

**Testimony before the Appropriations Subcommittee  
For the Office of the Mental Health Ombudsman  
January 27, 2005**

**Mandate**

The ombudsman shall represent the interests of individuals with regard to the need for public mental health services, including individuals in transition from public to private services. The ombudsman may not provide a legal advocacy service but may assist individuals with issues related to eligibility for and access to public mental health services.

**Duties**

- Receiving and investigating complaints
- Investigating on the ombudsman's own motion
- Recommending corrective action
- Engaging in activities that may improve the functioning of the public mental health system
- Issuing reports concerning the ombudsman's findings and recommendations, if necessary

**History**

- **1999:** Office was created by the Legislature when state's managed care contract for mental health was cancelled; the state resumed responsibility for mental health system; the first mental health ombudsman was appointed to 4-year term.
- **2001:** Legislature further clarified its intent for the office regarding administrative attachment; population served; access to information; legal advocacy; and reports.
- **2003:** Legislature did not pass a bill requested by the Governor to make the appointment of the mental health ombudsman optional; ombudsman reappointed.
- **2005:** Senate Bill 46 is before the Legislature with further clarification of the ombudsman's duties and access to confidential information (underlined).

**Funding**

- **FY 2000 to 2003:** annual budget grew from \$78,500 to \$90,000 with approximately \$30,000 of federal funding annually.
- **FY 04/05:** the Governor's office wanted all federal funding for the program, so 1) budget was combined with BOV; and 2) the federal funding request for ombudsman was increased; and 3) new federal funding was requested for BOV. On 12/14/04 the state was notified that federal funding was discontinued; we now know it is not available for FY 2005 (\$96,000).
- **FY 06/07** budget request is all general fund; two budgets will be separate again.

## Accomplishments

- Decision makers have taken Mental Health Ombudsman's recommendations into consideration: 1) Increase access to mental health care for children; 2) Maintain a pharmacy benefit; 3) Develop more community services with proven effectiveness; 4) Divert persons with serious mental illness from the criminal justice system.
- Respond to approximately 400 requests for assistance annually.
- Increase the participation of persons interested in mental illness in development of the public mental health system.
- Specific recommendations:
  - Restore extended mental health benefit to CHIP.
  - Improve access to mental health services for mentally ill leaving prison.
  - Develop a crisis response system
  - Move towards a System of Care for children
  - Increase the number of PACT slots