



**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 – JULY 2, 2002**

**State's first Family and Children's Ombudsman is leaving her post**

**TUKWILA** – The director of the Office of Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) today announced that she is leaving her position for family-related reasons. OFCO director, Vickie Wallen, said that her resignation, which becomes effective today, is based on her desire to provide full-time care for her infant son.

Wallen was appointed as the state's first Family and Children's Ombudsman in 1996 by then-Governor Mike Lowry, shortly after the Legislature established the office. Wallen was reappointed to a second term in 1999 by Governor Gary Locke. Her second term would have ended December 2002.

OFCO was created in response to several high-profile incidents involving the safety of children in state care, including ongoing abuse at the OK Boy's Ranch and the death of three-year-old Lauria Grace, who was killed by her mother while under state supervision. The independent office investigates citizen complaints against state agencies regarding the provision of services to abused and neglected children and their families, together with complaints involving the health and safety of children in state-operated or state-licensed residential care. The office is also responsible for identifying broader system-wide problems and recommending improvements to agency officials and state policymakers.

"It has been a privilege to guide this important office through its formative years," Wallen said. "I am proud that within a relatively short period, OFCO has established a reputation of being independent, fair, and effective," she said.

"After nearly six years, I believe more strongly than ever in our mission to serve as a safety net for our state's most vulnerable children and their families," Wallen added. "This office has literally helped save the lives of children who'd fallen through the cracks of the child protection system," she said.

In addition to assisting individual families and children, Wallen identified the following as significant accomplishments during her tenure as OFCO's director:

- As a result of OFCO's 1998 investigation of the 1994-95 Wenatchee child sexual abuse investigations, state law now requires: 1) Child Protective Services (CPS) to document and preserve in a near-verbatim format the questions posed and answers given during CPS interviews of children about alleged sexual abuse; 2) all child sexual abuse investigators, including the police, prosecutors, and CPS workers, be provided with specialized training in child sexual abuse investigative and interview techniques; and 3) each county to develop a written protocol for multidisciplinary collaboration on criminal child sexual abuse investigations.
- In response to an OFCO report that found that one-third of the children in child abuse and neglect proceedings do not have legal representation to advocate for their best interests, the 1999 Legislature appropriated \$1 million for the FY 1999-01 biennium to increase the number of children served by volunteer court-appointed special advocates (CASA)/guardians ad litem (GAL). This appropriation represented the state's first major expenditure for volunteer CASA/GALs.
- Following OFCO's 2000 case record review of the death of three-year-old Zy'Nyia Nobles by her mother while under state supervision, the office identified "caseworker bias" as a major factor that contributed to the state's failure to provide adequate protection. Subsequently, the Department of Social and Health Services/Children's Administration launched the Kids Come First initiative, which featured changes in policies, procedures and caseworker/supervisor training to strengthen and support "objective decision making."
- As a result of OFCO's 2002 report on student-on-student sexual abuse at the Washington State School for the Deaf, state law now requires CPS to conduct regular reviews, investigate child abuse and neglect reports, and follow up on safety-related deficiencies and concerns at the residential school.
- As a result of several OFCO reports highlighting the inability of CPS to timely and effectively intervene in cases involving chronic child neglect, efforts are underway in the Legislature to modify state law by eliminating the requirement that a child be at "imminent" risk of harm before CPS can investigate a child neglect report or seek legal intervention to protect the child.

OFCO is located organizationally in the Office of the Governor. It has six staff, including the Director, and an annual operating budget of approximately \$500,000. A search process for Wallen's successor is currently underway. Mary Meinig is serving as OFCO's acting director.

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For more information, contact Mary Meinig, Acting Director Ombudsman, at (206) 439-3870. For more information about the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, visit OFCO's Web site: [www.governor.wa.gov/ofco](http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco).