



A MESSAGE FROM THE
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

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DJJ COMMISSIONER LAUNCHES NEW OMBUDSMAN'S UNIT
Juvenile Justice Reform – Focus On Rights & Safety of Youth in Custody

(ATLANTA - GA) Commissioner Avery D. Niles is pleased to announce he is rolling out the new Office of the Ombudsman for the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice as he continues to restructure the agency to achieve best practices under Georgia's new Juvenile Justice Reform Law. Commissioner Niles said he is adding the new Ombudsman's unit to ensure the rights and safety of youth in custody at DJJ are protected and preserved by engaging a designated neutral party at the agency to independently review public complaints and allegations in an impartial and objective manner.

"We're adapting standing policies and procedures to put this new reform component to work within DJJ," said Commissioner Niles. The four-member Ombudsman's team will work under supervision of Deputy Commissioner Sarah Draper, DJJ Division of Operations and Compliance.

"Agency-Wide Problem-Solver"

"The Ombudsman position is DJJ's agency-wide 'problem-solver', responsible for reviewing complaints related to the treatment of youth, examining their grievances for policy compliance, and attempting to resolve all claims in a fair and judicious manner for our residents," said Commissioner Niles. "Our vision for this special office is to guarantee the highest levels of public transparency and accountability, while providing special youth care services within Georgia's juvenile justice system," the Commissioner said.

Single Point of Contact

The DJJ Office of Ombudsman is tasked as a single point of contact for family members, advocates and other concerned Georgia citizens who may have interest in reporting complaints on behalf of youth committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice, or in making inquiries about their well-being. The Ombudsman will impartially review and resolve complaints from juvenile offenders in secure facilities, group homes, or community youth programs.

The office was created so that individuals *outside* DJJ who believe they have a legitimate concern about the care or safety of a DJJ youth can now contact the Ombudsman for immediate assistance with allegations of physical or sexual abuse, threats or harassment; or imminent medical or mental health concerns. "The Ombudsman will objectively track and review complaints of wrongdoing, misconduct, or negligence alleged against the Department," said Commissioner Niles.

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How It Works, Outside DJJ

When the Ombudsman's Office receives an inquiry or complaint from outside the juvenile justice system, a Customer Service Agent (CSA) is assigned. The CSA's will check on issues brought before them to ensure DJJ offices, facilities, group homes, and youth programs are following the Department's policies to properly address the areas of concern. Depending on the level of severity, a return phone call, a letter, or a personal visit is made to complainants who contact the Ombudsman to inform them of actions taken to resolve the issue.

How It Works, Inside DJJ

Youth in every Georgia juvenile detention center are currently able to document their grievances by simply dropping a confidential note in one of the Director's Boxes or Grievance Boxes in their facility. Now youth in DJJ secure facilities or under DJJ supervision can also ask the Ombudsman for additional help if they have previously given DJJ Staff an opportunity to address their concerns but still believe a satisfactory resolution was not reached.

The Ombudsman will have each involved person submit a summary of their complaint. Once those summaries are received and a report is accepted and reviewed, the Ombudsman's Office will contact the individual who requested the inquiry, to discuss a resolution.

Increased Safety Measures

The Ombudsman has a special role in emergency situations to provide increased safety measures if needed. Youth in secure facilities or under DJJ supervision who believe they are being bullied, harassed, or intimidated are instructed to report their concerns immediately to the Ombudsman's Office. DJJ prohibits bullying, harassment, or intimidation against any youth – at any time.

Bridge of Accountability

DJJ also prohibits retribution, bullying or intimidation against any youth who uses the Ombudsman's Office to report a grievance or complaint. It is the Ombudsman's goal to treat all citizens with fairness and respect and to increase the accountability of the Department of Juvenile Justice by acting as a bridge between concerned citizens and the juvenile justice system.

Inquiries and complaints may be submitted to the new DJJ Ombudsman's Office by email at djjombudsman@djj.state.ga.us or by calling 404-508-7144 or 1-855-396-2978.

DJJ youth are encouraged to make certain they have thoroughly engaged the existing DJJ grievance process before contacting the Office of Ombudsman. But if a problem remains unresolved, the Ombudsman should be contacted for follow-up assistance. The DJJ Ombudsman is dedicated to fairness and serves to uphold the public trust by showing compassion, maintaining confidentiality, and remaining neutral.

“The Ombudsman doesn’t take sides or wear a uniform,” said DJJ Commissioner Niles. “Their goal is to find solutions to problems, put the minds of parents at ease, and put the fears of our youth to rest.”

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