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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on SSB 5510

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON SSB 5510
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES
Thursday, March 19, 2009

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 5510. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO").

We favor SSB 5510's inclusion of a parent's failure to have contact with a child for 15 months to the list of aggravated circumstances that provide DSHS with a basis for terminating parental rights without providing reasonable efforts to reunify the parent and child. In 1997, Congress enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in response to growing concerns about the length of time children were remaining in foster care. ASFA explicitly provides that States may include in their definition of "aggravated circumstances" abandonment. Thus, SSB 5510 would appropriately expand the basis for expediting terminations in a manner that is consistent with the intent of Congress.

We also support SSB 5510's expanded notice requirement for parents. When the stakes are high – that a parent could lose their parental rights to a child – we want DSHS to leave no room for misunderstanding. By requiring the agency to notify parents at the front end of the dependency, and at the six-month mark after dependency is established, that their failure to participate in services could result in termination of parental rights, parents may be motivated to engage in services on a more timely basis. At a minimum, they will more clearly understand the likely consequences if they do not.

Thank you to Senators Stevens, Hargrove, and other members for sponsoring this measure.