



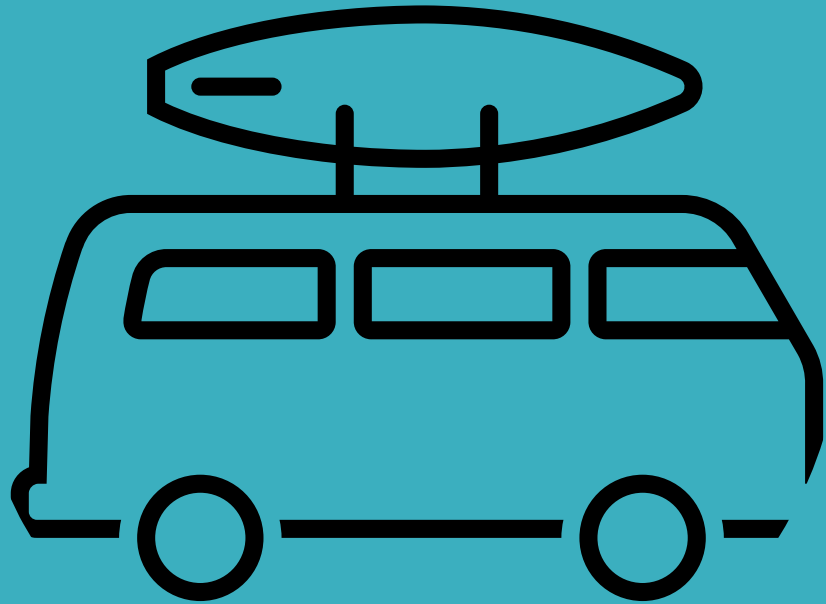
# Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman

Joint Health Committee SMART Government Act  
Hearing

**January 12, 2023**

**Stephanie Villafuerte, Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman**  
**Jordan Steffen, Deputy Ombudsman**

# ROAD MAP



- Introductions
- Overview of Ombuds Work
- CPO History and Charge
- Case Practices
- FY 2021-22 Annual Reports
- FY 2022-23 SMART Act Performance Plan
- Questions and Discussion

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

## OMBUDSMAN

- Swedish Word That Means “Agent” Or “Representative” of The People
- Gender Neutral
- Designed to help citizens navigate government
- Hold governmental systems accountable

## CHILD OMBUDSMAN OFFICES GO BY MANY NAMES





United States  
Ombudsman Association



# Ombudsman Offices

- Office Locations All Over The World
- Multiple Models
- Located In Both Private And Governmental Agencies
- Multiple Issue Areas
- Associations







# EVOLUTION OF OFFICES IN U.S.

## BEGINNING EFFORTS

**1967** - ABA Ombudsman Committee Recommends Federal/Regional Offices

**1969** - Hawaii Creates First General Jurisdiction Ombudsman

**1979** - Rhode Island Office Of The Child Advocate

**1992** - Juvenile Justice And Delinquency Prevention Act

**1993** - Offered Public Support for Establishing Ombudsman Programs For Children And Youth (ABA Center For Children And The Law)

**1994** - Federal Children Ombudsman Act

**Federal efforts end and state efforts strengthen. Today, there more than 40 child ombudsman offices nationwide.**



# History of the CPO

## Prior to Independence

- Response to the deaths of 12 Colorado children in 2007 who were known to child welfare services
- Public wanted more accountability and oversight
- Established in June 2010
- Existed as a program through a contract with a local non-profit.
- Program was issued and managed by the Colorado Department of Human Services

## Gaining Independence

- Legislators determined CPO needed independence from the agencies it was designed to review
- Legislation was signed into law in June 2015
- Original “program” was transformed into independent state agency
- Created CPO Board
- CPO housed in Judicial Branch
- Current Ombudsman took office in January 2016





# How We Serve Colorado Citizens

## INDEPENDENT & NEUTRAL PROBLEM SOLVER

The CPO is charged with helping citizens navigate a complex child protection system and educating stakeholders and the community.


## DUTIES

- Free and confidential services
- Objectively researches and investigates concerns
- Illuminates issues with the system
- Educates the public, legislators and stakeholders
- Makes recommendations for child protection system improvement

### How We Work for Colorado


Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman was created to ensure the state's complex child protection system consistently provides **high quality services** to every child, family and community in Colorado.

[OUR WORK](#)[FAQS](#)




#### Listen

We listen to people about their experience with and concerns about child protection.




#### Investigate

We research and investigate concerns reported by any Coloradan about service delivery within the child protection system.




#### Resolve

We determine the best way to resolve concerns – that might mean bridging communication barriers or resolving conflicts based on misunderstanding.



#### Identify Trends

We identify trends where the community's needs have changed and the system hasn't had the funding, resources or practices to keep up with it. As a result, we make public recommendations for system improvement.

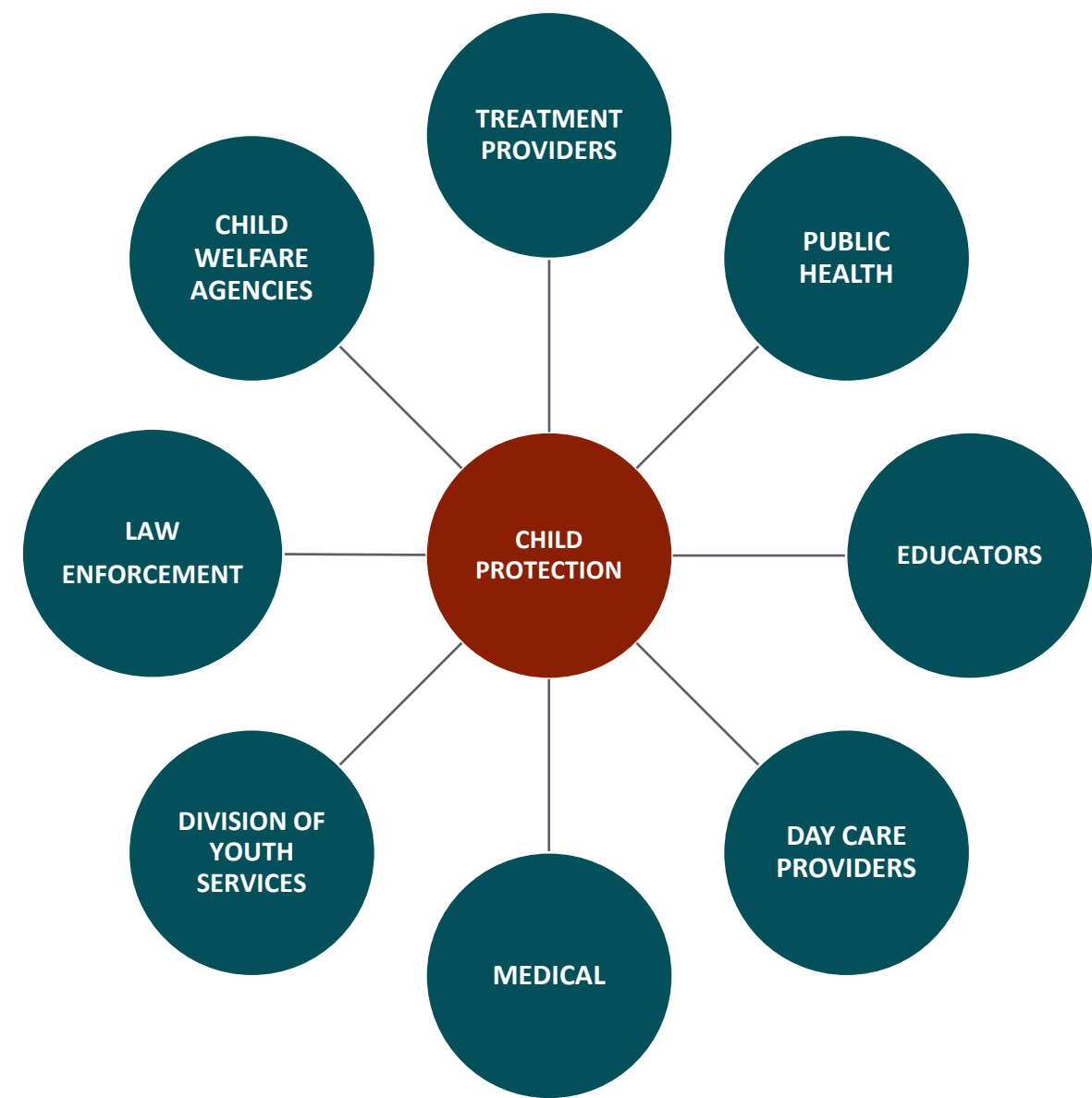


#### Lasting Change

We convene lawmakers, professionals and other stakeholders to advance legislation and policies that have a lasting, positive impact on children and families.



# The Child Protection System





# CASE PROCESS

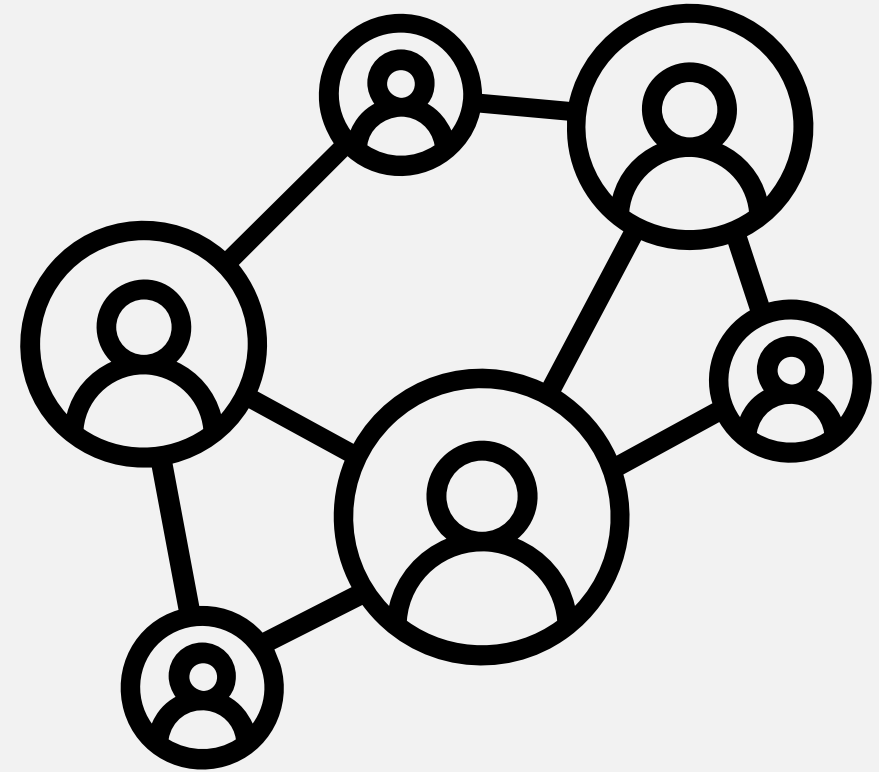


- The CPO takes calls during business hours and receives online complaints 24/7.
- The CPO receives almost 1,000 calls each year.
- Independent case review for all concerns.
- Reviews include Trails, court records, medical records, etc.
- Outcomes may vary based on need and may include resolution of both individual concerns and systemic issues.

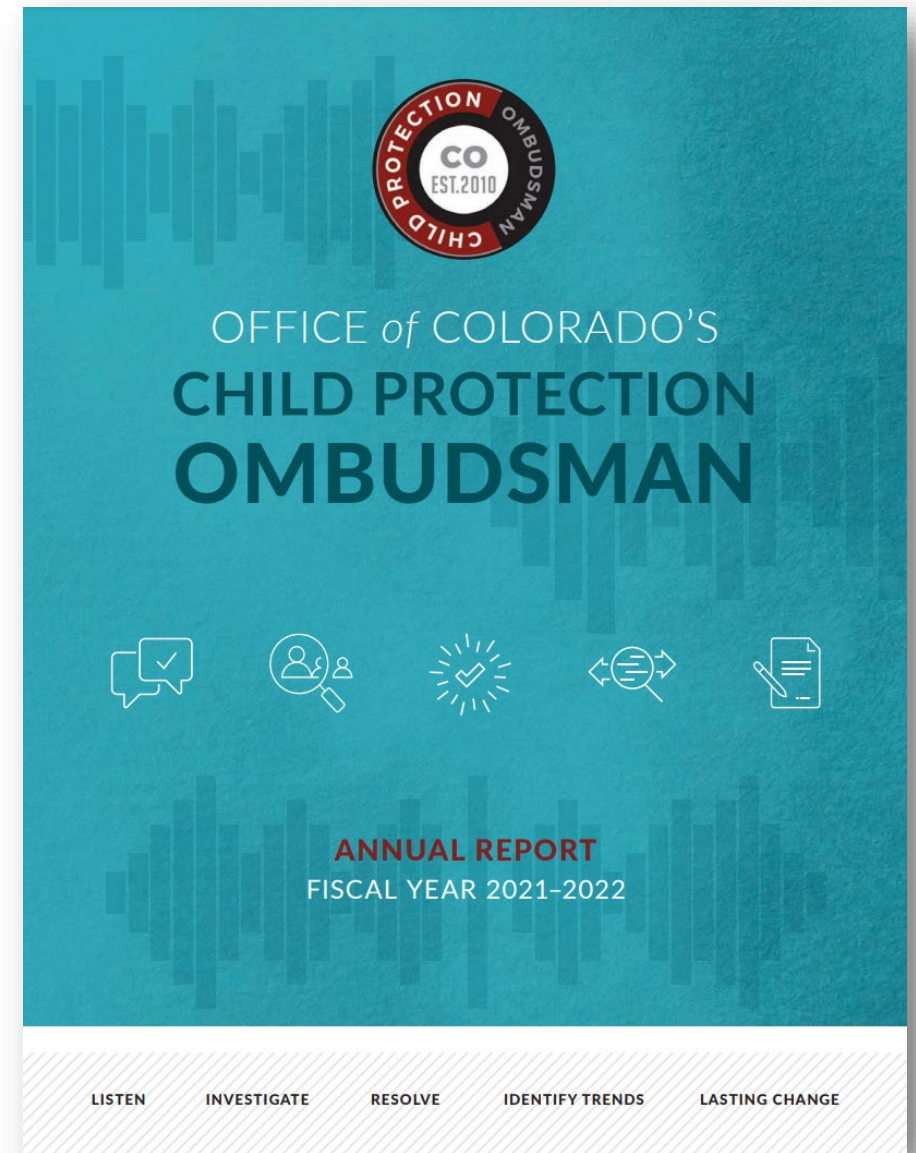
# Educate and Inform

## At a minimum, the CPO shall:

- “[H]elp educate the public concerning child maltreatment and the role of the community in strengthening families and keeping children safe.” *See C.R.S. 19-3.3-103(2)(c)*
- “[R]ecommend to the general assembly, the executive director, and any appropriate agency or entity the statutory, budgetary, regulatory, and administrative changes, including systemic changes, to improve the safety of and promote better outcomes for children and families receiving child protection services in Colorado.” *See C.R.S. 19-3.3-103(2)(e)*



# CPO Fiscal Year 2021-22 Annual Report



# Increasing Caseloads

- The CPO received a **record number** of calls in Fiscal Year 2021-22, resulting in a total of 982 cases.
- 15% increase from the previous fiscal year.
- Growing number of calls concerning behavioral health.
- Currently, the CPO anticipates opening approximately **1,300** cases in FY 2023-24.

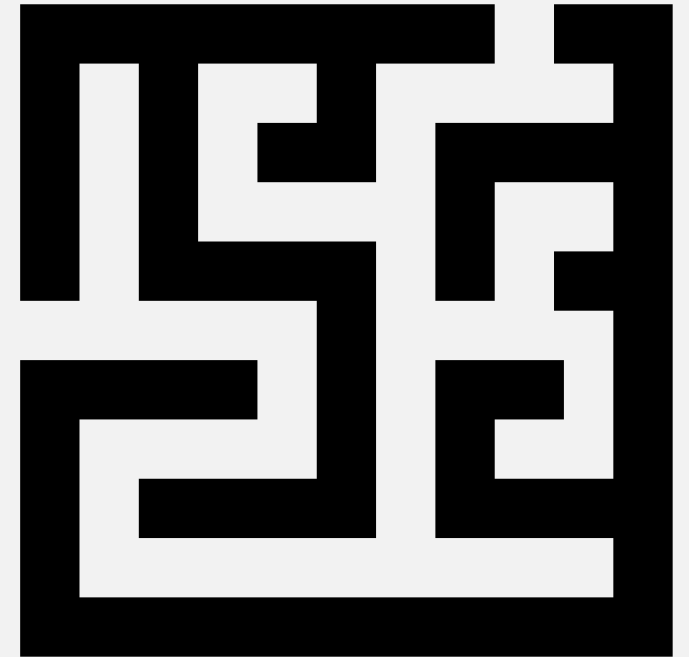
CPO Case History	Total Number of Cases
Fiscal Year 2021-22	982
Fiscal Year 2020-21	852
Fiscal Year 2019-20	725
Fiscal Year 2018-19	575
Fiscal Year 2017-18	611



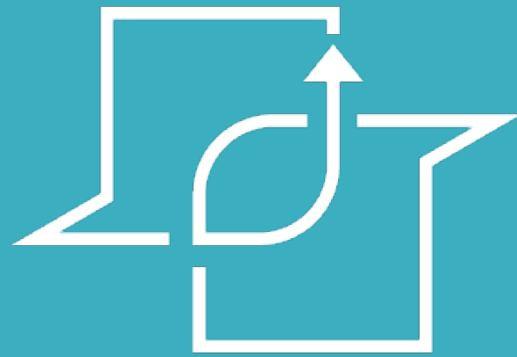
# Complex Cases

## Examples of Complex Issues:

- Poor living conditions in the Division of Youth Services
- Insufficient access to behavioral health care for children and youth residing in residential facilities
- Parents' access to information and care plans for children and youth in out-of-home placements
- Cases involving multiple systems
- Lack of placements for children and youth who require acute behavioral health services







# POLICY COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES





**Quality  
Assurance for  
Residential  
Child Care  
Facilities**

**Youth Who Run  
Away from Out-of-  
home care**

**Mandatory  
Reporting  
Laws**

# Current Public Policy Initiatives

# Additional Highlights

- Youth Outreach and Voice
- Unaccompanied Immigrant Children and Youth
- Critical Incident Reviews
- Recognizing Strong Child Protection Work
- National Presence



# CPO Fiscal Year 2022-23 Performance Plan



## CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN

**FISCAL YEAR 2022-2023  
PERFORMANCE PLAN**

**July 1, 2022**

**Stephanie Villafuerte  
Child Protection Ombudsman**





# SPI 1 – OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

Educate the public and stakeholders about the CPO to ensure access to services and to identify opportunities for improvement.

## Key Activities:

- Engage youth impacted by the child protection system.
- Engage child protection professionals.
- Engage caregivers, including parents, relatives, foster parents, adoptive parents and kin.
- Engage rural communities.
- Apply principles of diversity, equity and inclusion to agency communications and outreach.
- Provide consistent and timely communications regarding the CPO's services, ongoing work, ombudsman practice and findings.
- Encourage citizens and stakeholders to use the CPO as a resource.





# SPI 2 – SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Continue to develop and strengthen efficient and effective CPO practices to better serve Colorado citizens.

## Key Activities:

- Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for CPO staff.
- Apply principles of diversity, equity and inclusion to the CPO's services.
- Continue to develop the CPO's unaccompanied immigrant children's program – established by C.R.S. § 19-3.3-103(1)(a.5)(I) –to better review and monitor the safety and well-being of unaccompanied immigrant children.
- Engage rural communities.
- Continue to develop the CPO's process and procedures for reviewing egregious abuse or neglect, near fatalities or fatalities of a child, as established by C.R.S. § 19-3.3-103(1)(a)(I)(A).



# SPI 3 – PUBLIC POLICY

Continue to serve as a leader in advancing reforms to Colorado's child protection system.

## Key Activities:

- Identify and/or support systemic improvements to the child protection system.
- Analyze CPO data to identify systemic child protection issues.
- Facilitate and support stakeholder engagement through the CPO's Policy Collaborative for Children and Families.



# QUESTIONS?

