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YOUTH OMBUDS OFFICES

Ensuring Independent Advocacy and Accountability for Children and Youth

Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief Series



For inquiries: Anne Day Leong (research partnerships, aleong@unicefusa.org) • Danielle Goldberg (municipal partnerships, dgoldberg@unicefusa.org)

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Child well-being is strengthened when children and youth have meaningful opportunities to shape decisions that affect them. Youth ombuds offices provide an independent mechanism to ensure young voices are heard — offering trusted channels to share concerns and drive systemic improvements in services and policies. This brief highlights the offices' role and key considerations for cities, counties and states working to embed child-centered governance practices and drive positive outcomes for children.

YOUTH OMBUDS OFFICES AT A GLANCE

The lives of children today are profoundly different from the lives of adult decision-makers who design and oversee public systems. To ensure these systems are effective and efficient, governments need mechanisms that allow children to signal when services are falling short. Without clear channels for young people to raise concerns — from unsafe foster care to gaps in education or health services — their experiences and insights can be overlooked, which can let harmful patterns persist and prevent needed improvements.

Youth ombuds offices fill this gap. Beyond handling complaints, when truly independent, well-resourced and given a broad mandate, the offices can identify and address systemic challenges and ensure children's interests shape decisions. Acting independently from the agencies they oversee, these offices investigate issues, recommend reforms and may have authority to enforce corrective action— strengthening accountability, transparency and outcomes across government systems.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Emerging evidence from case studies suggests that youth ombuds offices can produce tangible benefits for children, child-serving systems and communities. When equipped with sufficient independence and authority, they strengthen accountability and elevate children's issues across government and public debate.

- Independent Monitoring of Children's Rights: Case studies demonstrate that youth ombuds offices play a crucial role in monitoring laws, policies and practices that impact children. [1]
- Pushing for Policy and Legal Reform: Case studies have shown that youth ombuds offices serve as a feedback mechanism identifying issues like foster care delays or unsafe facilities and pressing for corrective action.[2] Their annual reports and special investigations can spur evidence-based legislation and reforms.[3]
- Informing System-Wide Improvements: In the U.S., many youth ombuds offices recommend system-wide improvements in child well-being and protection in policy and practice, often via annual reports to the state legislature or governor.[4]
- Elevating Children's Issues on the Agenda: Youth ombuds offices elevate children's issues onto the public agenda. As a first point of contact for children, families and other stakeholders concerned about child well-being, they can develop a system-wide overview of issues impacting children in the protection system and beyond.[5]

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Most U.S. youth ombuds offices focus narrowly on child welfare, leaving gaps in education, health care, juvenile justice and child protection.[4,6] Offices with a broad, cross-sector mandate have, in case studies, demonstrated the ability to consolidate information across systems, identify gaps, elevate children's priorities in policy and budgets and drive reforms that improve outcomes across sectors.[5,7,8]

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Experience and research suggest that youth ombuds offices are most effective when they are given a broad mandate and authority and are independent, well-resourced, impartial and accessible to all children.[7] Offices that combine structural autonomy, broad authority, proactive outreach and cross-agency collaboration are better able to monitor systemic issues, advocate for children's interests and drive policy and practice improvements.

Independence: Youth ombuds offices are most effective when established through legislation that guarantees structural independence from the agencies they oversee. This independence allows them to challenge the status quo and avoid conflicts of interest.

Broad Mandate: Offices with authority across child-serving systems better advance child-centered governance and align with international standards.[6] Expanding offices to have a broad, cross-sector mandate – and integrating them into broader structures, such as Children's Cabinets – strengthens impact and ensures systemic issues are addressed.[7]

Capacity and Resources: Adequate funding and specialized staffing are essential for accessibility, equity and impact.[7] Well-resourced offices can conduct investigations, follow up on findings, do proactive outreach and maintain a presence in underserved communities. Under-resourced offices risk limited reach and reduced effectiveness.[9]

Authority to Act: Recommendations alone are insufficient if they cannot be enforced. Offices need a strong legal mandate to ensure credibility, influence and public support.[4,9] Subpoena powers, access to case records and the ability to publish independent reports without external approval enhance their ability to prompt reforms and ensure accountability.[9]

Proactive Outreach and Accessibility: Many children and families are unaware these offices exist. Child-friendly materials, community partnerships and school visits help reach more youth, while building trust with local authorities, law enforcement and the judiciary ensures the office can effectively influence policy and practice.[5,9]

YOUTH OMBUDS OFFICES IN PRACTICE

Across the U.S. and internationally, independent youth ombuds offices have been established to monitor child-serving systems, investigate complaints and advocate for systemic reform. In the U.S., five states have fully independent offices, and 33 states have child welfare-focused offices, with a few cities and counties also establishing mechanisms.[4] The examples below illustrate how these offices drive meaningful change for children:

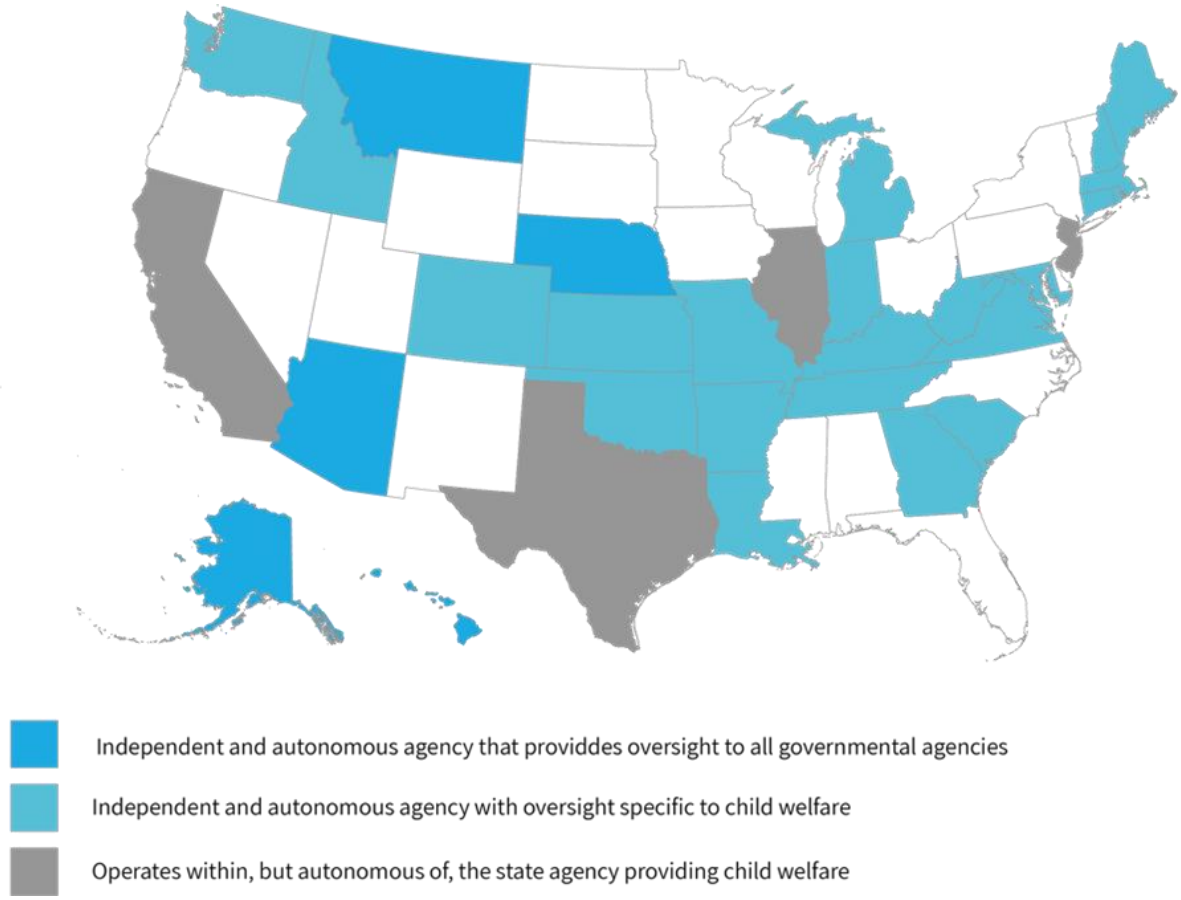
Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman: Established in 2010 and fully independent since 2016, this office oversees Colorado's child welfare system, including agencies involved in behavioral health, education and law enforcement. It addresses individual complaints from children, families, and community members and identifies systemic

issues to drive policy reform. Its efforts have led to statewide improvements, including standardized adoption assistance, clarification of mandatory reporting laws and policies to prevent and respond to runaway youth.[5] Learn more here.

Michigan Children's Ombudsman: Operating as an independent state office, the Michigan Children's Ombudsman investigates complaints within the child welfare system and issues annual reports highlighting systemic gaps. In its first 18 months, the office investigated 443 cases and identified 209 instances in which administrative actions caused actual or potential harm, prompting targeted reforms in case management and agency practices.[3] Learn more here.

Australia's National Children's Commissioner: Established by federal legislation in 2012, the Commissioner promotes children's well-being and interests across all policy areas and provides independent advice to the government. The office listens to children and investigates systemic issues affecting their rights and well-being, helping inform government policy and reform. The office has influenced national debates on youth justice, contributed to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, and informed COVID-19 policies to better address children's mental health and educational needs during the pandemic. Learn more here.

FIGURE 1: U.S. STATES WITH STATUTORY OMBUDSPERSONS OFFICES FOR CHILDREN, 2023 (SOURCE: NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES)[11]



GETTING STARTED

A good first step is to map existing child advocacy and oversight mechanisms. Even **if offices exist in child welfare, juvenile justice or health, review the authority, reach and capacity to identify gaps and opportunities.** From there, consider which stakeholders – government agencies, community organizations, local inspectors general, and children and youth themselves – should shape local priorities.

Every community will need to tailor its approach based on local structures, resources, and needs. The most important step is simply getting started by creating an independent, credible space where concerns can be heard, system issues identified, and early reforms pursued. **Strong offices start with achievable goals and grow more effective over time as trust, evidence and public support deepen.**

For practical guidance, review resources from the United States Ombudsman Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures and international examples through the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children.

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM UNICEF USA

UNICEF USA partners with government leaders, youth and key stakeholders to advance child-centered governance—supporting communities to strengthen how decisions affecting children are made so that policies and systems consistently uphold children's rights and improve their well-being.

What's next: UNICEF USA will roll out tools, guidance, research, and peer learning opportunities to support municipalities at different stages of their journey.

Sign up for our Communities for Every Child newsletter to stay informed about research, advocacy and child-friendly governance initiatives.

Learn more in our full Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief series: *Children's Budgets • Youth Councils • Child Impact Statements • Youth Ombuds Offices • Children's Cabinets*

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