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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on SB 5510

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON SB 5510
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS
Tuesday, February 10, 2009
J. A. Cherberg Building, Senate Hearing Room 1, 1:30 p.m.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on Senate Bill 5510. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO").

We favor SB 5510's inclusion of a parent's failure to have contact with a child for 15 months to the list of aggravated circumstances that provide DSHS with a basis for terminating parental rights without providing reasonable efforts to reunify the parent and child. In 1997, Congress enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in response to growing concerns about the length of time children were remaining in foster care. ASFA explicitly provides that States may include in their definition of "aggravated circumstances" abandonment. Thus, SB 5510 would appropriately expand the basis for expediting terminations in a manner that is consistent with the intent of Congress.

We also support SB 5510's expanded notice requirement for parents. When the stakes are high – that a parent could lose their parental rights to a child – we want DSHS to leave no room for misunderstanding. If the agency provides clear notice to parents at the front end and again, six months after dependency has been established, that failure to participate in services could result in termination of parental rights, this could be the wake up call that a parent needs.

Thank you to Senators Stevens, Hargrove, and other members for your sponsorship of this measure.