



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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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.

Field Offices Visited	Dillingham
Communities Visited	Dillingham area
Dates of Visit	April 29-30, 2021
Panelists	Lucinda Alexie, Trevor Storrs, Sharon Sparks, Retchenda George-Bettisworth

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

In the Dillingham area, CRP Panelists heard from 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).

The CRP Coordinator made contact with staff at Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation, whose Child Advocacy Center serves the area, but unfortunately were not able to arrange an interview. Other stakeholders that the Panel regretfully did not reach include schools and law enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, certain changes were made to the traditional CRP site visit schedule. Interviews were conducted virtually for the first time, which resulted in expanded access and increased participation. Several newly onboarded panelists also joined in the site visit process.

The panel members recognize the challenges faces by OCS workers and want the site visit interviews to feel empowering rather than interrogative. We gathered feedback from community partners and OCS staff during our visit. We began each interview with an acknowledgement of the difficult task at hand, as well as the social, cultural, political, logistical, challenges faced by workers as they 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 2020-2025 Work Plan the CRP will be incorporating these five priorities into site visit questions and activities.

- Reciprocal Engagement
- Public Outreach
- Collaborative Relationship with OCS
- CRP Education and Development
- Healthy CPS System

OVERVIEW

Three frontline workers from the Dillingham/King Salmon field office of OCS attended a meeting with our panelists via Zoom. Workers described managing untenably high numbers of cases, limiting their ability to respond only to crisis situations.

Panelists heard from OCS supervisors via Zoom, in which supervisors shared about processes and limitations in their work.

Panelists also had the opportunity to hear from management ICWA workers through the Family Services division of Bristol Bay Native Association, over teleconference. ICWA workers described their collaborative relationships with families, and their concerns with limited and tense information sharing from OCS. They expressed willingness and ability to support the work of OCS in terms of home visits and generally a shared responsibility for cases.

Panelists met with management and staff of the Safe and Fear Free Environment (SAFE) domestic violence services center, who shared about their role in facilitating visitation and working with clients to help regain custody of children.

Foster parents attended a meeting with CRP panelists. Foster parents shared about having great difficulty making contact with their assigned case workers, including for supervised visitation and backup childcare. Foster parents were often required to take these situations into their own hands and arrange visitations without the assistance or support of OCS.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Reciprocal Engagement

Strengths:

OCS workers share:

- In terms of reunification, these workers investigate each case and follow it all the way through to family services.
- Reunification is identified as the number one goal in training and the thing that all are working for in the end, unless it isn't a possibility.

- Workers have seen some reunification efforts, but not as many as hoped.
- The tribe and ICWA play a huge role in reunification efforts, if the tribe takes on a case and becomes the caseworkers, they do a lot of work with the families to get support and work towards reunification.

ICWA workers share:

- They are fortunate to see reunifications and help with OCS efforts. They note that the tribal council supports reunifications, but only a handful, some are local but also some of them are out of state.
- They are involved in arranging and helping with visitations and have been excited to work with OCS; they all have input into the process. When they all agree that the transition is going to be okay, they do the trial visit to see if it will work long-term; they don't just jump into the reunification.
- Tribe/ICWA also supports the parents with access to addiction treatments. Even if parents have relapse, they continue to support the parents. Parents have motivation to change, ICWA workers don't condemn people if they make mistakes. All the parties involved have been helping out.
- They print out and deliver paperwork and provide supervision for visits at home or tribal office, provide transportation to court or appointments, and also conduct walk throughs of homes to ensure safety.
- They support communication with the tribe and advocate for keeping cases open if there is a chance for reunification. Often this goes outside of OCS timeline, but they get the support of tribe to give parents a chance.
- ICWA workers do public events and have healthy activities, they can arrange visitation to take place at these events and it provides a great chance for connection.
- They remind parents of paperwork, hearings, appointments and visitation schedules.
- They also make sure the kids are tribally enrolled, this is what the tribal council wants them to do.

SAFE shares:

- Some people have said that OCS is very helpful; some clients do everything they are supposed to do - they have good relationships with OCS.
- Client has to want to make an effort toward reunification, but the resources are sparse and hard to come by. There is a general sense that if the parents are willing and able to do the work they can usually get the kids back.
- Counseling services are limited, the children and adults both seriously need it, very few have regular services; they have to fly to another community to access services.

Foster parents share:

- Having ICWA and the tribe involved more lately is the single most important change that has happened, those are the folks that have been supportive, they know the cultural connections.

Challenges:

OCS supervisors report:

- Most important is to deal with the underlying trauma that began the issues.
- Need improved access to:
 - drug and alcohol treatment, it is very challenging to get a bed in recovery facility
 - healthy activities – crafting and subsistence activities

- Internet – it is too expensive. With broadband access, telehealth resources could be utilized. COVID-19 is making this more feasible and there are more resources coming.

SAFE shares:

- Reunification process is somewhat uneven, sometimes reunification is successful, the goals are reasonable, and clients can fulfill them, but sometimes the clients are cut off and they don't get a lot of support in meeting the goals. The cases are treated differently, the worker get a little biased because they know the family and the treatment is different based on what they think about the specific family.
- There are a lot more resources available in urban areas. Resources in the more rural communities are so hard to access, for behavioral health programs there are waiting lists for kids and parents, there are also no parenting classes offered in the region; technology is also limited.

Foster parents share:

- They are essentially left to fend for themselves in that they go long periods without hearing from their OCS case worker, until OCS needs something.
- It is not the fault of any individual worker, the system is set up to fail biological and foster families, children, and OCS workers themselves.
- Foster parents feel undervalued and that their opinions and information they have about the children they foster is not taken into account. Panel members heard anecdotes of surprise reunification which then failed, reunification when the children were not ready to adjust once more.
- Foster parents sought support for weekend childcare and did not receive it.
- Foster parents are not getting support of OCS in supervising visitation with biological family – foster families are taking it upon themselves to supervise these visits.
- They describe the system as punitive in that they are consistently in unsupported crisis and concerned about getting in trouble.
- They have difficulty collecting the supplies needed in the home that are required for safety checks, such as a fire extinguisher.
- Communication is poor, there are often too many people involved who don't know what is going on who are providing input than the foster parents.

Recommendations:

SAFE shares:

- To deal with the unevenness of how families are supported in reunification process, it would be better for someone who isn't part of the community to come in and make some decisions.
- If OCS could offer classes to people in communities that would be useful.

Foster parents share:

- They recommend that OCS provide welcome kits to supply new homes with necessary supplies that are above and beyond what a typical household has, such as a fire extinguisher.
- Respite for foster parents; when they have medical emergencies for instance. Some childcare options and other support is very much needed.
- Acknowledge the role that foster parents play, they are often writing case notes and contributing more than most do, especially in rural Alaska

- It is a huge commitment, and they need support, sometimes being a foster parent is too much but there is often emergencies; even when they don't have a license anymore.
- The foster parents should be consulted for input into what happens with the kids; they often have more knowledge.
- Communication is an area where they hope to have significant evaluation, maybe a needs assessment and then fundamental change and improvement. There is a disconnect between the foster parents and OCS.
- ICWA in the region is overwhelmed and it is a staffing issue; ICWA needs to have their value recognized.

Public Outreach

Strengths:

ICWA workers share:

- There was a Tribal/State Collaboration meeting in Anchorage, it was a really great meeting, and they were able to share how to better the relationships between State and tribes; they try to have a good relationship.

Recommendations:

OCS staff share:

- Staff recommends that CRP do outreach much like these interviews, however taking it further and going to supervisors and having them ask their workers to speak with CRP, also to make people aware of what CRP does.
- Staff also named local people and organizations such as BBNA that they recommend the CRP be in touch with.
- Workers are supportive of community engagement, being in a smaller village, it could be easier to get the word out. People in the communities will have a lot to say, and this would be a good opportunity to talk with the public, maybe the foster parents.
- They recommend talking to the ICWA workers and tribal leadership in the smaller communities, who could potentially spread the word.

ICWA workers share:

- They recommend sending out emails to the tribes, like BBNA and BBNC, to let them know about the panel
- One worker expressed interest in CRP meetings and Panel membership
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion drafting
- Send information and/or a representative to tribal meetings that are open; some tribes are only doing Zoom meetings.
- Attending Zoom presentations are a great idea, cuts down on need for travel.
- Instead of contacting every single tribe, go to the President/Admin meeting each year, CRP could request a spot on the agenda and could present to the entire meeting of all tribal presidents.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

Strengths:

OCS workers share:

- Togiak had families/elders come talk to the OCS workers and judges about traditions and culture.
- On King Salmon side they have great relationships with tribe.

OCS supervisors share:

- There is one lady in the region who works with the tribe; she is open to communication and travels everywhere and she is busy and it is hard; for her to do OCS check-ups. OCS has been working with the Village Council, in the villages she reaches out and isn't afraid to ask for all the resources or whatever she needs.
- Sometimes SAFE acts as a resource for former foster kids; lets them know about what is available to them.

ICWA workers share:

- Recently the OCS supervisor has included them in twice monthly case reviews, that is a wonderful idea and really includes tribes in the process.
- One worker shared that they have had better communication and relationships with OCS offices out of state than in Alaska.
- King Salmon and Dillingham workers have built good relationships and there is trust there

Challenges:

OCS workers share:

- Caseloads are way too high, there is not support. Rural workers have the same caseloads as urban workers but don't have the same resources and their cases require more time and effort being in rural areas. It's not fair and there needs to be equitable distribution of resources, we need more financial resources. They are spending so much in the cities, but rural Alaska doesn't get as much support.
- Tribes often want the kids back in the village, they are angry about it, but they don't have the resources or places to have them back in the village. Workers would also like to see the kids back in the village but if the resources aren't present, workers aren't able to support reunification.
- Sometimes alcohol abuse is ignored because they are not able to monitor it; they do not have the resources
- Supervision is spread way too thin, they are not able to get responses, but are then accountable for what happens.
- They have nothing to offer people to who need support, in the winter resources are non-existent. They are expected to make change but there are no resources to support this change.
- Community partners, ICWA and tribe, are just as burnt out and overwhelmed as [OCS] are. The one here doesn't have the support or capacity to meet the needs.
- There is often a disconnect between the ICWA workers and the tribal council, which then causes conflict between OCS and the tribes.
- They are trying to improve the information flow between OCS and ICWA workers, which doesn't always flow to tribal council members. This causes problems between OCS and main tribal leadership; then there is hurt between all parties; there could be action taken to improve this relationship.

- In Dillingham there is a lot of conflict with the tribe; one of the reasons is staff turnover; someone new is coming all the time and trust between the agency and tribe has suffered.
- The travel is significant and difficult; every day there is a new place to go; it is impossible to keep everything going; there is not chance the synthesize the information and make the reports, do the outreach, and come up with a plan.
- They are not able to focus on prevention; only able to respond to crises.
- Workers are isolated, and don't talk to many of their other colleagues.
- For example – safety plan that works for Kenai isn't doable in the more rural areas.
- In their office, they have been at 50% staffing level for 8 years, which is not sustainable. There are traveling workers lately but these cause problems with the tribes and families because there are changes all the time.
- While workers note that it would be helpful to meet with tribal members directly, some white OCS workers have concerns about their safety in doing this because of perceived racial tension.
- Having such frequent turnover erodes the trust with the tribe. Traveling workers are helpful in theory, but in practice they are seen as just another white person traveling through that tribal members don't trust and don't want to work with. They are not expected to return and continue this work.
- The maltreatment of children has gotten worse through the year.
- Because they are spread so thin, they are not able to work with the tribes as much as they would want, they cannot get all the referrals done in a timely matter like they want. They just do not have the time.
- There are some initiatives and programming being planned, they hope that it does come and that it comes soon.
- The tribes and the families ask so much of the workers but there is just no time, and we are spread so thin.

OCS supervisors share:

- The one worker is really overbooked; on the other side the tribes are resentful and feel like they don't have any say over what OCS does; their role isn't recognized.
- There could be a lack of connection or no meeting of the minds.
- There is not a strong support system for when kids age out of care; the kids choose to be on their own and then they are floating around in the community; some didn't even know they were eligible for Medicaid; there isn't a good exit program, the former foster care kids end up in the shelter due to this.

ICWA workers share:

- OCS doesn't offer information to them, they have to directly ask for it. Often they find out about things that have happened months ago, if it had been shared there would have been ways to intervene, lots of situations could have been prevented had information been shared with ICWA workers.
- Information is held back, there is a feeling that the information is being withheld from ICWA, not sure why, but it seems apparent they do not want to freely share the information. OCS doesn't value ICWA workers as much as they could.
- It is mainly the outlying regions and workers where there is distrust.
- High turnover rate of OCS workers in the Bristol Bay region is also a problem, doesn't contribute to building relationships; some workers aren't experienced working with ICWA, they don't communicate with us or follow-up with us; the

traveling workers who work week on/week off are super hard to get ahold of and there are no relationships or coordination going on with them.

- The traveling worker is often too busy, ICWA workers field calls from frustrated parents who can't reach their workers, this is degrading the level of care.
- The caseload and the expectations put on the workers completely burn people out and it is totally unsustainable. The work and the caseload put on rural Alaska workers is way too much, they cannot do it all, even very conscientious local people who would be interested in the job are hesitant because they see the level of work. There have been a couple of local workers from the region who worked for OCS but got totally burnt out and had to move on from OCS for health reasons.

Recommendations:

OCS workers share:

- They would like to see ICWA workers come visit the kids in placement; seeing the kids firsthand in placement would give them more knowledge. Funding is big issue, but it would be great to have them see the kids especially when there are permanency issues.
- If the tribe could see kids in placement, it may help them see the kids and it might bring them some comfort and see what life is like.
- Casey partnership with OCS should trickle out to rural Alaska.
- Recommend that someone reach out to Samaritan's purse, as they have a lot of resources.
- Need access to:
 - Substance abuse treatment, UA's and monitoring, programs for fathers.

OCS supervisors share:

- The former foster kids don't trust people and they are not interested in resources; they need someone face-to-face; one worker describes that she hasn't had any luck in offering resources, they need guidance, but they don't want to have anything to do with the system.
- When there is bias, a cultural orientation class could help, often there is often a language barrier that limits engagement.

ICWA workers share:

- If OCS workers include ICWA workers in ALL of their visits and create a schedule so that both ICWA and OCS can participate; this relationship and communication needs to be strengthened.
- It would help all to communicate if the OCS caseworkers weren't so overloaded. There should be more caseworkers hired.
- If OCS case workers reached out to ICWA workers, they could help, but OCS are hesitant, and ICWA staff don't know why. Information and concerns could be shared earlier, and ICWA workers are able and willing to help.
- Also, there should be more financial support for ICWA workers, they can complete some tasks much more easily and know the regions/community/culture they are working in, OCS could provide more support for these positions and rely on/value them more.
- Perhaps OCS could require workers to attend community events as part of their job, to have positive interactions with the community rather than always communicating about CPS business and crisis.

- Recommend education on Undoing Racism, Knowing Who You Are, also ICWA training for all OCS workers.
- The Compact has taken some work off of OCS, should be utilized more often and could help with worker burnout. Things like home visits, relative searches, visitation and monitoring, safety walk throughs.
- ICWA workers could do some of the home visits so the state workers don't have to travel as much. Could be cost effective for state and would acknowledge value of the tribe.

CRP Education and Development

Recommendations:

OCS workers share:

- Basic OCS training, some ICWA trainings; the initial training for social workers.
- "Attachment and Bonding" really fuels everything we do.
- BBNA has a newsletter that might be interesting to Panel members. There are also a lot of Facebook groups about all things around the communities.
- Togiak has a YouTube channel that shows what the village is like and show village life, it was helpful for a foster parent in Fairbanks to see this, so they had more context about the child and their background. Could also keep the kids connected with their communities.

Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System

Challenges:

OCS workers share:

- Supervisors are so important; right now the supervisors are very difficult and expect way too much from the workers. These have been some of the most difficult times in their careers.

Recommendations:

OCS workers share:

- It is helpful to have the opportunity to shadow other workers so new people can learn from other workers rather than not having the proper training.
- Having workers be able to travel so they can see what other areas are like and people can gain more experience.
- Money for services; more community partners.
- "We have each other, even if we don't have anyone else."

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

ICWA workers share:

- They have tremendous difficulty in finding foster homes; but it is mandatory for them to recruit foster homes as part of their work.

