appealing the substantiations and having the findings.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found no merit to the allegation stating visitation had not been provided. Once the parents were released from jail, they moved away from the originating community making it difficult to find an available provider. Visitation has also been discussed during the CFTMs and a provider has been arranged for the family.

The DCS Ombudsman Bureau has found merit to the concern the CFTM notes have not been uploaded into the case management system pursuant to *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 7: Child and Family Team Meetings*. The two CFTM's that have occurred were not uploaded into the case management system two-three months later. Per ICWP 5.7, "The Family Case Manager will: 12. Ensure the CFT Meeting Notes are distributed to all appropriate parties, including the CASA/GAL if not present at the meeting, and entered in the case management system within seven (7) calendar days of the CFT Meeting;"

Recommendation: It was recommended the Local Office review *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 4 Section 22: Making an Assessment Finding* and *Indiana Child Welfare Policy Chapter 5 Section 7: Child and Family Team Meetings* as a reminder to ensure this policy is understood and implemented by FCMs and FCMS alike.

DCS Response: LOD reviewed the requested policies during an all-office meeting. The Local Office (LO) developed a plan to get documents entered the case management system timely.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Pursuant to IC 4-13-19-5(b)(2), (4), and (6), the DCS Ombudsman Bureau may also review relevant policies and procedures with a view toward the safety and welfare of children, recommend changes in procedures for investigating reports of abuse and neglect, make recommendations concerning the welfare of children under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court, examine policies and procedures, and evaluate the effectiveness of the child protection system. DCS responds to systemic recommendations made by the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. The recommendations are based on information derived from the volumes of information reviewed during case reviews and investigations with systemic implications, in addition to information gleaned from various reports and discussions with stakeholders.

Specific systemic recommendations discussed with DCS during 2024 included shared belief that visitation must be prioritized and policy followed regarding parental and sibling visitation. It was also identified in case review that more training is needed for staff on the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children. Risk assessment was evaluated in a review and discussion was held with DCS regarding the approach taken to assessing risk and how it relates to the allegations in a neglect or abuse assessment. DCS reports that they are continuing to evaluate how risk is assessed and have plans to provide new tools and training soon.

DCS Ombudsman Bureau
Reflections and Future Initiatives

Agency Response

During 2024 the DCS Ombudsman Bureau remained dedicated to its mission of addressing complaints regarding DCS actions or omissions by providing problem resolution services, independent case reviews, and recommendations to improve DCS service delivery to foster public trust.

Diligent efforts were made to provide services and monitoring to children and their families during this year despite barriers of staffing and provider availability which continue to cause cases to languish in the system. The collaboration of constituents and partners in Indiana was vital in maintaining a robust safety net for children and

families under challenging circumstances. Gratitude is extended to DCS leadership and staff as they continue to steer the agency toward their goals of safety and in support of families in Indiana. It was, and continues to be, a time of high risk for families and children, and we appreciate the community partners that assist in these efforts daily.

Open communication between the DCS Ombudsman Bureau and DCS at the state and local level has been supported by all parties and DCSO hopes to increase that in 2025 as the agency responds to new leadership. The use of Assists as a viable tool to foster communication and resolve concerns between complainants and the local offices continues to allow DCS Ombudsman Bureau staff to focus on more complex case reviews and investigations. DCS continues to respond to the requests for Assists in a timely professional manner and that provides much quicker responses to constituents. The DCS Ombudsman Bureau continues to work closely with DCS to include the DCS Foster Care Liaison and Kinship Care Navigator in Assists, Case Reviews, and Investigations to support and engage foster and kinship caregivers in their concerns. This is an area that continues to be identified as needing improved levels of communication and training.

DCS Ombudsman Bureau Initiatives

Staffing

The responsibilities of the DCS Ombudsman Bureau require experienced staff proficient in the areas of child welfare and criminal justice issues, problem resolution, research, public policy, law and best practice, and application of the same to constituent concerns. Additionally, the individuals must have above average oral and written communication skills and provide excellent customer service while engaging stakeholders with diverse needs and expectations.

Since its inception in 2009, there has been substantive changes specific to the staffing needs for the DCS Ombudsman Bureau. The agency was originally budgeted for one .5 full-time equivalent (FTE) Assistant Ombudsman (AO) position. The position was increased to one FTE in the Spring of 2012, and one additional FTE AO was added in the Fall of the same year. While staffing with two full-time AO positions remained constant, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau experienced significant turnover from 2013 to 2015 at the AO level. The continued recruitment and training of AOs during this time negatively impacted the Bureau's ability to retain staff and respond timely to clients' needs.

Efforts to address staffing concerns and retain talent continued in 2016. Effective April 2017, the AO classification status was adjusted from an Administrative Assistant 2 to a Program Director 2 with a 4.5% increase in salary. This important action contributed favorably to the DCS Ombudsman Bureau's ability to recruit and retain qualified staff. However, as constituent concerns continued to increase due to successful outreach efforts, agency response to constituent challenges continued under the AO staffing structure of two FTE positions. In response to these challenges, the DCS Ombudsman

Bureau requested and was granted approval for a staffing increase of one additional FTE AO position. This staff addition, and the experience level of the individuals in the positions, has led to greater expertise and stability in the AO roles.

Today we are fortunate to have competent, qualified staff that operate efficiently and meticulously and have remained consistent in 2024. Staff also received salary adjustment in 2022 following the Comprehensive Compensation Study conducted at the request of Governor Holcomb. We were grateful for this change as we expect it to assist with retention and reward for excellent service. The significant increase in referrals this year was challenging but we were fortunate to have experienced staff that managed the influx of calls well and continued to provide timely responses to the constituents.

Electronic Case Management and Data Tracking

In 2019, IDOA charged the DCS Ombudsman Bureau with the task of addressing the challenges of utilizing technology to manage cases and data while resolving space and storage concerns resulting from the agency's steady 15 year growth. As a member of the United States Ombudsman Association, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau surveyed member child welfare ombudsman agencies regarding their case management systems. Additionally, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau reached out to the State IT for direction for consultation. Information from both entities were compiled and next steps to identify, develop, and implement an electronic case management/data tracking system continued into 2020. The new data and case management system was in its first full year of use during 2021. The program continues to serve us well as we manage the caseload. DCS is currently in the process of developing a new case management system as well.

Our Bureau obtained approval of our plan for retention by the Indiana Archives and Records Administration. In 2022 we completed scanning and transferred all our documents for storage into archives. This eliminated our paper files, and those files were disposed of by Indiana Archives and Records Retention policy. This accomplishment has added one more level of confidentiality of our records and will ensure they are available for future use and data collection. Confidentiality is a critical aspect of our work and highly valued.

Acknowledgements

Throughout 2024, amid a dynamic global landscape and ongoing staffing challenges, the commitment and resilience of DCS managers and front line staff have been

exemplary. We extend our sincere gratitude to those dedicated professionals for their unwavering service to Indiana's families and children. We are deeply appreciative of the individuals who trusted us with their concerns, enabling effective collaboration in resolving them.

We also commend the leadership of the Department of Child Services whose resilience in a demanding year has been vital. The agency's ongoing efforts to address identified issues and to engage in dialogue with the DCS Ombudsman Bureau underscores the commitment to improving services for our vulnerable populations. We look forward to the work planned for the new year with fresh leadership and hope to continue a strong professional relationship to benefit the constituents and families.

Special recognition is due to the Indiana Department of Administration for their steadfast support, alongside the leadership of the Indiana Department of Child Services. As we reflect on the accomplishments of 2024, the DCS Ombudsman Bureau reaffirms its dedication to advancing its mandate and nurturing positive, collaborative relationships with DCS, with the goal of resolving family-DCS concerns whenever possible.

Lastly, profound gratitude and appreciation are extended to Assistant Ombudspersons Jessica Stier, Amanda Fassnacht, and Chandler Meyer. Their tireless work ethic, expertise, and unwavering commitment to Indiana's children and families are invaluable and deeply appreciated.

APPENDIX

Appendix A
DCS Ombudsman Bureau Staff

Director

Shoshanna Everhart assumed the position of DCS Ombudsman in September 2020. She brings over 40 years of child welfare experience in the public and private sector to her role. Director Everhart worked at the DCS local level in Indiana as a child services case worker, supervisor, trainer, and local officer director. She has served children, families, and individuals in a variety of settings as a clinical social worker working in the systems of hospitals, schools, and community agencies. She specializes in working with children in the areas of trauma and loss and in training professionals. Ms. Everhart was an instructor for Indiana University as an Adjunct Faculty member for many years and has been an active community member serving on many and varied youth serving boards and initiatives.

Director Everhart graduated with a B.S. from the University of Indianapolis and a M.S.W. from Indiana University. She currently holds a clinical license in social work in Indiana and is a member of the United States Ombudsman Association.

Assistant Ombudsman

Jessica Stier is native to the Indianapolis area. She graduated from Bishop Chatard High School and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) in 2011. She was hired as an Assistant Ombudsman in August 2011 and divided her time between the DCS Ombudsman and the DOC Ombudsman offices. She began working for the DCS Ombudsman full time in March 2012. In addition to conducting reviews and investigations, Jessica has taken on the role of managing the agency's data system and coaching new staff members.

Amanda Fassnacht grew up in Brownsburg, Indiana. She graduated from Brownsburg High School and holds a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from IUPUI. Amanda was employed as the Assistant Ombudsman for the Department of Corrections Ombudsman Bureau from 2012 to 2019 where she enjoyed assisting offenders and their loved ones. Amanda joined the DCS Ombudsman Bureau in September 2019.

Chandler Meyer grew up in Greenwood, Indiana. He graduated from Center Grove High School and received a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Indiana State University in 2022. Shortly after graduating, he started working full time for the DCS Ombudsman Bureau in August 2022. Although he originally planned to be a detective, he has found Ombudsman work to be compelling as a means to help better people's lives.

Appendix B
Rules of Engagement

DCS Ombudsman Guidelines

Agency and Complainant Rights and Responsibilities
in the DCS Ombudsman Bureau Complaint Process

Complainant Rights

Complainants are entitled to:

- A timely response acknowledging receipt of the complaint.
- Professional and respectful communication from agency staff.
- An impartial review.
- A credible review process.
- Contact by the Bureau if additional information is required.
- Communication regarding the outcome of the review.

Complainant Responsibilities

Complainants shall:

- Attempt to resolve problems with the local office prior to filing a complaint.
- Complete the complaint form as directed.
- Ensure that the allegations in the complaint are pertinent to the role of the ombudsman.
- Ensure the accuracy and timeliness of requested information.
- Communicate respectfully with agency staff.

DCS Ombudsman Bureau Rights

The Bureau may:

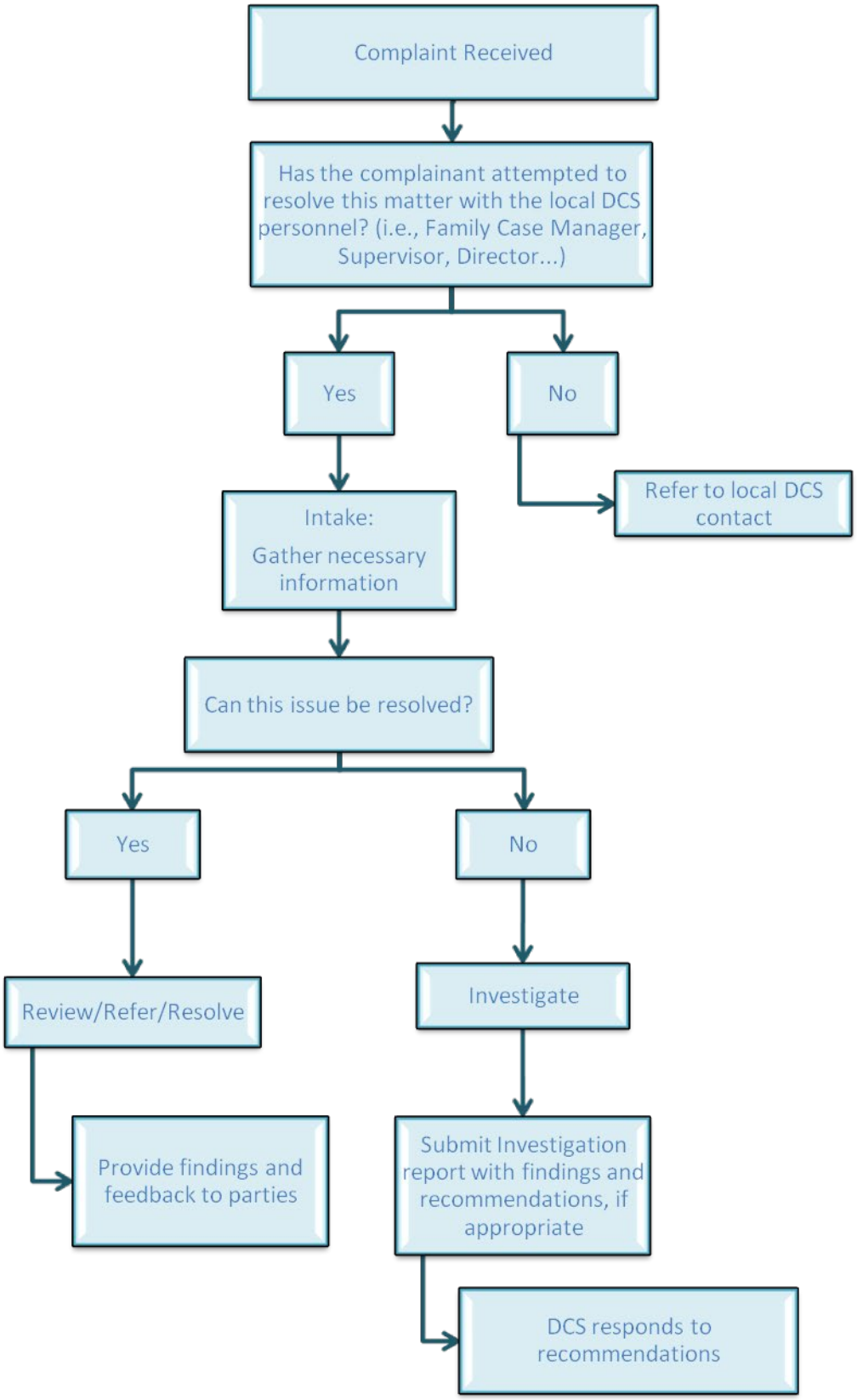
- Decline to accept a complaint that does not fall within the jurisdiction of the Bureau.
- Determine the level of review, the documentation, and interviews necessary for gathering the information required to determine findings.
- Expect the complainant to provide any additional information requested.
- Determine when a case requires no further action.

DCS Ombudsman Bureau Responsibilities

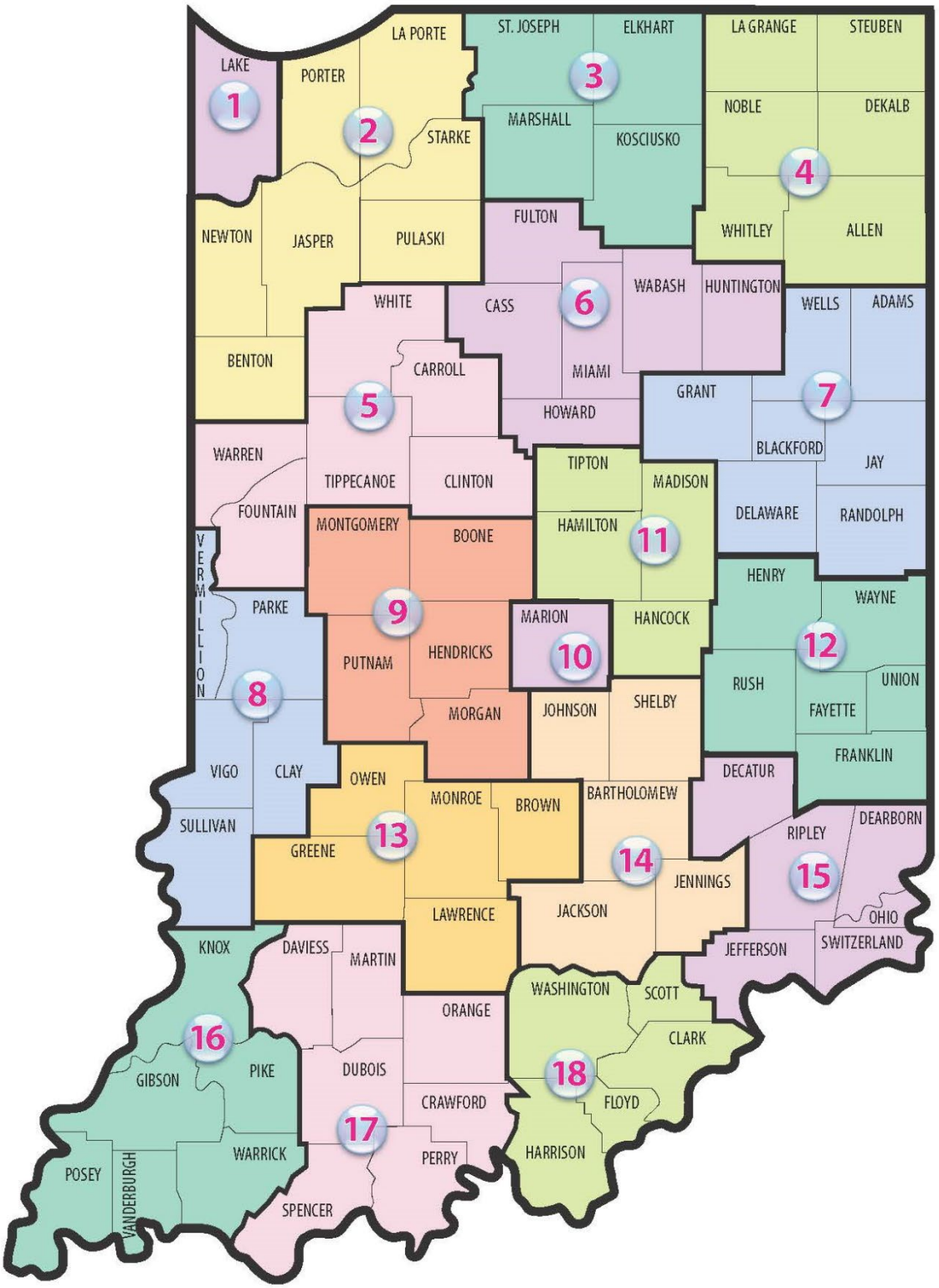
The Bureau shall:

- Complete reviews in a timely manner.
- Complete a thorough and impartial review.
- Ensure professional and respectful communication.
- Provide the results of the review to the complainant in accordance with IC 4-13-19-5.

Appendix C
How We Work



Appendix D
Regional Map



DCS Ombudsman Bureau

Office Hours
8:00 am to 4:30 pm

Telephone Numbers
Local: 317-234-7361
Toll-Free: 877-682-0101
Fax: 317-232-3154

Ombudsman E-mail
DCSOmbudsman@idoa.in.gov

Ombudsman Website
www.in.gov/idoa/2610.htm

Mailing Address
DCS Ombudsman Bureau
Indiana Department of Administration
402 W Washington, Room 462
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204