

HOUSE BILL REPORT

2SHB 2856

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to establishing the office of the child, youth, and family ombudsman.

Brief Description: Establishing the office of the child, youth, and family ombudsman.

Sponsors: Representatives Cooke, D. Schmidt, Wolfe, Reams, Tokuda, Chopp, Stevens, Costa, Mulliken, Hymes, Hatfield, Silver, Scheuerman, Kessler, Conway and Cole; by request of Governor Lowry.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 1/30/96, 2/1/96 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/3/96 [DP2S(w/o sub CFS)].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/9/96, 97-0.
Senate Amended.
House Concurred.
Passed Legislature.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Cooke, Chairman; Lambert, Vice Chairman; Stevens, Vice Chairman; Tokuda, Ranking Minority Member; Brown, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Boldt; Buck; Carrell; Dickerson; Patterson and Sterk.

Staff: David Knutson (786-7146).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass and do not pass the substitute bill by Committee on Children & Family Services. Signed by 28 members: Representatives Huff, Chairman; Clements, Vice Chairman; Pelesky, Vice Chairman; H. Sommers, Ranking Minority Member; Valle, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Beeksma; Brumsickle; Carlson;

Chappell; Cooke; Crouse; Dellwo; Dyer; Foreman; Grant; Hargrove; Hickel; Kessler; Lambert; Linville; McMorris; Poulsen; Reams; Rust; Sehlin; Sheahan; Talcott and Wolfe.

Staff: Beth Redfield (786-7130).

Background: In September 1995, the Governor convened a child protection roundtable to advise him on the problems related to protecting children. One of the recommended options to increase the safety of children and improve the effectiveness of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) was to create an independent ombudsman. The ombudsman's duties would be to identify problems in the child protection and welfare system and assist children, youth, and families who are experiencing problems with DSHS or state-licensed facilities.

Several other states have established an ombudsman office to address issues related to state services for children and families. Washington State has created other ombudsman offices to provide assistance in issues related to long-term care, small businesses, and mobile home parks.

The Governor's 1996 supplemental budget request includes \$343,000 for the ombudsman.

Summary of Bill: The Office of Children, Youth and Family Ombudsman is established in the Office of the Governor. The purpose of the ombudsman is to monitor and ensure that DSHS and state-licensed facilities comply with statutory requirements relating to children and families. The ombudsman is appointed by the Governor for a three-year term.

The ombudsman's specific duties include providing information relating to children and family services to the public; investigating cases involving DSHS or state-licensed agencies; monitoring practices and procedures; conducting periodic review of all state institutions and licensed facilities; reviewing investigative reports of children who die while receiving DSHS services; and recruiting and training volunteers to assist the ombudsman. The ombudsman must report to the Governor and Legislature annually.

The ombudsman's investigations and records are confidential and may be disclosed only as necessary to perform his or her duties.

A legislative children's oversight committee is created to monitor and ensure compliance with administrative acts, relevant statutes, rules, and policies pertaining to family and children services and the placement, supervision, and treatment of children in the state's care.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill has an emergency clause for Sections 2 through 6, 13, and 17, which take effect immediately. Sections 1, 7 through 12, 14 through 16, 18, and 19 are effective January 1, 1997. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Testimony For: (Children & Family Services) Children and families need an independent ombudsman to investigate actions by the Department of Social and Health Services. An independent ombudsman can respond to concerns of parents, children, the Legislature, and the Governor.

(Appropriations) This legislation is the result of a bipartisan effort. Its objectives are to increase agency responsiveness and to make sure clients receive information on their rights and responsibilities.

Testimony Against: (Children & Family Services) None.

(Appropriations) None.

Testified: (Children & Family Services) (Pro) Vickie Wahlin, citizen; Rebecca Cruz, Washington Association for the Education of Young Children; Margaret Casey, WSCC; Laurie Lippold, Children's Home Society; and Peter Berliner, Children's Alliance.

(Appropriations) Vicki Wallen, Office of the Governor.