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Family and Children's Ombudsman urges state and community leaders to take coordinated action on chronic child neglect

TUKWILA – The Family and Children's Ombudsman today identified chronic child neglect as one of the most persistent and challenging issues facing the state's child protection system, and called upon government and community leaders to come together to begin grappling with this complex issue before more children are harmed.

The ombudsman's comments were made in conjunction with a report issued today by the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman. The report identified the lack of timely and appropriate intervention in chronic child neglect situations as the issue that has been most frequently observed and documented by the ombudsman's office since becoming operational in June 1997. Chronic child neglect refers to the ongoing and serious deprivation of a child's basic physical, developmental and/or emotional needs by a parent or other caretaker.

According to the report, the ombudsman reviewed dozens of cases in which Child Protective Services (CPS) did not take decisive action to assist families or protect children from chronic neglect until after it had received multiple reports of suspected child maltreatment. In one case, for example, Child Protective Services (CPS) workers did not take decisive action to protect two children, aged seven and eight, from their neglectful mother until 1999, when they obtained a court order authorizing them to place the children in foster care. Their mother had been the subject of 21 reports to CPS during the preceding six-and-a-half years, during which time CPS periodically offered the family short-term support services. The ombudsman's report cited state statistics indicating that nearly one-fourth of the 40,796 reports to CPS in 1998 had more than 10 prior CPS reports.

The ombudsman's office also observed that by the time CPS took decisive action in chronic neglect cases, the children sometimes were already showing signs of developmental harm. In one case, for example, two children, ages four and five, were completely non-verbal when CPS workers obtained a court order to remove them from their home in 1998. Their mother had been the subject of seven neglect-related reports to CPS during the preceding three years.

"Chronic child neglect is one of the most persistent and challenging issues facing the state's child protection system," OFCO director Vickie Wallen said. "Our observation is that the system is often ineffective in preventing or protecting children from parental neglect that is ongoing and serious," Wallen said.

"The impact of chronic neglect on children - especially young children -- can be devastating," Wallen said. "We know from research on children's early brain development that the first few years of life are critical to a child's learning and development. Chronic neglect can severely damage the potential of children to grow and learn," she added.

According to research cited in the ombudsman's report, children who are chronically neglected often experience lasting adverse effects on their physical, emotional and cognitive development. These effects include delayed growth, language deficits and the inability to form emotional attachments.

According to the report, the question of how to prevent and effectively respond to chronic neglect is an "extraordinarily difficult" question that involves a variety of professional disciplines and raises a variety of challenging public policy and resource issues. One issue, for example, is whether and to what extent the state's legal authority to intervene in families should be expanded to better protect children from chronic neglect. Another issue is determining the extent to which the state must attempt to assist neglectful families before it is permissible to remove their children and/or terminate their parental rights. Child neglect cases constitute the majority of cases handled by the state's child protection system.

"This issue raises fundamental policy and resource questions that require public debate and consensus in developing our societal response to this type of child maltreatment," Wallen said. "This issue is beyond the ability of the DSHS to solve on its own," she added.

The report concludes that the issue of chronic child neglect is in need of sustained attention and coordinated action by state policy makers, government and private agencies, schools, the courts, and the public. The report recommends that state policy makers, community leaders, and representatives from the appropriate disciplines jointly convene a series of high level summits to begin addressing this issue. The purpose of the summits would be to begin collecting and sharing relevant data, framing the issues, and developing steps for coordinated action.

The report identifies six steps that should be considered for immediate implementation:

- The Children's Administration should ensure that all CPS investigations include assessments of the risk factors associated with the cumulative harm caused by chronic neglect.
- The Children's Administration should consider conducting developmental assessments of preschool children who are at significant risk of chronic neglect.

- The Children's Administration should consider requiring CPS workers to verify families' compliance with voluntary support services, assess the effectiveness of the services provided, and conduct a final safety check prior to closing their investigation.
- The Children's Administration and the Attorney General's Office should establish written guidelines for social workers and attorneys describing what is needed legally to file a dependency petition in chronic neglect cases.
- The Children's Administration and the Attorney General's Office should provide joint training to social workers, assistant attorney generals and prosecuting attorneys on their respective roles in determining whether a dependency petition should be filed.
- The Office of the Administrator for the Courts, in collaboration with the Children's Administration and the Attorney General's Office should consider making training available to juvenile court judges and commissioners on the cumulative harm to children associated with chronic neglect.

For more information, contact: Vickie Wallen, Director Ombudsman at (206) 439-3870. This issue is set forth in OFCO's 1999 Annual Report at pp. 35-42. The 1999 Report may be obtained by contacting OFCO, or by accessing OFCO's Web site: www.governor.wa.gov/ofco.

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