



A Safe Haven for Children in Crisis

February 3, 2009

Dear Members of the Health and Human Services Sub- Committee and Chairperson Henry:

I extend my appreciation to you for your commitment to the safety and care of Montana children.

I have the privilege of serving as the executive director of Watson Children's Shelter in Missoula. I respectfully submit the following testimony for your consideration regarding two Child and Family Services Division budget issues:

- 1) Provider Rates; and
- 2) Child and Family Services Vacancy Savings

Provider Rates:

Watson Children's Shelter provides emergency shelter to children, infant to age 14, who are victims of abuse, neglect, abandonment or family crisis. Founded in 1977, the shelter cares for 70 to 100 children annually from Missoula and the entire western Montana region.

As a shelter care provider, we receive a per diem rate from Child and Family Services of \$78.61. Actual cost of care is \$112 per day. Simply stated, this means we constantly turn to our community for funds to raise over 30% of our budget to keep our doors open to the 70 to 100 abused and neglected children who need us every year. With our challenging economy, charitable giving is on the decline. These funds are critical to not only provide for every child's nourishment, clothing, and emotional well being, but to provide quality care with nurturing, professional staff who are deeply committed to every child's safety and healthy development.

I urge you to include a provider rate increase of 3.5% in the budget to allow Watson Children's Shelter and other providers across the state to continue to welcome children and youth in desperate need of quality care, guidance and hope.

Child and Family Services Vacancy Savings:

The existing Governor's budget includes a Child and Family Services Vacancy Savings increase from 3% to 7%. As a cost savings initiative, this means that at any given time, 26 positions within Child and Family Services must remain unfilled. This means less social

workers to investigate referrals of child abuse and neglect, fewer visits to children in foster care, less time to develop permanency plans for children in out-of home care, and an overall squeeze on the limited human resources within Child and Family Services staff. This "squeeze" ultimately undermines existing staff and leads to eventual turn over, costing the state more dollars. There are federal financial sanctions as well. As the result of a recent federal audit, Child and Family Services is REQUIRED to have more contact with children in custody. The 7% proposed vacancy savings makes it virtually impossible to complete these visits. Failure to comply will result in federal financial sanctions, costing the state additional funds. Most importantly, this understaffing greatly undermines the ability of Child and Family Services to ensure care and permanency for children in custody and to protect the children in our communities who are suffering from physical or sexual abuse, or severe neglect. **For the safety of Montana children, I urge you to keep the Child and Family Services vacancy saving rate at 3%.**

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to children and youth who depend upon your voice.

Respectfully,

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