

STATE OF ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL



2024-2025
ANNUAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE PANEL



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 policies and procedures available on the CRP's website and an internal operating guidelines document.

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

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 essential to ensure the protection of children.

CONDUCTS PUBLIC OUTREACH

Conducts public outreach and gathers public comments on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.

ADVOCATES

Advocates for relevant actions that help improve Alaska's child protection services system.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership on the CRP is voluntary and expected to represent the state's diversity. The CRP selects its members through a formal recruitment and application process. State regulation specifies that the CRP should consist of at least five members and not exceed nine members (7 ACC 58.020). Members elect officers from among the membership. Term limits are established through state regulations.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP 2024-2025

Retchenda George-Bettisworth, Chair, Fairbanks
Colin Underwood, Vice-Chair, Anchorage
Lucinda Alexie, (Retired 12/24), Bethel
Abram Goodstein, Anchorage
Kim Saunders, (Resigned, 3/25), Kodiak
Desiré Shepler, Palmer
Trevor Storrs, Anchorage

STRUCTURE

QUARTERLY MEETINGS

- Due to the geographic dispersion of the CRP members and a focus on accessibility, meetings were held either completely remote or in a hybrid format with in-person and Zoom attendance options.
- The December and March 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, with some members meeting online and some meeting in person in Anchorage.
- 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 posted on the CRP’s website and the State of Alaska’s Online Public Notices website: <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices>.
- Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website on the Work Product page.

MONTHLY MEETINGS

The CRP meets monthly via Zoom to discuss focus area topics. The meetings often include presentations from subject matter experts, as well as updates from OCS leadership.

The monthly CRP meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time, and location are announced before the meeting and posted on the CRP’s website and the State of Alaska’s Online Public Notices website <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices>.

Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website on the Work Product page.

PRESENT TO LEGISLATORS

Panel members travel to Juneau annually to present their findings and recommendations to the Legislature. The CRP coordinates its presentations with OCS, giving Legislators an in-depth overview of the current challenges and ongoing work being done to improve the child welfare system. This is an important opportunity for the Panel to engage with Legislators, form connections, and increase awareness of the CRP’s focus areas.

BECOME A PANEL MEMBER OR PARTICIPATE IN OTHER WAYS



Register to attend the zoom meeting by going to crpalaska.org

JOIN A MEETING



Access meeting notes on the Work Products page of the website.

STAY INFORMED



Legislative presentations are available to the public at akleg.gov

WATCH PRESENTATIONS

INTRODUCTION TO THIS YEAR'S WORK



At the beginning of FY2025, the CRP launched a two-year work plan cycle that structures focus areas into two phases. Phase 1: Education and Knowledge Building, and Phase 2: Action and Implementation.

This year's focus centered on two significant areas of the child welfare system: Mandatory Reporting and Out-Of-Home Placement.

Work around each focus area began with data collection, expert consultation, and stakeholder engagement to better understand systemic challenges and to lay the groundwork for recommendations.

The Citizen Review Panel's findings and recommendations for 2024 - 2025 are organized under each focus area.

FINDINGS include observations made by the CRP while carrying out its functions and updates on activities performed throughout the year.

RECOMMENDATIONS identify ways to move forward to address the findings or to continue work on important existing initiatives.

PHASE 1: EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

FOCUS AREA SELECTION

In this phase, the emphasis is on deepening the Panel's understanding of the selected child welfare topics. The cycle begins with the Panel selecting key focus areas that will guide its efforts over the next two years.

EXPERT ENGAGEMENT

The Panel identifies subject matter experts in the focus areas and requests data and presentations at monthly CRP meetings.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

The Panel dedicates time to in-depth discussions and expert consultations specific to each focus area. This engagement helps build the Panel's understanding of each focus area.

SYNTHESIS & PLANNING

As each focus area progresses through Phase 1, the Panel reviews and synthesizes the gathered information to inform action planning for Phase 2.

PHASE 2: ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

TRANSLATE KNOWLEDGE

Building on the understanding gained in Phase 1, this phase focuses on translating knowledge into actionable recommendations and initiatives to address identified issues within the focus areas. This phase may overlap with Phase 1 activities as the Panel moves forward with specific actions to improve child welfare practices.

FOCUS AREA ONE



MANDATORY REPORTING

Mandatory reporting has been a central part of child protection in the U.S. for over fifty years. In Alaska, where rates of child maltreatment are among the highest per capita in the country, the effectiveness of mandatory reporting is essential to early intervention. Alaska law mandates that professionals in nine categories report any suspected abuse or neglect to the Office of Children’s Services within 24 hours. Reports of child sexual abuse must also be reported to law enforcement.

Despite its vital importance, significant gaps remain in how mandatory reporting is understood, taught, and applied across professions and communities. The Panel prioritized this issue to evaluate the effectiveness and cultural relevance of current training modules and to advocate for a system that equips Mandatory Reporters with the tools to make effective reports, while also grounding them in the understanding that the ultimate goal is to support and strengthen families.

PHASE ONE ACTIVITIES: AT A GLANCE



EXAMINED DATA

- Requested and reviewed data from Office of Children’s Services (OCS)
- Heard presentation from Alaska Children’s Trust (ACT)
- Reviewed National Maltreatment Report
- Reviewed Alaska Children’s Trust (ACT) survey data



REVIEWED RESOURCES

- Reviewed Alaska Children’s Trust (ACT) survey
- Toured the Online Resource for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) system
- Experienced and reviewed MR trainings
- Participated on Alaska Impact Alliance (AIA)



CONSULTED EXPERTS

- Heard presentation by Jared Parish
- Invited Alaska Impact Alliance (AIA)
- Invited All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2)
- Reviewed community resources guides

PHASE 1: EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

In 2024-2025, the Panel carried out significant research and information gathering for the focus area of Mandatory Reporting. This included coordinating closely with OCS on data collection and clarification, reports from subject matter experts, and a critical review of available training materials.

MANDATORY REPORTER DATA & TRAINING REVIEW

- The Panel requested, reviewed, and discussed multiple rounds of Mandatory Reporter data from the Office of Children’s Services (OCS). Topics included data from the last three years on screened-out reports, the number of reports the average Mandatory Reporter makes, the total number of reports received by OCS from a Mandated Reporter, with a breakdown of those reports by category and demographics. The Panel received clarification and context from the Director of OCS regarding the data and information shared.
- Panel members critically reviewed and discussed the effectiveness of two in-state Mandatory Reporter training modules and two out-of-state training modules for comparison. This included the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), the Children’s Justice Task Force (CJATF), the New York State Mandatory Reporter Training, and the Los Angeles County Mandatory Reporting Training. Information from this activity provided a substantive basis for the Annual Report recommendations.
- The Panel reviewed and discussed the Mandatory Reporting data and information found in the National Maltreatment Report, an annual report published by The Children’s Bureau, which summarizes data on child abuse and neglect cases known to child protective services agencies in the U.S.

PRESENTATIONS FROM SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

- The Alaska Children’s Trust (ACT) provided an in-depth presentation on Mandatory Reporting which included data from a state wide survey of Mandatory Reporters. The Panel reviewed and provided input on the survey data ACT developed. The Panel incorporated this survey data as an important resource that informed the Annual Report recommendations.
- The Alaska Impact Alliance (AIA) presented its infrastructure and technology projects, including the Alaska Family Resource Center Network, the UReCares Program, and the 907 Navigation App, a state wide resource for connecting people with services and system navigation.
- The All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2) provided the Panel with an overview of its programs, which include the Alaska Early Childhood Network (ECN), the Home Visitor’s Alliance, Help Me Grow Alaska, and the Partnership Access Line - Pediatric Alaska (PAL-PAK).
- Jared Parish, Senior MCH Epidemiologist at the Alaska Division of Public Health, presented his work and findings on the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project (ALCANLink), which takes data from existing sources to identify patterns that have the potential to predict protective and risk factors to child wellbeing.
- The Panel received a virtual tour of the Online Resources for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) system, a centralized platform for information collected and used by OCS to manage the state’s child welfare system.

PHASE 2: ACTION & IMPLEMENTATION

A key area for strengthening the mandatory reporting system to better serve families and protect children is improving the training provided to reporters. Developing a standardized, open-source curriculum that is accessible across all sectors and communities, reflects cultural and local contexts, and emphasizes not only how to report but also how to support families can transform the system into a more effective and compassionate tool.

FINDINGS

- Mandatory Reporter training is not standardized, leading to inconsistent information and varying requirements being shared. This lack of consistency across professions and organizations creates confusion and undermines the effectiveness of the training.
- The absence of clear ownership for regular review and updating the Mandatory Reporter training modules limits the ability to implement improvements.
- The training modules adequately describe what abuse and neglect looks like, but are very broad, potentially falling short of meeting the needs of distinct user groups.
- There is a need to educate the public on Mandatory Reporting to dispel misinformation and promote the goal of strengthening its effectiveness and incorporating it into a continuum that supports families in need.
- The reporting process could be improved to include a feedback loop with Mandatory Reporters that includes follow up information and resources.
- A normative shift is needed - protecting children isn't just about reporting abuse, but to also prevent it. Communities and reporters should be equipped to recognize early signs of stress and have the tools to help link families to support before harm occurs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

ONE STANDARDIZED TRAINING FOR ALASKA

Alaska's Mandatory Reporter training should be standardized into one curriculum for Alaska that is open sourced and accessible to organizations and trainers.

2

UPDATED TRAINING INFORMED BY USERS

This process should include Mandatory Reporters across the various professions, OCS staff across various levels and individuals with lived experience being reported to OCS, who can provide input on updates, additions, or identified shortcomings.

3

LONG-TERM OWNERSHIP OF TRAINING

Ownership of the design and maintenance of the curriculum and implementation of it, as well as how and when it is evaluated, should be clearly defined. Consider an independent, funded process separate from OCS to ensure objectivity and dedicated oversight.

FOCUS AREA TWO



OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT

When a child cannot safely remain at home, the child welfare system is responsible for ensuring a placement experience that prioritizes stability and well-being. Out-of-home placements refer to the temporary care arrangements made for those children.

For Alaska Native or American Indian children, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) establishes specific placement preferences which take precedence. These preferences prioritize placement with extended family, members of the child's tribe, or other Indian families, in that order.

Alaska state law guides the Office of Children's Services to make the best efforts to place children in the following order of placement preferences:

1. An adult family member
2. A family friend who meets the foster care licensing requirements established by the department
3. A licensed foster home that is not an adult family member or family friend
4. Or, an institution for children that has a program suitable to meet the child's needs. These placements aim to ensure the safety and stability of children while addressing their unique needs in alignment with federal standards for child welfare.

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PHASE 1: EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

The Panel has begun the initial stage of its work on focus area two, which involves developing data requests to be submitted to OCS. These data requests will be focused on placement stability, timeliness, and long-term outcomes. Through this process, and in collaboration with OCS and service providers, the Panel will identify strengths and gaps in the system, paying close attention to the role of cultural and community connections. The Panel will begin this process using the following data request questions to gather information.

DATA REQUEST QUESTIONS

- What practices are currently in place to support family reunification, and is there evidence that they are effective?
 - What is Alaska's reunification rate as measured against federal standards?
- How many kinship placements occurred in the past five years?
 - What is the breakdown of licensed vs. unlicensed kinship placements?
 - What are the differences in licensing requirements for kin vs. non-kin foster caregivers?
 - What financial support or funding is available for kinship caregivers?
 - What is the screening process for approving kinship caregivers?
- What are the demographics (race, age, gender, etc.) of all out-of-home placements over the past 5 years?
- What is the average number of placements children experience prior to reunification?
- What are the typical permanency outcomes (e.g., reunification, adoption, guardianship) over the past 5 years?
 - What is the average length of time from removal to permanent placement?
 - How often is guardianship used as a permanency solution?
 - In how many cases is guardianship used without terminating parental rights?
 - Is guardianship required to be renewed annually?

Temporary foster placements

- How long are children placed in temporary non-foster settings (e.g., OCS office, domestic violence shelters) before entering foster care?
- What is the process for screening other children in a home to assess safety before placing a foster child there?

Residential services placements

- Is there evidence that current system practices are contributing to further trauma for children?
- In the last five years, how many children were placed in residential treatment or services, separated by in-state and out-of-state placements?
- How many children have been placed outside their home communities in a way that limits or prevents visits with their parents?

PHASE 2: ACTION & IMPLEMENTATION

FINDINGS

Findings will be informed by what is learned in Phase 1.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations will be informed by what is learned in Phase 1.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS



The CRP is dedicated to enhancing the child welfare system and has implemented an updated, structured and strategic approach with a two-year work plan that is updated annually. The Panel prioritizes focus areas that are critical to improving child welfare services and work that is informed, impactful, and fosters continuous improvement in the child welfare system. As this work plan cycle progresses, previous years may be built upon, and other priorities may be identified.

Throughout this fiscal year, the Panel collaborated closely with OCS and others to review data and information on Mandatory Reporting. This included receiving presentations from subject matter experts and critically evaluating both in-state and national mandatory reporter training modules. Through this work, the Panel observed that Mandatory Reporter training could benefit from standardization and consistent training requirements for all Mandatory

Reporters. The Panel also suggests that the process of updating and improving the Mandatory Reporter training modules could be streamlined by assigning responsibility for them to a single entity. The Panel will continue its work on Mandatory Reporting by hosting meetings, co-signing letters of support, creating a legislative strategy, attending meetings and summits on the topic.

In the focus area of Out-of-Home Placement, the Panel has begun the process of data collection and subject matter expert identification. Their focus will be on the rate of reunification, kinship/foster/residential placements, demographics, permanency outcomes, and the average number of placements prior to reunification. The Panel seeks to gain a better understanding of the current system, its potential for creating more trauma, and ways to strengthen the gaps through cultural and community connections.

ACRONYM LIST

- ACT - Alaska Children's Trust
- AIA - Alaska Impact Alliance
- A2P2 - All Alaska Pediatric Partnership
- CAPTA - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
- CJA - Children's Justice Act
- CPS - Child Protective Services
- CRP - Citizen Review Panel
- DFCS - Department of Family and Community Services
- FY - Fiscal Year
- ICWA - Indian Child Welfare Act
- OCS - Office of Children's Services
- ORCA - Online Resource for the Children of Alaska

THANK YOU

FOR READING

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

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