



STATE OF WASHINGTON
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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on HB 1782

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON HB 1782
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES
Tuesday, February 10, 2009
John L. O'Brien Building, House Hearing Rm E, 1:30 p.m.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on House Bill 1782. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO").

We favor the bill's intent to encourage parental engagement early in the dependency process. We also support the bill's efforts to provide parents with clear communication about the possible consequences of not participating in their child's case at the front-end.

Under current law, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) must provide written notice to parents or legal custodians whenever a child is taken into custody under a dependency action. In addition to notifying parents that their child has been taken into legal custody, this written notice informs parents of important legal rights in connection with the dependency process. HB expands the provisions of written notice by providing parents advance notice of some of the significant actions that will occur in a dependency and the consequences of a parent failing to engage with DSHS early in the process.

Specifically, this newly expanded notice would:

- inform parents of the duty of DSHS to create a permanency plan for the child, with a primary and secondary option for placement; and
- make clear that if a parent wishes to be considered for placement, that the parent must comply with court-ordered services and visitation and that failure to respond, participate, or comply with a court order could result in termination of parental rights.

The Ombudsman is aware of numerous cases which have resulted in poor outcomes driven by poor communication between agency workers and children and families. To the extent, the agency can take concrete steps to establish and communicate in writing clear expectations to

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parents and likely outcomes of not following through on services or other aspects of a case, then we believe this will improve the dependency process.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with our thoughts on this legislation.