

State of California
Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson

Calendar Year 2021
Annual Report Data Summary



California Department of Social Services
Office of Equity



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The Office of The Foster Care Ombudsperson
Annual Report
Calendar Year 2021

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Legislative Mandate

In 1998, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) was mandated by the passage of Senate Bill (SB) 933 to establish a California Foster Care Ombudsperson Program. This was in response to concerns regarding the need for an autonomous and independent entity to resolve issues related to the care, placement, and services to youth in foster care.

The Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson (OFCO) was created in August 2000, and is empowered to investigate the acts of state and local administrative agencies caring for youth in care, make recommendations that promote the safety and delivery of appropriate services, and to safeguard the personal rights of these youth. Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) section 16164 mandates the OFCO to disseminate information and provide training and technical assistance on the rights of children and youth in foster care delineated under WIC section 16001.9. Further, the OFCO also must offer trainings regarding the reasonable and prudent parent standard, and create standardized age-appropriate information and training materials.

Assembly Bill (AB) 175 (2019) went into effect in January 2020, expanding the Foster Youth Bill of Rights to 41 rights and clarifying the role of the OFCO to provide training and technical assistance on the rights of children and youth in foster care, reasonable and prudent parent standard, and services provided by the office. As a result, the OFCO updated the training curriculum and developed digital and printed publications in preparation for statewide in-person trainings to meet this requirement.

The OFCO is required, under WIC section 16164, to compile and make available to the Legislature data collected over the course of the year, including, but not limited to: the number of contacts to the office, the number of complaints made, including the type and source of those complaints, the number of investigations performed by the office, the trends and issues that arose in the course of investigating complaints, the number of referrals made, the number of pending complaints, and a summary of the data received from the State Department of Education. The office is also required to include recommendations consistent with this data for improving the child welfare system.

AB 317 and AB 1140 were signed in September of 2021. AB 317 strengthened the OFCO's autonomy and confidentiality of information gathered in the course of the OFCO's investigations and improved the OFCO's access to foster youth and their records. Through these two bills the OFCO's jurisdiction was explicitly extended to include children in the custody of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee and Resettlement ("ORR") living in California licensed homes and facilities.

Message from the California Foster Care Ombudsman



2021 marked the 20th Anniversary of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights (“FYBOR”); and in September I was appointed the third Foster Care Ombudsperson, following Rochelle Trochtenberg (2016-2021) and Karen Grace-Kaho (1998-2016.) This report is retrospective of the past year. However, it is my hope that it will enlighten readers of the direction the office will be taking in the future. As the new leader of the office my priorities are to focus on outreach, improve data collection, and increase independence for the office.

In spring of 2021, aligning closely with the priority toward expanded outreach, the office released its new website and began distribution of the new FYBOR materials including for the first time a coloring book for foster youth ages 2-7, and an innovative trifold pocket-sized version of the FYBOR.

Fall 2021 saw the passage by the Legislature and signing by the Governor of Assembly Bills 317 and 1140. AB 317 strengthened the autonomy and confidentiality of information gathered in the course of investigations. These improvements are key in maintaining fidelity to a true government Ombudsperson model. Further, jurisdiction of the office was explicitly extended to include children in the custody of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refuge and Resettlement (“ORR”) living in California licensed homes and facilities.

2021 was the first full calendar year in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we were all significantly impacted, the impact on foster youth was greater than on the general population. The most significant impact on foster youth, and youth in general, was the impact on mental health as a result from isolation. The delivery of services to address mental health was further impacted by the pandemic. The result of a lack of delivery of mental health services, combined with the greater need for services for foster youth and their families, led to some difficult outcomes for youth.

Issues related to children’s placements were the most common complaint brought to the OFCO in 2021. Placement issues ranged from placement safety, to family members being overlooked as resources, failure to follow the placement preference of the Indian Child Welfare Act, to children living in county offices and showering at truck stops. While the immediate need is to have children living where they can receive treatment, and not in offices or even hotels, we should not lose sight of the fact that this is the symptom of the problem and not the problem itself. The problem is a complicated one, that involves the systemic over-representation of persons of color and LGBTQ+ youth at every stage of the system, combined with a failure to develop capacity of home-like settings for care of these children. The resources of the State need to go toward addressing the true problem, meeting the needs of these children in the communities they live, and not toward an increase of congregate care settings and shelters.

Larry Fluharty (he/him)
Foster Care Ombudsperson

Executive Summary

This annual report provides an overview of the activities of the OFCO during calendar year 2021 and contains analysis of the number, type and scope of complaints received and investigated. In addition to quantitative data, several issues related to foster youth rights have been identified by the OFCO as trends or key topics and are presented in more detail. Recommendations for system improvements are discussed in these areas. The OFCO Team was available to the public and able to address thousands of issues throughout 2021 concerning foster youth, caregivers, and other interested parties. The table below summarizes these activities.

Activity	Count
Calls Processed	18,179
Cases Opened	5,011
Issues Reviewed	1,964
Investigations Conducted	300
Verification Letters Provided	1,675
Training Classes Taught	70
Training Participants Number	1,354
Publications Sent	60,754

OFCO 2021 Highlights

Impact of COVID-19 on Foster Youth

COVID-19 was especially traumatic for children in foster care. The forced isolation that we all experienced impacted foster youth especially hard as they were cut off from their families and friends with few resources to bridge the digital divide to keep up their educations or means to maintain their social support system to help them weather the storm. In addition to questions about vaccinations and quarantine protocols, the OFCO received a high volume of concerns related to the impact of the pandemic on visitation between dependent youth and their families. Many youth in care experienced isolation due to pandemic-related shifting of visitation from in-person to virtual or phone visits only.

Participation in visitation is known to correlate with reunification outcomes for families. The overall impact of COVID-19 on reunification outcomes is yet to be seen, but the OFCO is concerned that the widespread decrease in access to visitation will have a negative impact.

Although not reflected in the OFCO's data, the pandemic had a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of all youth. Foster youth seemed to have fared worse than others. The isolation and helplessness which impacted all of us was more pervasive for foster youth. 2021 saw an increase in the loss of lives of foster youth and nonminor dependents to overdoses and suicides. There must be action taken to address the needs of foster youth and their mental health challenges in a manner which meets them where they are and delivers services to match their needs. Further, across programs and departments, there must be a recognition of the trauma which foster youth have been subjected to, and acknowledgment that sometimes this has been exacerbated by the very systems in place to protect and treat youth. The state cannot continue on the current path which expects foster youth to bend and squeeze to fit into the existing treatment systems. The state needs to create a system of treatment for foster youth which is built and fitted to the needs of foster youth and their characteristics.

iFoster Program

iFoster is a national non-profit that bridges the gap between youth in the child welfare system and the external corporations, foundations, and government agencies who have the resources to help them succeed. iFoster has built the largest and most inclusive online community of young people and organizations in foster care with currently over 45,000 members in all 50 states, reaching almost every foster youth. On behalf of the community, iFoster negotiates and collaborates with hundreds of partners who can provide the resources and opportunities that are central to foster care youth becoming successful, independent adults.

In July 2021, during the state of emergency related to COVID-19, the OFCO extended its contract with the iFoster and T-Mobile/Boost Mobile Phones for Foster Youth pilot program to help expand availability of free smartphones with unlimited voice, text, high speed data, and hotspot capability to include current school aged foster youth (kindergarten through grade 12). iFoster provided over 11,000 California foster youth with devices. In addition to providing emergency funds for the program, the OFCO assisted hundreds of youth with locating and completing iFoster applications, providing foster youth verification letters, and working with county partners to provide updates about the iFoster program.

iFoster cell phones are a tool, consistent with the Foster Youth Bill of Rights, to aid youth in accessing technology and the internet to complete online coursework, as well as providing Wi-Fi access when used as a hot spot. Having a cell phone also assured that youth have access to visits with family and can maintain social connections. Finally, access to cell phones and laptops promoted a sense of normalcy for foster youth. The iFoster contract expired on December 31, 2021, but the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) pilot continues. The Ombudsperson office strongly supports this project, and recommends the State provide future resources to empower foster youth to bridge the digital divide.

Foster Youth Bill of Rights 20th Anniversary

2021 marked the 20th anniversary of the passing of the FYBOR. To commemorate this major milestone, the OFCO held a virtual conference highlighting the impact these rights have had on foster youth and caregivers. This special event featured speakers such as former Ombudspersons Rochelle Trochtenberg and Karen Grace-Kehe, former members of the California Youth Connection who had been part of the creation of the FYBOR, and youth with lived expertise in foster care. The event was held in collaboration with the Child and Family Policy Institute of California and included reflective panel discussions and informative stakeholder breakout sessions.

Updates to Publications in Accordance With AB-175

2021 also saw the implementation and distribution of updated foster youth resource materials, both in English and Spanish including: a coloring book, accordion brochure, youth handbook, and freshly designed rights poster. Demand for these materials was high with requests for over 60,000 pieces over the course of the year. The OFCO made efforts to contact all of those mandated to use the new FYBOR materials and inform them of the need to use the updated materials and how to obtain materials at no charge from the OFCO. In 2022, the OFCO intends to expand outreach regarding the new materials. Further, these materials will be created in other languages to meet the demands of all children in the foster care system. The following table details the publications sent during the reporting period.

Type of Publication	Quantity
Wallet (English)	18436
Handbook (English)	13002
Coloring Book (English)	9250
Wallet (Spanish)	6915
Handbook (Spanish)	4906
Poster (English)	3974
Coloring Book (Spanish)	3429
Poster (Spanish)	833
Total	60,745

Challenges Implementing Placement Change Requirements under WIC 16010.7

The OFCO has been monitoring trends in the implementation of AB-2247 (2018), designed to address placement change requirements for youth in foster care. The OFCO receives a high number of calls from youth or caregivers who are concerned that counties are improperly moving youth or failing to follow the placement preservation requirements of this law. WIC section 16010.7 requires child welfare agencies to develop, implement, and document a placement preservation strategy in consultation with the Child and Family Team (CFT). After a placement preservation strategy is developed and implemented, if the agency still determines the placement change is necessary, a written 14-day notice must be provided to specified persons, including the youth.

Many counties are struggling to adhere to the requirement that a placement preservation meeting be held, and restorative efforts be made to save the placement before a notice can be given. Social Workers sometimes cite the "imminent risk to health or safety" exception to forego the preservation requirement, but do not move the child immediately. This exception should only be used if there is a true safety threat in the caregiver's home. The OFCO has seen this used frequently when the caregiver is a relative. Moving the child in this manner leaves the caregiver without the ability to grieve the decision, because the grievance process is only triggered by a formal notice. The table below lists, by county, the 74 complaints related to placement preservation received by the office.

County of Jurisdiction	Record Count
Alameda	2
Colusa	2
Contra Costa	3
El Dorado	1
Fresno	2
Humboldt	1
Kings	2
Lassen	1
Los Angeles	19
Madera	1
Monterey	2
Napa	1
Orange	3
Riverside	5
Sacramento	3
San Bernardino	14
San Diego	2
San Joaquin	2
Shasta	2
Solano	2
Tulare	2
Yuba	2
TOTAL	74

There is confusion regarding regulation of homes under the Resource Family Approval Program (RFA). RFA homes and caregivers are subject to different oversight and investigative processes in different counties with county CPS emergency response, county RFA, and in some counties, state Community Care Licensing (CCL). This is leading to confusion and sometimes unnecessary placement changes for youth due to poor communication between the entities. In some cases, the child remains in the placement for months while the home is investigated, and the grievance process is carried out. Social workers often tell the OFCO investigators that they are not allowed to look for alternative placement options until the investigation or grievance is concluded. In this scenario, when the county social worker is finally informed of the of an adverse licensing decision, it becomes an emergency to move the child.

Alternatively, sometimes it is reported to the OFCO that a 14-day notice was given after an incident because a social worker believes the caregiver will lose their license, or that any licensing action against the caregiver such as a corrective action plan makes the

caregiver unfit for permanency. This also results in youth being moved without placement preservation attempts

The OFCO also receives many placement change complaints from resource parents who wish to adopt the children in their home. Often the county has provided 14-day notice because of a problem with the caregivers that hasn't been properly addressed through a preservation strategy. Other complaints of this nature result from appropriate relatives being found later in the case. When the county has failed to include placement with a relative as part of the case plan, caregivers believe they are the permanent plan for the child and oppose relative placement.

Youth Housed in Unlicensed Settings

The OFCO substantiated a number of complaints related to foster youth living in county offices while waiting for a licensed placement to be found. In many instances, children lived in offices or hotels for months. In 2021, complaints about this were received from numerous counties across the state, including: Riverside, San Bernardino, Fresno, Santa Clara, Los Angeles, Madera, and Humboldt. This troubling practice is not new, as it is widely known that youth have on occasion stayed overnight in social work offices or hotel rooms due to placement issues or overcrowded shelters. However, in 2021, the OFCO found that youth in some counties are being housed in offices for extended periods of time. In one case, a youth was found to have been living in a county office for a total of 22 weeks between 2020 and 2021.

Notably, most of these youth are persons of color with extensive mental health and developmental needs. They often sleep on camping pads, eat solely fast food, and go without access to shower facilities. Many are not enrolled in school and do not receive mental health or behavioral services. Encouragingly, many counties have been engaging with CDSS for technical assistance in meeting the needs of high-needs youth. However, there must be a more nimble process to serve high-needs youth across the state.

Over the past year, youth in these office-living situations have called the OFCO to report concerns including: law enforcement being called on them for misbehavior such as throwing paper or walking outside; having to shower at truck stops; lack of privacy due to staff following and watching their every move; and mismanagement of their psychotropic medications, including pills being left out, destroyed, or improperly administered.

These office-living environments are inherently averse to the mental health needs of youth. A common feature is supervision by social work staff, who are often working overtime. The rotating staff exposes youth to constantly changing rules and expectations. Youth often resort to leaving the offices without permission, resulting in police contact, that frequently ends with the youth being placed on a WIC section 5150 hold.

This trend is a symptom of a larger systemic issue. Expansion of congregate care options, the direction favored by many counties, is not the solution. Counties need to increase family finding and placement preservation efforts earlier on in cases to address the overall placement shortages that result in youth sleeping in offices. Until there is sufficient capacity built, the state cannot allow counties to operate unlicensed settings. Further the State needs to make licenses available to counties when youth are in living in unlicensed facilities.

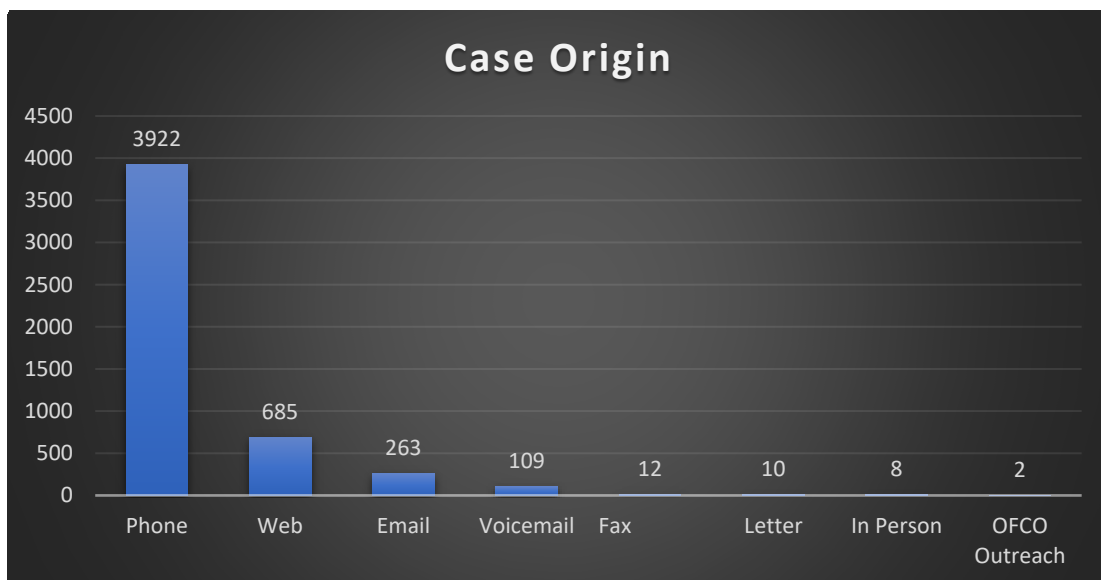
OFCO Data Summary

Number Helpline Contacts

Helpline Contact	Count
Inbound	13,882
Outbound	4,297
Total	18,179

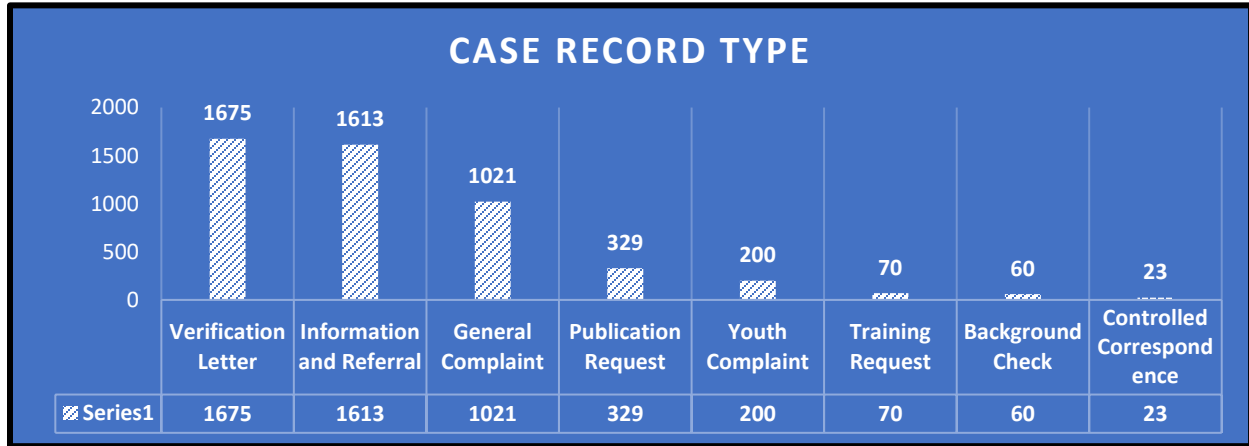
Number and Type of Contacts that Opened New Cases

Each contact from the public is an opportunity for the OFCO to respond to issues impacting the foster care population. The OFCO primarily receives communication via phone, web, and email inquiries.



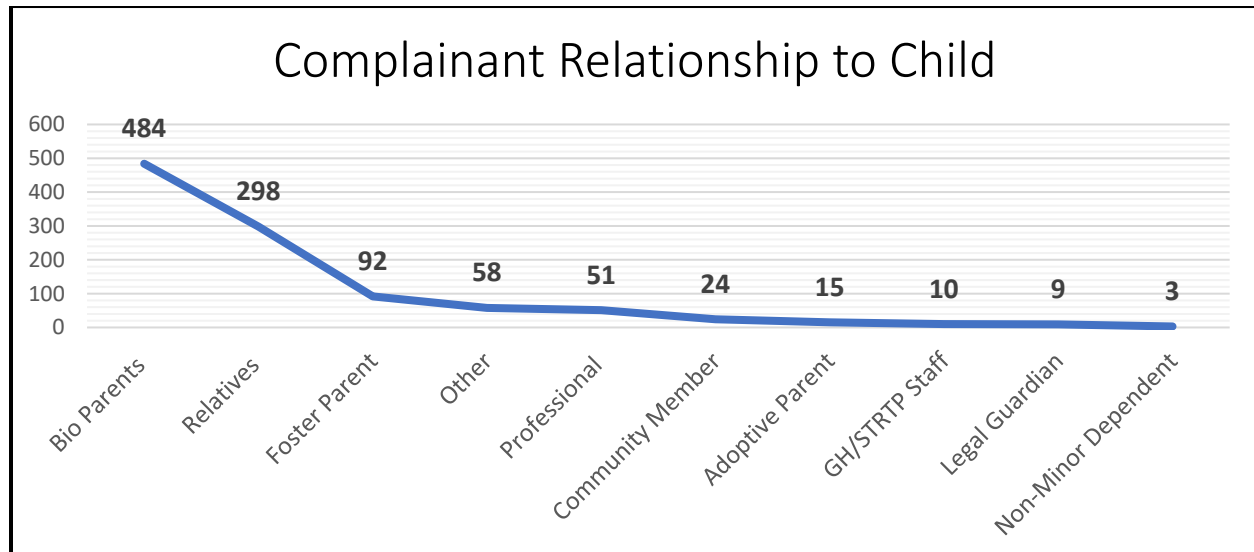
Number of Cases by Record Type

These contacts led to OFCO staff opening 5,011 cases as detailed in the below table:



Source of Complaint

The OFCO receives calls from individuals who are concerned about the care, placement, services, and rights of foster youth. Complaints that come directly from foster youth are prioritized over all other inquiries. During this calendar year the OFCO received a total of 1,391 complaints, primarily from foster youth and their biological parents.



Complaint Issues in Investigated Cases

When a complaint is received, the OFCO staff identify and track issues by category. Most complaints include more than one issue, and issues can be added or changed during the investigation. Of the 1,964 issues identified and investigated during the reporting period, the most prevalent issue was placement concerns. This category of complaint is frequently made by parents or caregivers who disagree with a placement decision made by the court or county placing agency. Foster youth rights violations were the second most common issue, and may include any violation of the more than forty rights enumerated in WIC section 16001.9. Allegations of inappropriate actions by county case workers were the third most reported type of issue.

The following table details the types of issues that were reported. The “other” category reflects issues such as adoption, child and family team (CFT), transitional housing and non-minor dependency, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), caregivers, pregnant/parenting youth, immigration, regional services, and commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC).

Complainant Issue	Count
Placement	373
FY Bill of Rights	352
Social Worker/Probation Officer/Agency Responsibilities	308
Other	179
Visitation	168
CPS Emergency Response	151
AB 2247 – Placement Preservation	103*
Reunification Services	70
STRTP and Group Homes	60
Health/Mental Health Services	50
Extended Foster Care	42
Resource Family Approval (RFA)	29
Education Services	28
Court	26
Out of State/International (ICPC)	25
Total	1964

*AB 2247- Placement Preservation are related categories, 74 were identified specifically as AB 2247(2018) concerns.

Case Findings

Of the allegations the OFCO reviewed, 185 were substantiated, 67 were investigated but found inconclusive, 285 complaints were determined to be unfounded, 1,427 were screened out after determining a full investigation was not warranted.

Investigated Cases

Complaints that are accepted for investigation are assigned to an OFCO Analyst. During the reporting period a total of 300 complaints were investigated. 112 of these complaints came directly from a foster youth. These complaints are given the highest priority and may be conducted without regard to severity or impact in order for the youth to feel heard and empowered. These interactions are critical insofar they help deescalate issues and inform foster youth of their rights. The remaining 188 investigations were initiated by individuals other than foster youth, and upon screening it was determined that the incidents required OFCO's intervention to protect the youth's rights.

Case Record Type	Record Count
General Complaint	185
Youth Complaint	112
Controlled Correspondence*	3
Total	300

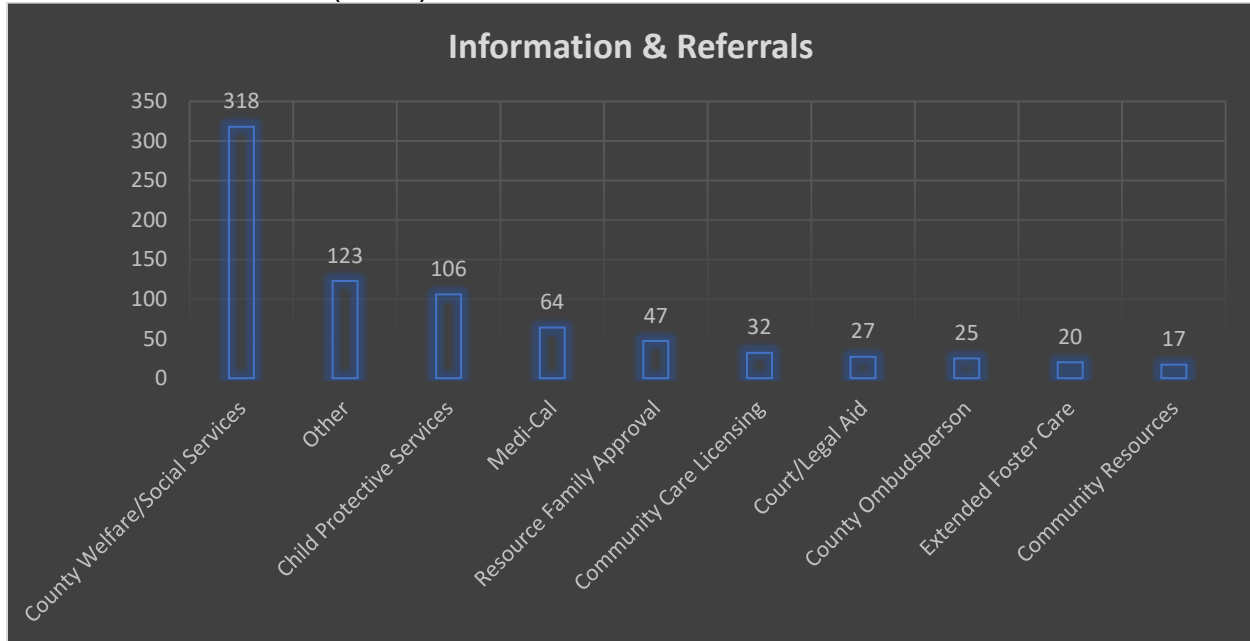
*Controlled Correspondence are general complaints that come through the Governor's Office, Legislature, CalHHS Agency or CDSS Executive offices.

Referrals Made

The OFCO provides general child welfare information and makes referrals to other agencies and local resources. Callers are encouraged to take direct action to attempt to resolve issues themselves before engaging the OFCO in a complaint. This prompts self-advocacy and creates opportunities to involve the public in understanding and upholding the rights of foster youth. Education of the public and empowerment of those interacting with the foster care system are an important role played by the OFCO.

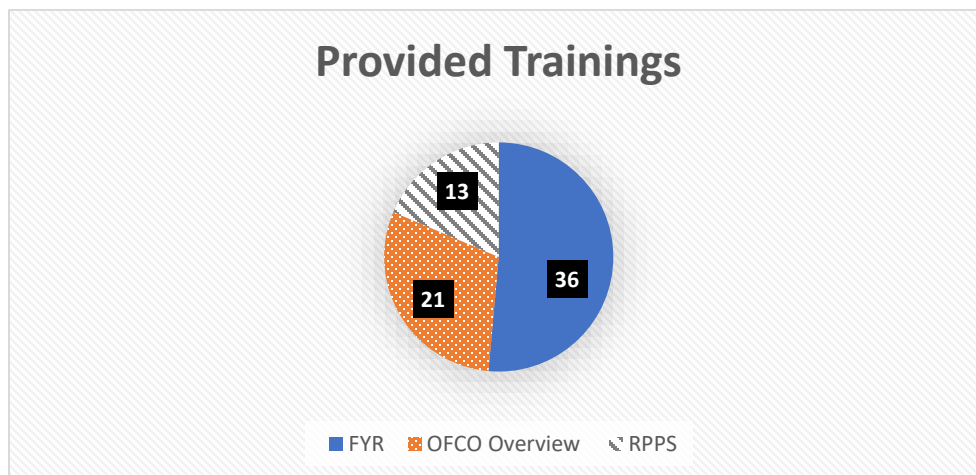
During this reporting period 333 callers were referred to 358 resources. Referrals to 123 "other" resources were made, including: education services, Kin-Gap, state adoptions, mental health services and adult protective services. The "other" category also includes technical assistance provided regarding the Chafee Cash Card Program,

placement issues, child and family team meetings, Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) and visitation.



Training Activity

The OFCO offers training in three topic areas: The Foster Youth Bill of Rights, Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standards, and Overview of the OFCO. In response to COVID-19 restrictions, the OFCO shifted into providing virtual trainings. During the 2021 calendar year, 70 web-based trainings were attended by a total of 1,354 foster youth, non-profit staff, foster care providers and county child welfare agencies.



Type	# of Trainings	# of Participants
FYR	36	834
OFCO Overview	21	274
RPPS	13	246
Total	70	1,354

Success and Impact

The following are redacted case summaries highlighting some of the successes the OFCO has had in improving the lives of foster youth.

Homeless to Healing

A 14-year-old homeless foster youth called the OFCO and reported she had been living on the streets for four months after running away from an abusive foster home. The youth was worried about getting behind in school and said she was finally ready to go back into foster care. She had tried to reach out to her social worker for help, but they argued, and the worker hung up on the youth. The OFCO immediately connected her with Family Urgent Response System and contacted the social worker. The worker reported that due to a shortage of available foster homes she was only able to offer shelter placement, but the youth refused to go. The youth had disclosed that she did not feel safe in a shelter setting due to experiencing trauma there in the past.

The OFCO helped the youth find a nearby school and connected with the district's foster youth education liaison to facilitate immediate enrolment as an unaccompanied minor. Through partnering with the school social worker, a runaway outreach social worker, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), and the youth's attorney, the OFCO helped the youth build a support system to advocate for her. The youth remained homeless but continued to engage and build trust with her team members. Eventually, placement was found with a foster parent who the youth felt safe with. The youth recently reported that in this home she is finally able to "be a kid" and starting to heal from her trauma. She is looking forward to having a normal high school experience, joining the swim team, and someday becoming a nurse.

Youth Showering at Truck Stops

The mother of a 10-year-old girl with complex needs called the OFCO to report that her daughter had been living at the county visitation center. She was concerned that her daughter had been showering regularly at a truck stop. The OFCO analyst contacted the county deputy director regarding the foster youth's right to live in a safe, healthy, and comfortable home. The deputy director agreed to stop the practice of using the truck stop as a place for foster youth without placement to shower and identified an alternative option.

SILP Success

An 18-year-old former foster youth who had previously worked with the OFCO on a separate issue reached out to our office to get assistance with re-entering foster care as a non-minor dependent (NMD). The youth had been in contact with her former county social worker (CSW) however was having difficulty re-entering due to her CSW wanting proof the youth was working or going to school. The OFCO initiated an investigation and worked informally with the CSW and the youth to resolve the complaint. The OFCO spoke with the CSW and provided her with information regarding ACL 20-112 which stated there is continued assistance for NMD's who cannot meet any of the participation conditions due to COVID-19. The CSW subsequently filed paperwork in court and the youth re-entered foster care on June 7, 2021. The CSW approved a supervised independent living placement (SILP) for the youth, and she is receiving services.

Placement Success

The OFCO received a complaint from a foster mother who stated she had placement of two half-siblings and the county was moving one of the siblings without a 14-day notice to be placed with his paternal grandparents. The OFCO initiated an investigation and found the CSW on the case was unaware of the requirements under WIC section 16010.7. As a result of the OFCO educating the CSW on placement preservation and 14-day written notice requirements, she immediately stopped the replacement and issued a 14-day notice. This allowed the CSW to take additional time to create a transition plan with the family and explore the paternal grandparents taking placement of both siblings to keep the siblings together. Subsequently, a trauma informed transition plan was created and implemented, resulting in the siblings being placed together.

Recommendations

Increase Family Finding and Engagement

A common trend across many counties was the lack of engagement of the extended family or even immediate family with the youth. Family finding was not conducted consistently and needs improvement in most counties. There were many instances where the OFCO observed family members who were located, but quickly ruled out as placement resources. Further, family members whether seeking placement or not were not included and engaged after the initial search. Counties are squandering an important resource for the youth and family, by not including the family as partners in the case throughout the life of the case.

Provide Meaningful Options to Prevent Youth from Living in Offices

Youth across the state continue to live in offices or other unlicensed setting while placement is sought. This is not a new problem, nor is it unique to California. Many of these youth have experienced trauma and have complex needs. They are in need of treatment but their experience in unlicensed settings results in not receiving services including behavioral and mental health interventions. Even access to basic needs such as education, healthy food, showers have not been provided in some instances. Shelters are not the answer to the problem. As those counties with ten-day shelters are experiencing overstays measured in months. Counties need to recruit more quality homes and relative caregivers for these youth. The state needs to create a licensing category to bridge between the need for a placement and a suitable long-lasting placement. The current situation of using unlicensed care is unregulatable and the rights of the children cannot be enforced. More importantly, treatment is nearly impossible to obtain. A two-pronged approach to build quality and capacity while creating a license which will allow children to live in a home-like setting where their rights can be respected, basics of life are provided, and treatment is available.

Create Equity for Kin Placements

There continues to be ongoing system bias against kin-placements of foster youth. The RFA process had improved compensation for kin, however, there is still a large gap between those planning to become resource parents and those who are suddenly asked to become resource parents overnight when their relatives are placed into foster care. There are many ways this biases the system toward placing in stranger care. Stranger care providers are already approved for placement. Stranger care providers are compensated immediately for care. Kin caregivers are not funded until they are RFA approved. Youth are placed with in stranger care homes with only the approval of the social worker. Kin seeking placement have the additional hurdle that the court must consider the factors in WIC section 361.3 to place with kin. By contrast, the social worker can place with stranger foster parents without any court oversight. WIC section 361.3 is intended to promote placements with kin, but is being used as an obstacle. When this extra hurdle is combined with the financial and racial disadvantages and disproportional treatment of black and Native American youth, the gap faced by families of color grows exponentially. This unforeseen consequence needs to be addressed in statute and policy.

Support and Scaffold Relatives for Success

Placement with a relative is preferred by statute. A youth's case plan goal should include placement with a relative as an alternative to reunification, and counties should be engaging the CFT and holding CFT meetings throughout the case to discuss permanency goals with caregivers and family in a transparent manner. If this is properly carried out, placement preservation as described in WIC section 16010.7 is not needed to move a child to the home of a relative. Efforts should focus on providing the same or

similar levels of support to kin caregiver as the youth would receive in congregate setting.

More collaboration is needed between case carrying social workers and RFA social workers to address problems that arise in a placement. Currently, RFA workers are not included in placement preservation efforts, but giving them a seat at the placement preservation table or otherwise increasing communication between these entities would allow for implementation of joint strategies to address problems or needs in the home.

Conclusion

2021 was a significant year in the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson. We connected with foster youth, and those dedicated to their care and well-being with over 18,000 phone calls, helped nearly 2,000 youth access educational and housing benefits, investigated 300 cases of alleged violations of their rights, enabled hundreds to access cell phones and laptops through the iFoster program, celebrated the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights, and welcomed a new Ombudsperson. The OFCO also promoted placement stability for foster youth by promoting adherence to all the requirements detailed in WIC section 16010.7. The OFCO was enhanced by the passage of AB 317 (2020), which clarified its authority to access children inside and out of facilities, strengthened confidentiality, and increased the autonomy of the OFCO.

As we look forward, the OFCO will continue to prioritize the rights of foster youth as we work with them and counties to ensure they have access to quality services. In addition, we look forward to expanding our community outreach and training programs to better inform the youth, their care givers, and social workers of their rights and responsibilities.