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In the year of its 10th anniversary, Ombudsman releases annual report to Governor and Legislature recommending improved case practice for Native children, better access to in-patient treatment and services for children with special needs, and manageable workloads.

TUKWILA, November 29, 2007 – The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) issued its annual report today recommending changes to improve case practice affecting Native children, improve access to in-patient treatment and services for children with special needs, and manageable workloads for child welfare workers.

OFCO Director, Mary Meinig, stated, "As we mature as an agency, we are more aware than ever of the privilege and responsibility of serving families and children in our state. In this year's report, we focused on those segments of our population who have a tendency to be marginalized by the system: children with special needs and Native families. Families are worn down trying to access services or out of home care for their children with special needs. The current system is confusing with too many hurdles to surmount to get children the help they deserve."

"Native families and children were granted unique recognition in the dependency process by the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. While there have been substantial efforts by DSHS to comply with the law, further reforms are needed to give full effect to the law. There must be more active recruitment of Native foster homes, improved communication and collaboration between the Tribes and DSHS, improved representation of Native children, and greater resources to provide services in Native communities."

The Ombudsman also cited ongoing concerns about the workloads for child welfare and protection workers: "Workloads are still not at manageable levels. This compromises child safety and was a factor in several child fatalities. It also affects the morale and retention of workers. As far back as 2000, we called for workloads to be reduced. It is discouraging that even with increased resources, DSHS has been unable to sustain lower caseloads. We think it is critically important."

Contact: OFCO's annual report may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 1-800-571-7321 or by accessing OFCO's web page at <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco>.