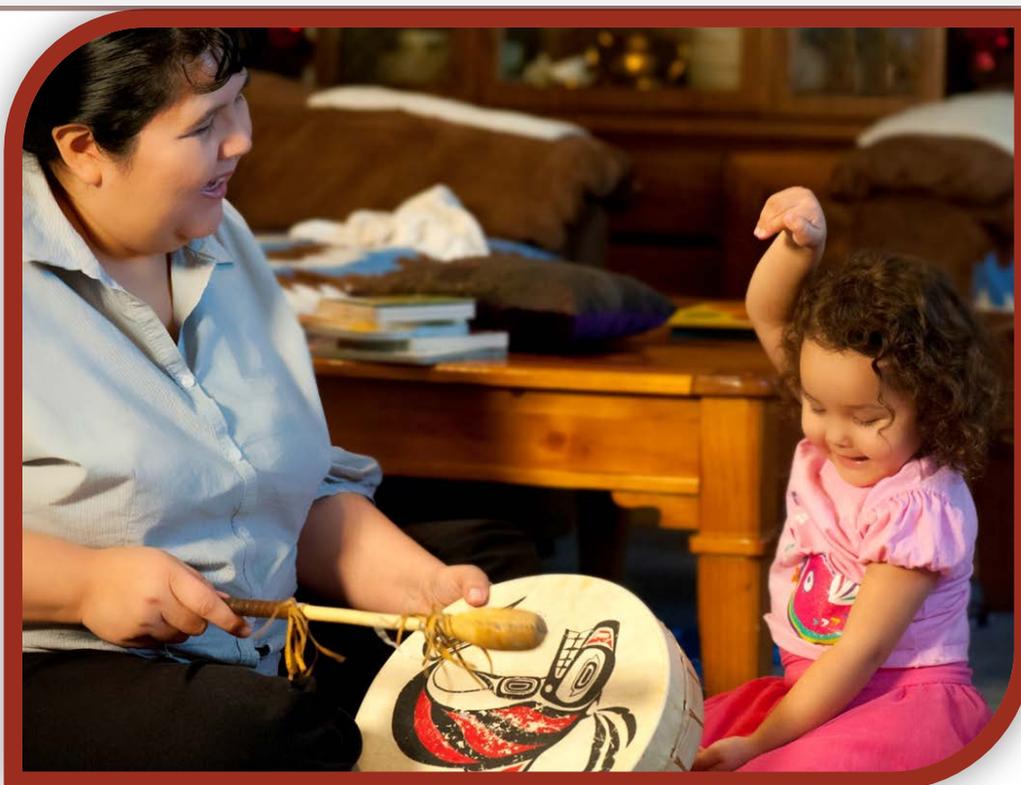


2012

OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



State of Alaska

Department of Health & Social Services

Office of Children's Services

Executive Summary

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), I wish to extend my sincere appreciation for your dedication and efforts to improve the child welfare system on behalf of the families of Alaska. The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) provides a venue for stakeholders, families, and staff to have a voice through your grass roots community outreach that might not otherwise be heard. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for staff to share their concerns or suggestions in a confidential manner that helps them to speak freely and without hesitation. Those voices are important to the OCS leadership and help to guide our efforts with enhanced insight into the various challenges that vulnerable Alaskans face every day.

OCS continues to focus on our goals related to enhancing community and Tribal partnerships; decreasing disproportionality, increasing our rate of staff retention, and steadily improving our safety, permanency, and well being outcomes. While these and other priority work efforts are critical and essential to improving services to families OCS serves, they are not easily achieved. These efforts in addition to increasing federal requirements continue to add more to the already full plates of everyone in our workforce. Layer upon layer is added every year that impacts our ability to do everything to the optimal level necessary. Focusing in on one area often causes unanticipated shifts in others, to which we are constantly trying to balance. Despite the constantly changing policy and practice, additions to everyone's responsibilities, challenging circumstances facing both rural and urban staff related to worker turnover and the everyday demands this work brings with it; our staff continues to make every effort to rise to occasion. The staff at OCS is committed and passionate about what they do and I wish to use this opportunity to publicly recognize them for the important public service they provide every day to Alaskan families to which often goes largely unrecognized.

After reviewing the OCS response to your recommendations, please don't hesitate to contact me so that I may clarify or provide additional information to the panel. I look forward to another year of productive partnership.

CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR



CRP Recommendation 1:

That OCS takes aggressive action to reduce staff turn-over.

OCS Response:

The Office of Children’s Services, like many public child welfare organizations, has long struggled with retaining staff. As noted by the CRP, a high turnover rate undermines efforts to provide quality child welfare services and negatively impacts outcomes for children and families. In the past two years, numerous programmatic changes have been made which we anticipate will directly or indirectly affect staff retention, but acknowledge there is a great deal of additional work necessary to correct this pervasive problem.

Recruitment:

Earlier this year, we produced a “Realistic Job Preview” video featuring OCS workers discussing various aspects of their jobs with an emphasis on working in rural communities. This is becoming a common recruitment strategy nationwide and is aimed at helping those considering a career in child welfare to gain an accurate idea of the requirements of the position. We believe that this, along with other efforts, will help better match applicants to positions for which they are a good fit and will increase the likelihood of success and satisfaction on the job. This video is available for viewing at: <http://vimeo.com/44692712>

Initial Training:

The initial staff development program has been significantly revamped to help new employees focus on learning the skills necessary for their position and expeditiously prepare them for field work. These modifications have involved classroom training, on-line modules, and on-the-job learning experiences.

An on-the-job staff development plan has been instituted which guides new employees early learning over the first six months of employment, efficiently making the most of previously unstructured time between classroom trainings and providing statewide consistency. In addition, we have modified the training schedule and refocused our new employee classroom based training curriculum resulting in a more focused education which prepares new employees to start fieldwork with appropriate support and mentoring, as quickly as possible. New employees are now ready to start fieldwork within one month from their hire date, offering faster relief to those workers with higher caseloads.

Single job class:

For many years, OCS employees worked under two separate job classes: Social Worker and Children's Services Specialist. After an extensive job classification study, the two job classes conjoined into a single job class in July 2012 titled Protective Services Specialist.

The job class has three ranges from the entry level through specialist, one supervisory level, and two manager levels. This change resulted in an increase in pay for many employees and created a career ladder for those interested in a career in child welfare. These changes are consistent with recommendations from the child welfare staff retention literature.

Travel Team:

In spring 2012, OCS created a team of traveling child welfare professionals who work throughout Alaska based upon the needs of the organization. Schedules and assignments vary based upon conditions at the time, but generally involve two week deployments to small rural field offices to ensure continuity of services for children and families when permanent positions are vacant. In addition to meeting the needs of children and families, the presence of these traveling workers provides relief to other local staff whose workload has become overwhelming during the time of staff shortage.

Strategic Planning:

Staff retention remains a top priority for OCS and we continue to work at improving our retention of qualified employees. With funding support from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, we are currently working with Agnew: Beck Consulting to identify specific strategies to implement in the coming year to improve retention with a focus on recruiting those who are committed to working long term in child welfare with emphasis on retaining workers in high turnover areas of the organization.

CRP Recommendation 2:

That OCS establishes deadlines that require non-emergency petitions to be filed allowing for supervision of the family by the continuum of legal parties without necessitating the removal of the child.

OCS Response:

The Office of Children's Services is in agreement with recommendation 2 for several reasons. We believe that the idea of "voluntary" participation in child protective services is misleading in that most families engaging in services on a "voluntary" basis do so due to their concern or belief that if they do not participate, the state will move to take legal action to attempt to force cooperation up to and including custody of their children.

While it is questionable that the filing of a legal petition increases a parent's motivation to engage in services or makes them want to change their behaviors, it does provide a mechanism for due process. Legal oversight provides for the parents to be fully informed in their decision making as it relates to disclosing maltreatment, agreeing to safety plans and case plans, and engaging in services. The provision of this infrastructure of people and processes provides increased collaboration, oversight, accountability, and timeliness in the delivery of appropriate and effective services.

The filing of a non-emergency petition requesting "supervision" would leave the parent as both the legal and physical guardian, but engage the appropriate legal parties and court reviews that would ensure the case moves forward, the in home safety plan is sufficiently monitored, and that the case is resolved within a timely manner.

This process would also support OCS programming efforts in that it raises the "visibility" of in home cases within the case system. Currently in smaller field offices, the in home cases may receive lower priority than out of home placement cases due to "court cases" being seen as more important and the overall work load demands on worker's time. As a result, resources tend to be directed at the out of home cases. Exceptions to this are that in some of the larger field offices "specialty units" provide for excellent service delivery to in home cases.

OCS wants to ensure that all families receive a full array of safety planning, case planning, and opportunities for parents to engage in services. There are parents who are motivated to make changes and fully work with the agency as voluntary case participants. For those families, the filing of supervision will provide the due process to insure they are fully informed and their rights protected. We believe that filing for "supervision" of in home cases through the courts, regardless of the parent's motivation, will facilitate improved care.

In 2013, OCS intends to form a sub workgroup to begin development of a plan to implement the needed changes and to engage the Court Improvement Project group to gain support for the effort and assistance with the mechanics of the changes it will necessitate. Once a full evaluation of all the factors involved, identifying the needed changes and the potential impact to the collective system, a more specific timeline for completion will be established.

In regards to the additional recommendation of setting a standard or threshold for when multiple past reports would automatically trigger the filing of a non-emergency petition, OCS does not concur. Each case needs to be independently evaluated when a report is received. This evaluation includes examination of prior OCS history with the family along with current information that is known in order to determine the level of intervention required. Scrutinizing past history at both the intake and initial assessment levels is already standard practice. That is one piece of the overall assessment of safety that

collectively helps us understand the current family functioning and guides the decision making on opening a case for initial assessment or service.

CRP Recommendation 3:

OCS should provide Western Region with a full complement of supportive (e.g., adoption specialist, intake supervisor, etc.) positions identical to those offered in all other regions.

OCS Response:

The Office of Children's Services is committed to the successful development of the Western Region. As a new region with many unique challenges, we intend to continue investing in the success of this region until they operate as effectively and independently as any of the other four OCS regions. Full independence will take some time and we hope this process will continue to evolve over the coming year with the region taking on increasing independence as the natural progression of organizational development permits. However, this is largely dependent on the evaluation of workload statewide and determination of where and how any adjustment to staffing levels are appropriate, such that additional PCN's might be freed up for use in the Western Region.

During the past year and a half, we have focused on meeting immediate needs, workload stabilization, and filling key leadership positions in the Western Region. Among the key leadership positions filled during this time are the Protective Services Manager II (regional administrator), Protective Services Manager I (staff manager), Administrative Officer, Indian Child Welfare Act Specialist, St. Mary's Protective Services Supervisor, Bethel Protective Services Supervisor, and Independent Living Specialist. The increased leadership and stability this has provided has been extremely positive and improvements are becoming more apparent, both within and outside of OCS. There are still other functions being conducted outside of the Western Region such as supervision of Child Protection Intake and travel coordination. If continued stability in the workforce within Western remains somewhat stable, we will also be able to more accurately explore and assess the capacity of current positions to determine if other duties could be added that would increase the ability of the region to be entirely self-sufficient.

CRP Recommendation 4:

We encourage OCS to enhance data compilation efforts to facilitate better understanding of child welfare issues in the state and promote evidence-based practice.

OCS Response:

We appreciate and understand the reasoning behind this recommendation, but are not able to take any action towards implementation at this time. This is due to the lack of capacity our staff and SACWIS system have presently to take on such an endeavor. As it

stands now, we have lengthy lists of technical and practical enhancements that are in the queue for developer and programmer time that will occupy the next several years at a minimum. While aligning with the census data would help in some ways, it isn't the ultimate solution. Many other departments/divisions have boundaries set differently that have been in place for decades that may or may not be in line with those of the census. Making this type of change may only be realistic if it were one that the entire state system decided to align to in one major undertaking such that our systems and data could all be more easily compared, manipulated and communicated.

OCS has been however, continuing efforts to drill down in the data that we provide statewide to provide more detail at both the regional levels and the office/community level. This has been a priority of the Tribal-State Collaboration Group as well and we recently had success with data with outcomes related to disproportionality, that while not perfect, is getting close to what both the Tribes and OCS would like to have readily available. We will continue those efforts as time and resources allow.

In regards to the use of data to ensure "best practice", we certainly agree. That is why since the implementation of ORCA in 2004, that enabled OCS to have much more sophisticated means to regularly generate reports and data from all angles, we have become increasingly cognizant and focused in using this data to guide decision making and evaluate our practice. It is routinely considered as we assess the efficiency and effectiveness of training, policy, and on the job coaching methods that all lend themselves to ensuring the idea or specific "model" that is intended, is in fact the one being replicated by staff and that is being done so with the highest level of fidelity we can achieve. While, we certainly continue to have more needs for data than our current resources can keep up with, we are certainly far more advanced in those endeavors and the practical use of data than ever before.

