

How the Child Protection Ombudsman Helps Children and Families Navigate COVID-19



United States
Ombudsman Association

Panelist Biographies

November 12, 2020

Stephanie Villafuerte

Ombudsman at the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman

BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie Villafuerte was appointed to serve as the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman in 2015. For the past 25 years, Ms. Villafuerte has dedicated her legal and public policy career to improving the plight of abused and neglected children. Prior to being appointed as the Ombudsman, Ms. Villafuerte served for five years as the Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center, a 30-year-old non-profit organization dedicated to providing quality legal services and public policy advocacy for abused and neglected children. In this capacity Ms. Villafuerte worked extensively with the state's juvenile courts, human service providers and non-profit agencies to address the myriad of needs of this vulnerable population. Ms. Villafuerte also has an extensive public policy and legislative background on children's issues and has worked 12 years in the Colorado state legislature advocating on behalf of maltreated children. Finally, Ms. Villafuerte has a distinguished legal career serving as child abuse prosecutor for 14 years in both the Denver District Attorney's Office and the Colorado United States Attorney's Office.



Ms. Villafuerte has received numerous awards for her contributions to the field including: the Aspen Institute Children and Families Health and Human Services Fellowship 2017, the Denver Business Journal Outstanding Women in Business Lifetime Achievement Award 2015, and the Colorado Women's Bar Association Raising the Bar for Children Award 2013.

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Dr. Moira O'Neill

Director of the New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate

BIOGRAPHY

Moira O'Neill is the first Child Advocate of New Hampshire. She was selected by the Oversight Commission on Children's Services and appointed by Governor Christopher Sununu and the Executive Council in January 2018. A nurse by profession, Moira has experience across all health care settings. She earned Master's degrees in Nursing and Public Health and a PhD at Yale University. The core of her scholarship is policy and management of care systems, program evaluation, diagnosing organizations, and building community-based services. For 11 years, Moira served as an Assistant Child Advocate with the Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate.



In the New Hampshire Office of the Child Advocate, Moira sets the mission, vision and priorities for the oversight of New Hampshire's state services and supports for children. Under her leadership, the Office has instituted a pioneering approach to evaluating child welfare services grounded in safety science as a means for both strengthening and holding

systems accountable. Moira takes what is learned from the experiences of children and families themselves to inform advocacy for responsive policies and practices in children's interests.

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Patrick Dowd

Director of the Washington State Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Dowd is the director of the Washington State Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds (OFCO). He was appointed to this position by Governor Jay Inslee in 2015. Prior to appointment, Mr. Dowd served as an ombuds with OFCO. He spent much of his career working in public defense representing clients in child welfare and juvenile justice systems and has extensive professional experience in child welfare law and policy. Mr. Dowd graduated from Seattle University and earned his J.D. at the University of Oregon.

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Jill Kehaulani Esch

Ombudsperson for American Indian Families at the Minnesota Office of Ombudsperson for Families

BIOGRAPHY

Jill Kehaulani (Kay-HOW-La-Knee) Esch is Native Hawaiian and was born and raised in Hawaii. She is a graduate of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She and her husband moved from Hawaii to Minnesota in 2000 so that she could attend William Mitchell College of Law, now known as Mitchell Hamline School of Law. In 2013, she became the Ombudsperson for American Indian Families. Previous to her current job, she worked in a small Hawaii law firm for 24 years; after law school, she was a judicial law clerk to Judge John Q. McShane and an associate attorney in Duluth for several years. She is an active member of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA); in 2017, she received its Member of the Year Award. Since 2017, she has served as co-chair of the Children and Families Chapter for the United States Ombudsman Association.

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Jordan Steffen

Deputy Ombudsman at the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman

BIOGRAPHY

Jordan Steffen joined the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman in July 2016. Jordan has extensive experience researching and analyzing public policy, laws and rules concerning child protection in Colorado. Prior to

joining the office, Jordan held an award-winning career in synthesizing data and stories from within the child protection system to inform the public.

For more than five years, Jordan worked as a journalist at Colorado's largest newspaper, The Denver Post. During her time at The Post, Jordan covered stories in every part of the state, writing about everything from high-profile criminal cases to local farmer's markets. Jordan was part of the team awarded the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Aurora movie theater shooting. She was also part of the team named as a Pulitzer Prize finalist for coverage of the Waldo Canyon wildfire in Colorado Springs. Jordan was recognized as the Society of Professional Journalists' 2015 Colorado Palmer Hoyt Journalist of the Year for her innovative work covering both practice and policy within the legal field.

But some of Jordan's most significant work centered on investigations into the policies, practices and inadequacies in Colorado's child protection system. Through years of reporting, Jordan researched long-standing state policies and practices for preventing child abuse. Her reporting gave the citizens of Colorado insight into shortcomings that repeatedly led to the abuse of children and explained systemic issues within the state system. Jordan was part of a team that produced an eight-part investigative series by compiling data and information on 72 children who died of abuse and neglect after entering the child welfare system. That series was recognized both locally and nationally.

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