

2011

OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



State of Alaska
Department of Health & Social Services
Office of Children's Services

Executive Summary

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), I want to thank you for your time and efforts during this past year. I recognize the volunteer hours and dedication that your membership requires and value your many efforts to impact positive growth and change for this agency. Through your many site visits, OCS staff have undoubtedly shown you how dedicated and wonderful they are as well.

The agency's vision of *safe children, strong families* can only be achieved through the dedication and commitment of the roughly 500 employees that come to work every day to do the best job they possibly can. The hardworking OCS staff deserve recognition for the contributions they make to help keep children safe, families strong, and in keeping the agency operations running smoothly day after day.

The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) provides valuable insight, information, and recommendations to the agency and to me as the Director. This past year has been filled with many successes and of course some new and ongoing challenges. I have appreciated all of the feedback you have provided to me via your contacts with staff, community, and others who have contact with OCS. In particular, I found the joint site visit to the Bethel community particularly beneficial as it allowed me to hear the issues first hand and be better equipped to follow up on issues raised.

After reviewing the OCS response to your recommendations, please don't hesitate to contact me so that I may clarify or provide additional information to the panel. I look forward to another year of productive partnership.

CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR



CRP Recommendation 1:

Based on our recent site visits to the Fairbanks and Wasilla field offices, we recommend that OCS work to improve the culture within the agency. The current atmosphere impairs the ability of workers to appropriately protect Alaska's children and families.

OCS Response:

We recognize the important contributions made by all OCS employees and strive to foster a collegial, positive and collaborative work environment. There are times however when pockets of staff within offices or offices as a whole are feeling particularly overwhelmed and frustrated. The culture within offices is often heavily influenced by the leadership within them. Leadership being long term front line staff as well as supervisors or managers. The positive or negative energy can ebb and flow, sometimes being influenced by as few as one disgruntled employee that impacts everyone around them. Office dynamics are challenging. We recognize that stress is inherent in this work and that it can play out in many ways with our employees. We encounter just as many employees who say they are leaving the agency because of the internal culture as we do who say they are staying because the culture of support, teamwork, and camaraderie is so positive.

In recent months, we have been trying some new approaches to involve OCS employees in fostering a more collegial and overall more positive work environment. These include soliciting feedback from employees, involving more employees in decision making, and modifying the way we share internal information.

Soliciting feedback from employees. We continue to modify and improve our annual employee survey. This year we had 317 responses representing 74% of our staff. Among the many things we learned from the survey:

- 79% agree or strongly agree that the philosophy of the Office of Children's Services as reflected in the Practice Model is clearly described to staff.
- 77% agree or strongly agree that they receive feedback from their supervisor regarding their performance which is useful in making changes in their work.
- 84% agree or strongly agree that their supervisor is available and responsive to questions they have regarding their work.

However, we also learned that only 42% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there are regular opportunities to provide information and suggestions to regional and state office management. For this reason, we are committed to continue working to improve opportunities for open communication between all employees of the organization.

Modifying the way we share internal information. Based upon feedback from OCS employees, our internal newsletter will be undergoing a major overhaul in 2012. Among the many changes, the name of the newsletter will be changed from "The Pipeline" to

“Frontline” to reflect our focus on the importance of our employees on the front line of child protection. In addition, the content will be modified to include all levels of staff from across the state, and focus more on positive events, self care tips, humor, and photos rather than strictly programmatic information sharing from management to field staff. All employees will be encouraged to submit topics and articles for Frontline.

Involving more employees in decision making. In recent months, the Wasilla field office has developed and started implementing a plan of improvement. This process was designed with the help of external facilitators who engaged local staff in problem solving and strategy development. This process has been very effective and by their reports, found to be useful and beneficial by all level of employees who participated including front line workers, supervisors, managers and administrators. We intend to continue using these types of inclusive methods to involve all levels in decision making whenever possible.

In addition, we are currently soliciting volunteers to participate in a formal *statewide* Employee Advisory Committee. Beginning in 2012, we intend for this committee to represent the interests of our front line staff and to have a regular and consistent forum to express their interests through direct discussion with the Director and senior leadership staff.

CRP Recommendation 2:

That OCS revisits the idea of regional intake and continues to evaluate its effectiveness.

OCS Response

The decision to move towards regionalized intake was made in large part based on the findings of the Child, Family, and Services Review (CFSR) conducted by the Children’s Bureau in 2008. It was clearly identified in this review as well as OCS’s reviews previously, that Protective Service Reports (PSR’s) were not being initiated timely. The CFSR measures states in the areas of safety, permanency, and well being. Safety Outcome 1 looks to ensure that children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. One item measure within this outcome measures the timeliness of initiation which looks at whether the assigned worker made face to face contact with the alleged victim within the priority response time. OCS recognized that one of primary reasons we were failing to meet the standard set for this item is that PSR’s were taking too long to come out of intake and get into the assigned worker’s hands. If a report for example is screened in as a P2 which dictates a face to face contact within 72-hours, that clock begins to run as soon as intake receives the call, not when the worker gets the actual assignment. So, if the PSR sits in intake due to any number of delays, the worker may already be out of compliance by the time they receive the report.

The lack of standardization and unique structure of OCS's 26 field offices was not conducive to the intake function being done efficiently enough to ensure child safety. This coupled with our recognition of the varied degrees of skills, job class, and office size that were handling intake reports really supported the idea that a major change needed to occur in order to see improvement.

That being said, there has been a significant amount of work done in the area of regionalizing intake in the last several years, most notably during 2011. While the road has not been entirely smooth, OCS feels we have made the right decision by regionalizing the intake process. To ensure that regional intake continues to make the needed progress, each of the regional intake offices is making training and community outreach a priority to local cities and villages. In addition, OCS is gathering data monthly in order to monitor data trends and how consistent we are being to our practice model. The use of data is invaluable to this process and helps to distinguish fact from fiction. For example, some in the Northern region were concerned regionalized intake were result in a decrease of reports being made because some locals would not call Fairbanks to make a report. The data overall however, indicates the opposite. Since regionalizing intake in NRO, the number of reports has increased incrementally since implementation began.

The Northern Region (NRO) and South East Region (SERO) have been active in educating and proactive in the communication regarding our new intake process with community providers, Tribes and OCS staff. The South Central Region (SCRO) has just begun working to provide training and education of community providers, tribes, and staff members. Most recently, NRO, SERO, and SCRO have received new outreach materials. These materials are newly designed business cards and posters that have the toll-free number for their regional office; and also have a bar code that can be scanned with a smart phone. The smart phone reads the bar code, and depending on which bar code scanned it leads to the specific regional phone number or the regional intake email box. Although we are striving to make all local concerns come through our regional intake offices, we recognize that there are still some community members that would rather make a report in their local office. We have worked with our local staff to assist in gathering the information and calling the regional intake worker together to try to bridge the gap of hesitancy of reporting to someone out of their area.

In addition to the outreach materials, OCS is conducting trainings through on-site visits in many of the rural communities as well as to those in the regional office location. Many of the regional intake offices are making frequent monthly telephone contact with the key stakeholders and reporters in the region. It is of vital importance to OCS to meet and alleviate any problems or concerns in the smaller communities, perceived or real. One of the ways OCS recently evaluated effectiveness was by completing a survey of stakeholders and OCS staff. The purpose of the survey was to accurately identify where things are going well and what needs are identified so we can make mid-course corrections if necessary. The survey was conducted in the Northern and Southeastern

Regions in August 2011 with follow-up to those who had not responded in early September. The survey was conducted electronically. The survey was sent to 131 community members with 59 respondents. The survey was sent to 83 OCS staff with 53 respondents.

The survey addressed the general experiences staff and community members had with the regional intake process. Areas such as how well they understood the intake process and how well they believed the process was working were explored. Responses were mixed and a summary of some of the responses are presented below.

According to survey results, community members generally indicated their calls were returned in a timely manner when they had to leave a message with 43 percent indicating the response was timely and 19 percent that the response was not timely. A large number, 71 percent, indicated they knew who to contact after hours. Community members generally did not agree that the Office of Children's Services was more responsive as a result of regional intake with only 16 percent agreeing and 34 percent disagreeing. Similarly, community members felt that timely feedback was an area for improvement with 44 percent indicating they did not receive timely feedback.

A little over 75 percent of staff, who responded, believed maltreatment concerns are received and documented in a timely manner since implementation of regional intake. Similarly, 82 percent believed they had a clear understanding of the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of intake staff. Staff indicated, 51 percent, which they had heard from community members that there was uncertainty in the community on who to make a report to after regular business hours.

In order to continue to monitor and receive feedback on the implementation of regional intake, OCS will survey community members and staff again in March 2012. This process will provide information on which to make adjustments to the program where needed and training to staff as indicated.

OCS has had many discussions regarding regional intake taking all calls after hours and on weekends. Due to budget consideration and staffing levels it is not possible to the regional intake staff to handle all after hours and weekend calls for their entire region. However, we are interested in more fully exploring the options and need in the future, but feel the focus for now, needs to remain on continued implementation of regionalized intake such that we are hitting the mark in all five regions and have streamlined the process to work at a premium for both stakeholders and staff. To expand and grow the program now would dilute our efforts here and spread us entirely too thin to accomplish our current goals.

Every region now has its own toll free 800 number. We are working on sharing this information with the local areas as well as updating the OCS web site to reflect the regional intake toll free numbers and email addresses. We have also been reviewing the afterhours and weekend practices that offices are using statewide with goal of improving

customer service and creating more uniformity. For the offices with answering services we are doing a thorough review of the contract to include what instruction they are given in an effort to ensure that they are not making any decisions or judgment calls, that are strictly agency ones. We are also setting up random calls to inspect their response to ensure appropriateness of answering service.

In summary, while we recognize there is more work to do to streamline and standardize our processes so that intake operates effectively, we believe it is the best strategy for Alaska and are committed to its continued implementation and development.

CRP Recommendation 3:

Improve compliance with court obligations.

OCS Response:

We recognize the importance of obtaining reasonable and active efforts findings in court as it indicates that OCS has met its obligation to provide adequate efforts to prevent the breakup of families while ensuring child safety. The importance of these findings cannot be overemphasized and it should be noted that OCS meets its obligation in the vast majority of cases.

As indicated in the CRP report, the Wasilla field office has been struggling on many levels for quite some time. While there has been very good work occurring with some families and stakeholders, others have reported very negative experiences.

During 2011, numerous efforts were made to improve services. In February, four new front line employees were moved to Wasilla to reduce the workload of existing employees. In July, key priorities for staff were identified to ensure clarity of focus. In September and October, members of the office participated in a planning process to develop problem solving strategies focused on overall responsiveness to clients and members of the community, timeliness of documentation (including court reports and ORCA input), the increase in the number of children in out of home placement, and the completion of caseworker visits with children and families. The resulting plan is currently being executed and we expect to see positive results in the coming weeks and months.

While many efforts were made during 2011, we expect further progress in 2012 and beyond. While our current efforts will continue, we also intend to engage families and community stakeholders in collaborative problem solving provide training and development opportunities for OCS employees, ensure balance of workload commensurate to other field offices, and help foster a philosophy of continuous quality improvement.

CRP Recommendation 4:

That OCS improves the prominence of the telephone number to report abuse in telephone book.

OCS Response

Since the concern of the CRP regarding the location and prominence, or lack thereof, was brought to the agency's attention we have reviewed the listings statewide. Each region reviewed the major phone books or publications used by the community to ensure that the OCS numbers were listed in a clear and prominent location.

All of these publications have since been updated and/or are in the queue to be based on the publisher's regular schedule. We believe this issue is fully addressed and that any person seeking our number or services should easily be able to locate our listing.