



## Alaska Citizen Review Panel

### Members

Diwakar K. Vadapalli, Chair  
Rebecca Vale  
Bettyann Steciw  
Sonya Hull  
JP Ouellette  
Donna Daniels  
Cameron Adams  
Wendy Barrett  
Cassandra Kincaid  
Dylan Conduzzi

### Staff

Denali Daniels & Assoc.  
admin@crpalaska.org  
[www.crpalaska.org](http://www.crpalaska.org)

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.

## Southeast Region 2018 Site Visit Report

Regional Office	Southeast Region
Field Offices Visited	Juneau
Communities Visited	Juneau
Dates of Visit	February 8-9, 2018
Panelists	Donna Daniels and JP Ouellette

### Stakeholders Consulted

#### **Alaska Native Entities**

*Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska*

#### **Public Safety**

*Juneau Police Department  
Alaska State Troopers*

#### **Legal Community**

*State of Alaska/Attorney General's Office*

#### **School System**

*Auke Bay Elementary School*

#### **Service Providers**

*State of Alaska/Office of Children's Services  
Juneau Youth Services*

*The Panel would like to thank the stakeholders and partner agencies who met with us during February 8-9, 2017 in Juneau, Alaska.*

**INTRODUCTION:** Before the February 2018 site visit to the Southeast Regional Office of OCS in Juneau, 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.

## **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 across the board expressed frustration with the current process. While appearing to be more efficient, it's felt to be far less effective at actually serving the best interest of the children. The rigid scheduling of reviews often renders the case worker and the parents unable to participate leaving input and decision-making to personnel in Anchorage who have far less invested in cases in Southeast. There was consensus among stakeholders that this was a solution to a problem Southeast wasn't facing and that regional reviews were far more efficacious at addressing the needs of the children served in the Southeast Region.

Stakeholders were not optimistic about a prospective judicial review process as they felt the courts were already overburdened and this would delay case planning in Southeast. Ideally, the courts could be more helpful given more resources to include more family-friendly programs (like FIT court, a CINA attorney, and a more family-friendly GAL).

### **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'.**

#### ***Underlying Philosophies***

In Southeast, there was unanimous agreement in the community that family reunification was a priority for OCS workers. OCS and community workers spoke with eagerness about the importance of kids staying with or being reunited with their biological families. There is a strong sense of collaboration between OCS and local agencies to prevent children from being separated from their families.

Though published policies and procedures are the same in both the Anchorage and Southeast regions concerning family reunification, the results of the interviews conducted by the CRP in these two regions differed greatly. In Anchorage, there was general discouragement among stakeholders around the experience that family reunification was not a priority for OCS workers, and it was more of an implausibility that created one more burdensome objective for OCS workers to try and obtain.

There seems to be a philosophical difference around the importance of keeping families intact between the two regions. One reason suggested for this

was that leadership and staffing in the Southeast Region across many agencies have more longevity. In fact many CPS-related leaders and workers grew up in the community they now serve, and have more of a personal investment in and understanding of the families in the region. Another was that, despite what studies show about the importance of keeping families intact, the mindset that “*Some children are just better off with better parents*” is pervasive, very difficult to overcome, and over-applied in certain areas around the state. This philosophy leads inexperienced, though well-meaning, case workers with little personal investment in the community they serve, to work under the assumption that *most* children are better off with better parents in spite of OCS’s stated objectives. More directly, it may be a leadership issue at the supervisory level that is difficult to overcome when turnover is so high and longevity is so low.

### ***Permanency Guidelines vs Access to Treatment***

Stakeholders described a difficult dance between permanency guidelines and the time it takes for parents desiring help to access services. They often have to seek treatment outside of the area and, despite their efforts, fall short of the timelines set by the state for permanency. Southeast workers were confident, however, in their abilities to discern when extension applications were appropriate and how to utilize the resources available to help children stay connected with their families.

### ***The GAL***

Multiple stakeholders complained that the GAL tends to overrule the case planning team, making decisions for the child that most involved don’t agree with. Many felt that the GAL has a high degree of mistrust for parents.

### ***In-Home Support (Prevention and Follow Up)***

At other times, kids go home too soon without the right supports in place for the parents and repeat maltreatment occurs. They would like to see more capacity to provide more in-home services. This would provide better post-care and also *prevent* children from entering state custody in many (maybe most) cases.

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

### ***Hesitant Families***

A concern was that parents are hesitant to offer information about relatives due to shame/pride. Relatives are hesitant to get involved to avoid family drama. There are financial barriers for relatives. Though relative placement *has increased* since the implementation of emergency placement funding, that

funding runs out after two weeks. Families don't want to commit to becoming a licensed foster home which, subsequently, leaves them in a tight spot financially and also makes ICWA foster homes are very rare.

### **Good Teamwork**

In Southeast, supervisors state they do extensive and effective relative searches using the software available, and, most importantly **local knowledge**. They state longevity of workers and tight-knit community results in workers having a good working knowledge of families in the area. Tlingit/Haida Tribal Council echoes this sentiment and states OCS works very well with the tribes to find relatives for placement.

### **Due Process Versus Cultural Appropriateness**

Multiple stakeholders state a concern with the mandated petition for removal when creating a safety plan. Parents and extended family often fear the ramifications of this "removal" and the perception of parental termination often creates a resistance to compliance. There is also difficulty in balancing cultural appropriateness and due process.

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

According to all stakeholders interviewed, including Tlingit/Haida Tribal Council, Southeast has developed good tribal collaboration even before the strategic plan/compact. The compact simply puts more of a concrete definition around what they have already been practicing and allows them to increase collaboration in areas such as tribal case-loads. They have good working relationships of trust with outlying areas including Metlakatla. While OCS workers feel tribes are capable of handling more cases, tribal council states they believe in starting slow and, as attorney general's office states below, not moving faster than they can handle (as in taking responsibility for CPS in larger chunks than are realistic for the tribe). The desire is to take the burden off of OCS tribal cases, but understand that doing that responsibly requires patience...and funding. THTC representatives state that funding for more workers would enable them to build more infrastructure for caring for tribal children.

The Preserving Native Families (PNF) program has helped improve tribal collaboration. As stated above regarding relative placement, though tribal governments are collaborative, tribal families still have a great deal of mistrust in the state which makes foster placement very difficult as families won't even participate in tribe-initiated foster programs for fear that they are "giving in" to the state.

- **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***

Stakeholders feel Anchorage addressed a problem Southeast didn't have and it is reducing efficacy in the region. Children in need of immediate assistance can be left unaddressed and workers can be responding to an "urgent" case that's already been stabilized. Local authorities get frustrated with the redundancy of the system and the poor (and often inaccurate) relay of information to the case workers. Local authorities appreciate that the system provides checks and balances that could be overlooked in remote areas (like an intake worker omitting data about friends and family). They continue to contact the local case workers directly, however, to ensure someone addresses the needs of the child in a timely manner. The triage is very poor and it's presumed that the centralized intake worker has little to no experience/knowledge about the region nor of how these cases are to be triaged. Other partners in the region who report echo these concerns and state that the ability to access OCS care for a child is greatly diminished.

#### ***Support for Supervisors***

Supervisors in Southeast want more support in being *good leaders* in order to reduce burnout of field staff and pass along valuable region-specific knowledge.

## **Support for In-Home Services**

Southeast OCS feels more preventative in-home services to address basic needs and provide support to families on the edge of mandatory state involvement would greatly reduce the number of children in foster care.

## **Training for OCS Workers**

*Child Interviews:* As was stated in the Anchorage visits, stakeholders feel case workers need better training in interviewing children. Even case workers state that, as parents, they can tell when other workers have not had experience with children as they address them in ways that leave children confused or frustrated (as if they are adults). The troopers office shared concern about the number of times a child is interviewed increasing the trauma caused by an adverse event. Between JPD, troopers, OCS, and CAC, children are often interviewed intensively up to 4 times, which only increases the negative impact on the child.

*Safety/Self Defense:* Troopers office and JPD also advocate for case workers to be trained in self defense and given authority to carry pepper spray for protection against dangerous people as well as animals. At present, they rely on troopers for protection; and troopers aren't always available. Information was shared during this visit between troopers, JPD and OCS to coordinate the training.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Administrative Review Process**

The panel recommends OCS consider the requests from stakeholders across the board to revert to *regional* admin reviews that were more effective at addressing the needs of the families served.

### **Family Reunification**

Consider what appears to be a strength in Southeast and applying it to larger, more complex regions. Consider breaking Anchorage into smaller regions that would be assigned to case-working teams who would familiarize themselves with the families, resources, community supports, cultural norms, schools, etc in their assigned region. Preferably the case worker would live in or near their region leading to more personal investment and "inside information" about the variables that make that region "tick."

Review the report, if available, from a recent state-funded visit to New Jersey to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of their in-home support methods. What can Alaska's CPS system utilize toward *prevention* of abuse and neglect, and provide ongoing support for families to decrease repeat maltreatment in reunified families.

Utilize funding to attract more *competent* case workers (rather than simply *more* caseworkers) and supervisors to slow down the turnover and bring better equipped workers and leaders into the field who have more capacity to support efforts in family reunification as well as set an example for less experienced workers.

### ***Support for Supervisors and Field Workers***

Utilize local leadership for mentoring rather than send workers from other regions to Anchorage for mentorship.

### ***Child Interviews***

Review policies and procedures on interviewing children after an adverse event and provide training and mentoring to ensure

1. Case workers are adequately equipped to interview children without adding stress
2. Information can be shared effectively and redundant interviews eliminated

### ***Safety/Self Defense***

Information was shared during this visit between troopers, JPD and OCS to coordinate self-defense training.

Reconsider current policies on bear spray to ensure OCS workers aren't unnecessarily vulnerable in potentially dangerous situations (be it animals or humans).