

**Testimony by Charlotte J. Smith, Supervisor
Office of Children's Ombudsman
HB 4649 and HB 4650
Families, Children, and Seniors Committee
October 9, 2013**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Committee.

My name is Charlotte Smith and I am the Supervisor/Manager for the Office of Children's Ombudsman (OCO). Verlie Ruffin, the OCO director, is out of town and could not be here today.

The OCO is responsible for investigating complaints about the handling of children's cases by the Department of Human Services and private child placing agencies with respect to children's protective services, foster care, adoption services and juvenile justice. In addition, we open a case for investigation when a child has allegedly died because of child abuse or neglect, and the child's family has previously been involved with DHS. Our investigations consist of reviewing agency actions to determine whether they complied with laws and policies.

I am here today to testify in support of HB 4649 also known as the Foster Parent Bill of Rights and the companion bill, HB 4650 that amends the Children's Ombudsman Act.

Although our office does not currently have the authority to investigate issues that are solely about foster parents, we receive complaints from foster parents regarding many of the concerns outlined in the Foster Parent Bill of Rights. We understand the importance of providing families who care for the state's abused and neglected children an avenue where their concerns can be reviewed in an impartial manner. The OCO is hopeful that we will be able to provide foster

parents with answers to their questions and a mechanism to help resolve their concerns.

Investigating foster parent concerns that are not about foster children will be a new focus for the OCO. This added responsibility is not an area the current OCO staff have expertise in or much knowledge about. Currently, when foster parents contact our office for assistance or concerns about issues such as their foster home license, payment, or training, we refer them to their licensing agency or to BCAL (the DHS Bureau of Children and Adult Licensing).

Our total budget appropriation for FY 2014 is \$1.2 million. The OCO is understaffed; our agency consists of the director, one supervisor, five investigators, and two administrative support staff. We have requested appropriations for four additional staff; two intake analysts and two investigators for FY 2015 that will help us handle the *current* volume of complaints and investigations. Unfortunately, until additional appropriations are received, we will not be able to handle foster parent complaints or conduct investigations.

With respect to HB 4650, we request an effective date of October 1, 2014 that is subject to appropriations. Prior to processing foster parent complaints and conducting investigations, we will need to do the following:

- Hire and train additional staff
- Develop new internal policies and procedures
- Find out from DHS and BCAL what documents we will need to investigate these complaints
- Find out how DHS, private child-placing agencies and BCAL presently handle foster parent complaints

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you about these bills.