



**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

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – DECEMBER 23, 1998**

**Ombudsman calls for improvements in child abuse investigations following independent review of 1994-95 Wenatchee child sexual abuse cases**

**TUKWILA** – The director of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) today released the report of her office's independent review of the 1994-95 Wenatchee child sexual abuse investigations. The report recommends changes in state laws and policies that would improve the quality of child abuse investigations conducted by Child Protective Services (CPS).

These recommendations – addressing interview documentation, child interview techniques, and cross discipline collaboration – are based on OFCO's six-month review of the Wenatchee child sexual abuse investigations. OFCO's review represents the first full-scale independent review of the Wenatchee investigations by a government agency. It was undertaken to determine whether new or stronger safeguards are needed to protect children who are the subject of CPS investigative interviews, and to ensure that possible child abuse victims are provided with appropriate mental health services.

According to the report, the 1994-1995 Wenatchee sexual abuse investigations present a progression with regard to the kinds of allegations made by children in sexual abuse cases. The allegations changed from those that are common (e.g., abuse of a child by a single family member or friend), to those that are less common (e.g., abuse of several children by both parents, and/or their friends), to those that are uncommon (e.g., organized and systematic abuse of many children by many community members).

Whether the uncommon allegations occurred as alleged, or something went wrong in the child abuse investigative system resulting in factual distortions, could not be determined through OFCO's review. The CPS investigations were not well enough documented to allow the ombudsman's office to ascertain whether the kinds of mistakes that can cause factual distortions occurred. In addition, insurmountable constraints encountered by OFCO investigators during the course of the review made it impossible to establish the underlying facts with a reasonable degree of confidence.

Nonetheless, the ombudsman's review has resulted in these key findings and recommendations:

- **Interview Documentation:** Current law and CPS documentation policies are not sufficient to ensure that interviews are documented in a manner that permits meaningful external review. OFCO recommends that CPS social workers be required to document interviews in a verbatim or near-verbatim manner that captures which questions are asked, in what order, and the exact answers given to the questions.
- **Child Interview Techniques:** Current law and CPS policies do not require that all CPS social workers receive specialized and ongoing training in effective interviewing techniques. Also, state-contracted mental health therapists who evaluate and treat children in state care who are possible victims of sexual abuse are not required to have specialized or ongoing training about sexual abuse. OFCO recommends that specialized and on-going training in interviewing techniques be required of all CPS social workers, and that the Department of Social Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration study whether state-contracted therapists should be required to have specialized and ongoing sexual abuse training.
- **Cross Discipline Collaboration:** CPS social workers currently collaborate with law enforcement agencies and other disciplines on child abuse investigations without the benefit of specific guidance or formal training on the goals, expectations and limitations of such collaboration. OFCO recommends that local jurisdictions be required to establish collaborative protocols for various disciplines involved in child abuse investigations, and that joint training opportunities be enhanced for CPS social workers and other professionals.

"If these recommended policies and procedures had been in place and followed in Wenatchee, they may have minimized the possibility of factual distortion," OFCO director Vickie Wallen said. "In addition, they would likely have ensured a more complete record for our external review," she added. "If put in place now, these recommendations would help reduce the possibility of factual distortion and create a better record in the future."

The report also includes a description of documented or alleged events in Wenatchee that are illustrative of investigative errors that experts agree can increase possibilities of factual distortion. The descriptions are a presentation of events as they were documented or alleged by others, and do not represent OFCO's factual findings. Without attempting to resolve factual disputes about whether the alleged events occurred, OFCO presents them in the report because they are representative of investigative activities that were frequently documented and/or alleged in Wenatchee, and that experts agree can increase possibilities of factual distortion.

"The report presents a compelling basis for why and how CPS child abuse investigations should be improved," Wallen said. "State policy makers and agency officials now have the opportunity to ensure that one of the legacies of the Wenatchee investigations is a better system for protecting children and families."

OFCO's 1998 Review of the Wenatchee Child Sexual Abuse Investigations may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 800-571-7321 or by accessing OFCO's web page at:

[www.governor.wa.gov/ofco](http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco).

###