

ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL



2006 ANNUAL REPORT

“When every human child is receiving the physical and emotional support needed from family and community to actualize the full potential of his or her humanity, we will know we are on course to a new human future. The current state of our children tells us just how far we have yet to travel.”

~David C. Korten

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Mission and Mandate

MISSION

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is committed to reviewing and evaluating the practices and procedures of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and in making recommendations relative to its findings to insure the safety and the well-being of the children of Alaska.

The CRP will achieve this commitment by examining the policies and procedures of the Office of Children's Services and collaborating agencies; examining, where appropriate, specific cases; evaluating the extent to which agencies are carrying out their child protection responsibilities; and preparing and making available to the public an annual report.

MANDATE FOR THE GROUP

The Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) is federally mandated through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA); Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003. The CRP is also mandated through Alaska statute Sec. 47.14.205.

“By allowing the Panels to have complete access to child protection cases, by requiring Panels to publicize their findings, and by requiring states to respond to criticisms and recommendations of the Panels, the Committee intends to subject states to public criticism and political repercussion if they fail to protect children.” (United States Congress, House Report 104-081, 1995, p.1)

DUTIES ASSIGNED TO THE GROUP

Summary of duties The CRP shall examine the policies, procedures, and practices of State and local agencies and where appropriate, specific cases, to evaluate the extent to which State and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.

CRP duties

- Evaluate OCS compliance with federal and state laws, examine policies and procedures for consistent statewide implementation, review cases with fatalities or near fatalities. The CRP shall evaluate the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under:
 1. the State Plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under 42 U.S.C. 5106a(b);
 2. Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and
 3. any other criteria that the CRP considers important to ensuring the protection of children, including the level and efficiency of coordination of foster care and adoption programs in the state and a review of child fatalities and near fatalities.

In carrying out the responsibilities listed above, the CRP shall examine the policies, procedures, and practices of OCS, and, where appropriate, evaluate specific cases of child abuse or neglect.
- Maintain confidentiality. A person attending a CRP meeting or a CRP member or CRP staff may not make any disclosure related to information obtained during a review by the CRP. A violation is subject to a civil penalty of up to \$2,500 for each violation.
- Conduct public outreach. The CRP shall conduct public outreach and gather public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving children and family services.
- Produce an annual report. The CRP shall prepare and make available to the governor, the legislature, and the public an annual report containing a summary of its activities and recommendations for the improvement of child protection services in the state.
- Meet at least every three months. The CRP is required by law to meet every three months. Additional meetings and/or teleconferences are scheduled as needed.

DUTIES ASSIGNED TO OCS RELATED TO THE CRP

HSS support. The Commissioner shall, by regulation, establish policies and procedures necessary to carrying out the duties of the CRP.

- Cooperation with state panel. OCS shall provide the panel access to information on child abuse or neglect cases that is necessary for the CRP to carry out its duties.
- Report response. Not later than six months after the date on which the report is released, OCS shall submit a written response that describes whether or how OCS will incorporate the recommendations of the CRP (where appropriate) to make *measurable* progress in improving the child protection system.

Membership and Staff Support

Required membership The panel shall be composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the state, including members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

Current membership

Fred Van Wallinga, Chair, Willow
Carol Olson, Vice Chair, Anchorage
Pamela Dupras, Kodiak
Dana W. Hallett, Soldotna
Arthur S. Hansen, Fairbanks
Susan Heuer, Anchorage
Shelis R. Jorgensen, Talkeetna
Esperanza Redelfs, Ketchikan
Ralph Taylor, Nome

Former members who left the group during this reporting period

Leonora Florendo, Juneau

Desired membership The CRP would like to meet its requirement to be broadly representative of the state by widening the geographic and racial and ethnic diversity of the membership. The group is working to recruit new members from unrepresented areas of the state such as Barrow and Bethel.

OCS liaison Bridget Crawford, Social Services Program Coordinator, is the current liaison between OCS and the CRP.

Staff support Staff support is provided by Sylvan Robb and Nancy Lowe of Information Insights.

Meetings and Activities

Group meetings

August 24, 2005	In person — Anchorage
September 21, 2005	In person — Fairbanks
November 11, 2005	In person — Anchorage
December 9, 2005	In person — Anchorage: Guests included Deputy Commissioner, Tammy Sandoval, and Pat Davidson with Legislative Audit
January 13, 2006	Teleconference
February 16-17, 2006	In person — Juneau
March 17, 2006	Teleconference
March 31, 2006	Teleconference
April 18, 2006	Teleconference
May 16, 2006	In person — Willow
June 9, 2006	In person — Anchorage

Other meetings

October 26-28, 2005	Anchorage: attended Drug Endangered Children conference and received training on Quality Assurance program from OCS staff members
January 31-February 1, 2006	Mat-Su: met with community partners and OCS staff
February 16, 2006	Juneau: testified before HESS Committee
February 17, 2006	Juneau: met with Tammy Sandoval, Deputy Commissioner, Myra Casey, Field Administrator, and Rynnieva Moss (of Rep. John Coghill's staff)
April 3, 2006	Nome: convened town hall meeting and met with community partners and OCS staff
April 14, 2006	Anchorage: met with Deputy Commissioner Tammy Sandoval and Deputy Commissioner Bill Hogan
May 15, 2006	Mat-Su: met with community partners and OCS staff

Annual activities

Although the CRP was formed in May 2002, the core of its current membership has been in place for approximately 18 months. The group meets monthly, with every third meeting being in-person. Activities this year included the expansion of the panel from six members to nine, with the new members providing good representation from rural areas of the state. The group also developed a public website at www.crpalaska.org to provide information on Alaska's CRP, as well as citizen review panels in general. In the

past year, as part of its requirement to conduct community outreach, the CRP has also held a town hall meeting in Nome.

In addition to these activities, the group just finished conducting its first in-depth site review in the Mat-Su in response to numerous reports of concerns about that OCS office, particularly with regard to its relationship with collaborative agencies and the manner in which certain cases have been handled. A report on the group's findings has been presented to Deputy Commissioner Sandoval and is available on our website at www.crpalaska.org along with the Deputy Commissioner's response to the recommendations. The CRP will continue to monitor the child protection practices in the Mat-Su area.

Recommendations

Our vision for the Office of Children’s Services is that the Deputy Commissioner of OCS have the right supports in place--by having open lines of communication, training for all staff, adequate funding, strong support from management for each regional office that includes progressive discipline practices as needed, and statewide emphasis on consistent policy practice by all staff—to ensure that OCS is functioning as effectively as possible. Our role is to support and advocate for the consistent and fair implementation of policies, procedures, and laws for the protection of all children in Alaska.

2006 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Concern: During discussions with OCS managers and line workers a number of their concerns and frustrations came to our attention. Staff members desired more recognition for the work they do. Staff members were frustrated with policies that require them to get approval for recurring, reasonable, small expenses, e.g., staff members may not authorize a urine drug screening even though it is part of a client’s case plan. Staff members were frustrated by the lack of supports to do their job. In one case, two staff members were sharing a telephone which substantially decreased their productivity. Offices in some rural areas lack the internet connection speed to complete required tasks in a timely fashion. Some locations must spend two hours to complete tasks that require ten minutes in other places. Other workers do not have any support staff in their offices, so social workers spend time copying files and transporting children.

Goal: Ensure that staff members have the necessary and appropriate resources, agency support, and discretion to do their jobs efficiently.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that staff members’ morale be improved in part by allowing greater staff discretion.
- It is recommended that when the Deputy Commissioner is visiting field offices, she assess the resource needs of each office including: equipment, supplies, staffing patterns. This will allow social workers to maximize their time working on their cases.
- It is recommended that OCS supervisors and managers use all available opportunities to recognize the stellar job that many employees are doing.
- It is recommended that OCS commit to a social worker conference with a track for supervisors and another for field workers.

- It is recommended that OCS develop a program that will provide funding for licensing fees and certification classes to support line workers.
- It is recommended that continuing education programs be developed to help Children's Service Specialists earn continuing degree credits so they can advance to a social worker position.
- It is recommended that staff be hired to enter data into ORCA so that social workers have more time to serve children and families.

2) Concern: The Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Children's Services has not visited all rural OCS offices to observe first hand the challenges that staff members face on a daily basis. This in turn contributes to staff members in the rural offices feeling under appreciated, forgotten, and misunderstood by staff members from the central office in Juneau. A visit to these offices would bolster morale and let staff know they are remembered and appreciated. Additionally, many of the rural areas of the state face unique challenges to provide services. Having the Deputy Commissioner see these challenges personally would increase the understanding of staff members' needs as well as the needs of collaborating agencies. When the Deputy Commissioner meets with staff at collaborating agencies a strong message will be sent that OCS values them and recognizes that they are also part of the child protection system.

Goal: Strengthen the child protection system by expanding hands-on understanding and support from top management that will encompass the entire state.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that the Deputy Commissioner of Health and Social Services accompany the Deputy Commissioner of OCS to each of the regional offices on an annual basis to meet with staff.
- It is recommended that the Deputy Commissioner of OCS visit each field office to open lines of communication and familiarize herself with the unique concerns of each site. This will enable the Deputy Commissioner to understand the nuances of each agency. It is recommended that the Deputy Commissioner bring a developed agenda to all field office and collaborating agency visits. Those being visited should have the opportunity to add to the agenda.
- It is recommended that when the Deputy Commissioner is visiting each field office, she also visit partner agencies, insofar as possible.

3) Concern: There is an inconsistent understanding and implementation of confidentiality regulations across the state. Specifically, in some areas of the state staff from collaborating agencies receive copies of materials at team meetings, while in other areas of the state, this is believed to be against regulations.

Goal: Clarify confidentiality regulations and ensure all offices are aware of what the proper interpretation is.

Recommendation:

- It is recommended that the Deputy Commissioner of OCS write a letter to the Assistant Attorney General (AAG) for the Human Resources Department of the Department of Law, and request an explanation in writing as to why disclosure policies regarding sharing of protective services reports with collateral child-protection agencies vary from area to area. If necessary, she should pursue this answer through the Attorney General to have the confidentiality issue resolved and standardized throughout the state. In her request to the AAG, we recommend she emphasize that open communication is essential to effective child protection and encourage a legal determination on confidential communication. We recommend that the Deputy Commissioner ensure that all OCS staff members are aware of and operate in accordance with the interpretation.
- 4) Concern: There are facets of the structure of OCS that inhibit its ideal functioning, such as the fact that rural areas are grouped in regions with urban areas. There are pilot programs addressing some of these issues in Anchorage which could be expanded statewide.

Goal: Remove any structural barriers that prevent OCS from providing optimal protection for children.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that some line workers' offices be collocated in collaborating agency facilities such as police stations, child advocacy centers (CACs), or other social service providers to encourage and foster healthy, collaborative relationships between OCS and its partner agencies.
- It is recommended that the Team Decision Making program currently piloted in Anchorage be implemented statewide. This innovative program ensures that any time there is a change in a child's placement the entire team comes together to be a part of the decision.
- It is recommended that home studies be conducted in collaboration with ICWA workers or tribes when appropriate to ensure that the worker conducting the study has cross cultural knowledge to assess whether a home is a safe and healthy place for the child.
- It is recommended that OCS develop a fifth region in the state covering the western, rural portion of the state. The region would include the areas surrounding Dillingham, Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue, and the Aleutians with a regional office located in one of the hub communities.

- 5) Concern: In some areas of the state, OCS does not adequately respect and support many of the foster parents and CASA volunteers in the child protection system which in turn contributes to burn out for those individuals. Retention of foster parents and CASA volunteers is not what it could be if they had more ongoing support and appreciation from OCS. We understand that training and support for CASA volunteers comes from the Office of Public Advocacy, not OCS. However, OCS can encourage an atmosphere that is supportive.

Goal: To ensure that foster parents and CASA volunteers have the support, training, and resources they need to be successful in their roles in the child protection system.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that where problematic, OCS workers recognize foster parents' skills and their knowledge of children. Social workers can demonstrate their support by giving foster parents more discretionary powers and acknowledging that they are major stake holders in the decision-making process. Because emotional attachment is natural and healthy in foster care situations, appropriate closure time should be considered when a child's placement is changed. Full disclosure and appropriate training related to prospective foster children's abilities and issues should always be provided prior to placement. Finally, OCS should ensure that payments to foster parents be made in full and on time and that respite care be provided as necessary.
- It is recommended that every effort be made to ensure that foster parents receive not only the child(ren), but their medical release(s), clothing and a handbook or information packet as well.
- It is recommended that social workers support and value CASA volunteers.

2005 RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2005 the following recommendation were made to improve child safety.

Recommendations that have been addressed by OCS are grouped separately from those that still remain to be addressed.

2005 Recommendations that have been addressed

- 1) Recommendations: OCS will ensure that the Quality Assurance section is evaluating all areas of operations and being responsive to the information gathered by creating positive and proactive goals for change by:
- Following Policy and Procedure *We know that the Quality Assurance program exists and does address these issues. However, we are concerned about the effectiveness of its implementation.*

- o Ensure accountability through supervisory case reviews and personnel related issues
- o Establish a process for system checks--tracking adherence to Policy and Procedure
- Provide Adequate Training *We understand that all employees receive and must be familiar with the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics. If this code were being enforced, we would recognize this issue had been addressed. Unfortunately, we hear repeated anecdotal accounts that workers are not abiding by the code.*
 - o Develop an OCS Code of Ethics in response to alleged incidents of unethical behavior
- Employee Satisfaction
 - o Conduct annual employee satisfaction surveys *This recommendation is here, but also remains with the recommendations that have not been addressed. Employee satisfaction surveys have not been conducted since 2003. However, we do wish to acknowledge the efforts to improve morale and retention that have been made. Providing some tuition help for people to obtain social work degrees is an excellent way to invest in employees. Likewise, opening the career ladder for those staff who have ample experience, but lack the formal training is a great idea. Allowing Children's Services Specialists (CSS) to advance to Social Worker III positions is a start, but to our knowledge there has been no change in loosening the criteria for Social Worker IV positions.*
 - o Conduct exit surveys for all staff *We understand this is happening and are very interested to see the results.*
 - o Compile, implement and track survey results and report to CRP June 2006

2) Recommendations:

- Gather information from stakeholders through surveys, including:
 - o Clients/consumers
 - o Foster families
 - o Community representatives
 - o Collaborative agencies
 - o Foster children
- Stakeholder Surveys should contain question(s) pertaining to effectiveness of staff implementation of policy and procedures. Document how OCS is being responsive to the information gathered from the surveys. *We appreciate having received these surveys and that OCS followed through on this recommendation.*
- Client and consumer resolution process:
 - o Implement complaint resolution process
 - o Develop an appeals process or evaluate the existing appeal process if one already exists

We are aware that the grievance procedures were revised in this spring. We provided comments on the revisions during the public comment period. This is a good first step, but the process is still quite onerous for those wishing to lodge a complaint. Additionally, many people are afraid to complain because they fear retaliation. The process needs to be further refined so everyone feels free to use the process.

3) Recommendations:

- Increase the number of minority/diverse population foster home options
- Train OCS workers on the regional cultural issues to increase competency of diverse populations and special needs
- Create a cultural brown bag lunch or cultural education sessions for OCS staff
- Make it a priority that foster families will receive adequate training on Policy and Procedures
- Improve relationships and communication with foster families

We know considerable effort has been invested in trying to address this issue and we want to acknowledge the efforts that have been made. These recommendations still remain in the unaddressed recommendations section as well because we believe this effort has not worked yet (although perhaps it will with more time). However, these issues remain and we believe that some of the problem may be that the efforts to address this problem have not included line workers directly. We hope OCS continues to devote so many resources and so much time to fully solving this problem.

2005 Recommendations that have not been addressed

- 1) Concern: Observations and concerns regarding staff include: low morale; a lack of supervisor support that includes a reluctance to make difficult decisions about personnel issues; the high turnover of talented line social workers who leave for reasons other than high caseloads.

Goal: Improved morale and reduce staff turnover through the implementation of Internal Quality Assurance of Personnel including Supervisors and Social Workers.

Recommendations: OCS will ensure that the Quality Assurance section is evaluating all areas of operations and being responsive to the information gathered by creating positive and proactive goals for change by:

- Following Policy and Procedure
 - o Incorporate training topics into daily practice
- Provide Adequate Training
 - o Consistent implementation and training on Policy and Procedure
 - o Ensure that Policies and Procedures are applied equally across the state
 - o Clearly communicate service goals

- o Publicly post the Code of Ethics to make it available to line workers and the public
- Employee Satisfaction
 - o Compile, implement and track survey results and report to CRP June 2006
 - o Determine if an agency independent of OCS should evaluate employee satisfaction *We believe this has not happened. We do know that there was a workload study conducted by a contractor last year. That was not made public to our knowledge, and should be addressed, or we should obtained a copy. However, the CRP was told we would get a copy and we never have.*

- 2) Concern: There is a breakdown in communication with external agencies in some areas resulting in unnecessary barriers to collaboratively and effectively help children.

Goal: Improved interagency collaboration through the implementation of External Quality Assurance.

Recommendations:

- Improve relationships and communication with foster families.
 - Break down barriers with stakeholders through increased training, and by consistently following Policy and Procedure, e.g., allow other agencies to participate in case conferences.
 - Client and consumer resolution process:
 - o Develop flow chart for appeal process for public access
 - o Implement monitoring of process regarding how individual complaints are addressed
 - o Ensure that complaints are resolved in a timely manner to the greatest possible satisfaction for all
- 3) Concern: Lack of knowledge, awareness and consideration of cultural issues among staff impacting foster care licensing, placement issues, and working with diverse populations.

Goal: OCS will decrease barriers to cultural concerns and families becoming licensed foster families.

Recommendations:

- Increase the number of minority/diverse population foster home options
- Train OCS workers on the regional cultural issues to increase competency of diverse populations and special needs
- Create a cultural brown bag lunch or cultural education sessions for OCS staff
- Make it a priority that foster families will receive adequate training on Policy and Procedures
- Improve relationships and communication with foster families

Commendations

Members of the House Health, Education, and Social Services Committee of the Alaska Legislature

Chair: Representative Peggy Wilson, District 2

Vice-Chair: Representative Paul Seaton, District 35

Members: Representative Tom Anderson, District 19

Representative Carl Gatto, District 13

Representative Vic Kohring, District 14

Representative Sharon Cissna, District 22

Representative Berta Gardner, District 24

Representative John Coghill and his staff member, Rynnieva Moss

OCS staff in Mat-Su, Nome, Anchorage, and Juneau

Staff members of collaborating agencies in Mat-Su and Nome

Looking Ahead

September 2006

*Town hall meeting in Mat-Su

*CAPTA training with outside educator

December 2006

Discuss regulation writing

February 2007

Testify before HESS committee

May 2007

*National CRP Conference in Kentucky

*Annual meeting to review mission and by-laws, review and update strategic plan, and write annual report

Urban site visit

Rural site visit

Respectfully submitted by the Citizen Review Panel:



Electronically signed
June 29, 2006

Fred Van Wallinga, Chair



Electronically signed
June 26, 2006

Carol Olson, Vice Chair



Electronically signed
June 26, 2006

Pamela Dupras, Member



Electronically signed
June 29, 2006

Dana W. Hallett, Member



Electronically signed
June 26, 2006

Arthur S. Hansen, Member



Electronically signed
June 26, 2006

Susan Heuer, Member



Shelis R. Jorgensen, Member

Signed for Shelis
Jorgensen by Sylvan
Robb, July 24, 2006



Esperanza Redelfs, Member

Electronically signed
July 17, 2006

*Never doubt that a small, dedicated group of citizens can make a difference.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has...*

~ Margaret Mead
