

April 7, 2021

Daniel Carey, M.D.  
Secretary of Health and Human Resources  
Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Resources  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Secretary Carey,

In April of 2020, after nearly a decade of advocacy, Governor Northam signed legislation establishing the Office of the Children's Ombudsman (OCO) as an independent entity in Virginia. The legislation was enacted "as a means of effecting changes in policy, procedure, and legislation; educating the public; investigating and reviewing actions of the Department, local departments, child-placing agencies, or child-caring institutions; and monitoring and ensuring compliance with relevant statutes, rules, and policies pertaining to child protective services and the placement, supervision, and treatment of, and improvement of delivery of care to, children in foster care and adoptive homes."

This legislation also created the Children's Advocacy Fund, in the state treasury, to support the operation and administration of the OCO. Specifically, Item 52 of SB5015 included \$416,000 the first year and \$479,500 the second year in general funds to support four and a half positions to establish the OCO.

An Ombudsman Office for children is an essential element of a strong child protection system in Virginia, one that is long overdue and sorely needed. Without it, children and families have no independent entity to turn to for investigation and correction when social services do not follow the law or policy or fail to provide adequate protections against abuse and neglect. This is particularly so right now, as we continue to struggle with a year-long pandemic that keeps children at home and out of sight of teachers, friends, and health care providers. We are very concerned that children are at greater risk for abuse and/or neglect under these circumstances. We know that calls from schools reporting suspected abuse and neglect decreased significantly last March, and have not yet returned to levels of reporting before COVID-19. Additionally, calls to domestic violence and sexual assault hotlines have been far above average during this crisis. This is a time of unprecedented stress for families and children. Now, more than ever, this office is needed to support and ensure appropriate responses to child protection issues.

We thank you for your support of this Office, but urge you to act immediately to implement and staff it. The law and the funding are in place. Virginia needs a Children's Ombudsman program, and we need it now.

Thanks for your leadership and for your attention to this matter.

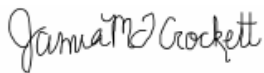
Sincerely,



Virginia Powell, PhD  
Co-Chair  
Advisory Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect  
Family and Children's Trust Fund Board Member



Amy Strite  
Chief Executive Officer  
Voices for Virginia's Children



Jamia Crockett  
Chief Executive Officer  
Families Forward Virginia