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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on HB 1961

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON HB 1961

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Friday, February 13, 2009

John L. O'Brien Building, House Hearing Rm A, 1:30 p.m.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 1961. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO").

HB 1961 relates to implementation of the Federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. OFCO urged the U.S. Congress to pass this law and in our recently released 2007 & 2008 annual report, we included a discussion of the Act and suggested that Washington State explore the availability of Federal dollars that the Act authorizes to improve out-of-home care for children.

We are pleased by the introduction of HB 1961 because it recognizes and makes use of new opportunities to use Federal funds to promote permanency and positive outcomes for youth in foster care.

- In particular, HB 1961 authorizes the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to provide continued foster care or group care, or adoption support or subsidized relative guardianship benefits to youth ages 18 to 21 who meet conditions related to education or employment that are specified in the bill. *In our annual report, OFCO recommended that the "Foster Care to 21" program be reauthorized if evaluation data from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) confirms that this program is making a positive difference in preparing youth for their early adulthood and future.*

As you know, the Foster Care to 21 program was a three year pilot program initiated in 2006 after the enactment of 2SHB 2002. It authorizes 50 youth a year, over the age of 18, to remain in foster or group care so they can participate in or complete a post high school academic or job training program and receive necessary support and transition services.

- HB 1961 broadens eligibility for youth over age 18 to receive support and services beyond what is currently provided for by the Foster Care to 21 program in several important respects: first, it provides not only for foster care or group care but adds adoption support benefits or subsidized relative guardianship benefits to such youth; second, it provides as a condition of receiving such benefits, not only enrollment in a post secondary or vocational educational program (as the current program provides), but also enrollment in a high school or high school equivalency program; participation in a program to remove barriers to employment; employment for 80 hours or more per month; or incapacity to engage in any of the specified educational or employment activities due to a medical condition.

We believe that expansion of the pool of youths who are eligible for placement and services after age 18 more realistically captures the reality of today's youth and the demands of our culture and economy. Youth between the ages of 18 and 21 are at a critical juncture in their lives and they need our support to have the best chance of success.

HB 1961 also promotes relative guardianships by clearly establishing that such guardianships are a permissible permanency plan, directing DSHS to conduct routine outreach for the relative guardianship program, and providing that relative guardianship subsidy agreements must be designed to promote long term permanency for children and support the stability of the placement. As we highlighted in our annual report, we are strongly in favor of measures that encourage placement of children with relatives when they need out-of-home care. These guardianships will only work if they are financially viable for families. We have seen situations in which relatives wanted to care for a grandchild, niece, or nephew, but simply could not financially afford to assume responsibility for another child. That child lost out on the chance to live with family. We don't want a child to miss out on staying with family due to financial constraints.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with our thoughts on this legislation.