

November 7, 2025

To: Secretary Kiame Mahaniah, Executive Office of Health and Human Services

From: Children's League of Massachusetts

Re: CLM Priorities for the Office of the Child Advocate Director Appointment

Dear Secretary Mahaniah,

On behalf of the Children's League of Massachusetts and our 60 service provider member organizations, I submit this testimony sharing our view on the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate. This testimony is independent of my service on the Child Advocate Nominating Committee.

CLM and our members have had the privilege of working closely with OCA Director Maria Mossaides, and we believe that under her leadership our sector has improved services and protections for youth and families, while also setting a standard of research-based, data-driven, and stakeholder-informed continuous improvement. We know there is still much to be done, and we look forward to continuing this progress together. In this spirit, we share our perspective on key qualities needed in the next Director of the Office of the Child Advocate.

A bold and thoughtful leader

The Child Advocate must be a bold leader with credibility and standing not only in the child welfare and adjacent sectors, but with the Legislature and Judicial branches of government that also play vital roles in setting and executing child welfare policy. One of the great powers of the Office of the Child Advocate is the ability to collect information, convene stakeholders, and recommend policy across agencies and Secretariats, and we believe this provides a unique opportunity to center the multisystemic, complex needs of families and children.

The Child Advocate must be willing to tackle the big challenges of child welfare with courage, bold vision, and innovative thinking for:

- Centering the voices of and giving agency to families, children, youth, and young adults in the work of the OCA.
- Keeping children and families out of the child welfare system or in-home whenever possible.
- Supporting families at risk of deeper systems involvement.
- Using data to drive change and achieve rapid, positive and permanent outcomes for youth in state care.
- Ensuring that youth who age out of state systems are set up for success.

- Implementing solution-oriented diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that tackle head-on the impacts of systemic racism in and around child welfare.
- Supporting academic research and pilot programs that cultivate new evidence-based innovations.
- Considering how technological innovation can positively impact the sector.

We believe the approach by the current Child Advocate to ground the work in data and research is critically important. The Child Advocate must prioritize defining, tracking, and reporting the critical outcomes that reflect child safety and family well-being, in order to best understand the opportunities to protect and support children and reduce harm, including the harms of system involvement itself.

Respect for lived experience voices

A foundational mindset of the Child Advocate must be to acknowledge the value of lived experience in understanding child welfare's deepest problems, and the opportunities for reform. The Child Advocate is well-positioned to create a child welfare system that not just "taps into" lived experience perspectives, but authentically and meaningfully incorporates the voices and expertise of youth, young adults, families, and intersectional professionals who have lived through the toughest challenges and brightest practices of our child welfare system. These experts must have equal seats at the research and policy-making tables convened by the Child Advocate – the same as any other stakeholder, agency, or expert.

A collaborative approach

Transformational change also requires commitment to meaningful, ongoing partnership and collaboration with community-based providers who are working side-by-side with our state agencies, and in many cases are leading the way in innovation. Successful models in the field – including in fields adjacent to child welfare such as substance-use disorder treatment and recovery, mental and behavioral healthcare, poverty reduction and economic supports, and domestic violence victim assistance – can and must be incorporated into our thinking about child welfare transformation. Providers bring valuable expertise from their daily work on the complex needs of children and families, and can offer innovative, concrete ideas for policies and practices that impact child welfare outcomes.

Practical experience

The Child Advocate should also be leader with advocacy victories who also understands how to operationalize policy on the ground will be critical to driving real change. The next Child Advocate should be able to translate data and research into state laws and agency policies and into practical



child and youth services that will improve outcomes. We would expect the Child Advocate to bring to the role:

- Deep understanding of the history, landscape, and current trends and issues in child welfare, and Massachusetts' position within those issues, in order to build on the strengths of our statewide systems.
- Understanding of where Massachusetts needs to improve its child welfare outcomes, with a plan for doing so.
- An array of past cross-sectional professional experiences in child welfare issues.
- Experience with the children's services landscape in Massachusetts and a commitment to leveraging cross-agency collaboration to holistically support child safety and well-being.

As always, CLM remains a committed partner to the Administration wherever we can contribute knowledge and support. We appreciate your attention to this issue and look forward to continuing our work together.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

Cc: Mary McGeown, Undersecretary for Human Services