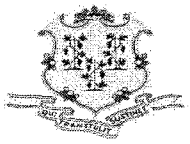
STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
999 ASYLUM AVENUE, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06105



Sarah Healy Eagan, J.D.
Child Advocate

TESTIMONY OF SARAH EAGAN, CHILD ADVOCATE
FOR THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Appropriations Committee
March 4, 2015

Good morning Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Ziobron, and all other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee.

I am Sarah Eagan, the Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut and I am submitting this testimony regarding the Governor's FY2016-FY2017 Biennium budget proposal appropriated for the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

The Office of the Child Advocate recognizes and appreciates the support of the Governor and this legislature through these continued very difficult fiscal times. Though OCA staffing levels have decreased over the past several years, we understand our obligation to stretch our resources and maintain our commitment to ensuring our most vulnerable children are well-served. OCA currently has six full-time employees, including the Child Advocate.

The statutory obligations of the OCA are to review concerns, investigate where necessary, and make recommendations regarding how our state-funded systems meet the needs of children. Much of our work relates to the following priorities:

RESPONDING TO CALLS FOR HELP

During the last fiscal year, the OCA responded to approximately 400 individual requests to help at-risk, abused, neglected or special needs children. Individuals seeking assistance from the OCA included youth in need of services, parents and other relatives of children in need, foster parents, attorneys, health/mental health/education professionals, juvenile and criminal justice professionals, community providers, legislators and employees of state agencies with responsibility for children's services. All calls to the OCA are confidential.

While concerns brought to the attention of the OCA continue to be extremely variable, common themes include:

- concerns about the appropriateness of educational services for children with identified disabilities;
- school discipline practices and utilization of seclusion and restraint for children with special needs;
- concerns regarding access and/or availability of critically needed home and community services for children with complex mental health/developmental disabilities;
- concerns related to child welfare decisions and case practice;

- concerns focusing on the quality of care and treatment and harmful practices in out of home treatment settings for children with special needs;
- concerns about children experiencing bullying, other forms of discrimination, and;
- concerns regarding conditions of confinement in the state's secure juvenile facilities.

OCA supports all callers, helps connect them with appropriate resources, and opens individual reviews in approximately 15% of cases. This Legislature granted OCA broad authority regarding access to information about children and state-funded facilities and programs. This knowledge allows OCA to advocate on behalf of specific children and to work effectively with agency personnel and leadership regarding recommendations for system improvement.

CHILD FATALITY REVIEW

The OCA staffs and co-chairs the CT Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP). The OCA is notified of all unexpected or unexplained child fatalities that are referred to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, law enforcement, and other state agencies. OCA is an active member of the National Center for the Review and Prevention of Child Deaths Advisory Board as well as maintains an active role with a consortium of New England child fatality reviewers.

OCA is the only entity with statutory authority to investigate and publicly report regarding child fatalities in the state. In 2014, OCA reviewed the circumstances of approximately 60 unexplained/unexpected deaths of children, more than half were children under the age of 3. OCA published several reports informing the public and lawmakers regarding the cause of unexpected child deaths and recommending numerous but specific prevention strategies:

- April 2014, *Public Health Alert: Unsafe Sleep Related Deaths are the Leading Cause of Preventable Deaths of Infants in Connecticut*
- July 2014, *Child Fatalities Children Birth to Three, 2013*
- July 2014, *Public Health Alert: Infant and Toddler Homicides*

In November 2014, the OCA released *Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School,* an comprehensive report examining the history of Adam Lanza and his intersection with state-funded or community-based health and educational systems. OCA brought together a highly skilled, multidisciplinary team of professionals who volunteered their time and expertise to this project. The report offers specific recommendations for an improved, integrated public health system.

FACILITY OVERSIGHT-HOSPITALS, RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT, CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS

OCA staff visits children and youth wherever they are being served. Our unique access allows us to get a true sense of the experience of the child within the facility. The need for out of state travel has been greatly reduced due to a strong commitment on behalf of both DCF and DDS to serve children within Connecticut, but admission to an out of state setting does not preclude OCA from executing our responsibilities for oversight and advocacy.

OCA responds to any reported concern regarding the safety and well-being of children in state funded or operated settings. We continue to focus our limited resources most on children and youth in state operated facilities as these are generally the children with the most complex and challenging needs, and there is little, if any, external oversight of state-operated programs.

Throughout the course of the year, OCA staff review the circumstances of hundreds of children and youth in congregate settings. Emphasis is on assessing quality of care and treatment, and ensuring collaboration and coordination of the often multiple entities having a share of responsibility including discharge planning. This work can be child specific or systemic.

A particular highlight of OCA facility work has been our partnership with the Department of Correction (DOC) and UConn Correctional Managed Healthcare to examine policies and practices impacting incarcerated teens. This work is ongoing, and thus far, several DOC policies have been changed to reflect the unique needs of adolescents and correctional best practices.

OCA continues its examination of conditions of confinement for adjudicated youth, advocating for much needed practice and policy change. OCA is an active participant on the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Council (JJPOC).

OTHER SYSTEMIC INVESTIGATIONS AND ADVOCACY EFFORTS

OCA is currently working on the following systemic issues, often emanating from our citizen response work:

- Eliminating unnecessary seclusion and restraint for children with disabilities in school. In February 2015, OCA produced a public report with recommendations, *Seclusion and Restraint in CT Schools: A Call to Action.*
- Strengthening the state's strategic plan for improving outcomes for high-risk infants and toddlers and reducing child fatalities.
- Improving access and availability to needed mental health services for children.
- In June 2014, OCA and the CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence cohosted a roundtable discussion at the LOB regarding children who witness and are exposed to domestic/family violence.

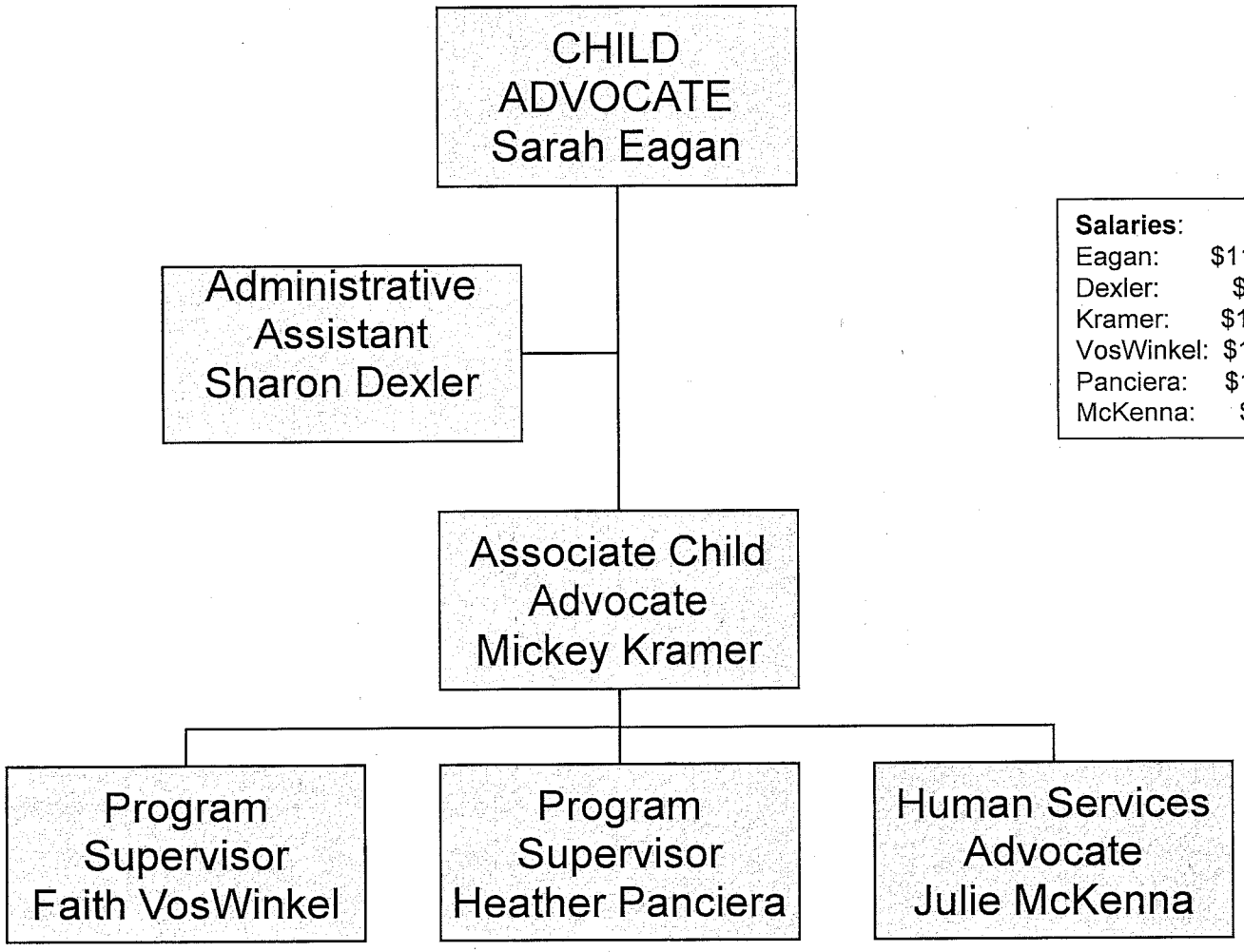
LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP/KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED

OCA prioritizes constructive dialogue with our state agency and community partners and we value collaborative solutions whenever possible. Our staff actively participate on more than 20 taskforces, committees and working groups across the state that convene to address children's mental health, child welfare reform, juvenile justice, addressing the needs of children with developmental challenges, family violence, child injury and death prevention and educational disparities. OCA staff are frequently invited to provide trainings and information to professionals and community members. This past year OCA has also launched a newsletter and list-serve to better disseminate critical information to stakeholders throughout the state, including information regarding trainings, emerging policy issues, OCA publications and more.

This work could not have been accomplished without the countless volunteer hours of many experts and student interns.

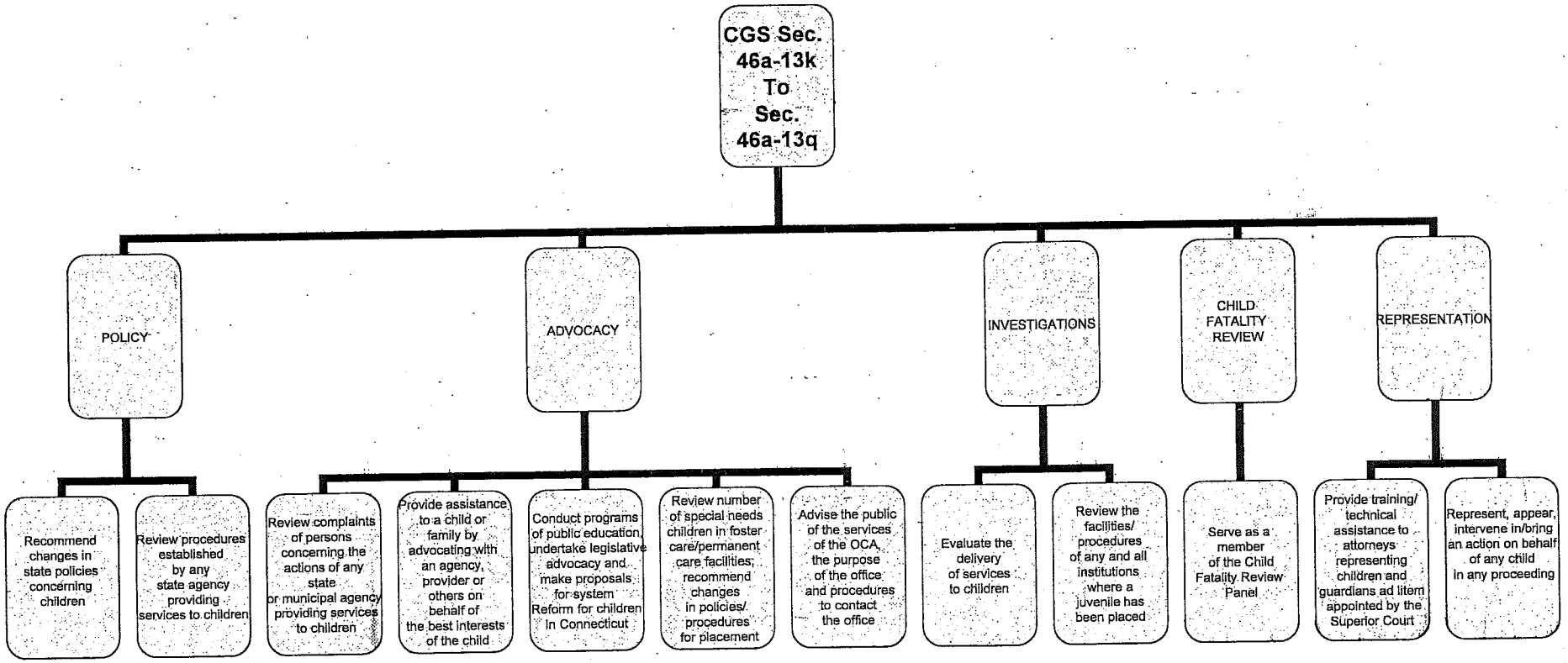
In conclusion, we thank the Governor and the legislature for your continued commitment to Connecticut's safety net for our most vulnerable children. We look forward to our continued work together and stand ready to assist you in any way we can as you tackle the significant fiscal challenges ahead.

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE



Salaries:

Eagan:	$113,300
Dexler:	$67,762
Kramer:	$118,362
VosWinkel:	$102,232
Panciera:	$100,713
McKenna:	$75,365

Revision Date 3/3/15

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES