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For release:
Wednesday, June 11, 2008

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FAMILY ADVOCATES CALL FOR INVESTIGATION OF SRS
Agency admits letting workers hype their allegations about families

WICHITA, June 11: Citizens for Change, a non-profit family advocacy organization in Wichita, is calling on the federal government to investigate the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services for allowing its workers to be bullied and browbeaten into including statements in sworn affidavits that the workers themselves don't believe.

The affidavits then are used to justify tearing children from their families.

A national non-profit child advocacy organization, the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, joined in the call for the investigation. NCCPR released a scathing report on Kansas child welfare last December.

The revelations about the affidavits, part of a tape-recorded conversation between SRS Secretary Don Jordan and members of Citizens for Change will be the topic of a public forum on Saturday, June 21 at 1:00 p.m. at Spirit One Christian Center, 1515 E. Harry, Wichita, Kansas. NCCPR Executive Director Richard Wexler and Suzanne Shell, Director, American Family Advocacy Center and Founder/Manager of Family Rights Advocacy Institute will join Citizens for Change President Vickie Burris at the forum.

"Untold numbers of children are traumatized every year by being torn from everyone they know and love," said Burris. "And now we know these decisions are being rubber-stamped by judges, relying on statements the caseworkers themselves don't believe. We know it because the Secretary of SRS himself said so."

Burris said SRS' actions violate federal law requiring child welfare agencies to make "reasonable efforts" to keep families together. On June 9, she wrote to Christine Calpin, the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, asking her agency to investigate SRS.

The revelation that workers are hyping their sworn affidavits came during a meeting between members of Citizens for Change and SRS Secretary Don Jordan. During the meeting, Jordan said that

*" in Sedgwick County oftentimes we end up writing things [in the affidavits] because it's what our social workers get bullied by the District Attorney's Office into writing. So they really **have no belief in what it says.**"[Emphasis added].*

Later in the meeting, Jordan said:

"I am working on our staff that we do our assessments properly and we not get bullied into writing things we don't believe. But then the reality comes down to, you send a 25-year-old social worker into a room with a 15-year county ADA (assistant district attorney) who is willing to yell at them, cuss at them, scream at them and threaten them, you know."

"It is horrifying to contemplate the harm done to children by needless foster care," Burris said. "It can traumatize a child emotionally for life – and there is significant risk of abuse in foster care itself. It is even more horrifying to think that judges have been misled into routinely inflicting such harm based on misinformation supplied by workers who – according to their own boss – were bullied into providing it."

Burris noted that later, Jordan said he shouldn't have used the word "bullied." "He has not, however, rescinded the terms 'yell' 'cuss' 'scream' and 'threaten.'"

After he found out his comments would be made public – but not until then – Jordan reportedly rushed to try to make amends, calling Sedgwick County Deputy District Attorney Ron Paschal to apologize. According to Paschal, Jordan assured him that when he met with Citizens for Change he was merely "pandering" to the group.

"If that is true, then Kansas is violating federal regulations in still another respect," Burris said. "Under a plan crafted to comply with findings of Kansas' federal Child and Family Services Review, SRS pledged to meet regularly with several organizations, including Citizens for Change. Jordan's statement indicates that he was merely going through the motions, holding the meeting to say he held the meeting, rather than to actually exchange ideas or improve the child welfare system. We presume this is not what the federal government had in mind when it approved Kansas' plan.

"If Paschal is quoting Jordan accurately then we know one thing for sure: Don Jordan deliberately misleads the people to whom he speaks," Burris said. "The only thing we don't know is if he misled Paschal, misled us, or both. Either way, we have to wonder why the Governor would tolerate such behavior from a cabinet secretary."

Burris added that "Jordan's apparent willingness to flip-flop on the issue, and, if Paschal is right, Jordan's self-proclaimed willingness to 'pander' should make lawmakers think twice before assuming Jordan has any intention of fixing this problem."

NCCPR joined Citizens for Change in calling for the investigation, noting that the national group had sought such an investigation before. In its December report, available on the State Reports page at www.nccpr.org NCCPR revealed that Kansas was evading federal regulations and taking away huge numbers of children without actually reporting their cases to the relevant federal database. "Had all these cases been counted, Kansas would be revealed to be taking away children at, probably, one of the highest rates in the

country, and Sedgwick County might turn out to be the child removal capital of America,” said NCCPR Executive Director Richard Wexler.

“Unfortunately, the Children’s Bureau turned its back on the vulnerable children of Kansas, and approved the loophole Kansas used to evade federal reporting requirements. We know of no other child welfare system in America engaging in this kind of rank intellectual dishonesty. As a result, Kansas is harming not only its own children but also jeopardizing the integrity of the data gathering process for the entire nation.

“In light of the Children’s Bureau’s evasion, we can’t say this is an actual violation of the letter of federal regulations –though it clearly violates their spirit,” Wexler said. “Immoral? Yes. Unethical? Yes, Harmful to children? Definitely, yes – but not necessarily a violation of the letter of the regulations.

“Sadly, the behavior of the Children’s Bureau in this case raises concerns that, even with the Secretary of SRS admitting that his workers hype their own sworn affidavits, the Children’s Bureau may well turn its back on the children again,” Wexler said. “That will depend in part on how much pressure they feel from the people of Kansas.”

The full letter to the Children’s Bureau is available from Citizens for Change.