

# Office of the Child and Youth Advocate



## Annual Report 2023-24

Cover Images by Young Artists:

**Hayley**

(Drawing of a puppy)

**Emily**

(Drawing of a bottle pouring a rainbow)

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## Message from the Child and Youth Advocate

I am pleased to present the 2023-24 Annual Performance Report for the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA). This report has been prepared in accordance with the **Transparency and Accountability Act** provisions for a Category Two entity. As the Child and Youth Advocate, I recognize my obligations under this Act, and I am accountable for the results in this report.

This is the first report on the latest Business Plan which outlines our goals and objectives for 2023-26. The work and initiatives presented in this report profile the efforts and dedication of all OCYA staff.

This year we connected with over 1,600 children, youth, parents, post-secondary students, professionals and members of community groups through our public education mandate. We also responded to over 500 requests for individual advocacy assistance, and through our systemic advocacy, we launched a review of the provision of mental health services for young people in the province.

All of the tenets of our work aim to advance, champion, and protect the rights of children and youth in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Sincerely,



**Linda Clemens-Spurrell**  
Child and Youth Advocate





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# Overview

## Mandate

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) is an Independent Statutory Office of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador. We are responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of all children and youth in the province and provide public oversight of government programs and services. We advocate to ensure children and youth have access to services they are entitled to, that their issues receive appropriate attention, and their voices are heard in matters affecting them.

We are mandated by legislation through the **Child and Youth Advocate Act**, to protect and advance the rights of children and youth. Our advocacy work is also guided by the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** and other policies and laws. Our primary clients are children and youth under the age of 19. If a young person is in extended care or custody, that age range is extended to the age of 21.

We help children and youth by standing up for their rights in dealing with child serving systems. We help young people speak up for themselves, we speak up with them, or we speak up for them.

We encourage young people to contact us if they are having an issue accessing services, if they feel their rights are not being respected, or if their viewpoint is not being heard. We also work closely with family members, professionals, other supporters, and champions working on behalf of children and youth.

We offer individual advocacy, as well as systemic advocacy where groups of young people are affected. We investigate and review complaints, and deliver public education on the rights of children and youth. The voices and rights of young people are integral to the work we do and guide all of our advocacy efforts.



Section 3 of the **Child and Youth Advocate Act** states the Office is established:

- (a) to ensure that the rights and interests of children and youth are protected and advanced and their views are heard and considered;
- (b) to ensure that children and youth have access to services and that their complaints relating to the provision of those services receive appropriate attention;
- (c) to provide information and advice to the government, agencies of the government and to communities about the availability, effectiveness, responsiveness and relevance of services to children and youth;
- (c.1) to review and investigate matters affecting the rights and interests of children and youth; and
- (d) generally, to act as an advocate of the rights and interests of children and youth.

## **Financial Information**

The budget approved for Fiscal Year 2023-24 was \$1,493,700.

## **Staff**

Our dedicated staff are passionate about standing up for the rights of children and youth. In addition to the Child and Youth Advocate, there are 13 permanent staff members on our team with diverse educational and professional backgrounds. These backgrounds include social work, social sciences, education, and psychology. Our administration staff serve important support roles to ensure advocacy and investigative staff can dedicate their efforts directly to issues affecting children and youth every day. Our office is located in St. John's, however we provide services throughout the province.

The OCYA is also a Field Education Site for the School of Social Work, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and the office was pleased to have a student in the 2023-24 fiscal year.



## What We Do

### Individual Advocacy:

All children and youth have rights, and these rights create expectations about the responses and services young people deserve. When we become aware that a child or youth is experiencing barriers to these rights and services, and that responses are not sufficient, we advocate on an individual level for that young person.

### Systemic Advocacy:

Systemic issues affect groups of young people. These systemic issues may involve gaps, changes, or reductions involving services, programs, policies, or laws. When we see broad issues that negatively impact the rights of children and youth, we advocate for broader systemic change to benefit these groups of young people. We will do this work regardless if anyone makes a complaint or request to our office.

### Reviews/Investigations:

We may formally investigate or review a matter on behalf of a child or youth or group of children or youth. This is a very serious matter which may involve witnesses being required to provide information under oath or affirmation. By law, we can compel the disclosure of documents and case files to this office and we may review policies, legislation, and other information. After determining the facts, we typically make recommendations for changes in policies, services, programs, and/or laws to better protect and advance children's rights in the future.

### Education and Outreach:

We are mandated to provide education on children's human rights. In this role, we are able to connect with children and youth, to learn directly about their issues at the community level, and to hear from others who are committed to improving services and responses to young people in Newfoundland and Labrador. In our education role, we may offer sessions to schools or youth groups, provide book readings to young children on rights-based themes, speak at conferences, deliver professional development workshops, and participate in cultural and community events.



## Our Vision

**A province where every child's and youth's rights are understood, protected, and respected.**

## Our Values

<b>Integrity:</b>	We act honestly, ethically, and sincerely in all areas of our work.
<b>Equity</b>	We work to ensure all young persons have access to the services they require and advocate for systems to be responsive to their individual needs.
<b>Inclusiveness:</b>	We provide a safe space for all children and youth where differences in experiences and expression are valued and respected.
<b>Relationships:</b>	We listen to learn and practice person-centred approaches that build mutual trust and understanding.
<b>Leadership:</b>	We strive to be an agent of positive change by promoting the rights of children and youth while pursuing fairness, transparency, and accountability within the systems that serve them.



# Highlights and Accomplishments

We advocate for the rights of young people to be respected and protected. During fiscal year 2023-24, we responded to over 500 requests for assistance. We are also mandated to provide education on child and youth rights. This past fiscal year we facilitated 50 engagement and outreach sessions for children, youth, and community groups.

## Systemic and Investigation Work

There were three investigations and five reviews ongoing throughout the year. Pursuant to Section 29(1) of the **Child and Youth Advocate Act**, the Advocate may publish these reports where it is in the interest of children and youth, in the public interest, or in the interest of a person, department, or agency of the government.

## Submissions

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate completed the following submissions this fiscal year:

- ▶ Submission to the Department of Education regarding the Early Learning Action Plan (July 2023)
- ▶ Submission to the Honourable Robert A. Fowler (R) on the Review of the Statutory Offices of the House of Assembly (May 2023)

## Review

On March 25, 2024, the Child and Youth Advocate issued a News Release (<https://www.childandyouthadvocate.nl.ca/files/NewsRelease-MentalHealthServicesPublicCall.pdf>) inviting feedback regarding mental health services for children and youth. This review is complex and work will be ongoing throughout the next fiscal year.



**Not being HEARD?**

**We LISTEN!**

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Invites Feedback About Mental Health Services to Children and Youth in NL

We'd like to hear from those who have experience with the mental health system for children and youth in Newfoundland and Labrador. This initiative will be ongoing from May to December 2024.

If you would like to share your experiences with us, please reach out to us:

Telephone: 709-753-3888  
Toll Free: 1-877-753-3888  
Email: [office@coya.nl.ca](mailto:office@coya.nl.ca)  
Text: 709-682-CCYA (6292)

We also welcome virtual meetings and Video Relay Service calls.

We will be travelling throughout the province, so please reach out if you'd like to meet with us in person.

\*Please Note: All feedback will be confidential as per section 13 of the Child and Youth Advocate Act



## Engagement and Outreach

During 2023-24, we engaged in 50 outreach sessions reaching over 1,600 children, youth, parents, post-secondary students, professionals and community groups.

### School Outreach

During 2023-24 we held outreach sessions with over 420 students ranging from grades one to 12 in the following schools:

- ▶ Prince of Wales Collegiate (as well as their Social Justice Group)
- ▶ Octagon Pond Elementary
- ▶ Eastpoint Elementary
- ▶ Learys Brook Junior High
- ▶ St. Francis of Assisi School
- ▶ St. John Bosco School
- ▶ St. Georges Elementary

### Community Outreach

During the fiscal year, we visited and delivered sessions throughout the community. We engaged with over 730 young people and adults at:

- ▶ Community Youth Network provincial meeting
- ▶ Choices for Youth Family Fun Day
- ▶ Association for New Canadians summer camp and summer enrichment sessions
- ▶ Franco Jeunes de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador
- ▶ Sharing Our Cultures open house
- ▶ Daybreak Parent Child Centre
- ▶ City of St. John's Move It Event
- ▶ Turtle Island Child Care Centre



- ▶ Teen Healthy Relationships Program through Planned Parenthood – NL Sexual Health Centre
- ▶ Shea Heights Community Centre, City of St. John's
- ▶ Newfoundland and Labrador Youth Centre, Whitbourne

We also hosted booths at the Foster Families NL Annual Conference, Sharing our Cultures event at the Rooms, and the Canadian Council and Rehabilitation and Work National Accessibility Fair.

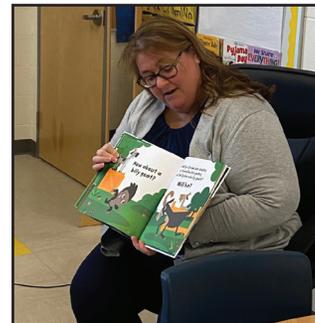
## Professionals and Post-Secondary Students

We were pleased to connect with and present to over 430 professionals and post-secondary students at:

- ▶ College of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador
- ▶ Eastern Academy
- ▶ Royal Newfoundland Constabulary
- ▶ Interprofessional Education Memorial University of Newfoundland
- ▶ Memorial University of Newfoundland School of Social Work
- ▶ Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development orientation
- ▶ Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work

## National Child Day

On November 20th each year, Canada celebrates National Child Day in recognition of the country's commitment to upholding the rights of children. The day also recognizes two historic events: the 1959 signing of the **UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child** and the adoption of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** in 1989. This is a very important day for our office and we celebrate for a full week. We broadcasted radio ads, created a poster, tweeted, and visited young people at Eastpoint Elementary, Sharing Our Cultures, Learys Brook Junior High, St. Francis of Assisi School, Daybreak, St. John Bosco School, and St. Georges Elementary.



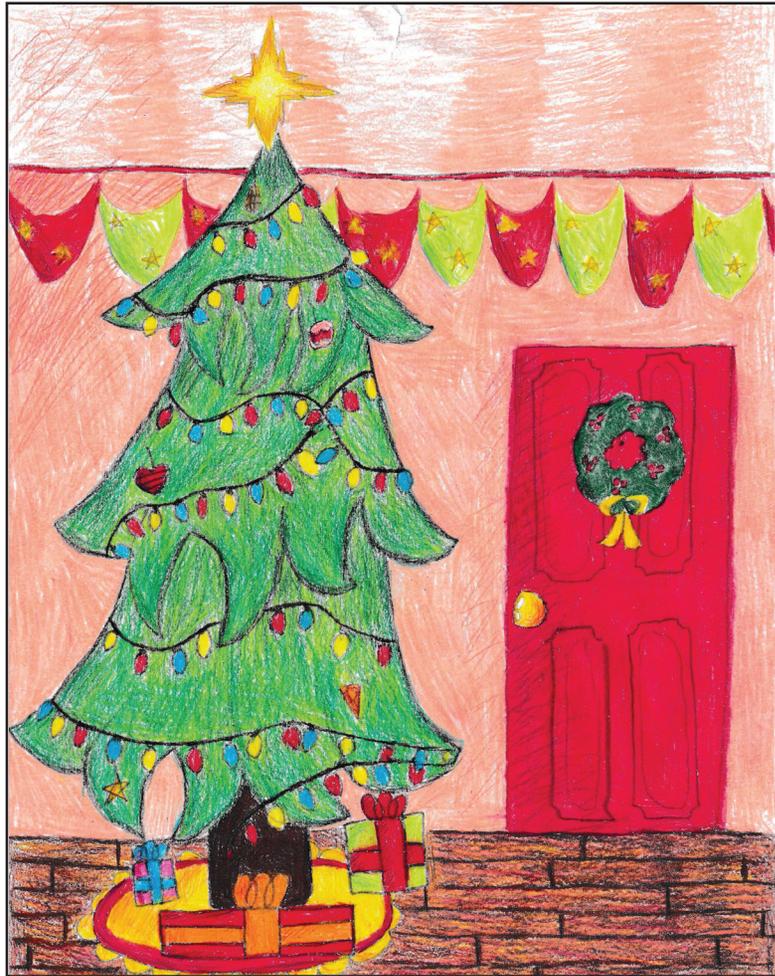
## Young Artist Program

We always want to hear directly from young people. We are here to listen when they have concerns they require assistance with and when they have talents they want to share with us. Our Young Artist Program exists to help create an awareness of our office among young people as well as to celebrate the artistic talents of young people throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. All year long we accept art from young people under 21 years old, and we send out a prize package of promotional materials to each person who submits art. We display this art on our Young Artist Wall of Fame, and use it on our website, social media, newsletters, reports and other resource materials about children's rights. We are interested in artistic creations such as drawings, paintings, pictures, and poetry.

If you would like to learn more please visit <https://www.childandyouthadvocate.nl.ca/YoungArtistProgram.htm>.



In November 2023, we launched a special Holiday Card Contest as part of our Young Artist Program. We were so pleased with the response, having received hundreds of amazing designs from all over the province. It was a challenge to just pick two winning entries. The winners were Rosemary Parsons and Emma Fitzpatrick.



By Young Artist Rosemary Parsons



By Young Artist Emma Fitzpatrick



## Supporting Initiatives Important to Young People

During each year, our Office participates in activities that support issues of importance to young people. This includes attending events in the community. Here are some photos of us supporting important initiatives.



# Continuous Learning and Information Sharing

We are committed to lifelong learning and continually seek professional development opportunities as we strive to advocate for the rights of children and youth. This fiscal year we participated in a variety of learning and information sharing opportunities. Topics included:

- ▶ Internet Child Exploitation (Royal Newfoundland Constabulary and Royal Canadian Mounted Police)
- ▶ Indigenous Approaches to Child Welfare
- ▶ Infusing Equity in Child Welfare
- ▶ Understanding Coercive Control: Impact and Supportive Responses
- ▶ The Impact and Potential of Regional Integrated Youth Services in NL
- ▶ Youth Mental Health & Addictions Treatment Practices and Barriers
- ▶ The Elders Speak: Two-Eyed Seeing & Two-Eared Listening
- ▶ From Wisdom to Treatment: Elder-led Programming in Youth Mental Health Substance Use Services
- ▶ Keira's Legacy of Hope: Judicial Training on Family Violence
- ▶ Promoting Excellence in Child Legal Representation: From Theory to Practice
- ▶ Child Rights Impact Assessment
- ▶ Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care
- ▶ Naloxone Training
- ▶ Affirmation Under Attack: How Can We Support Queer and Trans Youth - Safe Guards Training
- ▶ Jordan's Principle: Back to Basics
- ▶ Human Trafficking - The Newcomer Lens
- ▶ Social Work in Autism Services: A Family Centred Approach
- ▶ The Journey Project
- ▶ Toward Reconciliation: An Overview of Indigenous Histories Across Canada
- ▶ End Homelessness St. John's
- ▶ Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' Of Care
- ▶ Jacob Puddister Memorial Foundation Session
- ▶ Evidence Informed Policy: Advancing Health Equity for All Children



We thank those who offered these sessions and especially those whom we visited or visited us throughout the fiscal year. In addition to the above sessions we attended these conferences during the fiscal year:

- ▶ Symposium on Child and Youth Trauma
- ▶ Reducing Harms in Atlantic Communities: Synthesizing Voices in Health Equity, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder & Trauma
- ▶ International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child
- ▶ Newfoundland and Labrador Harm Reduction Summit
- ▶ Child and Youth Care Association Conference



# Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates

The Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA) is an association of children’s advocates from across Canada who have mandates to advance children and youth rights, as well as to promote their voices. Through the Council, Advocates identify areas of mutual concern and work to develop ways to address issues at a national level. Members share best practice, information, resources, and facilitate joint learning opportunities for staff in all jurisdictions. As a small jurisdiction, Newfoundland and Labrador benefits greatly from the Council’s network and resources.

In 2023, the CCCYA continued to monitor the Children’s Health Study conducted by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. In 2022, the CCCYA made a submission to this Standing Committee which emphasized the importance of applying child rights principles in its work and in recommendations proposed.

The CCCYA President, Dr. Lisa Broda, participated in the bi-annual meeting of the Forum of Ministers on Human Rights (FMHR). Members are federal, provincial and territorial Ministers and its mandate is to share information and discuss human rights and to provide direction to other levels of government. This year’s FMHR included a discussion of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC) and implementation of the 2022 Concluding Observations of the Committee on the rights of the child. After the meetings, a letter was forwarded on behalf of the CCCYA, to the Prime Minister and Minister officials calling upon the Government of Canada to develop a detailed Action Plan to implement its many obligations under the **UNCRC**.

The CCCYA continues to monitor the progress of Bill S-282 **An Act respecting a national strategy for children and youth** as it represents an important step in safeguarding children’s rights. The CCCYA will avail of any opportunities for further consultation or input.

All reports and submissions can be found on the CCCYA website <https://www.cccya.ca>.



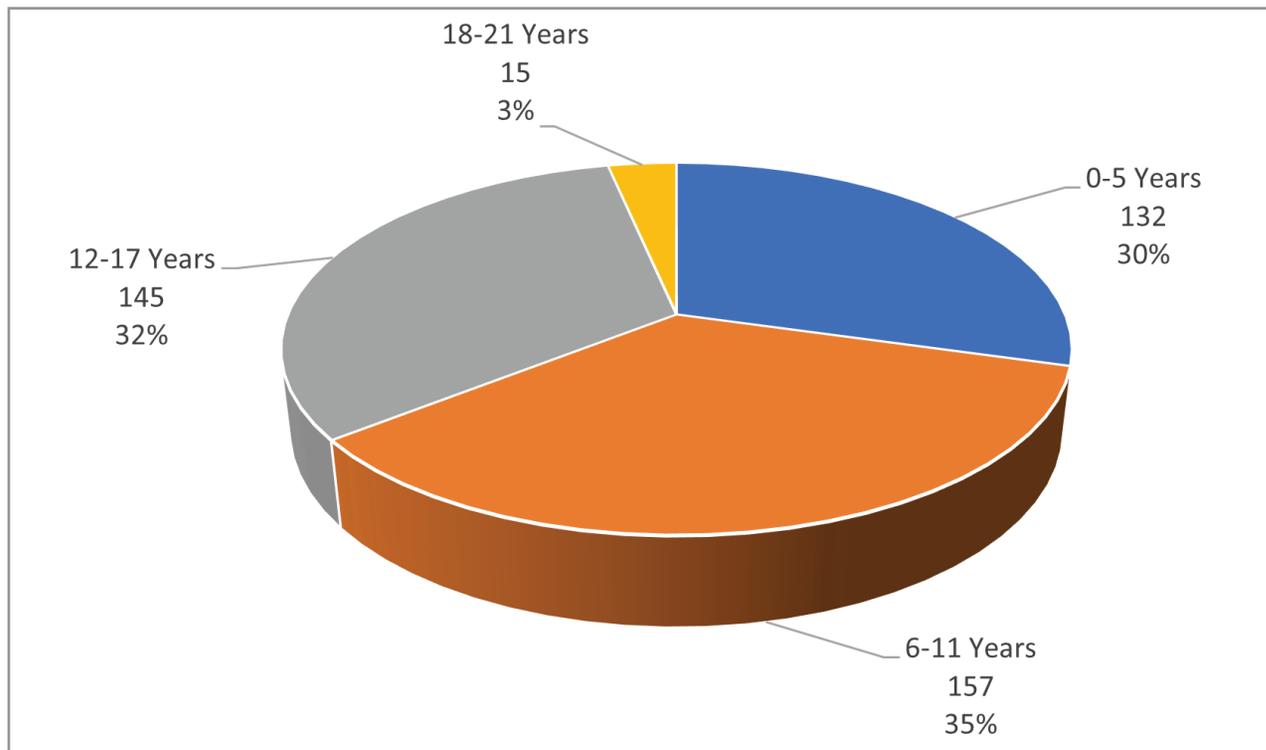
# OCYA Statistical Highlights

## Service Delivery and Performance

We responded to over 500 requests for services and advocacy assistance. This includes 67 shorter-term requests for information as well as assistance with navigating various systems of government and its agencies.

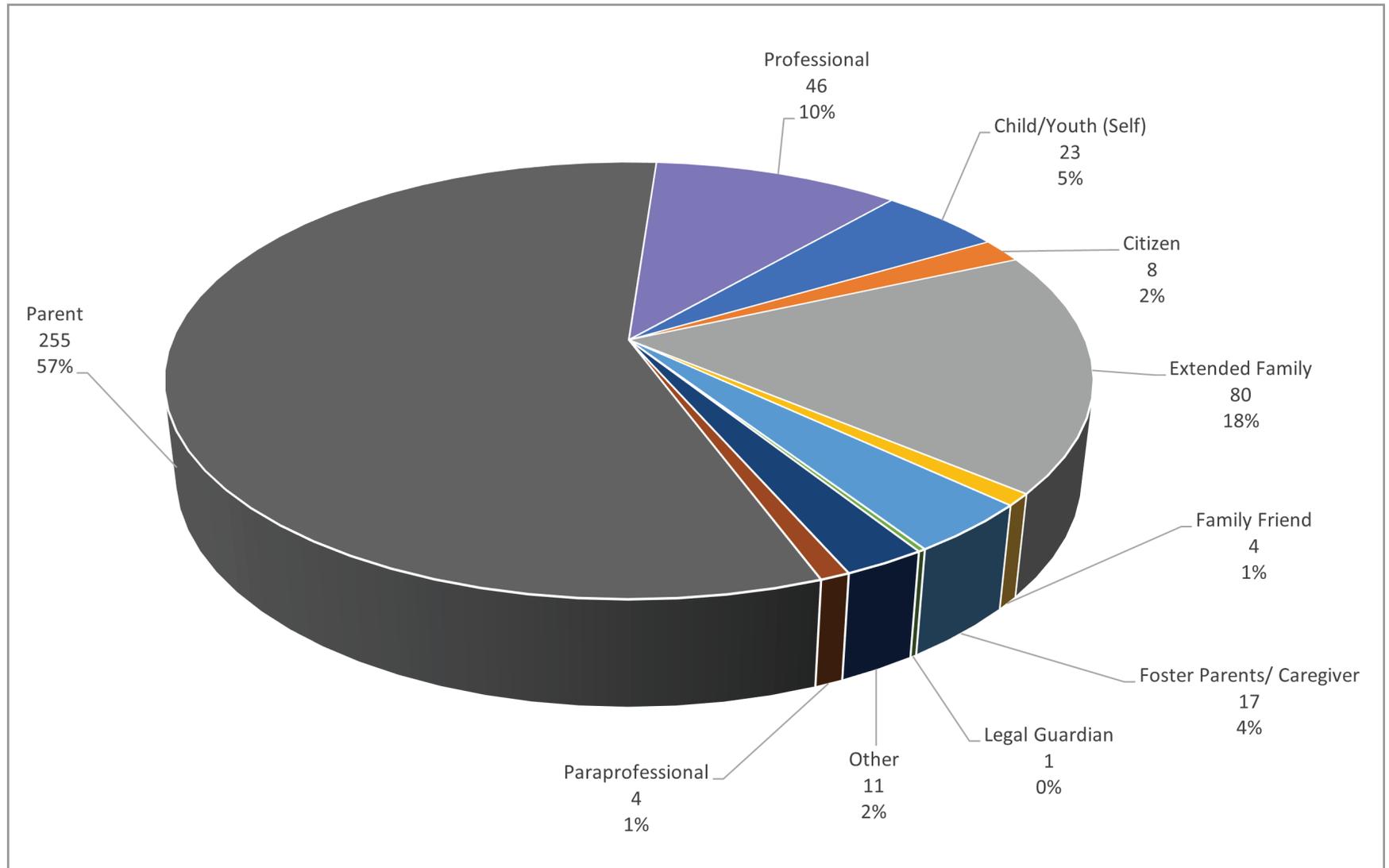
## Age of Client

This chart identifies the ages of clients who were the subject of the requests for advocacy assistance. This fiscal year, young people aged 6-11 years were the focus of the most requests for advocacy at 35%. Last year, young people aged 12-17 years were the focus of the most advocacy requests.



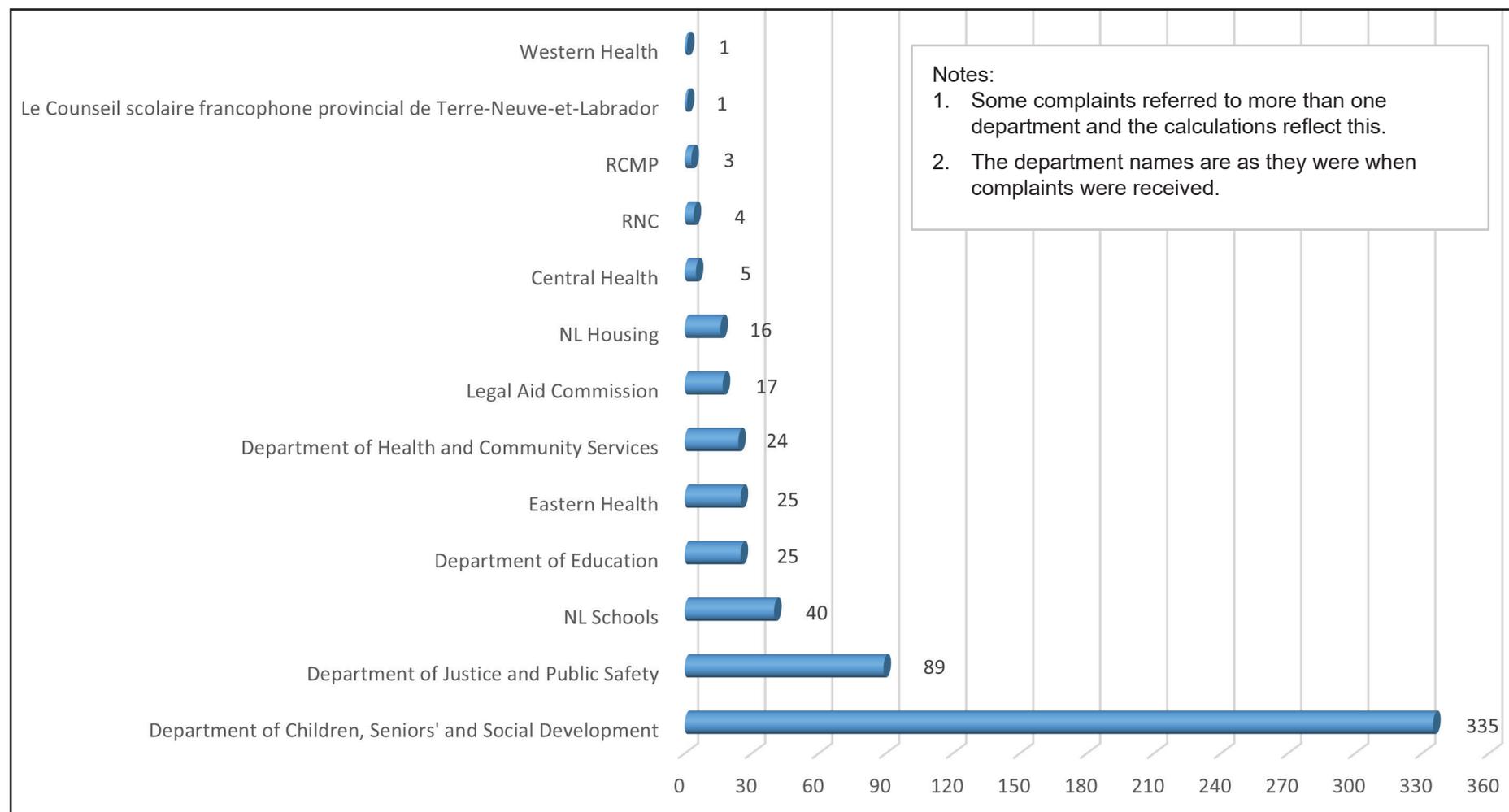
## Person Requesting Advocacy for Child/Youth

This chart identifies the person requesting advocacy assistance. Consistent with previous years, parents continue to be the primary group requesting advocacy services for their children (57%) followed by extended family (18%).



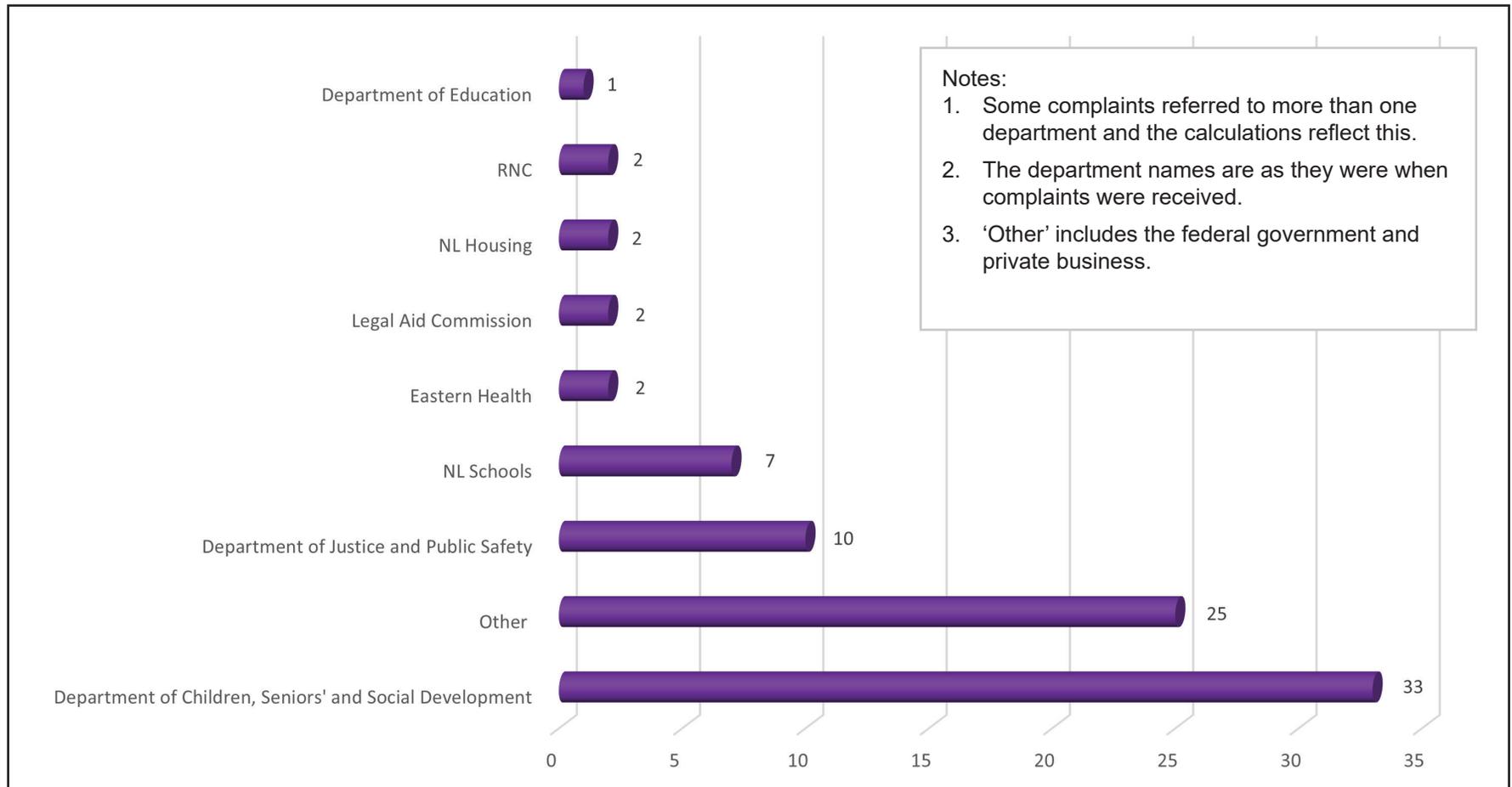
## Requests for Advocacy Assistance by Department or Agency Involved

The graph below represents the department or agency which was the focus of a concern or complaint and where formal advocacy services were provided in 2023-24. The Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development continues to be the highest department or agency of focus.



## Requests for Short-Term Advocacy Assistance by Department or Agency Involved

This graph below represents the department or agency which was the focus of the 67 shorter-term requests for information, as well as assistance with navigating various systems of government and its agencies in 2023-24. The Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development is the highest department or agency of focus.



## Mandatory Reporting of Deaths and Critical Injuries

The **Child and Youth Advocate Act** requires the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development and the Department of Justice and Public Safety to report child and youth deaths and critical injuries to the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate where the young person received a designated service.

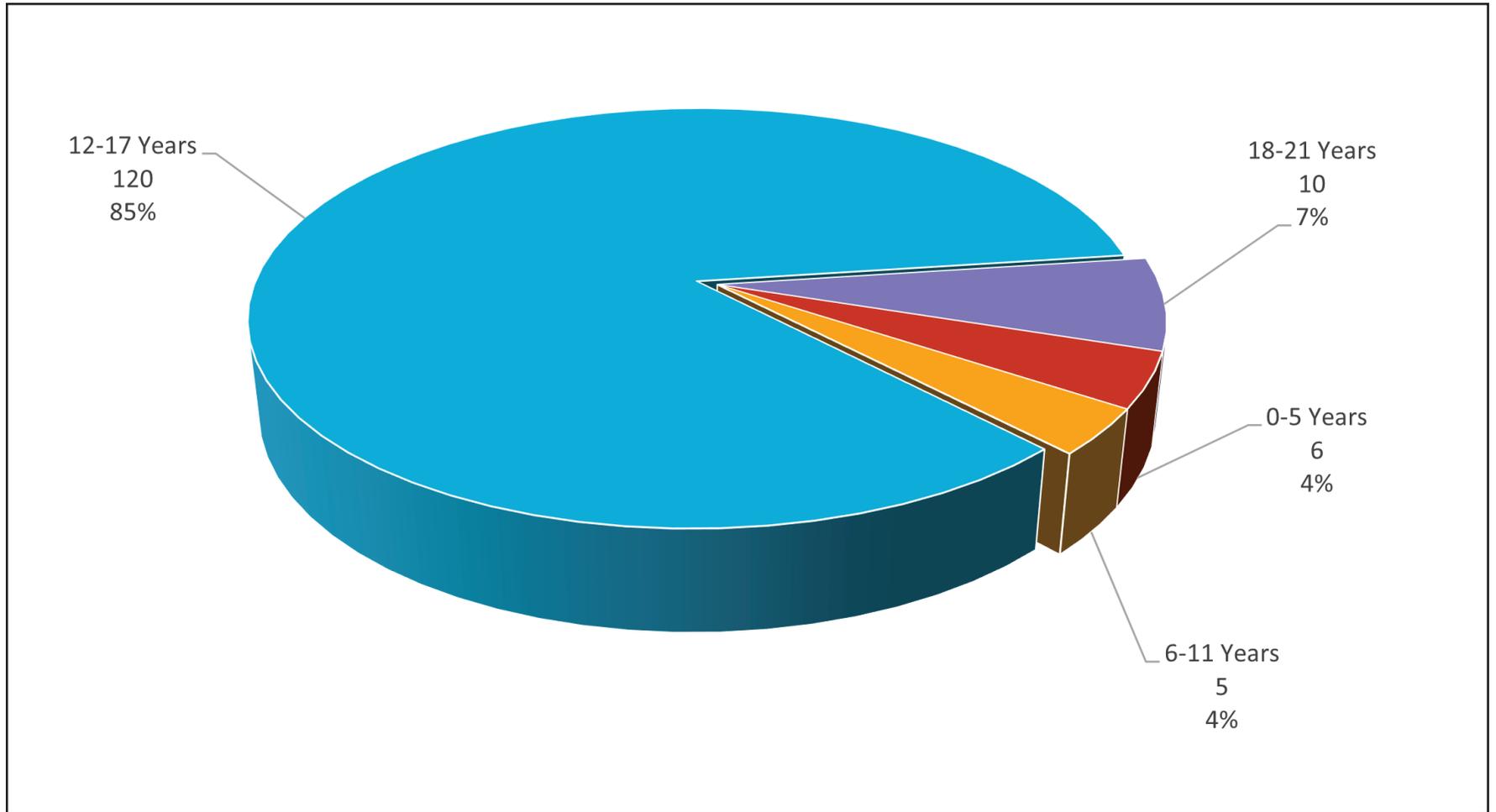
Section 16.1 in the legislation defines critical injury as “an injury, including physical or psychological injury, which may result in the death of a child or youth or may cause serious or long-term impairment of the health of a child or youth”. These departments are also required to report a death or critical injury within 12 months of the young person receiving a designated service, if the young person is no longer a client.

From April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2023, the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development reported 141 critical injuries and 6 deaths. The nature of death for these 6 young people included medical issues and suicide. The Department of Justice and Public Safety reported no deaths or critical injuries.



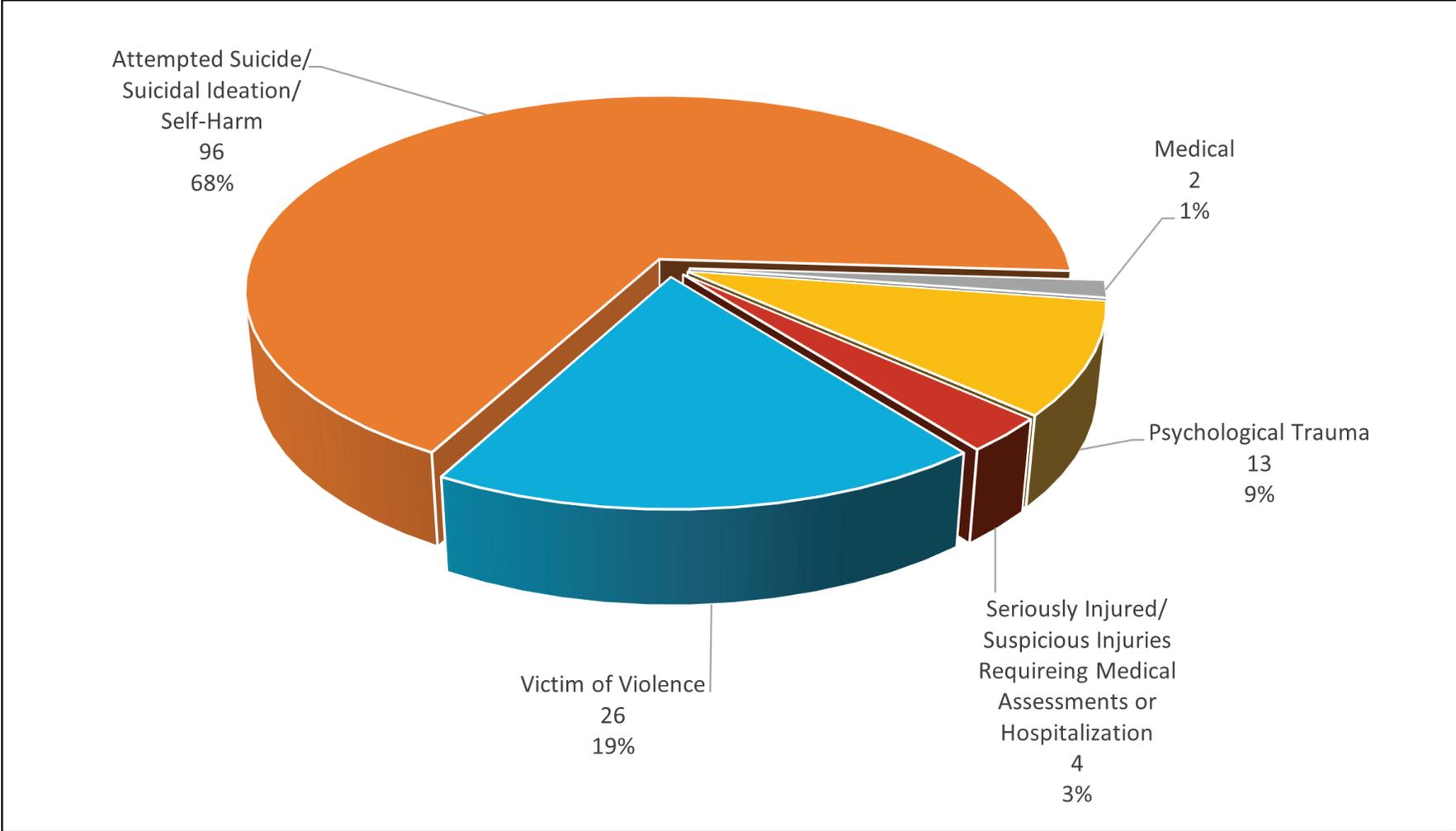
## Critical Injury by Age Group

Consistent with previous years the 12-17 age group is the highest subject of mandatory reporting of critical injuries at 85%.



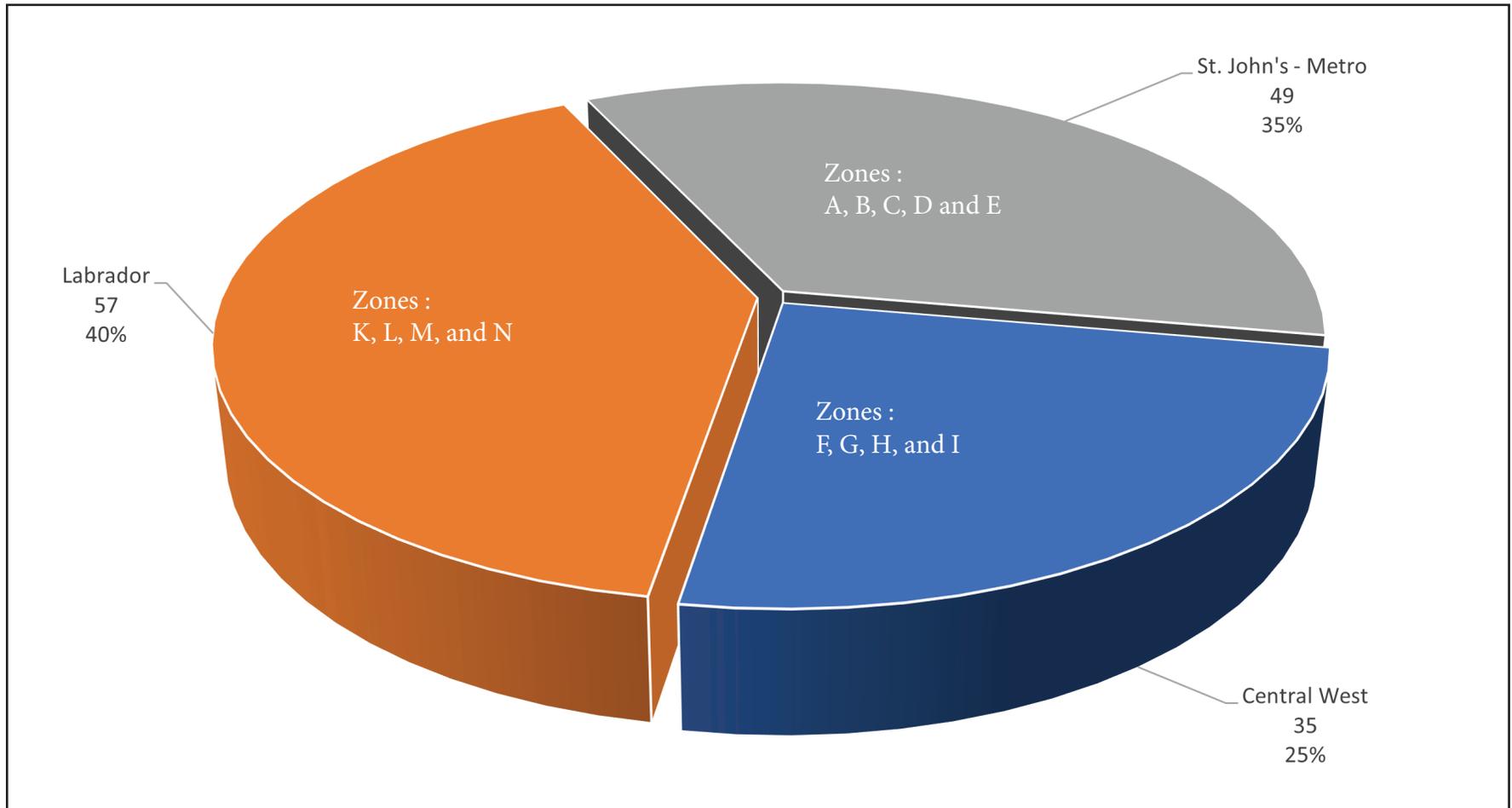
# Critical Injury by Type

Consistent with last year, mental health related issues (attempted suicide, suicidal ideation, and self harm) are the highest type of critical injuries reported.



## Critical Injury by Region

Each year, data regarding critical injuries is based on the information reported by the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development and the Department of Justice and Public Safety. The Department of Justice and Public Safety did not report any critical injuries during the fiscal year. The following table reflects the data as provided by the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development and reflects the changes to their regions as implemented in May 2023.



# Report on Performance

## Issue 1: Listening and Learning

We believe in the importance of actively listening to and learning directly from the voices of young people and the individuals and organizations who support them. Over the next three years, we will strategically engage young people from diverse backgrounds in conversations about the issues important to them and the rights afforded to them through the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, as well as other federal and provincial legislation and policies. We will also engage individuals and organizations who work with and support young people.

We will seek diverse perspectives, which we see as particularly important in the context of Indigenous populations and our commitment to doing our part towards true reconciliation.

A report of what we heard will be prepared and released publicly. This will include recommendations to government departments and agencies, if they emerge.

**Goal 1: By March 31, 2026, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have engaged diverse young people and the individuals and organizations who support them.**

Indicators:

- ▶ Engagement opportunities planned
- ▶ Engagement opportunities implemented
- ▶ Report of what was heard prepared



**Objective 1.1: By March 31, 2024, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have planned engagement opportunities to seek the diverse perspectives of young people and the individuals and organizations who serve them.**

Indicator	Results
<p>▶ Engagement sessions planned</p>	<p>OCYA management and staff met to plan engagement sessions throughout the province.</p> <p>Additionally, in March 2024, the Child and Youth Advocate invited young people and families who have direct experience with the mental health system in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as professionals and other stakeholders, to reach out to our office to share their experiences and ideas. Planning began for specific engagement sessions related to this systemic issue.</p>
<p>▶ Engagement sessions held</p>	<p>During 2023-24, we engaged in 50 outreach sessions reaching over 1,600 children, youth, parents, post-secondary students, professionals and community groups.</p> <p>We were pleased to connect with and present to over 430 professionals and post-secondary students.</p> <p>We also began our consultations for our Review of Mental Health Services to Children and Youth.</p>
<p>▶ Various modes for young people to provide their input identified</p>	<p>In addition to telephone and email, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate established text option for young people to contact us. We also made sure that we had the technology to join virtual sessions with young people, as well as flexible travel plans to meet young people where they are when requested. Planning for an online form also began.</p>
<p>▶ Various modes for young people to provide their input communicated</p>	<p>The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate distributed a news release advising the public how we could be contacted for this purpose. The Office also used social media to get the message out, as well as targeted communication with organizations and professionals who work in the area of mental health services for young people.</p>



**Objective 1.2: By March 31, 2025, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have continued engagement sessions with young people and the individuals and organizations who serve them.**

Indicators:

- ▶ Engagement sessions with young people continued
- ▶ Engagement sessions with individuals and organizations who serve them continued
- ▶ Various modes to contact us promoted

**Objective 1.3: By March 31, 2026, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have compiled a report of what was heard from engagement opportunities.**



## Issue 2: Systemic Issue Analysis

Systemic issues are issues that affect large groups of people. We know there are systemic issues affecting young people in Newfoundland and Labrador. We hear these issues in the individual advocacy calls our office receives daily, through investigations completed by our office, from the issues reported by news organizations, as well as from other sources. Currently, there are a number of issues of concern to our office, however, two issues of particular concern are young peoples' access to mental health services and service provision for children with exceptionalities.

We will complete an environmental scan to better understand these, and other issues identified from young peoples' perspectives. This will include conducting a jurisdictional scan, analyzing issues identified in the youth engagement opportunities facilitated by our office, and inviting various service providers to meet with us to discuss available services in detail.

We will prepare and release a report of our findings.

**Goal 2: By March 31, 2026, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have identified systemic issues affecting young people in the province.**

Indicators:

- ▶ Environmental scan completed
- ▶ All gathered Information analyzed
- ▶ Report prepared and released



**Objective 2.1: By March 31, 2024, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have begun an environmental scan focusing on issues affecting young people in the province.**

Indicator	Results
▶ Jurisdictional scan initiated	A jurisdictional scan was initiated by the end of the fiscal year.
▶ All information gathered analyzed	The information gathered up to the end of the fiscal year was analyzed. This work will continue into the fiscal year 2024-25.
▶ Comprehensive information about current services compiled	By the end of the fiscal year the office began to compile comprehensive information regarding mental health services for young people. This work will continue in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

**Objective 2.2: By March 31, 2025, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have continued an environmental scan focusing on issues affecting young people in the province.**

Indicators:

- ▶ Jurisdictional scan completed
- ▶ All information gathered analyzed
- ▶ Comprehensive information about current services continued to be compiled

**Objective 2.3: By March 31, 2026, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate will have prepared a report of systemic issues affecting young people in the province.**



## Opportunities and Challenges

Our mandate to advocate for the rights of children and youth continually provides opportunities, as well as challenges. It is very rewarding when we see changes to ensure and protect the rights of young people. This provides opportunities for other children and youth to benefit from these changes.

It is also very challenging when we conduct investigations that show some of the outcomes that occur when children's rights are not upheld by systems. While these cases are tragic and often devastating, through our investigative work and resulting recommendations, we have seen positive changes to prevent such tragedies in the future.

We continue to monitor trends and identify systemic issues for young people throughout the province. One specific issue we are currently reviewing is the provision of mental health services for children and youth throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. While this review has just begun, it is a very complex, multi-faceted issue. We anticipate that our learnings will result in recommendations and tangible change for young people requiring such services.

As always, we are committed to continuous learning from young people, other stakeholders and through professional development opportunities. Young people are the experts in their own lives and we are committed to listen to their experiences and support them in understanding and exercising their rights.



# Financial Statements

Office of the Child and Youth Advocate	Estimates		
	Actual	Amended	Original
	\$	\$	\$
01. Salaries	1,240,831	1,244,900	1,244,900
Operating Accounts			
Employee Benefits	1,789	3,500	3,500
Transportation and Communications	26,477	55,400	55,400
Supplies	5,940	6,000	6,000
Professional Services	6,123	19,000	19,000
Purchased Services	149,493	160,900	160,900
Property, Furnishings and Equipment	3,839	4,000	4,000
02. Operating Accounts	193,670	248,800	248,800
<b>Total: Office of the Child and Youth Advocate</b>	<b>1,434,501</b>	<b>1,493,700</b>	<b>1,493,700</b>





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