

## DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

**Audit Issue** Office of Children's Services (OCS) Compliance with Foster Care Reform Part III - Performance Audit

**Corrective Action** The Department of Family and Community Service's (DFCS) acting commissioner reported that all but one recommendation was addressed and the other was partially addressed. Significant improvements include enhancing staff tracking system, providing staff report preparation training, updating report preparation procedures, and working with the Talent Acquisition team to improve recruitment and retention through various initiatives, Further, the OCS recruitment and retention plan is updated regularly to reflect current priorities and future demands.

**Recommendation No. 1** OCS's director should implement procedures to ensure the annual staffing report is accurate.

Discrepancies were identified in OCS's 2023 staffing report vacancy statistics. At the statewide level, OCS reported 81 vacant case carrying positions as of October 1, 2023, while auditors calculated 93 vacant positions – a variance of 12 (15 percent). At the regional levels, vacancy rates reported by OCS differed significantly from those calculated by auditors for the Northern region and Southeast region, which were understated by 8.1 percent and 12.8 percent respectively.

**Recommendation No. 2** OCS's director should implement procedures to ensure the annual recruitment and retention report is accurate and prepared in compliance with State law.

Caseload data that was included in OCS's 2023 recruitment and retention report could not be verified by auditors because OCS staff did not maintain support for the information. Additionally, the 2023 report presented caseload and turnover statistics as of October 1, 2023 when statutes required the information be reported as of January 1, 2023, and July 1, 2023. The audit also found material discrepancies with regional turnover rates. The largest variances were at the Southeast region and Northern region, which were understated by 17.4 percent and 6.2 percent respectively, and the Western region which was overstated by 9.5 percent.

**Recommendation No. 3** OCS's director should consider implementing a more comprehensive training program that is grounded in practical applications.

During 2020, OCS began hiring workers with "core competencies" rather than hiring workers with specific qualifications such as a college degree or prior work experience as a means to expanding the applicant pool. Around the same time, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, training of new staff switched to a virtual platform. New workers are provided five weeks of virtual

training and one week of mentoring, often provided remotely. OCS did not collect evidence to demonstrate that six weeks of virtual/remote training adequately prepared new caseworkers hired with “core competencies” to competently provide services.

A legislative consultant hired to review OCS’s management structure found the new training program focused on the clinical side of the work but failed to incorporate practical aspects of the job. In addition, the consultant noted that interviewees described training as taking place remotely with reinforcement “on the job” limited mostly to remotely-delivered mentoring, coaching by overburdened supervisors and/or overburdened coworkers. Other voluntary supplementary training was not helpful and was difficult to take, given high caseloads.

**Recommendation No. 4** OCS’s director should continue to implement hiring best practices.

A legislative consultant hired to evaluate OCS management practices identified that OCS’s process to hire staff, and, in particular, frontline caseworkers, was strongly out of alignment with best practices. Furthermore, the hiring process was not realistic, with newly hired caseworkers arriving on the job with little to no understanding of what the job actually entailed. As communicated by the consultant, hiring best practices require agencies establish and implement realistic, streamlined, and standardized hiring processes. Not having a hiring process in line with best practices may cause major delays in hiring, and prevents OCS from hiring many of the strongest candidates it attracts. Further, hiring candidates that do not fully understand job duties increases turnover. Vacancies and turnover negatively impact the availability of services for Alaska children.

The consultant recommended OCS management implement the following:

- **Streamline the hiring process** – The consultant found that it took around five months to hire caseworkers and communication with candidates over the course of that time was exceedingly poor. As a result, promising candidates dropped out of the process and took other job offers. The consultant recommended that OCS conduct a “business process reengineering” effort to change the processes to meet the needs of job applicants and hiring managers.
- **Be more intentional about recruiting** – The consultant found that being more intentional with its recruiting efforts and actively cultivating a pipeline of talent will help OCS develop a pool of qualified candidates to recruit into vacancies. The consultant recommended that OCS management consider expanding the college pipeline beyond current relationships with the University of Alaska, to include relationships with other universities in other states with a particular focus on social work programs.
- **Expand the use of creative models to fill vacancies in rural offices** – The consultant recognized the difficulty of recruiting frontline workers in rural communities and the lack of available housing in these communities. The consultant recommended that OCS

expand its use of creative models to fill these vacancies. For example, OCS can expand its use of a “week-on, week-off” schedule to bring workers to rural communities, traveling caseworkers, and utilizing state provided housing.

- **Accurately describe the nature of the job** – The consultant found that many new hires did not understand the job duties prior to being hired. For example, some new hires thought that the position provided childcare while other new hires thought the position worked primarily with children, when the position worked primarily with adults. The consultant recommended that job descriptions and related competencies be updated to more accurately describe the nature of the job. In addition, a link to a realistic video describing the job could help screen out potential applicants who may have the required competencies, but are not a good fit for the job duties.

**Recommendation No. 5** OCS’s director should consider enhancing data to align with best practices and make recruitment and retention efforts more meaningful.

A legislative consultant was hired to determine whether the OCS staffing report was fully aligned with best practices. The consultant concluded that data contained in the staffing report and the recruitment and retention report could be enhanced to make recruitment and retention efforts more meaningful. Specifically, the following enhancements were recommended:

- **Time to fill vacancies** - This metric can be used to evaluate the efficiency of the hiring process and the effectiveness of recruiting strategies.
- **Offer acceptance rate** - This metric can show the success rate of recruitment strategies as well as provide insight into the clarity of job descriptions. For example, if positions garner high interest but have low acceptance, it is possible the job descriptions do not accurately detail the specifics of the job.
- **New hire turnover rate** - This metric can show OCS the number of new employees that resign within three months, six months, and/or 12 months compared to overall agency turnover to determine if additional supports should be offered to new employees.
- **Supervisor to staff ratio** - While caseload data provides a metric for measuring frontline worker workload, a more accurate picture of supervisor workload can be determined by comparing the number of supervisors to frontline workers.
- **Tenure in key positions** - This metric shows the make-up of staff in key positions in ways valuable to decision-making and continuous improvement in a number of areas, including succession planning for leaders approaching retirement age, learning and development for staff in key supervision/management/leadership positions, and supervision and support strategies for teams of caseworkers. Best practice reporting on

tenure includes both total tenure with the organization and how long people have occupied a given key position.

**Recommendation No. 6** OCS's director should include a forward-looking plan for addressing recruitment and retention challenges over the next five years in the annual recruitment and retention report.

The audit found OCS created a five-year recruitment and retention plan in 2019 and did not update the plan each year to maintain a forward-looking five-year strategy. Rather, OCS provided a status of the 2019 plan as part of its annual recruitment and retention report.