

ROLE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

The Ombudsman was established by the Washington State Legislature in 1996, following the death of three-year-old Louria Grace, who was killed by her mother while under the supervision of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and after years of youth-on-youth sexual abuse came to light at the DSHS-licensed OK Boys Ranch.

As well, the office was established during a time of growing concern about DSHS' participation in the Wenatchee child sexual abuse investigations. In each instance, families and citizens who previously had reported concerns about DSHS' conduct lacked an appropriate agency to turn to for an independent review when DSHS did not address their concerns.

In creating the Ombudsman, the Legislature sought to provide families and citizens an avenue through which they could obtain an independent and impartial review of DSHS decisions (See RCW 43.06A). The Legislature also intended for the Ombudsman to intervene to induce DSHS to revisit or change a problematic decision that has placed a child or family at risk of harm and to recommend improvements to system-wide problems.

Independence

The Ombudsman's independence allows it to perform its duties with freedom and objectivity. The Ombudsman operates as an independent agency under the Office of the Governor. The Ombudsman is located in Tukwila and conducts its operations independently of the Governor's Office in Olympia. The Ombudsman director serves a specified term of office and is required by law to work independently of DSHS.

Authority

The Legislature empowered the Ombudsman by providing it with broad access to confidential information, while also protecting the confidentiality of the Ombudsman's investigative records and the identities of individuals who contact the office. State law provides the Ombudsman with direct access to confidential DSHS records and the agency's computerized case-management system. The office is authorized to receive confidential information from other agencies and service providers, as well (including mental health professionals, guardians ad litem, and assistant attorneys general).

The Office of the Family and

Children's Ombudsman was

established to investigate complaints involving children and families receiving child protection or child welfare services, or any child reported to be at risk of abuse, neglect or other harm.

The Ombudsman was also established to monitor the state's protection of children's safety in state-operated and -regulated facilities. In addition, the Legislature directed the Ombudsman to recommend system-wide improvements that benefit children and families. The Ombudsman carries out its duties with independence and impartiality.

State law also authorizes the Ombudsman to maintain the confidentiality of its investigative records and the identity of individuals who contact the office to request information or file a complaint. These provisions enhance the quality of the Ombudsman's investigations. They also encourage individuals to come forward with information and concerns without fear of possible retaliation by others.

While the Ombudsman is not authorized to make, change, or set aside a law, policy or an agency practice or decision, the office can publish its investigative findings and system-improvement recommendations in public reports to the Governor and the Legislature. The Ombudsman's ability to identify and publicly expose a problematic law, policy, and agency practice or decision provides the office with significant influence.

In addition, the Ombudsman derives influence from its close proximity to the Governor and the Legislature. The Ombudsman director is appointed by and reports directly to the Governor. The director's appointment is subject to confirmation by the Washington State Senate. The Ombudsman's budget, general operations, and system improvement recommendations are reviewed by the Legislative Children's Oversight Committee.

Staff

Director/Ombudsman

Mary Meinig, Director of the Office of Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO), has served as an ombudsman with the office since it opened in 1997. Prior to joining OFCO, Ms. Meinig maintained a successful clinical and consulting practice specializing in treating abused and traumatized children and their families. Her previous experience includes working in special education, child protective services and children's residential treatment settings. Ms. Meinig is nationally known for her work developing Family Resolution Therapy, a protocol for the long-term management of relationships in abusive families. She is frequently asked to present her work at national conferences, and has authored several professional publications on this topic. Ms. Meinig is a graduate of Central Washington University, and received a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Washington. She is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers.

Ombudsman

Patrick Dowd is an attorney with extensive experience representing indigent parents and children involved in dependency actions. Prior to joining OFCO, Mr. Dowd was a public defense attorney in King County from 1987 to 1999. A significant part of Mr.

Dowd's practice involved dependency proceedings and from 1996 to 1999 he served as the Dependency Unit Coordinator for the Society of Counsel Representing Accused Persons. Mr. Dowd is a graduate of Seattle University, and received his law degree from the University of Oregon Law School. Mr. Dowd joined OFCO in December 1999.

Ombudsman

Linda Mason Wilgis is a former Assistant Attorney General for the State of Washington, where from 1991 to 2001 she gained extensive experience in dependency and guardianship cases involving both children and vulnerable adults. Before joining the Office of the Attorney General, Ms. Mason Wilgis was in private practice with a Seattle firm. She is a graduate of Skidmore College and received her law degree from the University of Virginia. Prior to attending law school, Ms. Mason Wilgis served under Senator Henry M. Jackson as a professional staff member on the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Special Projects Assistant

Doris Stevens came to OFCO in 2003 as Assistant to the Director for Special Projects. Ms. Stevens has had extensive experience as a social worker, supervisor, program manager and teacher. She retired from

Harborview Medical Center after 27 years creating and building programs in the social work department--pioneering counseling services for abused and traumatized patients. Formerly, Stevens spent five years as a child welfare worker for a private adoption agency. She graduated from Valparaiso University (Indiana), received a Master's degree in social work from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, and is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW) in the state of Washington.

Information Specialist/Office Administrator

Megan Palchak is a recent graduate of the University of Vermont. Prior to joining OFCO, Ms. Palchak was a Program Assistant for the Washington Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, and member of their legislative committee. She was also a Program Coordinator for a drop-in Boys and Girls Club located in a low-income housing neighborhood where she collaborated with local families, community professionals, and youth on various youth development projects. Ms. Palchak also interned with environmental advocacy group Save the River in Clayton, New York. Ms. Palchak has been with OFCO since August 2003.

Work Activities

The Ombudsman performs its statutory duties through its work in four areas.

- ▶ **Listening to Families and Citizens.** Families and citizens who contact the Ombudsman with an inquiry or complaint often feel that DSHS or another agency is not listening to their concerns. By listening carefully to families and citizens, the Ombudsman can effectively assess and respond to individual concerns and also identify recurring problems faced by families and children throughout the system.
- ▶ **Responding to Complaints.** The Ombudsman spends more time investigating complaints than on any other activity. The Ombudsman impartially investigates and analyzes complaints against DSHS and other agencies. Thorough complaint investigations and analyses enable the Ombudsman to respond effectively when action must be taken to change an agency's decision and to accurately identify problematic policy and practice issues that warrant further examination. They also enable the Ombudsman to back up the agency when it is unfairly criticized for properly carrying out its duties.
- ▶ **Taking Action on Behalf of Children and Families.** The Ombudsman takes action when it has determined that intervention is necessary to avert or correct a harmful oversight or mistake by DSHS or another agency. The Ombudsman's actions include: prompting the agency to take a "closer look" at a concern; facilitating information sharing; mediating professional disagreements; and sharing the Ombudsman's investigation findings and analysis with the agency to correct a problematic decision. Through these actions, the Ombudsman is often successful in resolving legitimate concerns.
- ▶ **Improving the System.** The Ombudsman is responsible for facilitating improvements to the child protection and child welfare system. The Ombudsman works to identify and investigate system-wide problems, and it publishes its findings and recommendations in public reports to agency officials and state policymakers. Through these efforts, the Ombudsman helps to generate better services for children and families.

The Ombudsman utilizes virtually all of its resources – five full-time staff and a biennial budget of nearly one million dollars – to perform these activities. The Ombudsman's work activities are described in more detail in the sections that follow.
