



OFFICE OF
CHILDREN'S
SERVICES

OCS Response to 2020
Citizen Review Panel
Annual Report

October 1, 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), appreciates the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) for their partnership in efforts to improve the child welfare system in Alaska. The CRP serves as a mechanism for public participation in child protection policy and practice as well as a system to evaluate OCS compliance with federal and state laws. OCS leadership appreciates opportunities to communicate with the panel and have mutual information sharing.

Fundamental to the provision of OCS services is that every family served is treated with dignity and respect, and with consideration to their family and cultural values. With this in mind, OCS has adopted the following agency mission, workforce values, and guiding principles.

MISSION STATEMENT

Ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children by strengthening families, engaging communities, and partnering with tribes.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **Safety** - Every child has the right to be safe.
- **Family** - Children remain in their home whenever possible.
- **Strength** - Families have specific strengths and cultures that are valued.
- **Success** - Empower children and youth to succeed.
- **Permanency** - Foster care is temporary. Every child deserves a safe and permanent home.
- **Community** - Community Partnerships are essential to engage and support families.
- **Connection** - Children need lifelong connections to their family, community and culture.
- **Tribes** - Tribes and OCS have a respectful government-to-government relationship.

CORE VALUES OF AN EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE

- **Hope – Motivates us**
We anticipate success. We are a strengths based organization. We support and empower people on their journey to success.
- **Integrity – Directs us**
We are trustworthy. We are reliable, authentic, and loyal. We do what we say we will do. We have the courage to do the right thing.
- **Respect – Guides us**
We honor all people. We value the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people. We treat others the way we want to be treated.
- **Empathy – Leads us**
We seek to understand. We work to listen and understand the unique perspectives and feelings of others.

OCS RESPONSE TO 2019-2020 CRP FINDINGS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Office of Children's Services' response to the Citizen Review Panel findings and recommendations for FY19-FY20 have been organized under their Five Year enduring priorities. These priorities include:

- Reciprocal Engagement
- Public Outreach
- Collaborative Relationships with OCS
- CRP Education and Development
- Healthy CPS System

RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

CRP RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Leadership in the OCS Regional Office should continue to encourage local offices to make the hosting of CRP site visits and meetings a priority.
- Increase participation by panel members in site visits and meetings by finding ways to make engagement more accessible.
- The CRP encourages the building of peer relationships as a means for improving quality of services.

OCS RESPONSE:

OCS values the information gathered from OCS staff and stakeholders during the CRP site visits to local OCS offices. The OCS Statewide Leadership Team will continue to encourage staff participation in the local OCS offices and treat these meetings as a priority. OCS encourages the CRP, per the new regulations, to provide at least four week notice prior to scheduling a site visit so regional office management can plan for staff attendance. OCS leadership recommends that the CRP provide a topic of focus or agenda for local offices to better prepare information to share with the CRP.

OCS is actively working on staff retention initiatives and strategies to implement lower caseload standards consistent with HB 151 requirements. At this time, some regional OCS offices are continuing to see high caseloads and may struggle to participate in site visits. OCS leadership appreciates that the CRP recognizes efforts made by OCS staff to engage in relationships with service providers, as this is a critical piece for linking the families we serve with appropriate services. This effort is something OCS leadership will continue to encourage from all regions.

OCS leadership requests the CRP to consider the efficacy and limitations of the site visits and encourages the CRP to use a variety of sources for the determination of CRP recommendations. Information from site reviews is only one information source available to the CRP. OCS leadership recommends that the CRP take a more holistic approach to examine Alaska's child protection system by evaluating the case review process, ORCA Data, Child and Family Services Plan and associated federally required Program Improvement Plan, policy and procedure, surveys and reports produced and compiled by the OCS Quality Assurance team, as well as other processes and programs.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

CRP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Through coordination with OCS, the CRP should continue to regularly and consistently identify and carry out meaningful public outreach activities.
- The CRP should continue ongoing outreach to the Alaska Training Cooperative, Alaska Center for Resource Families, the Child Welfare Academy, etc., to increase awareness of the existing training, seminars, classes, meetings, and conferences.

OCS RESPONSE

OCS believes public outreach to be a critical role of the CRP. In addition to the entities listed above, OCS leadership would recommend CRP outreach to the Alaska Children’s Trust, the Resource Family Advisory Board, the Children’s Justice Task Force, Tribal State Advisory Team, Tribal Co-Leads, and Facing Foster Care in Alaska. OCS welcomes the CRP’s continued efforts toward public outreach and would request that feedback from such efforts be provided to OCS leadership.

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH OCS

CRP RECOMMENDATIONS:

- OCS should make a concerted effort to engage and include the CRP when developing policies, procedures, and regulations that impact the functioning, operations, and autonomy of the CRP.
- OCS and the CRP should together focus on relationship continuity to reduce a reliance on specific individuals for positive system change.
- OCS should consider the value of recurring recommendations.

OCS RESPONSE:

OCS aims to consider the recommendations of stakeholders when developing regulations. AS 44.62.210 for Public Proceedings states, “the agency who developed regulations shall give interested persons and parties the opportunity to comment on the proposed regulations.” Per this statute, the panel is invited to provide public comment on any regulations that are proposed by OCS. The panel did provide public comments on the proposed regulations pertaining to the operation of the CRP. Those comments were considered prior to the finalization of the regulations, which went into effect on August 8, 2020. Per those new regulations, the CRP (not OCS) is responsible for drafting policies and procedures related to the functioning and operation of the CRP.

OCS leadership understands that turnover in all areas of the agency can cause struggles in maintaining relationships with stakeholders. OCS is happy to report that the Statewide Executives Team (SET) is fully staffed with long-standing and devoted OCS leaders. SET meets on a monthly basis to discuss initiatives, program changes, challenges, and successes. SET includes the Regional Protective Services Managers for part of each monthly meeting. This allows for statewide and region-specific conversations. Topics include budget, recruitment, hiring, retention, and much more. SET would appreciate an opportunity to integrate CRP panel members and recommendations into the agenda.

OCS values input and recommendations from the CRP. Another benefit of the further integration of CRP members into OCS leadership meetings and policy committee is an increased understanding of OCS initiatives. At this time, OCS is one year into a two-year Program Improvement Plan (PIP) from the 2017 Child and Family Services Review. The PIP is included in OCS' five year Child and Family Services Plan. These plans have strategies that require a heavy lift from OCS staff and leadership to implement, pilot, and review through continuous quality improvement. OCS leadership must balance the priority of potential program changes with staff development and retention. Any initiatives expected of OCS that do not align with these priorities are not within the agency's capacity to implement.

CRP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

CRP RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The CRP should prioritize attending trainings to increase awareness of the structure, functioning, and policies of the OCS system.
- The CRP should reach out to existing partners and networks to communicate CRP interest in training opportunities, workshops, seminars, conferences, and relevant meetings.
- The CRP should work to develop and implement clear and concise member bylaws.

OCS RESPONSE:

OCS leadership is pleased to support the CRP's continued education and development, and are happy to assist with providing upcoming training opportunities. OCS leadership is also interested in hearing CRP feedback regarding trainings attended as a part of our continuous quality improvement process.

HEALTHY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SYSTEM

CRP RECOMMENDATIONS:

- OCS should continue to build upon the lessons learned from the adaptability and flexibility implemented in response to COVID-19.
- When possible, OCS should allocate resources for employee wellness initiatives.
- OCS should continue to prioritize building relationships with biological parents and support family reunification plans.
- OCS should continue to support the mentorship program.
- OCS should consider the development of a resource database or similar system that provides all OCS staff with knowledge of community partners and services.

OCS RESPONSE:

OCS leadership would like to thank CRP for acknowledging the OCS response to COVID-19. These are unprecedented times, and OCS had made active efforts to maintain the health of our staff and resource families while still responding to allegations of child maltreatment. As for many other entities, the pandemic has created opportunities for adaptations and flexibility, and OCS does intend to assess those changes to identify potential long term modifications for the future.

OCS continues efforts on the 5-year recruitment and retention plan. The mentor program is one of the strategies included in that plan, and OCS intends to continue efforts on enhancing the mentor program.

A program evaluation was recently conducted by the University of Alaska Social Work Department. Information from this evaluation will be utilized in efforts towards continuous quality improvement of the program.

The PIP, as well as the CFSP, have strategies to continue enhancing staff skill and ability for parent engagement, as it is embedded in our guiding principles and core values. OCS understands the importance of this skill for navigating families through the child welfare system towards reunification.

OCS has historically considered a resource guide as a way to keep staff aware of services available in the communities of Alaska. Through experience, OCS has realized that creating a guide is not as difficult as maintaining it. Services change, sometimes daily, for providers based on grant funds, waitlists, staff turnover, and many other reasons and especially during a pandemic. OCS is currently in the brainstorming phase of implementing a centralized service program. This program will communicate directly with other state departments to create a streamlined referral process for families working with OCS. The program would receive updates and information regarding the availability of Indian Health Services, Medicaid Providers, grant programs, and contractors across the state.

CONCLUSION

OCS leadership would like to thank the CRP for all continued efforts towards improving Alaska's child welfare program. OCS looks forward to further partnering with the CRP on their efforts. The OCS response to the CRP Annual Report is a public document that is available on the [OCS](#) and [CRP](#) websites.