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State ombudsman reports that about one-third of Washington's children involved in child abuse and neglect proceedings do not have an advocate to represent them in court

TUKWILA – The director of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) today released the report which found that approximately one-third of Washington's children who are involved in child abuse and neglect proceedings do not have an advocate, known as a guardian ad litem, to represent them in court. The report recommends that state and county officials take appropriate steps to ensure that all abused and neglected children receive such representation.

These recommendations – addressing the lack of guardians ad litem and the statutory exception to the state mandate to appoint a guardian ad litem for every abused and neglect child -- are based on OFCO's statewide survey of juvenile court officials and others. In addition to revealing that a substantial percentage of children do not have a guardian ad litem, the survey found that seven counties account for nearly all of the unrepresented children: Benton, Clark, Franklin, King, Kitsap, Snohomish, and Spokane. Over one half of the children involved in child abuse and neglect proceedings in King, Snohomish and Spokane counties did not have a GAL during the one-year time period surveyed by OFCO.

"The number of children who lacked representation during the time period under review – over 4,600 children – is stunning," OFCO director Vickie Wallen said. "These are exceptionally vulnerable children who need someone to identify and advocate for their interests. Our state can and should do better for these children," she said.

Information obtained in the course of OFCO's survey also indicated that children in three counties are served by guardians ad litem with extremely high caseloads. In Pierce County, each professional guardian ad litem staff represents on average about 140 children at one time, while Spokane County reports that at least one professional has a caseload of about 90 children. Yakima County reports that the single, full-time professional GAL represents about 400 children, while a half-time professional GAL represents about 150 children.

The report makes the following recommendations:

1. The number of guardians ad litem in Washington State should be increased to a level that is sufficient to ensure appointment for all children who are involved in child abuse and neglect proceedings. State policy makers should consider appropriating funds to establish or expand guardian ad litem programs involving trained volunteers.
2. The statutory exception to the state mandate to appoint a guardian ad litem should be deleted. This will make clear that it is the state's policy that a guardian ad litem be appointed for every child who is the subject of a child abuse or neglect proceeding.
3. County officials in Pierce, Spokane and Yakima counties should review and take appropriate steps to reduce the caseloads of professional guardians ad litem in their jurisdictions. The caseloads of professional and attorney guardians ad litem in other counties should also be reviewed for this purpose.

"The implementation of these recommendations will ensure state compliance with federal funding requirements, reinforce the right of Washington's children to a 'speedy resolution' of their cases, and help shorten children's stay in foster care," Wallen said.

OFCO's Report on Guardian Ad Litem Representation of Children in Child Abuse and Neglect Proceedings may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 800-571-7321 or by accessing OFCO's web page at: www.governor.wa.gov/ofco.

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