



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES – AUGUST 19, 2026 DAN ROMEO, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Romeo, Mr. Kelly, Ms. Denton, Ms. Block, Mr. Burtis
ALSO ATTENDING: Chairwoman Watts; also see attached

Chair Romeo called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m., and the previous meeting's minutes were approved.

1. MCMAHON RYAN CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER: Erin Bates, Executive Director; Ally Haahr, Deputy Director of Operations

a. **INFORMATIONAL:** Overview of the McMahon Ryan Child Advocacy Center

(Attachment No. 1: McMahon-Ryan Child Advocacy Center)

- Each county has its own Child Advocacy Center (CAC); Onondaga County is fortunate to have county support to assist with the CAC's operational costs
- CACs were developed so that children experiencing abuse would have one location for all systems and operations, rather than repeating their story at multiple locations, which is traumatic for a child
- On a national level, one in 10 children will have been sexually abused by their 18th birthday, and five children die each day as a result of abuse and/or neglect; 90% of child sexual abuse victims know their abuser
- In 2025, about 23,400 children in New York State were involved in cases of sexual and severe physical abuse, neglect, and commercial sexual exploitation
- On the county level, 71% of child victims served are under age 12, and 96% of child sexual abuse victims knew their abuser, whether adults, children, or youthful offenders
- In 2025, McMahon-Ryan served 1,803 children in Onondaga County, and identified 142 cases of youth at risk of or identified as being commercially sexually exploited
- One third of cases involve youth-on-youth offenses; even when a youthful offender is identified, McMahon-Ryan does not treat them purely as an offender, since something may have happened to that youth to cause the behavior, and interviews are conducted carefully as a result
- No particular look or physical characteristic is associated with an offender; it is often someone who has invested time in building a relationship with the child and is known to the family (a parent, caregiver, grandparent, or relative); secrecy, threats, and manipulation are common reasons a child may not disclose right away
- Not uncommon for cases to come forward well after the abuse began

- Reasons children may not tell include fear of not being believed, secrecy or threats from the offender, a relationship with or protectiveness toward the offender, feelings that the abuse is their own fault, and simply not knowing that what happened to them is unsafe, often due to a lack of prior conversation about safety, relationships, and boundaries
- Exposure to child abuse is linked to mental illness, depression, anxiety, impaired social and emotional development, risky behaviors and delinquency, further trauma and abuse, PTSD, chronic disease, and early death, whether it is treated or not
 - Outcomes are better with an early response and treatment
- Cases come to the CAC through Child Protective or law enforcement when there is an allegation of abuse; there are other avenues for referral
- Child Protective Services and law enforcement are on site with the CAC; representation from county CPS workers specific to the investigators who handle abuse cases
- Law enforcement representation from the New York State Police, Syracuse Police, and the County Sheriff's Office, all Special Victims Bureau detectives; that is the only type of case they handle
- CARE program is the medical component within the building, the Child Abuse Referral and Exam program, run through Upstate Golisano Children's Hospital
- Every child with an allegation of abuse is offered a head-to-toe physical exam
- Two nationally accredited doctors on site, and Dr. Ann Botash, also nationally accredited in child abuse pediatrics, oversees the program
- Other community collaborating agencies make referrals, or call and ask questions if they're unsure if something should be referred or if they should call CPS; trying to be a resource to the community that way
- Self-referrals also come in, parents that aren't sure, maybe their child disclosed to them and they're not sure what to do with that
- Have a hotline during the day, and advocates will answer
- Co-location is not standard for a CAC; the more rural you get, the less funding opportunities there are, so they are not all co-located
- McMahan-Ryan is one of 12 co-located CACs in New York State
- Law enforcement on site, CPS on site; the District Attorney's Office rotates, and as of September will have an ADA from the Special Victims Bureau on site day-to-day
- Upstate Golisano Children's Hospital's CARE clinic is on site
- McMahan-Ryan staff on site include:
 - Victim advocates
 - Anti-trafficking advocates
 - Mental health therapists
 - Child fatality review team coordinator
 - Outreach and education team
- Victim advocates are the first point of contact for a child and non-offending caregiver, explain the process, answer questions, and stay with the family throughout, including through family or criminal court and beyond sentencing
 - Serve as the family's point person and liaison throughout their involvement with the center and beyond
- Mr. Romeo: Just along that line, what, when does your care end? After the court, you had said sometimes they go after that
- Ms. Bates: Our protocol is to be about three months; we do follow up for roughly that amount of time before we close a case out. It is also not uncommon for families or individuals who declined mental

health or a physical exam when everything was happening to call back; just because their case is closed doesn't mean those services are cut off from them

- Forensic interview process is a very gentle interview, in a child-focused, friendly, trauma-informed environment
- One individual is in the room with the child, a forensic interviewer, typically child protective or law enforcement, specifically trained to conduct those interviews
- After an interview, law enforcement and child protective typically meet with the family to discuss next steps, as will an advocate, to get releases signed
- CARE medical intake includes a head-to-toe physical exam that is not overly invasive unless required by the allegations, preceded by a psychosocial and emotional meeting with the non-offending caregiver and care team to ensure comprehensive services
- Mental health services are relatively new to the CAC, having been brought in-house by McMahon-Ryan about two and a half years ago with county funding support, after previously operating under an MOU with Vera House
 - Services include trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, family and group therapy when appropriate, EMDR, and play therapy
- Ms. Block: Does the therapy, is that open to the entire family, or just the child, the affected person?
- Ms. Bates: Typically it's the affected person; if there are other needs, we would refer those out. There are certain situations though where we have done the family therapy, and that's scenario specific; the clinical director actually makes that call whether that would be appropriate or not
- Ms. Block: Do you have people trained in family therapy there as well?
- Ms. Bates: The one who would be conducting the family therapy is a licensed clinical social worker, but she's got an R license, so yes, she would be able to provide that

Presentation continued:

- Outreach and education team is a distinguishing feature; McMahon-Ryan was one of the first two CACs accredited for the optional outreach and education standard, and currently offers a licensed program to over 80 schools in the county, reaching over 23,000 unduplicated children in 2025; number increases every single year
- "High Five" is the flagship program, licensed; meets Erin's Law mandate for K-8 public school students in New York State to receive information about exploitation and abuse, for free; already meeting that mandate before the law passed
- Reason for such strong relationships within the schools; called in not just to provide High Five but when a school is identifying needs, such as issues with social media, sharing nude photos, or bullying; outreach team tailors a presentation to the need for staff and/or students
- McMahon-Ryan has been receiving funding from the county for many years
- Significant portion of the operating budget
 - Overall operating budget is about \$3 million
- Over \$1 million in support from the county alone
- Without that funding would struggle
 - Funds are very flexible within the preventive budget with the county
- Helps fill in gaps with salary; helps with operating costs
 - Operating costs within the building take up a significant portion of the budget
- Footing the bill for all the other entities within the same building
 - Overarching entity that maintains the building and the lease

- Building is over a hundred years old; can be pretty expensive to maintain
- Take care of the entities that are with us; have their own tech, IT, things from their departments

Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Burtis: I've been doing this for a while, and this is the worst for me; I've been to your place before and it was very challenging, I can handle a lot of things, I cannot handle this item very well. What factors, as these cases continue to rise, I mean why, societal factors, what is your opinion? I have my opinion but I'd like to know specifically what your opinion is on why it's continued
- Ms. Bates: My opinion on that would be that it's always existed and we're just uncovering it more; it's become more openly accepted for children to come forward and share what's happening. Society as a whole is moving towards having a voice with children, and then all of the outreach work that we're doing, the National Children's Alliance is seeing that outreach and prevention education is just as important as that reactive piece; child advocacy centers have always been reactive, but that prevention work is just as imperative
 - Our outreach shows we're reaching over 20,000 students in a school year, in over 80 schools within Onondaga County; those numbers are directly related to the kids we're reaching, we're all over the map within the county providing that information and what to do if something is happening or you're concerned. We're seeing that reflected in the numbers of kiddos that are disclosing, and those numbers are increasing because I personally feel that we're making it safe for them to do so
- Mr. Burtis: I appreciate you and the McMahon-Ryan Child Advocacy Center. It's always a challenge. You're special people, you really are; I couldn't do it, not a lot of people could do it, and I appreciate everything that you do and I'm here to support you always. What about, you answered it a little bit, what about this "see something, say something" type of thing? You kind of alluded to that. Do these cases, what we're talking about, come out of neighbors, family? Obviously there's all kinds of people that could be the perpetrator; what's the normal way that this comes out, as far as being identified to us?
- Ms. Bates: It's a mixture. There's like a rainbow effect: schools, mental health providers, neighbors, family members that are concerned. We've had parents that have actually called Child Protective on themselves because they're concerned about their own child and something they may have witnessed; it really runs the gamut, we get referrals from everywhere
- Ms. Haahr: No; I would just say we do have a hotline that runs during the day that the advocates on call take those calls, and those are parents, neighbors, school professionals that are calling with scenarios to see what they should do; we're able to guide them and give them information and education and help them through that process of what's happening and what the next steps are
- Mr. Burtis: I believe I know the answer, but I want it from you: is this area specific? Is there a certain place, if we had a heat map, where most of it comes from?
- Ms. Bates: No; the only disparity that you might see if you had a heat map is barriers to access. In your rural counties, you might have smaller numbers; that doesn't mean it's happening less, it's just the access to the services itself. When you're getting more rural, those services are usually not co-located like we are, so that's another access barrier you're encountering, because you have to have all those entities come to one location
 - I don't think it's necessarily happening less all over; it's just depending on access to resources
- Mr. Romeo: Is your coverage area just Onondaga County, specific to Onondaga County?
- Ms. Bates: Yes

- Ms. Denton: You mentioned your budget is \$3 million; I don't know where the other sources are. I'm wondering, is there any concern for cuts or anything? I know with lots of different items coming up
- Ms. Bates: Yes; as a nonprofit, we have fundraisers that we do throughout the year, and we try to do a really great job with those, but a lot of our funding comes from grant funding, both state and federal, and then we obviously have county funding. We have been on pins and needles with federal funding, waiting to see if that got pulled or if they were going to lessen it, because of course they can; we have been very lucky that contract has not been reduced at this point, but we are coming to the end of it, and it's very difficult to get that federal funding for consecutive award years. I am a little concerned about our trafficking program, just because that is what our federal funds are funding right now; we have three advocates affiliated with that, serving 150 kids at any given point, and that's also Onondaga County specific
 - You also might know about our New York State OVS funding, our Office of Victim Services; we have historically had funding through them, and they gave out awards for 2025 to 2028, but that award was rescinded from us, as well as many other CACs and victim-serving agencies, a month after the contract was supposed to start, so we were left to scramble with that. They did do an extension, which we received, which was great, but we had to reapply for that Office of Victim Services funding, which we did receive for 2026 to 2028, but at a \$160,000 loss for those two years
 - I say all that to let you know that thankfully we did not have to let any staff go, so our program structure will remain the same; but we will not be able to expand, and we don't have any funds through that funding line now to give victims what we were giving before, rental assistance, locks for their home, hotel stays if they needed it, those kinds of things. The victim emergency service line is completely gone; the money we have literally only covers salary. We're going to have to be a little more creative with how we come up with funds for the victims themselves
- Mr. Kelly: To Legislator Burtis' point, this is tough; with me doing the work that I do in preschool education and early intervention services, you don't want to think about something like this. In an ideal world we wouldn't need a child advocacy center, and we wouldn't need to have this conversation, but what are the metrics that you look at in terms of terminal outcomes for the kids that require your services? You'd like to think that once they get the services they need, once these things are addressed, it doesn't happen again, but that was probably not the case; so what do you see in terms of how many cases go to prosecution, how many cases are taking kids out of an unsafe environment and finding better situations? Do you have an answer for that?
- Ms. Bates: Part of something that I want to do moving forward is find a way to pull all the different systems' information together, because as much as I would love to be able to answer that, I don't have a definitive answer, there's multiple data collection systems at play here: the district attorney uses their own system, Child Protective uses Connections, which we don't have access to, and then you have law enforcement that utilizes a couple different databases, and medical is a whole other cookie. There's a lot of things that come into it when it comes to outcomes, it's very difficult for us to know
 - What I will say is that in my experience, and I've been there for almost 13 years, prosecution could be better. As somebody that's been in this work a long time, I understand that there are limits to what our legal system can do as far as punishment and the types of charges that can be brought, but speaking from my own experience, and Ally, you can add to this if you have something different, I think what we see overall is that we would probably wish for harsher punishment; all too often we're seeing cases make their way through criminal court and not exactly have the outcome a family might be hoping for, lesser charges, lesser time, or no time served at all, maybe probation

- Mr. Kelly: I recognize that comes at a cost to the families and victims as well. Do you want to put yourself through something like that. It pains me to even ask the question, but do you see repeat instances with many individuals?
- Ms. Bates: We definitely have them; yes, unfortunately
- Mr. Romeo: Is that on both ends, as a victim and as a perpetrator?
- Ms. Bates: Correct
- Mr. Burtis: I happened to know somebody who was on a grand jury with this situation, in a very terrible situation; came in with two charges, accusations, left with 36. This person I know very well was very, very bothered by the whole thing, and I guess that is very common, so much so that a regular citizen needs counseling as a result of just sitting on a grand jury
 - To your point, they went from upset and troubled to very mad about the outcome and the courts not making sense of it at all, so it's very, very difficult. From a person I know very well to be that troubled by what they saw, and I guess the rest of the jury was equally troubled, to not be able to make any sense of the punishment that person is probably going to receive
 - I don't think these numbers are going to go down; most of us believe this is ugly and we don't want to focus on it or look at it, but when it hits you right in the face, it really can get to you when you see the whole picture. So all the more accolades to you folks for what you do continually; you're a great part of the community, very necessary, and I appreciate it
- Ms. Bates: I appreciate that, because as somebody who works in it every day, I think sometimes we're a little jaded by what we're experiencing; I was honored to be asked to come here today because I think it's important to know that we exist, and that this is happening within our county, the scope of what that looks like. So many individuals aren't even aware that we exist until something happens and they need us, which could be a good thing and a bad thing all in one; but hopefully with our prevention efforts, people will be aware of us and a little less taboo about reaching out to us for help. So this will help with that, and I appreciate the opportunity
- Mr. Kelly: We're all sitting here in full recognition that the work you do can be very challenging; one thing we've looked at within the county is supporting the folks that do the work. Are there efforts made on your part to make sure that people are getting the mental health supports they need, to make sure people are doing all right with the things that they see and encounter on a daily basis?
- Ms. Bates: Yes; our leadership team is very focused on making sure that we acknowledge that this is very difficult work. There are built-in perks for all of our staff, they're actually doing a movie afternoon today so they can have a break and watch a movie together and have some popcorn without having to worry about cases
 - They get one work-from-home day a week, because it is glorious to be able to sit in your pajamas until noon and just enter case notes, without the interaction you'd have in the office, the interruptions, the constant vicarious trauma that happens just by being present
 - There's plenty of perks like that built in; we take good care of them, which actually leads me to, we have plenty of people hitting five years and over, so our turnover is not terrible at all as far as staffing
- Mr. Romeo: I just have the one thing I was trying to think about earlier. I know that when I came to visit you guys, you had talked about a mandated reporting piece that people just didn't know about; I don't know if it was like witnessing something, I don't know if you remember that conversation, but I'm just trying to think about instances where people should be reporting and might not know that's a reportable instance. Are there gaps that you see that people should be considering when thinking about reporting, or what might be a reportable incident, even if you're not a mandated reporter, but somebody that just might see something

- Ms. Bates: Yes; I always direct, or I used to when I would take hotline calls, individuals to OCFS's website with regards to reporting, especially now because some of the parameters around that have changed, what they will accept and what they will not. I direct people to that page, but also if you're really unsure, it's okay to call and they'll tell you whether or not they can accept it. I always tell people if they don't accept it, call us and we can talk about other resources; there's other options out there for anyone concerned about a child or a family, and other ways to support that family, aside from calling in a report to law enforcement or Child Protective, if they're unable to take that case for any reason
 - On OCFS's website there is a very well-structured phone tree that tells you if you should or should not make that report

2. DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES: Amy Cunningham, Commissioner

a. INFORMATIONAL: Overview of the Youth Bureau and Discussion About DCFS Legal Team

- Youth Bureau is overseen by the Office of Children and Family Services
 - Like Child Welfare, but a different division
 - Division of Youth Development and Partnerships for Youth Success
 - Goal is to support a system of quality youth development programming throughout the state, at the county level
- Some cities also have municipal youth bureaus
- Onondaga operates what's called the Syracuse-Onondaga County youth bureau, a combination
 - Erin oversees the youth bureau, among other things
- Does staff development and training coordination
- Youth Board members are appointed by:
 - The Legislature (one seat)
 - County Executive's office
 - Mayor's office
 - Law enforcement representation
 - Towns and village representation
- Youth representation, from the City of Syracuse as well as outside the city within the county
 - That group guides the direction
- Receive about \$540,000 in youth development funding from the state
- About \$100,000 used on internal administration
- The rest RFP'd for youth development programming
- Board does the allocation review
 - Every three years, board talks about priorities and direction prior to the RFP going out
- Whether it's education, school attendance, sports, civic engagement, or career readiness
- Board decides the direction of programming for that funding cycle
- Staff includes:
 - Erin, who oversees it
 - A program coordinator who does site visits and oversees the actual programming
- An RHY (Runaway and Homeless Youth) project coordinator
- Programs currently receiving youth development funding:
 - Boys and Girls Club
 - Catholic Charities Refugee Youth Program
 - CNY Jazz Youth Orchestra
 - Huntington After School Program

- North Area Athletic Club boxing program
 - OnPoint for College
 - Big Brothers Big Sisters program
 - Camillus Town and Cicero Canteen, two suburban afterschool youth centers
 - Whole Me, a deaf enrichment after school program
- Every year, towns and villages that have received legacy funding can say whether they'd like it or not
 - Funds stuff like chlorine for pools, lifeguarding staff, rec program supplies
 - Small bits of money, but really help for those smaller towns and villages
- A couple years ago, OCFS started allocating youth sports funding
- Mission of equal opportunity to sports program access for youth throughout the county
- Two different pots of money: youth sports and education, and youth team sports
 - Youth sports and education bucket is trying to expand the definition of sports
 - Looking at stuff like yoga, dance, hiking, sports that might not typically be available to all youth
- Youth team sports funds are for team sports
 - Receive about \$300,000 for sports and education and about \$240,000 for team sports
- RFP for the next round of funding was just released
- Not sure how long the state will continue that funding
- YEOP, the youth basketball program within the city
 - Tully's Touch Soccer
- Supporting programs that don't have a lot of outside funds coming in, to allow equal access to sports for kids
- Also support:
 - Cornell Cooperative Extension summer camp, the sports component
 - Dunbar Leagues
 - RISE, the refugee youth sports
 - Let's Be Great tournament over the summer
 - Boys' sports in the city school district
- Runaway and homeless youth programming
- Receive just under \$300,000 from OCFS for that
- Very small amount put toward administration
- Rest goes to Booth House, the runaway youth shelter, and the Barnabas Transitional Independent Living program
- Booth House is a short-term shelter for 12 to 17-year-olds
 - Youth can self-refer, show up there
 - Schools can refer them there
 - Law enforcement will bring youth there sometimes
 - 211 also refers youth to Booth House
 - Generally a 30-day program
 - Stays can be extended up to 120 days
- Staff work to find them something permanent, whether working with their families to get them home, or finding other options
- Mostly, getting them back home is the goal, within those 120 days
- Not many stay that long, it's closer to 30 days
- Average about eight youth at a time
- Barnabas is for older youth, 16 to 22 year olds

- Transitional independent living, two-bedroom apartments
- Located where the old Booth House was, on Midland Road
- Girls, males and females can be part of it
- 12 month stay, can be extended up to 18
- Goal is to find permanent housing and employment for those youth, or schooling, whatever the next step is
 - Both programs offer case management, living skills
- When youth are in Booth House or Barnabas, must be engaged in school or work
- If they come into Booth House not engaged, will get them engaged, but that's one of the goals/requirements
- Within the youth bureau framework and OCFS, there's a very structured oversight process with report forms and site visits
- About 10 years ago, OCFS pulled in the results-based accountability framework
- Great framework for population-level outcomes as well as individual programs
- Expanded that process to the whole department many years ago
- Started within the youth bureau, where the program monitors first sat
- Since expanded that team of program monitors to oversee contracted agencies going on the site visits
 - Program monitors visit once or twice a year
 - Meet with staff
 - Meet with participants
 - Talk to them and evaluate the programs
 - Report back to the board

Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Kelly: On the runaway housing and transitional housing, I imagine a large component of that would be some myriad of factors involving substance use, mental health, potential abuse as well; what do you see in terms of demographics coming in, and what services are available to help guide people through that?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yeah, the transitional independent living can be any of those situations you said, some sort of substance use within the family, not necessarily the individual, but the individual wants to be out on their own independently; some sort of separation from the family, neglect, abuse earlier in their lifetime, and now transitioning as an adult, really need that extra support outside of that unit
 - Salvation Army is the agency that runs both of these, and has an extensive array of services within the programs but also outside the programs that individuals working through the transitional independent living program can access; case management, mental health services they can be referred to, substance use, and domestic violence services if they are still working to maintain a relationship with the family where that may have been an obstacle; and then employment and schooling, making sure that they're on track to be successful adults
- Mr. Romeo: The other piece that I had on here was the legal team coming over to Children and Family; can you just talk about what the status of staffing is in terms of recruitment, retention, or expansion, and what that might be?
- Ms. Cunningham: We currently have six full-time attorneys, a combination of contracted attorneys as well as county attorneys, and then one deputy chief who oversees that team, so seven attorneys total; all of the parts in Family Court are covered

- We are continuously recruiting to fill the county positions to be county employees, so that we can move away from the contracted positions; we have a couple interviews set up, we have a couple more resumes coming in. We're doing recruitment at the law schools here in Syracuse as well as Buffalo, Albany, across the state law schools, trying to find some with family court programs; not many of them have them, so encouraging SU to maybe pick that up again
- Looking at the internship and externship programs at SU Law, we have a third-year law student possibly coming in the spring to do an externship; really just engaging with the community more, to get the word out
- Mr. Kelly: If I remember, these positions fairly recently moved over from Law, correct? Has that had the desired effect to bring them into the department?
- Ms. Cunningham: Absolutely; they sit right on the seventh floor with our team, they prepare caseworkers, meet with caseworkers more regularly. I see them walking around the floor all the time now, that wasn't really the situation before; we can engage with them, walk up and talk to them, whereas they were behind several locked doors before and it was kind of difficult. But yes, it's been great, we meet, we have weekly meetings
- Mr. Romeo: If we do get full staffing from the county employee perspective, do we foresee keeping some of those other contracts to help with capacity?
- Ms. Cunningham: We would keep kind of like a per diem situation or short-term, whether we needed somebody to fill in writing petitions now and then; yes, we would absolutely keep at least one

C. Adjournment

A motion was made by Ms. Block, seconded by Mr. Burtis, to adjourn the meeting; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:56 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



HASSINA K. ADAMS, Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: **HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**
DATE: **AUGUST 19, 2026**

NAME (Please Print)	DEPT/AGENCY/ORGANIZATION
Rebecca Morgan	Comptroller
Erin Bates	McMahon Ryan OAC
Ally Haahr	McMahon Ryan OAC
Amy Cunningham	DCFS