



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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The Alaska Citizen Review Panel evaluates the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies for effectiveness in discharging their child protection responsibilities.

The Panel is mandated through CAPTA 1997 (P.L. 104-235), and enacted through AS 47.14.205.

Northern Region 2018 Site Visit Report

Regional Office	Northern Region
Field Offices Visited	McGrath
Communities Visited	McGrath
Dates of Visit	April 25-26, 2018
Panelists	Sonya Hull and JP Ouellette

Stakeholders Consulted

Alaska Native Entities

Unavailable due to the recent death of an elder

Public Safety

Alaska Wildlife Trooper Northern Detachment

Legal Community

No local legal community

School System

McGrath School

Service Providers

*State of Alaska/Office of Children's Services
Foster Families in McGrath*

The Panel would like to thank the stakeholders and partner agencies who met with us during April 25-26, 2018 in McGrath, Alaska.

INTRODUCTION: Before the April 2018 site visit to the Northern Regional Office of OCS in McGrath, the panelists reviewed the annual goals and priority areas established by the CRP for 2017-2018. During the meetings with stakeholders that were conducted as part of the site visit, the panelists used the 2018 workplan priorities to guide the discussions. They collected a vast amount of information during these visits, and used this material to develop a set of key observations and recommendations that are specific to the region.

Given that the Northern region encompasses such a vast and diverse area, this report is focused mostly on the area covered by the McGrath office which includes the villages of Anvik, Grayling, Holy Cross, Lime Village, Medfra, Nikolai, Shageluk, Tekotna, and Telida as well as the area covered by the Delta Junction office who shares supervision in Fairbanks with McGrath.

Citizen's Review Panel 2018 Workplan Goals

Goal 1: Examine the effectiveness of the current administrative review process and whether the changes made in 2015 have improved the system.

Goal 2: Examine if 'family reunification' is prioritized as a goal for children in out-of-home care placement, and OCS' efforts in pursuit of 'family reunification'.

Goal 3: Examine OCS' efforts in finding relatives for placement of children in foster care.

Goal 4: Expand public outreach in collaboration with efforts under the Tribal-State strategic plan.

Goal 5: Strengthen the panel through aggressive recruitment of new members, enhanced website, and tools to reach diverse groups of stakeholders.

Key Observations:

Goal 1: Examine the effectiveness of the current administrative review process and whether the changes made in 2015 have improved the system.

Stakeholders in the McGrath area, including supervisors in Fairbanks were pleased with the admin review process. The format and precision of the process helps to provide accountability as well as momentum to keep a case moving toward the goal of permanency. There was the notion that more experienced workers may find the AR process more helpful than less experienced workers as they are more comfortable receiving oversight and explaining when and why we have to go outside the checked boxes to accomplish the objectives. The requirement to put a timeline on permanency goals is helpful. As in other regions, parties such as parents and attorneys rarely participate. The current format is much more convenient for rural workers' travel schedule.

Goal 2: Examine if 'family reunification' is prioritized as a goal for children in out-of-home care placement, and OCS' efforts in pursuit of 'family reunification'.

Like Western region, the McGrath area has an asset in the familial nature of the communities. OCS workers and families work together to keep kids out of state custody or to bring them back home when at all possible. The McGrath office appears to an outstanding relationship with all stakeholders including the tribes and families in the area. Longevity is a real asset for this office; trust and collaboration has been built over time and the families are well cared for here. Case workers, supervisors, and ICWA workers lean on one another to coordinate care and utilize the resources at their disposal to prevent removal and to bring kids back home.

Some barriers to reunification that were identified include having to utilize the Bethel Court System which is "notoriously slow" in moving child welfare cases through. It's reportedly difficult to get removal findings from the court in order to begin putting together a case plan for the family.

Another barrier to reunification is that parents in the region seem to have the presumption that OCS will require them to receive services in Anchorage in order to be reunified with their children (this is apparently a lingering idea from the days

of DFYS when that was more often a reality). So parents move to Anchorage and end up getting lost in the shuffle and are unable to stabilize their lives. Of the services that are available in the area, villages either utilize South Central Foundation or YK Health. The areas covered by SCF yield much better results and, consequentially, those cover by YK Health (the villages of Anvik, Holy Cross, Shageluk and Grayling), are less likely to reunify after receiving behavioral health services.

Goal 3: Examine OCS' efforts in finding relatives for placement of children in foster care.

Again, similar to the Bethel area, the presence of large, willing families, and the diligence of case workers in the region make relative placement another strength. Members of the local office, regional office, and ICWA workers all do a good job of completing relative searches prior to the initial assessment.

While ERS is a significant aid to relatives, poverty and housing continue to be challenges to placements with families, especially when members with barrier crimes return home. In areas where there is no post office or a check is difficult to cash, ERS doesn't offer much help.

▪ **Goal 4: Expand public outreach in collaboration with efforts under the Tribal-State strategic plan.**

Many stakeholders were not very familiar with the Tribal State strategic plan. They were encouraged to review the plan on the OCS website. Some leadership, however was aware that TCC had signed the compact and they were in the process of educating staff on the impact of that. There will be a regional meeting in June to allow more staff to get the information on the plan and how it applies to their work. As noted above, the McGrath office already works very collaboratively with the tribes. The perception is that the tribal courts in place in the region are doing well at this point.

- **Goal 5: Strengthen the panel through aggressive recruitment of new members, enhanced website, and tools to reach diverse groups of stakeholders.**

This goal is not relevant to OCS as far as panel recommendations, though the panel is working to address this goal internally.

Other Observations:

Centralized Intake

Despite the rough start-up period, this system seems to be working well for the McGrath and Delta Junction areas. The challenges of having a centralized intake system- delayed and inconsistent reporting at times, have been accepted as a reality of having such a system. However, the region works together well to mobilize local resources when a child has an immediate need and generally views the intake line as a useful way to begin documentation of the case.

Worker Safety

It was noted that the only safety officer in the McGrath region is a Fish and Wildlife officer. That role has a limited capacity to provide safety in the region. During our visit, a good portion of the town was shut down do to a local manhunt that required the assistance of troopers from out of the area to come in. This proves very problematic when a removal is required due to a dangerous person. Similar to every other remote region we've visited, workers have little to no protection when tending to the immediate needs of children.

There was an incident in February with a very unsafe child and the community members didn't feel safe intervening. The fish and wildlife trooper was out of the area and the VPSO position was vacant. The troopers from Aniak had to go through Bethel and got stuck due to weather. The SSA had to wait for the Trooper and there was no worker available due to vacancies. The SSA here in McGrath had to do the removal with the Trooper once they arrived, which took several days. Child safety was compromised for several days due to the unavailability of the Troopers. Ultimately the child was removed and the perpetrators were arrested.

McGrath Field Office

It's notable that the field office worker in McGrath has an outstanding reputation in the community with all stakeholders interviewed. Both the case worker and the SSA work very well in the community and obviously have an investment in the well-being of the families under their "watch". It's another example of the type of worker we need more of in the system. More ideas about how to work toward that are addressed in the next session.

Worker Longevity, Experience, and Resilience

In the face of worker shortage and increasing caseloads, finding qualified workers that have the skills, character, and *resilience* to serve the needs of Alaskan families is key. Of the regions the CRP has visited, the ones that produce the best results have some things in common. Staff at varying levels include people who have time invested in the region as well as in their field of work. Workers producing the best results are invested in the communities they serve either because they grew up the area, or they have lived there long enough to consider it *home*. In a field where the average worker lasts about 2.5 years, those that have 5 and 10+ years in the field are invaluable assets, especially if they're invested in their region. The panel presumes there is a significant screening process for new applicants, but the across the regions, the shared perspective is that the current crisis has led to a significant decrease in the qualifications to becoming a case worker including job-specific education and experience. While this may serve to fill empty positions, it doesn't send the best Alaska has to offer into our areas of greatest need. In fact, sending unqualified workers into the field has created more problems, per our observation and the feedback we've received, than it has resolved including distrust and animosity between families and OCS. This and a lack of focus on self-care perpetuate burn-out at a high cost to families, workers, and the state budget.

Recommendations:

Family Reunification

While this is a relative strength for the region, it seems that villages who rely on YK Health for behavioral health services often don't achieve results leading to reunification. It's unclear if the new health facility currently underway in Bethel will bring about needed changes in YKH's capacity. It may be prudent to consider working with SCF to expand their service area in the region.

The judicial boundaries for the region are not serving the needs of the families who require the assistance of the courts. Consideration should be made to shift the region's court caseload to Fairbanks where OCS workers report having a much better working relationship. It should be noted, however, that this recommendation is made without the benefit of input from the tribes on the issue and it would be helpful to get such input before making such a transition.

Safety

Reconsider current policies on bear spray to ensure OCS workers aren't unnecessarily vulnerable in potentially dangerous situations (be it animals or humans). Review policies on dangerous visits to ensure that field offices can accommodate adequate protection for workers in the absence of safety personnel.

Worker Longevity, Experience and Resilience

The panel recommends more focus be placed on identifying those workers who have longevity, experience, *and* are producing the best results and giving them opportunities to mentor new case workers.

The panel also recommends screening applicants for a significant measure of education and/or work experience in the field of social work.

In addition, we recommend screening for resiliency. While we understand it's unfair to disqualify an applicant based the number of ACE's they may report (for instance), it's observable that unresolved trauma in younger, less experienced workers hinders their ability to adequately and objectively care for families in traumatic situations leading to dissatisfaction and high turnover rates in the field.

In addition, more attention needs to be given to self-care. This requires an aggressive effort by supervisors to invest in providing staff (including themselves) with routine wellness checks which could include counseling/coaching and wellness workshops offered by SCF or other agencies. Perhaps a regional chaplain or similar role could provide a measure of mental and emotional well-being that is currently not being met.

Thank you for the carrying the responsibility of protecting our children in the vast and challenging state of Alaska. The CRP is grateful for the opportunity to give feedback in accordance with the federal mandate to assist OCS in achieving it's objectives, as well as the effective and timely execution of the priorities outlined in the Tribal State Strategic Plan.