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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on SSB 5431

TESTIMONY ON SSB 5431
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES
Thursday, March 19, 2009

INTRODUCTION

My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman (known as "OFCO"). Our office does not take a partisan position in favor of or opposed to particular legislation, but we appreciate this opportunity to provide written testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 5431.

As you know, SSB 5431 requires DSHS to place a child with an appropriate and available relative in situations where a child had previously been placed in out-of-home care, was returned home, and subsequently is returned to out-of-home care; or if a relative is not appropriate or available, then to place the child in the foster home in which the child was previously placed.

We agree with the intent of this bill, which is to prioritize placement of dependent children with relatives and to maintain long term foster placements when a suitable relative is not available. We believe it is in the best interest of dependent children to be returned to a home where they are related to the care provider or have a pre-existing relationship with the foster family because these types of placements offer familiarity, continuity, comfort, and stability for children and recognize loving attachments that have developed. These are important ingredients to successful long-term placements.

As we highlighted in our 2007 and 2008 annual report, OFCO has had long-standing concerns about the too-frequent practice of DSHS not placing children with available relatives or not returning them to former foster care placements where they have pre-existing relationships and attachments. In the section of our report entitled "Maintaining the Family Connection," we made several recommendations to increase and maintain long-term placements with relatives.

SSB 5431 addresses shortcomings in current agency placement practice that are detrimental to children and families. Children are best served by being placed with family when possible. If relatives are not suitable, then children should be returned to a former foster placement where they have an attachment with the care provider. For that reason, we support the bill's intent and thank Senators Stevens, Hargrove, Regala, and other members for their sponsorship of this measure.

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