WEST VIRGINIA CODE CHAPTER 16b ARTICLE 16

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§16B-16-1. The Foster Care Ombudsman.

(a) There is continued within the Office of the Inspector General the position of the West Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman. The Office of the Inspector General shall employ a Foster Care Ombudsman to affect the purposes of this article. The independent Foster Care Ombudsman shall have experience as a current or former foster parent or experience in the area of child welfare.

(b) The duties of the Foster Care Ombudsman include, but are not limited to, the following:

(1) Establishing a statewide procedure to receive, investigate, and resolve complaints:

(A) Filed on behalf of a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent;

(B) On the Foster Care Ombudsman's own initiative, of a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system; or

(C) On the Foster Care Ombudsman's own initiative, on behalf of a foster child, relating to action, inaction, or decisions of the state agency, child-placing agency, or residential care facility which may adversely affect the foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent;

(2) Participating in any procedure to investigate and resolve complaints filed on behalf of a foster child, a foster parent, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or a kinship parent, relating to an action, inaction, or decision of providers of managed care services, or the representatives of such providers, of public agencies, or of social service agencies, which may adversely affect the health, safety, welfare, and rights of a foster child, a foster parent, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or a kinship parent.

(3) Review periodically and make appropriate recommendations for the policies and procedures established by any state agency providing services to the child welfare system;

(4) Pursuant to an investigation, provide assistance to an individual who the Foster Care Ombudsman determines is in need of assistance, including, but not limited to, collaborating with an agency, provider, or others on behalf of the best interests of the child;

(5) Advocating for the rights of a foster child, a foster parent, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or a kinship parent.

(6) Recommend action when appropriate, including, but not limited to, undertaking

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legislative advocacy and making proposals for systemic reform and formal legal action, in order to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children in the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system;

(7) Monitoring the development and implementation of federal, state, and local legislation, regulations, and policies with respect to foster care services.

(8) Conduct programs of public education when necessary and appropriate;

(9) Participate in ongoing training programs related to his or her duties or responsibilities;

(10) Have input into the creation of, and thereafter make recommendations consistent with, the foster children, foster parents, and kinship parents bill of rights;

(11) Establishing and maintaining a statewide uniform reporting system to collect and analyze data relating to complaints for the purpose of identifying and resolving significant problems faced by foster children, foster parents, children who are subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, children who have died or sustained a critical incident, children in the juvenile justice system, and kinship parents as a class. The data shall be submitted to the Bureau of Social Services within the Department of Human Services and the Legislative Oversight Commission on Health and Human Resources Accountability on a quarterly basis.

(12) Take appropriate steps to advise the public of the services of the Foster Care Ombudsman, the purpose of the ombudsman, and procedures to contact the office; and

(13) Make inquiries and obtain assistance and information from other state governmental agencies or persons as the Foster Care Ombudsman requires for the discharge of his or her duties.

(c) (1) The Foster Care Ombudsman or his or her staff may not be compelled to testify or produce evidence in any judicial or administrative proceeding with respect to the identity of an individual providing information to the ombudsman as part of an official investigation, or the substance of that person’s report to the ombudsman as part of an official investigation. All memoranda, work product, notes, or case files developed and maintained as part of an official investigation of the Foster Care Ombudsman Office are confidential and are not subject to discovery, subpoena, or other means of legal compulsion, and are not admissible as evidence in a judicial or administrative proceeding.

(2) The ombudsman may be compelled to provide testimony by a court or administrative body of competent jurisdiction related to any action carried out by the office that is unrelated to the substance of a specific official investigation, or reports submitted to the Legislative Oversight Commission on Health and Human Resources Accountability provided for in §9-5-27 and §49-9-102 of this code. Should the ombudsman be compelled to testify, provide evidence in discovery, respond to a subpoena, or otherwise divulge testimony or

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evidence in any judicial, administrative, or legislative proceeding, the ombudsman may not be compelled to provide testimony or evidence concerning the identity of any complainant or any individual providing information to the ombudsman as part of an official investigation, or the substance of any complaint or report unless the ombudsman should decline to exercise that privilege. The purpose of this provision is to ensure a level of confidentiality between the ombudsman and a person reporting to, complaining to, or providing other evidence to the ombudsman as part of an official investigation carried out by the office.

(3) Any objection by the ombudsman to the disclosure of any testimony, documentary, or physical evidence shall be reviewed by the presiding official of such tribunal, in camera, upon the request of the ombudsman, and the presiding official shall prevent the disclosure of the identity of any complainant, witness, or reporter as well as the substance of their complaint, testimony, or report.

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§16B-16-2. Investigation of complaints.

(a) Upon receipt of a complaint or by court order within the scope of the Foster Care Ombudsman Program, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall investigate, except as provided in §49-9-102(c) of this code, any act, practice, policy, or procedure of any state agency, child-placing agency, juvenile facility, or residential care facility which affects the health, safety, welfare, or rights of a foster child, a foster parent, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or a kinship parent.

(b) Investigative activities of the Foster Care Ombudsman include, but are not limited to: information gathering, mediation, negotiation, informing parties of the status of the investigation, notification to any aggrieved party of alternative processes, reporting of suspected violations to a licensing or certifying agency, and the reporting of suspected criminal violations to the appropriate authorities.

(c) The Foster Care Ombudsman need not investigate any complaint upon determining that:

(1) The complaint is trivial, frivolous, vexatious, or not made in good faith;

(2) The complaint has been too long delayed to justify present investigation;

(3) The resources available, considering the established priorities, are insufficient for an adequate investigation;

(4) The matter complained of is not within the investigatory authority of the Foster Care Ombudsman; or

(5) A real or apparent conflict of interest exists and no other person within the office is available to investigate the complaint in an impartial manner.

(d) The Office of the Inspector General and other appropriate state governmental agencies may establish and implement cooperative agreements for receiving, processing, responding to, and resolving complaints involving state governmental agencies under the provisions of this section.

(e) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall submit an annual written report to the Governor containing:

(1) The number of complaints;

(2) The types of complaints;

(3) The location of the complaints;

(4) How the complaints are resolved; and

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(5) Any other information the Foster Care Ombudsman feels is appropriate.

(f) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall summarize the reports and present that information to the Legislative Oversight Commission on Health and Human Resources Accountability. Nothing shall preclude the Foster Care Ombudsman office from submitting data, findings, or reports beyond this annual report.

(g) Another office, department, agency, or official may not prohibit the release of an ombudsman's recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature.

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§16B-16-3. Access to foster care children.

(a) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall, with proper identification, have access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility for the purposes of investigations of a complaint. The Foster Care Ombudsman may enter a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility at a time appropriate to the complaint. The visit may be announced in advance or be made unannounced as appropriate to the complaint under investigation. Upon entry, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall promptly and personally advise the person in charge of his or her presence. If entry is refused by the person in charge, the Foster Care Ombudsman may apply to the magistrate court of the county in which a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility is located for a warrant authorizing entry, and the court shall issue an appropriate warrant if it finds good cause therefor.

(b) For activities other than those specifically related to the investigation of a complaint, the Foster Care Ombudsman, upon proper identification, shall have access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. in order to:

(1) Provide information on the Foster Care Ombudsman Program to a foster child, foster parents, or kinship parents;

(2) Inform a foster child, a foster parent, or a kinship parent of his or her rights and entitlements, and his or her corresponding obligations, under applicable federal and state laws; and

(3) Direct the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship parents to appropriate legal resources;

(c) Access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility under this section shall be deemed to include the right to private communication with the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship parents.

(d) A Foster Care Ombudsman who has access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility under this section shall not enter the living area of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent without identifying himself or herself to the foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent. After identifying himself or herself, an ombudsman shall be permitted to enter the living area of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent unless that foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent communicates on that particular occasion the foster child, foster parents', or kinship parents’ desire to prevent the ombudsman from entering. A foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent has the right to terminate, at any time, any visit by the Foster Care Ombudsman.

(e) Access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility pursuant to this section includes the right to tour the facility unescorted.

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§16B-16-4. Access to records.

(a) The Foster Care Ombudsman is allowed access to any foster child's, foster parents' or kinship parents' records, including medical records reasonably necessary to any investigation, without fee.

(b) The Foster Care Ombudsman is allowed access to all records of any foster family home, state agency, child-placing agency, or residential care facility that is reasonably necessary for the investigation of a complaint, including, but not limited to, incident reports; dietary records; policies and procedures that a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility are required to maintain under federal or state law; admission agreements; staffing schedules; or any document depicting the actual staffing pattern.

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§16B-16-5. Subpoena powers.

(a) The Foster Care Ombudsman may, in the course of any investigation:

(1) Apply to the circuit court of the appropriate county or the Circuit Court of Kanawha County for the issuance of a subpoena to compel at a specific time and place, by subpoena, the appearance, before a person authorized to administer oaths, the sworn testimony of any person whom the Foster Care Ombudsman reasonably believes may be able to give information relating to a matter under investigation; or

(2) Apply to the circuit court of the appropriate county or the Circuit Court of Kanawha County for the issuance of a subpoena duces tecum to compel any person to produce at a specific time and place, before a person authorized to administer oaths, any documents, books, records, papers, objects, or other evidence which the Foster Care Ombudsman reasonably believes may relate to a matter under investigation.

(b) A subpoena or subpoena duces tecum applied for by the Foster Care Ombudsman may not be issued until a circuit court judge in term or vacation thereof has personally reviewed the application and accompanying affidavits and approved, by a signed order entered by the judge, the issuance of the subpoena or subpoena duces tecum. Subpoenas or subpoenas duces tecum applied for pursuant to this section may be issued on an ex parte basis following review and approval of the application by the judge in term or vacation thereof.

(c) The Attorney General shall, upon request, provide legal counsel and services to the Foster Care Ombudsman in all administrative proceedings and in all proceedings in any circuit court and the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

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§16B-16-6. Cooperation among government departments or agencies.

(a) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall have access to the records of any state government agency reasonably necessary to any investigation. The Foster Care Ombudsman shall be notified of and be allowed to observe any survey conducted by a government agency affecting the health, safety, welfare, or rights of the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship parents.

(b) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall develop procedures to refer any complaint to any appropriate state government department, agency, or office.

(c) When abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a foster child is suspected, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall make a referral to the Bureau for Children and Families, Office of Health Facility Licensure and Certification, or both.

(d) Any state government department, agency, or office that responds to a complaint referred to it by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program shall make available to the Foster Care Ombudsman copies of inspection reports and plans of correction, and notices of any citations and sanctions levied against the foster family home, the child-placing agency, or the residential care facility identified in the complaint.

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§16B-16-7. Confidentiality of investigations.

(a) Information relating to any investigation of a complaint that contains the identity of the complainant, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent shall remain confidential except:

(1) Where imminent risk of serious harm is communicated directly to the Foster Care Ombudsman or his or her staff;

(2) Where disclosure is necessary to the bureau in order for such office to determine the appropriateness of initiating an investigation regarding potential abuse, neglect, or emergency circumstances; or

(3) Where disclosure is necessary to the Office of Health Facility Licensure and Certification in order for such office to determine the appropriateness of initiating an investigation to determine facility compliance with applicable rules of licensure, certification, or both.

(b) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall maintain confidentiality with respect to all matters including the identities of complainants, witnesses, or others from whom information is acquired, except insofar as disclosures may be necessary to enable the Foster Care Ombudsman to carry out duties of the office or to support recommendations.

(c) Notwithstanding any other section within this article, all information, records, and reports received by or developed by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program which relate to a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent, including written material identifying a foster child, foster parent, or a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or kinship parent, are confidential pursuant to §49-5-101 *et seq*. of this code and are not subject to the provisions of §29B-1-1 *et seq*. of this code, and may not be disclosed or released by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program, except under the circumstances enumerated in this section.

(d) Nothing in this section prohibits the preparation and submission by the Foster Care Ombudsman of statistical data and reports, as required to implement the provisions of this article or any applicable federal law, exclusive of any material that identifies any foster child, foster parent, kinship parent, or complainant.

(e) The Inspector General shall have access to the records and files of the Foster Care Ombudsman Program to verify its effectiveness and quality where the identity of any complainant, a child who is subject to a reported allegation of abuse and neglect, a child who has died or sustained a critical incident, a child in the juvenile justice system, or foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent is not disclosed.

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§16B-16-8. Limitations on liability.

(a) The Foster Care Ombudsman participating in an investigation carried out pursuant to this article who is performing his or her duties is immune from civil liability that otherwise might result by reason of his or her participation in the investigation, as long as such participation is not violative of any applicable law, rule, or regulation, and done within the scope of his or her employment and in good faith.

(b) If an act or omission by the Foster Care Ombudsman or an act in good faith pursuant to a specific foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent complaint causes a foster child's, foster parents', or kinship parents' rights to be violated, no foster family home, state agency, child-placing agency, or residential care facility, its owners, administrators, officers, director, agents, consultants, employees, or any member of management may be held civilly liable as a result of the act or omission.

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§16B-16-9. Willful interference; retaliation; penalties.

(a) An individual who willfully interferes with or impedes the Foster Care Ombudsman in the performance of his or her official duties shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not more than $100.

(b) An individual who institutes or commits a discriminatory, disciplinary, retaliatory, or reprisal action against a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent for having filed a complaint with or provided information in good faith to the Foster Care Ombudsman in carrying out the duties pursuant to this article is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not more than $100.

(c) An individual violating the provisions of subsection (a) or (b) of this section is, for the second or any subsequent offense under either of these subsections, guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not more than $250. Each day of a continuing violation after conviction shall be considered a separate offense.

(d) Nothing in this section infringes upon the rights of an employer to supervise, discipline, or terminate an employee for other reasons.

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§16B-16-10. Funding for Foster Care Ombudsman Program.

The Foster Care Ombudsman Program shall receive such funds appropriated by the Legislature for the operation of the program.

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