

2016

OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



State of Alaska
Department of Health & Social Services
Office of Children's Services

Executive Summary

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) wishes to thank the Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) for its work in the past year to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of the children of Alaska by engaging the public on the issues and looking at ways to improve the system for those it serves.

The challenges Alaska faces in regards to the high rate of abuse and neglect our State's children experience is not the burden and responsibility of OCS alone, but of every Alaskan. It is only through the collective sense of shared responsibility and duty to keep our youngest citizens safe that we can begin to change the narrative around the story of our beautiful state. In 2015 Alaskans made more than 16,000 reports of maltreatment to OCS that brings to light families who are struggling and may need services that this agency provides. But, not all those families are screened in for an investigation or assessment of child safety. OCS relies on the community to help those families that are struggling but have not yet reached the threshold for a state intervention. We count on our community providers, Tribes and others to provide support and services to these families who may need to be connected. The CRP is uniquely designed to conduct public outreach, educate and to advocate for improvements they or the community identifies that helps to bridge some of this gap.

We know that we cannot do the work necessary to prevent and reduce child maltreatment without the assistance of all of our community partners. We appreciate the CRP for their diligence in examining policies and procedures and practices that then inform recommendations toward systems improvement of the OCS. While there may be different points of view on various issues or potential remedies, we value the time and effort given to keep working towards improvements that will benefit those we serve.

In the coming year, we look forward to making further strides towards increased effective collaboration that produce meaningful change and progress. In the spring of 2017, OCS faces a major federal audit with the coming third round of the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). This review will take a deep dive into case practice and compliance with federal/state laws by doing intensive case record reviews in three locations around the state over the span of a week. We welcome the CRP's participation in this review as well as in the creation of the anticipated Program Improvement Plan that will be an outgrowth of the review. This effort and the proceeding work to bring up poor performing areas will be a mammoth undertaking and will require focus and the support of our partners statewide.

"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success." – Henry Ford

CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR

CRP Recommendation 1:

Consider assigning the CRP a significant role in implementing various priority areas of “Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020”. With its statutory authority, CRP will be an asset for OCS in implementing this strategic plan. OCS Response:

Since the completion of the final draft of the Department’s strategic plan, OCS has sought the CRP’s involvement in the implementation phase of the plan’s priorities. CRP representatives are now members of three of the six workgroups: Self Governance, Embracing the Values of ICWA, and Community Engagement. Additionally, all work group co-leads send copies of meeting invites, agendas, work plans and notes to the CRP coordinator as we strive to keep all abreast of the implementation of the strategic priorities.

As the CRP’s role has transitioned from a “review and recommendation” model to a “review, outreach, and advocacy” approach, OCS and the Tribal State Collaboration Group (TSCG) are exploring ways to compliment and support each other as we strive to improve outcomes for Alaska’s children and families.

In November of 2016, the Tribal State Advisory Team met with the CRP to strategize ways to better partner. The first tactic was to review the CRP’s BIA Provider survey in order to elicit information that can help guide on the ground strategies to improve communication and relationships between OCS and Tribal partners. This was followed by brainstorming ideas of other ways that TSCG can partner with the CRP to reach a broader community base such as school districts, providers, etc.

CRP Recommendation 2:

Tribal State Collaboration Group (TSCG) should consider a dialogue with the leaders of Alaska Native for-profit corporations to garner their support and any resources they may be able to leverage to enhance child protection services.

It should be noted that OCS does not drive the work or efforts of TSCG unilaterally, we take our lead from our Tribal partners and are actively engaged in efforts of importance to them and the agency, but they are the primary drivers. Any plan to approach for-profit Tribal entities would only be initiated with the full support and guidance from our Tribal partners.

This recommendation will be added to the January 2017 Tribal State Advisory Team’s agenda to determine how best to address this proposed strategy. It is anticipated that Tribal Co-Chairs will introduce this recommendation during a subsequent Tribal Caucus meeting. OCS will support Tribal Caucus’ decision and plan accordingly. The next scheduled statewide Tribal State Collaboration meeting is May 3-4 2017.

CRP Recommendation 3:

The enterprise of CRP should be evaluated by an external entity to assess its effectiveness with particular attention to:

- A. Internal structure and process of CRP in order to improve efficiency;**
- B. CRP-OCS statutory relationship in order to ensure roles and responsibilities.**

OCS would agree that the CRP as an entity should be evaluated by an external resource that is not in any way associated with the CRP or with OCS, to assess the CRP's effectiveness as it relates to the internal structure and process of the CRP, as well as the relationship (statutory and otherwise) in order to ensure and clarify roles and responsibilities. For OCS the challenge will be to find funding and resources to support such a project, so that the efforts can assist both OCS and the CRP.

Over many years, OCS has worked collaboratively and respectfully with the CRP regarding the relationship, roles and responsibilities for each organization. It is OCS' view that through these continued efforts the relationship, roles and responsibilities have become clearer for all involved.

CRP Recommendation 4:

OCS should consider building on CRP's survey effort by:

- A. Viewing training of frontline workers as a longer enterprise that includes SKILS, and evaluating the entire enterprise for effectiveness;**
- B. Including special sections in the annual staff survey, focusing on a topic of interest, and repeating periodically every two or three years;**
- C. Identifying other similar survey efforts that OCS conducts, and leveraging resources from external entities such as CRP or UAA to conduct them.**

OCS appreciated the opportunity to collaborate in a unique way this past year to create and execute the annual staff survey; however, based on feedback from our staff, we are electing to continue our internal efforts going forth versus outsourcing this survey again.

In regards to A. OCS views training of frontline workers as a never ending enterprise that includes intensive classroom preparation via SKILS, webinars, self-study, job shadowing and "on boarding" activities. Workers are in a state of training through their first year and well into their second year. We meet regularly with the Child Welfare Academy and drive the training needs of our staff accordingly. While, nothing is ever perfect, we believe the larger issue here is the gaps we have in regards to the "transfer of learning" versus what the curriculum includes. When in the classroom setting the depth of understanding and engagement is great, but once out in the field and tasked with applying what was learned in real life complex situations we know workers struggle significantly. To combat this we have been coaching supervisors to develop improved supervisory and critical thinking skills and have started a small effort to create a "mentorship" element in at least the Anchorage office. The idea of the mentor is to liaison

between the CWA, supervisor and worker and help model and coach best practice in the field in real life scenarios to further solidify what was learned in the classroom. While we only have one staff member working in this designated role right now, we very much wish to expand in coming years.

The suggestion noted in B. is duly noted and is a good one. We will definitely look at how to include special sections in future survey efforts.

As to C. at this point, we remain open to the idea of other ways we might collaborate beyond what was done with the staff survey but do not have any identified areas of need at present.

CRP Recommendation 5:

OCS should work with CRP to strengthen CRP's ability for public participation, rely on it to improve public awareness of the nature and content of OCS work.

Throughout the report the CRP has mentioned the challenges that they face with capacity in meeting the mandates and goals that they set for the CRP. This has included the goal of five site reviews, but only being able to make three in FY 16. Additionally, the ability to recruit and keep longer-term CRP members is also a challenge. While OCS would welcome a more robust opportunity for the CRP to increase the public participation process, so that OCS can rely on the improved public awareness, the challenges that the CRP faces, makes this difficult as well. OCS has relied on the CRP reports to assist OCS regarding the public awareness of the agency and possible policy and program adjustments and improvements. These have typically been specifically focused, and rely in part, on the interests of the voluntary board. More appropriately, OCS would recommend that the CRP and OCS enter into a work plan for which a multi-year effort to improve the public awareness aspects of the CRP can be developed and implemented in conjunction with the other public awareness projects, such as the ICWA Strategic Plan and the Child and Family Services Review processes are currently utilizing.

