

Office of Children's Services Response to Citizen Review Panel 2006 Annual Report

This document includes the goals (in italics) listed in the Citizen Review Panel's (CRP) 2006 annual report. The annual report details the CRP's findings of concerns, goals and recommendations for the Office of Children's Services each year. The following is the OCS response to the CRP's findings for 2006.

Goal: Ensure that staff members have the necessary and appropriate resources, agency support, and discretion to do their jobs efficiently.

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) has done much in the past year to provide support to all employees to assist them in doing their jobs more efficiently. In the past year, 300 new Dell computers were ordered to replace slow and outdated computers. There was a delay in deployment of the computers due to advice from Dell that if we were to wait a couple more months, we could get the latest version, which we chose to do. The first deployment of the computers is set for early 2007.

Additionally on September 18, 2006, in collaboration with Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Information Technical Services, we deployed to all staff computers new software, Citrix NetScaler. This increased bandwidth all around the state and has greatly improved user satisfaction.

In further support of field offices, in June 2006, an OCS Safety Officer was assigned to act as a liaison with the DHSS Safety Officer (SO). One of the purposes was to request the Department SO to do office visits of offices thought to need repairs. So far these visits have occurred in Bethel, Nome, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. Concerns have been noted and work with the lesser has begun to bring the offices up to proper standards to improve working conditions.

Currently, there is no funding to support the licensing fees of social workers within OCS. While it is not a requirement to be licensed to be a front line worker, OCS does value its licensed social workers. For front line workers who are not social workers, OCS continues to fund and support a stipend program with the Universities that allow interested OCS workers to go back to school to obtain their social work degrees.

In the past year, OCS has supported a number of trainings and conferences as funding would allow, most notably, the statewide safety assessment training, Undoing Racism training in 3 locations, Regional Indian Child Welfare Act Conferences and the Child Maltreatment conference. Several other trainings, both required and elective, are available at the UAA Training Academy on contract with OCS.

A Training and Orientation for New Employees (TONE) Advisory Group formed this year to review and revise TONE to become state of the art, including incorporating the new safety assessment, revising curriculum to be more family centered and culturally competent.

It is acknowledged that more must be done to focus on supervisory needs and training as stated in the OCS Strategic Plan from last year. In June, Child Welfare League of America came to Alaska to conduct training with all supervisors statewide on recruitment and retention of front line workers. Additionally, supervisors have been given additional training and will be given additional technical assistance in the supervision of the new safety assessment model.

Regarding the recommendation that staff be hired to enter data into ORCA, OCS' online case management system, there are no allocations for additional positions or additional funding that would allow OCS to do so. However, two positions were reassigned to create an OCS ORCA Helpdesk to assist workers in the moment so that they do not become immobilized in their casework entries. By all accounts, the specialized helpdesk staff had been very helpful to front line workers in assisting them to complete their work.

Staff retention and morale continues to be an ongoing challenge. By the very nature of the work - provision of unsolicited services to, for the most part, an involuntary client - child protection services staff around the country have a high turnover rate. Yet, more can always be done to acknowledge the difficulty of the job and reward the commitment and dedication of our child protective services workers. Some of the ongoing activities around the state include in one office an "All Work No Play Makes You Grumpy Committee" whereby supportive activities include managers going around with a cart delivering "in-flight" breakfast snacks and juice. Another region has a "Sunshine Committee" that hosts SOUPER Thursdays, where staff brings in soup and bread to share lunch with one another. There are ongoing recognition of "Superstars of the Month", kudos e-mails, spotlights on workers in staff meetings, staff appreciation breakfasts or lunches, sharing of small gifts and tokens of appreciation. Certificates, plaques and holiday potlucks are customary and usual.

With additional resources, more could always be done to further support field staff. However, there are limits to legislative appropriations and the agency has to consider all needs, including those of the families we serve.

Goal: Strengthen the child protection system by expanding hands-on understanding and support from top management that will encompass the entire state.

It is agreed that the OCS could benefit from more visits to rural field offices by the Deputy Commissioner. It is always a balancing act with regard to decisions about how limited travel money ought to be spent. In addition to the Deputy Commissioner, the Field Administrator and Regional Managers should also be traveling to their rural offices. Given the limited number of resources, careful consideration is given to the purpose for staff travel.

It is agreed that the 2006 visits made by the Deputy Commissioner to Nome and Sitka, as well as less rural offices, i.e., Anchorage, Fairbanks and Wasilla, were extremely insightful and beneficial. Every opportunity for additional travel to rural offices to meet with staff and community partners will be taken this year. The Deputy Commissioner of DHSS will accompany the OCS Deputy Commissioner to field offices as the situation warrants.

Goal: Clarify confidentiality regulations and ensure all offices are aware of what the proper interpretation is.

Work with the Department of Law (DOL) on confidentiality has been ongoing over the past two years. It is true that there have been different interpretations around the state with issues surrounding confidentiality. In the past year, after House Bill 53 had been implemented for a year, OCS revised policy and procedures to provide more clarity and guidance. Additionally, a document titled "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Confidentiality" was developed with the DOL. Each region was responsible to train each of their staff on the FAQ and the FAQ were posted to the OCS website so that consumers and stakeholders are able to view the document for additional accountability by OCS staff.

Goal: Remove any structural barriers that prevent OCS from providing optimal protection for children.

OCS agrees with the recommendations of the CRP. In fact, several of the suggested activities contained within the recommendations have already started in some locales. Family to Family is being expanded to Fairbanks and Wasilla beginning early 2007. Some reassignment of staff needs to occur and with caseloads being such as they are, a methodical approach to spreading Family to Family statewide, including Team Decision Making, had to occur. Collocation of OCS staff with child advocacy center professionals and law enforcement officials is scheduled to occur in July 2007 in Anchorage. It would be optimal for more collocation around the state, however, there are additional lease costs that have to be planned for and approved through the state system.

The OCS agrees that tribes should be more directly involved with the home study process. The OCS home study contractors are required to coordinate and collaborate with tribes, as appropriate, during home studies. The OCS will continue to work with our contractors and the tribes to facilitate more tribal involvement.

The OCS has been in the process of assessment and evaluation of its service delivery system in the past year. With the change in safety assessment and a renewed emphasis on family centered practice, there are a plethora of ideas and recommendations for how OCS might reorganize itself to provide optimal service to families and children. Due to this being a transition year, no final decisions will be made about reorganization until after the Department Commissioner and OCS Deputy Commissioner are appointed.

Goal: To ensure that foster parents and CASA volunteers have the support, training, and resources they need to be successful in their roles in the child protection system.

It is agreed that better relationships with partners in the child protection system can always improve the delivery of services to families and children. Strengthening Community Partnerships was one of five goals in the OCS Strategic Plan of 2006. Additionally, separate surveys were done with foster parents and judicial partners, including Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), in the past year and the survey results have been posted to the OCS website. The survey results will be used to inform and improve practice.

Policy and procedure is clear about what should be given to foster parents, however, there is room for improvement in this regard. It is acknowledged that foster parents are critical to the functioning of OCS and retention and recruitment efforts are continually being examined and implemented as well. Increased focus on strengthening relationships with foster parents and CASA will be ongoing.

2005 Recommendations

OCS appreciates the recognition of the work done last year to improve its service delivery system and practice with children and families.

With regard to the continuing concerns about the Quality Assurance program, the Department of Health & Social Service's (DHSS) Division of Finance & Management is the agency responsible for all personnel concerns and violations involving DHSS staff. Quality Assurance within OCS serves a very specific function, that of the evaluation of practice related to federal requirements. However, any concerning information learned about an OCS staff member's performance is flagged and reported to the employee's staff and/or regional manager. OCS does not have the manpower to add duties related to personnel violations to the quality assurance process, especially given the Department provides those services whenever necessary.

The Deputy Commissioner sought information from all staff statewide in February 2006 regarding any tasks thought to be unnecessary to completing the OCS mission. The response rate was low, but did elicit good information that has

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been acted on. Additionally, there was a statewide online employee satisfaction survey in September 2006. Finally, OCS has put in a Maintenance Request through the state Personnel Division to allow non-social workers to become supervisors within OCS. This will provide a more attractive career ladder for Children's Service Specialists and enhance the OCS effort to retain qualified staff.

Changes to the OCS Grievance Regulations were made in the past year and become effective December 30, 2006. The OCS website will be reconstructed to highlight those changed regulations and procedures to make them more user-friendly. Further, OCS continues to dedicate resources in Central Office for a Community Relations Manager who receives and resolves complaints from all OCS consumers and stakeholders. Results of the contracted Workload Study were given to members of the CRP in June 2006 after its completion in May 2006.

The Office of Children's Services continues to work strenuously on its 5 stated goals of 2006: Strengthening Families, Keeping Children Safer, Decreasing Disproportionality, Quality and Stable Workforce and Strengthening Community Partnerships. Of those, we are most proud of our work to decrease disproportionality and strengthen our partnerships with tribes. Throughout the implementation of the new safety assessment model, OCS has partnered with tribes in a way unparalleled in the past. Additionally, OCS has tribal participation in its curriculum revision work with the UAA training academy so that cultural competency is woven into all training and not just a stand alone session. ICWA Specialists within OCS have also formed a work group with tribal partners to review and revise ICWA Specialist job functions to allow greater input into how OCS can improve its work with Alaska Native families and our tribal partners.

In summary, OCS continues to address the concerns raised by Alaska's Citizen Review Panel. We appreciate being able to respond to the recommendations put forth and we look forward to being able to report our progress again next year. Thanks to the CRP for its commitment to the children and families served by the Office of Children's Services.