

2021-2022 CRP Annual Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	About the Alaska Citizen Review Panel
4	CRP Activities
6	Findings, Challenges and Recommendations
14	Acronym List

ABOUT THE CRP

AUTHORITY

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP or Panel) is federally mandated through the 1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and authorized through Alaska Statute Sec. 47.14.205. The Panel operates under a set of operating guidelines which are available on the CRP's website.

FUNCTIONS

The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems in improving services through evaluation, public outreach, and advocacy. In Alaska, the designated child protection agency is the Office of Children's Services (OCS). Therefore, the Alaska Citizen Review Panel:

- Evaluates the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under: CAPTA State Plan (42 U.S.C. 5106a(b)); and Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP); Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and any other criteria that the Citizen Review Panel considers important to ensure the protection of children.
- Conducts public outreach and gathers public comments on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
- Advocates for relevant actions that help improve the child protection services system in Alaska.

STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

Membership on the CRP is voluntary and is expected to represent the diversity of the state. The CRP selects its own members through a formal recruitment and application process. State regulation specifies that the CRP should be composed of a minimum of five members and should not exceed nine members (7 ACC 58.020). The 2021-2022 CRP was composed of nine members, with each of the five regions of Alaska being represented in the membership. Members elect officers from among the membership. Term limits are established through state regulations.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP DURING 2021-2022 INCLUDED:

Cameron Adams (Chair) - Anchorage
Lucinda Alexie (Vice-Chair) - Bethel
Wendy Barrett - Anchorage
Retchenda George-Bettisworth - Fairbanks
Kimberlee Saunders- Kodiak
Sharon Sparks - Nome
Trevor Storrs - Anchorage
Colin Underwood-Anchorage
Kathleen Yarr- Ketchikan

ENDURING PRIORITIES

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel conducted a strategic planning process during the summer of 2019. As part of this process, panel members identified enduring priorities to guide CRP activity and inquiry over a five-year period. These priorities provide a focused framework for carrying out the CRP's basic functions using a targeted approach. During the strategic planning process, the CRP identified the following enduring priorities:

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

2021 - 2022 CRP ACTIVITIES

QUARTERLY MEETINGS

Due to the geographic dispersion of the CRP members and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings were held either completely remote or in a hybrid format with in-person and Zoom attendance options. The October and January Quarterly Meetings were held via Zoom. The fall Annual Retreat and the summer Annual Meeting, which serve as the other two quarterly meetings, were held in a hybrid format. All quarterly panel meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time and location were announced prior to the meeting and were posted on the CRP's website. In January, meetings began to be publicly posted on the State of Alaska's Online Public Notices website <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices>. Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the Work Products page of the CRP website.

MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS

In order to maintain a healthy working relationship and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy, the CRP meets monthly via Zoom with the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS. They share mutual progress, discuss latest developments, and respond to mutual queries. The monthly meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time and location were announced prior to the meeting and were posted on the CRP's website. Meetings began to be publicly posted on the State of Alaska's Online Public Notices website <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices> in January. Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the Work Products page of the CRP website.

2022 CRP OCS Round Table Discussions

SITE VISITS

In previous years, the CRP has conducted in-person site visits to OCS regional and field offices to gather information on practices and assess working relationships between OCS and its local partners. During the 2021 Annual Retreat, the CRP reflected on the site visit process and designed a different approach for this year that would allow them to directly connect with frontline child welfare workers. In lieu of the usual site visits, the Panel hosted a series of round table discussions focused on the issue of worker retention.

Throughout February and March of 2022, CRP members conducted round table discussions via Zoom with case-carrying child welfare workers in the Anchorage, Southeast, Southcentral, Western and Northern regions. A significant portion of the Citizen Review Panel's activities involved the research, design, and implementation of the round table discussions on worker retention. As such, the bulk of the following recommendations around retention and recruitment came from that process.

The full 2022 CRP OCS Round Table Discussions Report can be found at www.CRPAlaska.org.

Identify Focus

During the Annual Retreat, workforce retention was identified as the primary focus for the upcoming year.

OCS reported that the current turnover for child welfare workers in Alaska is the highest it has ever been.

Development

Open-ended questions were developed using themes identified in the lit review and Panel observations from the OCS reports.

Themes focused on the role of organizational culture in retention and the importance of looking at worker wellness from an individualized and multidimensional perspective.

Discussions

A 2 hour discussion was held via Zoom in each of the 5 regions of Alaska. Only case-carrying child welfare workers were invited to participate, no OCS leadership was in attendance. This format encouraged open and honest engagement.

This project offered workers an opportunity to share their experiences with an independent group. Participants reported a desire to be involved in finding solutions to the retention issue.

Report

The outline and notes were used to create a summary report which will be shared with all participants, the OCS Director, Commissioner of DHSS and the Governor's office.

The CRP encourages OCS to share the report, and their response on how they will utilize the report, with all OCS staff.

The 2022 CRP OCS Round Table Discussions Report can be accessed at CRPalaska.org.

Research

At the request of the CRP, a practicum student with the Social Work Department at The University of Alaska, Fairbanks conducted a literature review on child welfare worker retention.

The CRP reviewed OCS annual staff surveys, exit surveys and longevity study findings.

Recruitment

OCS leadership introduced the project to workers via email & shared info for the round table in their region.

CRP Coordinator's office handled all RSVP's and direct correspondence with participants.

Throughout all steps of the process, participants were reminded that the CRP operates independent of OCS & no identifying info would be shared with OCS.

Analysis

Note taking: Panel members & the CRP Coordinator took notes during each discussion

Debrief: Participating Panel members came to a consensus on broad takeaways and notable quotes for each region

Summary Outline: Themes that consistently arose across all or most regions were identified

Recommendations

Findings from the 2022 CRP OCS Round Table Discussions helped inform the recommendations in the 2021-2022 CRP Annual Report.

The Annual Report will be sent to OCS for response and will be made available to the public, community stakeholders and Alaska's policymakers.

FOR MORE DETAILS, VISIT
www.CRPAlaska.org

2021-2022 FINDINGS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Citizen Review Panel findings and recommendations for 2021-2022 are organized under each enduring priority.

- Findings include observations made by the CRP during the year while carrying out its functions.
- Challenges acknowledge factors that the system may be facing when considering why findings may exist.
- Recommendations identify ways to move forward in addressing the findings and challenges.

HEALTHY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SYSTEM

The Citizen Review Panel aims to support the Office of Children's Services in becoming a more functional and impactful child protective services system. In the five-year Long Range Plan that was developed in 2019, the CRP suggested exploration of the areas of day-to-day worker wellness, the rate of employee turnover, and community relationships for workers. To ensure that Alaska's children receive the protection, support, and quality of case management they deserve, OCS employees need a supportive environment and a workplace that is sustainable.

High staff turnover continues to be a challenge faced by child welfare systems nationwide. OCS Division Operations Manager, Travis Erickson, shared with the Panel that Alaska OCS reached a 60% turnover rate for case-carrying staff in quarter two of this fiscal year. Understanding that a strong and stable workforce improves outcomes for children and families, the CRP identified the issue of workforce retention as its primary focus for 2021-2022. The CRP requested a literature review be conducted on child welfare worker retention-related research. A practicum student placed at the CRP Coordinator's office by the Social Work Department at The University of Alaska, Fairbanks, conducted the literature review and provided overall support to this project. Using that research, and exit survey and longevity reports provided by OCS, the CRP designed and hosted a series of round table discussions with case-carrying frontline OCS staff. The intent of these discussions was to help the Panel understand the root causes of high staff turnover rates at OCS and identify potential measures that might be explored to address this critical problem in Alaska's child welfare system.

The following findings reflect the experiences shared by frontline child welfare workers during the round table discussions. The challenges are in reference to the round table discussion process. The recommendations section is broken down into ways to strengthen recruitment efforts and improve retention by looking at worker wellbeing from a multidimensional perspective.

ROUND TABLE FINDINGS

- There is a perceived lack of transparency around caseloads and availability of support during the hiring process.

- There is a general lack of awareness among workers about wellness tools offered by OCS.
- Improved or increased access to supervision would better support worker wellness.
- The organizational culture at OCS was described as toxic, unsupportive, disconnected, disorganized and one that encourages people to overwork themselves.
- Participants expressed a variety of ways they could feel more valued, that included improved benefits, increased access to supervisors, recognition, and improved safety.
- Lack of reliable technology leads to inefficiencies, increased workload, and decreased wellness.
- A frequent response around why workers leave OCS had to do with a lack of support or mistreatment from management although one region strongly identified high caseloads as the main reason people leave OCS. Workers across multiple regions said people stay with OCS if they have access to support and good supervision.

ROUND TABLE CHALLENGES

- The CRP only had the capacity to conduct one round table in each region. Participation may have been improved if there were more meeting opportunities for workers.
- Participants expressed they often respond to worker surveys and participate in these types of discussions, but they become frustrated when they do not see any results from their efforts. This concern may have prevented some workers from participating in the CRP round table discussions.
- While a virtual format makes it convenient for participants to join from any location, an in-person experience for future round table discussions may improve engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Retention: OCS needs to take a multi-pronged approach to improve worker retention. With that understanding, it is important to look at the following recommendations as interconnected pieces to the puzzle. OCS is currently taking many steps to address retention including adding a second safety officer position, a mental health clinician, implementing the Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) model of reflective supervision, working toward improvements in their hardware and software to add efficiencies, and exploring the creation of positions for advancement that do not include a supervisory element. These measures should all be taken and supported by the State of Alaska. In addition to current efforts, CRP recommends that OCS create a team composed of 3 people within OCS to develop a robust recruitment and retention program. This program should focus on organizational culture, wellness, compensation and benefits, training, and technology.

Organizational Culture & Worker Wellness

- OCS needs to focus on improving its organizational culture. Almost all regions reported dissatisfaction with their leadership and management. When one region reported positively about their supervisor, they appeared to have better wellness and satisfaction with their job. This is supported by previous CRP site visits where good supervision was noted as a strength of that office.
- Special attention should be paid to an evaluation of organizational culture. Round table discussion participants strongly identified the following as ways to improve organizational culture and worker wellness:

- Improved access to supportive supervision
- Prioritization of workers physical and psychological safety
- Team building activities
- Improved or increased access to a mental health provider, secondary trauma support groups and mandatory time to debrief or process critical incidents
- Expanding the mentor program or increasing opportunities for peer support
- OCS should develop a culture of transparency wherein leadership regularly communicates with staff about what is going on with the organization and things that will be impacting workers.
- CRP recommends that OCS develop and implement a formal wellness plan for workers and identify ways to increase awareness of the wellness tools currently available. Some of these recommendations are low-cost, tangible steps that could be implemented in the short term while a formal wellness plan is developed. Suggestions include:
 - Team building activities
 - Debriefing and peer support time allotment
 - Worker recognition
 - Curating a leadership team that encourages and supports workers creating and maintaining work-life boundaries
 - Create a confidential peer-counseling helpline to cope with everyday challenges
 - Engaging former OCS staff to support new staff in a peer-to-peer program
 - Consider how to support workers with families. OCS should evaluate how it creates an environment where parents can effectively work for OCS.

Compensation & Benefits

- OCS should review compensation policies for overtime, travel time, on call and comp time.
 - On-call compensation was discussed as a source of frustration, with staff reporting they are not adequately compensated while on stand-by status. They only receive full compensation when on an actual call but are not compensated for the disruption in their lives that comes as a result of having to be available for an entire week.
- Worker education on existing time-keeping policies should be improved as workers reported a lack of knowledge or clarity on policies.
- OCS should identify alternative ways to help workers feel more valued such as recognition of workers and creation of a Protective Services Specialists (PSS) III position.
- OCS should consider supporting workers by offering programs that help them access post-graduate degrees or courses.

Training & Development

- Workers need training in deciphering the results of drug testing and improved or additional training in writing court reports.
- Workers could benefit from training dedicated to personal development such as a social emotional learning course where staff are encouraged to learn about themselves and develop the skills needed to manage the stresses of the job.

- Create an evaluation process that is more reflective of worker's efforts and focuses less on data that may not accurately demonstrate their efforts
- Workers need additional or improved training in working with diverse populations. Participants in the round table expressed their training is not reflective of the needs of the populations they work with.

Technology, Workflow & Support

- OCS needs to improve software, hardware, and leverage technology to improve efficiency in the field and during reporting.
 - OCS should maintain a centralized electronic health information system where child and family information, note taking and charting, and records can all be updated and accessed.
 - All workers should have laptops that reliably hold a charge.
 - Dictation software should be offered to aid in note writing.
- Assess inefficiencies and workflows; develop a strategy to address barriers and challenges
- Create more SSA positions to support case carry workers in their efforts
- Create positions whose only job is to take on extra cases or provide extra support when caseloads are high
- In consultation with workers/managers, OCS should develop recommendations on how the surplus funding that OCS returns each year due to understaffing could be effectively utilized.

Recruitment: OCS should re-evaluate its recruitment strategies. No workers identified any recruitment efforts by OCS; the staff either found the job posting on the state of Alaska website or were recruited by friends.

- OCS should leverage the use of its current staff to recruit new staff. Consider recruitment bonuses, these could bring in new staff and aid in retention of current staff.
- OCS needs to look for alternative opportunities to share job postings. An action plan to be more active in recruitment efforts should be determined and include using social media, job fairs, and working with Alaska's universities to attract employees.
- OCS should improve transparency in the hiring process.
 - Include current employees in the recruitment process so that they can present a clear picture of the job to potential employees. Clarity around expectations and workload could improve retention.
 - Having current staff participate in the recruitment process could support in building relationships with potential employees. Humanizing child protection is necessary to create a sense of meaning and purpose for the work.
- OCS should work on recruiting in communities. Anecdotal evidence supports a positive relationship between a worker being connected to the community and their commitment to the job and their longevity on the job. Representation in the workforce, by way of culture or community, could also help improve outcomes for children in the families by increasing family engagement and potentially reducing misunderstandings.

RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

It is the intent of the Citizen Review Panel to not just gather information from stakeholders and produce a static report, but to share information gathered with community stakeholders, legislative bodies, as well as other interested entities. Reciprocal engagement with communities should be conducted with a focus on identifying and encouraging the implementation of solutions to these challenges.

All participants in the 2022 CRP OCS Round Table discussions will be provided with a copy of the summary report. The round table report as well as the 2021-2022 CRP Annual Report will be sent to the OCS Director, DHSS Commissioner, and the Governor of Alaska. Both reports will be posted on the CRP website for public access.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- By narrowing focus to the issue of child welfare worker retention, the CRP had the opportunity to take a more targeted approach to reciprocal engagement.
- The CRP was able to connect with workers in a new way this year by designing round table discussions that utilized an online format.
- Hosting round table discussions independent of OCS with only frontline workers present allowed authentic engagement and honest responses from participants
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences and workers reported a desire to be involved in finding a solution to the retention issue.
- Capacity continues to be a challenge faced by the Panel.
- Due to their focus on the round table discussions, the CRP did not have the capacity to attend any Tribal/State compact meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- CRP should establish a plan to engage with the Tribal/State compacting system.
- CRP requests OCS share the round table report, and their response on how they will utilize the report, with all OCS staff.
- CRP requests OCS share the CRP Annual Report, and the OCS response to the annual report, with all OCS staff.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel is a mechanism for meaningful public participation in child protection policy and practice. With public outreach as a principal CRP function, the panel is an opportunity for Alaska residents to engage in a public process to assist the child protection system in being more responsive to needs at the community and statewide levels. In order to be a relevant resource in communities across the state, new and more robust techniques of public outreach should be identified and implemented. Public outreach methods should be refined to be culturally responsive to the needs and wants of families, support systems, partner agencies and communities throughout Alaska. The public outreach conducted by the panel should include both passive mechanisms (website) and active mechanisms (site visits, stakeholder meetings, community events) that are accessible to panelists statewide and year-round.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- The 2021-2022 Citizen Review Panel was composed of 9 members, meeting recent state regulations around panel size.

- Regional diversity was a focus as the CRP filled open seats for 2021-2022.
- CRP updated their practices following the State of Alaska’s Open Meetings Act (AS 44.62.310-.312)
- The CRP website has been updated to be a relevant resource for stakeholders.
 - Additional updates pending year-end funds request
- CRP updated policies and procedures around the Panel membership application.
- Capacity of Panel members and contractor’s budget prohibited all outreach goals to be met this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- CRP further refines compliance with the Open Meetings Act.
- CRP establishes a plan to continue engaging with communities, legislators, and other stakeholders.

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH OCS

The State of Alaska’s Office of Children’s Services mission states that “The Office of Children’s Services works in partnership with families and communities to support the well-being of Alaska’s children and youth. Services will enhance families’ capacities to give their children a healthy start, to provide them with safe and permanent homes, to maintain cultural connections and to help them realize their potential.” The Citizen Review Panel recognizes the shared elements of the OCS mission with the work of the CRP.

The Alaska CRP also recognizes that to best support Alaska’s children and families that are navigating the child welfare system, the CRP needs to foster and maintain a relationship with OCS. This includes developing relationships with both individual leaders and staff to create an institutional understanding of the shared priority of supporting families and protecting Alaska’s children.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- The CRP appreciates OCS being open to relationship building and working cooperatively.
- OCS provided reports and documents which assisted in the development of the round table discussions.
- OCS collaborated on the development of the round table discussions, including sending emails to workers introducing the CRP project.
- Participation in round tables may have been limited due to the Panels' inability to communicate directly with OCS workers.
- OCS leadership attended monthly and quarterly meetings and responded to requests for debriefing on OCS related topics throughout the year.
- There continues to be a lack of awareness among OCS workers about the CRP. Increased awareness could increase participation when the CRP conducts site visits or hosts round table discussions in the future.
 - The CRP appreciates the offer from OCS in their response to the 2020-2021 Annual Report that stated they could collaborate with the CRP to publish article(s) authored or co-authored by the Panel in their monthly newsletter. The

CRP is considering that offer and will look for opportunities with capacity to collaborate on the newsletter in the future.

- The CRP was previously supported by a contractor budget of \$100,000. That budget was reduced to \$75,000 in FY21 and \$80,000 in FY22. Budget issues prevented completion of some work plan tasks and prevented Panel members from attending the 2022 national CRP conference. The CRP notes and appreciates that OCS has shared the avenues by which the CRP can request an increase budget at the end of FY22 and on the process for increasing the budget in FY23.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- OCS fully funds the contract for coordination services that support the work of the CRP.
 - Panel size has increased to meet state regulations which increases costs related to administrative activities, funding should be reflective of those changes.
 - A more robust travel budget is needed to allow Panel members to conduct in person site visits, and attend the national conference, Annual Meeting and Annual Retreat.
- OCS works toward increasing awareness of the CRP among OCS workers to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between OCS and the CRP.
- CRP and OCS should work together to identify methods that would allow a pathway for direct communication between the CPR and OCS workers.
- The CRP and OCS should continue to work together collaboratively while maintaining the autonomy of the CRP.

CRP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

For the Citizen Review Panel to conduct effective and impactful work it is tantamount that the panelists are aware of industry best practices, relevant legislation and public policy topics at the state and federal levels and share this knowledge with fellow panel members and community stakeholders. The CRP recognizes the value of existing resources at both the state and national level and seeks to include expertise from these resources in CRP discussions, activities, and recommendations. Individual panelists are encouraged to pursue their own subjects of interest and share information gleaned with their fellow members of the CRP.

The Panel may instruct the CRP Coordinator to research topics of interest. This year, the topic of worker retention was identified as a focus for the CRP. At the request of the CRP, a practicum student with the Social Work Department at The University of Alaska, Fairbanks conducted a literature review on the past 15 years of child welfare worker retention related research. The CRP also reviewed OCS annual staff surveys, exit surveys and longevity study findings.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

- The literature review and the round table discussions gave the CRP a better understanding of the challenges faced by Alaska's frontline child welfare workers and by the child welfare system as a whole.
- The CRP was not sufficiently funded to allow Panel members to participate in the National Citizen Review Panel Conference. That national conference is an important

educational opportunity to connect with other CRP's and gain an understanding of industry best practices.

- In lieu of in-person attendance, the CRP developed a slide presentation on the Alaska CRP to be shared by organizers of the National Citizen Review Panel Conference held in May 2022.
- There is a lack of clarity around the role and expectations of the CRP from the federal level.
- It is difficult to find information on how the CRPs in other states operate and are structured.
- Lack of capacity prevented the CRP from obtaining training on advocacy skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- CRP has a dedicated meeting with OCS leadership to find out what they would like the role of the CRP to be, how the CRP could help them improve OCS and to hear their perspective on how the CRP could be more effective.
- CRP becomes better educated and equipped to be advocates for the child welfare system.
 - The CRP needs more resources in order to increase capacity for advocacy.
- OCS identify key stakeholders that could advocate for OCS around retention.
- To ensure consistency in funding, the CRP coordination/support services contract should be a line item in the budget.
 - CRP will make a formal letter of recommendation to the Commissioner about the CRP being a line item in the budget.
 - CRP recommends the OCS Director formally request the CRP be a line item when developing their budget.
 - CRP should advocate legislatively as needed to ensure the CRP budget becomes a line item.

CONCLUSION

The CRP Annual Report is a public document and is distributed to all state legislators, the Office of the Governor of Alaska, the office of the Department of Health and Social Services Commissioner, and OCS leadership. It is accessible to the public on the CRP website: www.CRPAlaska.org

Acronym List

CAPTA - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act

CFSP - Child and Family Services Plan

CPS - Child Protective Services

CRP - Citizen Review Panel

FAN - Facilitating Attuned Interactions

OCS - Office of Children's Services

PSS - Protective Services Specialists

SSA – Social Services Associates