



**Alaska Citizen Review Panel**

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- Sonya Hull (Vice Chair)  
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- Cameron Adams Anchorage
- Lucinda Alexie Bethel
- Wendy Barrett Anchorage
- Amanda Hansen Anchorage
- Mariah Seater Anchorage
- Bettyann Steciw Anchor Point
- Joshua Stein Utqiagvik
- Rebecca Vale Anchorage
- Patricia Williams Fairbanks

**Staff**

Denali Daniels & Assoc.  
admin@crpalaska.org  
[www.crpalaska.org](http://www.crpalaska.org)

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel evaluates the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies for effectiveness in discharging their child protection responsibilities. The Panel is mandated through CAPTA 1997 (P.L. 104-235), and enacted through AS 47.14.205.

Field Offices Visited	Anchorage
Communities Visited	Anchorage
Dates of Visit	December 18, 19, 2019
Panelists	Mariah Seater, JP Ouellette

**STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED**

- AK Child and Family
- Anchorage Police Department
- Alaska CARES Child Advocacy Center
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council
- Office of Children’s Services (OCS)
  - Family Services
  - Intake (non-local)
  - Licensing
  - Administrative Staff
  - Supervisors
  - Managers

**INTRODUCTION**

Becoming fairly acquainted with the challenges faced by OCS workers, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) endeavors to continue being more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. We began each interview session with an acknowledgement of the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political, logistical, and otherwise challenges that workers must face in order to strive toward the goals of child protection and family reunification. We then invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities, giving them an opportunity both to vent frustrations and offer ideas for improvements.

## **CRP ENDURING PRIORITIES**

Through the long-range strategic planning process, the panel identified five enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over the next five years. For the 2019-2020 Work Plan the CRP will be incorporating these five priorities into site visit questions and activities.

## **OVERVIEW**

Overall, community feedback was supportive regarding relationships with OCS and challenges with OCS were stated empathetically, acknowledging that, in a region as populated and diverse as Anchorage, the local office is doing the best they can with the resources available to them. The CRP aims to be a facilitator of such collaboration and communication in the coming years allowing for more flexibility in what can otherwise feel like a very rigid and even punitive child welfare landscape. Our hope is, in addition to areas of improvement that may be identified, that the strengths and successes in the local field office can be acknowledged and replicated in other regions.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The observations and recommendations of regional site visits are not meant as official recommendations, but feedback for continued conversation contributing to our final annual assessment and official CRP recommendations.

### **Collaborative Relationship with OCS**

**Strengths:** The Anchorage regional manager stressed how effective the CRP site visit was last year in helping name and prioritize improvements to be made in the areas of staff wellness and safety. Since the visit last year, periodic check-ins and information sharing have been commonplace between the CRP and Anchorage OCS office leadership. The CRP receive updates on policy changes, monthly report cards, and invitations to participate in joint trainings.

**Challenges:** Pre-site visit calendaring and coordination was challenging. The aim of adding a pre-site visit meeting to our regional visits is to help prepare OCS staff for a productive interview by sharing our annual priorities and ensuring we are interviewing the most relevant stakeholders as identified by both OCS and the CRP. This was not accomplished and thus the site visit was less effective than it could have been in providing relevant feedback.

**Recommendations:** Continue building the trusting and collaborative relationship between local OCS leadership and the CRP. Prepare for site visits much further in advance. Ideally, the CRP should be sharing our tentative schedule we build out in August with the Director. Once this is accomplished, more effort on both the CRP and OCS sides can be made to ensure timely scheduling of necessary communication and sharing of information for the coming fiscal year.

### **CRP Education and Development**

**Strengths:** OCS has been supportive of this priority and has offered contact information for key personnel that can assist the CRP in this.

**Challenges:** It is difficult to stay abreast of all the existing policies and procedures as well as changes that come regularly.

**Recommendations:** One of the managers for the Anchorage office discussed involving a CRP panel member in the monthly policy meetings which would allow for CRP to get most up-to-date information regarding the most relevant policies. These connections have been made via email and a panel member is now scheduled to these meetings.

If OCS recognizes other opportunities for the panel to stay current in our understanding of policies and procedures, we are happy to pursue such.

### **Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System**

**Strengths:** A healthy CPS system starts with healthy CPS workers. The recommendations from last year's site visit were acted upon and the Anchorage office now has healthy snacks available for staff as well as a room for decompression. A pastor now frequents the Anchorage Office, and this has been well-received by all levels of OCS staff. Suicide awareness, mental health, and First Aid trainings have been accomplished and are now scheduled regularly.

Workers noted and appreciated the overall improvement in morale in the Anchorage office. The changes made over the last year have been encouraging and the staff across departments all seem to value and appreciate one another. More than once was this

attributed to leadership and attentiveness to tangible changes that can be accomplished to improve the quality of life for OCS staff as well as her role in facilitating positive relationships.

**Challenges:** Healthy office culture and morale is vital to maintaining valuable staff and equipping them to make potentially life-altering decisions for the families they serve. There was incongruence between staff and management around expectations for performance reviews and to what degree different elements are weighed to rate an employee. Differing expectations almost always lead to confusion and disappointment.

Due to vacancies, staff report getting caseloads (too many and too soon) before they feel is appropriate for their experience and training. While some workers felt very supported by their peers, supervisors, and mentors, others felt very isolated and overwhelmed with the amount or responsibility they'd been given. There was an apparent lack of consistency among workers regarding the amount of support they were given to do their jobs, particularly new workers.

**Recommendations:** The apparent incongruence in perceptions regarding the evaluations leaves opportunity to explore where better communication between management and supervisors regarding the evaluation process can help to bring clarity around expectations both of staff and of management. Explore how better communication of expectations and evaluation measures can be executed to avoid, as much as possible, staff being "caught off guard" by an evaluation.

Similarly, the CRP has heard consistently that communication with new staff regarding expected workload and available support is much different than what they experience during their first year or so on the job. The CRP appreciates the disparity between what state and federal laws mandate and what OCS can reasonably accomplish regarding hiring and maintaining qualified staff in order to keep caseloads at a manageable level. It feels much like a rock-and-a-hard-place situation. OCS can't reasonably tell applicants that caseloads may or may not be in line with state and federal mandates. This is more of a retention issue that is being addressed in the above measures. The best recommendation for this specifically is to emphasize and empower supportive leadership while correcting less supportive relationships

between staff and supervisors/managers to build resilience, rather than vulnerability, before the inevitable disillusion with workload expectations hits new employees.

### **Reciprocal Engagement**

**Strengths:** Relationships with other stakeholders in the region are, overall, collaborative, and this is steadily improving over time. Many community partners have staff in the OCS regional office. Many OCS staff also maintain a presence in the office of other stakeholders. Communication between OCS and these partners appears to be especially productive as one would hope.

**Challenges:** Communication between OCS and other stakeholders who don't encounter OCS staff as regularly as those mentioned above continues to be a challenge. For some, communication since the earthquake of 2017 has been non-productive. There was even confusion internally regarding the nature of the relationship with such stakeholders and the services they were still providing. Community partners and OCS have incongruent notions as to OCS's participation in training events, conferences, and multidisciplinary meetings.

There are relationship challenges between OCS and stakeholders in the legal system which OCS leadership is aware of and addressing. OCS workers who'd worked in other regions stated that public advocates in Anchorage have a more adversarial relationship than they've encountered elsewhere.

**Recommendations:** Utilize designated OCS staff to regularly reach out to community partners to ensure up-to-date information on opportunities to collaborate as well as to educate stakeholders in the challenges OCS faces (scheduling, resources, timeliness of invitations etc) when unable to attend events. Regular feedback between local partners in child welfare has been one of the most valuable components of strengthening the region's capacity to protect our children and preserve our families.

Admittedly, litigation is, by nature, adversarial. However, work can be done to improve these relationships without diminishing advocacy. It appears much easier to accomplish this in smaller communities where virtually everyone encounters one another outside of the litigation environment. One recommendation is to utilize mediation more often under the court's Child

In Need of Aid mediation program to get help reaching common ground. This is, in most cases, very successful at both increasing collaboration and producing better outcomes for families.

### **Public Outreach**

**Strengths:** Pending application approval of one potential panelist, the CRP now represents all five OCS regions on the panel.

**Challenges:** There was an expressed need for the CRP to be more active in improving awareness among tribal partners regarding our role as well as active panel recruitment from within the tribal community. Awareness of CRP and our role is much easier accomplished in smaller communities than in Anchorage as word-of-mouth is much more effective.

**Recommendations:** The CRP is actively recruiting in all regions and have, over the last couple years improved representation of the tribal voices on the panel. We will continue our recruitment efforts to improve this. We are actively soliciting information regarding newsletters, multidisciplinary gatherings, and other ways we can more effectively communicate to stakeholders the role of the CRP in Alaska and ways the public can participate.

### **OTHER OBSERVATIONS**

There were concerns regarding upcoming changes for reporters (requiring additional reporting to the police department) and how much more difficult this will make the reporting process.

The mentor program had very mixed reviews. It appeared that there may not be enough mentors to provide the hands-on support staff expect from the program. Unclear expectations have led to dissatisfaction among staff. Suggestions for improvement were localizing mentors and dedicating them to an office or even a region as well as developing more clear expectations for mentors and mentees.

The intake supervisor met with CRP separately and is looking forward to our help in the area of communication throughout the state with regard to the continuing improvements being made

since the initial implementation of centralized intake four years ago as well as the upcoming reporting changes mentioned above.

It was clarified that both the intake department and mentorship program are statewide programs that are not under the management of the Anchorage office. The CRP will pursue an additional site visit addressing state-wide offices/programs in order to broaden our understanding of the issues faced within each region.

A request was made to create a CRP that works exclusively within tribal entities. This will be addressed at the next panel meeting.