

OCS Response to 2020-21 CRP Findings, Challenges and Recommendations

The Office of Children's Services' (OCS) response to the Citizen Review Panel's (CRP) 2020-21 Annual Report addresses the recommendations identified under each of the Panel's Five-Year Enduring Priorities in the order they appear in the report:

- 1) Reciprocal Engagement
- 2) Public Outreach
- 3) Collaborative Relationship with OCS
- 4) CRP education and Development
- 5) Healthy CPS System

Reciprocal Engagement

CRP Recommendations

- CRP completes more site visits with a blended approach, capitalizing on the use of technology to reach stakeholders and communities where appropriate while recognizing the need to connect in person with communities that have less access to the necessary technology.
- CRP and OCS develop an understanding of the CRP and its actions so that when transitions occur incoming members of CRP and OCS can start work more quickly.
- CRP develops plan for sharing feedback from stakeholders and OCS with communities with which the CRP engages.

OCS Response

OCS recognizes the challenges that the pandemic created for the CRP, and therefore fully supports the CRP's intention to capitalize on technology, using a "blended approach" to site visits, particularly while the pandemic is still ongoing. Moreover, this approach makes fiscal sense. State government has relied on technology more in recent years due to reduced state resources to support government functions. It is necessary to prioritize essential services over travel wherever use of virtual meeting technology is a viable option. OCS offices have access to virtual meeting applications and technology and can make these resources available to the CRP where appropriate to assist this effort.

OCS also agrees that an understanding of the CRP and its actions will be helpful when transitions occur due to CRP member turnover and/or OCS turnover. To this end OCS is supportive of the CRP's efforts to establish policy and procedure documents that align with state and federal law (as well as state regulation) and provide detail on the panel's approach to conducting its work. Additionally, OCS remains committed to open lines of communication between the panel and the OCS Leadership Team, so when transitions occur there is immediate opportunity to address areas of confusion or misunderstanding. OCS has a longstanding

commitment and support for the work of the CRP. Finally, OCS continues to support CRP site visits by providing access to staff and necessary documentation wherever possible, only asking that adequate notice be provided to ensure necessary time to prepare.

The CRP's recommendation to develop "a plan for sharing feedback with stakeholders following site visits" is supported by OCS. Improved information sharing will likely increase trust in the panel as well as improve public understanding of the challenges faced by the child protection system and the recommendations that have been made to address them. The OCS and CRP will benefit when stakeholders in communities are more involved in identifying problems and finding their solutions.

Public Outreach

CRP Recommendations

- CRP develops mechanism for increased public outreach including improving efforts toward public meetings and meeting the standards of the open meetings act.
- CRP expands its public engagement offerings to include telephonic and video conference options.
- OCS works to educate its staff on the CRP and its role in the child welfare system by way of their monthly newsletter and/or in orientation.
- CRP continues its efforts to connect with Alaska's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities with an emphasis on Alaska Native peoples and their culture.

OCS Response

OCS supports all the recommendations under the CRP's Enduring Priority "Public Outreach". In the past this outreach has occurred through various means, however there are additional other ways that may be effective and should potentially be explored. Offering both telephonic and video options for the public to engage the panel also makes sense and aligns well with recommendations this year under the Enduring Priority "Reciprocal Engagement".

Use of the OCS Monthly Newsletter to educate staff about the work of the CRP is an excellent idea. OCS can collaborate with the CRP to publish article(s) authored or co-authored by the panel, one or more times per year to keep OCS staff better informed of the CRP's mission and activities.

OCS agrees with CRP's last recommendation under the Enduring Priority "Public Outreach". Progress in equitable service to Alaska's Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) cannot be achieved without prioritizing outreach to those communities and listening to their concerns. More than 60% of children in care are of Alaska Native/American Indian descent, so it is particularly important that both OCS and CRP continue to improve outreach to their communities, as well as to Tribes and Tribal organizations whose responsibilities include representing the interests of indigenous Alaskans.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

CRP Recommendations

- OCS works toward maintaining a stance of respectful autonomy with the CRP and its membership, respecting the needs to make decisions on activities.
- OCS and CRP work to develop better strategies to support a collaborative relationship and the CRP's autonomy.
- OCS fully funds the CRP
- OCS works toward increasing awareness among OCS regions and workers in order to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between OCS and CRP. This can be done by providing information in the monthly newsletter "Frontline" or other mechanisms for broad communication.

OCS Response

OCS agrees that the mission of the CRP requires that the panel conduct its work with a high level of autonomy, and therefore continues to ensure that decisions of the panel can be made without unnecessary interference or influence. While OCS Leadership and staff are sometimes asked for input by the panel regarding CRP activities, OCS never gives directives or establishes expectations for how the panel conducts its work beyond what is required in statute and regulation. OCS does manage a contract that funds coordination services to support the CRP's work, however the deliverables and timelines in that contract are created in consultation with the panel.

Over the past two decades, as evidenced in the annual CRP reports, OCS has consistently devoted significant resources and time in support of its collaborative efforts with the panel. This collaboration continues to be a high priority for the agency. Therefore, OCS is supportive of the second recommendation under this Enduring Priority, "to develop better strategies to support a collaborative and the CRP's autonomy". We look forward to jointly identifying strategies that might achieve this goal.

The third recommendation under this Enduring Priority is "OCS fully funds the CRP". OCS has never directly funded the CRP but has funded a contract for coordination services that support the work of the panel. Many states do not provide this kind of independent contract, however in Alaska this service has been made available to the panel, and OCS continues to support it. When the Alaska CRP was formed in 2002, coordination and technical assistance was provided by OCS (then the Division of Family and Youth Services) staff. In 2005, the Alaska State Statute for the CRP was passed (A.S. 47.17.205) and \$63,300 in funding was made available annually to support the panel with coordination services. In 2010, this funding was increased to \$100,000 and that level of funding had been maintained for most years until last year (SFY 2021) when it was reduced to \$75,000. This was one of many difficult cuts that DHSS has had to make in

recent years due to budgetary decreases. While OCS did increase the funding for CRP Coordination services in FY22 to \$80,000, further increases in the budget are not anticipated at this time. Recently it has been necessary for OCS to move many of its meetings and site visits to a virtual format to save costs. This may be an approach the panel needs to consider as well.

Related to the recommendation on the budget, in the Findings and Challenges section on page 7 of the CRP Report, it states that “The implementation of new regulations added increased administrative work for the CRP which included development of policies, procedures, and operating guidelines”. It should be noted that the CRP promoted the development of CRP regulations in the CRP 2017 Annual Report (See Page 14) and in the CRP 2016 Annual Report the panel identified a need for the CRP to develop its own guidance documents, policies, and procedures (see page 12). OCS worked with Departmental staff to begin the process of drafting regulations, a process which included significant opportunity for public input, in part based on the CRP’s suggestion that clear regulations would be helpful. So, while the new regulations and the subsequent development of policies and procedures for the CRP have added some additional work this year, both the regulation and the guidance documents were initially proposed by the panel.

OCS supports the last recommendation of this section, including the specific suggestion of providing information to workers about CRP in the monthly “Frontline” newsletter”. Any additional actions or recommendations that the CRP might identify to assist in achieving this recommendation will be welcomed.

CRP Education and Development

CRP Recommendations

- CRP needs to finish and finalize the policies and procedures and operating guidelines
- CRP should develop training for new members to orient them to Alaska CRP, the CRP history and purpose, and OCS practices, policies, and procedures.

OCS Response

OCS supports both recommendations under this CRP Enduring Priority and applauds the CRP for taking on and completing these tasks. The need to develop policy and procedures and other guidance documents was identified as a need by the panel when the CRP conducted its self-evaluation in 2015. It is a promising achievement that these documents are now moving towards finalization. Development of a member orientation process is a logical next step now that the policies and procedures are nearing completion. This should be a great help in years such as 2021 when there is significant turnover in membership.

One of the challenges the CRP identified under this Enduring Priority is the ability of the CRP to recruit members representing new categories (OCS geographical regions of the state) as

required by the recently established regulation. OCS recognizes that this is a challenge and that the CRP is intending to address it.

Healthy Child Protective Services System

CRP Recommendations

- OCS should continue to collaborate with Alaskan Tribes and ICWA workers to support efforts in preventing child maltreatment as well as supporting children and families who are already involved in the states CPS system.
- OCS should complete an annual evaluation and assessment of worker safety and wellness. This should offer an opportunity for frontline workers to offer suggestions and recommendations.
- OCS needs a mechanism for workers to share concerns about their experiences where employees feel safe do so and are protected when doing so.
- OCS should complete a compensation assessment to review its compensation model to ensure pay is competitive and comparable to the field and to retain new and seasoned workers.
- OCS works toward improving consistency among its supervisors.

OCS Response

OCS agrees to the CRP recommendations under this Enduring Priority, and there are current efforts underway to address each of them.

“Collaboration with Tribes to improve preventive services as well as services for families and children in care” is one of the agency’s highest priorities. OCS is continually looking for new and better ways to collaborate, including ways to offer more services to Tribal populations through existing Tribes and Organizations that represent Tribal Members. OCS is also committed to ongoing efforts related to Tribal Compacting. Tribal Compacting allows the provision of child welfare services to be provided directly by the 18 Tribes and Tribal Organizations that have signed the compact. OCS is currently collaborating with Tribes and Tribal Organizations representing more than 100 Alaska Tribes to implement the Tribal Family First Preservation Program, a program that serves families identified as high risk. The goal of this program is to keep the children in those families from entering or re-entering the child welfare system by providing culturally aligned supportive services. OCS has also streamlined its process for noticing Tribes of protective services reports with notice now occurring at the time of Intake. This means that collaboration between OCS and Tribes is initiated immediately, even prior to a case being assigned a worker.

OCS continues to collaborate with Tribes and Tribal Organizations on conducting relative searches and on performing safety home walk throughs to expedite placement of children with family. Additionally, OCS includes Tribal partners in recruitment efforts to include participating on OCS interview panels. OCS partners with Tribes to ensure more culturally aligned support

services are available, and OCS leadership continues to reiterate expectations to involve Tribes/ICWA workers from the inception of a case and throughout the life of a case. OCS employees receive specific training about ICWA, and OCS continues to maintain an ICWA specialist in each Regional Office, who provide staff with consultation and support when working with Tribal families.

The second CRP recommendation under this enduring Priority states that OCS should complete an annual evaluation of employee safety and wellness. Currently OCS does conduct a Safety Evaluation report each year. This report summarizes information regarding safety related incident reports statewide. In 2019, OCS hired a Safety Officer and since that time has created a variety of safety protocols and implemented other protective measures to ensure employee safety. This year the OCS Safety Team upgraded the incident reporting system. There is now a desktop icon on every employee's computer which they can easily access to report incidents when they occur. Safety training has also been added as a required part of SKILS orientation. While OCS does regularly offer the Employee Assistance Program to employees who are experiencing secondary trauma, or other wellness issues, and some training on self-care is offered during SKILS, the agency is working to identify additional ways to support employee wellness.

The OCS Quality Assurance unit conducts an annual employee survey that is anonymous, where employees can safely share any types of concerns or feedback they may have without any concern for repercussions. It would be possible to add more questions related to wellness and safety to the annual survey, and to evaluate other tools that might be helpful for employees who need to report issues related to either wellness or personal safety. OCS agrees that workers should have a mechanism to report regarding any concern they may have without being concerned about negative consequences.

The fourth CRP recommendation under this Enduring Priority states that "OCS should complete a compensation assessment to ensure OCS employee pay is competitive". Employee retention is a huge challenge for child protection agencies nationally and is a very significant problem in Alaska. Employee compensation is one of several areas OCS is evaluating related to employee turnover. OCS supports this recommendation; however, please note that any increase in employee compensation will require additional funding and is not a decision OCS can make on their own.

The fifth CRP recommendation, "to improve consistency among OCS supervisors", is supported by OCS. OCS developed and implemented Supervisory Staffing Guides that include structured supervision tools. Training on and expectations for using the Staffing Guide and Supervision Tools was provided to all employees with supervisory responsibilities. High quality supervision and a supportive office culture are vital to an employee's wellbeing and professional development. OCS continues to work, using input provided during focus groups from frontline staff, managers, and supervisors to identify ways to improve the consistency and quality of supervision. As a part of that effort OCS in collaboration with the UAA Child welfare Academy is

developing a new curriculum for training supervisors. This training will be offered four times per year, however there will also be online training available through the DHSS online Learning Management System so that new supervisors can begin training immediately upon being hired. A monthly statewide Zoom call is now offered for supervisors, where information is provided on key topics related to quality supervision.

Conclusion

OCS would like to thank the volunteer members of Alaska's Citizen Review Panel for their dedication and many uncompensated hours of work dedicated to improving the child welfare system in Alaska. The OCS Leadership Team looks forward to conducting further follow-up on these recommendations in close collaboration with the CRP in the coming year.