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Written Testimony to be Incorporated into the Record on SB 6417

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON SB 6417
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES AND CORRECTIONS
Thursday, January 21, 2010
J.A. Cherberg Building, Senate Hearing Rm 1, 3:30 p.m.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on Senate Bill 6417. My name is Mary Meinig and I am the Director of the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO").

SB 6417 creates a presumption that placing a child, who has been removed from his/her parent(s) due to abuse or neglect, with a relative is in the child's best interest when the parent has requested relative placement. The department would bear the burden of overcoming this presumption by a preponderance of the evidence.

We support the intent of SB 6417, which is to strengthen consideration of relative placements when parents have identified a preferred relative. We think it is important that this legislation gives a parent's preference regarding placement greater weight, especially at the shelter care stage before the child has been found dependent and when out-of-home placement usually occurs on an emergency basis. Placing a child with a family member minimizes the disruption to the child's life and maintains the child's connection to his/her family.

In our 2007 & 2008 Annual Report and in our 2009 Colville Report, OFCO recommended increasing relative placements for dependent children. This bill embraces the cultural shift towards formally recognizing the importance of relatives in the lives of dependent children. We also recommended that the department clearly and consistently communicate with parents and relatives regarding any reason why the department is not supporting relative placement for a child. By requiring the department to show that relative placement is not in the

child's best interest and by allowing the court to weigh the benefits of relative placement against any concerns for the child's health and safety, this bill would improve communication and, ultimately, outcomes for children.

Thank you to Senators Roach, Hargrove, and Stevens for their sponsorship of this measure and for this opportunity to provide our thoughts on this proposal.