



# ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

## **OCS ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS** FINAL REPORT

2022

# Abbreviations

---



CRP- Citizen Review Panel  
CPS- Child Protective Services  
DHSS-Alaska Department of Health and Social Services  
EAP- Employee Assistance Program  
LOA- Letter of Agreement, week on week off position  
OCS- Office of Children's Services  
ORCA: Online Resource for the Children of Alaska  
PSS I & II- Protective Services Specialists

# Background

---

In its 2021-2022 Annual Work Plan, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP or Panel) identified the issue of child welfare workforce retention as a priority focus area. The Panel created action items around this focus area that related to their enduring priority categories of Reciprocal Engagement, Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System and a Collaborative Relationship with OCS. This year, as an alternative to site visits, the Panel decided to conduct a literature review and design and host a series of round table discussions with case-carrying frontline OCS staff. The intent of these discussions was to help the Panel understand the root causes of high staff turnover rates at OCS and identify potential measures that might be explored to address this critical problem in Alaska's child welfare system. The results of this process will be shared with the public, stakeholders and Alaska's policy-makers.

## Project Overview

---

### RESEARCH:

Alaska's Citizen Review Panel requested a literature review (Appendix A) on the past 15 years of child welfare worker retention related research in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons why child welfare workers leave a position or the field. Tricia Minnick, a practicum student placed at the CRP Coordinator's office by the Social Work Department at The University of Alaska, Fairbanks, conducted the literature review and provided overall support to this project. The review of research revealed that child welfare workers rarely leave the job or field for a single reason, but instead it is most often an accumulation of stressors that shape their decision to leave. When tackling retention issues, efforts should be focused on addressing worker wellness from an individualized, whole-person perspective and effectively leveraging internal support which can act as a buffer for stress, burn-out and intention to leave. In addition to the literature review, CRP members reviewed annual staff surveys, and findings from exit surveys and a longevity study that were provided by OCS. Those OCS reports and the literature review were used to inform the framework for the round table questionnaire.

### QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT:

Open-ended questions in six focus areas (Appendix B) were developed using the broad themes identified in the literature review, including the role of organizational culture in retention and the importance of looking at worker wellness from an individualized and multidimensional perspective. Special attention was paid to avoid unnecessary redundancies across the round table discussions and the previously completed OCS surveys, while also keeping in mind participants may be more open to sharing their experiences with an organization that is independent of OCS.

### PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT:

For the 2022 CRP Round Table Discussions, Protective Services Specialists I & II (case-carrying frontline workers) were identified as the target participants. To allow time for authentic engagement, the decision was made to cap each round table at 15 participants. Alaska OCS is composed of the

following five regions: Anchorage Region, Southcentral Region, Southeast Region, Western Region and Northern Region. Each region is unique, so a round table discussion was planned for each of the five regions, and workers from that specific region were invited to participate in the corresponding round table.

As the first step in the recruitment phase, OCS leadership forwarded an email from the CRP Coordinator to workers in each of the five regions. The email introduced the round table, informed the workers that the project was independent of OCS and shared the project details and RSVP form on behalf of the CRP Chair, Cameron Adams (Appendix C). An alternative option to share through writing was offered to workers who were unable to attend a round table discussion. No responses were received for the written option.

#### VIRTUAL ROUND TABLE METHODOLOGY:

Throughout all steps of the process, participants were reminded that the CRP operates independent of OCS. They were informed that no names would be associated with their responses during the development of the round table report and OCS would not have access to a list of participants. The meetings were held via Zoom. Participants were held in a waiting room and then screened for admittance using the confirmed participants list. All participants used their names during the discussions and most participated on video with a few joining via phone using audio only. Participants were notified that a recording was being made of the discussion, but it would only be used for internal review purposes during the note taking process. Recordings were not shared and were deleted upon completion of the notes for each round table discussion. No names were used in any round table reports. As an additional measure to ensure anonymity, region names that were associated with responses were removed from the following summary.

## Round Table Design

---

#### ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES:

- **Ambassador:** A different CRP member acted as ambassador for each region. They were responsible for the opening and closing remarks during each round table. They also took notes & participated in a debrief.
- **Facilitator:** The CRP Chair, Cameron Adams, was the facilitator for all five round table discussions. She explained the expectations of the meeting, procedures around confidentiality and facilitated the discussion. She took notes and participated in a debrief.
- **Observer:** The Anchorage, Southeast and Northern regions had an additional CRP member sit in as an observer. They took notes during the meeting and participated in a debrief afterward.
- **Coordinator:** The CRP Coordinator handled the technology for the round tables, took notes and facilitated a debrief after each region's round table discussion.

## FACILITATION METHODS:

1. Facilitation methods varied depending on the number of participants and level of engagement.
2. Zoom hand-raising function followed by participants being called on by facilitator
3. A “round-robin” approach of calling on all participants by name for a focus area/question
4. Encouraging participants to simply unmute and begin speaking
5. Use of the Zoom chat function was encouraged if someone was uncomfortable sharing verbally, or if there was not enough time for everyone to share verbally.

## QUESTION FORMAT:

A slide was shared on screen for each focus area (Appendix B). On the slide were open-ended questions related to that focus area. The facilitator explained the focus area, read off all of the questions and then encouraged participants to respond to the one that stood out to them the most. Participants contributed to a focus area, but not necessarily to each specific question.

## FOCUS AREAS & QUESTIONS:

### 1. Uniqueness of Region, Community & Individuals

- a. When you think of your work, what makes your community and region unique?
- b. What are some reasons you chose to work at OCS?
- c. Were there specific recruitment efforts that got your attention?
- d. Were there any differences between what you expected it to be like and what it’s really like?

### 2. Wellness

- a. What tools do you personally use to buffer the stress, burnout or secondary trauma you experience on the job?
- b. What tools does OCS/State of Alaska currently provide you to buffer and manage the stress, burnout and secondary trauma you experience?
- c. What do you wish OCS/State of Alaska would provide you to buffer and manage the stressors and secondary trauma you experience?
- d. When looking at worker wellness from a multidimensional perspective, how could OCS better support your overall wellbeing?
- e. When you think about these, how might your workplace in your region support some of these areas of wellness?

### 3. Organizational Culture

- a. What words come to mind when you think about describing the organizational culture at OCS as a whole?
- b. Would you have different words to describe the organizational culture at your specific office?
- c. What’s working?
- d. What might not be working well?

#### 4. Compensation and Benefits

- a. What could help you feel more valued at work?
- b. When you think about other jobs in your community you might qualify for, how do the compensation or other benefits compare to your current job at OCS?

#### 5. Workload and Process Improvement

- a. Do you have any ideas that might help reduce workload?
- b. Can you think of any resources, technology, location of work or logistics that could be updated to help do your job?
- c. Do you see any ways to streamline or create efficiencies with paperwork?

#### 6. Deciding to Stay or Leave OCS

- a. What factors do you think would be the most critical to help people in your positions want to stay in their jobs, and what factors do you think are the main reasons someone leaves OCS?
- b. Imagine that tomorrow you wake up to find that a miracle has happened and the child welfare system as you know it has been completely dismantled and rebuilt for the better. What changed and what was the impact of those changes on workers, children and families?  
*(Wrapping Up)*
- c. What's the public perception of the field and how could we make it more positive?
- d. How could we recruit from the community?

#### DATA COLLECTION METHODS:

1. The Ambassador, Facilitator, Coordinator and Observer (if applicable) all took notes during the round table discussion.
2. Transcripts from the Zoom chat function were reviewed.
3. All round table discussions were recorded for immediate internal review only. Once the note taking was completed for that round table, recordings were deleted to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

## Round Table Participants

---

The following table shows the number of participants and areas represented by participants for each round table discussion.

Region	Date & Time	Number of Participants	Areas Represented
Anchorage	February 23, 2022 9am-11am	3	Anchorage & surrounding service area
Southeast	February 25, 2022 9am-11am	2	Ketchikan
Southcentral	February 28, 2022 9am-11am	9	Mat-Su, Dillingham, Gakona, Kenai, King Salmon, Homer, Kodiak, Valdez
Western	March 1, 2022 2pm-4pm	5	Bethel and surrounding villages
Northern	March 3, 2022 9am-11am	8	Fairbanks & surrounding areas, Nome, Kotzebue, Utqiagvik

## Analysis

---

**Note taking:** A note taking template was provided in advance of the meetings which was broken down into the six focus areas with specific questions under each. The right side of the note taking template was to be used to note any concepts or ideas that stood out to the notetaker in that specific area. While everyone tasked with taking notes was provided with this template, some chose to take notes in a format of their choosing.

**Debrief:** After each round table discussion, everyone who took notes met together to debrief. Each question was discussed, and the group arrived at a consensus on broad takeaways for each focus area as well as notable quotes which correlated with the themes. Notes from each debrief were then compiled in a draft report for that region.

**Summary Outline:** After the completion of all the round table discussions, the reports from each region were compared for similarities and differences. Themes that consistently arose across all or most regions were identified, and differences or challenges that were unique to a particular region were also noted. The themes and differences identified across regions were put into an outline in the form of a powerpoint presentation. This draft outline was shared with CRP members and OCS leadership during the March 15, 2022 CRP-OCS Zoom meeting.

**Final Report:** That outline and the notes from each regional debrief were used to create this final report and summary of findings.

# Overall Findings

---

This section provides a summary level recap across all regions for each focus area. Due to the question format used in the round tables, participants contributed to a focus area, but not necessarily to each specific question. Some regions were more drawn to one question while other regions may have identified more with a different question in the focus area. With that in mind, the following summary of overall findings are organized by broad takeaways in a focus area, instead of by specific questions. Note: Any suggestion or recommendation in this section is on behalf of participants, not the CRP.

## FOCUS AREA 1: UNIQUENESS OF REGION, COMMUNITY, AND INDIVIDUALS

“I wanted to be a part of OCS being able to make substantial changes within the community. I want to be a part of changing the face of OCS from what it’s been in the past as an overseer.”

- Each region is unique in terms of geography, diversity and needs of the community. Workers feel that policies and procedures should be reflective of the specific region.
- There was little to no reported awareness of formal recruitment efforts on behalf of OCS.
- Many participants felt there was a lack of transparency during the hiring process. Workers felt they had been presented with an idealized version of what to expect regarding case-loads, workload and availability of support, and that version is not consistent with their reality.
- Most participants described some version of a commitment to the field/a desire to help children and families as their reason for working at OCS. Many expressed that at some point, the weight of the workload will surpass their commitment to the field and they will have to make the decision to leave.
- It was noted that the week on/week off “LOA” position was enticing as a recruitment effort, but the reality has been that they don’t actually get a week off because there isn’t anyone to cover their cases on the off week.

“People might not leave the job if it was transparently discussed at hiring.”

“I’m at OCS because I like working with kids and want to make a difference.”



## FOCUS AREA 2: WELLNESS

“I don’t work a lot of overtime and I do that on purpose. I don’t take my work home with me.”

- a participant explained the boundaries they put in place to improve wellness

- Some participants responded they had learned to prioritize wellness by putting boundaries in place around time, chatting with a peer or prioritizing exercise, but most said they do not have many or any wellness tools in place to buffer the challenges at work.
- Most participants reported a lack of awareness around wellness tools provided by OCS. Some participants mentioned the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) by name or a “mental health assistance program”, but they found it either inaccessible, unhelpful or dismissive.
- Participants in all regions responded that improved or increased access to supervision would be a way OCS could better support worker wellness.
- Improved or increased access to a mental health provider, secondary trauma support groups and mandatory time to debrief or process were discussed as ways to improve worker wellness.
- Workers consistently mentioned opportunities for team building through activities or events as a way that they thought could improve worker wellness.
- There was a discussion about the connection between worker wellness and their physical workspace and access to technology. Offices in their physical workspace feel very isolated due to being individual cubicles/offices. Laptops that don’t work unless they’re plugged in and a lack of access to technology that allows them to dictate in the field increases their stress and workload which impacts their overall wellbeing.
- Workers felt wellness could be better supported if policies and expectations were less Westernized and were more reflective of Alaska Native values. There should be more education and awareness in general around other cultures.

“We’re missing some very foundational things, like enough staff. So a supervisor’s ability to be a supervisor is limited.”

“I don’t use any tools for wellness, I just plow through.”

### FOCUS AREA 3: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- The organizational culture was described as toxic, unsupportive, disconnected, disorganized and one that encourages people to overwork themselves.

“OCS does not support our well-being. We stay because we hope to make some sort of difference.”

“I feel like there is a good picture out there that we are supported, but the reality is that it doesn’t feel that way.”

- Many participants reported there is no connection between individual offices across their region, which creates animosity.
- Workers feel there is a lot of talk about things changing, but there is very little visible action.
- Process is emphasized over looking at workers as individuals with individualized needs.
- All regions suggested team building activities as a way to improve the organizational culture.
- One region noted they appreciated recent improvements in efforts to increase diversity in the leadership team.

“None of my efforts are ever recognized, ever.”

“Activities together, like potlucks, would help a lot. We need that connection with other workers.”

### FOCUS AREA 4: COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

- When asked what could help them feel more valued at work, the top responses were:
  - » lower caseloads
  - » higher pay
  - » access to full time support staff
  - » improved access to mental health services
  - » regular access to supervisors
  - » prioritization of their safety
  - » opportunities for team building activities
  - » recognition of their work or professional growth
  - » recognition of them as individuals
  - » monetary bonuses as incentives (time at OCS, sign-on, referral ,etc)
  - » more opportunities for advancement
  - » awarded personal time off or more personal time off
  - » improved policies around travel pay
  - » support with relocation costs, housing assistance for rural workers

One worker said, “Housing assistance in rural areas or help with moving costs would make a big difference.” Another agreed, responding, “We need help with the same things we help our clients with.”

- Workers in multiple regions talked about the current use of jackets and pins as incentives. They reported negative feelings around those incentives, with some calling them “insulting”. They want monetary bonuses.

“I can’t eat a coat.”  
statement regarding the current use  
of jackets and pins as incentives

“More recognition would be nice, a focus on what  
we’re doing right and not only focusing on the  
negative.”

- Most regions discussed the importance of prioritizing the safety of workers. They would like the option of having a supervisor or another worker with them on visits where there are safety concerns. Workers in different regions shared experiences of being stranded in remote areas without support and others shared the need for the work vehicles to be updated or better maintained to make them safer.

“It’s important for us to feel safe in our roles. We have no self-protection and we often work independently. We’re at risk.”

- Workers would like more advancement opportunities that don’t require a move to a supervisory position. In particular, creating a Protective Services Specialist III position was mentioned.

## FOCUS AREA 5: WORKLOAD AND PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

“I’m on my third laptop in three months. I don’t know anybody who has a laptop battery that stays charged unplugged.”

- Leverage technology to reduce workload and improve efficiency
  - » Working laptops (many participants mentioned how their laptops could no longer hold a charge)
  - » Technology that allows them to dictate notes in the field

“Right now, I have a half an hour conversation, then I sit in my car and write my notes by hand, I drive back to the office and I sit at my desk and type it up and then input it into ORCA. That’s so much work. We need real-time data in the field.”

- » The ability to fax from the computer (or not have to fax)
- » A centralized system
  - All files from past to present digitized
  - All files and forms indexed
  - All referrals and contact would automatically be tied into this system
  - Allow access to other systems (Accurant, Vital Stats, etc.)
- » Address internet connectivity issues or adjust timeline standards to accommodate lack of connectivity
- Other ways to reduce workload & improve efficiency
  - » Full time support staff to do filing, requesting documents, etc.
  - » Prioritization of OCS records request by local police department
  - » Support in drafting court reports
  - » Review policies around the screening process to decrease unnecessary cases being screened in and/or have lower level cases managed by intake
  - » Training around drug testing and how to interpret results would cut down on the amount of time they spend trying to decipher the results that are used to make important decisions.

“Having a system centralized would be so helpful. I don’t know exactly how they do it, but I know that other states do it better.”

## FOCUS AREA 6: DECIDING TO STAY OR LEAVE OCS

“I stay because child protection is my life’s calling and this is where I want to be. I’m hoping that we can fix the system and hopefully retain more workers.”

- Participants in multiple regions again expressed the perception that new hires are misled about job expectations which increases turnover and that increasing transparency and including current workers in the hiring process could help better prepare new hires.
- The most frequent responses around why workers leave OCS had to do with a lack of support or mistreatment from management although one region strongly identified high caseloads as the main reason people leave OCS.
- Workers across multiple regions said people stay with OCS if they have access to support and good supervision.
- An ideal child welfare system would have a centralized system, it would be fully staffed, workers would feel supported, and the caseload would be lower so that there could be a focus on prevention. Most workers said they want to see OCS get to a place where they can focus on families and prevention instead of only “putting out fires”.
- Workers expressed that the public perception of OCS is negative, it could be improved by connecting with the community.

“If we could fix management, we could fix all of the other issues.”

“I’ve seen people leave for a job that pays less but offers them more respect.”

“Child welfare is my passion, but honestly most days I feel like I’m just trying to survive. I’m drowning for the most part and I really want to be able to serve our families better.”

## Next Steps

---

A copy of the Round Table Final Report will be shared with all participants, the OCS Director, Commissioner of DHSS and the Governor's office. The CRP will encourage OCS to share the final report, and their response on how they will utilize the report, with all OCS staff.

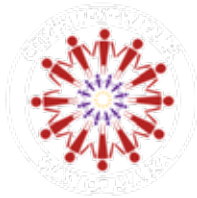
Findings from the 2022 CRP OCS Round Table Final Report will inform the recommendations that are developed as part of the CRP Annual Report. The Annual Report will be sent to OCS for response and will be made available to the public, community stakeholders and Alaska's policymakers.

## Appendices

---

Appendices for the 2022 CRP OCS Round Table Discussions Report can be accessed on the work products page of the CRP website [CRPalaska.org](https://CRPalaska.org)

- A. Child Welfare Worker Retention Literature Review
- B. Round table discussion slideshow
- C. Participant recruitment email from CPR Chair



## 2022 ROUND TABLE FINAL REPORT