



STATE OF WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN

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To the Residents of Washington State:

I am pleased to submit the combined 2007 and 2008 Annual Report of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO). As we enter 2009, new leadership is underway within the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). Both Robin Arnold-Williams as Secretary of DSHS, and Cheryl Stephani, Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration (CA), recently announced their resignations. We appreciate their tenure and wish them well.

New leadership provides an opportunity to re-examine the structure of the State's child welfare agency and assess whether it is poised to effectively serve and protect our most vulnerable children and families during these challenging economic times. It becomes more critical than ever to recognize and support important public-private partnerships that can help advance these goals and bring about durable reform. OFCO anticipates a very active year of oversight as DSHS absorbs these many changes.

We recognize the Governor's significant efforts to keep measures in place to prioritize child safety, including ongoing oversight of the child welfare agency by an independent Ombudsman. This is particularly commendable in an economic climate requiring difficult decisions about funding priorities.

The 2008 legislative session brought about expanded statutory duties for the Ombudsman, which we have begun to implement. Newly enacted 2SSB 6206 will result in greater scrutiny of families with a history of multiple referrals for child abuse or neglect, greater attention to reports made by mandated reporters, and improved tracking and implementation of recommendations that arise from child fatality reviews. We highlighted these as shortcomings in earlier annual reports and thank the Legislature for recognizing the merits of our recommendations to address these issues. It was no small task for the Legislature to translate these into new law that will improve outcomes for children.

This report provides an account of OFCO's activities from September 1, 2006 to August 31, 2008 and our recommendations for systemic improvements. Based on our investigation of complaints and ongoing tracking of patterns of problems and systemic shortcomings, we have identified three issues that need further review and improvement. First, the system needs to better support and maintain placement of dependent children with relatives. Second, dependent children need timely permanence through child welfare agency compliance with the timeframes established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act. Finally, DSHS should re-commit to agency accreditation through the Council on Accreditation.

On behalf of all of us at OFCO, thank you for taking an interest in the work we do and allowing us to give voice to the concerns of families and children across the State of Washington.

Sincerely,

Mary Meinig
Director Ombudsman

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

*MEMBER THROUGH 2008

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Spokane

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Lutheran Community Services,
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KIM KOPF
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36th District

Senator Val Stevens
39th District

Representative Ruth Kagi
32nd District

Representative Judy Clibborn
41st District

STAFF

Director - Ombudsman

Mary Meinig, Director of the Office of Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO), has served as an ombudsman with the office since it opened in 1997. Prior to joining OFCO, Ms. Meinig maintained a successful clinical and consulting practice specializing in treating abused and traumatized children and their families. Her previous experience includes working in special education, child protective services and children's residential treatment settings. Ms. Meinig is nationally known for her work developing Family Resolution Therapy, a protocol for the long-term management of relationships in abusive families. She is frequently asked to present her work at national conferences, and has authored several professional publications on this topic. Ms. Meinig is a graduate of Central Washington University, and received a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Washington. She is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers. Ms. Meinig serves as the co-chair of the United States Ombudsman Association, Family and Children Chapter.

Ombudsman

Colleen Hinton is a social worker with broad experience working with children and families. Prior to joining OFCO in 2000, she provided clinical assessments of children in foster care through the Foster Care Assessment Program, and provided training on child maltreatment to community professionals through Children's Response Center (within Harborview Medical Center). Prior to this work, Ms. Hinton helped to establish assessment and treatment services for abused children at Children's Advocacy Center of Manhattan, and worked as a therapist for the Homebuilders intensive family preservation program in King County. She is a graduate of the University of Natal in South Africa, and received her MSW from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers.

Ombudsman

Linda Mason Wilgis is a senior attorney who before joining OFCO in 2004 served as an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Washington. From 1991 to 2001,

she gained extensive experience in dependency and guardianship cases involving both children and vulnerable adults. Before joining the Office of the Attorney General, Ms. Mason Wilgis was in private practice with a Seattle law firm. She is a graduate of Skidmore College and received her law degree from the University of Virginia. Prior to attending law school, Ms. Mason Wilgis served under Senator Henry M. Jackson as a professional staff member on the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Ombudsman

Steven Wolfson is a social worker with extensive experience working with families and youth. Prior to joining OFCO in 2004, Mr. Wolfson served as a court appointed Guardian ad Litem, investigating and making recommendations to the court regarding child custody and visitation disputes. From 1990 to 2000, Mr. Wolfson served as Clinical Director at Kent Youth and Family Services. Mr. Wolfson is a graduate of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts and received his MSW from the University of Washington. He is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker.

Ombudsman

Colleen Shea-Brown is a licensed attorney with experience representing parents and other relatives in dependency and termination of parental rights proceedings at Legal Services for New York's Bronx office. She received her law degree from New York University, where she participated in the school's Family Defense Clinic. Ms. Shea-Brown has also worked extensively with victims of domestic violence, advocated for women's rights in India, and served as a residential counselor for a women's shelter in Washington, D.C. Following law school, Ms. Shea-Brown served as a clerk to the Honorable Gabriel W. Gorenstein in the Southern District of New York.

Ombudsman

Corey Fitzpatrick Wood is a licensed attorney with experience representing parents in dependency proceedings as well as youth in truancy and at-risk youth proceedings. She received her law degree from the University of Washington, where she participated in the school's Children and Youth Advocacy Clinic. Ms.

Wood has worked extensively with at-risk youth and currently serves as Board President for Street Youth Legal Advocates of Washington. Prior to law school, Ms. Wood worked for OFCO as an Information and Referral Specialist.

Ombudsman

Megan Palchak first came to OFCO in 2003 as an Information and Referral Specialist/Office Administrator. She left to pursue a Masters degree in Policy Studies from the University of Washington, and soon returned as a Research Analyst to assist with special projects. After graduate school, Ms. Palchak spent a year promoting equity in education as a Communications and Research Specialist at the Governor's Office of the Education Ombudsman, the first state-level K-12 focused ombudsman in the nation. Prior to joining OFCO in 2003, Ms. Palchak worked to secure housing for youth exiting the foster care system. She also coordinated youth development programs in a low-income housing complex, in collaboration with local families, community professionals, educators, and youth.

Special Projects/Database Coordinator

Rachel Pigott holds a Dual Master's degree in Social Work and Education from Boston University. Before joining OFCO in 2005, she worked to improve school attendance by working with families through the Boston Public Schools. She spent a year in the AmeriCorps program working to strengthen families and to connect undergraduate students from Western Washington University to their community by coordinating service-learning projects. She was also a Program Specialist for the Boston Center for Adult Education.

Information Specialist/Office Administrator

Amy Johnson earned a Bachelor's degree in Communication and Sociology from Pacific Lutheran University. Prior to joining OFCO she worked as a Ticket Sales Coordinator for the Seattle Mariners. She also served as a case aide for DSHS Division of Children and Family Services in 2004. While attending PLU she completed an internship with the Prison Pet Partnership Program within the Washington Correctional Center for Women.

