

# Citizen Review Panel

STATE OF ALASKA



2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE CRP

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### AUTHORITY

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is federally mandated through the 1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and authorized through Alaska Statute Sec. 47.14.205. The Panel operates under a set of operating guidelines which are available on the CRP's website.

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### FUNCTIONS

The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems in improving services through evaluation, public outreach, and advocacy. In Alaska, the designated child protection agency is the Office of Children's Services (OCS). Therefore, the Alaska Panel:

- Evaluates the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under: CAPTA State Plan (42 U.S.C. 5106a(b)); and CFSP; Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and any other criteria that the Citizen Review Panel considers important to ensuring the protection of children.
  - Conducts public outreach and gathers public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
  - Advocates for relevant actions that help improve the child protection services system in Alaska.
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### STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

Membership on the CRP is voluntary and is expected to represent the diversity of the state. The CRP selects its own members through a formal recruitment and application process. Members elect officers from among the membership. Term limits are established through state regulations.

### PANEL MEMBERSHIP

#### DURING 2020 – 2021 INCLUDED:

Cameron Adams (Chair) - Anchorage  
Lucinda Alexie - Bethel  
Wendy Barrett - Anchorage  
Retchenda George-Bettisworth - Fairbanks  
Sharon Sparks - Nome  
Trevor Storrs - Anchorage

#### *Special recognition to the contributions of members who resigned during this year:*

Sonya Hull - Wasilla  
Mariah Seater - Anchorage  
Patricia Williams - Fairbanks

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### ENDURING PRIORITIES

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel conducted a strategic planning process during the summer of 2019. As part of this process panel members identified enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over a five-year period. These priorities provide a focused framework for carrying out the CRP's basic functions using a targeted approach. During the strategic planning process the CRP identified the following enduring priorities:

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

CRP Education and Development

Healthy CPS System

Reciprocal Engagement

Public Outreach

## 2020 - 2021 CRP ACTIVITIES

The CRP's 2020-2021 annual calendar included the following activities:

### QUARTERLY MEETINGS

Due to the geographic dispersion of the CRP members, two quarterly meetings are held over the telephone or via Zoom. A Spring Annual Meeting and a Fall Retreat are typically held in-person and serve as the other two quarterly meetings. All quarterly panel meetings are open to the public and include a public comment period. The meeting agenda, date, time, location, and call-in number are announced prior to the meeting and are posted on the CRP's website.

### MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS

In order to maintain a healthy working relationship and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy, the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS meet by telephone or via Zoom with the CRP monthly to share mutual progress, discuss latest developments, and respond to mutual queries.

### SITE VISITS

The CRP typically conducts visits to various OCS regional and field offices to gather information on practice and assess working relationships between OCS and its local partners. Local stakeholders are also consulted during site visits. The CRP's observations and recommendations are documented in a report and are subsequently discussed with the OCS' state and regional leadership. The CRP conducted site visits to field offices in Kenai and Dillingham in the Southcentral Region in 2020-2021. Meetings were conducted with regional OCS workers and leadership, partner organizations, and foster care parents. In response to COVID-19 the CRP conducted all meetings virtually, which allowed for expanded participation and flexibility.

#### Site Visit: Kenai - April 23, 2021

During a virtual site visit this Spring, CRP Panelists heard from the Central Peninsula Child Advocacy Center, the Soldotna Police Department, and the Kenai Police Department; as well as frontline workers and supervisors at the Office of Children's Services (OCS).



#### Site Visit: Dillingham - April 29-30, 2021

CRP Panelists conducted virtual meetings with foster parents, workers from Safe and Fear Free Environment (SAFE), ICWA workers, Bristol Bay Native Association's Family Services, as well as frontline workers and supervisors at the Office of Children's Services (OCS).



## 2020-2021 FINDINGS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Citizen Review Panel findings and recommendations for FY20 -FY21 are organized under each enduring priority.

- Findings include observations made by the CRP during the year while carrying out its functions.
- Challenges acknowledge factors that the system may be facing when considering why findings may exist.
- Recommendations identify ways to move forward in addressing the findings and challenges.



### RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

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A significant portion of the Citizen Review Panel's activity involves annual site visits to communities within each of the five OCS regions. The nature of these visits involves panel members meeting with OCS supervisors and frontline workers, agency partners, tribal child welfare programs, family support agencies, school district stakeholders, and, when possible, foster parents and households that have had cases with OCS.

It is the intent of the Citizen Review Panel to not just gather information from stakeholders and produce a static report, but to also share information gathered with all stakeholders, as well as other interested entities. Reciprocal engagement with communities should be conducted with a focus on identifying and encouraging the implementation of solutions to identified challenges.

#### *FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES*

- CRP was able to connect with stakeholders in new ways this year due to the virtual environment. However, it continues to be a challenge to connect with rural communities and tribes and their stakeholders.
- CRP was unable to complete as many site visits as it would like due to the COVID-19 pandemic and CRP turnover which caused a delay in the initiation of the site visit process.
- CRP was unable to tackle some of its desired actions due to the COVID 19 pandemic and CRP turnover.

#### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

- CRP completes more site visits with a blended approach, capitalizing on the use of technology to reach stakeholders and communities where appropriate while recognizing the need to connect in person with communities who have less access to the necessary technology.
- CRP and OCS develop an understanding of the CRP and its actions so that when transitions occur incoming members of the CRP and OCS can start work more quickly.
- CRP develops plan for sharing feedback from stakeholders and OCS with the communities with which the CRP engages.



## PUBLIC OUTREACH

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The Alaska Citizen Review Panel is a mechanism for meaningful public participation in child protection policy and practice. With public outreach as a principal CRP function, the panel is an opportunity for Alaska residents to engage in a public process to assist the child protection system in being more responsive to needs at the community and statewide levels. In order to be a relevant resource in communities across the state, new and more robust techniques of public outreach should be identified and implemented. Public outreach methods should be refined to be culturally responsive to the needs and wants of families, support systems, partner agencies and communities throughout Alaska. The public outreach conducted by the panel should include both passive mechanisms (website) and active mechanisms (site visits, stakeholder meetings, community events) that are accessible to panelists statewide and year-round.

### *FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES*

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and mitigation measures, as well as CRP turnover, there has been little effort made toward public outreach aside from posting on the CRP website.
- Opportunities for public engagement are only offered through teleconference and CRP does not offer an opportunity to engage through other video conference mechanism.
- Many of the community stakeholders and the OCS staff that the CRP engaged with during site visits were unaware of the CRP's existence and its purpose.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

- CRP develops mechanism for increased public outreach including improving efforts toward public meetings and meeting the standards of the Open Meetings Act.
- CRP expands its public engagement offerings to include telephonic and video conference options.
- OCS works to educate its staff on the CRP and its role in the child welfare system by way of their monthly newsletter and/or in orientation.
- CRP continues its efforts to connect with Alaska's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities with an emphasis on Alaska Native peoples and their culture.



## COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH OCS

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The State of Alaska’s Office of Children’s Services mission states that “The Office of Children’s Services works in partnership with families and communities to support the well-being of Alaska’s children and youth. Services will enhance families’ capacities to give their children a healthy start, to provide them with safe and permanent homes, to maintain cultural connections and to help them realize their potential.” The Citizen Review Panel recognizes the shared elements of the OCS mission with the work of the CRP.

The Alaska CRP also recognizes that to best support Alaska’s children and families that are navigating the child welfare system, the CRP needs to foster and maintain a relationship with OCS. This includes developing relationships with both individual leaders and staff to create an institutional understanding of the shared priority of supporting families and protecting Alaska’s children.

### ***FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES***

- OCS experienced a change in leadership this year, as did the CRP, which created difficulties in completing panel activities.
- OCS took the time to educate the CRP on “open for services” and on the data that OCS has available for CRP to use when evaluating.
- The CRP was not fully funded this year which led to CRP activities left incomplete and delayed.
- The implementation of new regulations added increased administrative work for the CRP which included the development of policies, procedures, and operating guidelines which took time away from panel activities like site visits and other public outreach efforts.
- There was an increase in expectation of the CRP with a decrease in resources and capacity for a volunteer panel to complete.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

- OCS works toward maintaining a stance of respectful autonomy with the CRP and its membership, respecting that the CRP needs to make decisions on its activities.
- OCS and CRP work to develop better strategies to support a collaborative relationship and the CRPs autonomy.
- OCS fully funds the CRP.
- OCS works toward increasing awareness among OCS regions and workers in order to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between OCS and the CRP. This can be done by providing information in monthly newsletter “Frontline” or other mechanisms for broad communication.



## CRP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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For the Citizen Review Panel to conduct effective and impactful work it is tantamount that the panelists are aware of industry best practices, relevant legislation and public policy topics at the state and federal levels and share this knowledge with fellow panel members and community stakeholders. The CRP recognizes the value of existing resources at both the state and national level and seeks to include expertise from these resources in CRP discussions, activities, and recommendations. Individual panelists are encouraged to pursue their own subjects of interest and share information gleaned with their fellow members of the CRP. The panel may instruct the CRP Coordinator to research topics of interest.

### *FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES*

- CRP had a nearly total turnover and has new leadership; there is varied understanding of Alaska's CPS system within the panel given the new membership.
- CRP has not recruited members to represent the categories as required by the new regulations and has had difficulty meeting that requirement.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

- CRP needs to finish and finalize the policies and procedures and operating guidelines.
- CRP should develop training for new member to orient them to Alaska's CRP, the CRP history and purpose, and OCS practices, policies, and procedures.



## HEALTHY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SYSTEM

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To support the Office of Children's Services in becoming a more functional and impactful child protective services system the Citizen Review Panel recognizes that the entire system, not just case management, needs to be studied and supported. To ensure that Alaska's children receive the protection, support and quality of case management they deserve, OCS employees need a workplace that is a sustainable and supportive environment. Some areas to be explored across the state include but are not limited to: day to day worker wellness, the rate of employee turnover, and community relationships for workers.

### *FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES*

- During the pandemic when there were strict travel restrictions, OCS required assistance in rural communities to contact children and families. In some instances, Alaskan Tribes stepped in to provide this service and contacted the children and families. OCS collaborated with the tribes to support efforts in protecting children in ways OCS had not done in the past.
- Recognition of Indian Tribe Welfare Act (ICWA) worker's knowledge and expertise and partnership

with them is varied among offices and workers within those offices.

- OCS asks its frontline workers to travel to different communities than they are assigned to, which creates stress for staff; particularly impacted is their ability to complete the work of child protection in their home communities and their home life.
- Safety of workers in the field is frequently compromised with varied support from OCS when safety concerns arise.
- There is inconsistency across offices in the quality of supervision and supervisors.
- Worker turnover, especially in rural Alaska, creates inefficiencies and prevents workers from being able to effectively respond to the needs of the child welfare system.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- OCS should continue to collaborate with Alaskan Tribes and ICWA workers to support efforts in preventing child maltreatment as well as supporting children and families who are already involved in the state's CPS system.
- OCS should complete an annual evaluation and assessment of worker safety and wellness. This should include an opportunity for front line workers to offer suggestions and recommendations.
- OCS needs a mechanism for workers to share concerns about their experiences where employees feel safe to do so and are protected when doing so.
- OCS should complete a compensation assessment to review its compensation model to ensure pay is competitive and comparable to the field and to retain new and seasoned workers.
- OCS works toward improving consistency among its supervisors.

### **CONCLUSION**

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The CRP Annual Report is a public document and is distributed to all state legislators, the Office of the Governor of Alaska, the office of the Department of Health and Social Services Commissioner, OCS leadership and it is accessible to the public on the CRP website: [www.CRPAlaska.org](http://www.CRPAlaska.org)

## CRP ACRONYM LIST

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CRP – Citizens Review Panel

CAPTA – Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act

OCS – Office of Children’s Services

CFSP – Child and Family Services Plan

CSP – Child Protective Services

SAFE – Safe and Fear Free Environment

ICWA – Indian Child Welfare Act

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color