

# 2022-2023 ANNUAL REPORT



**Citizen Review Panel  
State of Alaska**

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# ABOUT THE CRP

**AUTHORITY:** The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP or Panel) is federally mandated through the 1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and is 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.

**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 Citizen Review 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 Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP); Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and any other criteria that the Citizen Review Panel considers important to ensure the protection of children.
- **CONDUCTS PUBLIC OUTREACH** and gathers public comments on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
- **ADVOCATES** for relevant actions that help improve the child protection services system in Alaska.

## 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. State regulation specifies that the CRP should be composed of a minimum of five members and should not exceed nine members (7 ACC 58.020) Members elect officers from among the membership. Term limits are established through state regulations.

### PANEL MEMBERSHIP DURING 2022-2023 INCLUDED:

**CAMERON ADAMS (CHAIR) -**  
ANCHORAGE

**LUCINDA ALEXIE (VICE-CHAIR) -**  
BETHEL

**RETCHENDA GEORGE-BETTISWORTH -**  
FAIRBANKS

**KIMBERLEE SAUNDERS -**  
KODIAK

**SHARON SPARKS -**  
NOME

**TREVOR STORRS -**  
ANCHORAGE

**COLIN UNDERWOOD -**  
ANCHORAGE






**KATHLEEN YARR -**  
KETCHIKAN



5 OCS REGIONS  
 PHOTO CREDIT: OFFICE OF CHILDREN’S SERVICES, ALASKA

## 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:

				
<b>Reciprocal Engagement</b>	<b>Public Outreach</b>	<b>Collaborative Relationship with OCS</b>	<b>CRP Education and Development</b>	<b>Healthy CPS System</b>

## 2022-2023 CRP ACTIVITIES

### PROGRESS ON 2022–2023 WORKPLAN

- Below is an overview of the progress made by the CRP on the current workplan.
- Some activities are on-going and will continue to be included in future workplans, while some were completed.
- More details on the public meetings and site visits can be found following this overview.

Priority	2021-2022 Workplan Activities	Progress
Healthy CPS System	Assess organizational culture and wellness through round table discussions with OCS supervisors and regional managers	COMPLETED – see <a href="#">“2022-2023 Roundtable Report”</a>
	Compile and review complaints against OCS received by the CRP; look for systemic issue and use identified issues to guide recommendations	6 complaints received, reviewed at annual meeting; no systemic issues identified
Reciprocal Engagement	Increase awareness of the CPR through connection with the Child Welfare Academy	Panel will continue outreach to the Child Welfare Academy (CWA) at UAA to explore collaboration
	Connect with participants from the 2022 CRP round table discussions around implemented changes	COMPLETED
	Engage with OCS staff newsletter through readership and contributions	CRP published article in OCS newsletter on behalf of CRP and info on CRP is embedded in newsletter
Public Outreach	Present to Alaska Legislators on the CRP and workforce retention	COMPLETED
	Establish CRP presence on OCS website	COMPLETED (CRP docs are on front page of site.)
	Ensure diversity in membership recruitment	Currently at 7 members and need to recruit 2 more
	Engage with community stakeholders in all regions of Alaska	This will be a continuing activity; expand distribution of annual report
Collaborative Relationship With OCS	Follow-up with OCS on last year’s recommendations and programs that have been implemented	COMPLETED
	Gather information from OCS on organizational culture and wellness metrics	OCS has provided the CRP with several sets of metrics
CRP Education & Development	Attend CRP 101 presentation from the Capacity Building Center for States	COMPLETED
	Continual engagement with the Capacity Building Center for States	Ongoing; all members on listserv
	Attend CRP National Conference	Cancelled in 2022; select members plan to attend in 2023
	Annual review of CRP policies & procedures	COMPLETED (most work done during first quarterly meeting)



## QUARTERLY MEETINGS

- Due to the geographic dispersion of the CRP members and a focus on accessibility, meetings were held either completely remote or in a hybrid format with in-person and Zoom attendance options.
- The October and January Quarterly Meetings were held via Zoom.
- The fall Annual Retreat and the summer Annual Meeting, which serve as the other two quarterly meetings, were held in a hybrid format, with some members online and some meeting in-person in Anchorage.
- All quarterly panel meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time and location were announced prior to the meeting and were posted on the CRP's website.
- In January of 2022, meetings began to be publicly posted on the State of Alaska's Online Public Notices website <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices>.
- Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website: [Work Products](#)

## MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS

- In order to maintain a healthy working relationship and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy, the CRP meets monthly via Zoom with the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS.
- They share mutual progress, discuss latest developments, and respond to mutual queries.
- The monthly meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time and location were announced prior to the meeting and were posted on the CRP's website.
- Meetings began to be publicly posted on the State of Alaska's Online Public Notices website <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices> in January of 2022. Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website: [Work Products](#)

## SITE VISITS

- In previous years, the CRP has conducted in-person site visits to OCS regional and field offices to gather information on practices and assess working relationships between OCS and its local partners.
- During the 2021 Annual Retreat, the panel began reflecting on the site visit process and prioritized the topics of worker retention. The past two years have the panel has used a new approach allowing panel members to directly connect with frontline child welfare workers, managers, and supervisors.
- During 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, this approach replaced the usual site visits with a series of hosted round table discussions focused on the issues of worker retention, employee wellness, and any location-specific concerns. The panel will revisit the site visits and round table designs at their fall 2023 annual retreat as they develop the 2023-2024 work plan.
- The CRP hosted 5 round table discussions around organizational culture and wellness in 2022-2023. One discussion was held with each of the following groups: PSS I/II (past participants), Regional Managers, Staff Managers, Urban Supervisors and Rural Supervisors. For the purpose of these discussions, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Wasilla, and Juneau were considered urban offices

and the remaining offices were considered rural offices.

- A significant amount of the Citizen Review Panel’s activities this year involved the research, design, and implementation of the round table discussions on worker retention. As such, the bulk of the following recommendations around retention and recruitment came from that process.
- The full 2022-2023 Round Table Report can be found on the CRP website: [Work Products](#).

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Citizen Review Panel’s findings and recommendations for 2022 - 2023 are organized under each enduring priority.

- **FINDINGS** include observations made by the CRP while carrying out its functions and updates on activities performed throughout the year.
- **RECOMMENDATIONS** identify ways to move forward to address the findings or to continue work on important existing initiatives.





### INTRODUCTION:

The Citizen Review Panel aims to support the Office of Children’s Services in becoming a more functional and impactful child protective services system. In the five-year Long-Range Plan that was developed in 2019, the CRP suggested exploration of the areas of day-to-day worker wellness, the rate of employee turnover, and community relationships for workers. High staff turnover continues to be a challenge faced by child welfare systems nationwide. In 2022, OCS Division Operations Manager, Travis Erickson, shared with the Panel that Alaska OCS reached a 60% turnover rate for case-carrying staff in quarter two of this fiscal year. This year at the 2023 Annual Meeting, the new staff turnover rate at the end of quarter 1 was 54% which is an improvement would not be considered stable until the turnover rate is in the 30% range.

TO ENSURE THAT ALASKA’S CHILDREN RECEIVE THE PROTECTION, SUPPORT, AND QUALITY OF CASE MANAGEMENT THEY DESERVE, OCS EMPLOYEES NEED A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND A WORKPLACE THAT IS SUSTAINABLE.

Understanding that a strong and stable workforce improves outcomes for children and families, the CRP identified the issue of workforce retention as its primary focus for 2021-2022 and continued this focus in 2022-2023.

The CRP hosted six roundtable discussions around organizational culture and wellness in 2022-2023. To encourage authentic engagement, the decision was made to host individual discussions with each level of staff. One discussion was held with each of the following groups: PSS I/II (past participants), Regional Managers, Staff Managers, Urban Supervisors and Rural Supervisors. For the purpose of these discussions, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Wasilla, and Juneau were considered urban offices and the remaining offices were considered rural offices. The following sections highlight the experiences shared during the 2022-2023 round table discussions. The findings section outlines the strengths we heard reflected, as well as the primary issues where the panel sees potential for improvement. The recommendations relate to these areas for improvement and provide guidance on how to make progress that comes directly from the workers who participated.

### FINDINGS:

#### STRENGTHS:

- Staff at all levels were clearly dedicated to healthy and safe children and families.
- Managers reported feeling supported by colleagues and that they collaborated well together despite challenges.



## AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

### *Frontline workers:*

- Staff consistently expressed a sense of undervaluation and lack of appreciation.
- Insufficient provision of wellness time, with limited availability and dependence on workers' initiative and funding.
- A high number of vacancies result in workers being assigned tasks beyond their training and expertise.
- Continues to be a great need for access to mental health services due to the nature of the work.
- Several concerns arose regarding inconsistencies in handling critical incident debriefing.
- A perceived lack of follow through on promised changes such as:
  - New positions
  - More bonuses
  - Access to a mental health clinician
  - Changes to the on-call system
- Workers feel disconnected and disempowered; they don't feel they are included in any decision-making processes.

### *Managers and Supervisors:*

- The foremost challenge lies in the severe shortage of staff.
- The lack of emphasis on a "culture of wellness" at OCS neglects the well-being and retention of managers and supervisors.
- The current pay structure, benefits, and lack of support fail to incentivize staff to stay or promote open positions to others.
- Managerial and supervisory training offered is inadequate in preparing them for their daily responsibilities.
- Cumbersome and overly bureaucratic systems prevent OCS from being strategic and responsive, such as the timely hiring of qualified applicants and slow response times to requests.
- Unreliable technology and a lack of resources further burden staff with heavy workload.
- Participants feel like decisions are made without input from the people they impact.
- Middle management lacks awareness of roles and responsibilities, causing confusion about who is accountable for specific tasks.
- There is a vast difference between service provision in rural and urban locations; rural perspectives are frequently overlooked or not included in policy decisions, program designs, and new processes or regulations.
- Improved descriptive and transparent communication from OCS leadership is crucial in minimizing miscommunications with managers and staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **DEDICATED AGENCY IMPROVEMENT TEAM** - Consistent feedback from interviews highlighted the pervasive presence of a negative agency culture as a root cause of many of the issues OCS faces related to hiring and retaining qualified staff. Due to the already heavy workload of leadership, we suggest a specific team of 2-4 individuals be formed with the sole responsibility being to implement the various strategies required to reverse the high staff turnover rate.
- **COMMUNICATIONS** - Encourage greater connectivity between leadership and staff by having more in-person and all-staff meetings.

- **TRANSPARENCY** - Increase transparency; keep staff updated on what is working well at OCS and what is not. Conduct exit interviews independent from OCS so departing employees can be more honest and forthcoming.
- **BENEFITS AND BONUS STRUCTURE** - Explore the existing bonus structure and evaluate the actual effectiveness. Is it motivating to staff to participate? How can bonuses be more enticing? Look in to opportunities to implement the [Supporting Healthcare Access through Loan Repayment Program \(SHARP\)](#) incentives throughout OCS workforce.
- **EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY GROUPS** – Advocacy groups could potentially help with communication and workplace decision-making. The panel recommends that strengthening such groups could increase feelings of employee empowerment if they are accessible and representative. There is an existing policy group. Does the existing policy group have the correct representatives, and do they fairly represent staff? How could CRP work with this group and help strengthen advocacy efforts?
- **MANAGEMENT TRAINING** – Implement a mandatory training for urban and rural managers and supervisors that must be completed within 6 months of taking on the supervisory role. The training should have a focus on learning effective communication styles, both for their work with families and for their role in managing and supporting a team. Including a cultural component where possible would help with transitions between regions, community outreach and relationship building.
- **TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS:** OCS should develop and implement a comprehensive technology roadmap that includes current and projected IT needs, how technology will be utilized to improve services, and how technology will be refreshed as equipment ages. In addition, the plan should outline the annual expected cost which is then incorporated into OCS’s annual budget.
- **INTEGRATION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICES:** OCS should evaluate how they are integrating cultural competency as a standard practice in rural communities to ensure their offices and processes are aligned with the communities.





## RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

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### INTRODUCTION:

It is the intent of the Citizen Review Panel to not just gather information from stakeholders and produce a static report, but to engage reciprocally and share information collected with community stakeholders, legislative bodies, and other interested organizations and entities.

All participants in the 2022-2023 CRP/OCS Round Table discussions will be provided with a copy of the summary report. The round table report as well as the 2022 – 2023 CRP Annual Report will be sent to the OCS Director, DHSS Commissioner, and the Governor of Alaska. Both reports will be posted on the CRP website for public access.

### FINDINGS:

- A CRP member published an article in the OCS newsletter on behalf of CRP and the CRP contact information is now embedded in to the newsletter.
- CRP members contacted the Child Welfare Academy (CWA) and will continue developing the relationship and following up.
- The CRP successfully completed 6 roundtables with 38 total participants. Findings from these roundtables can be found on the CRP website: Work Products
- Hosting round table discussions independent of OCS allowed authentic engagement and honest responses from participants.
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences and workers reported a desire to be involved in finding solutions to some of the problems identified.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CULTURAL ASSESSMENT OF THE WORKPLACE:** Work with OCS to encourage conducting a cultural assessment of the workplace; or work with them to design an assessment and hire a contractor qualified to conduct an assessment.
- **RECONNECT WITH OCS ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANTS:** The CRP will continue to connect with those who participated in past round tables.
- **OCS NEWSLETTER:** CRP will continue to engage with the OCS staff newsletter through outreach efforts, sharing relevant information, and panel member contributions.
- **WEBSITE INFORMATION:** Work with OCS web/tech staff so that the information on the OCS website directs traffic towards the full CRP website rather than just providing links to pdf documents.



### INTRODUCTION:

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 provides 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:

- CRP Chair Cameron Adams presented to the Alaska Legislators on the CRP and the workforce retention round tables.
- The panel worked to establish a CRP presence on OCS website to promote panel accessibility.
- The Panel continues to work on ensuring diversity in membership recruitment. There are currently at 7 members and need to recruit 2 more; this will continue to be on the workplan action list.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **UPDATE CRP WEBSITE:** The CRP will assist coordinator with a website rebuild so that it is more user-friendly and accessible. The CRP will work on search engine optimization (SEO), increasing traffic, and posting relevant resources on the page for the public to access.
- **REACH OUT TO STAKEHOLDERS:** Panel members plan to reach out to stakeholders in their respective regions; this will be a continuing activity as public outreach proceeds.
- **EXPAND REPORT DISTRIBUTION:** This year the CRP will work towards and expanded distribution list for the Annual Report to stakeholders beyond legislators; this should include other organizations focused on child welfare in Alaska.
- **COLLABORATION WITH OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE:** Explore collaboration with Ombudsman's office in next workplan and understand the process for reviewing complaints and sharing information on any themes or systemic issues.
- **OCS GRIEVANCE PROCESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF BASIC PROCESSES:** Review changes made to the OCS grievance process and explore ways to educate panel members about basic OCS processes more generally.
- **HOLD COMMUNITY CAFES DURING SITE VISITS:** Have community café conversations to discuss OCS capacity building and focusing on workforce perspective: What do they need? What needs to be done differently? Explore what is going on in the region/community through multiple conversations to assess what the issues are and what are the most crucial needs.
- **REEVALUATION OF PUBLIC NOTICING OF MEETINGS:** ensure meetings are accessible to members of the public to facilitate public participation.





## COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH OCS

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### INTRODUCTION:

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 as they navigate 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:

- The CRP followed-up with OCS on last year’s recommendations and were updated as to the progress made on each priority and the programs or activities that have been implemented
- OCS provided CRP with metrics on organizational culture and wellness.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT WITH OCS:** Engage leadership through continued OCS attendance at CRP planning, quarterly, and monthly meetings. Explore options for additional round table sessions with frontline workers and managers.
- **HOLD COMMUNITY CAFES DURING SITE VISITS:** Have community café conversations to discuss OCS capacity building and focusing on workforce perspective: What do they need? What needs to be done differently? Explore what is going on in the region/ community through multiple conversations to assess what the issues are and what are the most crucial needs.
- **WORK WITH OCS TO EXPLORE AND UNDERSTAND PROCESSES:** Panel members want to learn more about OCS processes (with a priority being the grievance process) potentially through holding educational sessions at the quarterly meetings. Each meeting would be a different topic, and OCS staff could guide the panel members through the basics for a better understanding.



## CRP EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

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### INTRODUCTION:

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.

### FINDINGS:

- CRP members attended the CRP 101 presentation from the Capacity Building Center for States.
- All CRP members are subscribed to the Capacity Building Center listserv for continuing education.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CRP CAPACITY-BUILDING:** Continual engagement with the Capacity Building Center for States; encourage all panel members to review the opportunities.
- **ATTEND CRP NATIONAL CONFERENCE:** Send selected members to national conference as funding allows.
- **ANNUAL REVIEW OF CRP POLICIES & PROCEDURES:** Review with new panel members and ensure that all panel members are familiar with the regulations and policies governing the CRP.
- **EDUCATIONAL SEGMENTS:** The CRP will propose dedicating 30 mins during quarterly meeting to educational topics from OCS and other partner agencies.



## 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)

### **Acronym List**

CAPTA - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act  
CFSP - Child and Family Services Plan  
CPS - Child Protective Services  
CRP - Citizen Review Panel  
FAN - Facilitating Attuned Interactions  
OCS - Office of Children's Services  
PSS - Protective Services Specialists  
SSA – Social Services Associates