

2023-2024 ANNUAL REPORT



State of Alaska
Citizen Review Panel

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About the Panel

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 policies and procedures that are available on the CRP's website, as well as 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. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) is the designated child protection agency in Alaska. Therefore, the Alaska Citizen Review Panel:

- **EVALUATES** the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under the 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** and gathers public comments on current OCS procedures and practices involving child protection services.
- **ADVOCATES** for relevant actions that help improve Alaska's child protection services system.

STRUCTURE AND 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.

2023-2024 PANEL MEMBERS

Retchenda George-Bettisworth (Chair) - Fairbanks
 Colin Underwood (Vice-Chair) - Anchorage
 Lucinda Alexie - Bethel
 Kimberlee Saunders - Kodiak
 Sharon Sparks - (RESIGNED 5/24) Nome
 Trevor Storrs - Anchorage

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ENDURING PRIORITIES

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

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

PROGRESS ON THE 2023–2024 WORK PLAN

- The following chart provides an overview of the progress made by the CRP on the 2023-2024 Annual Work Plan.
- Some activities are ongoing and will continue to be included in future work plans.
- More details on the work plan tasks can be found in the following sections.



Enduring Priority	2023-2024 Work Plan Activities	Progress
Healthy CPS System	Assess policies and procedures related to screened-out reports and how families are referred to support services.	Complete
	Receive a presentation from OCS about the newly implemented HR hiring process.	Complete
Reciprocal Engagement	Increase awareness of the CRP through connection with the Child Welfare Academy.	Complete/Ongoing
	Identify advocacy opportunities around retention, recruitment, and staff well-being by utilizing OCS staff surveys.	Complete
	Request OCS distribute the CRP Round Table report with OCS division staff.	Complete
	Engage with the OCS staff newsletter through readership and contributions	Complete
Public Outreach	Ensure diversity in membership recruitment	Complete/Ongoing
	Present to Alaska Legislators on the CRP	Complete
	Engage with relevant parties in the Alaska child welfare system	Complete/Ongoing
	Annual review of CRP website	Partial/Ongoing
Collaborative Relationship With OCS	Receive an update from OCS on the status of the new HR hiring process	Complete
	Continue monthly meetings with OCS to assist in implementing the Annual Work Plan	Complete
CRP Education & Development	CRP revisits the long-range plan and begins an updated version and process for revisiting annual actions	Complete/Ongoing
	Request OCS data and policies regarding the screened-out process and referral system	Complete
	Receive updates from OCS on State and Tribal compact agreements and use them to inform future planning	Complete
	Annual review of CRP Policies and Procedures	Complete
	Attend the CRP National Conference	Complete



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 November 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, 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, location, and Zoom registration information are announced before the meeting and posted on the CRP's website and the State of Alaska's Online Public Notices website: Alaska Online Public Notices.
- Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website on the Work Product page.

MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH OCS

- The CRP meets monthly via Zoom with the Director and the Division Operations Manager of OCS to maintain a healthy working relationship and stay informed of the latest developments in practice and policy.
- The CRP and OCS share progress, discuss the latest developments, and respond to mutual queries.

- The monthly CRP-OCS meetings are open to public attendance via Zoom and include a public comment period. The date, time, location, and Zoom registration information are announced before the meeting and posted on the CRP’s website and the State of Alaska’s Online Public Notices website: Alaska Online Public Notices.
- Notes from each meeting can be accessed on the CRP website on the Work Product page.

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Some years, the CRP conducts 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. In 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, the Panel took a new approach that allowed members to directly connect with frontline child welfare workers, managers, and supervisors. This approach replaced site visits with a series of hosted round table discussions focused on worker retention, employee wellness, and location-specific concerns.

In 2023-2024, the CRP delved further into the experiences of OCS workers by examining three years worth of data in the form of OCS staff surveys; they looked for advocacy opportunities around worker retention, recruitment, and well-being. They further connected with workers by contributing to the OCS staff newsletter and attending a Fireside Chat with OCS leadership and staff.

The Panel will revisit the design of future engagement activities at their fall 2024 Annual Retreat when they develop the 2024-2025 CRP Annual Work Plan.

The Citizen Review Panel’s findings and recommendations for 2023 - 2024 are organized under each enduring priority.

- *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.

Healthy CPS System

The CRP identified workforce retention as a key focus area for its work from July 2021 to June 2023. To that end, it hosted round-table discussions with frontline child welfare workers, supervisors, and managers in each of Alaska's five regions. The insight gained from those discussions helped shape the retention-related recommendations made to Alaska policymakers in the previous two years’ Annual Reports.

In 2023-2024, the CRP expanded its focus to include recruitment practices and prevention efforts. The CRP received two presentations from OCS about the State’s newly implemented centralized hiring system. The knowledge gained from these presentations may guide future work related to recruitment and retention advocacy efforts. The CRP focused on prevention by exploring the

policies and data related to screened-out practices at OCS and practices around how families are referred to support services.

The child welfare intake screening process begins with reports of concerns about a child's safety or well-being. These reports are carefully assessed to determine the level of risk to the child, and a decision is made on whether to screen the report in or out. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), 74.3% of screened-in cases are children who have experienced neglect.¹ It often takes multiple reports for a case to be screened-in for neglect, providing an opportunity to support these families before they enter the system. Ensuring families have access to essential services like food, shelter, education, and healthcare can act as a protective factor against neglect.² With that in mind, the CRP dedicated much of its efforts this year to understanding what happens after families are screened-out and what the barriers are to connecting those families with prevention services.



FINDINGS

- **State HR Hiring Practices:** The State of Alaska implemented new hiring practices in fall 2023. The CRP received two updates from OCS on the initial implementation efforts and the initial outcomes those practices had on hiring.
 - OCS is collecting data on process outcomes to monitor progress.
 - The new HR hiring procedures are a work in progress.
 - According to OCS, initial data indicates the new HR hiring process is more efficient and centralized.

¹U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). Child Maltreatment 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cm2022.pdf>

²Weiner, D. A., Anderson, C., & Thomas, K. (2021). System transformation to support child and family well-being: The central role of economic and concrete supports. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://cblcc.acf.hhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Chapin-Hall-Policy-Brief-Economic-and-Concrete-Supports.pdf>

- State employee policies may not accommodate the diverse structure of OCS. More flexibility is needed (on-call, etc).
- **OCS Intake Policies:** The CRP met multiple times as a group and with OCS to assess intake policies, procedures, and regulations and found the following:
 - According to OCS, sixty-five percent of reports are screened-out.
 - Tribal-related protective services reports are shared with the respective Tribes who have a confidentiality agreement with OCS.
 - Due to existing regulations, which allow only OCS staff to access the confidential information collected during the screening process, OCS' ability to connect screened-out, non-Tribal families to resources is limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **State HR Hiring Practices:**
 - Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) needs to create flexibility to allow OCS to implement HR policies that support their complex scheduling needs, and the hiring process needs to be attractive to potential applicants.
 - Allow for flexible working conditions within the OCS system.
- **OCS Intake Policies:**
 - OCS should look at examples from other states (e.g., Minnesota's response to screened-out reports) as a model for connecting screened-out families with resources.
 - OCS should collaborate more closely with organizations to advocate for changes related to providing support for screened-out calls. OCS should partner with organizations to provide direct support for families of screened-out calls. This could involve placing an OCS worker within the partnering organization or establishing a direct contract with the organization to handle the support.
 - OCS should work with the current administration to identify and develop solutions to alleviate legislative/regulatory barriers and allow direct support to screened-out calls.
 - The CRP requests OCS create an annual report of screen-out case data to be shared with the CRP for review.

Reciprocal Engagement

Engaging with other groups working on child welfare issues in Alaska is essential for collaboration, sharing insights, and amplifying collective efforts toward improving the well-being of children and families. The Citizen Review Panel's intent to engage reciprocally and share information with various stakeholders underscores a commitment to holistic and inclusive approaches to addressing challenges in the child welfare system. This approach allows the Citizen Review Panel to maximize its impact and contribute to a more comprehensive approach to improving child welfare outcomes in Alaska.

Throughout fiscal years 2022 and 2023, the Citizen Review Panel dedicated its efforts to addressing the critical issue of workforce retention within Alaska’s child welfare system. Engaging frontline workers, supervisors, and managers in discussions across the state provided valuable insight to inform recommendations to improve retention rates.

Understanding that workforce instability negatively impacts children and families³, the CRP continued its workforce efforts and expanded its focus in 2023-2024 to include worker recruitment. By examining data from Office of Children’s Services (OCS) staff surveys, the CRP aimed to identify advocacy opportunities related to retention, recruitment, and staff wellbeing.

The CRP will continue to actively engage with community groups that share a focus on workforce retention and well-being. This collaborative framework enhances the effectiveness of initiatives and strengthens support networks within the child welfare system.

FINDINGS:

- The CRP Chair connected with the Child Welfare Academy (CWA). The Panel will continue developing the relationship and following up in the coming year.
- *OCS Newsletter*: The CRP published an article in the OCS Frontline staff newsletter to increase awareness of the CRP and share the results of its 2022-2023 work on retention.
- *OCS Fireside Chats*: CRP members attended a “Fireside Chat” with OCS leadership and staff.
 - Fireside Chats provide an opportunity for workers to connect with OCS leadership.
 - Attendance at the Fireside Chat increased the CRP's understanding of OCS efforts related to staff well-being and retention.
 - Staff in attendance were engaged, and the discussion seemed helpful to workers.
 - OCS is trying to build positive relationships with employees.
- *OCS Staff Surveys*: The CRP dedicated two monthly meetings and a work session to reviewing three years of data in the form of OCS staff surveys. The CRP review of the 2023 OCS All Staff Surveys revealed the following:
 - a slight improvement in staff turnover rates from 2021 to 2023
 - on-call schedules and policies continue to be highlighted as a staff concern
 - workers report concerns with the culture of the court system, which creates challenges in their work
 - flexibility in work schedules and teleworking seems to have increased overall worker well-being and feelings toward OCS
 - the response rate of staff surveys is an identified strength

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *OCS Newsletter*: The CRP should contribute to the Frontline newsletter at least twice a year to share the Annual Report and reports from engagement activities such as site visits or round tables.

³Casey Family Programs. (2023). How does turnover in the workforce impact children and families? <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/>

- **OCS Fireside Chats:** The CRP encourages OCS leadership to continue facilitating the Fireside Chats with staff on a regular basis. The CRP would appreciate the opportunity to participate in future Fireside Chats.
- **OCS Staff Surveys:**
 - The CRP recommends that OCS hire an outside agency to conduct staff surveys, maximizing the reliability of the results and staff willingness to participate.
 - OCS should continue to assess the on-call structure for workers.
 - OCS should offer ongoing cultural training throughout the year for all levels of staff.
 - OCS should connect with court system leadership or the training division, the Public Defender's Office, and the Office of Public Advocacy (OPA) to address worker concerns about court culture.
 - The CRP requests that OCS leadership provide them with a report each year that includes all staff, exit surveys, and leadership summit surveys.

Public Outreach

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel is a mechanism for meaningful public participation in child protection policy and service. This year, the Panel continued to prioritize public outreach as a core function, aiming to provide Alaska residents with opportunities to actively participate in shaping the child welfare protection system at the community and statewide levels.

To ensure effectiveness in communities across the state, the Panel worked to identify and implement robust public outreach techniques. The efforts focused on methods that are culturally responsive to the diverse needs of families, support systems, partner agencies, and communities throughout Alaska.

The Panel conducts public outreach through a combination of passive and active mechanisms. These include maintaining an informative website, hosting public meetings, and engaging with a variety of stakeholders throughout the year. By employing various approaches, the Panel seeks to engage with stakeholders in all regions of Alaska to facilitate ongoing dialogue and collaboration on child welfare issues.

FINDINGS

- The Panel continues to work on ensuring diversity in membership recruitment. There are four vacant positions on the CRP, and the Panel does not currently have representation of membership from the Southeast region of Alaska. Membership recruitment will continue to be on the work plan action list.
- CRP member bios and headshots were published on the CRP website.

- Each Panel member planned to reach out to stakeholders in their respective regions throughout the year. This effort was successful in a couple of regions, and it will continue as public outreach proceeds in the future.
- The CRP Chair met with a representative of the Children’s Justice Act (CJA) Task Force to learn more about its mission and potential opportunities for future collaboration.
- The CRP maintained legislative relationships, with the Chair presenting to a joint session of the Senate and House Health and Social Services (HSS) Committees about the CRP's function and work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The CRP should continue building relationships with Alaska legislators by inviting them to the Annual Meeting and Retreat and by presenting to the HSS Committees annually.
- The CRP should strive for membership representation from all regions of Alaska by increasing outreach in the Southeast region.
- The CRP should engage more intentionally with the CJA Task Force next year.
- The CRP requests that OCS connect the CRP with representatives from the State-Tribal Compact meetings. The CRP should develop a relationship with this group and seek opportunities to support them.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

The State of Alaska’s Office of Children’s Services mission states, "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, provide them with safe and permanent homes, maintain cultural connections, and help them realize their potential."

The Citizen Review Panel recognizes the elements of the OCS mission that are shared with the work of the CRP. The Alaska CRP also acknowledges that to best support Alaska’s children and families 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 understanding of the shared priority of supporting families and protecting Alaska’s children.

FINDINGS

- At the April 2024 CRP-OCS monthly meeting, OCS updated the CRP on the newly implemented hiring process. While the newly implemented HR hiring procedures are a work in progress, they appear to be improving hiring efficiency.
- The CRP engaged with OCS leadership through continued OCS attendance at the CRP monthly meeting and the CRP Annual Meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The CRP and OCS should continue to work together collaboratively while maintaining the autonomy of the CRP.
- The CRP requests an update from OCS on the impact of the new hiring practices in the next fiscal year.
- The CRP should meet annually with the Commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) and the OCS Director to share Annual Report findings and recommendations.

CRP Education & Development

In order for the Citizen Review Panel to fulfill its mission and make an impactful difference, it is imperative for Panel members to stay informed on industry best practices, relevant legislation, and key public policy developments at both the state and federal levels. This knowledge serves as a cornerstone for informed decision-making and impactful advocacy in child welfare.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of the field, the CRP focuses on continuous learning and knowledge



sharing. Panelists are encouraged to delve into subjects of interest individually, gathering information that they then bring back to the group. The CRP aims to ensure that diverse perspectives inform discussions and recommendations by seeking resources at the state and national levels. This focus includes collaborating with experts from various disciplines, leveraging partnerships with relevant organizations, and integrating research into its activities.

Embracing a collaborative and proactive approach to learning allows the CRP to strengthen its ability to advocate effectively on behalf of children and families.

FINDINGS

- OCS leadership shared updates on the State-Tribal Compact agreement during two monthly meetings. This knowledge will be used to inform future CRP work.
- OCS leadership and the OCS Intake Manager provided the CRP with details on policies, procedures, practices, and data on the OCS intake process.
- The CRP began drafting new enduring priorities for an updated long-range plan during their Q2 and Q3 meetings. Through a reflective process during the Annual Meeting, the CRP decided to refocus its efforts through a strategic planning process to ensure greater impact.
- Two CRP members attended the CRP National Conference in San Diego. The National Conference is an important educational opportunity to connect with other CRPs and understand industry best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The CRP should meet in Anchorage in July 2024 for an in-person strategic planning retreat to develop a new long-range plan and determine how to be more impactful in future work.
- The CRP should use information learned and connections gained from the CRP National Conference to inform future work.

Conclusion

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.

In recognition of the evolving priorities and challenges in the field, the CRP has initiated the development of a new comprehensive five-year plan to guide its efforts to greater impactfulness. The plan will focus on strengthening the strategic direction and effectiveness of the Panel's work within Alaska's child welfare system.



Acronym List

CAPTA - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act

CFSP - Child and Family Services Plan

CJA - Children's Justice Act

CPS - Child Protective Services

CRP - Citizen Review Panel

DFCS - Department of Family and Community Services

FY - Fiscal Year

HSS - Health and Social Services

NCANDS - National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System

OCS - Office of Children's Services

OPA - Office of Public Advocacy