

## THE CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN ACT Act 204 of 1994

AN ACT to establish the children's ombudsman office; and to prescribe the powers and duties of the children's ombudsman, certain state departments and officers, and certain county and private agencies serving children; and to provide remedies from certain administrative acts.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005.

*The People of the State of Michigan enact:*

### 722.921 Short title.

Sec. 1. This act shall be known and may be cited as "the children's ombudsman act".

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995.

### 722.922 Definitions.

Sec. 2. As used in this act:

(a) "Administrative act" includes an action, omission, decision, recommendation, practice, or other procedure of the department, an adoption attorney, or a child placing agency with respect to a particular child related to adoption, foster care, or protective services.

(b) "Adoption attorney" means that term as defined in section 22 of the adoption code, MCL 710.22.

(c) "Adoption code" means the Michigan adoption code, chapter X of the probate code of 1939, 1939 PA 288, MCL 710.21 to 710.70.

(d) "Central registry" means that term as defined in section 2 of the child protection law, MCL 722.622.

(e) "Child" means an individual under the age of 18.

(f) "Child abuse" and "child neglect" mean those terms as defined in section 2 of the child protection law, MCL 722.622.

(g) "Child caring institution" means that term as defined in section 1 of 1973 PA 116, MCL 722.111.

(h) "Child placing agency" means an organization licensed or approved by the department to receive children for placement in private family homes for foster care or adoption and to provide services related to adoption.

(i) "Complainant" means an individual who makes a complaint as provided in section 5.

(j) "Child protection law" means the child protection law, 1975 PA 238, MCL 722.621 to 722.638.

(k) "Children's ombudsman" or "ombudsman" means the individual appointed to the office of children's ombudsman under section 3.

(l) "Closed session" means that term as defined in section 2 of the open meetings act, 1976 PA 267, MCL 15.262.

(m) "Department" means the department of health and human services.

(n) "Foster care" means care provided to a child in a foster family home, foster family group home, or child caring institution licensed by the department under 1973 PA 116, MCL 722.111 to 722.128, or care provided to a child in a relative's home under a court order.

(o) "Foster parent's bill of rights law" means the foster parent's bill of rights law created in section 8a of the foster care and adoption services act, 1994 PA 203, MCL 722.958a.

(p) "Full investigation" means an act of fact finding, document review, or systematic inquiry or examination that occurs after the completion of a preliminary investigation.

(q) "Investigation" means either a preliminary investigation or a full investigation.

(r) "Office" means the children's ombudsman office established under section 3.

(s) "Preliminary investigation" means an act of fact finding, document review, or systematic inquiry or examination to determine if there is a correlation between an administrative act and the death of a child or to determine if a trend or systematic issue is identified that would cause the ombudsman to open a full investigation.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2014, Act 455, Eff. Apr. 1, 2015;—Am. 2020, Act 186, Imd. Eff. Oct. 8, 2020.

### 722.923 Children's ombudsman; establishment; appointment; removal.

Sec. 3. (1) As a means of effecting changes in policy, procedure, and legislation, educating the public, investigating and reviewing actions of the department, child placing agencies, or child caring institutions, monitoring and ensuring compliance with relevant statutes, rules, and policies pertaining to children's protective services and the placement, supervision, treatment, and improving delivery of care of children in

foster care and adoptive homes, the children's ombudsman is established as an autonomous entity in the department of management and budget.

(2) The governor shall appoint an individual as the ombudsman, with the advice and consent of the senate. The individual shall be qualified by training and experience to perform the duties and exercise the powers of the children's ombudsman and the children's ombudsman office as provided in this act.

(3) The governor may remove the children's ombudsman from office for cause that includes, but is not limited to, incompetency to properly exercise duties, official misconduct, habitual or willful neglect of duty, or other misfeasance or malfeasance in connection with the operation of the office of the children's ombudsman. The governor shall report the reason for the removal to the legislature.

(4) The children's ombudsman serving in office on the effective date of the amendatory act that added this subsection shall serve at the pleasure of the governor.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005.

#### **722.924 Procedures; training; complaint; investigation; notification of safety concerns.**

Sec. 4. (1) The ombudsman shall establish procedures for the office for budgeting, expending money, and employing personnel according to the management and budget act, 1984 PA 431, MCL 18.1101 to 18.1594. Subject to annual appropriations, the ombudsman shall employ sufficient personnel to carry out the duties and powers prescribed by this act.

(2) The ombudsman shall establish procedures for receiving and processing complaints from complainants and individuals not meeting the definition of complainant, conducting investigations, holding informal hearings, and reporting findings and recommendations resulting from investigations.

(3) Personnel employed by the office of the children's ombudsman shall receive mandatory training conducted by the Michigan domestic violence prevention and treatment board in domestic violence and in handling complaints of child abuse or child neglect that involve a history of domestic violence.

(4) Any individual may submit a complaint to the ombudsman. The ombudsman has the sole discretion and authority to determine if a complaint falls within his or her duties and powers to investigate and if a complaint involves an administrative act. The ombudsman may initiate an investigation without receiving a complaint. The ombudsman may initiate an investigation upon receipt of a complaint from an individual not meeting the definition of complainant. An individual not meeting the definition of complainant is not entitled to receive information under this act as if he or she is a complainant. The individual is entitled to receive the recommendations of the ombudsman and the department's response to the recommendations of the ombudsman in accordance with state and federal law. During the course of an investigation, the ombudsman may refer a case to the department if the ombudsman determines that the department received a complaint on the case, but did not conduct a field investigation. If the ombudsman refers a case to the department, the department shall conduct a field investigation of the case or provide notice to the ombudsman why a field investigation was not conducted, or what alternative steps may have been taken to address the situation. If a field investigation has been conducted, the department shall report the results to the ombudsman.

(5) The ombudsman shall notify the department of any immediate safety concerns regarding a child or children who are part of an active or open child protective services or foster care case. This notification shall occur as soon as possible, but not later than 1 business day after the ombudsman becomes aware of the concerns.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2014, Act 243, Eff. Sept. 25, 2014.

#### **722.925 Individuals making complaint to children's ombudsman.**

Sec. 5. All of the following individuals may make a complaint to the ombudsman with respect to a particular child, alleging that an administrative act is contrary to law, rule, or policy, imposed without an adequate statement of reason, or based on irrelevant, immaterial, or erroneous grounds:

- (a) The child, if he or she is able to articulate a complaint.
- (b) A biological parent of the child.
- (c) A foster parent of the child.
- (d) An adoptive parent or a prospective adoptive parent of the child.
- (e) A legally appointed guardian of the child.
- (f) A guardian ad litem of the child.
- (g) An adult who is related to the child within the fifth degree by marriage, blood, or adoption, as defined in section 22 of the adoption code, MCL 710.22.
- (h) A Michigan legislator.
- (i) An individual required to report child abuse or child neglect under section 3 of the child protection law, 1975 PA 238, MCL 722.623.

(j) An attorney for any individual described in subdivisions (a) to (g).

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005.

#### **722.925a Children's ombudsman; powers.**

Sec. 5a. The children's ombudsman has the authority to do all of the following:

(a) Pursue all necessary action, including, but not limited to, legal action, to protect the rights and welfare of a child under the jurisdiction, control, or supervision of the department, the Michigan children's institute, the family division of circuit court under section 2(a)(1) of chapter XIIA of the probate code of 1939, 1939 PA 288, MCL 712A.2, a child caring institution, or a child placing agency.

(b) Pursue legislative advocacy in the best interests of children.

(c) Review policies and procedures relating to the department's involvement with children and make recommendations for improvement.

(d) Subject to an appropriation of funds, commence and conduct investigations into alleged violations of the foster parent's bill of rights law.

**History:** Add. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2013, Act 38, Imd. Eff. June 4, 2013;—Am. 2014, Act 455, Eff. Apr. 1, 2015.

#### **722.926 Victim of child abuse or child neglect; powers of children's ombudsman; child fatality cases; investigation.**

Sec. 6. (1) The ombudsman may do all of the following in relation to a child who may be a victim of child abuse or child neglect, including a child who may have died as a result of suspected child abuse or child neglect:

(a) Upon his or her own initiative or upon receipt of a complaint, investigate an administrative act that is alleged to be contrary to law or rule, contrary to policy of the department or a child placing agency, imposed without an adequate statement of reason, or based on irrelevant, immaterial, or erroneous grounds. The ombudsman has sole discretion to determine if a complaint involves an administrative act.

(b) Decide, in his or her discretion, whether to investigate an administrative act.

(c) Upon his or her own initiative or upon receipt of a complaint and subject to an appropriation of funds, investigate an alleged violation of the foster parent's bill of rights law.

(d) Except as otherwise provided in this subdivision, access records and reports necessary to carry out the ombudsman's powers and duties under this act to the same extent and in the same manner as provided to the department under the provisions of the child protection law. The ombudsman must be provided access to medical records in the same manner as access is provided to the department under section 16281 of the public health code, 1978 PA 368, MCL 333.16281. The ombudsman shall be provided access to mental health records in the same manner as access is provided to the department in section 748a of the mental health code, 1974 PA 258, MCL 330.1748a, subject to section 9. The ombudsman may request substance use disorder records if the ombudsman obtains a valid consent or a court order under 42 CFR part 2. The ombudsman is subject to the same standards for safeguarding the confidentiality of information under this section and the same sanctions for unauthorized release of information as the department. In the course of a child fatality investigation, the ombudsman may access records from the court of jurisdiction, attorney general, prosecuting attorney, or any attorney retained by the department and reports from a county child fatality review team to the same extent and in the same manner as provided to the department under state law.

(e) Request a subpoena from a court requiring the production of a record or report necessary to carry out the ombudsman's duties and powers, including a child fatality investigation. If the person to whom a subpoena is issued fails or refuses to produce the record or report, the ombudsman may petition the court for enforcement of the subpoena.

(f) Hold informal hearings and request that individuals appear before the ombudsman and give testimony or produce documentary or other evidence that the ombudsman considers relevant to a matter under investigation.

(g) Make recommendations to the governor and the legislature concerning the need for children's protective services, adoption, or foster care legislation, policy, or practice without prior review by other offices, departments, or agencies in the executive branch in order to facilitate rapid implementation of recommendations or for suggested improvements to the recommendations. No other office, department, or agency shall prohibit the release of an ombudsman's recommendation to the governor or the legislature.

(2) The ombudsman shall conduct a preliminary investigation into all child fatality cases that occurred or are alleged to have occurred due to child abuse or child neglect in 1 or more of the following situations:

(a) A child died during an active child protective services investigation or open services case, or there was an assigned or rejected child protective services complaint within 24 months immediately preceding the

child's death.

(b) A child died while in foster care, unless the death resulted from natural causes and there was not a previous child protective services or licensing complaint concerning the foster home.

(c) A child was returned home from foster care and there is an active foster care case.

(d) The foster care case involving the deceased child or sibling was closed within 24 months immediately preceding the child's death.

(3) Upon completing a preliminary investigation into a child fatality case described under subsection (2), the ombudsman shall determine whether a full investigation is necessary. If the ombudsman determines a full investigation is necessary, he or she shall open a full investigation into the child fatality case described under subsection (2).

(4) Subject to state appropriations, a full investigation under subsection (3) must be completed within 12 months after the ombudsman opens that child fatality case for a full investigation.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2013, Act 38, Imd. Eff. June 4, 2013;—Am. 2014, Act 243, Eff. Sept. 25, 2014;—Am. 2014, Act 455, Eff. Apr. 1, 2015;—Am. 2020, Act 186, Imd. Eff. Oct. 8, 2020.

## **722.927 Decision to investigate; notice; pursuing administrative remedies or channels of complaint; further investigation; violation of state or federal criminal law; complaint against child placing agency; petition requesting court jurisdiction or termination of parental rights.**

Sec. 7. (1) Upon deciding to investigate a complaint, from a complainant and an individual not meeting the definition of complainant, the ombudsman shall notify the complainant or the individual not meeting the definition of complainant of the decision to investigate and shall notify the department, adoption attorney, or child placing agency of the intention to investigate. If the ombudsman declines to investigate a complaint or continue an investigation, the ombudsman shall notify the complainant or the individual not meeting the definition of complainant and the department, or child placing agency of the decision and of the reasons for the ombudsman's action.

(2) The ombudsman shall advise a complainant of administrative remedies and may advise the individual to pursue all administrative remedies or channels of complaint open to the complainant before pursuing a complaint with the ombudsman. Subsequent to the administrative processing of a complaint, the ombudsman may conduct further investigations of a complaint upon the request of the complainant or upon the ombudsman's own initiative.

(3) If the ombudsman finds in the course of an investigation that an individual's action is in violation of state or federal criminal law, the ombudsman shall immediately report that fact to the county prosecutor or the attorney general. If the complaint is against a child placing agency, the ombudsman shall refer the matter to the department for further action with respect to licensing.

(4) The ombudsman may file a petition on behalf of a child requesting the court to take jurisdiction under section 2(b) of chapter XIIA of the probate code of 1939, 1939 PA 288, MCL 712A.2, or a petition for termination of parental rights under section 19b of chapter XIIA of the probate code of 1939, 1939 PA 288, MCL 712A.19b, if the ombudsman is satisfied that the complainant has contacted the department, the prosecuting attorney, the child's attorney, and the child's guardian ad litem, if any, and that none of these persons intend to file a petition as described in this subsection.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2013, Act 38, Imd. Eff. June 4, 2013.

## **722.928 Department and child placing agency; duties; information to be provided to biological parent, adoptive parent, or foster parent; access to departmental computer networks.**

Sec. 8. (1) The department and a child placing agency shall do all of the following:

(a) Upon the ombudsman's request, grant the ombudsman or his or her designee access to all information, records, and documents in the possession of the department or child placing agency that the ombudsman considers relevant and necessary in an investigation.

(b) Assist the ombudsman to obtain the necessary releases of those documents that are specifically restricted.

(c) Upon the ombudsman's request, provide the ombudsman with progress reports concerning the administrative processing of a complaint.

(d) Upon the ombudsman's request, provide the ombudsman information he or she requests under subdivision (a) within 10 business days after the request. If the department determines that release of the information would violate federal or state law, the ombudsman shall be notified of that determination within the same 10-day deadline.

(2) The department, an attorney involved with an adoption, and a child placing agency shall provide information to a biological parent, prospective adoptive parent, or foster parent regarding the provisions of this act.

(3) The ombudsman, the department, and the department of technology, management, and budget shall ensure that the ombudsman has access, in the ombudsman's own office, to departmental computer networks pertaining to protective services, foster care, adoption, juvenile delinquency, and the central registry, unless otherwise prohibited by state or federal law, or the release of the information to the ombudsman would jeopardize federal funding. The cost of implementing this subsection shall be negotiated among the office of the children's ombudsman, the department, and the department of technology, management, and budget.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2013, Act 38, Imd. Eff. June 4, 2013.

## **722.929 Confidentiality of record of children's ombudsman; disclosure; limitations; release of certain information.**

Sec. 9. (1) Subject to subsections (2) through (7) and except as provided in subsection (8), a record of the children's ombudsman's office is confidential, shall only be used for purposes set forth in this act, is not subject to court subpoena, and is not discoverable in a legal proceeding. A record of the children's ombudsman's office is exempt from disclosure under the freedom of information act, 1976 PA 442, MCL 15.231 to 15.246. If the ombudsman identifies action or inaction by the state, through its agencies or services, that failed to protect children, the ombudsman shall provide his or her findings and recommendations to the agency affected by those findings, and make those findings and recommendations available to the complainant and the legislature upon request to the extent consistent with state or federal law. The ombudsman must not disclose any information that impairs the rights of the child or the child's parents or guardians.

(2) The ombudsman may release information to a complainant or to a closed session of a legislative committee that has jurisdiction over family and children's services issues regarding the department's handling of a case under the child protection law that is obtained or generated during an investigation conducted by the office.

(3) Unless otherwise part of the public record, the office must not release any of the following confidential information to the general public:

(a) Records relating to mental health evaluation or treatment of a parent or child.

(b) Records relating to the evaluation or treatment of a substance use disorder of a parent or child.

(c) Records relating to medical diagnosis or treatment of a parent or child.

(d) Records relating to domestic violence-related services and sexual assault services provided to a parent or child.

(e) Records relating to educational services provided to a parent or child.

(4) Notwithstanding subsection (3), if the ombudsman determines that disclosure of confidential information is necessary to identify, prevent, or respond to the child abuse or child neglect of a child, the ombudsman may disclose information in his or her possession to the department, a court, a law enforcement agency, or a prosecuting attorney investigating a report of known or suspected child abuse or child neglect. The ombudsman shall not release the address, telephone number, or other information regarding the whereabouts of a victim or suspected victim of domestic violence unless ordered to by a court.

(5) Except as provided in subsection (4), the ombudsman shall not disclose information relating to an ongoing law enforcement investigation or an ongoing children's protective services investigation. The ombudsman may release the results of its investigation to a complainant, or an individual not meeting the definition of complainant, if the ombudsman receives notification that releasing the results of its investigation is not related to and will not interfere with an ongoing law enforcement investigation or ongoing child protective services investigation.

(6) The ombudsman shall not disclose the identity of an individual making a child abuse or child neglect complaint under the child protection law unless that individual's written permission is obtained first or a court has ordered the ombudsman to release that information.

(7) The ombudsman may release an individual's identity who makes an intentionally false report of child abuse or child neglect under the child protection law.

(8) Not more than 30 days after the case closure date of a case investigated by the office under this act, the ombudsman shall release his or her findings, recommendations, and the agency responses, if any, to the public. The ombudsman shall redact confidential information consistent with state and federal law.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2013, Act 38, Imd. Eff. June 4, 2013;—Am. 2020, Act 185, Imd. Eff. Oct. 8, 2020.

**722.930 Report of findings; recommendations; consultation with individual, department, or child placing agency; publication of adverse opinion; notice of actions; information provided to complainant; child fatality investigation; report.**

Sec. 10. (1) The ombudsman shall prepare a report of the factual findings of an investigation and make recommendations to the department or the child placing agency if the ombudsman finds 1 or more of the following:

- (a) A matter should be further considered by the department or the child placing agency.
- (b) An administrative act or omission should be modified, canceled, or corrected.
- (c) Reasons should be given for an administrative act or omission.
- (d) Other action should be taken by the department or the child placing agency.

(2) Before announcing a conclusion or recommendation that expressly or by implication criticizes an individual, the department, or a child placing agency, the ombudsman shall consult with that individual, the department, or the child placing agency. When publishing an opinion adverse to the department or child placing agency, the ombudsman shall include in the publication any statement of reasonable length made to the ombudsman by the department or child placing agency in defense or mitigation of the action. The ombudsman may request to be notified by the department or child placing agency, within a specified time, of any action taken on any recommendation presented.

(3) The ombudsman shall notify the complainant of the actions taken by the ombudsman and by the department or child placing agency.

(4) The ombudsman may provide to the complainant the following information:

(a) A copy of the ombudsman's report regarding the investigation's findings, recommendations to the department made according to the investigation, the department's response to the ombudsman's findings and recommendations, and any epilogue to the ombudsman's report and the department's response.

(b) Information that has otherwise been made public.

(5) The ombudsman shall not release information to the individual making the complaint that will endanger the health or welfare of a child or another individual.

(6) With respect to a child fatality case investigated under section 6(2) and upon review of records or other information received under section 6(1)(c) or (d), in the course of a child fatality investigation, if there is no ongoing child protection proceeding involving a sibling of the child who died, the ombudsman shall provide any necessary recommendations for improving systemic issues that are discovered during the investigation of the child fatality. The recommendations may be provided to the court of jurisdiction, the state court administrative office, the county child fatality review team, medical professionals, or attorneys or other legal professionals involved with the particular child who died. The recommendations shall also be summarized and included in the annual report referenced in subsection (7).

(7) The ombudsman shall submit to the governor, the director of the department, and the legislature an annual report on the ombudsman's conduct, including any recommendations regarding the need for legislation or for change in rules or policies.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005;—Am. 2014, Act 243, Eff. Sept. 25, 2014.

**722.931 Penalty for filing complaint or cooperating in investigation prohibited; intentional false complaint.**

Sec. 11. (1) Subject to subsection (4), an official, the department, or a child placing agency shall not penalize any person for filing a complaint or cooperating with the ombudsman in investigating a complaint.

(2) An individual, the department, an adoption attorney, or a child placing agency shall not hinder the lawful actions of the ombudsman or employees of the ombudsman.

(3) A report by the ombudsman is not subject to prior approval by a person outside of the office.

(4) An individual who intentionally makes a false complaint of child abuse or neglect under this act is subject to the penalties contained in section 13(5) of the child protection law, MCL 722.633.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995;—Am. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005.

**722.932 Authority granted under other acts or rules.**

Sec. 12. The authority granted the ombudsman under this act is in addition to the authority granted under the provisions of any other act or rule under which the remedy or right of appeal or objection is provided for a person, or any procedure provided for the inquiry into or investigation of any matter. The authority granted the ombudsman does not limit or affect the remedy or right of appeal or objection and is not an exclusive remedy or procedure.

**History:** 1994, Act 204, Eff. Jan. 1, 1995.

**722.933-722.935 Repealed. 2004, Act 560, Imd. Eff. Jan. 3, 2005.**

**Compiler's note:** The repealed sections pertained to a registry of adoption attorneys and the effective date and conditional effective date of the act.

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