



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**STATE AUDITOR'S OFFICE RECOMMENDS IMPROVEMENTS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE
AND TIMELY CHILD PROTECTION OMBUDSMAN REVIEWS**

DENVER—An audit by the Colorado Office of the State Auditor (OSA) has found that the Department of Human Services hasn't implemented sufficient rules and contract management practices to make sure the Child Protection Ombudsman Program effectively reviews child protection complaints, and produces timely and complete reports and recommendations.

The Child Protection Ombudsman Program began in 2011 and is operated by a non-profit organization, the National Association of Counsel for Children, through a contract managed by the Department of Human Services.

A primary function of the Ombudsman Program is to receive complaints about Colorado's child protection system. The program conducts case reviews to decide if complaints have merit, if actions should be taken on cases that are the subject of complaints and if overall changes are needed in the child protection system. If a review identifies serious concerns, the Ombudsman Program may conduct a more extensive investigation that generally results in written reports that are made public.

Since its inception, the Ombudsman Program has completed 490 case reviews and five investigations.

Auditors reviewed 17 case reviews and found that five of them didn't document how Ombudsman Program staff reached their conclusions about the merit of complaints or recommendations to address issues identified during the review.

The Ombudsman Program also hasn't consistently documented that it notified relevant parties involved with complaints about the outcome of its reviews, the audit found. Auditors reviewed 20 files and found that in six cases complainants were not notified, in three cases county departments under review were not informed, and in 13 cases the Department of Human Services was not notified.

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The Ombudsman Program is not always timely in completing its reviews, the audit also found. Twenty-nine of the 163 reviews open in Fiscal Year 2014 took more than 30 days to finalize, and seven reviews had been open between 198 and 497 days without being finalized.

The audit acknowledged that the current organizational structure of the Ombudsman Program may not be ideal to achieve the optimum level of independence necessary to fulfill the legislative goal of the program. The Department is tasked with overseeing the Ombudsman Program while at the same time providing the program a level of independence that allows it to conduct thorough and credible reviews of the child protection system, including the Department's role in that system.

The decision of whether the organizational structure of the program is appropriate is a matter of public policy and outside the scope of the OSA's audit. During the 2014 Legislative Session, the General Assembly raised the issue of the program's autonomy. Senate Bill 14-201 established a work group which is tasked with examining the autonomy and accountability of the Ombudsman Program under the current structure and making recommendations for any necessary changes.

The OSA made five recommendations for improvements going forward. The Department of Human Services agreed with all five recommendations.

The full report is available electronically on the OSA's website, <http://www.state.co.us/auditor>, via the link called "OSA Audit Reports." In accordance with state statute, the Legislative Audit Committee released the audit by a majority vote during a public hearing.

Under the direction of the state auditor, the OSA is the state's nonpartisan, independent external auditor with broad authority to audit state agencies, departments, institutions of higher education, and the Judicial and Legislative Branches. The OSA's professional staff serve the people of Colorado by addressing relevant public issues through high-quality, objective audits and reviews that promote accountability and positive change in government. Performance audits address whether programs operate in compliance with laws and regulations and in a manner that accomplishes intended program goals. Financial audits include annual audits of the state's basic financial statements and federal grants on a statewide level. IT audits review procedures and technology to ensure the confidentiality, integrity and availability of the state's critical computer systems and taxpayer data. The OSA also tracks about 4,000 Colorado local governments for compliance with the Local Government Audit Law.