

# Alaska Citizen Review Panel



## 2010 Annual Report



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## Dedication

Our work this year is dedicated to the memory of Carol Olson, a long-time member of the Citizen Review Panel, dedicated Master CASA volunteer, beloved teacher, and staunch defender of children. She cannot be replaced, but will be remembered.

Carol Jean Olson, December 19, 1941 – February 23, 2010

## Mission and Mandate

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### 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 ensure 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.

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### 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)

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### 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.

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## 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

Susan Heuer, Chair, Anchorage

Bonnie Edmondson, North Pole

Dana W. Hallett, Soldotna

Arthur S. Hansen, Fairbanks

Kristin Hull, Wasilla

George Kirchner, Fairbanks

Ralph Taylor, Eagle River

Fred Van Wallinga, Willow

### Former members who left the group during this reporting period

Pamela Dupras, Kodiak

Carol Olson, Anchorage

**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 underrepresented areas of the state as well as a greater diversity of child-centered expertise and backgrounds.

**OCS liaison** Tammy Sandoval, Director, 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

July 16, 2009	Teleconference
October 4, 2009	In person -- Barrow
October 20, 2009	Teleconference
January 8, 2010	In person -- Anchorage
February 16-18, 2010	In person — Juneau
March 23, 2010	Teleconference
April 22, 2010	Teleconference
May 13, 2010	In person -- Bethel
June 24, 2010	Teleconference
June 29, 2010	Teleconference

### Other activities

August 6, 2009	Teleconference: Susan Heuer and Sylvan Robb held orientation with new members Bonnie Edmondson and George Kirchner
September 29, 2009	Teleconference: Susan Heuer, OCS Director Tammy Sandoval, and Sylvan Robb
October 5, 2009	Barrow: met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
October 6-7, 2009	Nuiqsut: Susan Heuer and Sylvan Robb met with partnering agencies
October 6-7, 2009	Point Hope: George Kirchner and Fred Van Wallinga met with partnering agencies
October 6-7, 2009	Wainwright: Pamela Dupras and Kristin Hull met with partnering agencies
November 16, 2009	Teleconference: with all four Child Safety Managers
December 2, 2009	Teleconference: Sylvan Robb participated in National CRP training call
February 17, 2010	Juneau: met with Lt. Governor Campbell
February 18, 2010	Juneau: met with Commissioner Kreitzer and staff, Department of Administration

February 18, 2010	Juneau: met with Commissioner Hogan, Department of Health and Social Services
February 18, 2010	Juneau: testified before House Health and Social Services Committee
February 16-18, 2010	Juneau: met with Senators and Representatives
May 11, 2010	Hooper Bay: Susan Heuer and George Kirchner met with partnering agencies
May 11-12, 2010	Aniak: Fred Van Wallinga met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
May 11-12, 2010	Kwigillingok: Bonnie Edmondson and Sylvan Robb met with partnering agencies
May 11-12, 2010	St. Mary's: Dana Hallett met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
May 11-13, 2010	Bethel: met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
May 26-29, 2010	Lexington, Kentucky: Art Hansen attended the National Citizen Review Panel conference
June 2, 2010	Fairbanks and teleconference: met with concerned citizen

### **Annual activities**

Although the CRP was formed in May 2002, the core of its current membership has been in place for approximately six years. The group meets face to face roughly quarterly, with monthly teleconferences in between. The Panel currently has nine members. Two new members were added this year. Their current city affiliations mask their full Alaskan experiences they bring to the Panel. One individual grew up in Southeast Alaska, while the other new member lived for many years in the Dillingham area. One long-time member resigned at the end of the year. Another inactive member passed away during the year. At present, membership is holding steady and we are not actively recruiting new members at this time. While we would always like to be more inclusive and have people from every region and culture in the state, we must balance that desire with the reality of budgetary limitations.

We conducted two major regional site reviews this year which included travel to smaller communities than those we had previously visited. We felt it was important to get beyond the hub villages to explore how things are working in those communities that do not have an OCS office. In the fall, we visited Barrow and three other North Slope Borough villages--Nuiqsut, Point Hope, and Wainwright. This spring we traveled to Bethel and four villages in that region--Aniak, Hooper Bay, Kwigillingok, and St. Mary's.

We collected a great deal of regional data personally through these community site visits. We interviewed local OCS staff and staff from the following types of partnering agencies regarding what is working and what needs improvement in their relationship with OCS and how we can help facilitate those efforts.

- Counseling center staff
- District attorneys
- Foster parents
- Health aides & public health nurses
- Health clinic staff
- ICWA workers
- Local police departments
- Municipal representatives
- OCS staff
- School principals, teachers, nurses & counselors
- State troopers
- Tribal representatives
- WIC workers

As part of our public outreach we presented testimony to the Alaska House Health and Social Services Committee about our activities and recommendations. We attempted to also present before the Senate Health and Social Services Committee, but were unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts. While in Juneau we also met with the Lt. Governor, Craig Campbell and his staff, the Commissioner of Health and Social Services, Bill Hogan, the Commissioner of Administration, Annette Kreitzer and numerous individual legislators. We also continue to maintain our website for public outreach at [www.crp.alaska.org](http://www.crp.alaska.org).

As more people become aware of our existence we receive more calls from dissatisfied citizens. As in the past, we have informed citizens that we do not intervene in individual cases, but encourage people to avail themselves of either the OCS grievance process or to open a case with the Ombudsman's Office. When we are aware of cases, however, we do try to monitor complaints with an eye out for patterns of concerns and problems.

The CRP continued to focus this year on three areas for which we had previously advocated. Our primary area of focus for the last several years has been the creation of a fifth service region for OCS to be headquartered in the Bethel area. This has been our most important recommendation in our annual report for the last several years. We were pleased this year when a fifth service region was created. We believe this will have an enormous impact on the welfare of children in the area. The map below shows the OCS service regions, including the new fifth region.



The CRP has also focused for a number of years on the impact of unacceptably and unnecessarily slow Internet connection speeds. This directly impacts child protection by taking valuable time out of workers' days as they wait for pages in OCS' data system, ORCA, to load. In addition to occupying an unnecessary amount of workers' time, the slow speed has led to workers falling behind in their data entry which prevents others from accessing the most up-to-date information about a case. On a more global level, the lack of current data in ORCA from rural areas of the state forced OCS to make data-driven decisions based on incomplete data. While slow connection speeds are a problem in all rural areas of the state, we were very pleased to learn that funding was found to allow the State to address the problem in the Bethel area. Even with the improvement, connection speeds will still not be equal to that in urban areas, but they will be improved.

The CRP visited the Copper River Basin area in November 2007. We had serious concerns about this area before and after our site visit. The community has since started a child advocacy center (CAC) for the area. The local OCS office was increased from a one-person office to a two-person office to accommodate the additional staff time required by the creation of the CAC. The local OCS office was to collocate with the CAC in the old school in Gakona to promote collaboration. For over 15 months efforts have been made to iron out the bureaucratic wrinkles so that the collocation can be implemented. There continues to be impediments to completing the collocation. We have continued to monitor the progress and keep a close eye on the office and are very frustrated with the seemingly endless delays in accomplishing what seems like an easy goal.

This year, as in past years, one member attended the National Citizen Review Panel Conference in Lexington, Kentucky. Attendance at the national conference allows us to learn of any legislative changes that impact citizen review panels and to network with members from other states to exchange ideas. We are active participants in the national listserv for CRPs. We have responded to data requests as well as submitting several questions to solicit information from the national community of CRPs.

Director Tammy Sandoval has been our OCS liaison for the entire year. We have been pleased with the direct communication and access this affords us. The relationship and outcomes have improved between OCS and the CRP. We hope to continue a similar relationship with the next director.

Susan Heuer is in the middle of her term as chair of the Panel. We will elect a new vice-chair at our next meeting; the position is currently vacant.

## Recommendations

As the Panel has continued to mature and learn more with time and experience, we realize that many issues impacting OCS are beyond the scope of OCS. As a result, this year we have chosen to group our recommendations to acknowledge the party responsible for implementing change. We feel our recommendations this year either require action by OCS or the legislature. We have three recommendations for OCS and four for the legislature. The recommendations are presented in priority order.

While we have fewer recommendations for OCS than for the legislature, there remain two areas that we strongly urge OCS to continue to focus on. We did not feel we could make a recommendation on these topics because we did not have a measurable, achievable goal in mind. We sincerely believe OCS needs to continue to work on **improving the relationship it has with tribal agencies** and specifically with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) workers. Our other area of concern is **foster care**. Foster homes need to represent a safe respite for children in custody. There need to be a sufficient number of culturally appropriate, safe, caring homes to allow children to remain in their community of origin whenever possible. In the past we have made recommendations about these areas. They continue to be areas of concern for us. We will continue to focus on them during our site visits and monitor these concerns throughout the year.

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### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

#### **Recommendation 1: That the discrepancy between rural, bush and urban child protection be acknowledged and addressed.**

Anyone who has been in Alaska for very long is familiar with the notion of there being an rural/urban discrepancy in all sorts of things—transportation options, law enforcement, availability of housing and other goods, energy prices, access to services and communications--just to name a few things. The Panel proposes that the state really has three levels of communities as it relates to these things: bush (e.g., non-hub communities off the road system), rural (e.g., hub communities off the road system and small, isolated communities on the road system), and urban (e.g., Anchorage, the Mat-Su core, Juneau, and Fairbanks).

OCS has made efforts to standardize its operations around the state which is a goal the CRP advocated for and supports. However, in some rural communities we have visited--as well as in communities we have not visited--there effectively is little or no child protection. We have been to communities where we heard reports of abuse, but also were told that no workers from OCS had been in that community in years.

We would like to see OCS become more standardized regarding principles of its operation—that children be protected—and standardize the basic tenets of how to provide that protection. But we want them to be more accommodating in the practice to deal with the realities of rural and bush child protection so that those children are receiving the same level of care. If a priority one report of harm is investigated within 24 hours in urban areas, then a priority one report of harm should also be investigated that quickly in rural and bush communities, NOT within weeks as is sometimes the case currently. We understand there are challenges to doing so such as weather and finances and staffing. While OCS cannot control the weather, it needs to partner with appropriate people in communities so someone can follow-up when they cannot get there. Finances and staffing are within OCS control. Essentially, OCS needs to be ‘unstandardized’ enough about on-the-ground practice to keep the important standards about care and investigations.

Currently any pilot programs or new trainings in OCS start in an urban area. We would like to see more thought put into changing practices to deal with the realities of rural and bush Alaska. The numbers are different. The communities are different. The cultures are different. OCS needs to be different too, but not just by forcing the square peg of an urban program into the round hole of a bush village. We would like OCS to begin to acknowledge and work on this discrepancy by evaluating internally how service provision in these communities is different; look at the data. Programs should then be developed for rural and bush areas, not always just modified from those found to work well in urban areas.

**Recommendation 2: That OCS front line workers have adequate support staff to allow them to focus on social work, not paperwork.**

In May 2006 OCS received the report on a workload study it had commissioned from outside consultants on front line workers’ workloads. That report has been the basis for subsequent requests for additional positions and efforts to reduce caseloads to more manageable numbers. It provided data to help the agency move toward best practices for front line workers. We would like to see OCS commission a similar study for support staff to determine the best ratio of support staff to social workers. Currently there is no figure used and the ratio varies considerably from office to office within the agency. Some front line workers are well supported and others are literally going it alone.

Social workers are expensive, trained professionals in short supply. Depending on where they are located and the availability of support staff in their office, these OCS professionals currently spend time making copies, entering data, filing, picking up and delivering documents, transporting children for parental visits, supervising visits, taking children to medical, dental and counseling appointments, fixing and installing office equipment, and serving as a receptionist. Clearly many of these tasks do not require a professional. It is expensive and counter-productive to employ them in this manner.

Social workers are drowning in paperwork. Any relief for front line workers from clerical, transportation, and visitation tasks would free more time for them to provide professional services to the children and families on their caseload. A study is needed to determine the best ratio of support staff to front line workers. Once the study is completed and begins to be implemented, we encourage OCS to begin implementation in rural and bush areas.

**Recommendation 3: That the training for new OCS workers be modified to better reflect the on-the-ground reality of the job.**

Recently, OCS revamped and expanded its new employee training. The new program is a big improvement over the previous training. However, there is still room to tweak the new training to better reflect issues workers are likely to encounter. Workers in the field suggested areas to expand or improve include:

- Ethics training that addresses boundaries and confidentiality
- Grief and loss and trauma
- Consequences of uprooting children from families and communities
- General overview of mental health issues, e.g., depression, PTSD, anxiety without getting into diagnoses (Alaska Native children are over-diagnosed already)
- Simple training on suicidality (First Responder approach) – include teachers in the training along with OCS staff
- Emphasize cross cultural communication (with people for whom English is not their first language, use simple English and don't insist on eye contact) and understanding of cultural traditions such as funeral practices
- Basic substance abuse information – alcohol, marijuana, tobacco (cigarettes and chew)
- Introduction to ASAM criteria
- Adoption laws – both state and tribal
- Make sure examples are not all from urban settings

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGISLATURE**

**Recommendation 1: That the discrepancy between rural, bush and urban child protection be acknowledged and addressed.**

This was also our first recommendation to OCS. We would like the legislature to build on the data that OCS gathers. We believe that this information will be of interest to legislators from rural and bush communities. We are seeking remedy for children in those areas of the state who are not currently receiving equal or even adequate child

protection. Rural and bush children should not be in greater jeopardy due to geography.

**Recommendation 2: That the fiscal responsibility for transportation of children to a child advocacy center be clarified.**

There are eight child advocacy centers around the state. Child advocacy centers (CACs) are a safe place that offers a child-friendly, non-institutional environment where specialized forensic interviewers talk with children and determine whether or not abuse has occurred. CACs are a place where law enforcement, prosecutors, and child protective service case workers can investigate abuse allegations in a manner sensitive to the needs of young victims. CACs allow law enforcement, child protective services, prosecution, and medical and mental health professionals to share information and develop effective coordinated strategies sensitive to the unique needs of each case.

Given that there are CACs in only eight communities in Alaska (Anchorage, Bethel, Dillingham, Fairbanks, Glennallen, Juneau, Nome and Wasilla) children frequently need to be transported from their home community to the nearest CAC. At this time, there are some cases where it is not clear whether this transportation should be funded by OCS or the Troopers. Clarification of the statute or regulation regarding which agency has fiscal responsibility will speed children's trip to the CAC and remove a potentially thorny issue that might impede cooperation between these agencies.

**Recommendation 3: That a capital budget be formed to fund housing and facility work for OCS and its workers.**

The Panel asks that a capital fund be created to fund housing for rural OCS workers and to make facility improvements at those offices greatly in need of them. The Panel is aware that other state agencies offer housing for their personnel in rural areas. Schools and Troopers in some rural communities have recognized that being able to offer decent housing makes it much easier to recruit qualified workers to remote communities and retain them. OCS would like to be able to use this recruiting tool as well since attracting applicants to rural positions is difficult. We recommend this issue be explored and a five year plan developed. Since the model already exists in other departments, the issue seems to be one of funding rather than logistics or having to pilot a project.

There is a window in a child's life in which to make an impact. There are children right now who are aging out of that window without positive intervention from OCS because the office in their rural community is understaffed. We do not think it is too strong a statement to say that lives are at stake. Even if no child dies from abuse, negative life-altering events such as sexual abuse are occurring. OCS needs to be fully staffed in rural

areas to combat these issues. The easier it is to recruit AND retain workers, the better for Alaska's children.

**Recommendation 4: That the State standardize resources available to all state departments.**

Currently there are many resources that are available in numerous state departments that are not standardized. We acknowledge and agree that not all departments have the same needs nor do they require being treated the same in all circumstances. However, if Alaska values the safety of its children it must not prolong the time it allows the Office of Children's Services to continually be under-resourced.

In nearly every rural community we visited, we continued to hear of the problems plaguing OCS offices related to slow Internet connections. This was a recommendation last year and it continues to be an issue. We know that efforts are being made to correct this problem in the Bethel area. We laud the improvements, but the issue of connection speed is a problem in every rural community, not just those in the Bethel area. This issue needs to remain on the front burner. Even as rural connection speeds are improved, urban speed will also continue to increase. We know the rural areas will always be playing catch up, but want to make sure the need for them to catch up is fully understood.

This is not a matter of convenience, as some may imagine it; the dreadfully slow Internet connections endured by these offices have a tremendous impact on productivity. Workers in rural offices can spend 20 minutes doing something that takes two to three minutes in an office with a decent connection. One result of these very slow connections is to impact the safety and outcomes for children as workers have less time to provide services to children and families. While that alone should be enough to motivate a remedy to the situation, directly jeopardizing the safety of children is not the only impact. Due to the overwhelming amount of time needed to enter data into OCS' ORCA database in offices with these tremendously slow connections, workers tend to get quite behind with their entries. This leads to a substantial lag between the data in ORCA and the reality on the ground. Since OCS is admirably trying to make decisions based on data, ORCA is frequently mined for data to inform decisions. However, those decisions are then made based on outdated and/or inadequate data.

The most frustrating part of this scenario is that in nearly all the communities we have visited where we heard of these exceedingly slow Internet connections, we have found other offices of state government to be connected at the highest speeds. OCS should not always be provided with the slowest connection. We understand that this problem requires remedy by those outside of OCS in other state agencies. We appreciated learning more about the State's network and security issues from staff at the Department of Administration (DOA). We know DOA is working with OCS to find a

solution to this issue and we appreciate their efforts. OCS workers have jobs with plenty of inherent challenges; they don't need to endure this maddening one while knowing that the school, the Trooper's office, and the public health nurses all have faster connections.

The other resource that is available to some state agencies as a recruitment tool for rural workers is housing. We feel this would enable OCS to recruit and retain workers in these challenging communities much more easily. Having consistent staffing not only improves individual cases, but allows OCS to develop a presence in the community. For the same reason people talk of the positive impact a 'police presence' can have on a community, being able to rely on the same OCS worker, who knows the community allows OCS to have this same positive, preventive presence in a community. The value of this cannot be underestimated.

While our immediate desire is to see OCS receive the same quality Internet connection as other offices and the same recruiting tools, we think the state is missing an opportunity to save money by consolidating these services. In the same way that all state agencies must book travel through the state travel office, all state agencies in a community should share an Internet connection. We understand from DOA that this is preferable on the technical side as well. Likewise, all agencies could share state housing in a community for recruiting purposes. We feel this has the potential to raise the caliber of everything being offered by various agencies. Better services would decrease frustration, improve employee retention, and improve the delivery of state services.

## Commendations

We commend OCS Director Tammy Sandoval for her years of work on behalf of Alaska's children. She provided excellent stewardship to the agency. OCS is healthier now than when she took her position. We wish her well in her new endeavors.

We commend Pamela Dupras for her work as a member of the Citizen Review Panel. She brought a unique and valuable perspective to the Panel. We are saddened and diminished by her resignation from the Panel.

Respectfully submitted by the Citizen Review Panel:



Susan Heuer, Chair

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Pamela M. Dupras, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Bonnie Edmondson, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Dana W. Hallett, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Arthur S. Hansen, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Kristin Hull, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



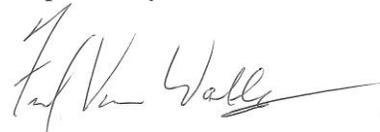
George Kirchner, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Ralph D. Taylor, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010



Fred Van Wallinga, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2010

*Never doubt that a small, dedicated group of citizens can make a difference.*

*Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has...*

*~ Margaret Mead*