



AN ACT CREATING AN INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE CHILD AND FAMILY OMBUDSMAN; DESCRIBING THE DUTIES AND POWERS OF THE OFFICE; AMENDING SECTION 41-3-205, MCA; PROVIDING FOR CONTINGENT VOIDNESS; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE AND A TERMINATION DATE.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

**Section 1. Office of child and family ombudsman established.** (1) There is an office of the child and family ombudsman within the department of justice provided for in 2-15-2001.

(2) As used in this part, "ombudsman" means the office of the child and family ombudsman.

**Section 2. Purpose and intent.** The legislature finds that:

(1) an independent, impartial, and confidential ombudsman can serve to protect the interests and rights of Montana's children and families; and

(2) an independent, impartial, and knowledgeable ombudsman can work collaboratively with the department to strengthen the department's child and family services.

**Section 3. Appointment.** (1) The attorney general shall appoint an individual who is a resident of this state and is qualified by training and experience to perform the duties of the ombudsman as provided in [section 6].

(2) The appointment must be made from a list of at least three persons prepared and submitted by a committee consisting of:

- (a) one attorney appointed by the Montana bar association;
- (b) one district court judge appointed by the chief justice of the Montana supreme court;
- (c) one medical doctor appointed by the Montana medical association;
- (d) one psychologist appointed by the Montana psychological association;
- (e) one social worker appointed by the Montana chapter of the national association of social workers;

- (f) one person appointed by the attorney general as a representative of private children's agencies;
- (g) one person appointed by the attorney general as a representative of the general public; and
- (h) one person appointed by the director of the department.

**Section 4. Staff.** Subject to available funding, the department of justice shall hire necessary staff to carry out the provisions of [sections 1 through 7]. Staff must be under the supervision of the ombudsman.

**Section 5. Independence.** The ombudsman acts independently of the department of public health and human services in the performance of the duties of the office.

**Section 6. Duties.** The duties of the ombudsman are to:

- (1) ensure that each child under the jurisdiction of the department, and in appropriate cases an individual interested in the child's welfare, is apprised of the child's rights under the law;
- (2) take all possible action, including but not limited to programs of public education and advocacy, to pursue the legal, civil, and special protections of children;
- (3) help interested parties obtain any information pertaining to the case work and procedures of the department that they are entitled to under the law;
- (4) review complaints and investigate, in accordance with the powers provided for in [section 7] and with procedures adopted and made publicly available by the ombudsman, those complaints that indicate, in the opinion of the ombudsman, that a child might be in need of assistance from the ombudsman;
- (5) investigate, in accordance with the powers provided for in [section 7] and with procedures adopted and made publicly available by the ombudsman, the circumstances relating to the death of any child who has received services from the department;
- (6) when the ombudsman's investigation related to a complaint or a death appears to warrant it, share the relevant findings, subject to the disclosure restrictions and confidentiality requirements provided in [section 7], with individuals or entities that are legally authorized to receive, inspect, or investigate reports of child abuse or neglect;
- (7) periodically review the procedures used by the department with a view toward the rights of children;
- (8) recommend to the department changes in its procedures; and

(9) annually submit to the attorney general a detailed report analyzing the work of the ombudsman and any recommendations resulting from it.

**Section 7. Powers of ombudsman.** (1) The ombudsman has, subject to subsection (2), the power to:

(a) inspect, copy, or subpoena department records, including case notes, correspondence, evaluations, videotapes, and interviews pertaining to any child under the jurisdiction of the department who is alleged to be abused or neglected;

(b) request that individuals or entities outside the department that are legally authorized to receive, inspect, or investigate reports of child abuse or neglect provide information related to a complaint or death that the ombudsman is investigating; and

(c) take appropriate steps to see that persons are made aware of the services and procedures of the office of the child and family ombudsman, its purpose, and how it can be contacted.

(2) The ombudsman is subject to the disclosure restrictions and confidentiality requirements provided in 41-3-205.

**Section 8.** Section 41-3-205, MCA, is amended to read:

**"41-3-205. Confidentiality -- disclosure exceptions.** (1) The case records of the department and its local affiliate, the local office of public assistance, the county attorney, and the court concerning actions taken under this chapter and all records concerning reports of child abuse and neglect must be kept confidential except as provided by this section. Except as provided in subsections (7) and (8), a person who purposely or knowingly permits or encourages the unauthorized dissemination of the contents of case records is guilty of a misdemeanor.

(2) Records may be disclosed to a court for in camera inspection if relevant to an issue before it. The court may permit public disclosure if it finds disclosure to be necessary for the fair resolution of an issue before it.

(3) Records, including case notes, correspondence, evaluations, videotapes, and interviews, unless otherwise protected by this section or unless disclosure of the records is determined to be detrimental to the child or harmful to another person who is a subject of information contained in the records, may be disclosed to the following persons or entities in this state and any other state or country:

(a) a department, agency, ombudsman, or organization, including a federal agency, military enclave, or

Indian tribal organization, that is legally authorized to receive, inspect, or investigate reports of child abuse or neglect and that otherwise meets the disclosure criteria contained in this section;

(b) a licensed youth care facility or a licensed child-placing agency that is providing services to the family or child who is the subject of a report in the records or to a person authorized by the department to receive relevant information for the purpose of determining the best interests of a child with respect to an adoptive placement;

(c) a health or mental health professional who is treating the family or child who is the subject of a report in the records;

(d) a parent, guardian, or person designated by a parent or guardian of the child who is the subject of a report in the records or other person responsible for the child's welfare, without disclosure of the identity of any person who reported or provided information on the alleged child abuse or neglect incident contained in the records;

(e) a child named in the records who was allegedly abused or neglected or the child's legal guardian or legal representative, including the child's guardian ad litem or attorney or a special advocate appointed by the court to represent a child in a pending case;

(f) the state protection and advocacy program as authorized by 42 U.S.C. 15043(a)(2);

(g) approved foster and adoptive parents who are or may be providing care for a child;

(h) a person about whom a report has been made and that person's attorney, with respect to the relevant records pertaining to that person only and without disclosing the identity of the reporter or any other person whose safety may be endangered;

(i) an agency, including a probation or parole agency, that is legally responsible for the supervision of an alleged perpetrator of child abuse or neglect;

(j) a person, agency, or organization that is engaged in a bona fide research or evaluation project and that is authorized by the department to conduct the research or evaluation;

(k) the members of an interdisciplinary child protective team authorized under 41-3-108 or of a family group decisionmaking meeting for the purposes of assessing the needs of the child and family, formulating a treatment plan, and monitoring the plan;

(l) the coroner or medical examiner when determining the cause of death of a child;

(m) a child fatality review team recognized by the department;

(n) a department or agency investigating an applicant for a license or registration that is required to operate a youth care facility, day-care facility, or child-placing agency;

(o) a person or entity who is carrying out background, employment-related, or volunteer-related screening of current or prospective employees or volunteers who have or may have unsupervised contact with children through employment or volunteer activities. A request for information under this subsection (3)(o) must be made in writing. Disclosure under this subsection (3)(o) is limited to information that indicates a risk to children, persons with developmental disabilities, or older persons posed by the person about whom the information is sought, as determined by the department.

(p) the news media, a member of the United States congress, or a state legislator, if disclosure is limited to confirmation of factual information regarding how the case was handled and if disclosure does not violate the privacy rights of the child or the child's parent or guardian, as determined by the department;

(q) an employee of the department or other state agency if disclosure of the records is necessary for administration of programs designed to benefit the child;

(r) an agency of an Indian tribe, a qualified expert witness, or the relatives of an Indian child if disclosure of the records is necessary to meet requirements of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act;

(s) a juvenile probation officer who is working in an official capacity with the child who is the subject of a report in the records;

(t) a county attorney, peace officer, or attorney who is hired by or represents the department if disclosure is necessary for the investigation, defense, or prosecution of a case involving child abuse or neglect;

(u) a foster care review committee established under 41-3-115 or, when applicable, a citizen review board established under Title 41, chapter 3, part 10;

(v) a school employee participating in an interview of a child by a social worker, county attorney, or peace officer, as provided in 41-3-202;

(w) a member of a county interdisciplinary child information team formed under the provisions of 52-2-211;

(x) members of a local interagency staffing group provided for in 52-2-203;

(y) a member of a youth placement committee formed under the provisions of 41-5-121; or

(z) a principal of a school or other employee of the school district authorized by the trustees of the district to receive the information with respect to a student of the district who is a client of the department.

(4) A school or school district may disclose, without consent, personally identifiable information from the education records of a pupil to the department, the court, a review board, the office of the child and family ombudsman provided for in [section 1], and the child's assigned attorney, guardian ad litem, or special advocate.

(5) Information that identifies a person as a participant in or recipient of substance abuse treatment services may be disclosed only as allowed by federal substance abuse confidentiality laws, including the consent provisions of the law.

(6) The confidentiality provisions of this section must be construed to allow a court of this state to share information with other courts of this state or of another state when necessary to expedite the interstate placement of children.

(7) A person who is authorized to receive records under this section shall maintain the confidentiality of the records and may not disclose information in the records to anyone other than the persons described in subsection (3)(a). However, this subsection may not be construed to compel a family member to keep the proceedings confidential.

(8) A news organization or its employee, including a freelance writer or reporter, is not liable for reporting facts or statements made by an immediate family member under subsection (7) if the news organization, employee, writer, or reporter maintains the confidentiality of the child who is the subject of the proceeding.

(9) This section is not intended to affect the confidentiality of criminal court records, records of law enforcement agencies, or medical records covered by state or federal disclosure limitations.

(10) Copies of records, evaluations, reports, or other evidence obtained or generated pursuant to this section that are provided to the parent, the guardian, or the parent or guardian's attorney must be provided without cost."

**Section 9. Codification instruction.** [Sections 1 through 7] are intended to be codified as an integral part of Title 41, and the provisions of Title 41 apply to [sections 1 through 7].

**Section 10. Contingent voidness.** If House Bill No. 2 does not appropriate money to the department of justice for the purposes of [sections 1 through 7], then [this act] is void.

**Section 11. Effective date.** [This act] is effective July 1, 2013.

**Section 12. Termination.** [This act] terminates June 30, 2015.

- END -

I hereby certify that the within bill,  
HB 0076, originated in the House.

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Chief Clerk of the House

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Speaker of the House

Signed this \_\_\_\_\_ day  
of \_\_\_\_\_, 2013.

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President of the Senate

Signed this \_\_\_\_\_ day  
of \_\_\_\_\_, 2013.



HOUSE BILL NO. 76

INTRODUCED BY C. PEASE-LOPEZ

BY REQUEST OF THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES, HEALTH, AND HUMAN SERVICES INTERIM COMMITTEE

AN ACT CREATING AN INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE CHILD AND FAMILY OMBUDSMAN; DESCRIBING THE DUTIES AND POWERS OF THE OFFICE; AMENDING SECTION 41-3-205, MCA; PROVIDING FOR CONTINGENT VOIDNESS; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE AND A TERMINATION DATE.