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Michael F. Easley, Governor

Carmen Hooker Odom, Secretary

September 3, 2003

The Honorable Michael F. Easley
Governor
State Capitol
Raleigh, North Carolina

Dear Governor Easley:

As I read the recent Charlotte Observer series on child fatalities in North Carolina, I was struck by how the series both captured the complexity of the child protection system, and made crystal clear some gaps that we, as keepers of the public trust, should and must remedy.

While a case management system is in place to help our child support enforcement efforts, social workers charged with protecting children are struggling with 20 year technology as caseloads grow and become more complex. The simple move of a family across county lines can stymie a case and mean a child's life. We have an automation project called NC FAST that can accomplish this, but it needs funding.

While licensing boards for dental hygienists and realtors have access to state criminal records, social workers who decide who will care for a child must act without this information, or go to Herculean efforts to get it. There is no provision in federal law to give them access to any criminal records from other states. Similarly, there is no listing of child abuse perpetrators (who may or may not have a criminal record). Providing social workers access to state criminal records--in their own offices--and a list of perpetrators will save lives. I'd like you to join with me and the state Child Fatality Task Force in advocating for changes in federal law that will help us identify felons who move here from other states.

While all the agencies involved with children are well meaning and want to do what's best, in fact breakdowns of communication among law enforcement, health care providers, mental health, and social services are all too common and regrettable, and have been identified as contributing factors in numerous fatality reviews. We need to assemble



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the right people around the table to discuss rules and barriers to sharing information and how we can better work together.

We already have a dedicated cadre of professionals assembled in the form of the Domestic Violence and Child Well-Being Task Force, Investigating Child Abuse and Neglect in Child Care Facilities Task Force, and the Child Fatality Task Force. They are already working separately on many of these issues. I would like to better coordinate these efforts and use their recommendations as the framework to address coordinated information sharing among state and local health and human services professionals.

Social work is a tough job. Every year, social services departments lose needed expertise and seasoned workers through burnout. Statewide turnover averages 30 percent a year, with rural counties often experiencing 50 to 100 percent turnover. We need to recruit the best, most qualified people who are educated in social work, and then we need to hold onto them. I think a study of child welfare positions at the county and state level is in order, how they are classified and graded. Where counties are understaffed, I'd like to help them meet their caseload standards. I'd like to consider lowering caseloads so that workers can do more thorough assessments. I'd also like to expand our child welfare collaborative to help us recruit more staff educated in social work.

While the state has a Child Fatality Task Force to advocate for needed system changes, the single paid position associated with this task force has just been cut. I'd like to see this position restored, so that the task force can have the resources they need to truly lead the charge to protect children.

For each child who is found abused or who dies from abuse, there is usually a person who knew about it and failed to report. The public needs to be more aware of the need to report child abuse, yet our budget for such efforts are a mere \$60,000. I'd like to expand our partnership with Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina and other advocacy groups to help get the word out to all North Carolinians.

These issues are far from surprises to my agency. The important work of the state child fatality review team and the NC Child Fatality Task Force have over and over again advocated for needed changes. With our existing resources, we have taken numerous proactive steps. A demonstration program that rewrites the rules in how social workers interact with families and other agencies is moving to 33 counties next year.

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I am writing to enlist your active support and participation in helping us lay the groundwork, legislatively and fiscally, to pursue the passage of these common-sense solutions.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carmen Hooker Odom". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Carmen Hooker Odom