

Anchorage Region 2018 Site Visit Report



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.

Regional Office	Anchorage
Field Offices Visited	Anchorage
Communities Visited	Anchorage
Dates of Visit	November 8 & 9, 2018
Panelists	JP Ouellette, Cameron Adams

Stakeholders Consulted:

Cook Inlet Tribal Council

Alaska Youth and Family Network

Covenant House Alaska

Alaska CARES Children's Advocacy Center

Office of Children's Services

- *Regional Managers*
- *Administrative staff, ET Unit, APSIN Unit*
- *SSA staff, PSS staff*
- *Licensing staff*
- *Supervisors, TDM and MHU*

INTRODUCTION: During the meetings with stakeholders that were conducted as part of the Anchorage Region site visit, the panelists used the 2019 workplan priorities to guide the discussions. They collected a vast amount of information during these visits and used this material to record observations and develop recommendations that are specific to the region.

This year, the panel, being fairly acquainted with the challenges faced by OCS workers, endeavored to become more empowering and less interrogative in our approach to interviews. We gathered positive feedback from community partners on day one and brought it back to OCS during our visit on day two- primarily with case workers, supervisors, and managers. We began each interview session with an acknowledgement of the difficult task at hand, the social, cultural, political, logistical, and otherwise challenges that workers must face in order to strive toward the goals of safe and healthy Alaskan families. We then invited feedback under the headings of our stated priorities, giving them an opportunity both to vent frustrations and offer ideas for improvements. We ended the sessions by asking workers in each department what they liked most about their work. This was particularly heart-warming and noticeably changed the atmosphere in the room each time.

Overall, community feedback was positive regarding relationships with OCS and challenges with OCS were stated empathetically, acknowledging that state-run efforts, like child welfare, can often feel self-defeating by the time all the political, financial, and legal influences factor into how the stated mission of those efforts is to be accomplished. The bottom line is *everyone* wants more collaboration, more communication, and more flexibility in serving Alaska's most vulnerable families. The CRP aims to be a facilitator of collaboration and communication in the coming years allowing for more flexibility in what can otherwise feel like a very rigid and even punitive child welfare landscape.

GOALS FOR THE YEAR 2018-2019

- GOAL 1: Assess Family Reunification Efforts & Best Practices
- GOAL 2: Evaluate OCS Staff Wellness Efforts and Community Engagement
- GOAL 3: Region-Specific/Culturally-Appropriate Training for OCS Staff
- GOAL 4: Awareness of Tribal-State Strategic Plan
- GOAL 5: Coordinate Panel Activities & Improve Panel Participation:

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.

GOAL 1: Assess Family Reunification Efforts & Best Practices

Strengths: Collaboration with community partners in finding relatives and filling in the gaps in care is a significant strength for OCS. Covenant House, CITC, and AYFN all reported improved collaborative efforts in Anchorage resulting in more wrap-around care for families and more kids going home.

Challenges: With the rise in opioid use, decrease in resources, and continued lack of services such as substance abuse treatment and neuropsych professionals, it's difficult to keep positive momentum for struggling families. Contact between parents and children are essential to the reunification process and to child development. Many barriers exist to parent-child contact including lack of resources (both human resources and funding), inflexibility in the use of available funding, Case plans often stall out leaving children in foster care.

Community partners felt that more support following an initial report of harm or neglect would lead to less removals, particularly for families with prior contact with OCS. Involving resources such as peer navigators would help fill in the gaps in services, prevent removal, lead to more client-focused case planning, and support parents in understanding case those plans.

Also voiced were concerns that foster parents are not supportive of reunification and viewed foster care as more of a precursor to adoption.

Reccomendations:

- Encourage case workers to enlist the support of partners like CITC or AYFN at initial assessment to prevent families from entering the system.
- Training/orientation for foster parents in the value of reunification and screening for parents who will be supportive of family case plans.

GOAL 2 - Evaluate OCS Staff Wellness Efforts & Community Engagement

Strengths: This *matters* to supervisors and managers. This was evident in the efforts that have been put forth to improve moral and support case workers. When questioned about staff wellness, all departments immediately voiced concern for their front line staff. The “All Work, No Play” committee was something staff recognized and appreciated. Thing like the in-house pastor, yoga, massage, Vitality Café and morale-building events during the work-day are all apreciated. The availability of “mental health days” and supportive supervisors also were a strength for OCS. Many staff also take the initiative to get outside during the day and invited others to do the same.

Challenges: Many of the above supports are no longer in place. Staff feel there is no place to escape the tension during the work day, and no safe way let off steam.

While efforts have been made to improve the physical environment, the building has a long way to go to be an inviting space for families and workers alike.

While EAP benefits are communicated via email, staff are not adequately aware of the resources available to them. Emails about benefits are burried under more urgent communication.

In spite of the high level of stress, there is no ongoing training for suicide awareness or secondary trauma.

Staff do not feel safe in their daily operations. Many report it is dangerous to walk to their car during hours of darkness. Staff have witnessed aggression in or near the parking lot. The inability to carry protective measures such as pepper spray, and the absence self-defense training contributes to staff feeling unsupported where safety is a concern.

Reccomendations:

1. Provide a safe and inviting space in the OCS building where staff can pray, meditate, or just sit quietly for a moment.

2. On-site wellness provider. Work to get another on-site counselor, clinician, or pastor for staff to utilize during the day. All staff should be scheduled to meet with an on-site wellness provider at regular intervals. They can utilize the time to vent, confide, chat about life, or simply be quiet; but if this remains optional, staff are not likely to utilize this essential resource.
3. Consider including staff-wellness in the responsibilities of the new safety officer position. This personnel can be utilized to seek out resources to bring in-house for staff.
4. Regular suicide awareness training. Staff should be knowledgeable about how support one another and how to access support when suicidal ideations are present.
5. Ongoing training in secondary trauma.
6. Safety: increased security support for workers entering and exiting the building, self defense training, and the ability to carry some form of self defense such as pepper spray.
7. More morale building events during the work day. Staff sincerely appreciated events that don't require staying at work longer or utilizing their off-time. When supportive efforts are made during paid time, it communicates a higher level of care and appreciation.
8. Regular reminders of EAP benefits at all-staff meetings.
9. The CRP may consider offering anonymous exit interviews for OCS staff to gather more data that could lead to worker retention.

GOAL 3 - Region-Specific/Culturally-Appropriate Training for OCS Staff

Strengths: Cultural awareness training is in place at orientation and provides an introspective approach to assessing how we relate to others. Aside from official training, working and learning along side tribal partners may be an even more effective approach to cultural competency. Collaboration with tribal partners, like CITC, is improving. They reported a good OCS showing to the *Safe and Together* training discussing a DV-informed practice. They were "moved by the humility of the OCS workers" and that new staff really seem to appreciate the training. CITC felt it would be very beneficial for supervisors to attend the training.

Unfortunately, time did not allow for more conversation around this issue during the OCS site visit. Consequently, we did not get OCS worker's perspective on cultural competency.

Recommendations:

- Continue to seek out collaborative training opportunities with tribal partners like CITC. Working and learning along side people of other cultures is an effective approach to building cultural competency and increasing cross-cultural collaboration.

GOAL 4 - Awareness of Tribal-State Strategic Plan

Strengths: Again, collaboration with CITC is a great example of working toward the intended purpose of the strategic plan. They stressed that their relationships with OCS ICWA workers were quite valuable. The ICWA workers were culturally connected and provided a valuable voice in creating case plans for Alaska Native families.

Recommendation: As above, continue seeking collaborative opportunities and work to involve tribal partners at the earliest possible point in the case plan (ie: at the initial assessment).

GOAL 5 - Coordinate Panel Activities & Improve Panel Participation

This goal was not discussed with stakeholders. However, given the positive experience with facilitated conversations, the CRP may consider increasing visibility and presence by offering wellness workshops (something within the chair's wheelhouse of services). More below in "other observations."

OTHER OBSERVATIONS:

Communication

- Lack of follow up after a report is made is discouraging for reporters as they don't get a sense that the time and effort put into making a report resulted in child safety.
- Follow-up from case workers after referring to community partner could be improved. Acknowledging that case-workers are overwhelmed and appreciating their use of their community partners, continued follow-up by the case worker does improve continuity of care and leads to better outcomes for families. The lack of such works against those goals.

Other

- Redundant data entry is demoralizing. The data entry systems utilized by the state carry the spirit of futility into the lives of everyone who must access them. The impact this has cannot be overstated. It contributes to low morale, delays in communication, higher workload, less timely reporting, and eventually poor results for families. After a discussing this with leadership, it seems there is little that can be done about this. The CRP simply wishes to acknowledge that this is a significant strain on the system.
- As was voiced in last year's site visit, there is still apparent inconsistency in how cases are screened in and out.
- Given the need for morale-building activities and increased visibility for the CRP, we may consider offering workshops on a variety of topics like
 - Conflict resolution
 - General wellness

- Secondary trauma
 - Suicide awareness
- The current CRP chair is also vice-chair of the Professional Mediators of Alaska (PMAK) and may be able to enlist mediators on a volunteer basis to help with workplace conflict and difficult conversations if OCS would be interested in exploring that.