

2015

OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



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

Executive Summary

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) serves to fulfill a mandate of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and is authorized under Alaska State Statute 47.14.205. The CRP should be composed of a broad representation of volunteers from within the state and include those who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. CRP must maintain confidentiality and have mechanisms for obtaining public comment to assess impact of procedures and practices on children and families in the community.

Alaska's CRP has continued to meet these requirements and has been working to find new avenues for outreach, ensuring diversity in the membership and ways in which they can help to positively impact change in the child welfare system.

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) wishes to thank the CRP for its work in the past year to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of the children of Alaska. We know that we cannot do the work necessary to prevent and reduce child maltreatment without the assistance of all of our community partners. We appreciate the CRP for their diligence in examining policies and procedures and practices that then inform recommendations toward systems improvement of the OCS. It has been another industrious year for OCS. We have continued efforts to reduce the rate of repeat maltreatment, ensure initial assessments involving the most vulnerable children get additional levels of review to ensure appropriate action is taken, avoid lengthy out of home care stays, and improve outcomes for older youth and to increase compliance with ICWA.

While many improvements and successes have been accomplished, we continue to face new challenges every day. The rising number of children in foster care presently is unprecedented and the increase in the last single year alone exceeds 30%. While OCS believes these are children who must be served and who without an intervention would most certainly face further maltreatment, this steady increase over the past five years has placed considerably more pressure on the system and the employees who operate it.

The CRP and OCS have continued to work in collaboration in many areas and this agency values the input that the CRP provides. While at times, there can be differing opinions as to the exact nature of the identified challenges and therefore the solutions, together we continue to dialogue in a manner that promotes increased understanding. OCS is looking forward to another productive year and to working with CRP members to find new ways to partner in the face of increasing challenges.

CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR



CRP Recommendation 1:

OCS continues to implement the Panel's 2013-2014 recommendations on the intake policy.

OCS Response:

We have been actively working towards implementing the CRP's recommended changes to the intake policy since January, 2015. Actions include having regular work meetings with intake supervisors to revise policy and seeking answers to challenging questions from leadership and attorneys. It is important to note that much of the revisions will take place as we move towards centralizing our intake functions. We are currently in the first phase of implementation that includes hiring a Protective Services Manager I (PSMI). The position will be responsible for implementing the centralized intake work plan while managing statewide intake. The PSMI will be responsible for developing training; implementing a stakeholder communications plan; and develop an intake specific; practice model and policy (utilizing the current working draft document). By providing centralized management to regional intake, OCS will improve consistency in practice; data collection and quality assurance efforts; training for intake workers; increased community outreach.

The following includes specific updates to the 2013-2014 Panel's intake policy recommendations:

Create and support several methods for people to make a report.

OCS's current reporting methods include telephonic, fax, and in-person and there has been exploration of on-line reporting and collecting reporting forms used in other states along with forms that our local mandated reporters use when they fax a report of harm. Developing an online form that meets the criteria of all our mandated reporter agencies policies is not realistic. However, based on what other states have and key areas identified by our stakeholders, OCS can create an online form that provides one more way to make a report for those who do not have specified reporting forms. The primary barriers for implementing on-line reporting is the time and cost for the development and implementation to have a secure online reporting system created, that is able to insure the necessary confidentiality issues inherent in child abuse and neglect reporting.

Uniformly implement statewide the current pilot project of having a supervisor from outside of the intake unit review all cases after 10 screened out PSRs regarding different incidents.

Not all OCS regional offices are reviewing cases that have 10 screened out Protective Services Report's (PSR's). There will be an increase in consistent practices once centralized intake PSMI is hired.

Periodically send a list of screened out PSRs to the local field office.

The OCS staff managers and intake supervisors now have access to an ORCA Report Manager which provides details of the intake workload and screening decision for each region and worker. The report provides timeframes, who created the report, who the report is concerning, the screening decision, and/or screen out reason.

OCS response to change the intake procedure so reporters have to opt-out of receiving follow up on the case, not opt-in:

The supervisor intake group drafted the following language to ensure mandated reporters are asked if they want to know whether the PSR is screened in or screened out:

Intake staff must ask the mandated reporter if they want to be notified of the status of the screening decision. When the mandated reporter wants to know the intake decision, the worker will:

- a. Provide the mandated reporter with the screening decision when information collected clearly indicates the report will be screened-in. If the screening decision changes after supervisor review, the intake worker will notify the reporter of the change. The intake staff will document the notice in the PSR;
- b. When more information is needed to make a screening decision, request the reporters email address and send a confidential response upon supervisor approval of the decision. When email is not an option, another source of confidential notice may be explored. The intake staff will document the notice in an ORCA intake note.

CRP Recommendation 2:

OCS constitutes an internal taskforce to specifically focus an in-home service model. This task force should be tasked with operationalizing Strategy 2.A.2 of the 2015-2019 CFSP.

- **In collaboration with local service providers, asses the existing in-home service model as it exists in each region.**
- **Identify additional, more specific outcomes with respect to Strategy 2.A.2 of the 2015-2019 CFSP.**

OCS Response:

The effective and efficient delivery of in-home services to children at risk of maltreatment or who have recently experienced an episode of maltreatment has been a challenge for many years. There are a number of reasons why this is particularly difficult such as;

- a. geography of Alaska which can create great distances between where families live and where OCS offices are staffed;
- b. the availability of services in rural Alaska generally;
- c. the “voluntary” nature of most in-home case that come without the oversight of the court and other parties and leave a worker in isolation to support the family, and
- d. the general fact that many of those OCS is attempting to serve through an in-home plan are often too far along on the continuum as to the complexities of their live challenges that brought them to our attention to have the kind of positive impact we might have if they had been served earlier.

Many of the families we have served through voluntary in-home services have later resulted in needing an out of home removal. We have seen limited success even with the use of a full time dedicated in-home unit in Anchorage, where often services are fairly available.

OCS is not mandated by state or federal law to have an in home model or program, but we are required to provide “preventive services to prevent removal”. This is done through

the initial assessment process whether we substantiate or not or whether OCS determines that the family needs a legal intervention. Initial assessment workers routinely refer families to appropriate services, often we pay for some limited services during that process as well follow up in cases where we feel a family needs to take that proactive step before we close out the assessment and end contact with the family. That being said, OCS continues to recognize the value of in-home service delivery. It would be a disservice to Alaskans to no longer have the option of in-home service delivery, as it is viable for some families.

As is well known, OCS is a crisis driven agency serving families who are experiencing medium to high levels of maltreatment and also have various other associated challenges that are contributing to the maltreatment. For all the reasons explained here, OCS has begun to rethink the approach to in-home services delivery, and is now looking to a new strategy whereby OCS would outsource this program and services to a network of providers statewide. We are looking into ways we might “compact” with Tribes as well as with other entities such that native and non-native families have equal access to quality services within their communities of origin.

By referring families directly to the Tribe/Tribal organization, and/or a private contractor or grantee for services there is the possibility that a legal intervention with the family can be avoided. The referral agency would have the best opportunity of serving these families, without the OCS intervention or involvement, leading to greater success. OCS is currently exploring ways to execute an “outsourcing” of this particular service to improve the level of access and quality of service families at risk of a formal intervention need to receive. As a part of this effort, OCS is looking at realignment of grants funded with general fund dollars as well as the strategy of “compacting” with Tribes or a single entity who can then further break out the dollars by need and community.

While we are exploring these options, in home services will continue to be provided in the same manner we have been employing for years.

CRP Recommendation 3:

OCS should address the root cause of the Initial Assessment (IA) backlog:

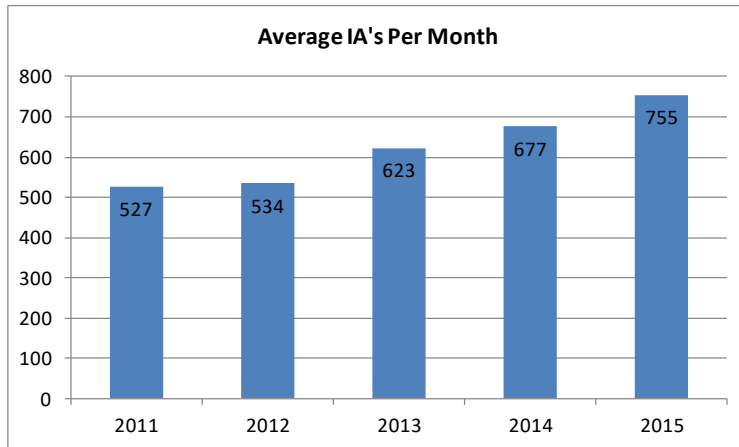
- **Identify the nature of cases that are due past 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, and 120 days.**
- **Revisit the Differential Response process and examine its fit to the current situation.**

OCS Response:

The Office of Children’s Services continues to struggle in keeping up with completing initial assessments within established timeframes. OCS shares the CRP’s concern for this continuing cycle of backlog growth and remains committed to ending it.

Many factors contribute to the completion of initial assessments including workload, prioritization of cases based upon safety and risk, employee turnover and management of workflow. The most salient factor contributing to the current backlog has been a rising

workload. Over the past five years, the average number of initial assessments conducted per month has risen 43% from 527 per month in 2011 to 755 per month in 2015 (January through October).



As noted, this cycle has persisted for many years. Despite extensive efforts, permanent solutions have proven elusive. Focusing resources intently in this area has been effective for short periods of time; however, have come at the expense of other organizational programs and priorities. OCS currently has an internal committee developing a pilot project focused on modifying our initial assessment program with the goal of developing policies and procedures that will allow for both increased speed of initial assessment completion while enhancing informed child safety decision making. It is expected that the first phase of the pilot project to begin during the first calendar quarter of 2016.

While we develop permanent solutions, we will continue managing the initial assessment workloads focusing on timely completion and triaging when necessary to focus limited resources on the most vulnerable, unsafe and highest risk children.

CRP Recommendation 4:

Improve efforts to recruit and retain resource families across the state:

- Identify, and advertise through appropriate channels, a clear message on the approximate numbers of resource families needed.
- Identify outcome measures and track success of recruitment and retention strategies.

OCS Response:

It is a challenge to identify approximate numbers of resource families needed as the growth of children and youth into foster care has been unprecedented. OCS does recognize the regional committees will need to direct efforts into utilizing data regarding the rate and areas of the state the children and youth are coming into custody versus the availability of foster homes. We also want to emphasize that the goal is always to complete early relative and family friend identifications

for placement of children that is a variable impact in approximating the need for general foster homes.

OCS has made a concerted effort to message the need of resource families on a statewide and regional level. The statewide campaign includes television and radio ads that addresses the overall need for more resource families and includes specifically the need for more Alaska Native foster homes. Each region currently has two recruitment and retention committees established. One to address the recruitment, support and retention of resource families and the other to address the need to increase ICWA preference placements and Alaska Native foster homes. The regional committees develop work plans that identify specific goals for the recruitment of foster homes that is applicable for their region. This is completed by extracting data around current foster homes, locations of the foster homes and vacancy reports. The regional plans identify the need to not only recruit general foster homes, but also specifically target hard to place population groups such as medically fragile children, sibling groups and teens.

OCS does recognize the tracking of recruitment efforts and initiatives was not adequate to measure the goal outcomes of increasing foster homes. To address this OCS has collaborated with the Alaska Center for Resource Families (ACRF) to provide data after a recruitment effort or event as well as to provide the names of individuals interested so they can be tracked throughout the licensing process i.e. orientation and licensure. Last year, OCS began tracking recruitment efforts in the ORCA database system to begin setting up a tracking and measuring system. OCS has consistently been entering the data into the ORCA function and is now analyzing how this function can be used as a measuring tool.

Additionally, each native foster home recruitment regional workgroup is independently tracking and measuring their progress in increasing licensed native foster homes. These efforts and successes have been reported out to the regions and the tribal state collaboration groups. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the statewide television and radio ads in direct relation to the recruitment of foster homes, but some data can be extracted from the toll free inquiry calls and also understanding the importance the role the statewide ads provide in terms of community education and awareness.

CRP Recommendation 5:

Improve the survey instruments and reporting of results on various surveys that OCS QA unit conducts to assess important components of OCS operations.

OCS Response:

OCS is pleased overall with the quality and variability our survey methods employ and the results they provide to leadership and the state overall. While, not perfect, we believe our surveys are getting the job done.

That being said, because the CRP has been critical of the surveys overall particularly that of the employee annual survey, OCS has asked for CRP's assistance. The CRP benefits by having a chair that is a University of Alaska Anchorage Assistant Professor of Public Policy. With that, Mr. Vandapalli has been asked and has offered access a class of students to work with the CRP to make modifications and improvements to the survey instrument OCS has been using in recent years. OCS and the CRP have discussed and agreed to the parameters of this arrangement and we very much look forward to seeing the ultimate outcome of that work in the spring.

CRP Recommendation 6:

Adopt a method to identify, measure, and assess various components of workload of frontline workers.

OCS Response:

OCS currently utilizes a workload balancing tool created by us to help measure, monitor and review the allocation of workforce resources in comparison to caseloads statewide. It is not perfect, but has been effective in looking broadly at the imbalances and used to help inform leadership's decision making as to when it's appropriate to reallocate resources from one office to another.

However, OCS recognizes there may be more sophisticated ways to go about this and we are open to exploring those options. Alaska was recently invited to be a part of a small group of state child welfare leaders to be on a committee formed by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute to look at caseload and the measurement of those in relationship to workforce. Travis Erickson, Division Operations Manager, is the representative and is scheduled to attend the first face to face meeting in the Spring of 2016.

Additionally, OCS has enlisted the assistance of our Title IV-E consultant Don Schmid to examine and analyze the two prior workload studies completed by Hornby, Zeller & Associates and see how OCS might extract some of their methodology for meaningful and effective day-to-day use to review workload. This work is still underway and it is expected when Mr. Schmid comes on site in February we will see and learn more about what he has been able to design or will recommend.

Lastly, recently the Child Welfare League of America announced they were close to releasing updated recommendations on appropriate caseload size. This will be the first time those national standards have been updated in many years and may also help provide further guidance to Alaska in concert with our other planned efforts.