



Office of Ombudsperson for Families

The Office of Ombudsperson for Families (OBFF) does not consistently follow requirements in law and lacks adequate oversight. Ultimately, OBFF's impact in recent years is unclear.

Report Summary

Role in Child Protection

Racial and ethnic disparities in Minnesota's child protection system have persisted for decades. Individuals we spoke with expressed strongly the need for an office—such as OBFF—to be a resource for people of color involved in the child protection system. However, we found that:

- The ombudspersons do not fulfill all duties required by law and spend considerable time on activities that are not required. (p. 26)
- Although the Legislature established OBFF to serve communities of color, the office also serves children that are not members of the communities identified in law. (p. 31)
- Each ombudsperson has significant discretion as to how they fulfill their duties in law, and they have adopted different approaches to doing so. (p. 25)
- Many individuals we spoke with across Minnesota's child protection system were unfamiliar with OBFF. (p. 29)
- OBFF's impact in recent years on families of color involved in the child protection system—or the child protection system overall—is unclear. (p. 33)
- OBFF has limited resources given its broad duties in law; however, it has not spent its full appropriations in recent years. (p. 34)

Recommendation ► The Legislature should amend statutes, as necessary, to ensure that OBFF's duties align with the Legislature's policy priorities and align those duties with the office's resources. (p. 37)

Recommendation ► OBFF should fulfill all duties required by law. (p. 39)

Background

OBFF is meant to ensure that children and families of color involved in the child protection system are treated fairly and appropriately. Among other responsibilities, statutes require OBFF to monitor whether various entities—such as certain state agencies, courts, and county social service agencies—comply with child protection and placement laws as they affect children of color. Statutes also permit OBFF to investigate complaints about matters pertaining to the child protection system and make recommendations in response to its findings.

By law, OBFF has three ombudspersons. Each ombudsperson serves children and families belonging to specific communities of color: the African and African-American communities, Asian-Pacific community, or Spanish-speaking community.

Statutes also establish three community boards with responsibility for appointing the ombudsperson for their respective community. Statutes further require the boards to advise and assist their respective ombudsperson in fulfilling their duties.

Oversight and Accountability

Current mechanisms to ensure that OBFF effectively fulfills its mission and duties are ineffective and insufficient.

- Most of OBFF’s community boards did not meet regularly in accordance with law. The boards have had persistent issues with board member attendance, and rarely—if ever—advised the ombudspersons, as required by law. (pp. 43, 44)

Recommendations ► OBFF’s community boards should:

- Meet in accordance with requirements in law and ensure consistent attendance among members.
- Fulfill their duties as required by law. (p. 48)
- OBFF does not have a designated leader, making it more difficult to hold the office accountable for its performance. (p. 49)

Recommendation ► The Legislature should amend law to establish a single leader of OBFF. (p. 51)

Complaint Handling

The scope of OBFF’s investigations into complaints about the child protection system is limited.

- OBFF has few complaint management policies or procedures. The office handled complaints inconsistently and did not follow best practices when handling complaints. (pp. 13, 16, 18)

Recommendations ► OBFF should establish complaint management policies and procedures to be used by all staff; ensure a consistent approach when conducting investigations, including following best practices; and provide information about its complaint handling practices on its website. (p. 20)

- Because OBFF does not adequately document its complaint handling, complaint outcomes are unknown. (p. 22)
- OBFF does not collect adequate data on complaint handling, which impedes its ability to identify complaint trends and address issues in the child protection system systematically. (p. 22)

Recommendation ► OBFF should utilize a complaint management system. (p. 21)

Recommendation ► OBFF should collect and analyze complaint data to identify complaint trends and more systematically address issues in the child protection system. (p. 24)

Summary of the Office of Ombudsperson for Families Response

In a letter dated January 26, 2026, OBFF’s ombudspersons Hill, Gubasta, and Zuniga said that the recommendations from OLA’s report “could lead to better fulfillment of the OBFF’s statutory duties and addressing complaints,” which the ombudspersons identified as aligning with the office’s mission of “reducing racial disparities in Minnesota’s Child Protection System.” The ombudspersons agreed with OLA’s recommendations and said the office has either begun to implement or will work on implementing most of the recommendations. For example, they reported that OBFF is in the process of developing complaint handling policies and procedures and has begun to implement a case management system. The ombudspersons also agreed with OLA’s recommendations to establish a single leader of OBFF and to strengthen the community boards’ oversight of the office. Overall, the ombudspersons stated that OLA’s evaluation “will help guide us through our reorganization plans and we appreciate [OLA’s] analysis.”