

Citizen Review Panel

STATE OF ALASKA



2019-2020 Annual Report

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ABOUT THE CRP

AUTHORITY

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is federally mandated through the 1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and authorized through Alaska Statute Sec. 47.14.205. The CRP operates under a set of operating guidelines which are available on the panel's website.

FUNCTIONS

The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems in improving services through evaluation, public outreach, and advocacy. In Alaska, the designated child protection agency is the Office of Children's Services (OCS). Therefore, the Alaska Panel:

- Evaluates the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under: CAPTA State Plan (42 U.S.C. 5106a(b)); and CFSP; Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and any other criteria that the Citizen Review Panel considers important to ensuring the protection of children.
 - Conducts public outreach and gathers public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
 - Advocates for relevant actions that would help improve the child protection services system in Alaska.
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STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

Membership on the CRP is voluntary and is expected to represent the diversity of the state. The CRP selects its own members through a formal recruitment and application process. Members elect a Chair and Vice Chair from among the membership. While members are expected to serve for at least two years, there are no stipulated term limits.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP

DURING 2019 – 2020 INCLUDED:

Sonya Hull (Acting Chair) - Wasilla
Cameron Adams - Anchorage
Lucinda Alexie - Bethel
Wendy Barrett - Anchorage
Amanda Hansen - Anchorage
JP Ouellette - Anchorage
Mariah Seater - Anchorage
Bettyann Steciw - Anchor Point
Patricia Williams - Fairbanks
Rebecca Vale - Anchorage

ENDURING PRIORITIES

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel conducted a strategic planning process during the summer of 2019. As part of this process panel members identified enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over a five-year period. These priorities provide a focused framework for carrying out the CRP's basic functions using a focused and targeted approach. During the strategic planning process the CRP identified the following enduring priorities:

- Collaborative relationships with OCS
- CRP Education and Development
- Healthy CPS System
- Reciprocal Engagement
- Public Outreach

2019- 2020 CRP ACTIVITIES

The CRP’s 2019-2020 annual calendar included the following activities:

QUARTERLY MEETINGS: Owing to the geographic dispersion of the CRP members, all quarterly meetings are held over the telephone. All quarterly panel meetings are open to the public and include a public comment period. The meeting agenda, date, time, location, and call-in number are announced a week prior to the meeting and are posted on the CRP’s website.

MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS: In order to maintain a healthy working relationship and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy, the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS meet by telephone with the CRP monthly to share mutual progress, discuss latest developments, and respond to mutual queries.

SITE VISITS: The CRP conducts visits to various OCS regional and field offices to gather information on practice and assess working relationships between OCS and its local partners. The CRP’s observations and recommendations are documented in a report and are subsequently discussed with the OCS’ state and regional leadership. The CRP conducted 3 site visits during 2019-2020 – to the Anchorage, Western, and Southcentral Regions. In response to COVID-19 the CRP attempted to schedule virtual meetings with stakeholders in the Southeast and Northern Regions, however there was a lack of organizational capacity at the site visit locations leading these visits to be postponed.



2019-2020 FINDINGS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Citizen Review Panel findings and recommendations for FY19 -FY20 have been organized under each enduring priority.

- Findings include observations made by the CRP during the year while carrying out its functions.
- Challenges acknowledge factors that the system may be facing when considering why findings may exist.
- Recommendations identify ways to move forward in addressing findings and challenges.

RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

A significant portion of the Citizen Review Panel’s activity involves annual site visits to communities within each of the five OCS regions. The nature of these visits involves panel members meeting with OCS supervisors and frontline workers, agency partners, tribal child welfare programs, family support agencies, school district stakeholders, and, when possible, foster parents and households that have had cases with OCS. It is the intent of the Citizen Review Panel to not just gather information from stakeholders and produce a static report, but to also share information gathered with all stakeholders, as well as other interested entities. Reciprocal engagement with communities should be conducted with a focus on identifying and encouraging the implementation of solutions to these challenges.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- OCS’s availability to participate in site visits has improved by hosting pre-site visit briefings, however local OCS office engagement is still inconsistent.
- OCS workers are actively engaging in building peer relationships with other direct service and case management professionals from the tribal and nonprofit sectors. The CRP relies on volunteer panel members to conduct site visits and panel member schedules vary widely and it is often challenging to align CRP volunteer availability and the schedules of OCS regional offices and community stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Leadership in the OCS Regional Office should continue to encourage local offices to make the hosting of CRP site visits and meetings a priority.
- Increase participation by panel members in site visits and meetings by finding ways to make engagement more accessible.
- The CRP encourages the building of peer relationships as a means for improving the quality of services.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel is a mechanism for meaningful public participation in child protection policy and practice. With public outreach as a principal CRP function, the panel is an opportunity for Alaska residents to engage in a public process to assist the child protection system in being more responsive to needs at the community and statewide levels. In order to be a relevant resource in communities across the state, new and more robust techniques of public outreach should be identified and implemented over the next five years. Public outreach methods should be refined to be culturally responsive to the needs and wants of families, support systems, partner agencies and communities throughout Alaska. The Public outreach conducted by the panel should include both passive mechanisms (website) and active mechanisms (site visits, stakeholder meetings, community events) that are accessible to panelists statewide and year-round.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- More widespread geographic representation on the CRP has yielded stronger relationships in communities and regions throughout the state.
- The existing methods of public outreach conducted by the CRP, including the website, stakeholder meetings, and recruitment, continue to be utilized in order to encourage public participation in CRP activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Through coordination with OCS the CRP should continue to regularly and consistently identify and carry out meaningful public outreach activities.
- The CRP should continue ongoing outreach to the Alaska Training Cooperative, Alaska Center for Resource Families, the Child Welfare Academy, etc., to increase awareness of existing trainings, seminars, classes, meeting, and conferences.

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH OCS

The State of Alaska's Office of Children's Services mission states that "The Office of Children's Services works in partnership with families and communities to support the well-being of Alaska's children and youth. Services will enhance families' capacities to give their children a healthy start, to provide them with safe and permanent homes, to maintain cultural connections and to help them realize their potential." The Citizen Review Panel recognizes the shared elements of the OCS mission with the work of the CRP.

The Alaska CRP also recognizes that to best support Alaska’s children and families that are navigating the child welfare system, the CRP needs to foster and maintain a relationship with OCS. This includes developing relationships with both individual leaders and staff to create an institutional understanding of the shared priority of supporting families and protecting Alaska’s children.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- The CRP approach to a collaborative relationship with OCS, as reflected by the enduring priorities in the strategic plan, has contributed to building unity among OCS and its partners by:
 - Naming and normalizing the stress incurred by those who work directly with families in their greatest time of need.
 - Providing empathetic and positive feedback from the community to OCS workers.
 - Communicating to all stakeholders the common goals of OCS and community partner organizations.
- There has been an observable and positive change in the Anchorage and Western Regions based on CRP recommendations.
- There has been a lack of opportunity for the CRP to engage in and provide feedback on the development of policies and procedures directly related to the functioning and operation of the panel.
- Changes in leadership at both the regional and statewide levels within OCS, as well as the Citizen Review panel itself has challenged the continuity of CRP relationships and priorities.
- The panel and OCS are not aligned regarding the value of recurring annual CRP recommendations. Repeated recommendations signify the importance and continued relevance of the CRP’s findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- OCS should make a concerted effort to engage and include the CRP when developing policies, procedures, and regulations that impact the functioning, operations and autonomy of the CRP.
- OCS and the CRP should together focus on relationship continuity to reduce a reliance on specific individuals for positive system change.
- OCS should consider the value of recurring recommendations.

CRP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

For the Citizen Review Panel to conduct effective and impactful work it is tantamount that the panelists are aware of industry best practices, relevant legislation and public policy topics at the state and federal levels and share this knowledge with fellow panel members and community stakeholders. The CRP recognizes the value of existing resources at both the state and national level and seeks to include expertise from these resources in CRP discussions, activities, and recommendations. Individual panelists are encouraged to pursue their

own subjects of interest and share information gleaned with their fellow members of the CRP. The panel may instruct the CRP Coordinator to research topics of interest.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- CRP members participated in the following trainings/conferences during FY19-20.
 - Family Resource Council
 - Alaska Maternal Child Death Review Conference
 - Knowing Who You Are Training – Child Welfare Academy
- Panel wants to become more aware of relevant trainings and events.
- Panel wants to become more aware of the legal process in relation to the CPS system.
- Panel wants to become more aware of terminology and organizational structures in CPS system.
- Panel wants to become more aware of OCS internal processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The CRP should prioritize attending trainings to increase awareness of the structure, functioning, and policies of the OCS system.
- The CRP should reach out to existing partners and networks to communicate CRP interest in training opportunities, workshops, seminars, conferences, and relevant meetings.
- The CRP should work to develop and implement clear and concise member bylaws.

HEALTHY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SYSTEM

To support the Office of Children’s Services in becoming a more functional and impactful child protective services system the Citizen Review Panel recognizes that the entire system, not just case management, needs to be studied and supported. To ensure that Alaska’s children receive the protection, support and quality of case management they deserve, OCS employees need a workplace that is a sustainable and supportive environment. Some areas to be explored across the state include but are not limited to: day to day worker wellness, the rate of employee turnover, and community relationships for workers.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- The CRP has observed an increased level of adaptability and flexibility within OCS. The response from OCS leadership to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates an increased level of health in the system, resiliency, and an openness and capacity for change.
- There has been a focus on the importance of worker wellness. Interviews conducted during site visits have focused on contributing factors leading to burnout, turnover, backlogs, and

less-than-optimal results for children and families.

- Site visit interviews have suggested that there is increased collaboration to support best efforts toward family reunification.
- OCS workers based in smaller communities consistently provided positive feedback on the mentorship program.
- Case load size continues to be a major challenge as well as the readiness of new employees to take on case work.
- Based on site visit input, the CRP has heard that OCS staff may have limited capacity to effectively connect with tribal and other community partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- OCS should continue to build upon the lessons learned from the adaptability and flexibility implemented in response to COVID-19.
- When possible, OCS should allocate resources for employee wellness initiatives.
- OCS should continue to prioritize building relationships with biological parents and support family reunification plans.
- OCS should continue to support the mentorship program.
- OCS should consider the development of a resource database or similar system that provides all OCS staff with knowledge of community partners and services.

CONCLUSION

The CRP Annual Report is a public document and is completed each year no later than June 30th and is distributed to all state legislators, the Office of the Governor of Alaska, the office of the Department of Health and Social Services Commissioner, OCS leadership and it is accessible to the public on the CRP website: www.CRPAlaska.org

APPENDICES

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October 2019 Southcentral- Site Visit Report
December 2019 Anchorage Region - Site Visit Report
February 2020 Western Region - Site Visit Report



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

Members

JP Ouellette (Chair)
Anchorage

Sonya Hull (Vice Chair)
Wasilla

Cameron Adams Anchorage
Lucinda Alexie Bethel

Wendy Barrett Anchorage
Amanda Hansen Anchorage

Mariah Seater Anchorage
Bettyann Steciw Anchor Point

Joshua Stein Utqiagvik
Rebecca Vale Anchorage
Patricia Williams Fairbanks

Staff

Denali Daniels & Assoc.
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The Alaska Citizen Review Panel evaluates the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies for effectiveness in discharging their child protection responsibilities. The Panel is mandated through CAPTA 1997 (P.L. 104-235), and enacted through AS 47.14.205.

Region Visited	Southcentral Region
Communities Visited	Kodiak
Dates of Visit	October 2-4, 2019
Panelists	Bettyann Stewic

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

Office of Children’s Services (OCS)

Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak

Kodiak Police Department

Kodiak Area Native Association

Child Advocacy Center

INTRODUCTION

Appreciating the challenges faced by OCS workers, the CRP endeavors to continue being more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. During each interview session we try to acknowledge the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political, logistical, and otherwise challenges that workers must face in order to strive toward the goals of child protection and family reunification. We then invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities, giving them an opportunity both to vent frustrations and offer ideas for improvements.

CRP ENDURING PRIORITIES

Through the long-range strategic planning process, the panel identified five enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over the next five years. For the 2019-2020 Work Plan the CRP will be incorporating these five priorities into site visit questions and activities.

OVERVIEW

In 2019-2020 the panel continues to strive to become more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews and site visit. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. We began each interview session with an acknowledgement of the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political logistical and other challenges that workers and partners in this field must face in order to work towards the goals of child protection and family reunification. We invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities with the hope of presenting opportunities for sharing challenges while providing constructive feedback.

Those contacted through this site visit share concern and compassion for Kodiak's vulnerable children. Broadly, the community is trying to identify how to best support families and children through a trauma informed lens, within the restricting parameters of both the existing case load and funding challenges. Themes that emerged speaking with stakeholders included community concern for case overload of OCS staff, the high rate of turnover of OCS staff/leadership in the community, lack of recognition/compensation of tribal partners. The following notes focus on the external priorities of the Citizen Review Panel: Healthy CPS System, Reciprocal Engagement, and Public Outreach.

Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System

The current OCS Director for Kodiak has been in this position since January 2019. Community stakeholders noted that though there has been a recent high rate of turnover in the position, the previous OCS Director for Kodiak, fostered strong relationships with community partners. Current leadership in Kodiak is data driven and has developed efficient protocols of tracking the family service, intake assessment and child visit team.

- **Physical Infrastructure:** There is not enough furniture in the Kodiak office. King Salmon office (not on Kodiak Island, but located in the same OCS region) doesn't have adequate physical infrastructure, telecommuting positions may be a possible replacement.
- **Letter of Opportunity (LOA) Workers:** Traveling LOA handoff has inefficiencies with communication and case note history completion.
- **Skills Training:** OCS staff generally liked how skills training is now presented in three segments, however it was noted that the first skill training focuses on intake

assessments, but staff responsibilities post this training covers more than just intake assessments.

- ***Mentorship Program:*** OCS staff at the Kodiak office like the mentorship program within OCS.
- ***Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Training:*** At the time of this site visit not all OCS staff had received ICWA training.

Reciprocal Engagement

OCS is using individual private contractors to conduct family visits in the community, and there is a perception that private contractors are not required to provide transportation support. OCS staff noted that the Kodiak School District has a good partnership with the local OCS office. Though the school district offers parenting classes, OCS staff and other community stakeholders noted the need for additional/more inclusive parenting classes for families throughout the OCS service region. OCS staff noted that they struggle with providing services to incarcerated parents,

Hiland Correctional Facility has an OCS liaison worker that is incredibly helpful, it is difficult to contact parents who are incarcerated in federal facilities. OCS staff noted that tribal partners provide critical support, highlighting the work of Sun'aq's child protection programs. Staff stated that tribal councils are helpful, and that there are good existing relationships with tribal partners in Old Harbor and Afognak.

For those in the community who experience alcohol and/or substance dependency there is a lack of available services. This, of course, impacts families and children.

Public Outreach

It was suggested that the CRP should have announced site visit in the local newspaper prior to site visit.

The disconnect between public's perception of the role of OCS and the reality of services offered to the community by OCS, using the example of community members believing OCS

can come into a household and take someone's child. As mentioned above, multiple stakeholders and OCS staff identified the need for more parenting classes.

The Panel currently doesn't have the capacity to host and facilitate community meetings in a productive/safe manner. A more accurate public perception of the role of OCS in the community is critical.



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

Members

- JP Ouellette (Chair)
Anchorage
- Sonya Hull (Vice Chair)
Wasilla
- Cameron Adams Anchorage
- Lucinda Alexie Bethel
- Wendy Barrett Anchorage
- Amanda Hansen Anchorage
- Mariah Seater Anchorage
- Bettyann Steciw Anchor Point
- Joshua Stein Utqiagvik
- Rebecca Vale Anchorage
- Patricia Williams Fairbanks

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Field Offices Visited	Anchorage
Communities Visited	Anchorage
Dates of Visit	December 18, 19, 2019
Panelists	Mariah Seater, JP Ouellette

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTE

- AK Child and Family
- Anchorage Police Department
- Alaska CARES Child Advocacy Center
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council
- Office of Children’s Services (OCS)
 - Family Services
 - Intake (non-local)
 - Licensing
 - Administrative Staff
 - Supervisors
 - Managers

INTRODUCTION

Becoming fairly acquainted with the challenges faced by OCS workers, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) endeavors to continue being more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. We began each interview session with an acknowledgement of the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political, logistical, and otherwise challenges that workers must face in order to strive toward the goals of child protection and family reunification. We then invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities, giving them an opportunity both to vent frustrations and offer ideas for improvements.

CRP ENDURING PRIORITIES

Through the long-range strategic planning process, the panel identified five enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over the next five years. For the 2019-2020 Work Plan the CRP will be incorporating these five priorities into site visit questions and activities.

OVERVIEW

Overall, community feedback was supportive regarding relationships with OCS and challenges with OCS were stated empathetically, acknowledging that, in a region as populated and diverse as Anchorage, the local office is doing the best they can with the resources available to them. The CRP aims to be a facilitator of such collaboration and communication in the coming years allowing for more flexibility in what can otherwise feel like a very rigid and even punitive child welfare landscape. Our hope is, in addition to areas of improvement that may be identified, that the strengths and successes in the local field office can be acknowledged and replicated in other regions.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The observations and recommendations of regional site visits are not meant as official recommendations, but feedback for continued conversation contributing to our final annual assessment and official CRP recommendations.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

Strengths: The Anchorage regional manager stressed how effective the CRP site visit was last year in helping name and prioritize improvements to be made in the areas of staff wellness and safety. Since the visit last year, periodic check-ins and information sharing have been commonplace between the CRP and Anchorage OCS office leadership. The CRP receive updates on policy changes, monthly report cards, and invitations to participate in joint trainings.

Challenges: Pre-site visit calendaring and coordination was challenging. The aim of adding a pre-site visit meeting to our regional visits is to help prepare OCS staff for a productive interview by sharing our annual priorities and ensuring we are interviewing the most relevant stakeholders as identified by both OCS and the CRP. This was not accomplished and thus the site visit was less effective than it could have been in providing relevant feedback.

Recommendations: Continue building the trusting and collaborative relationship between local OCS leadership and the CRP. Prepare for site visits much further in advance. Ideally, the CRP should be sharing our tentative schedule we build out in August with the Director. Once this is accomplished, more effort on both the CRP and OCS sides can be made to ensure timely scheduling of necessary communication and sharing of information for the coming fiscal year.

CRP Education and Development

Strengths: OCS has been supportive of this priority and has offered contact information for key personnel that can assist the CRP in this.

Challenges: It is difficult to stay abreast of all the existing policies and procedures as well as changes that come regularly.

Recommendations: One of the managers for the Anchorage office discussed involving a CRP panel member in the monthly policy meetings which would allow for CRP to get most up-to-date information regarding the most relevant policies. These connections have been made via email and a panel member is now scheduled to these meetings.

If OCS recognizes other opportunities for the panel to stay current in our understanding of policies and procedures, we are happy to pursue such.

Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System

Strengths: A healthy CPS system starts with healthy CPS workers. The recommendations from last year's site visit were acted upon and the Anchorage office now has healthy snacks available for staff as well as a room for decompression. A pastor now frequents the Anchorage Office, and this has been well-received by all levels of OCS staff. Suicide awareness, mental health, and First Aid trainings have been accomplished and are now scheduled regularly.

Workers noted and appreciated the overall improvement in morale in the Anchorage office. The changes made over the last year have been encouraging and the staff across departments all seem to value and appreciate one another. More than once was this

attributed to leadership and attentiveness to tangible changes that can be accomplished to improve the quality of life for OCS staff as well as her role in facilitating positive relationships.

Challenges: Healthy office culture and morale is vital to maintaining valuable staff and equipping them to make potentially life-altering decisions for the families they serve. There was incongruence between staff and management around expectations for performance reviews and to what degree different elements are weighed to rate an employee. Differing expectations almost always lead to confusion and disappointment.

Due to vacancies, staff report getting caseloads (too many and too soon) before they feel is appropriate for their experience and training. While some workers felt very supported by their peers, supervisors, and mentors, others felt very isolated and overwhelmed with the amount or responsibility they'd been given. There was an apparent lack of consistency among workers regarding the amount of support they were given to do their jobs, particularly new workers.

Recommendations: The apparent incongruence in perceptions regarding the evaluations leaves opportunity to explore where better communication between management and supervisors regarding the evaluation process can help to bring clarity around expectations both of staff and of management. Explore how better communication of expectations and evaluation measures can be executed to avoid, as much as possible, staff being "caught off guard" by an evaluation.

Similarly, the CRP has heard consistently that communication with new staff regarding expected workload and available support is much different than what they experience during their first year or so on the job. The CRP appreciates the disparity between what state and federal laws mandate and what OCS can reasonably accomplish regarding hiring and maintaining qualified staff in order to keep caseloads at a manageable level. It feels much like a rock-and-a-hard-place situation. OCS can't reasonably tell applicants that caseloads may or may not be in line with state and federal mandates. This is more of a retention issue that is being addressed in the above measures. The best recommendation for this specifically is to emphasize and empower supportive leadership while correcting less supportive relationships

between staff and supervisors/managers to build resilience, rather than vulnerability, before the inevitable disillusion with workload expectations hits new employees.

Reciprocal Engagement

Strengths: Relationships with other stakeholders in the region are, overall, collaborative, and this is steadily improving over time. Many community partners have staff in the OCS regional office. Many OCS staff also maintain a presence in the office of other stakeholders. Communication between OCS and these partners appears to be especially productive as one would hope.

Challenges: Communication between OCS and other stakeholders who don't encounter OCS staff as regularly as those mentioned above continues to be a challenge. For some, communication since the earthquake of 2017 has been non-productive. There was even confusion internally regarding the nature of the relationship with such stakeholders and the services they were still providing. Community partners and OCS have incongruent notions as to OCS's participation in training events, conferences, and multidisciplinary meetings.

There are relationship challenges between OCS and stakeholders in the legal system which OCS leadership is aware of and addressing. OCS workers who'd worked in other regions stated that public advocates in Anchorage have a more adversarial relationship than they've encountered elsewhere.

Recommendations: Utilize designated OCS staff to regularly reach out to community partners to ensure up-to-date information on opportunities to collaborate as well as to educate stakeholders in the challenges OCS faces (scheduling, resources, timeliness of invitations etc) when unable to attend events. Regular feedback between local partners in child welfare has been one of the most valuable components of strengthening the region's capacity to protect our children and preserve our families.

Admittedly, litigation is, by nature, adversarial. However, work can be done to improve these relationships without diminishing advocacy. It appears much easier to accomplish this in smaller communities where virtually everyone encounters one another outside of the litigation environment. One recommendation is to utilize mediation more often under the court's Child

In Need of Aid mediation program to get help reaching common ground. This is, in most cases, very successful at both increasing collaboration and producing better outcomes for families.

Public Outreach

Strengths: Pending application approval of one potential panelist, the CRP now represents all five OCS regions on the panel.

Challenges: There was an expressed need for the CRP to be more active in improving awareness among tribal partners regarding our role as well as active panel recruitment from within the tribal community. Awareness of CRP and our role is much easier accomplished in smaller communities than in Anchorage as word-of-mouth is much more effective.

Recommendations: The CRP is actively recruiting in all regions and have, over the last couple years improved representation of the tribal voices on the panel. We will continue our recruitment efforts to improve this. We are actively soliciting information regarding newsletters, multidisciplinary gatherings, and other ways we can more effectively communicate to stakeholders the role of the CRP in Alaska and ways the public can participate.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

There were concerns regarding upcoming changes for reporters (requiring additional reporting to the police department) and how much more difficult this will make the reporting process.

The mentor program had very mixed reviews. It appeared that there may not be enough mentors to provide the hands-on support staff expect from the program. Unclear expectations have led to dissatisfaction among staff. Suggestions for improvement were localizing mentors and dedicating them to an office or even a region as well as developing more clear expectations for mentors and mentees.

The intake supervisor met with CRP separately and is looking forward to our help in the area of communication throughout the state with regard to the continuing improvements being made

since the initial implementation of centralized intake four years ago as well as the upcoming reporting changes mentioned above.

It was clarified that both the intake department and mentorship program are statewide programs that are not under the management of the Anchorage office. The CRP will pursue an additional site visit addressing state-wide offices/programs in order to broaden our understanding of the issues faced within each region.

A request was made to create a CRP that works exclusively within tribal entities. This will be addressed at the next panel meeting.



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Region Visited	Western
Communities Visited	Bethel
Dates of Visit	February 11 th and 12 th
Panelists	Lucinda Alexie, JP Ouellette

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

4H

AVCP ICWA Office Foster Parents

Tundra Women’s Coalition Bethel Police Department

OCS:

- Staff
- Supervisors and Specialists Managers

INTRODUCTION

Appreciating the challenges faced by Office of Children’s Services (OCS) workers, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) endeavors to continue being more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. During each interview session we try to acknowledge the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political, logistical, and otherwise challenges that workers must face in order to strive toward the goals of child protection and family reunification. We then invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities, giving them an opportunity both to vent frustrations and offer ideas for improvements.

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For the 2019-2020 Work Plan the CRP will be incorporating these five priorities into site visit questions and activities.

OVERVIEW

The Bethel office has experienced a positive change in leadership, change in location, and onboarding of new staff over the past year. This is considered both in the strengths observed by the CRP as well as the challenges noted. The Panel appreciates that not everything can be tackled at once and seeks to continue supporting this office in its transition to an image of quality and competency in the Western region.

Overall, community feedback was supportive regarding relationships with OCS and challenges with OCS were stated empathetically, acknowledging that, in a region as vast as Western, and the challenges of staff turnover, the local office is doing the best they can with the resources available to them. The CRP aims to be a facilitator of such collaboration and communication in the coming years allowing for more flexibility in what can otherwise feel like a very rigid and even punitive child welfare landscape. Our hope is, in addition to areas of improvement that may be identified, that the strengths and successes in the local field office can be acknowledged and replicated in other regions.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The observations and recommendations of regional site visits are not meant as official recommendations, but feedback for continued conversation contributing to our final annual assessment and official CRP recommendations.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

Strengths: Regional and state leadership worked eagerly with the CRP this year to prepare for a fruitful site visit. OCS's responsiveness to the CRP following last year's site visit left a positive impression on the regional office as well as community partners.

Panel members have made it a point to extend "kudos" for observations of exemplary casework. Communication has involved OCS leadership and the caseworker, making the opportunity for internal recognition much easier. This has made a significant impact on individual caseworkers during times of stress and, as reported by the caseworkers,

contributed to their capacity to keep going. During an interview with KTUU, the chair publicly shared the panel's stance on the importance of supporting OCS in their work and, while remaining critically objective, focusing on constructive feedback and collaboration.

Challenges: While state leadership responded directly to the CRP's concerns about leadership in the region, the regional office (possibly due to transition mentioned in the overview) did not follow up on many of the opportunities proposed by the CRP last year. Thus, many of our recommendations (below) remain the same regarding communication, collaboration, local recruitment, and cultural competency training.

Recommendations: Understanding that, with the transition to new leadership, some continuity of dialogue with the CRP may have been lost, we recommend that leadership in Western region take these recommendations more seriously than previous leadership. The CRP works to help OCS improve outcomes for families statewide by helping to facilitate positive changes in the culture of each regional office and their relationships with community partners. The recommendations include thoughtful and supportive responses from the community as well as ideas from within OCS. It can be difficult to work our feedback into the well-defined grooves of the status quo, but regions who've done so have benefited from it.

CRP Education and Development

This goal was not addressed during this site visit.

Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System

The transition to a new regional manager was a very positive step for the Western regional office in Bethel. Staff and supervisors alike report a significant improvement in office culture. In particular, a new management role was a clear acknowledgement of positive leadership in the region as reflected by staff input. There is a very positive tone for the staff in Bethel in encouraging comradery and self-care.

- **New Office:** Moving on the CRP's recommendation to contract with AVCP Housing to centralize OCS operations in Bethel also led to significant

improvements in communication and collaboration among the staff in addition to providing them with a nicer, more organized work space.

- **More Staff:** Hiring new staff to answer the significant turnover that occurred last year has also contributed to the improvement in the quality of life for staff. As was evident by the fruitful dialogue with the CRP and echoed by supervisors, the new hires are thoughtfully selected individuals who, though very new to casework in the Western region, appear to be well-suited for the job. Many times over during our conversation with staff we heard their praise and support for one another.
- **Letter of Agreement (LOA) Workers:** While there are some challenges noted below, LOA workers stated this schedule is more satisfying for staff that don't call Bethel home. These workers state that the new schedule will contribute to their longevity with the organization.
- **Community Collaboration:** The foster parent interviewed felt very supported by OCS. Acknowledging the difficulties of working in the Western region, the parent named two case workers and an SSA that work hard to help parents and foster parents throughout the life of a case. Community partners in Bethel also had very positive things to say about the centralized intake operators. The operators were reportedly very courteous, knowledgeable, and supportive in handling calls from reporters. Community partners also felt that LOA workers have been especially helpful in moving cases forward that perhaps needed fresh eyes. In contrast to previous site visits, community partners noted an absence of negative interactions with OCS over the last year, stating "despite needed improvements, we really are glad OCS is here." OCS's consistent presence at case reviews is also noted and appreciated. Some OCS staff have taken it upon themselves to build connections with tribal partners in Bethel as well as village elders. This requires a rare personality type and is uncommon. These personnel are happy to share connections with their peers.

Despite the continuing challenges in collaboration mentioned below, there is desire from both OCS staff and community partners to have meaningful dialogue leading to better understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and potential for collaboration with other

agencies. With the right support, the Bethel office is poised for a new image in the community. As noted below, staff are motivated to build a new reputation.

Challenges:

Internal OCS Culture

Supervision: While significant improvements have occurred over the last year, there is still some work to do in improving the health of the Bethel office. One reason staff rely so heavily on one another is that they still don't feel supported by their supervisors. In questioning the staff and management what the role of the supervisor is, it was understood that the responsibility of the supervisor was to support the staff in decision-making through regular staffing of cases, responding to questions that arise, and providing expertise in the area of policies and procedures on a case-by-case basis. It was also clear that staff and management felt supervisors were too overwhelmed to consistently provide this type of support to the staff who, in turn, have learned to rely on one another and avoid bringing concerns to their supervisors. Staff also feel dissuaded from bringing concerns to regional leadership when direct supervision isn't available. Mentorship does provide some assistance in these matters, but the Anchorage-based mentors reportedly have difficulty relating to the complexities of rural Alaska.

Centralization: While centralization of multiple departments including intake, regional management, and travel have resolved some logistical challenges for the agency, rural areas continue to report that, in their regions, this may be costing the state more money while contributing to rising caseloads and cases lingering in the system. For rural Alaska, many of the boots-on-the-ground veterans feel they could resolve travel and management issues much more efficiently and prevent cases from being screened in prematurely thus saving many hours of travel and casework. This sentiment is not unique to Western region.

Safety: Safety is still a major issue for staff. There are reportedly no protocols or provisions for protection from potentially violent individuals. Staff report responding to PSR's in matters of gun violence, or when communities have an active shooter. The lack of training in de-escalation, self-defense, and the inability to carry non-violent means of

self-protection, only add to the sense of vulnerability for workers in areas where law enforcement is not always available when a child is in potential danger. Staff also requested training in office safety including active shooter protocols and fire drills. Staff also report feeling ill-equipped for travel in extreme weather and request winter survival training. Staff appreciate the safety officer position, but feel the focus is more “big picture” versus protecting them in their daily work via items like masks, emergency cold weather gear, or advocating for protective aerosols.

Training: Staff felt the training and retraining they receive from Child Welfare Academy is more conceptual and includes information they received in college about “being a good worker,” but it did not equip them with the tools they need to actually accomplish the nuts-and-bolts of child-protection. Echoing the sentiments of other regions, staff stated they learn most of their relevant casework training through trial by fire. Staff in more than one region have requested more “field training” and less time in classes.

LOA Workers: This has had many positive outcomes, but is still a work in progress. While this schedule works very well for the intake assessment workers who have a relatively short duration of involvement with each case, it presents many challenges for family services workers and community partners. There is difficulty in maintaining continuity of care between family service workers. The lack in continuity contributes to the image of “incompetence” during a worker’s off week, particularly when a working knowledge of the case is required for court appearances or when needs arise for families. There is, for some workers, an established relationship of sharing another worker’s cases as “secondary”, but there still needs to be clarity on how this is to be accomplished for all LOA workers in family services.

Working with Other Regions: Staff express continued frustration over the lack of collaboration between regions. Each region prioritizes reducing their own caseload and has difficulty understanding the unique needs of other regions. Workers who’ve worked in multiple regions state each region is unique in practice and tends to be self-serving in its efforts to move cases off their desk, satisfy federal requirements or other workload/stress-reducing effort. None of this is grossly unreasonable given all the current

stressors workers face, but has specifically resulted in children being sent to Bethel from Anchorage without any collaboration with the Bethel office (ie: TDM). In lieu of large-scale collaborative efforts, Bethel staff ask that TDMs be required before moving children from other regions to Western.

Community Collaboration: While previous negative interactions appear to have ceased between OCS and the community, feedback from community partners reveals that collaboration continues to be an area needing improvement with the Bethel office. Connecting in Bethel is especially difficult due to the landscape, the weather, lack of transportation and other resources, and a strong cultural homogeneity that runs counter to the predominant cultural makeup of OCS. It's easy for workers unfamiliar with Yupik culture and rural Alaskan life to remain socially isolated. Community connection, in this region more than others, requires a concentrated effort to reach out partners and look for opportunities to engage. The observation of the Panel over the years is that the OCS office culture in Bethel doesn't encourage community connection. This disconnect is detrimental to the worker's well-being, the effectiveness of the Bethel office, and the relationship with the Bethel community- all of which play a vital role in outcomes for families.

The lack of communication has led to confusion about the roles and responsibilities of OCS. For example, Bethel Police Department and other partners have consistently stated that they ended up with children in their offices because OCS isn't responding to provide safety for the child. Partners acknowledge that the need in Bethel exceeds OCS's capacity, and that community partners should work together to care for its families in need. However, without collaborative communication on the issue, it doesn't feel like a partnership, just a strained relationship with poorly defined expectations. There was confusion in the community regarding OCS's duty to respond. The assumption is that OCS does not respond so long as there is a "safe and responsible adult" present regardless of whether or not that adult could reasonably assume responsibility for the child in need of aid.

The same sentiments, however, are echoed by OCS staff. They also desire for more communication from their tribal partners and assistance in working with the families of Western region. They feel that the Bethel office, under previous leadership, has built a reputation of incompetence in the community that precedes them when appearing in court or at events such as ICWA trainings. There is a strong desire to change this perception through better case work and more dialogue with tribal partners regarding perceptions, roles, resources, definitions of “safety”, responsibilities, tribal jurisdiction, etc.

While getting its own house in order, OCS has reportedly not begun to reach out to any tribal partners regarding region-specific training, wellness events, and local recruiting efforts. Community partners in Bethel work well together and express a desire to see OCS benefit from community engagement as well.

Reporters of child abuse also express a desire to build a confidential way to establish continuity of care for children after abuse has been reported. When a child is displaced after a substantiated report of harm to protect them from further abuse, the abrupt change and loss of relationships increases the negative impact to the child. Continued relationship with teachers, childcare workers, and other trusted adults in their lives would increase their resiliency factors.

Community partners also expressed concern that the recent change in the Assistant Attorney General’s office has led to more aggressive and unnecessary litigation against parents creating further disconnect between OCS and the community.

Recommendations:

Internal Office Culture

1. As a previous supervisor that staff looked up to and responded well to, new leadership has agreed to provide training in conjunction with recent leadership training for supervisors in how to support the unique needs of staff in Bethel to include understanding their need for connection and more effective and empathetic communication.

2. Leadership will also reach out to the trooper's office to see what training may be available for de-escalation, self-defense, and arctic survival.
3. Consider creating "lead staff" positions as a way for more experienced staff to provide that bridge between staff and supervisors.
4. Investigate the efficacy of centralized services in rural Alaska. Each region has very unique needs and standardized policies and procedures may work against the desired intent of increased efficiency in child protection.
5. Consider a regional liaison position to address breakdowns in communication between regions while requiring that moving a child from one region to another be a collaborative decision.
6. Consider limiting LOA work to intake assessment workers or establishing a well-defined and workable protocol for family services workers to effectively share caseloads.

Community Collaboration

1. Engage tribal partners as soon as a case is screened in and copy ICWA worker on all case updates.
2. Allowing the initial assessment of an ICWA worker to stand has a high likelihood of reducing caseload and empowering the tribes to care for their families.
3. On a previous site visit, ONC expressed a desire to support wellness for OCS workers and listed many events they will extend invitations for. Bethel staff should be encouraged to participate. It's understood that staff has little-to-no time for such events, but outcomes for families in the region are not going to worsen as staff take time to take care of themselves and invest in better understanding of the families they work with.
4. ONC offered to provide ICWA training which will include.
5. More collaborative perspective (beyond rules and regs).
6. Training on transferring to tribal jurisdiction in a way that maintains continuity of care.
7. Engage with YK Health in sending workers through the Calicaraq training to increase cultural competency and self-awareness.

8. AVCP has trained facilitators who are available to lead the Knowing Who You Are training. Sitka has had great results utilizing tribal facilitators for this training and Bethel should also consider this.
9. Consider presenting at local job fairs such as the YK Health job fair and focus on more local recruiting efforts.
10. Consider confidentiality agreements with reporters involved in child care who are also stable figures in a child's life so that the child can benefit from healthy bonds created in a time of need. This is one of the main components of building resiliency in children.
11. Consider working with local nonprofits such as Bethel Family Clinic, or Bethel Community Services Foundation to facilitate fruitful dialogue between OCS and community partners.
12. This has proven instrumental in other communities such as Sitka and Wasilla in fostering collaboration in child welfare.

Reciprocal Engagement

Strengths: Staff in Bethel stated that they did have access to last year's site visit report and were very grateful for its thorough review.

Challenges: The CRP still has no protocol for sending reader-appropriate site visit reviews to all site-visit participants.

Recommendations: CRP to develop protocols for distributing appropriate feedback to all participants of a site-visit such as modified reports that don't include the more sensitive in-house recommendations.

Public Outreach

Strengths: With the help of our coordinators, Denali Daniels and Associates, the CRP has produced and distributed our five-year strategic plan as well as our 2019-2020 work plan to site-visit participants. We've also developed and distributed CRP business cards with our website printed on them encouraging stakeholders to leave anonymous feedback, both positive and critical, on our website. A link to the CRP is also listed on the

OCS website and members of the public are utilizing the anonymous online feedback form.

Challenges: The CRP has yet to make a significant effort to reach the public at large with information regarding the panel and its work.

Recommendations: CRP to continue reach out to stakeholders and get list of newsletters and publications to which we can contribute information.