

Alaska Citizen Review Panel

2018 – 2019 Annual Report



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.

www.crpalaska.org

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CRP ANNUAL REPORT:

Alaska CRP's annual report is released on June 30th each year, and covers the Panel's activities through the period beginning July 1st of the previous year. The Office of Children's Services is required to respond to this report and its recommendations within six months of its release.

This report is distributed to all state legislators, Alaska's congressional delegation, the Children's Bureau, and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. It is also available for any interested party and the general public on the Panel's website at www.crpalaska.org.

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ABOUT THE PANEL

AUTHORITY: The CRP is a federally mandated body that operates independently of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) with the primary purpose of reviewing the policies, procedures, and practices of OCS. (1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA))

FUNCTIONS OF THE PANEL: The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems to improve 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 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 CFSP; Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and any other criteria that the CRP considers important to ensuring the protection of children.
- **Conducts public outreach** and gathers public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
- **Advocates** for relevant actions that would help improve the child protection services system in Alaska.

STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP: Membership on the Panel is voluntary, and expected to represent the diversity of the state. The Panel selects its own members through a formal recruitment process. While members are expected to serve for at least two years, there are no stipulated term limits. The Panel membership during 2017 – 2018 included:

JP Ouellette (Chair 2018-2019) Anchorage

Bettyann Steciw	Anchor Point
Patricia Williams	Fairbanks
Dylan Conduzzi	St. Paul Island
Rebecca Vale	Anchorage
Wendy Barrett	Anchorage
Sonya Hull	Wasilla
Cameron Adams	Anchorage
Mariah Seater	Anchorage
Lucinda Alexie	Bethel
Amanda Hansen	Anchorage

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Panel is grateful to the staff and leadership in the Office of Children's Services for their hard work and dedication to keeping Alaska's children safe. OCS staff and leadership were consistently available to the Panel throughout the year, and their cooperation is much appreciated. The Panel recognizes and appreciates their diligence as they continue to serve some of the most vulnerable children and families of Alaska. The Panel also thanks all the partner agencies and their staff, and looks forward to working with them during this next year. Denali Daniels and Associates (DDA) provides staff support under a contract with the State of Alaska

Acronyms

APSR	Annual Progress and Services Report
ARO	Anchorage Regional Office
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
CAPTA	Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
CB	Children's Bureau
CFSP	Child and Family Services Plan
CFSR	Child and Family Services Review
CIP	Court Improvement Project
CJA	Children's Justice Act
CRM	Community Relations Manager
CPS	Child Protective Services
CRP	Citizen Review Panel
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Services
HSS	Health and Social Services
IA	Initial Assessment
ICWA	Indian Child Welfare Act
NRO	Northern Regional Office
OCS	Office of Children Services
SRO	Southeast Regional Office
TSCG	Tribal State Collaboration Group
UAA	University of Alaska Anchorage
WRO	Western Regional Office

2018- 2019 Work Plan Goals

GOAL 1 - Assess Family Reunification Efforts & Best Practices

The panel would like to continue an examination of OCS' efforts in promoting family reunification as a goal for children in OCS' custody. Site visits from last year had indicated that current rates of family reunification are low at many OCS sites in Alaska, thus the panel had decided to continue investigating factors that play into reunification success.

- In collaboration with regional and statewide leadership at OCS, the panel will hold pre-site visit briefings before each visit; these briefings will review the facts and figures for the region as well as any other relevant data or information.
- This year site visits should investigate the primary barriers in family reunification and identify available resources that could be leveraged to increase success.
- Have there been improvements in reunification rates? What are the rates of reunification over time?
- Where is reunification succeeding (regions and offices)? Why do these locations have better rates of reunification?
- What specific policies, procedures, and practices help or hinder reunification?

GOAL 2 - Evaluate OCS Staff Wellness Efforts and Community Engagement

Site visits from 2017 - 2018 revealed significant OCS employee burnout and a need to evaluate the available resources and assess employee awareness of those resources for self-care and staff sustainability. In addition, past site visits have shown that the most successful OCS – community relationships involve OCS employees who are personally engaged and invested in the community and have developed support systems. For this goal, the Panel will:

- Collaborate with OCS to determine success of both wellness and community connection efforts; look at employee awareness of resources, assess availability and relevance of current efforts and resources, especially in rural communities.

- Investigate how OCS can foster those successful relationships and employee experiences. Look at barriers to relationship-building with community.

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

During site visits conducted in rural Alaska, the Panel members discussed with stakeholders, both internal and external, the training that the OCS staff and caseworkers in the community received. The CRP wants to further evaluate the effectiveness of the current training as well as find ways to better integrate cultural elements and facilitate community and tribal participation in trainings and workshops.

- Examine and evaluate current training for OCS staff; focus on rural locations & indigenous communities. What is working and where are they coordinating? What can the panel see that is lacking or missing from training?
- Are there resources in the community that aren't currently being utilized? CRP would like to make concrete recommendations and facilitate connections between regional OCS staff and local organizations.
- Can there be better integration, communication, and participation with tribes in communities? What actions can be taken to move this goal forward?

GOAL 4 - Awareness of Tribal-State Strategic Plan:

The CRP would like to collaborate better with OCS on initiatives outlined in the Tribal-State Strategic Plan. The CRP discussed the lack of knowledge of the Plan in the communities they visited, and wants to play a more active role in both educating and assessing awareness in members of the community.

- Dedicate time to educating panel members themselves about Tribal-State Strategic Plan and Compacting Agreement. Ask OCS for an overview or briefing for Panelists.
- Participate in relevant working groups, provide updates to other panel members during quarterly and annual meetings. Coordinator will send out information on meetings and subject matter.
- Assess awareness and accuracy of knowledge during site visits, both with local OCS staff and stakeholders.
- What role can CRP play in raising awareness?
- Plan to finish each visit by bringing all interview participants together as a means of distributing information and bridging local connections; also raising awareness of Plan and Compact.

GOAL 5 - Coordinate Panel Activities & Improve Panel Participation:

- **Policies and Procedures** - Update “operating guidelines” and work with OCS on new regulations for CRP.
- **Panel Participation** - Assess panel participation; ways to encourage engagement and improve attendance at panel meetings & other activities.
- **Website** – The CRP Coordinator will continue improvements and regular maintenance of the CRP website, and will distribute the link to panel members on a regular basis. Materials will continue to be posted in a timely manner.
- **Strategic Plan & Legislative 101 Training** - Coordinator will help plan and facilitate legislative 101 training session in January 2019 and a strategic planning session during the next annual meeting in June 2019.

ANNUAL ACTIVITIES

The Panel's 2017-2018 annual calendar included the following activities:

- **QUARTERLY PANEL MEETINGS:** The Panel met in August of 2018 to develop their work plan, held a quarterly meeting in December of 2018, another quarterly meeting in March 2019, and then held their annual meeting in June 2019. Owing to the geographic dispersion of the Panel members, all quarterly meetings are held over the telephone. All quarterly Panel meetings are open to the public and include a public comment period. The meeting agenda, date, time, location, and call-in number are announced a week prior to the meeting, and are posted on the Panel's website. Summary minutes are also posted on the Panel's website. Agency representatives or others with experience and expertise on a specific practice or policy are often invited to present to the Panel at quarterly meetings.
- **MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS:** In order to maintain a healthy working relationship, and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy, the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS meet by telephone with the Panel every month to share mutual progress, discuss latest developments, and respond to mutual queries.
- **SITE VISITS:** The Panel conducts visits to various OCS regional and field offices to gather information on practice and assess working relationships between OCS and its local partners. The Panel's observations and recommendations are documented in a report and are subsequently discussed with the OCS' state and regional leadership. All site visit reports that have been reviewed with OCS are available on the CRP website. The Panel conducted 5 site visits during 2018-2019 – Anchorage, Southeast Region, Western Region, Southcentral and Northern Region.
- **REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE:** Each year, the panel aims to present a summary of the previous year's work and an update on the current year's work to the Alaska House and Senate Committees on Health and Social Services (HSS). The Panel Chair successfully secured a hearing with both

the Senate and House HSS Committees. In addition, the Panel Chair met with several individual legislators and shared the work of the panel.

- **OUTREACH ACTIVITIES:** The Panel reaches out to the public and various stakeholder groups to collect public comment. The Panel maintains an active website www.crpalaska.org that hosts all Panel documents and serves as a means for the public to reach the Panel. The Panel also meets with, or participates in meetings of, various other groups, Panels, and commissions to inform them of the Panel's activities.
- **CRP NATIONAL CONFERENCE:** 5 Alaska Panel members and the coordinator attended the National Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico in June, 2019.

2018-2019 Recommendations & Findings

Goal 1:

Assess Family Reunification Efforts & Best Practices

Positive Findings:

- State-wide improvement in rates of family reunification.
- OCS relying more on the resources available through tribal partners to find and reunite families.
- An increase in the education of the importance of family reunification.
- CRP appreciates the efforts both external and internal to OCS that recognize workers embodying the belief that children are best served in their family of origin.

Challenges:

- A lack of consistency in the collateral information applied in initial assessment of whether or not to remove a child.
- There is a lack of support/mentoring for case workers to navigating the process of creating individualized reunification plan for each family. Lack of family involvement in the case planning process.

Recommendations:

- Early and consistent involvement of community partners in the initial assessment process.
- Prioritization of building relationships with the biological parents to increase buy-in their family reunification plan.
- Providing mentorship continuing the culture shift within OCS of prioritizing family reunification.

Goal 2:

Evaluate OCS Staff Wellness Efforts and Community Engagement

Positive Findings:

- OCS staff and leadership recognize the need for internal staff support and wellness.
- OCS is using tribal resources in the hiring process.
- Anchorage leveraged community resources to improve employee wellness programming.
- In offices where there are supportive relationships between supervisors and case workers, employee wellness occurred naturally.

Challenges:

- The structure of OCS doesn't promote the prioritization of employee wellness.
- A high stress work environment when combined with poor internal supports doesn't foster critical peer to peer relationships.
- Problematic workers moved to remote offices with decreased supervision contribute to hostile work environments and poor reputation of OCS in the community.

Recommendations:

- When possible allocate resources for employee wellness initiatives.
- Place problematic workers in centralized locations for increased support, monitoring and guidance.
- Share successful wellness initiatives internally with other OCS offices.

Goal 3:

Region-Specific/Culturally-Appropriate Training for OCS Staff

Positive Findings:

- Regions like Anchorage and Sitka have built relationships to create region specific cultural training leading to stronger understanding between OCS and tribal partners.
- Feedback from tribes statewide consistently mentioned a more positive relationship with OCS.
- OCS identifies positive tribal relationships as a crucial component to successful casework.

Challenges:

- Internal OCS communication does not prioritize collaboration with tribal partners.
- While intentions to connect are present and enthusiastic, follow-through is absent.
- Institutional racism.
- Failure to provide adequate cultural preparation for workers placed in rural offices.

Recommendations:

- Prioritize collaboration with tribal partners in internal and external OCS communications.
- Utilize training events as an opportunity to build relationships through cross-cultural networking.
- Local offices should seek to collaborate with local tribal partners to provide region and cultural specific training for caseworkers as part of initial orientation process.

Goal 4:
Awareness of Tribal-State Strategic Plan.

The CRP has assessed the awareness of, and engagement with the Tribal-State Strategic Plan. We acknowledge that most stakeholders and staff are not directly impacted by current activities within the plan and will tailor future recommendations to caseworker/community interactions. functions.

Positive Findings:

- OCS workers are aware of the existence of the Tribal-State Plan.

Challenges:

- OCS workers could not identify the goals of the plan and how those goals would affect their day to day function.

Recommendations:

- The CRP will continue to address tribal-state engagement.

APPENDIX

Appendices are not included with this report. They are available on the CRP website at www.crpalaska.org. Please refer to them for further information.

1. CRP 2018-2019 Work Plan
2. 2018-2019 Site Visit Reports

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CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES IN ALASKA are administered through a complex network of various government, non-government, tribal, for-profit, non-profit, and private agencies and organizations. A majority of these entities are located in Anchorage, or other major urban centers or hub communities across the state. The Office of Children’s Services (OCS) is a state-designated agency, primarily responsible for responding to and addressing reports of child maltreatment and providing child protective services in Alaska. It is situated within the Department of Health and Social Services. OCS operates through 5 regional offices and 25 field offices. In addition, OCS provides a number of its services through contracts and grants to numerous organizations located across the state.

