

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|              |  |   |
|--------------|--|---|
| Section 21.1 | Purpose .....  | 1 |
| Section 21.2 | Definitions.....   | 1 |
| Section 21.3 | Advocacy Office for Children and Families.....                         | 2 |
| Section 21.4 | Advocacy Office Statewide Toll-Free Phone Number .....                 | 2 |
| a)           | What the Advocacy Office Does Not Accept.....                          | 2 |
| b)           | Confidentiality.....   | 2 |
| c)           | Access to Records .....  | 3 |
| d)           | Response Time .....  | 3 |
| e)           | Ongoing Report.....  | 3 |
| f)           | Documentation (Filing) .....   | 3 |
| g)           | Issue Resolution.....  | 4 |
| h)           | Respect for Our Callers.....   | 4 |
| Section 21.5 | Receiving and Processing Complaints .....                              | 4 |
| a)           | Accepting a Complaint .....  | 4 |
| b)           | Respond to Director’s Office Correspondence.....                       | 4 |
| c)           | Email .....  | 5 |
| d)           | Governor’s Office Correspondence Concerning DCFS Service Delivery..... | 5 |
| e)           | Research Issues Presented by Legislators.....                          | 5 |
| f)           | Receive and Track Employee Unusual Incident Reports .....              | 5 |
| g)           | Diligent Search Requests.....  | 5 |
| h)           | Adoption Attorney Panel List.....                                      | 5 |
| i)           | Parental Inquiry Requests.....   | 6 |
| j)           | License Renewal Requests.....  | 6 |
| k)           | Spanish Interpretation Requests.....                                   | 6 |
| l)           | Youth Hotline.....   | 6 |
| m)           | Foster Care Waivers .....  | 6 |
| n)           | T.D.D.....   | 7 |

**Section 21.1            Purpose**

The purpose of this Administrative Procedure is to establish policies for receiving, processing, researching, and resolving concerns presented by anyone with an interest in child welfare in Illinois.

**Section 21.2            Definitions**

“Advocacy” - Advocacy is to speak on behalf of another. The Advocacy Office for Children and Families (AOCF) advocates for the best interests of children and may act as an intermediary for those who contact the office in interacting with the Department or its agents.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

“Advocacy Office” means The Advocacy Office for Children and Families of the Department of Children and Family Services.

“Department” means the Department of Children and Family Services

“Legitimate” for purpose of this procedure means the issue of the complaint is real and is related to issues that the Advocacy Office can research because it relates to services provided by the Department or its contracted agencies.

**Section 21.3            Advocacy Office for Children and Families**

The Advocacy Office for Children and Families (AOCF) was established within the Director’s Office to receive and respond to concerns presented to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) regarding the child welfare system in Illinois. AOCF shall also handle inquiries and other duties as assigned by the Director in advocating for the well being of children who are under the responsibility of the Department (20 ILCS 505/5d).

**Section 21.4            Advocacy Office Statewide Toll-Free Phone Number**

The statewide toll-free number for the Advocacy Office operates Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. This toll-free number shall be included in all appropriate notices and handbooks regarding services available through the Department.

The Advocacy Office Toll-free number is:    **1-800-232-3798**

**a)            What the Advocacy Office Does Not Accept**

The Advocacy Office does not research concerns about:

- 1)        Actions that do not involve the Department or the agencies with whom the Department contracts for services
- 2)        Decisions made by Courts or Judges
- 3)        Agencies of the federal government
- 4)        Child abuse or neglect
- 5)        Other governmental state agencies

**b)            Confidentiality**

The Advocacy Office follows Department rules concerning confidentiality of information as outlined in **Part 431, Confidentiality of Personal Information of Persons Served by the Department of Children and Family Services.**

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

**c) Access to Records**

The Advocacy Office shall have access to all information and personnel necessary to perform the duties of the office. All Department and private agency employees, foster parents and owners, operators and employees of licensed child care facilities shall cooperate with the Advocacy Office. Cooperation includes, but is not limited to:

- 1) permitting full access to, and production of, information and records. Information and records can be shared with the Advocacy Office without violating confidentiality provisions;
- 2) fair and honest disclosure of documents and information reasonably requested by the Advocacy Office in the performance of its duties;
- 3) management encouraging employees to fully comply with reasonable requests of the Advocacy Office in the performance of its duties;
- 4) management prohibiting retaliation against employees for providing information or records or complaining to the Advocacy Office;
- 5) management being prohibited from requiring employees to seek supervisory approval prior to filing a complaint with, or providing information or records to, the Advocacy Office;
- 6) employees providing complete and truthful answers to questions; and employees not willfully interfering or obstructing the Advocacy Office investigation;
- 7) the Department and its agents prohibiting retaliation against anyone who requests the intervention of the Advocacy Office.

**d) Response Time**

The Advocacy Office shall attempt to respond to all concerns within two working days of documenting the concerns and shall make a final report to the person initiating contact regarding the resolution, as appropriate.

**e) Ongoing Report**

The Advocacy Office shall attempt to complete cases within 30 days of receipt. If the case is ongoing, the Advocate shall give a status report by telephone to the complainant every 30 days

**f) Documentation (Filing)**

All issues and resolutions shall be documented and kept on file for three years.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

**g) Issue Resolution**

The Advocacy Office takes the concerns of all complainants seriously and will research and advocate on behalf of the caller accordingly.

Advocates will first determine if the complainant has tried to resolve the issue with the DCFS or private agency caseworker and caseworker supervisor. If the caller has not tried to resolve the issues with the caseworker and caseworker supervisor, Advocates will encourage them to do so and refer them to the appropriate person for resolution. If they have tried unsuccessfully to resolve their issues, the Advocate shall assist in seeking a resolution.

The objective is a satisfactory resolution of an issue that is in the best interest of the child.

**h) Respect for Our Callers**

The Advocacy Office will treat every complainant with dignity and respect.

**Section 21.5 Receiving and Processing Complaints**

Advocacy Office staff function as Advocates on behalf of the best interest of the child, providing assistance in seeking resolution to a problem when the caller has not been able, or does not know how, to find a satisfactory resolution.

**a) Accepting a Complaint**

The Advocacy Office will receive concerns by phone, electronic mail, letters, or in person.

The Advocacy Office shall accept calls or other contacts from anyone with an interest in child welfare in Illinois.

Anyone can call the AOCF and speak with an Advocate. The Advocacy Office has a statewide toll-free number that may be used to present issues or obtain information about child welfare services from DCFS or its agents. When Advocates are unavailable, receptionists will take messages and forward them to the appropriate AOCF staff.

Advocates first must determine if the claim is “legitimate.” If the claim is not legitimate, Advocacy Office staff shall try to mediate for a better working relationship. If the claim is legitimate, it is Advocacy Office’s responsibility to determine what is hindering a solution to the problem and to seek resolution.

**b) Respond to Director’s Office Correspondence**

Director’s correspondence concerning service delivery is referred to the Advocacy Office and assigned to an Advocate who shall attempt to contact the correspondent by telephone within two working days. The Advocate will determine if the issue is legitimate and seek resolution. Responses to the writer will be handled by telephone when possible. Letters to the Director are handled on a priority basis.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

**c) Email**

The Advocacy Office receives e-mails, some directly and most forwarded from various sources. Only very general information can be shared in an e-mail response. The Advocacy Office asks e-mail correspondents to provide a phone number or mailing address for contact.

**d) Governor's Office Correspondence Concerning DCFS Service Delivery**

Letters forwarded to the Department from the Governor's Office concerning child welfare are referred to the Advocacy Office. These letters are handled on a priority basis, requiring the Advocacy Office to attempt to contact the correspondent by telephone within two working days after receiving the letter. The Advocacy Office shall make the appropriate contacts to ensure that there is a resolution to the issue presented and shall inform the Governor's Office of Citizen's Assistance of actions taken.

**e) Research Issues Presented by Legislators**

The Advocacy Office and the Department's Legislative Liaison Office coordinate efforts in order to address issues that are presented by legislators.

**f) Receive and Track Employee Unusual Incident Reports**

An Advocacy Office supervisor is responsible for receiving and tracking any employee-submitted Unusual Incident Reports that do not involve a ward. It is the Advocacy Office's responsibility to enter this information and complete a disposition ensuring that responsible actions have been taken.

**g) Diligent Search Requests**

Agencies call the Advocacy Office in an attempt to locate parents or family members of children in the system in order to proceed with adoptions (terminating parental rights). Advocates use Department databases to locate these parents or family members for the agency requesting the information.

**h) Adoption Attorney Panel List**

When the Advocacy Office receives a call requesting information about an adoption attorney, the Advocate gives the caller a website address that contains the Adoption Attorney Panel List. If the caller does not have access to a computer, the Advocate will print the Adoption Attorney Panel List and mail it to the caller. Attorneys who call requesting to be listed on the Adoption Attorney Panel List are referred to the Office of Legal Services.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

**i) Parental Inquiry Requests**

Parents contact the Advocacy Office to determine if their child/children are in the system. Advocates will check Department databases to determine this. If the child is in the custody of the Department, Advocates refer the parent to the county and court that took custody of the child. If the Department has no legal relationship with the child, Advocates will relay this information to the parent. If the child has been adopted, Advocates will refer parents to the Midwest Adoption Center. A record of these inquiries is retained for Diligent Search requests.

**j) License Renewal Requests**

When an Advocate receives a license renewal request, he/she fills out a Foster Home License Renewal Inquiry form. This form asks such information as: caller's name, address, phone number, provider identification number, licensing agency, whether or not the caller received a renewal packet from his or her licensing representative, and the caller's message or problem. These renewal requests are picked up by a representative of the Central Office of Licensing on a daily basis and are then processed.

**k) Spanish Interpretation Requests**

The Advocacy Office ensures that language is not a barrier to services by providing Spanish-speaking advocates. The Advocacy Office also maintains Spanish voice mail in case the Spanish speaking staff is not available.

**l) Youth Hotline**

The Youth Hotline has its own number. This line is answered by Advocates and is marketed to Illinois youth under Department jurisdiction to handle complaints, concerns, and inquires specific to this population.

The Youth Hotline number is a toll-free number and is available statewide. It operates Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Youth Hotline number is:

**1- 866-459-6884    or    866-ILYOUTH**

Advocates shall attempt to contact youth calling the Youth Hotline within 24 hours.

**m) Foster Care Waivers**

The DCFS Director can grant waivers to certain policy requirements. Caseworkers and others may contact the Advocacy Office to request policy waivers. A common request is to expand the capacity of a foster home to care for more children than Department policy allows. The Advocacy Office gathers all pertinent information related to such requests and presents it to the Director's Office for a decision.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

n) **T.D.D.**

To ensure that hearing impaired clients experience no barriers, the Advocacy Office maintains a Telephone Device for the Deaf. The line operates Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Messages are automatically taken after hours. The number of the T.D.D. is **217/524-3715**.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE # 21**  
**Providing Assistance and Advocating for Children and Families**  
**November 1, 2002 – P.T. 2002.29**

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