



STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN
6720 Fort Dent Way, Suite 240, Tukwila, Washington 98188
(206) 439-3870 * (800) 571-7321 * FAX (206) 439-3877

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Independent Ombudsman's office to conduct targeted review of Wenatchee child sex abuse investigations

TUKWILA – The director of the independent Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) announced today that her office will conduct a targeted review of the 1994-95 Wenatchee child sex abuse investigations. The review will help the office to evaluate the need for new statewide policies and protocols designed to protect children who are the focus of such investigations.

A petition was filed with the new state office when it opened in June requesting that OFCO review the actions of the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) in serving Wenatchee-area children and families who were under police investigation for suspected child sexual abuse. The petition asserted that the department inappropriately assisted the police investigation in various ways.

Specifically the ombudsman's office will review how the joint law enforcement/DSHS interviews of suspected child sex abuse victims were conducted and documented by local police officials and state child protective services workers to determine whether the protocols and policies in place then and now are adequate to protect the interests and well-being of child interviewees. The office will also review mental health treatment decisions made by DSHS, including decisions to place children in psychiatric hospitals, to evaluate the need for stronger policies and protocols to ensure that mental health treatment decisions are based solely on a child's needs.

"Our independent review will focus on these specific issues because they raise potential system-wide problems that may affect the safety and well-being of children and undermine perceptions of children's credibility," said OFCO director Vickie Wallen. "Children need an investigative process that acknowledges the distinct roles of law enforcement and child protective services and ensures that children's interests are protected," she said.

In addition to reviewing these issues, Wallen stated that her office will begin working to develop recommendations for a new statewide policy to address situations where there may be a conflict between a foster parent's role as a foster parent and his or her role as a professional. The need for

such a policy was highlighted in the Wenatchee investigation where the foster parent of two suspected child sex abuse victims was also the lead police investigator.

Wallen said that before making today's announcement, her office carefully reviewed The Wenatchee Report and over 3600 pages of supporting documentation provided by Report author, Kathryn Lyon. The office also reviewed several internal reviews provided by DSHS. "My staff and I have spent literally hundreds of hours reviewing the information presented to us before making the decision to proceed with a targeted review," Wallen said.

Wallen estimated that the targeted review will take several months to complete and that the final report would likely be available by mid- to late 1998. "We will fit this activity with our other responsibilities and priorities; consequently, it will take several months to complete," she said.

She also stated that she will submit a supplemental budget request to the governor and the legislature to cover anticipated costs associated with the targeted review. The office has three full-time investigators and an annual budget of \$407,500.

The petition was accompanied by letters of support from defense attorneys and an array of social service organizations, as well as by thousands of signatures of Wenatchee-area residents calling for an independent review of the investigation.

Contact: Vickie Wallen, Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, 206-439-3870

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