



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	Kenai
Communities Visited	Kenai, Soldotna
Dates of Visit	April 23, 2021
Panelists	Cameron Adams, Sharon Sparks, Retchenda George-Bettisworth

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

In the Kenai area, 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).

The CRP Coordinator connected with the Children's Services Division of the Kenaitze Indian Tribe but unfortunately an interview with their group did not occur.

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

Nine OCS frontline workers from the region attended a meeting with our panelists via Zoom. Workers described having extremely large caseloads, and an inability to engage with cases beyond those in crisis. They are required to conduct initial assessments, which they are not trained to do, and there is little financial incentive to gain tenure after a certain point.

OCS supervisors attended a meeting with our panelists via Zoom, in which they shared about their efforts to improve services and work-life balance for their staff. There aren't opportunities to do prevention work or offer resources to help families who are identified as high-risk before a problem happens.

Panelists met with the manager of the Central Peninsula Child Advocacy Center, who shared about taking the initiative to establish and maintain positive collaborative relationships with all levels of staff at OCS.

Law Enforcement in Kenai and Soldotna provided information on their involvement, which is limited to cases where there has been harm reported against a child.

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.

Reciprocal Engagement

Strengths:

Frontline case workers share:

- They have seen successful reunifications or permanent placements, but they are still difficult, and some are still open.
- Workers report that successful cases of reunification are those where parents are accountable and recognize they need a behavior change; they engage with services.
- OCS does provide things like family contact and access to UA's to support parents
- Sometimes meetings (NA, AA) and faith-based services can help, also online parenting classes and trainings

Supervisors share:

- For initial assessments (IAs) they've tried to focus on not taking custody of kids where possible, they are focusing on keeping families together when they can. Their goal is to work with the families and the tribe to keep the kids at home.

- What they do a good job of right now is collaborating with all the parties involved in the case, they get buy-in from the other players like the guardians ad litem (GALs), the parents, the tribe, and the attorneys.
- They do a pretty good job of finding permanent placements, the federal guidelines are difficult to meet but they try. Permanency specialists work with other workers to support efforts toward reunification.
- When the parents hit the ground running and are engaged immediately and change their mindsets about responsibilities; there is a lot of success with reunifications.
- When there are available services for parents it is really helpful, but the delay because of lack of space makes it difficult for parents to get better.

CAC shares:

- OCS is part of their multi-disciplinary team; they have 2 seats
- Whenever there is a PSR, OCS works with SPHH CAC.
- They have a lot of communication with OCS on a daily basis; have a very healthy relationship with OCS. Overall, their relationship is really positive.
- If they are on case with OCS, they have a process, first they have a discussion as a team, then they evaluate the roles and responsibilities.
- Once a month they have their MDT meetings about each case, OCS has seats at the table.
- Their communication has always been good; they do investigations in collaboration with OCS

Challenges:

Workers report:

- It can be especially hard to access services in rural Alaska, there are only a handful of providers of treatment services and even harder for parents to get support.
- When treatment services and support aren't available, parents lose their motivation and chances for reunification are low.
- When someone is ready for treatment and there isn't anything available it is often hard to pursue reunifications.

Supervisors report:

- There is a backlog with the AG's, trials get continued and continued, they don't have enough capacity in the AG offices
- Sometimes one parent will be doing well, but the other won't and it will cause backsliding; they need to find buy-in and the parents have to be engaged.
- The providers have really long waitlists and there are waiting periods with the court and these delays compound on the difficulties and parents lose motivation to do all that is required to get custody.
- Also staff turnover causes problems when case had to be taken over by a new worker and there is distrust among the parents.
- Worker turnover contributes to the delays.

CAC shares:

- There are some frustrations with the case IA process.
- They see very little of the family reunification process; when the case is with family services it slips away from the CAC

- If people are in foster care system, they have to do some reaching out to get updates on the family or the children.

Recommendations:

CAC shares:

- When the case is first new and gets to the team, they all work together collaboratively; but once it goes to family services (“upstairs”) there is a disconnect. OCS might benefit by having the CAC and other organizations continue to be involved once the cases move on.
- When it is at the team level, all the team members have information to share, all that does is help everyone coordinate; not to duplicate services and confuse the family and children.
- The disconnect is harmful in many ways; for example, when there are siblings still in the home, they want to keep the family dynamics moving and would like to keep the families in contact, but there is a break in the connection sometimes when the cases are moved to family services.
- There is help out there that they don’t use; their services could be useful beyond just the initial assessment and investigation process, even as they are moving forward through the system and the process.

Public Outreach

Strengths:

Supervisors share:

- Frontier Community Services is a service provider that they work with very often
- The GALs in the region work with OCS pretty closely
- There are coalitions that work with OCS to support their work, one is called “Chosen” they support the clients that work with OCS. Their goal is to increase resilience in the community. OCS engages with the coalition as a member.
- They often work with law enforcement, also the tribe.

Challenges:

CAC shares:

- CRP has little visibility on the Peninsula.

Recommendations:

CAC shares:

- Perhaps there could be someone from their communities on the panel. This could create a real, significant presence.
- Another way to increase visibility would be to engage organizations like the CAC; informing the community and asking people to assist.
- CRP should participate in conferences, events, and trainings that are offered; it would be a good way to get the word out down on the peninsula.
- CAC wanted to know if CRP members would attend if they were invited to functions or conferences.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

Strengths:

OCS workers share:

- Working with law enforcement has been pretty productive and successful.

Challenges:

Workers share:

- Court system in the region is extremely adversarial; it is difficult to constantly defend their position
- The judges may not always be neutral, they often make decisions not based on OCS opinions and evidence
- Parent attorneys fight about everything and that is difficult; sucks time away from working on the cases.
- Lack of knowledge from the court system, OCS is supposed to be the largest source of information; often they can't refute things that are said during the hearings.
- There is a large amount of compromise between the AG and the parents, sometimes OCS isn't always comfortable with the compromises.
- The AGs are often inexperienced; they gain experience, but they always take the path of least resistance.
- When OCS has to fight with their own attorney it causes conflict; they aren't taken as seriously that they would like.
- They are so backed up, there are cases that should have been decided last year but are still not decided; it definitely affects the status of children in their care. Affects the number of reunifications and placements
- The continuous family contact when cases are continued is really traumatic for the children, when there is termination in the future.

CAC shares:

- In this region, working with the tribes is difficult for everyone, community agencies as well as OCS.
- The CPS system is also within the tribe, and sometimes it creates mix-ups; it is a confusing system for everyone involved.

Recommendations:

CAC shares:

- CRP could improve outreach into communities, too many times the organizations reach out to OCS and offer help but it's a two-way street.
- In our region, our MDT creates really good connections, there is a 22-member team of organizations, agencies, etc.
- They need to step beyond that and initiate the relationships with local organizations.

CRP Education and Development

Recommendations:

CAC shares:

- There are meetings and gatherings that happen, there are a lot of support groups and colleague groups, they have meetings and conferences and chances to share.
- CRP may be able to attend and do outreach, CRP should be aware.
- There is a conference down on the Peninsula in the fall, that might be a good opportunity for CRP to participate.
- Recommends that all OCS workers have increased training in child development, they try to plug that hole at the CAC.

Healthy Child Protective Services (CPS) System

Strengths:

Workers share:

- Supervision affects turnover, when there is a good supervisor, it is much easier
- Supervision in their region is really good and successful.

Supervisors share:

- They are trying to institute programs, things like extra time off and additional funds; but these incentives are not enough.
- In their region, there seems to be an upswing in how workers are doing; the job is so stressful, but they seem to be doing ok because there is a positive environment.
- When they get a referral for a family they sometimes immediately recommend and provide referrals so families can access services.

Challenges:

Workers share:

- While one worker shared that they haven't been concerned about safety so far, another worker describes not feeling safe at all and has been subject to racially motivated threats in the field. This worker hasn't felt protected or that this behavior was addressed. It was unclear who perpetrated the violent behavior.
- There are efforts to have people work in partnerships, but this is hard because it puts other cases on the back burner; there is also policy that the workers check-in with their supervisors for safety reasons.
- There are sometimes cases where Family Services have to do the IAs and it is a problem. When it is a family services case, they have to do the related IAs, as a practice they have been asked to do others in other areas as well.
- This causes job dissatisfaction and makes people not want to do the jobs; it affects job retention rates and workers often leave. The Family Services workers don't want to do IA's, the FS workers also haven't been trained in IA.
- They aren't confident that they can make the right decisions for the kid and they don't have the trainings and the skills to do initial assessments.
- Workers being sent to help in other offices is a problem because it isn't in the job description; they are "volun-told" to travel to other areas, sometimes rural villages.

They understand there is shortages of workers, but they already have their caseloads, and those cases get behind when they have to travel, they don't get paid extra for the extra effort.

- Once you get to 6 years there is little ability to grow and little incentive for sticking around. The longer someone stays, the harder it is to pay someone more; cost to keep an experienced worker is less than training new staff.
- Issues with evaluations and raises evaluations are not done and then raises end after a certain tenure.

Supervisors share:

- There aren't opportunities to do prevention work or work with families who are identified as high-risk before a problem happens.
- There is stuff out there and places where people can access services ahead of time, but it is not publicized.
- OCS doesn't provide a function where parents can reach out for support and get assistance, in other states they have things like that, there isn't a way for parents to get help ahead of time.
- OCS just doesn't have the capacity to handle anything ahead of time, their work is reactive, and they just respond to reports as they come in.
- When there is a big push for data from management; it seems, they forget about the individuals and how unique each case is; the staff need to worry about families and child safety rather than collecting data. They simply don't have time for that.
- DATA - It takes time to collect data and the data needs to be more removed from that, it's not important for the frontline workers to have to have understanding of how the data works and what it means. Sometimes it feels like management forgets things like that because they aren't on the front lines.

Recommendations:

Workers:

- Family Services emphatically shares that they are not equipped to do initial assessments.
- Emphatically recommend assignment of smaller caseloads and hiring more workers.
- Judges need to get experience in what OCS does, they don't understand what they do and so the decisions are sometimes not informed
- Judges also need to gain more experience; stop continuing cases and allowing them to be delayed.
- Workers recommend paying people more.

Supervisors:

- Weekly staff meetings but checking in with workers daily and making sure they are ok; just showing employees that you care and have normal conversations with them.
- Sometimes because of the job they are wrapped up in such negative stuff, there is a need to have a conversation that just normalizes life.
- Periodically join in with staff and allow them to goof off and relax during the day.
- COVID-19 has made it a bit more difficult to get together; but they have adapted.
- Allow workers to be flexible, more time off and find ways to make sure workers stay healthy.

- Even if there was just a hotline that could screen out reports and maybe refer them to another agencies; OCS might know who all of the service providers.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

The following services were described as available to children by frontline OCS staff:

Strengths:

Workers share:

- OCS uses same providers to provide counseling, therapy, equine therapy, mental/emotional assessments, referrals for speech therapy, etc.
- Addressing both medical, dental, and psychological health - They also do neuro-psychological evaluations
- Assistance with education
- Covid has opened up telehealth resources which has been very beneficial

Challenges:

- The following types of services have limited availability:
 - therapeutic foster care, which was noted to be helpful in Anchorage.
 - therapists who specialize in trauma-informed care, waitlist of over a year.
 - Play therapists are also especially helpful; lack of these in the region
- The children who need help eventually get it, but there is a lag time and sometimes that can cause a lot of emotional turmoil
- In rural areas, there is sometimes no resources at all, so they have to send away the kid from the community