



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**

**Following 10-month review of child welfare practice in Colville, Washington, Ombudsman releases report to Governor and Legislature finding widespread crisis of confidence by community in child welfare system and significant erosion of trust that adversely affects decision-making and puts children and families at risk of harm.**

**TUKWILA, May 6, 2009** – The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) issued a comprehensive investigative report today, which finds that lack of trust between parties and among stakeholders in the Stevens County/Colville area undermines decision making in dependency cases and puts children at risk of harm.

Director Mary Meinig and Ombudsman Linda Mason Wilgis found poor communication, an absence of collaboration and cooperation among professionals, and a lack of transparency in the decision-making of DCFS to be significant factors in the community's lack of confidence in the child welfare agency. Community professionals do not feel respected and the relationships of the child welfare agency, Colville Division of Children and Family Services, with the Court Appointed Special Advocate program (CASA) and medical professionals in particular are severely strained.

Director Meinig stated that, "The Colville community identified child safety as its number one priority, but this will continue to be compromised unless significant work is done to repair relationships and create a culture of accountability and mutual respect. Families need to know that DCFS will be held accountable when the agency violates the laws and policies that govern its work."

The Ombudsman's report makes recommendations targeted toward all sectors of the child welfare system. Key among these is the use of an outside professional mediator, creation of a community advisory board, supporting relatives through improved notice and visitation, refinement of the child protection team process, and expanded resources so that contested cases can be heard on a timely basis and supervision within the agency can be more effective.

Contact: OFCO may be reached at 1-800-571-7321. The report entitled "Loss of Trust: A Crisis of Confidence in the Child Welfare System in Colville" may be accessed on OFCO's web page at <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco>.

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