

# INDYSTAR.COM

## Call in reinforcements for vital work

After years of seeking an ombudsman's bureau to serve families dealing with the state child welfare system, advocates feared they got too little of what they wanted.

Two years in, any doubts that ombudsman Susan Hoppe meant business can be laid to rest. Yet her commendable performance is in itself evidence that more money and more staff still are needed if the office is going to come near the capacity comparable to other states and commensurate with the task in Indiana.

Hoppe and one shared part-time assistant managed to investigate 64 cases in 52 weeks last year, along with sundry other duties. In 20 of those cases, they cited the Indiana Department of Child Services for failure "to protect the physical or mental health or safety of any child" or failure "to follow specific laws, rules or written policies."

What is troubling is that Hoppe completed the same number of investigations both years, yet calls for help to her office jumped 42 percent from 2010 to 2011. Hoppe actually opened fewer cases in 2011, a fact she attributed to increased resolution of matters before they got to the formal stage.

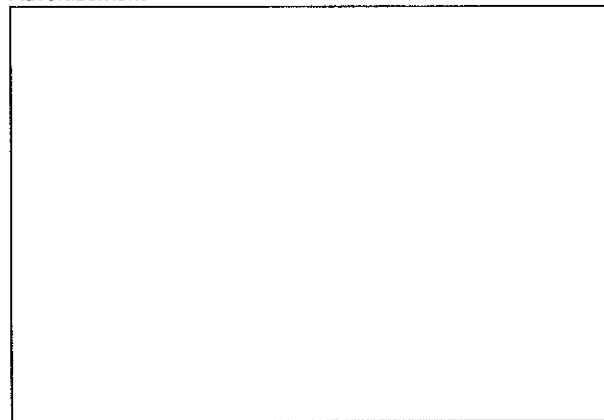
Still, it is difficult to see the spike in calls, coupled with the flat or lower numbers for dealing with those calls, as anything but a warrant for reinforcements.

"It is definitely our feeling that more staff is needed given the increase in calls to the ombudsman and the increase in calls coming in to DCS itself," says Mindi Goodpaster, director of public policy for the Marion County Commission on Youth. "With the state of the economy, it's not going to get any better."

Hoppe's willingness to hold her bosses accountable, as well as the sheer amount of work she and her aide have put in, validate the General Assembly's establishment of the office after years of advocacy prompted by the state's intolerable rate of child abuse and neglect.

A state Senate bill that would give Hoppe three full-time assistants and create a DCS evaluation committee in the legislature appears moribund for the session. Resuscitating it would recognize the ombudsman's report as a testament to the vital work she does.

Advertisement



Print Powered By 