

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Lael Chester
Citizens for Juvenile Justice
(617) 338-1050

First Report of the Office of the Child Advocate Supports Important Juvenile Justice Reforms

Advocates hail work of new agency

Boston - Citizens for Juvenile Justice (CfJJ), the only statewide juvenile justice advocacy organization in Massachusetts, applauds the Report of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) for calendar year 2008, which was posted without fanfare yesterday on the OCA website.

Gail Garinger, a former Juvenile Court judge, was appointed by Governor Patrick as the Commonwealth's first Child Advocate in April 2008. Her new report summarizes the activities of the OCA during the last 8 months of 2008 and presents concrete legislative and policy recommendations for improvements.

"While most people associate the OCA with its traditional ombudsperson role - the investigation of the tragic deaths of children who are receiving services from executive agencies - OCA's charge is much broader: to improve the safety, health and well-being of Massachusetts' children by promoting positive change in public policy and practice," said Lael Chester, Executive Director of CfJJ. "As the Report makes clear, the OCA has been extraordinarily energetic and thoughtful on a wide range of issues involving at-risk children. The juvenile justice community has been thrilled with its support of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, its clear call for the Department of Youth Services to take over (with appropriate funding) the operation of the secure lock-up facilities used to detain children and youth at night and on weekends when court is not in session, and its vocal concern about how schools have, through the implementation of "Zero Tolerance" policies, become feeders to the juvenile justice system."

Chester particularly applauded the OCA's focus on the need for better data collection. "As the Child Advocate explains in her cover letter to the Report, 'systemic reform is impossible without better data collection and integration....The looming shortfalls in state revenues make it imperative to be able to assess which programs best serve which children and families in the most cost-effective manner.' She's right: Massachusetts can no longer afford to develop its public policy with only anecdotal evidence; we need the numbers. Hopefully, this Report will either persuade the agencies that fail to provide the data to start doing so now or encourage legislators to quickly pass bills like Senate No. 940, which would require the collection and public dissemination of non-identifying statistical data from all juvenile justice agencies."

However, Chester also worried that the same “looming shortfalls” in state revenue may also severely hinder the crucial work of the OCA. “The OCA has done a tremendous job in its first 8 months with a very modest budget but we’re deeply concerned about the nearly 12% cuts for next year. Massachusetts cannot afford to underfund the agency charged with the protection and oversight of our most vulnerable children.”

For more information about Citizens for Juvenile Justice, please visit www.cfjj.org.
For a copy of the Office of the Child Advocate Annual Report 2008, and a copy of its Executive Summary, please visit www.mass.gov/childadvocate