



OFFICE OF
CHILDREN'S
SERVICES

OCS Response to the 2022-2023 CRP Annual Report

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
OCS Response to 2022-23 CRP Findings, Challenges and Recommendations.....	2
Healthy Child Protective Services System.....	3
CRP Recommendations.....	3
Reciprocal Engagement	6
CRP Recommendations.....	6
Public Outreach.....	7
CRP Recommendations.....	7
Collaborative Relationship with OCS	8
CRP Recommendations.....	8
CRP Education and Development	9
CRP Recommendations.....	9
Conclusion.....	10

Introduction

This year, for a second time, the Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) focused its oversight and evaluation efforts on recruitment and retention within the Alaska Office of Children's Services (OCS). Recruitment and retention, particularly of frontline staff, has been one of the agency's greatest challenges recently, so the Panel's continued focus on this issue is timely. While there has been some improvement in employee retention during the past year, the rate of turnover is still much higher than acceptable (above 50%) and the labor market continues to be very tight across the Alaska and the rest of the nation. OCS continues to implement a variety of initiatives to improve employee retention and to attract and hire high quality recruits. Some of these efforts are recognized in the CRP's annual report. The CRP also offers several excellent recommendations for additional measures that OCS could implement in the future. This report provides a formal response to the CRP's report with a focus on the recommendations identified by the panel.

OCS Response to 2022-23 CRP Findings, Challenges and Recommendations

The OCS response to the CRP's 2022-23 Annual Report addresses the recommendations identified under each of the Panel's Five-Year Enduring Priorities in the same order they appear in the report. Within each section, the CRP's associated recommendations appear first, followed by the OCS response regarding each recommendation. The Enduring Priorities appear as follows:

- 1) Healthy Child Protective Services System
- 2) Reciprocal Engagement
- 3) Public Outreach
- 4) Collaborative Relationship with OCS
- 5) CRP Education and Development

Healthy Child Protective Services System

CRP Recommendations

Recommendation 1, Dedicated Agency Improvement Team: The CRP suggests creating a team of 2-4 individuals whose sole responsibility will be to implement the various strategies required to reverse high staff turnover.

OCS Response: OCS has a dedicated agency improvement team comprised of members of OCS Leadership, however, most all those with key roles associated with agency improvement also have other job duties and responsibilities. The CRP's recommendation that a team be developed that is fully dedicated to this task is a good one. OCS recently hired a Wellness and Resiliency Coordinator whose sole role is improve the health of the agency's culture and enhance employee wellness. OCS will evaluate the possibility of developing additional roles with a similar singular focus on agency improvement and welcomes any further input that the CRP may have related to this topic.

Recommendation 2, Communication: Encourage greater connectivity between leadership and staff by having more in-person and all-staff meetings.

OCS Response: This has been a priority for OCS for years, however, leadership recognizes that there are many staff who feel they do not have adequate connection with agency leaders and recognize more effort in this area is necessary. OCS recently adopted a 'Framework for Fostering a Stable Workforce', based upon the U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-being. 'Communication and Community' is one of the 5 major components of the plan. Due to the recent and ongoing high levels of employee turnover many staff are unaware of the numerous opportunities that currently exist to interact with and provide feedback to agency leadership. Efforts will be made to further advertise these opportunities and to encourage employee participation. The recently hired Wellness and Resiliency Coordinator (a licensed MSW Clinician and member of OCS Leadership) will be meeting with staff in each of the regions over the coming year, in both one on one and group settings, to help familiarize them with the new Framework as well as with opportunities that exist for connecting with agency leaders. One of those opportunities is the Staff Advisory Board, a formal process whereby staff can participate in conversations with agency leadership, hear about ongoing initiatives to improve working conditions and provide direct input on issues that are of concern to them. This year the OCS Director has also held quarterly meetings with frontline staff during which she provides agency updates and opportunities for questions and feedback. OCS Leadership intends to continue expanding opportunities and providing information to employees so that they can feel better connected as party of a supportive professional community.

Recommendation 3, Transparency: Increase transparency; keep staff updated on what is working well at OCS and what is not. Conduct independent exit interviews so that departing employees can be more honest and forthcoming.

OCS Response: This recommendation overlaps with the previous one. OCS agrees with the importance of transparency for a healthy workplace environment and works to keep staff informed using some of mechanisms mentioned above (E.g., Staff Advisory Board, Director's quarterly meetings with frontline staff). Ideas for additional mechanisms to enhance transparency and communication are welcome as we continue efforts to improve in this area. OCS also supports the idea of working with the Panel to ensure exit interviews are conducted in a manner such that they can be more honest, forthcoming and ultimately more useful to management.

Recommendation 4, Benefits and Bonus Structure: Explore the existing bonus structure and evaluate effectiveness. How can more staff participate? Expand opportunities to implement 'Supporting Healthcare Access through Loan Repayment Program' (SHARP) throughout the workforce.

OCS Response: OCS agrees with this recommendation and is in the process now of evaluating the agency's initial efforts to improve recruitment and retention through targeted bonuses and other incentives. Leadership is exploring the possibility of expanding bonuses and incentives to include additional staff. This year opportunities to participate in SHARP have also been increased and additional expansion of access to this program is anticipated. OCS Leadership fully supports increasing incentives such as loan repayment programs for staff to participate in professional development and higher education.

Recommendation 5, Employee Advocacy Groups: The panel recommends that strengthening employee advocacy groups could increase feelings of employee empowerment. Does the existing employee advocacy group have representatives that fairly represent staff? How could CRP work with this group to help strengthen their efforts?

OCS Response: OCS agrees that strong employee advocacy groups can be invaluable for strengthening employee empowerment as well as provide crucial opportunities for staff to channel ideas and feedback to agency management. The Staff Advisory Board (SAB) is open for participation to all frontline staff, so should be generally representative of the agency's workforce, however, additional advertising of this opportunity and further encouragement to participate could be helpful. OCS Leadership is also open to discussing with the panel how there might be a role for the CRP in strengthening the SAB.

Recommendation 6, Management Training: Implement a mandatory training for urban and rural managers and supervisors that must be completed within 6 months of taking on a supervisory role. The training should be focused on learning effective communication styles and should include a cultural component.

OCS Response: OCS leadership agrees with the importance of adequate training for supervisory staff and managers. Currently upon entering a supervisory role, employees are required to complete supervisory training within their first year of hiring or promotion. Emphasis is placed on leadership skills, emotional intelligence, coaching workers, trauma stewardship, and strategic planning. All supervisors are also invited to participate in a monthly training call specific to an area of leadership policy or practice. After completing supervisor training supervisors participate in 'Coaching Supervisors to Best Practice'. Each cohort is paired to an expert coach, and this is a 13-week program. In addition, OCS recently implemented 'Facilitated Attuned Interactions' (FAN) training. This is a program in which all OCS staff in leadership roles (supervisor and above) are expected to participate and is based on a model which teaches reflective supervision. Cultural components are integrated within each training course, including concepts related to cultural humility and working with Tribal communities. Since training and professional development is one of the top priorities of OCS Leadership, evaluation of all these training efforts will continue and training courses will be updated and improved.

Recommendation 7, Technology Improvements: OCS should develop and implement a comprehensive technology roadmap that includes current and projected IT needs, how technology will be utilized to improve services, and how technology will be refreshed as it ages. The annual projected cost should be incorporated into OCS's budget.

OCS Response: The voluminous reporting and case management tasks that OCS staff conduct necessitates the best and most efficient technology. Therefore, OCS Leadership agrees that meeting the technology needs of the workforce is a high priority. Some of these tasks such as maintaining a roadmap for refreshing old equipment are currently handled by Department IT staff, however, OCS has been engaged in evaluating and updating technology used in the field as well as Database technology for storage, management, and retrieval of client records. Recently OCS has been working with BerryDunn consultants to conduct a full feasibility analysis as well as assessing the agency's case management information system needs in preparation for replacing the current database ('Online Resources for the Children of Alaska' or ORCA) with a new Comprehensive Child Welfare Information system (CCWIS). This will be a huge investment and the new database will include a variety of built in features aimed at streamlining and automating tasks that workers perform online. OCS has also been evaluating new technology for use in the field including rugged touchscreen laptops and tablets with longer battery life than the current laptops. A new app is also anticipated to go live within a year which will enable staff to conduct case management tasks in the field which currently can only be performed in the office while logged into the ORCA database. Additionally, the training for staff on the CCWIS system is being improved and updated. There are additional technology initiatives underway or being planned, and members of OCS Leadership recently attended the national Technology in Child welfare Conference to learn about the most recent innovations that might benefit OCS staff in the future. OCS also gathers staff input provided at monthly SAB meetings and monitors IT help requests to better understand the challenges workers are

experiencing with their use of technology. The CRP's input is also helpful in this area and any additional specific recommendations are welcome.

Recommendation 8, Integration of Culturally Relevant Practices: OCS should evaluate how they are integrating cultural competency as a standard practice in rural communities to ensure their offices and processes are aligned with the communities.

OCS Response: OCS agrees with this recommendation and works with the Alaska Child Welfare Academy as well as Tribes, Tribal Organizations, and community leaders on an ongoing basis to improve relationships as well as strengthen cultural components of training for OCS staff, and to improve OCS policies and procedures so that they are more culturally informed. Recently, in addition to the cultural components interwoven throughout OCS staff orientation and training, the Alaska Blanket Exercise was introduced as a training requirement for all staff, to help them better understand the need for cultural humility and to appreciate the history and the experience of Alaska Native communities. OCS will continue to look for ways to improve in this area and looks forward to collaborating with the Panel and other statewide partners to identify additional ways to strengthen relationships with communities in rural Alaska.

Reciprocal Engagement

CRP Recommendations

Recommendation 1, Cultural Assessment of the Workplace: Work with OCS to encourage conducting a cultural assessment of the workplace; or work with them to design an assessment and hire a contractor qualified to conduct and assessment.

OCS Response: OCS is receptive to discuss specific ideas the Panel may have relative to conducting a cultural assessment of the agency. As mentioned above, the recently hired Wellness and Resiliency Coordinator is travelling to each of the regions this year to support the roll-out of the 'Framework for Fostering a Sustainable Workforce' and to address the five major components of that framework which include: 1) Protection from Harm 2) Connection and Community 3) Work-Life Harmony 4) Mattering at Work, and 5) Opportunity for Growth. The goal is that each region will have a work plan developed to achieve progress in all the key areas included in the framework. Any cultural assessment that is conducted might benefit through building on the work the Wellness and Resiliency Coordinator has started, which is focused entirely on improving the professional environment and the work experience for staff.

Recommendation 2, Reconnect with OCS RoundTable Participants: The CRP will continue to connect with those who participated in past roundtables.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and always encourages staff to participate wherever possible with the Panel’s evaluations, interviews, and focus groups.

Recommendation 3, OCS Newsletter: CRP will continue to engage with OCS staff newsletter through outreach efforts, sharing relevant information, and panel member contributions.

OCS Response: The panel is always welcome to use the OCS monthly Frontline newsletter as a tool for communication with staff and for sharing information on the activities and findings of the Panel.

Recommendation 4, Website Information: Work with OCS Public Information Team to ensure that the website directs traffic to the CRP website.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation, and it can be easily accomplished.

Public Outreach

CRP Recommendations

Recommendation 1, Update the CRP Website: The CRP will assist the CRP Coordinator with a website rebuild so that it is more user-friendly and accessible. The CRP will work on search engine optimization (SEO), increasing traffic, and posting relevant resources for the public.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation. The website is an excellent source of information on the panel.

Recommendation 2, Reach Out to Stakeholders: Panel members plan to reach out to stakeholders in their respective regions.

OCS Response: OCS supports this and recognizes outreach to stakeholders as one of the panel’s key ongoing activities.

Recommendation 3, Expand Report Distribution: This year the CRP will work towards an expanded distribution list for the Annual Report.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation.

Recommendation 4, Collaboration with Ombudsman’s Office: Explore collaboration with Ombudsman’s Office in next workplan and understand the process for reviewing complaints and sharing information on any themes or systemic issues.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and recognizes that there may be a benefit to the Panel in determining if there are systemic issues that the Ombudsman’s Office may be able to identify.

Recommendation 5, OCS Grievance Process and Understanding of Basic Processes: Review changes made to the OCS grievance process and explore ways to educate panel members on OCS processes more generally.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and can provide the panel with information to assist them in developing a better understanding of the grievance process and any other processes of interest to panel members.

Recommendation 6, Hold Community Cafes During Site Visits: Have community café conversations to discuss OCS capacity building and focusing on the workforce perspective: What do they need? What needs to be done differently? Explore what is going on in the region/community through multiple conversations to assess what the issues are and the most crucial needs.

OCS response: Community Cafes may be a valuable tool for information gathering and assessment purposes. OCS supports this and would support staff participating if requested by the panel.

Recommendation 7, Reevaluation of Public Noticing of Meetings: Ensure meetings are accessible to members of the public and facilitate public participation.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation to facilitate increased public participation.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

CRP Recommendations

Recommendation 1, Continued Engagement with OCS: Engage leadership through continued OCS attendance at CRP Planning, quarterly, and monthly meetings. Explore options for additional round table sessions with frontline workers and managers.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and appreciates the opportunities extended in the past to meet with the Panel and to be able to provide input during planning activities of the CRP. OCS staff can also be made available for interviews and roundtable sessions.

Recommendation 2, Hold Community Cafes During Site Visits: Have community café conversations to discuss OCS capacity building and focusing on the workforce perspective: What do they

need? What needs to be done differently? Explore what is going on in the region/community through multiple conversations to assess what the issues are and the most crucial needs.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation (which was included in the previous section as well so please see OCS response there).

Recommendation 3, Work with OCS to Explore and Understand Processes: Panel members want to learn more about OCS processes (with a priority being the grievance process) potentially through holding educational sessions at the quarterly meetings. Each meeting would be a different topic, and OCS staff could guide the panel members through the basics for a better understanding.

OCS Response: OCS support this recommendation and is open to having staff participate in educational sessions at quarterly meetings if that is determined to be the preferred venue by the panel.

CRP Education and Development

CRP Recommendations

Recommendation 1, CRP Capacity Building: Continual engagement with the Capacity Building Center for States; encourage all panel members to review the opportunities.

OCS Response: OCS agrees that the Capacity Building Center for States is a useful resource and strongly supports the panel's efforts to strengthen their knowledge of best practices used nationwide.

Recommendation 2, Attend CRP National Conference: Send select members to the CRP National Conference as funding allows.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation.

Recommendation 3, Annual Review of CRP Policies and Procedures: Review with new panel members and ensure that all panel members are familiar with the regulations and policies governing the CRP.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and the attention given to onboarding new panel members.

Recommendation 4, Educational Segments: The CRP will propose dedicating 30 minutes during quarterly meetings to educational topics from OCS and other partner agencies.

OCS Response: OCS supports this recommendation and if requested can make staff available to provide educational sessions at panel meetings.

Conclusion

OCS again thanks all members of the CRP for their ongoing dedication to Alaska's children and to improving Alaska's child protection system. All members of the panel donate their time and energy to this project and receive only our thanks in return, along with the knowledge of progress being made in our work to keep children and families healthy and safe. Your efforts are appreciated, and OCS leadership looks forward to working alongside you again in 2023-24.