



## Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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The Citizen Review Panel is a statewide group of volunteers mandated by federal and state law to provide oversight to the Office of Children's Services.

<b>Dates of visit</b>	October 2-3, 2014
<b>Date of the Report</b>	October 29, 2014
<b>Members of CRP on the visit</b>	The entire Panel (6 members) Sylvan Robb (staff)

### Offices covered in this visit

<b>Regional Office</b>	Anchorage Regional Office
<b>Field Office</b>	Anchorage
<b>Communities served</b>	Anchorage, Tyonek

### Agencies consulted

**Public Safety:** *Alaska State Troopers (AST); Anchorage Police Department (APD)*

**School system:** *Anchorage School District (ASD)*

**Typical parties to a CINA case:** *Attorney General (AG) Office (representing the OCS); Public Defenders Agency (PDA, representing the parents); Office of Public Advocacy (OPA, representing children); Alaska Native Tribes and ICWA workers (representing their community); CASA (volunteer advocates for children in need of aid); Alaska Legal Services*

**Service Providers:** *Child Advocacy Center (Alaska C.A.R.E.S.); Residential Service Providers (North Star Hospital; Covenant House)*

*Acknowledgments:* The CRP would like to thank all staff of the Anchorage Regional Office for taking time to meet with the Panel. The Panel really appreciates Sara Childress, CSM at Anchorage Regional Office, for allowing us to meet with her staff amidst impossible 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 OCS regional or field offices 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 (not on strengths and weaknesses of individuals). 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 made available to OCS senior leadership, and to all parties that were consulted on that visit.*

This report summarizes the Panel's consultations with supervisors and staff at the ARO and representatives of local partner agencies. This report is organized into three major sections that are relevant to the current focus of the Panel. While the Panel tries to be as comprehensive in their review as possible, large areas of practice may have been omitted from review for various reasons. The Panel encourages all concerned parties to consider this report as part of a constructive dialogue in improving child protection services within ARO and the state, and remains open for a continued conversation.

## **General reflections**

Anchorage Regional Office (ARO) is the largest of the five OCS regions. The region is home to approximately half the state's population and 42% of the state's children. The region has a proportionally high caseload, and thus the largest staff, among all regional offices. Anchorage is also endowed with a variety of available services in contrast to almost all of the rest of the state. Therefore, ARO caseload includes a number of children and families that migrate from other parts of the state, or are moved here for services.

## **Leadership**

The Panel met with the CSM and some of the unit supervisors. Many of them have been in their positions or in this regional office for quite some time (usually more than 4 years). Their longevity certainly is welcoming and explains some of the positive comments gathered during the visit. Additionally, it is very encouraging to note the entrepreneurial approach of the CSM, and the freedom she has in innovating, in trying new ideas such as designating a specific supervisor to be the liaison for several partner agencies so each agency has a named person to whom they can reach out. Another example is how new staff spend several days going around town visiting partner agencies while they wait for SKILLS training sessions.

While high turnover and vacancy rates among OCS Child Protection Specialist positions are debilitating in general, ARO had an unusually high number of positions vacant during the time of this visit. In light of that, the Panel noted some challenges with leadership:

- Lack of training for frontline workers: No formal mechanism exists for on-the-job training that includes coaching, mentoring, and job shadowing especially for new and inexperienced workers in IA and Intake. Specific skills that were mentioned that may not often be part of the worker's previous training or academic program may include drafting petitions and reports for court; managing and meeting the expectations of the attorneys from the AG's office while in court; managing relationships with all different parties involved in a case.
- Some of the frontline workers felt that a formal mechanism to support, encourage, and train some of the supervisors would improve their morale and help with decreasing the current turnover rate.
- Promotion of senior SSAs is hindered by some unwieldy HR requirements. Unit supervisors expressed helplessness in trying to retain some of their most experienced and skilled SSAs due to this barrier.

- While the Panel does not have a means to examine this, inertia of doing things a particular way was mentioned as one of the challenges in devising and implementing innovative management ideas at the ARO.

### OCS staff workload and morale

The Panel met with approximately 20 staff (frontline social workers, SSAs, and admin staff) from intake, IA, family services, in-home, and licensing. Many of these frontline workers had much shorter tenures and stated that their jobs are stressful. A change in OCS intake practice leading to a rise in number of screened-in reports over the last several months seems to have had an impact on the workload of the staff. Both the staff and supervisors expressed many related concerns on high workload, and potential ways to manage it:

- Despite Anchorage being the largest population center in the state with the largest concentration of service providers, workers claimed that the available services are still inadequate. An assessment of unmet needs and available services will be helpful. Such an assessment might be most feasible if done in partnership with other agencies providing similar or complementary services.
- New workers were expected to find someone to shadow on their own; there is no formal mentoring (as mentioned in the previous section). A worker suggested a system similar to residency for medical doctors, where new doctors are required to accrue a certain amount of experience with each type of procedure. In the current case, the new social workers would work through a list ensuring that they shadowed someone doing each of the elements of their position before they were expected to do it on their own. Although workers with a college education would have had a field practicum, the Panel agrees with the idea of more formal on-the-job training mechanism.
- SSAs in Anchorage spend 40-45 percent of their time in transporting children for visitation. While this is an important and required task, it appeared that the opportunity cost of having SSA's do this is very high, especially in light of high workloads. ARO should explore using SSA's skills in better assisting social workers in many other critical tasks.
- A related concern is the lack of adequate number of vehicles. With just a handful of vehicles, waiting for a ride consumes much of SSA's time.
- Anchorage office has just five laptops that could be checked out by social workers. Past attempts at providing workers with mobile technology seem to have been unsuccessful. Availability of mobile technology with access to ORCA can significantly improve the workers' abilities to manage their workload.
- ORCA does not support multiple goals for a case plan. This is a source of confusion, especially when it is statutorily required.

Many workers appreciated the BizHub copy and fax machine. Nearly everyone appreciated the return of dictation, but didn't appreciate it having been taken away for so long with nothing to replace it. Recent efforts in increasing safety were certainly appreciated.

Partner agencies expressed typical frustrations with OCS staff being hard to reach and overworked. Nearly all partner agencies acknowledged that OCS workers have large caseloads

and not enough resources to get their work done. However, the usual complaints were heard as well, primarily around communication. Points below are not universally true. However, they were mentioned by partners as more frequent and avoidable.

- Case planning takes too long, sometimes are not discussed with the clients, and sometimes are not signed.
- ICWA workers did not feel like they were kept in the loop nearly as well as they should have been.
- Supervised visits are being overused.
- Need some streamlining of the number of meetings. While partners realize the purpose and need for each meeting, they wish to see a more streamlined process that would minimize meeting times.
- With clients that need critical care, it is important that OCS workers have access to, and find means to share appropriate information that is necessary to start care.
- While the OCS' Psych Nurses are appreciated, North Star staff suggested that some of their advice is contradictory to the advice from North Star professionals, and this is a severe problem.

Particularly, there appears to be room for improvement and streamlining in relationships with the legal system. The Office of Public Defenders Agency (PDA) and the Attorney General's (AG) office both expressed the need for training social workers in drafting petitions. It was not clear if writing petitions is the responsibility of a social worker who has minimal legal training, or of the attorneys with sophisticated legal training at the AG's office. There seems to be no standard format or clear guidelines on content for the petitions filed by social workers at the initiation of a CINA case. Clarity at this time is critical for all parties to attend to their share of the work in ensuring the child and family involved receives all services necessary. Clarification of roles and responsibilities may be necessary.

### Partner relationships

Overall, relationships between the Anchorage Regional Office and local partner organizations seemed positive. While several partners pointed many limitations to their relationship with OCS workers, there is a general recognition that staff and workers are trying hard to do their best while battling very difficult and stressful situations. Along the same lines the partners also point out that they themselves are working in similarly stressful situations, implying systemic changes within OCS are required to change the status quo. Almost all partners were quick to point out that their opinions do not concern any individual at OCS. The following specific concerns/thoughts were noted by several partners:

- Good and frequent communication is desired. There was some frustration expressed, but often the problem seemed manageable through better communication. For example, one partner expressed frustration that workers didn't show up for court cases estimating that this happened 5-6 times annually out of approximately 200 court dates. Even with the liaison system, there was a desire for more communication. Several people noted that it doesn't feel like a two way street—when OCS wants something they need it now, but when being asked for something they never have time to return the favor.

- The legal community in general (OPA, PDA, AG) expressed the need for better training on legal procedures for social workers. Since the needs of each of these legal agencies are different, it is likely quite challenging to satisfy them all, especially with minimal legal training. It appears important that OCS attempts to clarify the mutual roles and responsibilities and ensure that workers' skills match their responsibilities vis-à-vis the legal community.

The Panel is concerned that local partner relationships have surfaced to be of concern on almost every site visit for last several years. With relatively large amounts of resources at the office's disposal, it is very concerning that Anchorage Regional Office too is suffering from the same problems as the Western Regional Office.

Admission 087 Hearings seem to be a major source of disagreement and contention for at least the medical and mental health professionals at North Star Hospital and the AAG's office. The Panel did not hear any concerns from OCS staff on this issue. The Panel understands this to be an important issue to be resolved, and suggest the concerned parties approach either the Court Improvement Project or the Children's Justice Act Task Force. Both serve broader mandates and are better equipped to address this issue.