

# **WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE**

**2020 REGULAR SESSION**

**ENROLLED**

**Committee Substitute**

**for**

**House Bill 4094**

BY DELEGATES HILL, PACK, SUMMERS, ESPINOSA,  
MANDT, ROWAN, WORRELL, FLEISCHAUER, PUSHKIN,  
C. THOMPSON AND WALKER

[Passed March 6, 2020; in effect ninety days from passage.]



1 AN ACT to amend the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, by adding thereto a new article,  
2 designated §49-9-101, §49-9-102, §49-9-103, §49-9-104, §49-9-105, §49-9-106, §49-9-  
3 107, §49-9-108, §49-9-109, and §49-9-110, all relating to the Foster Care Ombudsman  
4 Program; continuing the Foster Care Ombudsman; providing authority to the ombudsman;  
5 permitting access to foster care children; providing access to certain records; providing  
6 the ombudsman with subpoena authority; requiring government entities to cooperate with  
7 the ombudsman; requiring investigations to remain confidential; providing the ombudsman  
8 with a limitation of liability; setting forth criminal penalties; providing funding for the  
9 ombudsman.

*Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:*

**ARTICLE 9. FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM.**

**§49-9-101. The Foster Care Ombudsman.**

1 (a) There is continued within the Office of the Inspector General the position of the West  
2 Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman. The Office of the Inspector General shall employ a Foster Care  
3 Ombudsman to affect the purposes of this article.

4 (b) In addition to the duties provided in §9-5-27 of this code, the duties of the Foster Care  
5 Ombudsman include, but are not limited to, the following:

6 (1) Establishing a statewide procedure to receive, investigate, and resolve complaints filed  
7 on behalf of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent, or, on the Foster Care Ombudsman's  
8 own initiative, on behalf of a foster child, relating to action, inaction, or decisions of the state  
9 agency, child-placing agency, or residential care facility which may adversely affect the foster  
10 child, foster parent, or kinship parent;

11 (2) Review periodically and make appropriate recommendations for the policies and  
12 procedures established by any state agency providing services to foster children, foster parents,  
13 kinship parents, including, but not limited to, the system of providing foster care and treatment;

14 (3) Pursuant to an investigation, provide assistance to a foster child, foster parent, or  
15 kinship parent who the Foster Care Ombudsman determines is in need of assistance, including,  
16 but not limited to, collaborating with an agency, provider, or others on behalf of the best interests  
17 of the foster child;

18 (4) Recommend action when appropriate, including, but not limited to, undertaking  
19 legislative advocacy and making proposals for systemic reform and formal legal action, in order  
20 to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of foster children who reside in this state;

21 (5) Conduct programs of public education when necessary and appropriate;

22 (6) Have input into the creation of, and thereafter make recommendations consistent with,  
23 the foster children, foster parents, and kinship parents bill of rights;

24 (7) Take appropriate steps to advise the public of the services of the Foster Care  
25 Ombudsman, the purpose of the ombudsman, and procedures to contact the office; and

26 (8) Make inquiries and obtain assistance and information from other state governmental  
27 agencies or persons as the Foster Care Ombudsman requires for the discharge of his or her  
28 duties.

**§49-9-102. Investigation of complaints.**

1 (a) Upon receipt of a complaint filed on behalf of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship  
2 parent, on his or her own initiative or by court order within the scope of the Foster Care  
3 Ombudsman Program, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall investigate, except as provided in §49-  
4 9-102(c), any act, practice, policy, or procedure of any state agency, child-placing agency, or  
5 residential care facility which affects the health, safety, welfare, or rights of a foster child, a foster  
6 parent, or a kinship parent.

7 (b) Investigative activities of the Foster Care Ombudsman include, but are not limited to:  
8 information gathering, mediation, negotiation, informing parties of the status of the investigation,  
9 notification to any aggrieved party of alternative processes, reporting of suspected violations to a

10 licensing or certifying agency, and the reporting of suspected criminal violations to the appropriate  
11 authorities.

12 (c) The Foster Care Ombudsman need not investigate any complaint upon determining  
13 that:

14 (1) The complaint is trivial, frivolous, vexatious, or not made in good faith;

15 (2) The complaint has been too long delayed to justify present investigation;

16 (3) The resources available, considering the established priorities, are insufficient for an  
17 adequate investigation;

18 (4) The matter complained of is not within the investigatory authority of the Foster Care  
19 Ombudsman; or

20 (5) A real or apparent conflict of interest exists and no other person within the office is  
21 available to investigate the complaint in an impartial manner.

22 (d) The Office of the Inspector General and other appropriate state governmental agencies  
23 may establish and implement cooperative agreements for receiving, processing, responding to,  
24 and resolving complaints involving state governmental agencies under the provisions of this  
25 section.

26 (e) Beginning with the third quarter of 2020, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall submit a  
27 written report to the Governor containing:

28 (1) The number of complaints;

29 (2) The types of complaints;

30 (3) The location of the complaints;

31 (4) How the complaints are resolved; and

32 (5) Any other information the Foster Care Ombudsman feels is appropriate.

33 (f) Beginning in December 2020, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall summarize the  
34 quarterly reports and present that information to the Legislative Oversight Commission on Health  
35 and Human Resources Accountability.

**§49-9-103. Access to foster care children.**

1           (a) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall, with proper identification, have access to a foster  
2 family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility for the purposes  
3 of investigations of a complaint. The Foster Care Ombudsman may enter a foster family home, a  
4 state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility at a time appropriate to the  
5 complaint. The visit may be announced in advance or be made unannounced as appropriate to  
6 the complaint under investigation. Upon entry, the Foster Care Ombudsman shall promptly and  
7 personally advise the person in charge of his or her presence. If entry is refused by the person in  
8 charge, the Foster Care Ombudsman may apply to the magistrate court of the county in which a  
9 foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility is located  
10 for a warrant authorizing entry, and the court shall issue an appropriate warrant if it finds good  
11 cause therefor.

12           (b) For activities other than those specifically related to the investigation of a complaint,  
13 the Foster Care Ombudsman, upon proper identification, shall have access to a foster family  
14 home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility between the hours of  
15 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. in order to:

16           (1) Provide information on the Foster Care Ombudsman Program to a foster child, foster  
17 parents, or kinship parents;

18           (2) Inform a foster child, a foster parent, or a kinship parent of his or her rights and  
19 entitlements, and his or her corresponding obligations, under applicable federal and state laws;  
20 and

21           (3) Direct the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship parents to appropriate legal  
22 resources;

23           (c) Access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential  
24 care facility under this section shall be deemed to include the right to private communication with  
25 the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship parents.

26 (d) A Foster Care Ombudsman who has access to a foster family home, a state agency,  
27 a child-placing agency, or a residential care facility under this section shall not enter the living  
28 area of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent without identifying himself or herself to the  
29 foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent. After identifying himself or herself, an ombudsman  
30 shall be permitted to enter the living area of a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent unless  
31 that foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent communicates on that particular occasion the  
32 foster child, foster parents', or kinship parents' desire to prevent the ombudsman from entering.  
33 A foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent has the right to terminate, at any time, any visit by  
34 the Foster Care Ombudsman.

35 (e) Access to a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a residential  
36 care facility pursuant to this section includes the right to tour the facility unescorted.

**§49-9-104. Access to records.**

1 (a) The Foster Care Ombudsman is allowed access to any foster child's, foster parents'  
2 or kinship parents' records, including medical records reasonably necessary to any investigation,  
3 without fee.

4 (b) The Foster Care Ombudsman is allowed access to all records of any foster family  
5 home, state agency, child-placing agency, or residential care facility that is reasonably necessary  
6 for the investigation of a complaint, including, but not limited to, incident reports; dietary records;  
7 policies and procedures that a foster family home, a state agency, a child-placing agency, or a  
8 residential care facility are required to maintain under federal or state law; admission agreements;  
9 staffing schedules; or any document depicting the actual staffing pattern.

**§49-9-105. Subpoena powers.**

1 (a) The Foster Care Ombudsman may, in the course of any investigation:

2 (1) Apply to the circuit court of the appropriate county or the Circuit Court of Kanawha  
3 County for the issuance of a subpoena to compel at a specific time and place, by subpoena, the  
4 appearance, before a person authorized to administer oaths, the sworn testimony of any person

5 whom the Foster Care Ombudsman reasonably believes may be able to give information relating  
6 to a matter under investigation; or

7 (2) Apply to the circuit court of the appropriate county or the Circuit Court of Kanawha  
8 County for the issuance of a subpoena duces tecum to compel any person to produce at a specific  
9 time and place, before a person authorized to administer oaths, any documents, books, records,  
10 papers, objects, or other evidence which the Foster Care Ombudsman reasonably believes may  
11 relate to a matter under investigation.

12 (b) A subpoena or subpoena duces tecum applied for by the Foster Care Ombudsman  
13 may not be issued until a circuit court judge in term or vacation thereof has personally reviewed  
14 the application and accompanying affidavits and approved, by a signed order entered by the  
15 judge, the issuance of the subpoena or subpoena duces tecum. Subpoenas or subpoenas duces  
16 tecum applied for pursuant to this section may be issued on an ex parte basis following review  
17 and approval of the application by the judge in term or vacation thereof.

18 (c) The Attorney General shall, upon request, provide legal counsel and services to the  
19 Foster Care Ombudsman in all administrative proceedings and in all proceedings in any circuit  
20 court and the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

**§49-9-106. Cooperation among government departments or agencies.**

1 (a) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall have access to the records of any state  
2 government agency reasonably necessary to any investigation. The Foster Care Ombudsman  
3 shall be notified of and be allowed to observe any survey conducted by a government agency  
4 affecting the health, safety, welfare, or rights of the foster child, the foster parents, or the kinship  
5 parents.

6 (b) The Foster Care Ombudsman shall develop procedures to refer any complaint to any  
7 appropriate state government department, agency, or office.



8 (c) When abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a foster child is suspected, the Foster Care  
9 Ombudsman shall make a referral to the Bureau for Children and Families, Office of Health Facility  
10 Licensure and Certification, or both.

11 (d) Any state government department, agency, or office that responds to a complaint  
12 referred to it by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program shall make available to the Foster Care  
13 Ombudsman copies of inspection reports and plans of correction, and notices of any citations and  
14 sanctions levied against the foster family home, the child-placing agency, or the residential care  
15 facility identified in the complaint.

**§49-9-107. Confidentiality of investigations.**

1 (a) Information relating to any investigation of a complaint that contains the identity of the  
2 complainant or foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent shall remain confidential except:

3 (1) Where disclosure is authorized in writing by the complainant foster child, foster parent,  
4 kinship parent, or the guardian.

5 (2) Where disclosure is necessary to the Bureau for Children and Families in order for  
6 such office to determine the appropriateness of initiating an investigation regarding potential  
7 abuse, neglect, or emergency circumstances; or

8 (3) Where disclosure is necessary to the Office of Health Facility Licensure and  
9 Certification in order for such office to determine the appropriateness of initiating an investigation  
10 to determine facility compliance with applicable rules of licensure, certification, or both.

11 (b) Notwithstanding any other section within this article, all information, records, and  
12 reports received by or developed by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program which relate to a  
13 foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent, including written material identifying a foster child,  
14 foster parent, or kinship parent, are confidential pursuant to §49-5-101 *et seq.* of this code, and  
15 are not subject to the provisions of §29B-1-1 *et seq.* of this code, and may not be disclosed or  
16 released by the Foster Care Ombudsman Program, except under the circumstances enumerated  
17 in this section.

18 (c) Nothing in this section prohibits the preparation and submission by the Foster Care  
19 Ombudsman of statistical data and reports, as required to implement the provisions of this article  
20 or any applicable federal law, exclusive of any material that identifies any foster child, foster  
21 parent, kinship parent, or complainant.

22 (d) The Inspector General shall have access to the records and files of the Foster Care  
23 Ombudsman Program to verify its effectiveness and quality where the identity of any complainant  
24 or foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent is not disclosed.

**§49-9-108. Limitations on liability.**

1 (a) The Foster Care Ombudsman participating in an investigation carried out pursuant to  
2 this article who is performing his or her duties is immune from civil liability that otherwise might  
3 result by reason of his or her participation in the investigation, as long as such participation is not  
4 violative of any applicable law, rule, or regulation, and done within the scope of his or her  
5 employment and in good faith.

6 (b) If an act or omission by the Foster Care Ombudsman or an act in good faith pursuant  
7 to a specific foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent complaint causes a foster child's, foster  
8 parents', or kinship parents' rights to be violated, no foster family home, state agency, child-  
9 placing agency, or residential care facility, its owners, administrators, officers, director, agents,  
10 consultants, employees, or any member of management may be held civilly liable as a result of  
11 the act or omission.

**§49-9-109. Willful interference; retaliation; penalties.**

1 (a) An individual who willfully interferes with or impedes the Foster Care Ombudsman in  
2 the performance of his or her official duties shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction  
3 thereof, shall be fined not more than \$100.

4 (b) An individual who institutes or commits a discriminatory, disciplinary, retaliatory, or  
5 reprisal action against a foster child, foster parent, or kinship parent for having filed a complaint  
6 with or provided information in good faith to the Foster Care Ombudsman in carrying out the duties

7 pursuant to this article is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not  
8 more than \$100.

9 (c) An individual violating the provisions of subsection (a) or (b) of this section is, for the  
10 second or any subsequent offense under either of these subsections, guilty of a misdemeanor  
11 and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not more than \$250. Each day of a continuing violation  
12 after conviction shall be considered a separate offense.

13 (d) Nothing in this section infringes upon the rights of an employer to supervise, discipline,  
14 or terminate an employee for other reasons.

**§49-9-110. Funding for Foster Care Ombudsman Program.**

1 The Foster Care Ombudsman Program shall receive such funds appropriated by the  
2 Legislature for the operation of the program.



The Joint Committee on Enrolled Bills hereby certifies that the foregoing bill is correctly enrolled.

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*Chairman, House Committee*

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*Chairman, Senate Committee*

Originating in the House.

In effect ninety days from passage.

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*Clerk of the House of Delegates*

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*Clerk of the Senate*

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*Speaker of the House of Delegates*

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*President of the Senate*

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The within ..... this the.....  
day of ....., 2020.

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*Governor*