

TESTIMONY ON HB 3061
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES
February 1, 2008
Olympia, WA

Good afternoon Representative Kagi and Members of the Committee. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman. We welcome this opportunity to comment on HB 3061.

- Children's Administration social workers and other staff have the hardest job in the world – keeping vulnerable children safe, caring for them, and finding better ways to improve their lives; and working to reunify families faced with challenges. So at the outset, I want to recognize the difficult and daunting work that CA staff do.
- We have come to believe that this mission is made harder by the organizational structure of CA and the culture that has evolved over the years to support it.
- HB 3061 is an important step in addressing these problems. It envisions restructuring the child welfare system, but only after careful and measured study, analysis, and thought. Specifically, the bill establishes a “design panel” to create a transition plan and fiscal projection related to establishing a new department to promote and support child safety, permanency, and well-being. OFCO is among the seven members with expertise in child welfare that would be appointed to the design panel.
- The design panel will base its recommendations on how to restructure a new department by relying on the best available data; examining state and federal funding sources; and considering input from stakeholders, the public; and other experts.
- HB 3061 comes on the heels of the work by the Joint Task Force on Administration and Delivery of Services to Children and Families. This Task Force was established by the legislature in 2005 in ESSB 5872. Its goal was to determine the most appropriate and effective way to deliver social and health services to children and families. Representatives Schual-Burke and Walsh were members of this task force as was our office along with other experts in the child welfare community. A key question we examined was whether it made more sense to have Children's Administration continue to operate within the large umbrella of DSHS or whether it could be more effective as a separate agency, perhaps on a cabinet level.
- The Task Force had the benefit of hearing from a wide-range of DSHS program leaders, academic professors and researchers, outside consultants who provided information on promising practices in other states, and citizens from across the

state who provided perspectives on child welfare. Some of the most compelling testimony came from current and former employees of CA.

- Although the task force did not reach consensus on whether an agency separate from DSHS would best serve the citizens of Washington State, there was a strong and vocal majority that supported the creation of a separate agency. OFCO voted with the majority. Since that time, the Chair of the Task Force, Dee Wilson, Director of the Northwest Institute for Children and Families at the School of Social Work at the University of Washington, who previously voted against creating a separate agency, has since changed his mind to endorse the need for a new administrative structure.
- To be clear, our support for a change in the organizational structure is driven by our belief that a change in the structure will promote a shift in the organizational culture.
- We favor the creation of a new cabinet level department because we believe a smaller, stand-alone agency:
 - ❖ Puts strong leaders in a better position to advance the priorities of child welfare and protection;
 - ❖ Provides the agency necessary access to the Governor;
 - ❖ Would have autonomy to advance its own fiscal priorities;
 - ❖ Could foster better communication and more consistent practice;
 - ❖ Will make it easier to hold people accountable;
 - ❖ Will be more flexible;
 - ❖ Can more easily embed and reinforce a new culture of value and respect; and
 - ❖ Is poised to build relationships with local communities to help address the unique needs of children and families.
- As the failures of the current organization have mounted, the need for a new and separate child welfare agency has become more compelling. We would like to highlight some of the consistent themes that emerged in the testimony before the Task Force, many of which are consistent with our own findings or observations at OFCO:
 - Caseworkers and the care providers do not feel valued and respected;
 - Morale is low within CA;
 - The organization does not promote innovative and creative solutions;
 - Policies and practices are driven from the top down but applied randomly at the local level and in the field. There is a lack of good, consistent practice across the state.
 - Data is unreliable;

- Social work is driven by quantity, not quality, what one CA manager, who is also a foster parent, described as “drive-by social work.”
 - Social workers are overwhelmed which leads to cynicism which in turn leads to despair and ultimately a culture of mediocrity;
 - While there are lessons learned and initiatives that are developed as a result of these lessons, initiatives are not implemented.
 - There is a lack of direction by leadership.
 - Social work practice is more reactive than proactive.
 - The debate over how to shape the organization has been examined and re-examined over at least the past 20 years. It is time to act.
- Currently different divisions within DSHS are often serving the same child and family and this can have the unintended effect of no single division assuming responsibility for coordinated and comprehensive services for that child and family. We have certainly seen this with regard to services and placement of children with developmental disabilities and/or mental illness.
 - The mission and demands on a child welfare agency are huge and complex. We feel strongly that the transition to establish a new and separate agency outside of DSHS must be carried out in a careful, thoughtful, and measured way. Change can be difficult for people. We do not want this process to heighten the already low morale of many Children’s Administration workers, but instead to re-invigorate the work force and the state’s commitment to meeting the needs of our abused and neglected children and needy families. We think this can happen and for that reason we support the intent of HB 3061 and thank Representative Schual-Berke for her sponsorship of this measure.