



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES
CHILDREN'S ADMINISTRATION
PO Box 45040 Olympia WA 98504-5040

January 31, 2012

Mary Meinig
Director Ombudsman
Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman
6720 Fort Dent Way, Suite 240
Tukwila, WA 98188

Re: 2011 Annual Report

Dear Ms. Meinig:

Thank you for the Office of Family and Children's Ombudsman's (OFCO) 2011 Annual Report. We greatly appreciate our partnership with OFCO and public and private partnerships in our ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for children and families involved in Washington's public child welfare system. Our 2009 Interagency Agreement with OFCO has strengthened our partnership and collaboration to address our shared concerns about child safety, permanency and well being as well as identifying the system and practice areas needing improvement.

As we review the data in your report on the number of complaints, adverse findings and child fatalities, it is important for these to be viewed in context. CA received 76,688 intakes in 2011, either reporting alleged abuse or neglect or requesting services and CA served approximately 14,500 children who were in out of home care for a period of time. The number of intakes has steadily decreased since 2009, as has the number of children placed in out of home care as we continue to strengthen our services to prevent placement and ensure safety of children in their own homes. We are also gratified to see that complaints about our cases filed with OFCO has steadily decreased from 728 in 2009, 676 in 2010, and 608 in 2011 and that the vast majority of these complaints were successfully resolved. Also in decline are the adverse findings from 82 in 2010 to 65 in 2011. While we understand the small percentage that these cases represent, it is equally important to know that we take each and every one of these complaints or adverse findings seriously and, when necessary we address those practice or performance areas.

The report's Key Findings and Recommendations on page nine are areas of shared concerns that the Children's Administration continues to address both internally and in collaboration with OFCO, other public and private agencies and our Tribal partners.

- **Adverse findings**-These cases are thoroughly reviewed by local, regional and headquarters staff. There are cases where we may agree with OFCO's assessment and others where we may disagree based on the information and facts available. We will continue to work closely with OFCO in reaching a satisfactory resolution in all of the cases.

- **Severe abuse and neglect, including starvation in adoptive, pre-adoptive and other permanent placements.** We share OFCO's concern about these cases that involve in-state, out-of-state, international, and private adoption cases. We look forward to working with OFCO and other public and private entities in closely reviewing and addressing any policy, practice or systemic issues that may be identified.
- **Completion of CPS Investigative Assessments within 45 days** – We currently have corrective action plans for each region to address this. This is in addition to what we are already doing in developing the technology to obtain monthly statewide data in order to monitor this issue on a regular basis. We are also reviewing CA policy that requires a shorter timeframe for completion of investigations than is required in statute.
- **Unsafe sleep environment** – This continues to be a critical concern as this is a factor in many child fatalities reported to the department. Hospitals as well as department social workers provide information to families of newborns about safe sleep and the things they can do or avoid doing to ensure a safe sleep environment for their baby. We are also working with the Tribes, Indian organizations, Department of Health and other professionals to address education about safe sleep environments in Native communities.

A concern identified in your report was the increase in child fatalities where clear abuse or neglect was a contributing factor (8 in 2009 and 17 in 2010). Although, the 2009 data represented a significant decrease in maltreatment-related fatalities (20 in 2007, 29 in 2008), any child maltreatment fatality where the family had some level of CA involvement in the year prior to the child's death, causes us to look closely at our practice, policies and systemic issues related to service delivery. We continue to review these cases as well as near-fatality cases if CA provided services in the year prior to the incident. OFCO is invited to each of our reviews along with local community partners and professionals in identifying if and where improvements can be made in how the public child welfare system responds to reports of abuse or neglect and provides services to children and families.

Thank you for OFCO's 2011 Annual Report and data as well as detailed information about individual cases. We have discussed many of these cases throughout the year in our ongoing communication through your participation in critical incident reviews and case staffings. We look forward to our continued partnership in improving outcomes for children and families involved in Washington's public child welfare system.

Sincerely,



Denise Revels Robinson, Assistant Secretary
Children's Administration

cc: Robin Arnold-Williams, Secretary, DSHS