

Community visited	Barrow
Dates of visit	Sept 23-24, 2013
Members of CRP on the visit	Diwakar Vadapalli Dana Hallett

Offices covered in this visit

Regional Office	Northern Regional Office
Field Office	Barrow
Communities served	Point Lay; Wainwright; Atkasuk; Barrow; Nuiqsut; Kaktovik

Agencies interviewed

Arctic Slope Native Association
 Barrow Police Department
 Children and Youth Services, Barrow
 Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope
 Native Village of Barrow
 North Slope Borough Health and Social Services
 Office of Children's Services
 School Personnel

Meeting Notes

Partner A: We gathered that OCS refers individuals to a particular agency but does not communicate well. Often times, the agency does not know if OCS referred a particular individual unless the person mentions it. The partner is under the impression that OCS has very little presence in the community and the region and is often disengaged or put in very little effort to participate in providers' joint meetings. A case in point is the recent "Legal Providers' Meeting" where they just presented their piece and did not stick around for the discussion or to hear others' points of view. OCS is understood to be too focused on reacting to situations than participating in prevention. Reporting of harm is still hit and miss after regionalization of intake. It was worse before then.

Partner B: A tribal partner had generally very positive things to say about OCS. We got conflicting reports about how many foster homes there are in Barrow and the villages. The tribal agencies should soon be able to recruit their own foster homes if they obtain IV-E funding. Although, everyone is in agreement that the licensing requirements are too demanding and the paperwork is cumbersome and extremely lengthy. Fairbanks regional intake office often does not answer the phone and people have to leave a message. This is hardly ideal for someone concerned and wanting to report.

Partner C: Staff at this organization barely seems to interact with OCS. There is no formal communication protocol between OCS and this organization. They happen to call OCS whenever they have a report of harm. This lack of formal communication protocol

creates some problems for the organization since they could benefit from knowing more about children with whom they interact. Staff at the organization thought that the community in general takes care of the abuse and neglect issues through family and kinship networks. Occasionally, when situations come to their attention, they take swift action.

A formal communication protocol would have made a recent awkward "breach of confidentiality" incident much easier. Confidentiality was not maintained by OCS although later OCS did follow up by assigning the case to a worker from outside Barrow. Despite objections expressed by several other partners, staff at this organization felt that regional intake is helpful. They feel a sense of security in the anonymity it offers.

Partner D: Staff at this agency had generally positive impressions of OCS. Their major area of concern is the regional intake. They were very critical of the regional intake process. They often had to leave a message and they were quite concerned with the delay in relaying the message to the local office, especially when they needed an immediate response to a tense situation. They praised their strong relationships with the local OCS staff and felt the regional intake undermines these existing relationships. They were quite inclined to ignore the regional intake process and calling the local OCS office for all reporting. As evidenced by their strong relationships locally, this may work quite well for them. But, the Panel is concerned that this will put additional burden on the local OCS staff to reroute the report of harm to the regional intake unit in Fairbanks.

This partner was also concerned with OCS' relationship with Native Village of Barrow. They are not clear on how this relationship should work and how it works in practice. From their perspective, regional intake is an additional layer of vagueness on this relationship.

We asked if they attend the "Legal Providers' Meeting". This agency confirmed that they attend although they feel those meetings can be improved. Their reason to attend was to maintain good relationships with other partners and to not alienate any one.

Partner E: This agency is generally appreciative of OCS efforts. Their major concerns were with the foster care licensing guidelines. They thought the foster care licensing guidelines are just too long, cumbersome, and almost impossible for most families to meet. Communication between OCS and this agency was obviously lacking. The agency was unaware of basic parameters of their relationship with OCS.

Partner F: Resources this agency has available for the community and the region were not being utilized in the most effective manner possible. Staff at this agency had a good understanding of OCS and continue to have a great working relationship with the local OCS staff. This partner was most concerned with OCS absence at the required periodic staff meetings with social workers on each case. Often these meetings are not attended by OCS staff, causing procedural difficulties for the partner. The partner wished for a consistent policy on required tasks that partners expect OCS staff to perform.

This partner felt it normal that people in areas like Barrow should expect to go beyond their call of duty, and finds OCS staff needing considerable prodding to go the extra mile. Despite that, this partner always found the current OCS staff to be responsive, especially when prodded. They are of the opinion that OCS should do the same when it comes to working with their tribal partners – prod and be proactive, and go the extra mile.

The regional intake system is also a problem in this agency's perspective. Staff felt that the regional intake system undermines the established local working relationships.

General reflections

Leadership:

The OCS office in Barrow is generally well run, under able leadership. The office supervisor is knowledgeable of the service model and seemed well informed of policies and procedures. He is very well connected with the larger community, and is highly respected for his contributions through many of his voluntary activities. In many ways, Mr. Houston can be considered an exemplar of an OCS employee in Alaska. Mr. Houston seems to take a hands-off approach to leadership. While the staff are content, some partners found it lacking.

Staff competence and morale:

The Staff seemed quite competent and committed; and the morale is high. Staff have long ties to the community and are well respected.

OCS staff workload:

We felt that the staff work load was less than what one would expect, given all the issues that were mentioned by partner agencies. Possible reasons include:

- A very weak institutional relationship between NVB and OCS
- A general dislike of the regional intake by almost everyone we met
- Tendency (as reported by some) to keep child abuse and neglect issues within the immediate and extended family and avoid reporting.

Relationships with OCS regional and state office: Relationships with the regional state office are generally strong. Two areas of concern mentioned were: low travel budget approval limit for the local manager; and delay in ORCA updates from secondary worker from elsewhere in the OCS system.

Partner relationships:

While it is refreshing to note that most relationships are strong, they are all based on personal relationships. Individual relationships need to be developed into institutional relationships. Many obstacles were highlighted by several partners:

- No consistent communications policy with partners as evidenced by lack of follow up after reports of harm, or referrals
- Lack of regular attendance at (or assigning low priority to) the periodic case meetings, or "legal providers' meetings"
- Regional intake undermining local relationships, and partners do not understand why regional intake was necessary

The Panel is particularly concerned with the relationship between OCS and the Native Village of Barrow (NVB). There is a general lack of understanding of NVB's role, and a currently active Tribal-State Agreement is being woefully underused. The Agreement was to ensure "institutional knowledge and experience of each party to this Tribal-State Agreement results in good child protection policy and practice." While OCS staff may be right that NVB is often understaffed or otherwise under-resourced to be an effective partner as per the terms of the Agreement, the Panel believes it is in the best interests of the children that OCS reach out to NVB to ensure the effectiveness of the Agreement. The Panel believes that the Agreement's primary intent is to ensure child safety through a seamless network of service providers, not just to clarify jurisdictional boundaries. As long as the Agreement serves to just identify jurisdictional boundaries, we are afraid many children will continue to slip through the cracks.