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Ombudsman calls for further safety improvements following independent review of the Washington School for the Deaf

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 Washington School for the Deaf (WSD). The report recommends changes at WSD that would reinforce current efforts to strengthen student safety at the residential school. The report also recommends changes in state policies that would improve the effectiveness of child abuse investigations conducted at WSD by Child Protective Services (CPS).

These recommendations are based on the Ombudsman's review of documented reports of sex-related incidents involving students at WSD during the 1995-96 through 2000-01 school years. Through this review, the Ombudsman sought to understand the seriousness and frequency of sex-related incidents reported at WSD, and to examine the response to these incidents by WSD, CPS and law enforcement.

The Ombudsman's review resulted in these key findings:

- OFCO counted 121 reports of serious incidents of student-on-student sexual misconduct during the six-year period under review. These reports described forcible or predatory sexual contact, harassing physical contact and non-physical sexual harassment. Due to the lack of comparable data, OFCO was unable to determine how this figure compares to public schools or other residential deaf schools.
- Most of the serious misconduct reported at WSD during the review period was committed by a relatively small number of troubled students. The Ombudsman found that 11 "repeat perpetrators" were responsible for 62 percent of the reports of serious sexual misconduct. These students had severe behavioral and/or mental health issues.
- WSD lacked the resources necessary to meet the needs of the repeat perpetrators while also keeping other students safe. Yet the school continued to enroll and serve these sexually aggressive students. This led to the ongoing victimization of other students and appeared to result in a culture that tolerated sexual aggression and victimization.
- Although CPS investigated 13 incidents of student-on-student sexual misconduct and identified deficiencies in the supervision provided by the school, it failed to facilitate necessary safety improvements. School administrators did not address the supervision

concerns brought to its attention by CPS, and CPS was not able to compel WSD to do so because the school is not licensed.

The Ombudsman's report sets forth four recommendations, which are intended to build upon current safety improvements being implemented at the school in response to Governor Gary Locke's student safety directive:

1. Incident documentation and record keeping. WSD should design and implement an integrated incident documentation system that provides administrators with the information they need to continuously evaluate and improve student safety at WSD. The system should ensure the recording of critical incident information and have the capacity to track reports and identify patterns.
2. Behaviorally disturbed students. WSD should develop a system for managing severely behaviorally disturbed students, including sexually aggressive students. The system should include clear disciplinary procedures that include objective criteria establishing when a behaviorally disturbed student must be removed from the general student population. WSD should also establish a school within WSD for severely behaviorally disturbed students so they can study, recreate and reside apart from the other students. Students with the most dangerous behavior and/or serious treatment needs should be served elsewhere.
3. Expert consultation on sexual aggression and victimization. WSD should obtain expert consultation on sexual aggression and victimization issues to: assist educators in identifying sexually aggressive students; improve staff awareness and understanding of sexual aggression and victimization; and assist with the development of a protocol for assessing and addressing the needs of student victims.
4. CPS and DLR Licensing. The Governor or the Legislature should formalize and strengthen the relationship between CPS and WSD by providing CPS with formal authority (by statute or executive order) to investigate incidents at the school and to take action if school administrators do not act to address student safety concerns.

The report also includes case examples illustrating the challenges faced by WSD in managing these students and the impact on other students resulting from the school's inability to protect them from these sexually aggressive students.

"This report should shatter any remaining doubt or denial about the seriousness and frequency of student-on-student sexual abuse at the Washington School for the Deaf," said OFCO director Vickie Wallen. "It's now up to school officials and state policymakers to ensure that effective and lasting improvements are put in place to prevent such abuse from happening again," she said. "School and state leaders must take all necessary steps to ensure that deaf and hard-of-hearing students are provided with a safe and appropriate education," Wallen added.

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OFCO's Review of the Washington School for the Deaf may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 800-571-7321 or TTY 206-439-3789, or by accessing OFCO's web page at: www.governor.wa.gov/ofco.