

Executive Summary

The 2008 Annual Report is the fourth report on the yearly activities of the Office of the Milwaukee Ombudsman for Child Welfare (Ombudsman Office). This information is intended to complement other quality assurance and evaluation information to assess the delivery of child welfare services in Milwaukee County. The information in this report is not intended to make evaluative statements about the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (Bureau) services as a whole. Following are some highlights of the 2008 report.

Role of the Ombudsman

The Ombudsman Office is a neutral, independent office that reviews case-specific concerns regarding the safety, permanence, and well-being of children and families involved with the Bureau. The Ombudsman Office also provides education, information, and referrals to individuals contacting the office.

Key Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

The Ombudsman Office has identified four key areas from its observations of the complaints received and/or reviewed since it opened in June 2005 that need additional attention. The Ombudsman Office believes that the Bureau can increase both the safety of children and improve case management for families for each of these areas:

- Lack of Quality Supervision
- Lack of Accurate Documentation
- Lack of Clear Measurable Goals
- Lack of Adequate Communication

The Ombudsman Office makes six recommendations to assist in improving these areas and proposes that the Bureau:

1. Explore new policies and training methods for supervisors that emphasize the critical role a supervisor has in the development of skills in their staff and the supervisor's role as it relates to ensuring that the transfer of learning is occurring with new staff members;
2. Investigate methods that would ensure that supervisor oversight occurs with staff and that it results in good child welfare practice by their staff;
3. Review the methods by which its supervisors monitor documentation in the case record to ensure its thoroughness and accuracy, as previously recommended by the Ombudsman Office in 2007;
4. Scrutinize and develop methods to ensure that a supervisor's review of goals include ensuring that they match the parent's documented diminished protective capacities and that they incorporate behavioral, cognitive, or emotional changes that are clear and measurable;
5. Incorporate the need for adequate communication among program areas, with families, and with service providers into existing training to ensure that staff have and utilize necessary skills; and
6. Develop a form that would provide parents with written information from the case plan and/or case progress evaluation about needed changes in the parent's behavior, cognitive or emotional states that addresses the parent's diminished protective capacities for reunification.

Contacts for Services

Throughout 2008, the Ombudsman Office responded to a total of 242 new contacts for services. Contacts to the Ombudsman Office are classified as either a complaint or for information and referral. Complaints were up 50% compared to 2007 contacts for information and referrals were up 200% from 2007.

There were 164 complaints received by the Ombudsman Office during 2008 covering a total of 447 issues. Twenty-seven complaints were resubmissions¹ and 103 complaints (62%) were referred to the Bureau's complaint resolution process (CRP), the internal review method the Bureau uses for resolving complaints. In seven complaints all issues were found to be outside the scope of Ombudsman Office after initial review.

Reviews: Findings and Recommendations

In 2008, the Ombudsman Office carried over four reviews from 2007 and screened in and began reviews of 31 separate complaints containing a total of 84 complaint issues. Of these, 25 reviews were completed in 2008 covering 64 complaint issues. The Ombudsman Office affirmed the actions of the Bureau 56 times, found two violations, six concerns, and 16 additional findings.

The Ombudsman Office made 38 recommendations from the 25 reviews that were completed in 2008; 29 were systemic in nature and nine were case-specific. Of the 29 systemic recommendations made, approximately one-half (15) involved reviewing existing standards, policies, or practices; just over one-third (11) related to areas lacking clarity in existing policies or practices; and the remaining addressed training (3).

Looking Forward to 2009

The Ombudsman Office looks forward to continuing our efforts to support children and families served by the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare. The Ombudsman Office in 2009 will focus on:

- Cooperating with the State Department of Children and Families in their evaluation of the work of the Ombudsman Office;
- Working with the Bureau to improve the tracking of Ombudsman Office recommendations that the Bureau has agreed with and reporting progress made by the Bureau on a quarterly basis to the Partnership Council;
- Expanding on the quality of information conveyed in our finding letter to the complainant, particularly when the actions of the Bureau are affirmed;
- Exploring how the Ombudsman Office can be useful to the review process that takes place if a child dies in the care or custody of the Bureau;
- Assessing the efforts of the Ombudsman Office through the use of survey instruments in order to improve service to complainants and to target outreach efforts; and
- Receiving feedback on the content and structure of the Annual Report to ensure that stakeholder's expectations are being met.

¹ Complainants who had previously contacted the Ombudsman Office but were originally referred to the Bureau's Complaint Resolution Process.