

2018



# OCS Response to Citizen's Review Panel (CRP) Recommendations



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**CHILDREN'S SERVICES**  
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## **Executive Summary**

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), I wish to extend my sincere appreciation for your dedication and efforts to improve the child welfare system for Alaskan families in crisis. The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) provides a venue for stakeholders, families, and staff to have a voice through your grass roots community outreach that might not otherwise be heard. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for staff to share their concerns or suggestions in a confidential manner that helps them to speak freely and without hesitation. Those voices are important to the OCS leadership and help to guide our efforts with enhanced insight into the various challenges that vulnerable Alaskans face every day.

OCS continues to focus on our goals related to enhancing community and Tribal partnerships, decreasing disproportionality, increasing our rate of staff retention, and steadily improving our safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. While these and other priority work efforts are critical and essential to improving services to families, they are not easily achieved. These efforts in addition to increasing federal requirements continue to add more to the already full plates of our workforce. Layer upon layer is added every year which impacts our ability to accomplish everything to the optimal level necessary. Focusing in on one area often causes unanticipated shifts in others, to which we are continually trying to balance. Despite the constantly changing policy and practice, additions to everyone's responsibilities, challenging circumstances facing both rural and urban staff related to worker turnover and the everyday demands this work brings with it; our staff continues to make every effort to rise to occasion. The staff at OCS is committed and passionate about what they do and I wish to use this opportunity to publicly recognize them for the important public service they provide every day to Alaskan families to which often goes largely unrecognized.

OCS is in the process of negotiating the terms and conditions of our third Child and Family Services Review – Program Improvement Plan (CFSR-PIP). Several 2017-2018 CRP recommendations are also aligned with the PIP priorities, and create the opportunity for focus and attention to meet cross-cutting goals and objectives.

We are exciting about the new leadership within the CRP and all the new members that have come and are coming on board. We look forward to a productive year.

After reviewing the OCS response to your recommendations, please don't hesitate to contact me so that I may clarify or provide additional information to the panel.

CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR

## **Recommendation One**

### **IMPROVED AMINISTRATIVE REVIEW PROCESS**

The Panel recommends that OCS not transition to a judicial review process but fine-tune the current administrative process to make it more comprehensive.

#### **OCS General Response**

At this time, OCS has been advised that the court system does not have the state-wide capacity to assume the administrative review process into the judicial review. Nonetheless, with the ultimate aim to reduce redundancy and to make the case review a more accountable process for all parties; OCS remains steadfast in its position that this remain a long-term goal. OCS is exploring options to potentially pilot a judicial review process in one jurisdiction as part of the CFSR-PIP. In the meantime, OCS is committed to making the current administrative review process as meaningful as possible.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

OCS should take steps to: ensure that case workers are present during the review; and maintain flexibility in scheduling so that there is maximum participation from interested parties.

#### **OCS Response**

OCS currently takes the following steps to address this action item:

- Reviews are scheduled one month in advance to give invitees ample planning time.
- Email and hard copy mail are used to notify parents, Tribal partners, AAG's, GAL's, caseworkers, and supervisors.
- Caseworkers / supervisors have five business days from the time of the notice to respond if the suggested time will not work.
- The evaluation unit administrative staff send out a weekly reminder for the upcoming admin reviews to the caseworkers, supervisors and managers.
- In cases where the caseworker does not call into the review, the reviewer will email and call the caseworker, supervisor, and managers in an attempt to gain coverage for the review.
- Extensive flexibility in scheduling and rescheduling is difficult due to a need to remain within the federal time frames for completing the reviews, the number of monthly reviews, and the number of parties involved.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #2**

OCS should evaluate the case-continuum for opportunities to build rapport and collaboration among *all* stakeholders if this (unintended, but crucial) objective is no longer being met during the Administrative Review (AR)

#### **OCS Response**

- Reviewers seek and encourage input from all parties participating in the review.

- In instances where there is disagreement among participants, reviewers mediate as much as possible but are not arbitrators with a final decision.

**CRP Recommended Action #3**

OCS should ensure case workers are provided with ample constructive and supportive feedback in how to better achieve compliance.

**OCS Response**

- Reviewers are mandated to remain neutral and as such do not provide supervision to caseworkers during reviews, but will often walk them through a process to allow them to make a determination or decision regarding the case.
- Concerns regarding safety and practice are forwarded to supervisors and managers when necessary.
- As part of the federal Child and Family Services Review - Program Improvement Plan, OCS supervisors will be receiving new tools and expectations with respect to the frequency and content of feedback given to case workers to promote compliance with case plan goals.

**CRP Recommended Action #4**

OCS should implement a training or orientation on the AR process to be developed and delivered for case workers and families to better understand the scope and goals for AR and what should be the anticipated outcomes that follow from an AR.

**OCS Response**

OCS is aligned with the CRP with respect to the concept of creating an orientation training for new workers regarding the AR process. The evaluation unit will work with the Child Welfare Academy to create a short training module to be incorporated into SKILLS training for family service workers regarding Administrative Reviews, CFSR reviews, and the role of the evaluation unit and continuous quality improvement within the agency. Additionally, the following methods are currently in place to provide an orientation to parties regarding the AR process:

- Reviewers include an introduction that explains that the review is an internal six month administrative review and not a court hearing, that will cover the four federally required topics to include: 1) the parent's participation in services. 2) The changes the parents have made. 3) Determining the need for out of home case, and 4) Estimating a date to achieve permanency.
- Reviewers will specifically ask parents if they understand and if they have questions. If they have questions regarding the process the reviewer will provide further explanation as needed.

## **Recommendation Two**

### **IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION**

#### **OCS General Response**

OCS is aligned with the CRP in recognition of the importance of efforts to prevent removal of children from the family home, and if removal is necessary, timely reunification to not exasperate the trauma impact on children and families.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

OCS should target recruiting efforts to workers with life experience in or near the regions they will be serving.

#### **OCS Response**

OCS acknowledges workforce and retention issues have an implicit impact on the service delivery and case management for families within the child welfare system. OCS concurs with the suggestion that less turn over, greater retention, and knowledge about community resources would aid in reunification efforts.

OCS is actively working on recruitment and hiring initiatives in rural areas of Alaska. These efforts include improved accessibility and assistance with the application process in rural areas where access to the online application and internet bandwidth may create barriers for potential applicants. These efforts and numerous other strategies are further explained under Recommendation #5 section of this document.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #2**

OCS should provide orientation and training that explains the often overlooked cycle of trauma children endure when separated from their families, and the reason family reunification is a priority. OCS supervisors and trainers should encourage a strengths-based approach to working with parents.

#### **OCS Response**

OCS believes that this action recommendation is sufficiently addressed in existing orientation and training for new staff in the following ways:

- The concepts of trauma informed care are embedded throughout the 5 weeks of mandatory training received by all new protective services staff. Trauma informed care provides a lens for how staff are taught to assess and intervene for both parents and children. The training also includes a section on separation, grief and loss to help new staff learn and understand how families are impacted by removal and ways to help families cope with these issues. The impacts of historical trauma are also addressed.
- OCS utilizes the Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors framework, an evidenced and strength based approach in working with our families on case planning and the identification of reunification goals.

- OCS is launching a Cultural Resource Guide in an effort to assist staff to work with parents on the identification and inclusion of traditional health and wellness activities and services into the case planning process. This initiative incorporates both the Strengthening Families™ framework and trauma informed principles.

### **CRP Recommended Action #3**

OCS should support and train workers to practice early intervention / in-home efforts to prevent removal. We suggest drawing from the experience of more seasoned workers who do this very well in their regions to provide mentorship opportunities.

### **OCS Response**

OCS agrees that mentoring for new OCS staff is a valuable tool in facilitating the transfer of learning process from the classroom setting to the field. Since January 2018, OCS has implemented a mentoring program for new front line protective services staff. Mentors are provided to new case workers for their first six months of employment to aid in the information gathering and decision making regarding the correct level of intervention necessary by the agency.

OCS's efforts to address early intervention includes training staff in the areas of sufficient information gathering, safety planning and decision making. These efforts are essential, OCS recognizes it does not have a consistent and comprehensive in-home family case model. A lack of an in-home case model and policies does create inconsistencies throughout the state on how we serve at-risk populations. OCS is committed to engaging in discussions regarding a statewide agency stance on in-home family cases, policies and practices. This is a goal identified in the CFSR – PIP and for the five year Children and Family Services Plan, to be finalized by June 2019.

## **Recommendation Three**

### **STRENGTHENED CULTURAL COMPETENCY**

The Panel recommends that OCS leadership look into identifying the cultural differences that can contribute to bias among OCS workers and minorities, then find ways to improve their cultural competency.

### **OCS General Response**

OCS leadership is concerned about and committed to addressing potential racism and cultural bias among its workforce. This is addressed in an ongoing fashion through multiple strategies.

### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

This can be done through more observation, listening, and engagement, as well as targeted and evidence-based trainings like "Healthy Families" and "Knowing Who You Are."

### **OCS Response**

Prior to attending new worker training (SKILS) staff are required to complete the on-line Introduction to the Indian Child Welfare Act and Cultural Humility training. ICWA I is required after SKILS and includes meeting with local Tribal partners so staff are familiar not only the services provided by the

Tribe/Tribal Organization but to also begin to learn about cultural customs and develop relationships. ICWA II is co-trained with a Tribal partner and provides learning opportunities around why the law is needed, the continued impact of historical trauma, and also allows for further relationship building and increase in cultural understandings.

“Knowing Who You Are” (KWYA) provides a framework for participants to examine how their racial and ethnic identity impacts their personal and professional interactions. KWYA aims to identify and propose strategies for addressing personal and professional assumptions and biases.

- OCS has required KWYA for all Protective Services staff and management since the roll out in 2008. The Staff Development Plan, specifies that KWYA is to be completed within the first year of employment. During the past year, management has also included the training requirement for Program Coordinators, Program Officers, Program Administrators, Licensing staff, Licensing Supervisors, Licensing Managers, Social Services Associates, and is optional/subject to funding and availability for Office Assistants. Workshops occur across the state on average 12 times a year. KWYA has been a consistent and integral piece of OCS’ infrastructure for the past decade and key concepts such as “courageous conversations” have become familiar language within the agency.
- In May 2018, OCS leadership met to discuss ways to continue to improve the organizational culture, specifically around having courageous conversations regarding cultural differences, along with identifying and addressing bias. A follow-up meeting occurred on July 25, 2018 with the expectation to expand these conversations to other staff.
- The OCS Director and her management team attended Healthy Families in Bethel in 2015 and encourage new senior staff to participate in this valuable experience.

### **CRP Recommended Action #2**

OCS should return to previous practices which included cultural competency training from local village councils or other tribal training partners. This not only builds from a collaborative foundation between OCS and the tribes, but also gives caseworkers an opportunity to engage with tribal representatives and establish better lines of communication for achieving ICWA objectives.

### **OCS Response**

All front line staff are required to meet with the local Tribal partners as part of ICWA I training. ICWA Specialists from local Tribes and Tribal entities participate in the ICWA training with new workers to introduce and facilitate relationship building. Likewise, all OCS staff are encouraged to participate annually in local community and cultural events.

- The Tribal State Collaboration Group is comprised of Tribal child welfare leaders, ICWA workers, OCS statewide leaders, regional managers and OCS ICWA Specialists. Through November 2014, the TSCG met three times a year. Changes were made to the structure to encourage collaboration through regional TSCG meetings to address priorities, to enhance relationships with frontline workers and improve practice. Managers from each region serve as Co-Chairs with their Regional Tribal partner and work together to plan and prioritize region specific needs focusing on relationships, cultural understanding, and improving outcomes for Alaska Native

children and families. This shift also provides front line OCS and Tribal staff the opportunity to engage and establish open lines of communication.

- Effective March 2017, OCS received approval from the Department of Administration, Division of Personnel and Labor Relations to expand the inclusion of Tribal partners on all case carrying and key management position hiring committees. A workgroup was established to develop questions that will help identify possible biases that may be present at the time of the interview to assist in hiring a work force that exhibits the values of cultural humility and understanding of the population we serve.

### **CRP Recommended Action #3**

OCS should collaborate with tribes in the Western region to ascertain if and where the presence of an elder would empower ICWA workers and parents to take a more assertive role in case-planning leading to better results. The ICWA specialist could use the relationships with local elders and community leaders to help case workers develop effective strategy for community engagement and interaction with Tribal resources and perspective.

### **OCS Response**

OCS is currently implementing a cultural resource guide that will assist workers in identifying cultural appropriate services including new ways of approaching strategies to address the reason for OCS involvement. Elders are a critical resource in case planning; however, we must be mindful to how and when they are included.

The following are excerpts from Cultural Resources for Alaska Families: Traditional Health and Wellness Guide.

#### **“Elders, leaders, community doers and Traditional Healers**

Elders of the community are considered the anchors to tradition, native ways of life, and worldview. The community creates space for intergenerational transference of knowledge to occur as it is the role of the elders to share and guide the community. Helping to translate old ways to the younger generations, sharing wisdoms learned, and encouraging the next generation to step into their identities and roles.....

#### **Setting Up Referrals and Brokering Traditional Health and Wellness Services**

Topics to be thoroughly reviewed/explored with a culturally based health and wellness provider include:

Expected frequency of contact between the health and wellness provider and the family case plan participant(s). Frequency and format of feedback from the health and wellness provider. For example, whether written or verbal updates are expected from the practitioner or elder/helper to the caseworker about the case plan participants; or are there requirements for feedback to be shared with parent(s),

caregiver(s) or others; likelihood or possibility of having to testify in court; method for compensation.

The caseworker should clearly explain the purpose of the family case plan is to identify and access traditional remedies to help the parent and children regain wellness and safety so that families can stay together in their communities.

In some situations the traditional healers, elders or helpers may be reluctant to be viewed as extension of a government entity. It is important for the caseworker to fully disclose and explain the role of the practitioner or elder/helper in family case planning process."

The Western Regional ICWA Specialist is working on an "elder support list" for OCS workers to refer to when developing case plans. OCS staff are strongly encouraged to refer families to AVCP's Healthy Family program; elders serve as part of the facilitator team.

## **Recommendation Four**

### **INCREASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The Panel recommends that more community engagement be done during CRP site visits, and that the CRP work with regional OCS authorities to collaborate with other partners and stakeholders.

#### **OCS General Response**

The Office of Children's Services is committed to partnering with the CRP to strengthen community engagement.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

Encourage local/regional OCS leadership to help arrange and facilitate town hall or "talking circle" type meetings during each site visit that the CRP conducts in 2018 and 2019.

#### **OCS Response**

Through collaborative effort, the Transforming Child Welfare for Alaska Native Children, Community Engagement Workgroup, identified integrating talking circles into CRP site visits as a key priority in 2017. State and regional representatives participated in the first CRP site visit using a talking circle in spring of this year and considered it a successful method for engaging participants with great promise to use throughout Alaska.

For successful implementation of this recommendation, advanced planning will be necessary to ensure state and local staff are available and prepared to participate effectively. This will require both the CRP and OCS to work together to identify mutually agreeable schedules for site visits at least three months in advance. OCS is committed to working with CRP to accomplish this goal.

## **Recommendation Five**

### **WORKER BURNOUT AND VACANCIES**

Recruiting, supporting, and retaining workers that have the skills, character, and resilience to serve the needs of Alaskan families is key.

#### **OCS General Response**

The Office of Children's Services has prioritized case worker recruitment and retention to ensure stabilization of the workforce. HB 151, with its effective date of June 27, 2018, provided for 21 new case carrying and support staff positions to ensure caseload cap requirements specified in the new law are met. A work plan was created to monitor and track tasks involved around an effective workforce. Below are a few efforts that are outlined in the plan and discussed within various workgroups:

- OCS leadership and HR leadership meet weekly to identify and combat obstacles related to effective recruitment. The workgroup is exploring options around retention such as financial incentives, respite, creative work schedules, job sharing and flexible work schedules for employees. In addition, the team is also working on recruitment, including training for staff involved in hiring and selecting staff, job postings, minimum qualifications for staff, streamlining recruitment by exploring options for continuous recruitment as well as involvement with community and tribal partners.
- OCS is appointing a position to manage all recruitment and retention efforts for the Division specific with case carrying staff and positions that support those staff. The position will implement innovative methods that will lead to a stable and committed workforce by being strategic and persistent. In addition, this position will manage the OCS recruitment website, develop a marketing plan to draw in candidates that are as diverse as the communities served by OCS, and act as a point of contact for candidates seeking additional information about working for OCS.
- OCS is evaluating minimum qualifications for the Social Services Associate and Protective Services Specialist classified positions to ensure a progressive tier for advancement within the workforce that will allow for greater retention.
- OCS will prepare an annual staffing report to the legislature per AS 18.05.020; and a weekly staffing report to Department leadership.
- OCS is working with the Department of Health and Social Services Public Information Team in development of a new recruitment video, recruitment collateral, community radio interviews/chats to ensure viable local messaging in an effort to recruit from within the communities' served by OCS.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

OCS should tighten its hiring policies in the following ways:

- Acquire or develop a tool that screens job applicants for resiliency.
- Require that applicants have field-related experience and/or education.

### **OCS Response to Action #1**

Over the course of the past year much attention and resources have been allocated to focus areas of workforce development, support and retention. Having a strong, confident and competent workforce that is vested in the work of the agency is a critical foundation in supporting positive outcomes for families.

OCS enlisted the services of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) to provide technical assistance and training through their Leadership Academy for Middle Managers. The focus of this particular academy is to encapsulate adaptive changes within an agency. Out of this academy OCS identified three priority workforce areas to address: Recruitment, Competency Based Evaluations and Culture/Retention. The Recruitment workgroup has a vision to enhance quality, strategize and streamline advertising of vacancies and the hiring process. Within that vision the recruitment workgroup is also targeting an enhanced incoming workforce to include competency and value based interviewing and hiring. This will include a lense towards screening for an applicant's resiliency traits and whether they are suited for the work at OCS. Competency Based Evaluations are currently being implemented for front line Protective Services Staff. The workgroup first identified through research and focus groups competencies of successful child welfare staff in the State of Alaska. Through those competency categories, a competency based evaluation was developed to identify areas of strength and needs for skill enhancement particular to the field of child welfare. The intent of the evaluations is to target areas within a particular PSS for training and support needs, commend areas of strength, or conversely identify that the individual may not have the competencies or values necessary to be successful for this field of work. The Value/Retention workgroup is developing a clear message of the Mission, Vision and Values of OCS in prelude to integrating a culture change within OCS to base hiring, practice guidelines, and community connections around core values. All three workgroups are actively engaged and working toward the priorities and anticipate these workgroups to be ongoing.

Several strategies and resources are employed to support all OCS staff, prevent burnout and promote retention. Core Training for new Protective Services Staff includes curriculum about the impact of trauma, resiliency, burn-out, self-care and worker safety in the field. Leadership at OCS is vocal and visible in the importance of self-care to include articles in the Frontline, expectation staff receive weekly supervision, provision and access to the Employee Assistance Program for support services such as counseling, and outlines in policy debriefing procedures after traumatic incidences.

In addition, the Mentor Program at OCS was fully implemented in the Spring of 2018. The mentors assigned to new Protective Services Staff provide an additional support and learning resource. Mentors are available to prepare staff for new experiences in the field, provide teaching opportunities and support through debriefing and being a neutral person at OCS from the field office they are assigned to. Mentors are experienced OCS staff that can help new staff organize and strategize the workload to enhance their productivity and help reduce impacts of workload backlog that attributes to burn out and stress. An evaluation of the program is being created with a partnership with UAA, but

initial reports from PSS staff that have been assigned a mentor report feeling supported, they are assisted in their learning, and appreciate having a hands on in the field resource.

## **Recommendation Six**

### **IMPROVE CENTRALIZED INTAKE**

While regions are adapting to what may be an irreversible change, there are still significant concerns about the efficacy of the current intake process. Stakeholders across the regions shared frustration over the inconsistency of the process and the intake worker's inability to facilitate necessary actions in a region they are unfamiliar with in a timely manner.

#### **OCS General Response**

OCS agrees with the recommendation to improve Centralized Intake and is actively working towards this goal through policy changes, training, and continuous quality improvement efforts. While we agree with the overall recommendation, CRP may be unaware of some of the changes that Centralized Intake has undergone in the last year. While we value all input, further conversation about what is working and not working should include intake staff to ensure the richest possible dialogue.

#### **CRP Recommended Action #1**

Equip centralized intake workers with region-specific resources and a concise standardized assessment tool for prioritizing calls based on already existing OCS policies and procedures.

#### **OCS Response**

This action item is already complete. OCS implemented a standardized assessment tool for prioritizing calls in early 2018. OCS disagrees with the assertion made by the CRP that centralization of intake functions as decreased consistency. OCS data indicates significant improvement in consistency since centralization.

Prior to Centralized Intake, screen out percentages ranged from 35% to 69%, depending on region, and policy was not being followed statewide regarding prioritization of calls. Since centralizing, screen out percentages are much more consistent, ranging from approximately 40% to 55%. In addition, policies and procedures for Intake are more consistently followed with one chain of command versus the previous system of five different regional chains of command. This has resulted, however, in some effects that have been difficult for regional staff, such as an increase in Priority 2's (72 hours to initiate) across the state.

Over the past two years, extensive feedback from staff has been solicited in order to improve process issues throughout this implementation. Many areas of concern have been noted; but the concern of timeliness has not been common. Further input from staff and community stakeholders regarding this issue will be solicited in order to create an action plan to address the concern.

While the data does not support the assertion that Centralized Intake has resulted in inconsistency, we agree that improvement of Centralized Intake needs to be a priority. The feedback from internal staff and a few stakeholders indicates a perception of inconsistency that needs to be addressed.

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Centralized Intake was developed in order to address the inconsistencies in the regions. Some regions are seeing a decrease in screen in's while some regions are seeing a decrease in screen outs. We recognize that most regional staff and stakeholder are reporting not understanding why things are screened the way they are, which produces frustration and lack of buy-in with the new process. Centralizing Intake is in fact creating consistency in what is screened in and what gets screened out. Further efforts are needed to provide outreach and training to regional staff regarding the changes that Intake has undergone over the past two years. This will occur through a time-limited workgroup involving regional staff to ensure policy reflects the changes of practice, as well as outreach to each region to help facilitate understanding of why these changes were necessary.