

OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN

TESTIMONY ON SB 6207

Senate Committee on Human Services & Corrections

January 18, 2008

Olympia, WA

Good morning Chairman Hargrove, and Members of the Committee. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman (otherwise known as "OFCO"). We are pleased to comment on SB 6207. We support the bill's intent to strengthen the role of guardian ad litem (GALs) and court-appointed special advocates (CASAs) by requiring the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to inform CASA/GALs when a report of alleged child abuse or neglect is received by the agency concerning a child whom they are representing.

- CASA/GALs are charged with the unique and special role of representing a child's best interest in dependency cases. To carry out this role in a meaningful way they must be well informed about the child for whom they are advocating. This means having access to the most current available information that bears on the child's emotional and physical well being.
- If Child Protective Services receives a referral involving the child, the child's CASA/GAL needs to know. We believe this requirement, if it does not already do so, should be expanded to include notification to the CASA/GAL of any referrals received on the home in which the child is placed (and the subsequent investigative finding on the referral)—even if the referral does not concern the child for whom the CASA/GAL has been appointed. This ensures another degree of vigilance on the part of the CASA/GAL and may affect recommendations that the CASA/GAL makes to the court.
- Additionally, this measure may provide the child with enhanced emotional support from the CASA/GAL while the referral is being investigated and resolved.

We thank Senator Zarelli for his sponsorship of this measure and thank the committee for this opportunity to comment.