

Minutes
Legislative Audit Commission
January 29, 2026

Members Present:

Senator Calvin K. Bahr
Senator Steve J. Drazkowski
Senator Mark W. Koran
Senator Ann H. Rest
Representative Rick Hansen
Representative Steven Jacob
Representative Fue Lee
Representative Duane Quam

Members Absent:

Senator D. Scott Dibble
Senator Tou Xiong
Representative Patti Anderson
Representative Emma Greenman

Senator Ann H. Rest, Chair, called the Legislative Audit Commission (LAC) meeting to order at 1:05 p.m. in room G23 State Capitol to hear key findings and recommendations in the program evaluation, *Office of Ombudsperson for Families*. Senator Rest welcomed Jodi Munson Rodríguez, Deputy Legislative Auditor, and Caitlin Badger, Evaluation Manager, from the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA).

Ms. Munson Rodríguez began with an overview, saying that Minnesota has had a long history of disproportionately involving children of color in the child protection system. She said the 1991 Legislature created the Office of Ombudspersons for Families (OBFF) to be a resource for families and professionals involved in the system to help ensure culturally appropriate supports and services are available. She added that stakeholders agree the office is still very much necessary 30 years later. She then introduced Caitlin Badger to speak further.

Ms. Badger explained that the state established three ombudspersons within OBFF, each serving children and families of specific communities of color: (1) Ombudsperson for African American Families, (2) Ombudsperson for Asian Pacific Families, and (3) Ombudsperson for Spanish-Speaking Families. The Ombudsperson for American Indian Families had also been within OBFF until a few years ago, when it became its own office. Ms. Badger said that overall, the evaluation found OBFF's impact in recent years is unclear. She said several issues contributed to this, such as (1) the ombudspersons' duties in law are broad, with OBFF having limited resources, (2) the ombudspersons do not fulfill all of their required duties in law, (3) complaint handling activities are not well documented, and (4) OBFF's organizational structure does not have a single leader for oversight or accountability.

Ms. Badger explained that OBFF is required by law to monitor agency compliance with all child protection laws as they impact children of color, and is required to work with state courts on various activities. OBFF may also conduct investigations of certain aspects of the child protection system, but is not required to do so. However, statutes define "agency" very broadly, and the definition includes any individual or service or program providing child protection or placement services in coordination with or contract under the Department of Human Services or the Minnesota Department of Health. It also includes local courts and county social services agencies that provide child protection and placement services. To fulfill this duty, OBFF would have to monitor the compliance of a wide swath of entities.

Ms. Badger said OLA also found that the ombudspersons spend considerable time on activities that are not required by law, with most of the child protection-related accomplishments the ombudspersons' reported as revolving around advocating for policy changes and participating in work groups. She said that in a survey of people across the child protection system, many strongly expressed the need for an office to be a resource for people of color involved in the child protection system but were unfamiliar with OBFF specifically, while others suggested ways in which OBFF's duties should be refined.

Ms. Badger said the report recommends that if the Legislature envisions OBFF spending more time on policy work or serving in work groups, that the laws reflect those duties and that the Legislature ensure that OBFF's resources align with their duties. Also, OLA recommends that OBFF fulfill all duties required by law, or bring proposed changes to the Legislature to have its duties align with how it thinks it can best serve outcomes for children and families of color.

Ms. Badger then explained that there are three community boards which are the primary entities to which OBFF and its ombudspersons are accountable: (1) African American, (2) Asian Pacific, and (3) Spanish Speaking. Statutes direct these boards to also meet together as one joint board. However, OLA found that most of the boards were not meeting these requirements because they often did not have their full complement of board members and were not meeting regularly. She further explained that each of OBFF's three ombudspersons share equal powers and responsibilities, rather than having a single role for oversight.

Senator Rest then asked members for discussion. Members had concerns with OBFF doing nonrequired activities they thought were helpful but not strictly aligned with law, and any money spent on those activities. There was also discussion regarding the oversight boards and what reports OBFF has produced or how often OBFF was reporting to the boards. A suggestion was made to consider a sunset goal and then redesign the office to make sure community needs would be met.

Senator Rest introduced Ann Hill, Ombudsperson for African American Families. Also invited to speak were Muriel Gubasta, Ombudsperson for Spanish-Speaking Families, and Manuel Zuniga, Ombudsperson for Asian Pacific Families.

Ms. Hill began by saying that while OBFF agrees with OLA's recommendations, the most delicate one pertained to revising OBFF's organizational structure. She noted that while the African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act may have been communicated in the report as an activity not in statute, this Act's legislation came out of complaints to OBFF, and it will work to improve outcomes for all children in the state. She also noted that OLA's report reviewed only 2 years out of 30 years of operations, and said OBFF has been quite effective over their 30 years. She said their office helps callers with counseling, resource assistance, or investigation.

Ms. Gubasta then explained the history of OBFF's staffing during and prior to the evaluation period. As for OBFF's activities not specifically mentioned in legislation, she said that OBFF is oftentimes invited by community groups to present their perspectives on the communities they represent. She said this is why statute gives OBFF broad powers and that the founding members of OBFF had this type of involvement in mind.

Senator Rest asked members for discussion. In response to questions, Ms. Hill said that OBFF has helped people of all races, including Caucasion, because the office decided many years ago to do that, since family relationships can be multiracial. Member discussion also included whether OBFF could benefit from having one ombudsperson with deputy ombudspersons that would be specialists in specific functions of the child protection system, such as being experts with the county system or the Department of Human Services, and of having the office then designed to serve everybody since the need for this type of help is great.

Seeing no further discussion, Senator Rest adjourned the meeting at 2:41 p.m.