



**Alaska Citizen Review Panel**

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- Cameron Adams Anchorage
- Lucinda Alexie Bethel
- Wendy Barrett Anchorage
- Amanda Hansen Anchorage
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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.

Region Visited	Western
Communities Visited	Bethel
Dates of Visit	February 11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup>
Panelists	Lucinda Alexie, JP Ouellette

**STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED**

4H

AVCP ICWA Office Foster Parents

Tundra Women’s Coalition Bethel Police Department

OCS:

- Staff
- Supervisors and Specialists Managers

**INTRODUCTION**

Appreciating the challenges faced by Office of Children’s Services (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. During each interview session we try to acknowledge 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**

The Bethel office has experienced a positive change in leadership, change in location, and onboarding of new staff over the past year. This is considered both in the strengths observed by the CRP as well as the challenges noted. The Panel appreciates that not everything can be tackled at once and seeks to continue supporting this office in its transition to an image of quality and competency in the Western region.

Overall, community feedback was supportive regarding relationships with OCS and challenges with OCS were stated empathetically, acknowledging that, in a region as vast as Western, and the challenges of staff turnover, 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:** Regional and state leadership worked eagerly with the CRP this year to prepare for a fruitful site visit. OCS's responsiveness to the CRP following last year's site visit left a positive impression on the regional office as well as community partners.

Panel members have made it a point to extend "kudos" for observations of exemplary casework. Communication has involved OCS leadership and the caseworker, making the opportunity for internal recognition much easier. This has made a significant impact on individual caseworkers during times of stress and, as reported by the caseworkers,

contributed to their capacity to keep going. During an interview with KTUU, the chair publicly shared the panel's stance on the importance of supporting OCS in their work and, while remaining critically objective, focusing on constructive feedback and collaboration.

**Challenges:** While state leadership responded directly to the CRP's concerns about leadership in the region, the regional office (possibly due to transition mentioned in the overview) did not follow up on many of the opportunities proposed by the CRP last year. Thus, many of our recommendations (below) remain the same regarding communication, collaboration, local recruitment, and cultural competency training.

**Recommendations:** Understanding that, with the transition to new leadership, some continuity of dialogue with the CRP may have been lost, we recommend that leadership in Western region take these recommendations more seriously than previous leadership. The CRP works to help OCS improve outcomes for families statewide by helping to facilitate positive changes in the culture of each regional office and their relationships with community partners. The recommendations include thoughtful and supportive responses from the community as well as ideas from within OCS. It can be difficult to work our feedback into the well-defined grooves of the status quo, but regions who've done so have benefited from it.

### **CRP Education and Development**

This goal was not addressed during this site visit.

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

The transition to a new regional manager was a very positive step for the Western regional office in Bethel. Staff and supervisors alike report a significant improvement in office culture. In particular, a new management role was a clear acknowledgement of positive leadership in the region as reflected by staff input. There is a very positive tone for the staff in Bethel in encouraging comradery and self-care.

- **New Office:** Moving on the CRP's recommendation to contract with AVCP Housing to centralize OCS operations in Bethel also led to significant

improvements in communication and collaboration among the staff in addition to providing them with a nicer, more organized work space.

- **More Staff:** Hiring new staff to answer the significant turnover that occurred last year has also contributed to the improvement in the quality of life for staff. As was evident by the fruitful dialogue with the CRP and echoed by supervisors, the new hires are thoughtfully selected individuals who, though very new to casework in the Western region, appear to be well-suited for the job. Many times over during our conversation with staff we heard their praise and support for one another.
- **Letter of Agreement (LOA) Workers:** While there are some challenges noted below, LOA workers stated this schedule is more satisfying for staff that don't call Bethel home. These workers state that the new schedule will contribute to their longevity with the organization.
- **Community Collaboration:** The foster parent interviewed felt very supported by OCS. Acknowledging the difficulties of working in the Western region, the parent named two case workers and an SSA that work hard to help parents and foster parents throughout the life of a case. Community partners in Bethel also had very positive things to say about the centralized intake operators. The operators were reportedly very courteous, knowledgeable, and supportive in handling calls from reporters. Community partners also felt that LOA workers have been especially helpful in moving cases forward that perhaps needed fresh eyes. In contrast to previous site visits, community partners noted an absence of negative interactions with OCS over the last year, stating "despite needed improvements, we really are glad OCS is here." OCS's consistent presence at case reviews is also noted and appreciated. Some OCS staff have taken it upon themselves to build connections with tribal partners in Bethel as well as village elders. This requires a rare personality type and is uncommon. These personnel are happy to share connections with their peers.

Despite the continuing challenges in collaboration mentioned below, there is desire from both OCS staff and community partners to have meaningful dialogue leading to better understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and potential for collaboration with other

agencies. With the right support, the Bethel office is poised for a new image in the community. As noted below, staff are motivated to build a new reputation.

## **Challenges:**

### *Internal OCS Culture*

**Supervision:** While significant improvements have occurred over the last year, there is still some work to do in improving the health of the Bethel office. One reason staff rely so heavily on one another is that they still don't feel supported by their supervisors. In questioning the staff and management what the role of the supervisor is, it was understood that the responsibility of the supervisor was to support the staff in decision-making through regular staffing of cases, responding to questions that arise, and providing expertise in the area of policies and procedures on a case-by-case basis. It was also clear that staff and management felt supervisors were too overwhelmed to consistently provide this type of support to the staff who, in turn, have learned to rely on one another and avoid bringing concerns to their supervisors. Staff also feel dissuaded from bringing concerns to regional leadership when direct supervision isn't available. Mentorship does provide some assistance in these matters, but the Anchorage-based mentors reportedly have difficulty relating to the complexities of rural Alaska.

**Centralization:** While centralization of multiple departments including intake, regional management, and travel have resolved some logistical challenges for the agency, rural areas continue to report that, in their regions, this may be costing the state more money while contributing to rising caseloads and cases lingering in the system. For rural Alaska, many of the boots-on-the-ground veterans feel they could resolve travel and management issues much more efficiently and prevent cases from being screened in prematurely thus saving many hours of travel and casework. This sentiment is not unique to Western region.

**Safety:** Safety is still a major issue for staff. There are reportedly no protocols or provisions for protection from potentially violent individuals. Staff report responding to PSR's in matters of gun violence, or when communities have an active shooter. The lack of training in de-escalation, self-defense, and the inability to carry non-violent means of

self-protection, only add to the sense of vulnerability for workers in areas where law enforcement is not always available when a child is in potential danger. Staff also requested training in office safety including active shooter protocols and fire drills. Staff also report feeling ill-equipped for travel in extreme weather and request winter survival training. Staff appreciate the safety officer position, but feel the focus is more “big picture” versus protecting them in their daily work via items like masks, emergency cold weather gear, or advocating for protective aerosols.

**Training:** Staff felt the training and retraining they receive from Child Welfare Academy is more conceptual and includes information they received in college about “being a good worker,” but it did not equip them with the tools they need to actually accomplish the nuts-and-bolts of child-protection. Echoing the sentiments of other regions, staff stated they learn most of their relevant casework training through trial by fire. Staff in more than one region have requested more “field training” and less time in classes.

**LOA Workers:** This has had many positive outcomes, but is still a work in progress. While this schedule works very well for the intake assessment workers who have a relatively short duration of involvement with each case, it presents many challenges for family services workers and community partners. There is difficulty in maintaining continuity of care between family service workers. The lack in continuity contributes to the image of “incompetence” during a worker’s off week, particularly when a working knowledge of the case is required for court appearances or when needs arise for families. There is, for some workers, an established relationship of sharing another worker’s cases as “secondary”, but there still needs to be clarity on how this is to be accomplished for all LOA workers in family services.

**Working with Other Regions:** Staff express continued frustration over the lack of collaboration between regions. Each region prioritizes reducing their own caseload and has difficulty understanding the unique needs of other regions. Workers who’ve worked in multiple regions state each region is unique in practice and tends to be self-serving in its efforts to move cases off their desk, satisfy federal requirements or other workload/stress-reducing effort. None of this is grossly unreasonable given all the current

stressors workers face, but has specifically resulted in children being sent to Bethel from Anchorage without any collaboration with the Bethel office (ie: TDM). In lieu of large-scale collaborative efforts, Bethel staff ask that TDMs be required before moving children from other regions to Western.

**Community Collaboration:** While previous negative interactions appear to have ceased between OCS and the community, feedback from community partners reveals that collaboration continues to be an area needing improvement with the Bethel office. Connecting in Bethel is especially difficult due to the landscape, the weather, lack of transportation and other resources, and a strong cultural homogeneity that runs counter to the predominant cultural makeup of OCS. It's easy for workers unfamiliar with Yupik culture and rural Alaskan life to remain socially isolated. Community connection, in this region more than others, requires a concentrated effort to reach out partners and look for opportunities to engage. The observation of the Panel over the years is that the OCS office culture in Bethel doesn't encourage community connection. This disconnect is detrimental to the worker's well-being, the effectiveness of the Bethel office, and the relationship with the Bethel community- all of which play a vital role in outcomes for families.

The lack of communication has led to confusion about the roles and responsibilities of OCS. For example, Bethel Police Department and other partners have consistently stated that they ended up with children in their offices because OCS isn't responding to provide safety for the child. Partners acknowledge that the need in Bethel exceeds OCS's capacity, and that community partners should work together to care for its families in need. However, without collaborative communication on the issue, it doesn't feel like a partnership, just a strained relationship with poorly defined expectations. There was confusion in the community regarding OCS's duty to respond. The assumption is that OCS does not respond so long as there is a "safe and responsible adult" present regardless of whether or not that adult could reasonably assume responsibility for the child in need of aid.

The same sentiments, however, are echoed by OCS staff. They also desire for more communication from their tribal partners and assistance in working with the families of Western region. They feel that the Bethel office, under previous leadership, has built a reputation of incompetence in the community that precedes them when appearing in court or at events such as ICWA trainings. There is a strong desire to change this perception through better case work and more dialogue with tribal partners regarding perceptions, roles, resources, definitions of “safety”, responsibilities, tribal jurisdiction, etc.

While getting its own house in order, OCS has reportedly not begun to reach out to any tribal partners regarding region-specific training, wellness events, and local recruiting efforts. Community partners in Bethel work well together and express a desire to see OCS benefit from community engagement as well.

Reporters of child abuse also express a desire to build a confidential way to establish continuity of care for children after abuse has been reported. When a child is displaced after a substantiated report of harm to protect them from further abuse, the abrupt change and loss of relationships increases the negative impact to the child. Continued relationship with teachers, childcare workers, and other trusted adults in their lives would increase their resiliency factors.

Community partners also expressed concern that the recent change in the Assistant Attorney General’s office has led to more aggressive and unnecessary litigation against parents creating further disconnect between OCS and the community.

***Recommendations:***

*Internal Office Culture*

1. As a previous supervisor that staff looked up to and responded well to, new leadership has agreed to provide training in conjunction with recent leadership training for supervisors in how to support the unique needs of staff in Bethel to include understanding their need for connection and more effective and empathetic communication.

2. Leadership will also reach out to the trooper's office to see what training may be available for de-escalation, self-defense, and arctic survival.
3. Consider creating "lead staff" positions as a way for more experienced staff to provide that bridge between staff and supervisors.
4. Investigate the efficacy of centralized services in rural Alaska. Each region has very unique needs and standardized policies and procedures may work against the desired intent of increased efficiency in child protection.
5. Consider a regional liaison position to address breakdowns in communication between regions while requiring that moving a child from one region to another be a collaborative decision.
6. Consider limiting LOA work to intake assessment workers or establishing a well-defined and workable protocol for family services workers to effectively share caseloads.

#### *Community Collaboration*

1. Engage tribal partners as soon as a case is screened in and copy ICWA worker on all case updates.
2. Allowing the initial assessment of an ICWA worker to stand has a high likelihood of reducing caseload and empowering the tribes to care for their families.
3. On a previous site visit, ONC expressed a desire to support wellness for OCS workers and listed many events they will extend invitations for. Bethel staff should be encouraged to participate. It's understood that staff has little-to-no time for such events, but outcomes for families in the region are not going to worsen as staff take time to take care of themselves and invest in better understanding of the families they work with.
4. ONC offered to provide ICWA training which will include.
5. More collaborative perspective (beyond rules and regs).
6. Training on transferring to tribal jurisdiction in a way that maintains continuity of care.
7. Engage with YK Health in sending workers through the Calicaraq training to increase cultural competency and self-awareness.

8. AVCP has trained facilitators who are available to lead the Knowing Who You Are training. Sitka has had great results utilizing tribal facilitators for this training and Bethel should also consider this.
9. Consider presenting at local job fairs such as the YK Health job fair and focus on more local recruiting efforts.
10. Consider confidentiality agreements with reporters involved in child care who are also stable figures in a child's life so that the child can benefit from healthy bonds created in a time of need. This is one of the main components of building resiliency in children.
11. Consider working with local nonprofits such as Bethel Family Clinic, or Bethel Community Services Foundation to facilitate fruitful dialogue between OCS and community partners.
12. This has proven instrumental in other communities such as Sitka and Wasilla in fostering collaboration in child welfare.

### **Reciprocal Engagement**

**Strengths:** Staff in Bethel stated that they did have access to last year's site visit report and were very grateful for its thorough review.

**Challenges:** The CRP still has no protocol for sending reader-appropriate site visit reviews to all site-visit participants.

**Recommendations:** CRP to develop protocols for distributing appropriate feedback to all participants of a site-visit such as modified reports that don't include the more sensitive in-house recommendations.

### **Public Outreach**

**Strengths:** With the help of our coordinators, Denali Daniels and Associates, the CRP has produced and distributed our five-year strategic plan as well as our 2019-2020 work plan to site-visit participants. We've also developed and distributed CRP business cards with our website printed on them encouraging stakeholders to leave anonymous feedback, both positive and critical, on our website. A link to the CRP is also listed on the

OCS website and members of the public are utilizing the anonymous online feedback form.

**Challenges:** The CRP has yet to make a significant effort to reach the public at large with information regarding the panel and its work.

**Recommendations:** CRP to continue reach out to stakeholders and get list of newsletters and publications to which we can contribute information.