

2013

OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



State of Alaska

Department of Health & Social Services

Office of Children's Services

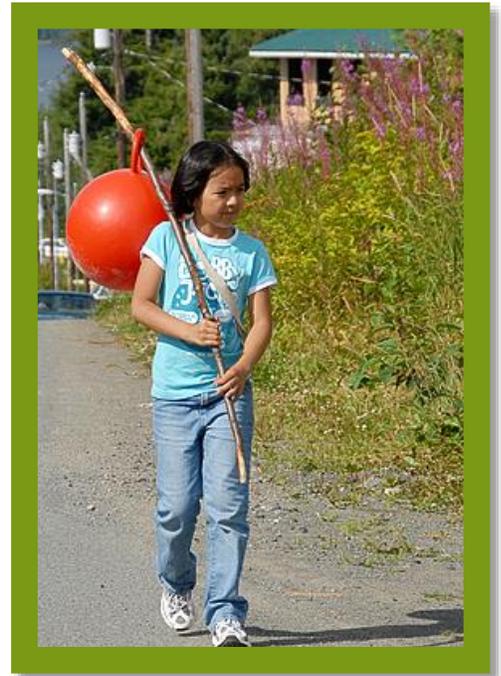
Introduction

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), I wish to extend my sincere appreciation for the continued dedication, leadership and investment of time the members of the Citizen's Review Panel (CRP) continue to make year after year. The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) provides a vehicle and voice for stakeholders, families, and staff to have issues of concern or importance escalated to leadership's attention in a unique fashion. The viewpoints gathered and shared with OCS from the CRP's efforts provide another level of insight to systemic issues that are useful in making improvements overall.

OCS looks forward to another productive year, partnering on scheduled site visits and continuing to find ways our collective efforts can ensure *safe children, strong families* throughout Alaska.

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 sees this as the most vital of the recommendations outlined within this report and also views it as an agency priority. As noted in the past, the high turn-over rate undermines the efforts to provide quality child welfare services and it can negatively impact outcomes for children and families. In addition to the impact to families, it also negatively impacts our existing workforce morale and overall stability.

We have continued our efforts on recruiting and retaining quality staff. This year we have joined in partnership with Agnew::Beck Consulting regarding our recruitment and retention efforts. At this time they are evaluating and examining what can be done to increase our retention while looking at our hiring practices and efforts to hire the right employee match for child welfare.

We recently determined that our current turn-over rate at the direct line worker position is 27%. We will continue to make recruitment and retention a focus at OCS. The below list shows some of the ongoing efforts in this area.

Recruitment:

OCS has now established continuous recruitment strategies to decrease the amount of time necessary between resignations and having new people hired into the job.

We also have been exploring the use of alternate work week scheduling for some of the hard to fill rural offices. Looking at the strategies utilized by our colleagues in law enforcement has created ideas to which to create innovative opportunities within OCS. We are hopeful to launch the week on-week off scheduling in early 2014. We anticipate that these will be a sought after positions, while creating staffing consistency in personnel.

We are using a realistic job recruitment video to show to interested applicants. The hope is that this will allow for a more honest view of what an average Child Welfare worker experiences on a daily basis. We are also looking to create another video in 2014 that is even more informative and becomes incorporated within the recruitment process. Having prospective employees be as informed and educated as to what and how the agency operates will aide in our overall retention rates.

Retention:

This last year and going forward OCS is embracing becoming a trauma-informed agency. We believe that our workforce is highly impacted by the trauma they see and hear as well as the trauma the system may unintentionally create by nature of our intervention. We have trained many of our staff on secondary or vicarious trauma, child trauma, and parent trauma over this last year. This will be an ongoing effort and adds to a larger initiative to change the culture of being a trauma ridden agency which results in workers burning out and leaving the agency.

We have refined our staff development plan for on boarding of new staff and attempting to put in case load caps for line workers during the first six months on the job.

In 2014, in coordination with our training partners at the UAA, Child Welfare Academy, a coaching program will be implemented. This is a need that our agency has heard repeatedly over the years and we anticipate this will assist workers in the understanding and level of learning the OCS practice model, bringing what's learned in the classroom to the field and have a sounding board of ideas and solution based thinking.

The travel team is a group of individuals that travel to offices that have staffing needs they are not currently able to fill. Travel team individuals are deployed to fill these spots on a short term basis. This has been very effective and we will continue to use this strategy.

Many staff report that the burden of having to take extensive on-call rotations, and respond to after-hour child welfare emergencies in addition to their busy day jobs increases stress and burnout. OCS is actively exploring standardizing after-hour procedures and the feasibility of implementing a centralized after-hour call center, in order to mitigate unnecessary calls to on-call workers.

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 agrees that our in-home services program is in need of continuing development to better meet the needs of families where children remain in the home while receiving child protective services. This includes a better determination of when to use legal intervention to provide for supervision of the family.

The needs of the in-home program have been an area of continuing concern, having been noted in the CRP 2012 report and as well the OCS Quality Assurance Reviews; both reports have identified developmental needs for this program. In particular, the internal Quality Assurance Reviews have identified a lack of consistency in the program model across regions and a resulting "unevenness" in service delivery. The Anchorage Region, for example, has a well-developed, in-home program with dedicated staff and a full service array allowing for frequent monitoring of the family and management of safety issues. In other regions with smaller field offices, the in-home program is designed to be implemented by workers who also have other caseloads such as initial assessment and this results in a need for more focused service delivery for the in-home cases, as the workers try to balance their time and attend to different roles. Some smaller field offices also have a single worker assigned to manage in-home cases and the workers are in need of a better developed model to provide them structure and guidance. There are also

identified program needs state wide in determining which family issues and histories can be served through an in-home program. And again, we concur that in many cases legal intervention can benefit the family.

To address the multiple issues raised by the CRP and our own internal reviews, OCS has developed a work group to review the issues and to conduct research from national resources on in-home programs. This work group consists of members of the judicial system to include the Court Improvement Project, Guardian ad Litem, and Public Defender. They have consulted with the National Resource Center for In-Home Services through the University of Iowa. The group has reviewed in-home program models, types of family problems served by in-home programs, and levels of legal intervention. Currently the work of this group is ongoing and final program recommendations have not yet been made. Preliminary decisions are that there are identified in-home cases on which there would be immediate filing for legal oversight. These case types include 1) Parent with a prior history of termination or relinquishment of parental rights 2) Infants born with drug positive screenings, excluding marijuana 3) Cases where the safety plan requires a child to be placed temporarily outside their home. As noted, the work of the group continues. It is OCS's intent to further develop an in-home program model that meets the needs of both rural and urban areas. It is expected that this model will be responsive to the CRP recommendations for improved supervision of in-home cases, increased access to services for those families where removal is not necessary, establishment of better control in cases with non-responsive cases, and improved responsiveness to cases with ongoing concerns.

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:

We remain committed to developing the Western Region and its capacity to meet the needs of children and families. In 2013, we continued to build on this commitment in a number of ways.

We have continued to build administrative structures and processes to meet service demands. Toward this end, two existing Bethel-based positions were dedicated to in-home family services. A third will likely be added in early 2014. We have continued focusing on local leadership development and stabilization and are pleased to report zero turnover among the management and supervisory staff in 2013. Two additional positions were reassigned to Western Region from other OCS regions. A Protective Services Specialist and an Office Assistant were added, thus, increasing the overall staffing capacity of the region by 6%.

We have continued to seek new, innovative, and creative ways to meet the needs of children and families using existing resources. For example, in late 2013 Western Region was identified as the pilot region for an open continuous recruitment process to reduce the overall vacancy rate and minimize the lag between resignations and new hires. In addition, we are preparing to test alternative staff scheduling (week on/week off) in the St. Mary's Field Office in an attempt to increase staff retention. We are also preparing to pilot a mobile technology project by issuing computer tablets, dictation services, and VPNs to increase efficiency of Protective Services Specialists when traveling between villages.

We have attempted to reduce the workload burden for staff during times of high employee vacancies or increased protective services reports through the thoughtful use of interim Travel Team assignments. In 2013, Western region was the top recipient of the Travel Team by receiving 22 (41%) of the 54 deployments statewide.

Due to the unique characteristics of western Alaska, full independence commensurate to the other four OCS regions may not make good business sense for the foreseeable future due to the size of workloads, limited bandwidth, recruitment and retention challenges, and other factors. However, we continue to develop the capacity of the region and ensure equitable access to resources even when those resources are located in another region of Alaska.

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:

Enhanced data compilation, reporting, and analysis to inform decisions is a continuous area of effort and focus at OCS. Data driven decisions are critical to ensuring we use precious resources as effectively and efficiently as possible.

OCS will continue to look at how to enhance and expand on existing methods for data compilation such that we have the most accurate information by which to focus our efforts.

In the past year one of our key leadership members was privileged to be accepted into a prestigious national data training entitled, "Advanced Analytics for Child Welfare Administration" sponsored by Casey Family Programs. The skills, information and guidance received during this training will infuse our efforts locally. As a result, OCS is looking at funding opportunities to once again have access to the Chapin Hall database. This data will significantly increase our abilities to look at trends, areas needing attention and to also evaluate what is working well. OCS looks forward to continuing this dialogue and hearing suggestions from the CRP as to other ways we can maximize our current system to the best we possibly can, as well as exploring perhaps, long-term strategies that may ultimately be necessary.

