

2017

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 and looking at ways to improve the child welfare system.

In particular, we wish to commend and thank the CRP Chair, Diwakar Vadapalli, for his tireless leadership, continued commitment and for the enormous amount of time and energy that his role requires. While there might not always be agreement on the issues or the solutions, we do value his dedication to making a system that impacts many vulnerable Alaskan children and families better. In the past year, further progress was made in helping both the agency and others see the CRP in a different light, one that is more collaborative versus punitive. We appreciate the focus on creating a framework for participatory evaluation and look forward to further work in this area.

This year OCS also joined the CRP at their annual retreat along with members of the Alaska Legislature and the State Ombudsman's Office. Representative Ivy Spohnholz made a presentation and offered the CRP four recommendations, two of those four in particular OCS believes could significantly help to increase the credibility of the CRP as well as broaden the potential for a more widespread and systemic collective impact.

Those two were:

1. Align goals with other stakeholders to amplify impact, and
2. Expand the CRP membership to include additional high influence members of all three government branches.

The notion of the CRP aligning themselves with other entities (such as Children's Justice Act Task Force and the Ombudsman), who also have some oversight responsibilities for OCS and whom also make recommendations for systems improvements is worth further exploration. A more collaborative approach to identifying problems and solutions within the OCS system would not only make for stronger recommendations, it would also make our successful implementation of those solutions more realistic and manageable.

The CRP's voluntary based membership is struggling to maintain volunteers and the level of energy necessary to achieve its stated goals. Perhaps, pursuing members from all three branches of government would help solicit individuals who have more time to give, and may also be allowed to work on CRP activities as part of their employment; make way for faster progress on all fronts.

OCS continues to commit to meeting and collaborating on all fronts with the CRP such that it is as successful as possible and is able to meet its statutory mandates.

We look forward to another productive year.

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:

The Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children, Strategic Plan 2016-2020 was created in part stemming from recommendations from the US Attorney General’s Advisory Committee on American Indian/Alaska Native Children Exposed to Violence: Ending Violence so Children Can Thrive report issued in November 2014.

The Vision is: “Alaska Native culture keeps Alaska Native children safe”

The Mission is: “Alaska Native children, families and communities are thriving through respectful government to government collaboration, community leadership, and aligned systems of care”

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 have been invited to join any or all of the six workgroups and currently actively participate in some. 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.

In recent months the Community Engagement workgroup had been exploring further how to utilize the CRP as a mechanism for public engagement and outreach.

The purpose of the Community Engagement workgroup is to: Strengthen community involvement and inclusion in the child welfare system through increased engagement with Tribes, villages, and the community at large.

Since the CRP is already an existing model of community engagement the notion to align with them and work in close partnership seemed like a win-win and a way to further the efforts with our community at large overall.

Two ways we propose specific collaboration are through:

1. Community Site Visits

- The CRP already conducts site visits. These could serve as a key mechanism for sharing information and ideas on a community basis and to help engage community members in partnering to improve child welfare outcomes for children.

- The structure of site visits could be modified to include such things as: traditional welcoming by an elder, celebration/showcase of community strengths, town hall meeting to share and receive ideas and information, focus groups and individual interviews with select stakeholders.

2. Community Survey

- The CRP already conducts a survey of rural providers
- The OCS already conducts a survey of tribal representatives
- The CRP could take lead responsibility of merging the two surveys and conducting a single annual survey that meets all needs.

The CRP must focus on all kids, but this graphic is just in case anyone needs to be convinced that it is important to focus specifically on the Alaska Native population because they are the majority in child welfare and significantly overrepresented on a population basis.

This provides the CRP a significant role in this 5-year strategic plan and we look forward to seeing this evolve in the coming year ahead.

CRP Recommendation 2:

Speed up the grievance process and implement the new tracking system by December 2017.

OCS Response:

The Office of Children's Services agrees with this recommendation. Since 2015, the Office of Children's Services has invested time and funding into the development of a custom grievance tracking software system that will allow for data reporting on all grievances filed with OCS. In 2015, OCS and the DHSS Information Technology team worked to establish the tracking system, called the Management Incident Tracking Tool (MITT). This tool includes not only the tracking of grievances, but also appeals, and worker safety incidents. To date, none of the technology has been implemented due to various unforeseen challenges, including:

- The lack of a completed DHSS IT security plan
- The challenges of incorporating HIPAA related data into the database
- The need to update the MITT software to accommodate the upgrades in IT technologies, such as changes in email platforms, security upgrades, etc.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, the ORCA (Online Resource C-? A-?, OCS's electronic case management platform) staff have been working diligently with DHSS IT staff to see that the MITT was fully implemented in 2017; to date, this has not occurred. As a result, the

ORCA staff are working on developing a tool within ORCA to track grievances; however, the timeframes are being assessed and evaluated at this time.

In the meantime, the OCS Community Relations Manager, the OCS Deputy Director and administrative support staff have been working to upgrade the existing Excel tracking log for grievances, so that each grievance has:

- A unique tracking number
- A hyperlink to the ORCA case related to the grievance
- Data collection on aggregate grievance data.

Specific data that are being tracked for individual grievances, and the upgrades include:

- A. The date and participants of the meeting;
- B. Issues discussed;
- C. Decisions reached (copy of the formal response);
- D. Whether the decision was agreed or not agreed upon by the complainant;
- E. Any applicable action steps and who is responsible;
- F. That the complainant was informed of having 10 business days to contact the Community Relations Manager to appeal the decision and request it be reviewed by the PS Manager II (or designated PS Manager I);
- G. Any additional applicable correspondence or documents attached in the complaint file in the tracking system.

Additionally, for each grievance that is received, an activity note will be entered into ORCA to indicate that the grievance was received and assigned.

The above changes are expected to be implemented in December 2017.

It is also anticipated that the upgrades to the existing Excel database will become foundational for the ORCA data collection and processes in the future.

CRP Recommendation 3:

Establish adequate connection between a case file and any related grievances, with necessary protection for the worker identify.

OCS Response:

As mentioned in recommendation #2, each grievance will have a unique tracking number and a hyperlink to the necessary ORCA case. Additionally, an Activity Note will be entered into ORCA to indicate that a grievance has been filed and assigned.

CRP Recommendation 4:

Publish monthly aggregate data on the number of grievances received, nature of those grievances, and time to resolution of those grievances outlined.

OCS Response:

OCS agrees with this recommendation. While OCS is supportive of the data being on the OCS website, it is also important the reporting mechanism/strategies are reliable, valid, and accurate. For this reason, OCS anticipates that the posting of the reports will take longer, though no date can be determined at this time for full implementation. OCS is actively working to see that the data is published, recognizing that in moving the data processes from an Excel database to the ORCA database will mean changes in how data reports are developed and implemented.

CRP Recommendation 5:

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

OCS Response:

As noted in the response to recommendation one, OCS has fully engaged and is eager to help further CRP's ability to effectively dialogue with the public and increase awareness about the child welfare system. At the CRP Annual Retreat in August, the group agreed to join efforts with the Community Engagement workgroup, one of six working groups working implement recommendations from Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children, Strategic Plan 2016-2020.

The group is ambitious and we believe this close collaboration will help strengthen the CRP's efforts going forward.

CRP Recommendation 6:

OCS should continue to work with the CRP to identify a clear working relationship under the participatory evaluation framework.

OCS Response:

OCS agrees that the good work over the past year needs to continue and that the framework the participatory evaluation concept provides creates a more meaningful way to engage on the issues. We look forward to that endeavor and continued partnership.