

## Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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*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*

## SITE VISIT REPORT

<b>Regional Office</b>	Western Region
<b>Field Offices visited</b>	Bethel
<b>Communities visited</b>	Bethel
<b>Dates of visit</b>	May 7 – 8, 2015
<b>Members of CRP on the visit</b>	Donna Aguiniga, Jen Burkmire, Bettyann Steciw

### Partner Agencies consulted

#### **Public Safety**

*Alaska State Troopers  
Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program at Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP)*

#### **School system**

*Lower Kuskokwim School District Social Work Department*

#### **Legal Community**

*Attorney General (AG) Office  
Guardians ad Litem*

#### **Service Providers**

*Tundra Women’s Coalition Child Advocacy Center  
Foster parents*

#### **Alaska Native entities**

*Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) ICWA Office*

The Panel reached out to several other partner agencies that either could not be reached or were not available for a meeting.

*Acknowledgments:* The CRP would like to thank all staff of the Western Regional Office (WRO) for taking time to meet with the Panel. The Panel appreciates Fennisha Gardner, WRO’s Children Services Manager, for allowing us to meet with her staff amidst difficult workloads. The Panel would also like to thank all local partners for their time and their honest appraisal of their working relationships with OCS.

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*Site visits are an important part of the annual work load of Alaska’s Citizen Review Panel. Panel members consult with staff at an OCS regional or field office and their local partner agencies to assess various instrumental practice behaviors and institutional relationships. The Panel’s consultations cover a broad range of topics, focusing on systemic issues and not on individual strengths and weaknesses. Questions are often open-ended, and part of a free-flowing unstructured conversation. All information shared with CRP is confidential and will be de-identified and summarized into a Trip Report. Trip reports are posted on the Panel’s website.*

## 1 Key observations:

- A silent crisis appears to be brewing in the Western Region. The number of children during any given month of the year who are in in-home custody ballooned from 26 in 2011 to 351 in 2014, a dramatic 1,227% increase in a region where these children are distributed across 45 remote communities. This raises many important and unsettling questions about the abilities of the region’s staff in attending to all the cases on their case load, and consequently, the general health and welfare of these children. This increase needs to be understood and explained.
- Lack of formal institutionalized relationships between OCS and other partnering agencies has been a consistent concern over the last several years, and is most acute in WRO. While efforts to improve relations continue, we noted the following during this visit:
  - Most concerning is the lack of a meaningful relationship with local public safety infrastructure. WRO is vast, with 45 villages only reachable by air. Social workers are often alone and isolated while in the field. While the Panel is aware of and appreciates OCS’ efforts to improve worker safety across the state, we suggest OCS establish a formal agreement with the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program. VPSOs are often the only public safety officers in most villages in the region.
  - OCS should create formal agreements with institutions (e.g., schools, tribal authorities) in villages to provide workers safe accommodations if they need to stay overnight in a community. It is unacceptable that workers are responsible for locating their own accommodations based on their connections in the villages. This is particularly problematic considering the high turnover rate, resulting in new workers unfamiliar with the villages.
  - CRP’s previous WRO site visit report (January 2014) noted that the relationship with Bethel PD was an area for growth. It seems that there is still room for improvement in this relationship.
  - Outreach efforts to village ICWA workers, tribal elders, VPSOs, and other community leaders are recommended. Specifically, ICWA workers and VPSOs are trained and equipped to help OCS workers during their visits to villages.
  - “Healthy Families” curriculum is currently structured for families. While attending this training is useful, a more customized curriculum structured for workers (as opposed to families) would better help build competency and strengthen relationships. OCS should also implement shorter or more informal training or relationship-building opportunities to help build cultural awareness and sensitivity of workers.
- WRO has suffered a relatively very high workforce turnover over the last couple of years.
  - OCS should explore creating a workforce development program/partnership to identify and recruit employees from among the residents of the region. Residents are more likely to be familiar with the culture and its unique aspects of life. While intrafamilial and intratribal relationships may pose some challenges, these can also be strengths.
  - Community partners recommended the creation of a specialist position to work with parents with FAS/FAE to facilitate family maintenance and family reunification.
  - Partner with tribes and schools for services and resources for children.



- The most recent review of any of the WRO offices by the OCS QA unit was in May 2014. The QA Unit focused its efforts over the last year on in-home cases in the region. While this was desirable and welcome, the Panel is concerned that none of the field offices or the region was reviewed by the QA unit over more than a year. This is especially concerning given the severe challenges faced by offices in the region.
- Electronic Tablets, which have the potential to improve case worker efficiency and documentation, are not yet functional for caseworkers. There have been delays in implementation and problems with IT providing support. Based on feedback provided during the site visit, the CSM calendared a training session to take place within the next month to teach workers how to use the tablets effectively. Providing assistance for workers, including IT support, will help ensure that technology is useful for them.
  - A related concern is the caseload issue. Caseloads continue to be very high, with an individual worker carrying as many as 79 cases at once. This is well above any known standard recommendation of worker case load, and is humanly impossible to adequately perform on all cases.
- Continue support for in-person foster parent training and recruitment for village families.

## 2 Categories

The Panel examines a specific set of categories on each site visit. Below are observations on three specific categories.

### 2.1 Leadership

Western region has had a change in leadership since the last CRP visit. The new Children's Services Manager had some working experience in the Western Region in the past, and was a senior manager with the Agency for several years. It has been a few months since the change in leadership and the supervisors and staff expressed a sense of optimism. The CRP is looking forward to positive changes in the region.

### 2.2 OCS Staff workload, morale, and practice issues

OCS, as most other CPS systems across the nation, has been battling high workloads that are often debilitating and demoralizing to the workers. A worker in the Western Region reported seventy-nine (79) cases. CRP reported almost the same number of cases on the workers' case load during our January 2014 site visit. This translates to approximately 150 children, with each child needing a visit by the worker every month. Given that these children are distributed across 45 villages, it is simply impossible to meet the legal mandate, and unreasonable to expect adequate service provision. Note that this is not the only task assigned to the worker.

Given the high rates of maltreatment, sexual exploitation, suicide rates, truancy, and many other related issues in the region, a single agency with more than 30% staff turnover cannot adequately serve the child protection needs of the population. The following observations are not new, and have been made repeatedly over the last several years. These observations are indicative of a general systemic failure rather than any individual workers' or managers' fault. While the Panel realizes that change is difficult and resources are limited, we hope these observations will galvanize action:

- OCS shared the latest numbers of children in out-of-home care and in-home care prior to this site visit. Table 1 shows the number of monthly average number of cases in both situations in each region, for the years 2011 through 2014. The number of children during



any given month of the year who are deemed to be safe enough to be left at home ballooned from 26 in 2011 to 351 in 2014, a 1,227% increase. Numbers for other regions are presented for comparison. While the number of in-home cases increased in all regions, the increase in Western Region is incomparably high (the next highest increase was 300% in South Central Region). The comparable number for children in out-of-home placement settings (foster care) grew from 161 in 2010 to 174 in 2014, an increase of 8%.

Table 1: Monthly average number of children in out-of-home care and in-home care by OCS region (2011-2014)

Year	Western Region		Anchorage Region		South Central Region		Southeast Region		Northern Region	
	OOH*	IH	OOH	IH	OOH	IH	OOH	IH	OOH	IH
2011	220	26	671	86	508	20	166	38	300	89
2012	206	72	701	114	508	52	167	62	286	113
2013	165	253	805	221	506	74	166	79	327	147
2014	174	351	864	189	548	79	160	72	390	118
Percentage change (2011-2014)	-21%	<b>1,227%</b>	29%	121%	8%	300%	-4%	89%	30%	33%

\* OOH – Out-of-home care; IH – In-home care

- OCS’ internal Quality Assurance (QA) Unit reviewed a sample (93) of in-home cases during 2014. A summary of the reviews made available to the CRP prior to this visit indicated that all children involved in these cases were facing impending danger, and none of them had current or adequate safety plans.
- Multiple community partners remarked that calls to OCS, from the agency staff or clients, go unreturned, and that OCS does not initiate contact to the same degree as other agencies.
- Reported by several community partners that assessment of children is inconsistent, with some being left in unsafe situations while others were removed when situations may not have warranted. Of particular concern is the report that 100% of out-of-home placements are ICWA cases.
- Reporters of harm typically do not receive a follow-up letter on the status of a report they make. Reporters, a majority of them being mandated reporters, are often uncertain if a report was acted upon. CRP recommended in 2014 that OCS consider an opt-out option for reporters than the present opt-in option for receiving follow-up letters. This recommendation was accepted and is expected to be implemented.
- Case workers often approach schools, particularly in villages, expecting to speak with or remove children from school without necessary IDs or documentation.
- Schools are often unaware of children’s status re: custody and placement. This was also identified by the Panel in our December 2012 site visit.
- Foster parents not receiving necessary information (i.e. Red Packet) upon placement.
- We were informed that Aniak does not currently have assigned caseworkers and the SSA will not travel under most circumstances; this office needs to be staffed and it needs to be determined if cases are being properly served. In addition, the success of St Mary’s week



on/week off program needs to be evaluated, with attention given to documentation and case service compliance.

Despite these concerns, the Panel recognizes that staff and management of the Western Region, and the State office, try to respond to critical needs in a swift and affective way.

- In January 2014, the site visit report noted that workers were unable to provide for the needs of children removed from their homes. During this visit, we were informed that food and diapers are now available in the office for children. We encourage the continued development of a resource closet to ensure children have their basic needs met upon removal.

### 2.3 *Partner relations*

The Panel had consistently recommended institutionalizing relationships with local partners, and identifying consistent protocols for collaboration. Several community partners identified lack of consistent and sustained communication is the biggest impediment in their relationship with OCS:

- Communication: Poor communication with community partners has a negative impact on workers' ability to service their cases and OCS' reputation in the community. Prior site visit reports, including the two from 2012, recommended restarting the MDT. The Panel was informed on the last visit (January 2014) that OCS was convening a meeting of all key players to restart the MDT. It is yet to be functional. We learned that a facilitator from the Child Welfare Academy is scheduled for June 11th for an all-day meeting to help bring OCS and community partners together. This is a positive step forward in the reformation of the MDT. A functional MDT will provide OCS with regular communication with community partners and help ensure that families and children are being served. Communication is severely impaired due to absence of MDT.

While great interpersonal relationships can exist in any context, they cannot be a substitute for structured protocols that can ensure accountability. The recent change in senior leadership seems to have infused a sense of hope and optimism among the community partners. The Panel hopes to see development of structured protocols for collaboration with local partner agencies.

'Culture' surfaced as a central theme during our discussions on this visit. A majority of partner agencies interviewed reported that OCS workers do not demonstrate culture awareness and sensitivity:

- Cultural awareness/competency: Lack of cultural competency and awareness of unique issues of villages and the region impedes practice, impacts case disposition, and creates distrust and distance between many organizations and OCS. OCS leadership and staff did not identify any particular concerns with this issue. OCS staff referenced attending trainings, *Knowing Who You Are* and *Undoing Racism*, as evidence of their efforts on this front. While certainly helpful, these trainings are not specific to the Western Region. Several OCS staff also attended *Healthy Families* offered by AVCP. *Healthy Families* includes information specific to the Western Region. Our conversations indicate that not all workers have attended this program. In fact, many workers report never having heard of the *Healthy Families* program.



It is very concerning that comments and feedback from OCS management staff is inconsistent with comments from several partner agencies, specifically with regard to attendance at cultural awareness/sensitivity training and the occurrence of monthly partnership meetings with the school district.

The geography and weather in the region pose several challenges to service provision. Most villages can only be reached by air, and transportation is expensive in the region. Among other things, organizing visits between families and children, and between workers and children, are logistically challenging and expensive. The CRP recommended in March 2012 that specific workers be assigned to villages to improve rapport and maintain consistency in relationships. A program to assign workers to villages is in development stages, and augurs well for improving relationships with remote villages. CRP made further recommendation in March and December 2012 to identify specific individuals in each community as contact persons.

- Through this report, we are recommending that both ICWA workers and VPSOs be formally identified and clear protocols be established to encourage collaboration.

Along these lines, CRP noted in the past two site visit reports that relationships with AVCP needs to be more structured. The recent creation of an office at OCS that allows AVCP ICWA workers to be co-located is a positive and proactive step forward.

### 3 Western Region Overview

This section gives a brief background of the region to help readers understand the context of this report's findings.

#### 3.1 Background

Western regional office (WRO) includes the Bethel Census Area and the Wade Hampton Census Area in southwest Alaska. The regional office is located in Bethel and two field offices are located in Aniak and St. Mary's. The region is home to 26,453 people, with 41.80% 21 years or younger (U.S. Census 2010). There were approximately 174 children in out-of-home placement situations, and 351 children receiving services at their homes, in the region during any given month in 2014. A total of 29 staff were serving in the region and five positions were vacant (Table 2)

Figure 1: Western Region (Regional office in Bethel with two field offices – Aniak and St. Mary's)

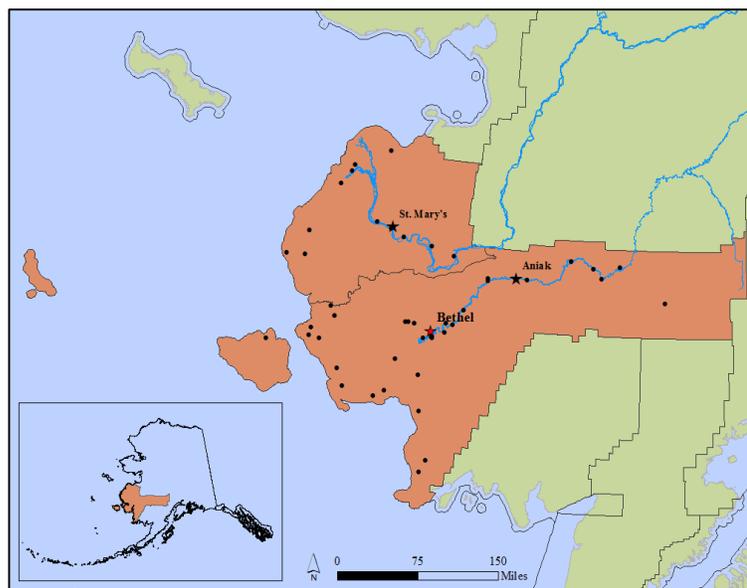


Table 2: Employment profile of Western Region by field office

	Bethel	Aniak	St. Mary's
Number of Communities Served	29	8	8
Total population served (2010)	19,613	1,249	4,563
Staff Counts (as reported during this visit)			
<i>Protective Services Specialist (PSS) IV</i>	4 (1*)		
<i>Protective Services Specialist (PSS) I/II</i>	17 (4*)		2
<i>Social Services Associates (SSA)</i>	3	1	1
<i>Office Assistant (OA)</i>	1		

\* Vacancies

### 3.2 Choosing field offices to visit

WRO has had severe challenges with staff turnover in the last several years since its creation in 2010. Accordingly, the Panel has been focused on the regional office, and limited its last several visits to the regional office in Bethel. While the choice to visit just the Bethel regional office was dictated by various factors, this summary presents performance indicators from the region's most recent Quality Assurance (QA) reviews conducted by the Office of Children Services QA Unit. Please refer to the box for further explanation of the QA review process.

The earliest such QA review for which we have data in the Western region was done in 2009 for Bethel, and each of the three offices were reviewed at least four times since. It is important to note that the latest such review was of St. Mary's in June 2014. The QA Unit reported that QA reviews were not conducted in the Western Region since June 2014, and instead, a sample (93) of in-home cases were reviewed.

Figure 2: Performance on seven key outcomes by field office – 2013-2014

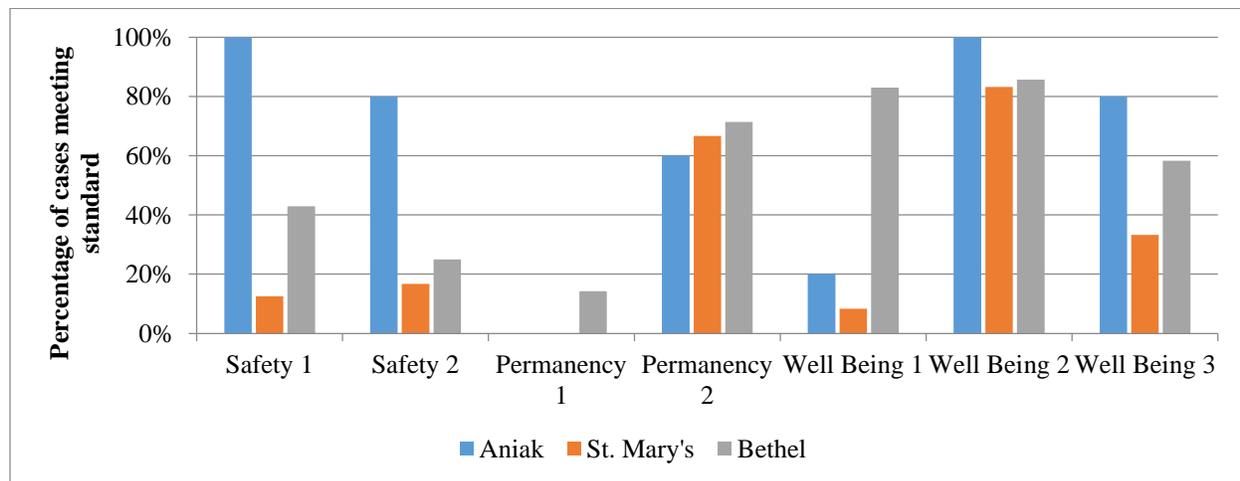


Figure 2 shows the percentage of cases in each field office that substantially achieved an outcome on their respective latest QA review. All seven outcomes are reported. St. Mary's was the only Western region office reviewed in 2014. Field offices in the Western region performed



well on well-being 2, but appear to have had some challenges with the other outcomes. St. Mary's seems to have had the most challenges across all outcomes. OCS had consistent challenges in staffing this field office and is currently experimenting with a one-week-on/one-week-off schedule. Effectiveness of this schedule is yet to be examined.

Figure 3: Performance on 7 quality assurance (QA) outcomes – Aniak field office, 2010-2013

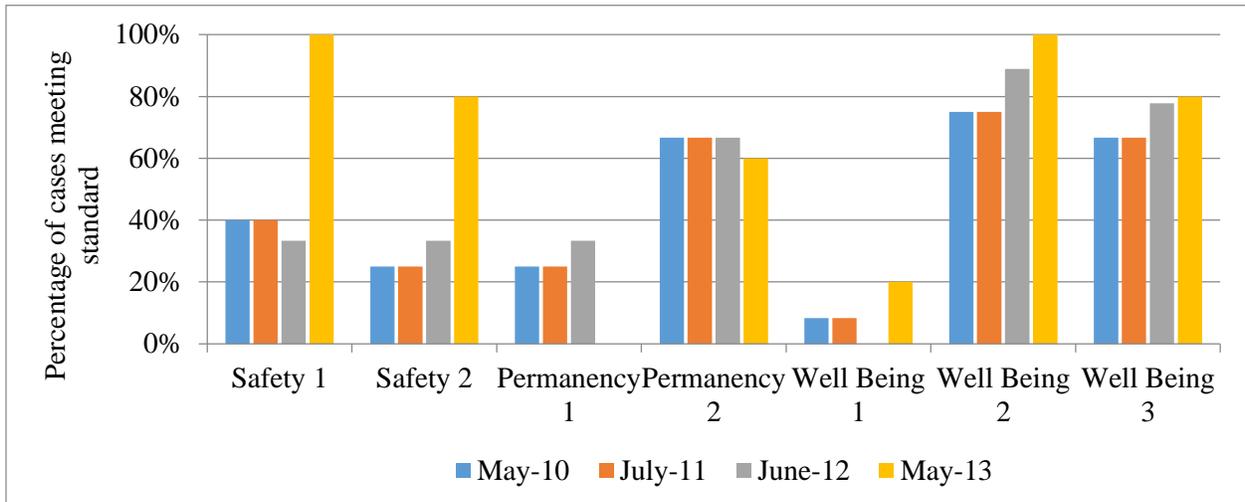


Figure 3 through Figure 5 show the QA performance values for Aniak, Bethel and St. Mary's respectively, for all the years that QA reviews were conducted. Permanency 1 and Well-being 1 seems to be of serious concern in Aniak. Similarly Safety 2 and Wellbeing 1 in Bethel; Safety 1, Permanency 1, and Well Being 1 in St. Mary's are of high concern.

Figure 4: Performance on 7 quality assurance (QA) outcomes Bethel field office, 2009-2012

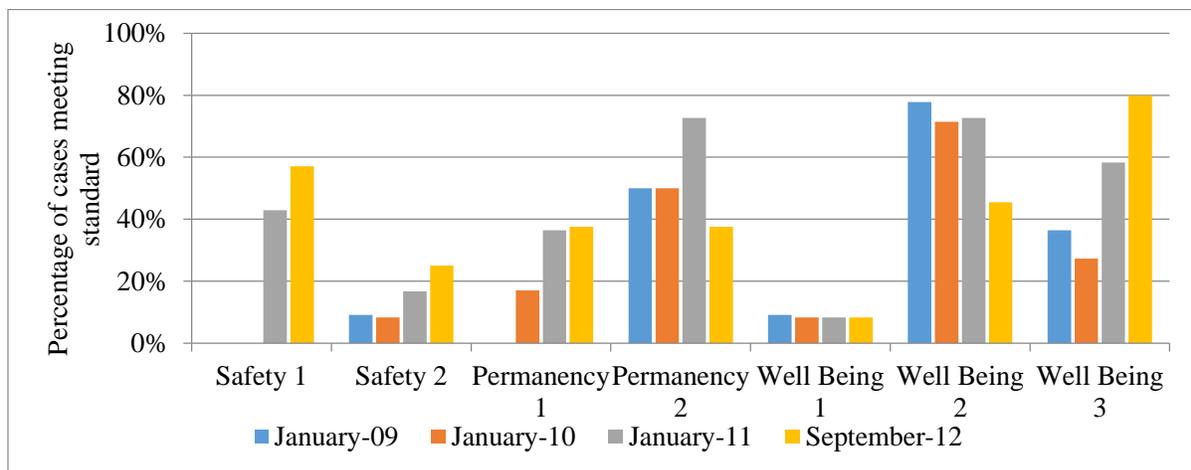
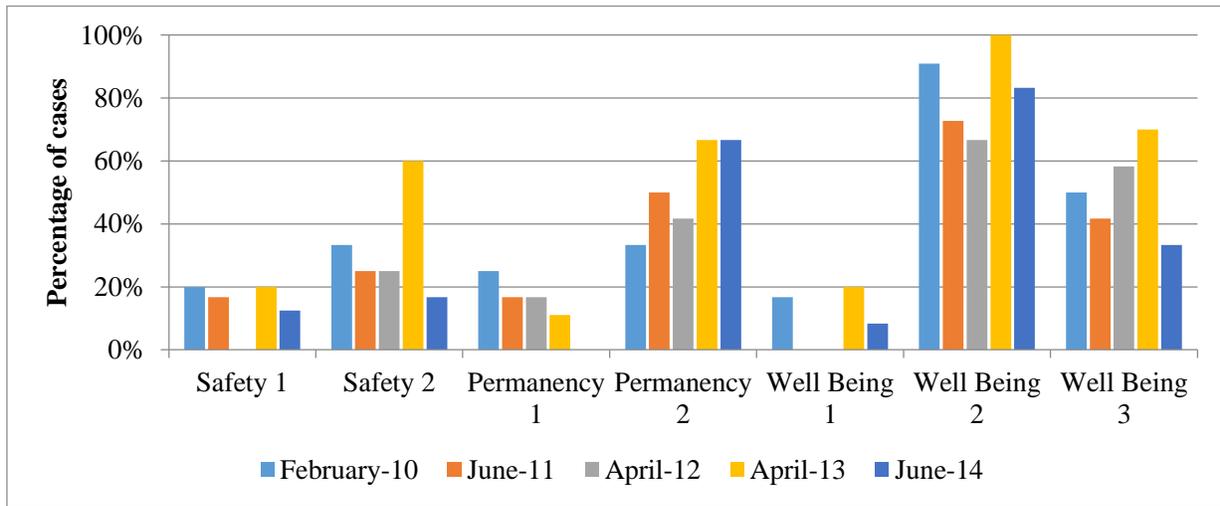


Figure 5: Performance on 7 quality assurance (QA) outcomes St. Mary’s field office, 2010-2014



### OCS Quality Assurance Reviews

Alaska OCS Quality Assurance (QA) unit tries to review every field and regional office each year. The review follows the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) method consisting of a complex set of questions covering 23 distinct functional areas (items) classified into seven broad outcomes – 2 safety outcomes, 2 permanency outcomes, and 3 wellbeing outcomes. A small sample of cases served through the office under review are examined and rated on each of the 23 items. Performance on each outcome area is reported in terms of percentage of the sample of cases meeting the expected standard on a subset of items that represent that outcome. Each item is assessed using a set of questions pertaining to various decisions and actions in the case. These QA reviews are used by senior management to identify areas for improvement. Each regional or field office is encouraged to prepare a program improvement plan (PIP) in response to the QA review. Given the small sample of cases, these reviews may not always reflect a comprehensive picture, and may not be representative of the regions’ performance in general.

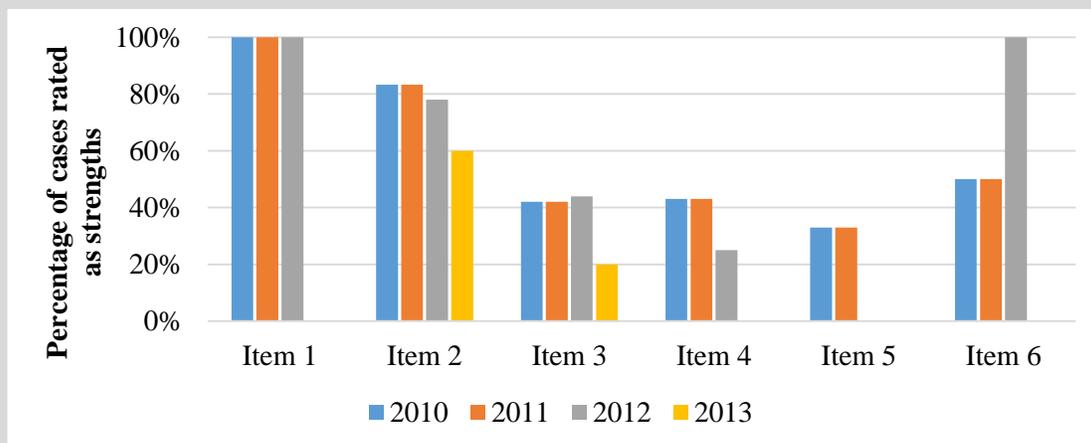
For example, Permanency 1 outcome is determined by performance on six different items:

1. Foster care re-entries
2. Stability of foster care placements
3. Permanency goal for child
4. Reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives
5. Adoption
6. Permanency goal or other planned permanent living arrangement

Figure 6 shows the percentage of cases that were strengths on all six items that make up Permanency 1 for the years 2010 through 2013 for Aniak Field office. The most concerning among these items are numbers 3, 4, and 5. For example, Item 3 refers to permanency goal for a child in OCS custody and is assessed using seven different questions:

1. What is (are) the child’s current permanency goal(s) (or if the case was closed during the period under review, what was the permanency goal before the case was closed)?
2. Is (are) the child’s permanency goal(s) specified in the case file?
3. Were all permanency goals in effect during the period under review established in a timely manner?
4. Were all permanency goals in effect during the period under review appropriate to the child’s needs for permanency and to the circumstances of the case?
5. Has the child been in foster care for at least 15 of the most recent 22 months?
6. If the answer to question 5 is No, does the child meet other Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) criteria for termination of parental rights (TPR)?
7. If the answer to either question 5 or 6 is Yes, was a TPR petition filed before the period under review or in a timely manner during the period under review?
8. If the answer to question 7 is No, is an exceptional or compelling reason for not filing for TPR specified in the case file?

Figure 6: Performance on six items of Permanency 1 outcome, Aniak Field Office, 2010-2013



A protocol dictates how a case is rated (Strength, Area Needing Improvement, or Not Applicable) on the item. A little over 40% of the cases were marked as strength in Aniak on permanency goal during the first three reviews. This percentage dipped to 20% in the latest review conducted in 2013.

The above description is based in part on the Round 2 CSFR, a federal process of reviewing state child protection systems (CPS). Alaska OCS was reviewed in 2009 as part of the Round 2 reviews. For further information on Round 2 CSFR instrument and process, please refer to <https://training.cfsrportal.org/resources/1159>. OCS and several other state CPS are using the CSFR instruments to conduct their own internal reviews, a practice encouraged by the federal government. Round 3 reviews are commencing now and Alaska OCS is scheduled to be reviewed in 2017. For Round 3 resources visit: <https://training.cfsrportal.org/resources/3105>.

