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Following Independent Case Review of Sirita Sotelo Fatality, Ombudsman Calls for Improvements to Case Management and Support Services after a Child is Returned Home

TUKWILA – The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) today released its independent review of the Division of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) involvement with Sirita Sotelo and her family. Mary Meinig, Director Ombudsman of OFCO, criticized the actions of DCFS stating, "The agency did not adequately monitor the situation in the father's home after Sirita was placed in his care. Specifically, regular home visits to check on the child's health and welfare did not occur on a consistent basis." The report recommends heightened assessment standards for non-parent adult caregivers in the home, regular health and safety checks of children returned to a parent's care, and increased family services once a child is returned home.

Three weeks before she was born, Sirita Sotelo was the subject of a Child Protective Services (CPS) referral, alleging prenatal substance abuse by her mother. After she tested positive for cocaine at birth, CPS filed for dependency and placed Sirita in foster care. Over the next three years, the department made numerous attempts to reunite Sirita with her mother. While efforts were being made to reunite Sirita with her mother, the child's father, who was notified of the dependency action, did not involve himself in the process, nor seek placement of Sirita. In May 2003, after learning that the department was seeking to terminate parental rights, Sirita's father stepped forward and requested that she be placed with him and his wife. The department then developed a service plan for the father. The father successfully completed services, and in November 2003, Sirita was placed with her father, stepmother and their four children. In November 2004, the dependency was dismissed and state agency involvement ceased. On January 22, 2005, CPS received a referral from law enforcement reporting a suspicious death of four year-old Sirita. Medical examiners later determined she died as a result of blows to the head and body. The stepmother later stated that she couldn't handle Sirita's fits and tantrums and admitted she threw her in a cold shower and beat her.

The Ombudsman identified the following areas of concern:

- Lack of services provided to Sirita, her father and stepmother, following her placement in their care.
- Delay in establishing permanency for Sirita.

- Frequency of health and safety checks did not comply with department policy.
- The father's and stepmother's CPS referral history may not have been fully considered prior to placing Sirita in their home.
- A thorough assessment of the stepmother's ability to parent, and meet Sirita's needs was not required.

Based on its review, the Ombudsman developed several recommendations aimed at: strengthening case supervision following a child's return to a parent's care; assuring that appropriate services for successful reunification are provided; and improving assessment of other adult care-givers in the parent's home. "The weeks and months following a child's placement in a parent's home, and often with an unfamiliar caregiver, are a crucial stage of reunification. It is critical that regular home visits occur, and that appropriate services are provided in order to assure the health and safety of the child and preserve families," stated Ombudsman Meinig.

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Contact: Sirita Sotelo Fatality Review: Report of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 800-571-7321 or by accessing OFCO's web site at: www.governor.wa.gov/ofco.