

OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN

TESTIMONY ON SB 6209

Senate Committee on Human Services and 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. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on SB 6209, sponsored by Senator Zarelli. We support the general premise of this bill which is that multiple referrals on a family signal problems that bear on the safety and well being of children and that these problems need to be addressed to avoid tragic outcomes.

- Indeed, as referenced in section 1 of the bill, our review of fatalities in 2004 found that 63% (55 fatalities out of 87) involved families who had 3 or more prior abuse or neglect referrals –what we refer to as chronicity.
- This bill provides for additional oversight of chronicity by requiring DSHS to notify the Ombudsman when it receives a third or more report of abuse or neglect on a child. Although this bill does not explicitly require OFCO to take specific action, it implicitly provides OFCO with an opportunity to monitor the agency's screening of multiple referrals on the same family, its investigations of accepted referrals, and take corrective action as needed based on our existing statutory authority under chapter 43A.060 RCW.
- It also provides that DSHS will notify OFCO of its "disposition" of the report/referral received. This added duty is set forth in sections 2 and 3 of the bill which amends RCW 26.44.030 to add a new subsection (13). It states, in part, that "The department shall also provide additional notification at the time of the disposition of the report." We presume this means the screening decision made by Child Protective Services' (CPS) intake, whether CPS will investigate the referral, and if so, the result of the investigation. We would suggest that this provision be clarified to state more explicitly what "disposition of the report" covers.
- The challenge is in anticipating how many cases would meet the threshold of 3 or more referrals on a child and thus trigger agency notification to OFCO. The most recent estimate we received from DSHS for the year 2007, was that the agency received 22,000 repeat referrals. We welcome the opportunity to provide additional scrutiny in cases of chronic CPS referrals.

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