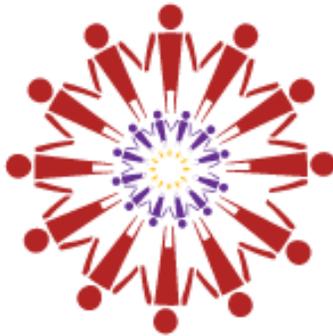


WORK PLAN

2015-2016

Approved on October 6, 2015



Alaska Citizen Review Panel

212 Front Street, Suite 100, Fairbanks, AK 99701

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.

www.crpalaska.org

About the Panel

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, available on the Panel's website.

FUNCTIONS: The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems to be more responsive to community needs and opportunities in providing child protection services through evaluation and public outreach.

Alaska child protection system is state-administered and state-operated. The Office of Children Services (OCS) within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS) is the designated child protection agency at the state level.

The Panel is neither a grievance redress mechanism nor an audit mechanism, and thus is not equipped to address any concerns or situations involving individual cases or contracts. Where applicable, the Panel may review individual cases and contracts to examine systemic issues.

STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP: Membership on the Panel is voluntary and expected to represent the diversity of the state. The Panel selects its own members through a formal recruitment process. Members elect a Chair and Vice Chair from among the membership. While members are expected to serve for at least two years, there are no stipulated term limits.

STAFF SUPPORT: Information Insights, Inc. provided staff support under a contract with the State of Alaska.

PRIMARY FUNCTIONS OF THE ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

Evaluates the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under:

- The State Plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under 42 U.S.C. 5106a(b);
- Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and
- Any other criteria that the CRP considers important to ensuring the protection of children

Conducts public outreach and gathers public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving children and family services.



Introduction

This document outlines the proposed work and annual calendar of the Alaska Citizen Review Panel for the year 2015-2016. This document consists of three main sections: goals, calendar, and other important issues.

Goals: A set of 4-6 goals are identified each year. Goals either address one or more components of the child protection practice model in Alaska, or are focused on the internal functions of the Panel. During the course of its work, the Panel often identifies issues or concerns for deeper examination at a later time. A list of these concerns has been maintained over the years and serves as a primary source of major topics for focus for the Panel. In addition, goals from the previous year may continue to be relevant or may not have been fully addressed. All potential goals are discussed by the Panel before adopting 4-6 goals for the year. Each goal, as stated in the work plan, may be very broad, vague, and may contain multiple sub goals. As the Panel works through each goal, they will be further specified, may be narrowed, or broadened.

GOALS FOR THE YEAR 2015-2016

Goal 1: Explore the evolving relationships between Tribal organizations and and Office of Children Services (OCS).

Goal 2: Strengthen panel's skills and organizational policies and capacities.

Goal 3: Determine whether current and former foster parents and agency partners' experiences align with OCS foster care policies.

Goal 4: Evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the new administrative review process.

Other major work: While goals define the major part of the year's work, the Panel also keeps track of several organization performance indicators and addresses several other issues of importance that may surface during the course of the year. Each year's annual report provides specific content on these issues. Potential issues are listed for this year.

In addition, the Panel also conducts surveys to collect public input, maintains and manages an active website, and presents at various venues to increase public awareness about the Panel's work and functions.

Calendar: The Panel meets quarterly, as required by the mandate. In addition, the Panel meets with OCS senior leadership each month, conducts site visits, presents to the legislature, and attends the national CRP conference. While the dates may change due to scheduling conflicts or other reasons, the Panel tries to follow this calendar.



Goals

GOAL 1: Explore the evolving relationships between Tribal organizations and and Office of Children Services (OCS)

Alaska is home to 229 federally recognized Alaska Native tribes, located in communities across the state, and which collectively form the largest minority of the state. With diverse languages, cuisines, customs, geographical contexts, and governance structures, each tribe has unique opportunities and challenges in meeting the needs of its population. As opposed to most tribes in the lower 48 states, Alaska Native tribes do not have territorial jurisdictional boundaries.¹ Tribal jurisdiction is primarily applicable to their enrolled or otherwise associated members.² Child protection, along with several other services, is an important service component for all tribes in Alaska. All members of a tribe are eligible for child protection services that the tribe may offer.

Historically, since statehood in 1959, all child protection services in Alaska were administered and offered by the State of Alaska through a designated child protection agency. The Office of Children Services (OCS) within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS) is currently the designated agency. While the state continues to increase the scope and reach of these vital services, many tribes, through diverse governance arrangements and agreements, offer varying degrees of child protection services to their membership. Despite increased availability and accessibility of services, Alaska Native children continue to be disproportionately represented in the child protection system. Since members of any tribe residing in the state are also served by OCS, working relationships between tribes and OCS are a critical factor in the quality of service provision to children and families in need of aid.

While there are several success stories of OCS-tribal relationships, many more challenges remain at all levels of service provision. The Tribal-State Working Group, a forum established to mend and build working relationships between OCS and tribes, has been meeting for over two decades. Few tribes assumed exclusive jurisdiction over child protection cases with varying success. Many tribes and tribal entities receive grant funds from or through OCS for providing vital services. Some others have contractual relationships with OCS. Most recently, tribal entities have been assuming responsibilities for foster care payments through Title IV-E Maintenance Program Agreements.

Since its inception, the Citizen Review Panel has consistently noted the challenges of OCS-tribal relationships. Every site visit each year consistently notes the weak or haphazard OCS-tribal relationships at the local level. A survey of ICWA workers last year³ found that OCS-tribal relations at the local level are quite inconsistent. The Panel's recommendations over the last several years directly or indirectly suggested the need for improved OCS-tribal relationships.

¹ Metlakatla is the only Indian reservation in Alaska. Few other tribes have differing degrees of territorial jurisdiction through various mechanisms. Lack of territorial jurisdiction is an important determinant of how they can and do serve their children in need of aid.

² Membership is defined by each tribe and it varies by tribe.

³ CRP conducted a survey of ICWA workers at the BIA Providers' Conference in December 2014. Results were reported in "*Local child protection system in Alaska's communities: Results from a survey*", a CRP report published in January 2015.



Despite many references over the years, the spectrum of these relationships have not been systematically examined by the Panel. This goal is intended to allow such a systematic examination.

Goal 2: Strengthen the panel’s skills and organizational policies and capacities.

Alaska Citizen Review Panel recognizes the need for consistent, structured, and responsive operations of the Panel. The Panel was established in 2001 and produced its first annual report in 2002. OCS provided staff support in the early years, but private contractors have been providing staff support through a contract with OCS since 2005. The Panel has always been independent and quite resourceful. It always maintained a working relationship with the OCS while managing strong support from the legislature. However, as any operation would, Alaska CRP had much room for improvement.

The Panel began to take a critical look at its own operations in 2012 and implemented a series of changes to improve its effectiveness and meet its mandate:

- Regularized its calendar,
- Met more frequently,
- Met with OCS senior leadership every month,
- Developed and adopted Operating Guidelines,
- Standardized many operational documents,
- Developed templates for its regular operations such as site visits, monthly meetings, etc., and,
- Instituted the “work plan” as a guiding document for its work through the year.

This year, the Panel decided to examine its own work and operations in a more systematic way and develop standards of operation. This goal will allow the Panel to suggest improvements in its own policies to be more effective and meet its mandate.

Goal 3: Determine whether current and former foster parents and agency partners’ experiences align with OCS foster care policies.

Resource Families are families that provide foster care. During the year 2014-2015, the Panel began examining OCS’ policies related to foster care. Given the Panel’s limited capacity, the Panel could only examine policies for recruitment and retention of resource families.⁴ While that was informative, it was clear that providing foster care is a complex enterprise involving multiple agencies, community leadership, and a number of resource families.

This year, the Panel intends to reach out to resource families and other agency partners that work with OCS to understand their experiences interacting and collaborating with OCS to provide foster care or related services. This understanding will add to the Panel’s knowledge of foster care system in Alaska.

Goal 4: Evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the new administrative review process.

The OCS Practice Manual defined administrative review as “a review open to the participation of the parents of the child, conducted by a panel of appropriate persons at least one of whom is not responsible for the case management of, or the delivery of services to, either the child or the parents who are the subject of the review”.

⁴ Refer to the 2015 Alaska CRP Annual Report for the Panel’s observations and recommendations



In a recent plan to reorganize the review process, OCS proposed to move this review responsibility from regional offices (ICWA specialists and Permanency Planning Specialists in these offices were conducting these reviews) to the OCS Quality Assurance (QA) unit. In addition, OCS also intends to meet the minimum federal requirements for these reviews and eliminate any components specific to Alaska added over the years.

This proposed change provides an opportunity for the Panel to understand administrative reviews as a mechanism, and examine the current and proposed practice in Alaska as opposed to other states.

Other major work

The Panel has been paying particular attention to the following, and will likely continue to do so this year:

- Initial Assessment (IA) backlog,
- Performance of each OCS field office on Quality Assurance (QA) reviews,
- Employee survey data
- Quarterly data on vacancy and turnover, specifically among frontline PSS positions.
- OCS budget and staffing patterns
- Change in the substantiation protocol

In addition, the Panel will continue to conduct its annual survey of ICWA workers, Tribal court personnel, and tribal social services employees that attend the social services sessions at the BIA Providers Conference. In addition, the Panel plans to identify collaborative relationships to gather public input.

Calendar

Meetings: The Panel meets for an hour, from noon to 1PM, quarterly on the following days. All meetings are public.

- October 6, 2015
- December 1, 2015
- March 1, 2016
- June 7, 2016

In addition, the Panel meets monthly with OCS senior leadership.

Travel: Following are the approximate dates for all planned travel:

- October, 2015: Northern Region (October 27-30)
- January, 2016: Anchorage Region (January 13-16)
- February 2017: Southeast Region and Presentation to the Legislature
- April, 2016: South Central Region (Tentatively April 13-16 - not yet budgeted)
- May 2016: Western Region (tentative – not yet budgeted)
- June 2016: National CRP Conference (tentative – not yet budgeted)

