



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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The Citizen Review Panel is a statewide group of volunteers mandated by federal and state law to provide oversight to the Office of Children's Services.

Community visited	Bethel
Dates of visit	January 30-31, 2014
Members of CRP on the visit	Diwakar Vadapalli, Chair Sylvan Robb (staff)

Offices covered in this visit

Regional Office	Western Regional Office
Field Office	Bethel
Communities served	Akiak, Akaichak, Atmauthluk, Bethel, Chefornek, Chevak, Eek, Goodnews Bay, Hooper Bay, Kasiqluk, Kipnuk, Kongiganak, Kwethluk, Kwigillingok, Marshal, Mekoyuk, Napakiak, Napaskiak, Newtok, Nightmute, Nunapitchunk, Oscarville, Platinum, Quinhagak, Scammon Bay, Toksook Bay, Tuluksak, Tuntutuliak, Tununak

Agencies consulted

Alaska State Troopers (AST)
Attorney General (AG)
Bethel Police Department (BPD)
Child Advocacy Center (Tundra Women's Coalition - TWC)
Guardians ad Litem (GAL)
Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) workers
Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD)
Office of Children's Services (OCS)

CRP visits to OCS' regional and local field offices are meant to assess several aspects of the workings of these offices. CRP members meet with as many OCS staff as available. Additionally, we also meet with leaders or their designees of local partner agencies to assess local working relationships. In a climate of declining resources and increasing demand for services, CRP considers these relationships to be paramount for OCS in service provision and in meeting their mandate.

CRP's consultations with everyone we meet cover a broad range of topics, and questions are often open-ended, and part of a free-flowing unstructured conversation. People are encouraged to report both positive and negative impressions and experiences in working with OCS. All information shared with CRP is confidential and will be de-identified and summarized before it is shared with the OCS leadership as part of a Trip Report. Trip reports are a summary of CRP consultations, and are made available to all parties that we had an opportunity to meet.

General reflections

These notes are derived from our consultations with local partner agencies and discussions with local OCS staff.

Leadership:

As noted in our previous trip report to Bethel, Michael Isom is a refreshing addition to the Bethel office. His leadership is well-respected by the staff. However, workers feel isolated from the upper management and felt that their concerns are not being heard. They see a lack of communication from state OCS leadership and requested more frequent visits from Travis Erickson. The mid-level supervisors work well with each other and support Dr. Isom in his work.

However, OCS' leadership – as perceived by local partners – seems to be an area of growth:

- While all partners are familiar with Dr. Isom, a few of the directors at partner agencies have yet to meet him, even though he has held his position for almost two years. This is concerning in a region where OCS has had a challenging time working across geographical, institutional, and cultural barriers.
- OCS' representation at local Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) meetings varied depending on the expected content of the discussion. The MDT is required by Alaska statute, AS 47.14.300, and is intended to assist OCS with the provision of child protective services and the investigation of reports of child abuse and neglect. According to local partners, Dr. Isom would attend the MDT meetings only if managerial issues were to be discussed. However, some partners perceive the absence of the highest authority as a sign of “assigning lower priority” to MDT meetings, especially when his counterparts are attending irrespective of the expected content of these meetings.

Staff competence and morale:

Staff competence and morale are high. It is very encouraging that there has been minimal turnover in staff since the last CRP visit a year ago. The staff seems to work well as a unit and they are very supportive of each other, but everyone is overwhelmed. Communications are much better within the office than they were in the past. However, there are several issues that impact working conditions:

- Workers are severely stressed despite being in good spirits. Many workers reported lack of sleep and lack of self-care. Staff members find it hard to take vacation time. They requested double the number of SSAs and office assistants. The in-home unit, even with three workers, needs two SSAs to support them. There are still thirteen distinct functions being performed by staff located outside the region. This has to be addressed for Western Region to be fully functional.
- Poor provision of supplies – Workers reported not having supplies to care for children immediately after removing them from their homes. This is extremely concerning, especially in an office with such a high volume of out-of-home cases. Workers should not have to go around seeking supplies. There must be a constant supply of essential things that children will need when they are removed from their homes. Whether it is a local budget management issue or an issue that requires higher-level decision-making, this needs to be addressed immediately.
- Workers' safety – Safety is a concern when VPSOs in the villages cannot assist caseworkers during village visits. At least one worker reported having no choice and being directed to go to a village despite lack of help from the local VPSO. At least one partner reported that OCS could benefit from better relationships with village ICWA workers, and with workers of other agencies or institutions that have frequent village travel. This not only helps with workload pressures but also with safety concerns.
- Workers are confused about allowable expenses in “open for services” cases. Caseworkers and management requested additional explanation of the policies concerning payment for services in these cases.

OCS staff workload:

There seems to be an overwhelming workload for individual caseworkers. Worker morale is very healthy, but caseworkers are under severe stress due to high workloads. The promise to supply all workers with tablet computers for better case management and documentation was never realized. Western Region needs a focused and innovative strategy to help workers manage their workload. This should include efforts to improve staffing, relationships, and supervision. Specific concerns raised by OCS staff and partner agencies include:

- Impossible caseloads for the in-home unit – With more than 70 cases per worker, it is simply impossible for any social worker to meet the demands of their job in conditions as challenging as they are in this region. We were informed that a third worker will soon join the in-home services unit. This should ease the burden a little but the caseload will still be quite daunting, and much higher than anywhere else in the state.
- Approval for overtime is cumbersome – Workers reported that approval of overtime is cumbersome and this creates difficulty with overwhelming workloads.
- Delay in screening decisions – Screening decisions from regional intake often take five (5) days before they reach the Bethel IA unit. This poses challenges to the local IA unit. The long delay can escalate a preventable crisis, especially in an emergency.
- Lack of foster homes in Bethel constrains out-of-home placements – Workers reported not having enough local foster homes in which to place children. While there is

shortage of foster homes in Bethel, village foster homes are mostly underutilized. Recruitment of new foster homes and optimum utilization of existing ones are issues needing attention.

As a side note, the number of reports from the Aniak office is suspiciously low compared to the rest of the region. Staff members at the Aniak office are new and do not have a good sense of the history of the village yet, and could not speak to this issue.

Partner relationships:

Local relationships are still very haphazard, and no formal institutional relationships have been built. There is widespread distrust of OCS as an institution, but personal relationships are getting better. Dr. Isom is slowly working his way through the partner agencies, meeting each of his counterparts. Most local partners acknowledged that they share a good relationship with individual workers.

- The Attorney General's office works well with the social workers, but social workers expressed that the AG's office seem to respond to the demands of the court and defense attorneys more than the needs of social workers. While the AGs spend time working with social workers, their relationships with social workers are not always constructive. The AGs are reported to have a win-at-all-costs approach, not an attorney/client relationship as one would expect.
- The relationship with the Bethel Police Department is an area for huge growth. This relationship is very adversarial at the moment and has been that way for quite some time. In contrast, the region's Alaska State Troopers have a good working relationship with OCS workers.
- The relationship with the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) is perceived as very good by third parties, but OCS staff did not think so. Relationships with village ICWA workers are inconsistent.
- The relationship with Guardians ad Litem can improve. GALs reported that they do not get timely notices about children's placement changes.
- The institutional relationship with Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) needs better communication. Just like OCS, LKSD assigns their school counselors to specific villages. OCS workers would benefit from knowing these village assignments and using LKSD data that they are willing to share.

The MDT hasn't been meeting as expected, but the OCS Central Office has been working on redefining it. Each community partner is currently waiting to hear from OCS about the MDT.

Acknowledgments: The CRP would like to thank all staff of the Western Regional Office for taking time to meet with us. We really appreciate Dr. Isom allowing us to meet with his staff amidst impossible workloads. The CRP would also like to thank all local partners for their time and their honest appraisal of their working relationships with OCS.