

ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

ANNUAL REPORT

2017



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

Contents

About the Panel.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Annual Activities	5
Work plan	7
Findings	8
Other important work this year	11
Appendix.....	23

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.

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 operating guidelines, available on the Panel's website.

FUNCTIONS: The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems to be more responsive to community needs and opportunities in providing child protection 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. Members elect a Chair and Vice Chair from among the membership. While members are expected to serve for at least two years, there are no stipulated term limits. The Panel membership during 2016-2017 included the following (* indicates the member resigned during this work year, and + indicates the member joined the Panel during this year):

Chair	Diwakar Vadapalli	Anchorage
Vice Chair	Dana W. Hallett*	Haines
Members	Bettyann Steciw	Anchor Point
	Joshua Stein*	Barrow
	Margaret McWilliams	Juneau
	Donna M. Aguiniga*	Anchorage
	Rebecca Vale	Anchorage
	Sonya Hull+	Wasilla

STAFF SUPPORT: Denali Daniels and Associates provides staff support under a contract with the State of Alaska.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Panel expresses its gratitude to all the staff and leadership of the Office of Children’s Services for their dedication to keep Alaska’s children safe, and being available to us through the year. The Panel recognizes the difficult jobs they have, filled with painful decisions, and greatly appreciates their willingness to continue to serve some of the most vulnerable children and families of Alaska.

The Panel also thanks all the partner agencies and their staff for being available for consultation, their thoughtful reflections, and helpful suggestions.

The Panel is thankful to all the individuals that served as resource persons to the Panel.

The Panel thanks Rep. Ivy Spohnholz, Chairperson of the House Committee on Health and Social Services, Sen. David Wilson, Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, and all the Committee members of both committees for encouraging the Panel and providing a forum for meaningful and constructive dialogue. The panel expresses its special appreciation to the efforts of Sen. Coghill and his legislative staff for their support and encouragement.

NOTE

The Citizen Review Panel is tasked with reviewing the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protective services in Alaska. In that capacity, this report notes the Panel’s observations on various components of the system in Alaska. The Panel’s review is intended to provide constructive feedback to inform OCS’ policy and practice. No observation should be construed as critical of any individual OCS employee.

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
SKILS	Standards, Knowledge, & Insight Leading to Success
SRO	Southeast Regional Office
TSCG	Tribal State Collaboration Group
UAA	University of Alaska Anchorage
WRO	Western Regional Office



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel continued its critical examination of its own purpose, structure, and processes; significantly increased its public outreach, and developed better understanding of all three its mandated functions. The panel had four goals this year. Very little progress has been made on any of the goals. This is primarily because of two reasons. First, the panel's staff support contract was terminated by the previous contractor in 2016, and a new contractor was not hired until December 2016. Despite intermittent support by designated OCS staff, this created a long gap in available staff. Second, the Alaska Panel organized and hosted the 16th National CRP Conference in Anchorage. The conference was an important event for Alaska CRP, and as expected, boosted the visibility of Alaska CRP within the state. Considerable volunteer time was consumed in organizing the event, and left very little room to pursue the goals for the year.

While unable to accomplish all it set out to do for the year, the Panel still managed to significantly expand its outreach, conducted a day-long workshop for ICWA workers, conducted the annual BIA Providers' Conference Survey, and participated in the Round 3 Children and Family Services Review (CFSR) of Alaska's child protection system, and actively participated in the implementation of the "Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020". The Panel could only visit two OCS regional offices this year, as opposed to an average of three in the past, each site visit generating a separate site visit report.

Our work this year yielded six recommendations. Two of these recommendations (1 and 5) are repeated from last year. Both these recommendations point to the need for OCS to integrate the Panel into its community engagement activities, and assign the Panel an instrumental role in its community engagement efforts. Recommendations 2, 3, and 4 are a result of our review of OCS' implementation efforts of its new grievance policy. Through Recommendation 6 we are suggesting OCS continue to work with CRP under a participatory evaluation framework and participate in CRP's activities.

2016-2017 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Consider assigning the CRP a significant role in implementing various priority areas of "Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020". With its statutory authority, CRP will be an asset for OCS in implementing this strategic plan.

Recommendation 2: Speed up the process and implement the new tracking system of grievances by December 2017

Recommendation 3: Establish adequate connection between a case file and any related grievances, with necessary protection for worker identity.

Recommendation 4: Publish monthly aggregate data on number of grievances received, nature of those grievances, and time to resolution of those grievances online.

Recommendation 5: OCS should work with CRP to strengthen CRP's ability as a robust mechanism for public participation, and rely on it to improve public awareness of the nature and content of OCS work.

Recommendation 6: OCS should continue to work with CRP to identify a clear working relationship under the participatory evaluation framework.



ANNUAL ACTIVITIES

The Panel's 2016-2017 annual calendar included the following activities. Reports on all major activities are available on the Panel's website at www.crp.alaska.org.

QUARTERLY PANEL MEETINGS: The Panel met on the first Tuesday in December 2016 and March 2017. In addition, the panel met for its work plan in August 27-28, 2016 and to finalize its annual report on June 24, 2017. Owing to the geographic dispersion of the Panel members, all meetings by default are held over the telephone. All quarterly Panel meetings are open to public. The meeting agenda, date, time, location, and call-in number are announced a week prior to the meeting, and posted both on the Panel's website and on State of Alaska online public notices website. Summary minutes are 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 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 the regional leadership. All site visit reports are available on the CRP website. The Panel conducted two site visits during 2016-2017 – Nome and Anchorage. Due to transition in staff the panel was unable to complete its site visit reports.

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE: Each year, the panel presents 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 was finally successful in securing a hearing with the Senate HSS Committee first time in five years. In addition, the panel leadership met with several individual legislators and shared the work of the panel. The panel also met with DHSS Commissioner Valerie Davidson in September 2016, and updated her on current concerns.

2016-2017 CALENDAR

Panel Quarterly Meetings	Meetings with OCS	Site visits	Other
Aug 27-28, 2016	Oct 4, 2016 Oct 19, 2016 Nov 14, 2016		
Dec 6, 2016	Dec 13, 2015	Dec 5-6, 2016 NRO Jan 18-20, 2017 ARO	
Mar 7, 2017	Feb 14, 2017 Mar 15, 2017		Mar 20-21, 2017 Presentation to the legislature May 10-12, 2017 CRP National Conference
Jun 24, 2017			

2016-2017 PRESENTATIONS TO THE PANEL

Month	Person	Title
Dec 2016	Scott Heaton	Community Relations Manager, OCS
Mar 2017	Linda Lord Jenkins	Ombudsman, State of Alaska



OUTREACH ACTIVITIES: The Panel reaches out to the public and various stakeholder groups to collect public comment. The Panel maintains an active website www.crp.alaska.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. Such activities included:

- Sept 14-15, 2016 Anchorage Attended the two-day Casey Family Permanency Work organized by OCS
- Oct 8, 2016 Anchorage Resource Family Advisory Board
- Oct 13, 2016 Anchorage Children’s Justice Act Task Force
- Oct 19, 2016 Webinar Presentation to OCS senior leadership on reorienting Alaska CRP
- Dec 1, 2016 Anchorage Presentation to the ICWA representatives at the BIA Providers Conference
- Jan 19, 2017 Anchorage Presentation at the Alaska Health Summit
- Mar 30, 2017 Anchorage Presented a day-long workshop on CRP for ICWA workers
- Apr 14, 2017 Anchorage Presentation to the Alaska Court Improvement Project
- May 10-12, 2017 Anchorage Hosted the 16th National CRP Conference

CRP NATIONAL CONFERENCE: Alaska CRP hosted the 16th annual conference during May 10-12, 2017, in Anchorage. With over 160 attendees from 22 states, the conference was well attended. The entire agenda was focused on a CRP’s responsibilities and functions. Several key stakeholders in Alaska’s child protection participated as plenary speakers, and the conference evaluations were mostly positive. Few members of the senior leadership of OCS attended the conference. Organizing the conference involved numerous scheduled and unscheduled meetings, coordination, and communication over email and telephone. The Chair of the panel also chaired the Conference Organizing Committee and was responsible for the entire effort. Panel’s coordinator was recruited for help in the final two-weeks of the conference to minimize obligating CRP funds towards the national conference.

CHANGES TO PANEL OPERATIONS: Major changes to the panel’s operation include the change in staff support contractor, and a concerted effort to reorient the panel’s relationship with OCS. The new contractor was hired in December 2016. The previous contractor terminated their contract with OCS upon citing concerns with the panel leadership. OCS reported to have shared those concerns but was not forthcoming with any specific concerns to be directly addressed, despite multiple requests. Further conversations led to two specific efforts.

1. A legislative proposal to move Alaska CRP from within the budgetary control of OCS and under the Ombudsman’s Office. Sen. Coghill’s office is leading this work.
2. A concerted effort to reorient the OCS-CRP relationship based on principles of participatory evaluation.



WORK PLAN

The Panel's annual work plan contains three components: (1) **specific goals** as part of the Panel's mandate of review and outreach; (2) associated **travel schedule** including site visits; and (3) specific **activities to change or improve its operations**. The Panel's travel and operational improvements are reported in the previous section of this report. Work plan goals evolve in the course of the Panel's activities.

GOAL 1: Explore the evolving relationships between Tribal organizations and Office of Children's Services (OCS).

The panel continued its work from previous year on this goal.

GOAL 2: Review the implementation of the OCS grievance policy.

In response to a review by Alaska's Ombudsman, OCS revised its grievance policy and implemented a new policy in early 2014. After two years of its implementation, the panel reviewed its implementation. Specifically, the panel was interested in reviewing OCS' efforts in tracking and resolving filed grievances.

GOAL 3: Develop and disseminate public awareness materials on OCS' Intake and IA processes.

Following its efforts in developing visual aides to help improve public awareness of OCS policies and procedures, the panel intended to refine its flowcharts and disseminate materials on OCS' intake and Initial Assessment policies.

GOAL 4: Evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the new administrative review process

The panel retained this goal from the previous year in an attempt to make further progress. OCS changed its administrative review process in early 2015 from an extended multi-hour review involving all associated parties to a case to a shorter review that met the federal minimum standards. This significant change has substantial implications.

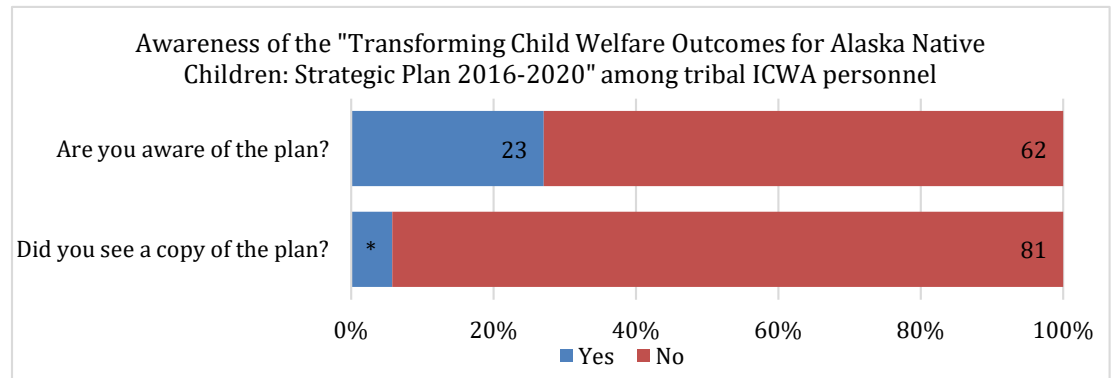
FINDINGS

GOAL 1: Explore the evolving relationships between Tribal organizations and Office of Children Services (OCS).

This goal was retained from last year, recognizing the need for continuing effort on understanding this important relationship. “Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020” was released in August 2016, and is a product of innovative and collaborative work by OCS, several other state agencies, and many leaders from various Alaska Native tribes and tribal organizations. While the panel was involved in a pre-planning visioning session in May 2015, it was neither invited to, nor was informed of, the planning process. “Community engagement”, one of the six priority areas identified in the final plan, has considerable overlap with the functions of Alaska CRP. Despite that, the plan neither identified CRP as a resource nor assigned it any specific role in implementing it. The panel recommended that OCS “consider assigning the CRP a significant role in implementing various priority areas of” the plan.

In response to the panel’s insistence, OCS invited the CRP to participate in any of the six Priority Area Working Groups to implement the plan. All meeting invites and minutes of the meetings are forwarded to the panel. The panel consistently participated in two priority area group deliberations during this year. The priority groups are still at the beginning stages and no concrete action steps were identified. Alaska CRP continues to clarify to OCS leadership that the panel exists to help OCS be more responsive to community’s child protection needs. Leveraging an existing statutory mechanism will allow for optimal use of scarce resources. Despite the panel’s consistent efforts through the year, OCS is yet to assign any specific role for the panel in implementing this plan.

The panel continued its efforts in conducting a survey of all ICWA workers at the annual BIA Providers’ Conference in Anchorage. This is the fourth consecutive annual survey of ICWA workers that attended the conference. Since the strategic plan was released in August 2016, and efforts to implement it began soon after. The CRP’s survey conducted in December 2016 was a timely opportunity to examine the awareness of ICWA workers with respect to the plan. As shown in the adjacent figure, less than 30% of the respondents (23 out of 85) were aware of the plan’s existence, and only a handful of them saw a copy of it. The same survey also asked respondents to identify the local institutions that they consider part of the local child protection system. Three years in a row, a vast majority of the respondents identified multiple institutions as part of their community’s child protection system. Primarily, local ICWA office, OCS, local school, local public safety, and the local clinic constitute a “system of care” to address community-level child protection needs.



The plan’s mission statement reads: “Alaska Native children, families and communities are thriving through respectful government-to-government collaboration, community leadership and aligned systems of care.” While the respondents to the CRP survey are not representative of the community leadership of all Alaska Native communities across the state, they are a substantial number from all regions of the state. Their low levels of awareness points to significant challenges in implementing this plan’s goals and objectives. If the plan is to truly ‘transform child welfare outcomes for Alaska Native



children', one would expect a grassroots-level input gathering effort in designing the plan followed by a campaign to involve multiple stakeholders in implementing it. Neither seems to be the case.

Nevertheless, architects of this plan still have the opportunity to generate and sustain meaningful and sustained dialogue to inform the implementation of this plan. All good plans are working documents, with room for continued input and reorientation, and there is no reason to believe this plan is any different. With its statutory authority and mandated functions, CRP can help this effort by engaging a wide variety of stakeholders. With limited capacity, CRP is certainly constrained for resources. However, it is counterintuitive to ignore CRP for its lack of resources. The panel needs to be strengthened to perform its functions and assist OCS in its efforts to transform child welfare outcomes for Alaska Native children. Thus, we reiterate the recommendation from last year.

Recommendation 1: Consider assigning the CRP a significant role in implementing various priority areas of “Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020”. With its statutory authority, CRP will be an asset for OCS in implementing this strategic plan.

GOAL 2: Review the implementation of the OCS grievance policy.

OCS aims to treat every family served with dignity, respect and with consideration to their cultural values. Complaints against OCS employees are first expected to be resolved informally. However, if these complaints have not been resolved the OCS grievance policy is a formal way to ensure concerns are heard and addressed. The purpose of the OCS grievance policy is to review and resolve all case-specific complaints received from a parent, foster parent, adult family member, a person with a significant relationship with a child, or a person participating in provision of services to a child or family who have an allegation of being affected by an action or decision of an employee of OCS.

The Alaska Ombudsman’s office issued a report in June 2012 recommending that OCS completely revamp its grievance process. Recommendations included: repeal and replace existing regulation, track all grievances, repeal and replace policies and procedures, and institute ongoing grievance training. OCS accepted all recommendations, and in response, devised and instituted a new grievance policy in the fall of 2014. In addition, OCS’ Community Relations Manager started tracking all grievances. OCS Director Christy Lawton stated then that the new regulations and process was currently far better than the previous versions. The panel’s efforts on this goal are limited to examining the process within OCS once a grievance is filed.

OCS’ policy manual (Sec. 6.1.5) states that all grievances will be routed to the Community Relations Manager (CRM). The CRM will then determine if the grievance is valid, and assigned valid grievances to appropriate supervisors or managers. The policy identifies three levels in resolving a grievance. If the grievance identified an individual worker decision on a case, the CRM assigns the grievance to the worker’s supervisor. If the grievance remains unresolved, it will be assigned to the regional manager, and further to the Division Operations Manager. At each stage, the assigned officer has 10 business days to contact and hold a meeting with the grievant, and further 15 days to issue a decision. All such decisions must be also relayed to the CRM and entered into an agency-wide tracking database.

The CRM for the agency discussed the current process with the panel during its December 2016 quarterly public meeting. During the ensuing discussion, the CRM clarified that the current system of tracking is simply an Excel spreadsheet, and is not accessible across the agency. The Director of OCS conveyed to the panel in an email dated 10/7/2014, soon after the new grievance policy was implemented, that the information on grievances are tracked in Excel,



and a new more sophisticated tracking system will be implemented in due course. The CRM clarified in an email (12/21/2017) that “the Office of Children’s Services has been aware of the limitations of some of our data tracking in these areas and has been working to develop significant improvements in the quality and quantity of the data we collect. The Office of Children’s Services has recently completed the development of the Management Information Tracking Tool (MITT) and are very nearly ready to begin utilizing the new data tracking system”. The CRM again reiterated the same in a later email on 02/17/2017.

The panel requested data on grievances filed thus far since implementing the new policy. Specifically, the panel requested data on the number of grievances received thus far, nature of grievances, and time to resolution. Despite several requests, the data was not made available for the panel’s review. Instead, the CRM shared a list of data items tracked in Excel. Currently, only four details of each grievance are tracked: date formal grievance is received by the state office, name of the grievant, date formal grievance is filed with the regional manager, and the regional manager with whom the grievance is filed and the region that the grievance originated (email communication from the CRP on 12/21/2016). This Excel spreadsheet is not accessible to the supervisors, regional managers, or the Division Operations Manager that would handle the grievance, and are required to document the following details of each grievance in an agency-wide tracking system:

- a. the date and participants of the meeting;
- b. issues discussed;
- c. decision;
- d. whether the decision was agreed or not agreed upon by the complainant;
- e. action steps and who is responsible;
- f. that the complainant was informed of having 10 business days to have the
- g. decision reviewed by the PS Manager II (or designated PS Manager I); and
- h. any additional applicable correspondence or documents attached in the complaint file in the tracking system.

Our very limited review of OCS’ efforts since implementing the new grievance policy in 2014 raises three major concerns. First, the current efforts in tracking grievances seems highly inadequate, and falls well short of OCS’ own policy requirements. Three years since the new policy was implemented, OCS is yet to implement an agency-wide tracking system. Current tracking efforts do not seem to capture the actual process of resolution, and are limited to tracking assignment of grievances. Without direct access to the data, the panel cannot assess the efficiency and effectiveness of this process. We recommend that OCS speed up the process and implement the new tracking system by December 2017.

Second, grievances are not recorded as part of ORCA, OCS’ case management system. Therefore, there is no record of a grievance in the related case file. With the high turnover among frontline workers at OCS, it is highly likely that a new case worker will not be aware of any previous grievances filed by the client. Such knowledge could be helpful for the new case worker in understanding the trajectory of the case, which would be important. The CRM clarified that connecting grievances to case files may violate confidentiality of workers since grievances are often against individual workers. We believe this concern can be addressed by masking relevant information. We recommend that, once the tracking system is in place, adequate connection be established between a case file and any related grievances.



The panel's consultation with stakeholders during site visits revealed that grievances are often not filed due to lack of confidence in the process. A common concern is lack of separation between those that are subjects in a grievance and those that are assigned to resolve it. For example, if a parent files a grievance against a worker's decision, it is assigned to the worker's supervisor. However, clients are advised to discuss any disagreements with the worker and their supervisor if necessary, even before filing a grievance. The purpose of the three-level hierarchy of the new grievance policy seems to be to ensure centralized oversight over the process that the client would otherwise follow up the OCS decision-making hierarchy. Many stakeholders expressed concern over lack of an independent review of grievances that is outside the chain of decision-making on the case. To improve transparency and increase public trust in the process, we recommend that OCS share aggregate data every month on number of grievances received, nature of those grievances, and time to resolution of those grievances online.

Recommendation 2: *Speed up the process and implement the new tracking system by December 2017*

Recommendation 3: *Establish adequate connection between a case file and any related grievances, with necessary protection for worker identity.*

Recommendation 4: *Publish monthly aggregate data on number of grievances received, nature of those grievances, and time to resolution of those grievances online.*

GOAL 3: Develop and disseminate public awareness materials on OCS' Intake and IA processes.

GOAL 4: Evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the new administrative review process

The panel could not make any progress on the Goals 3 and 4 this year due to shortage of staff. Much of the volunteer time was consumed in organizing and hosting the National CRP Conference in Anchorage.

OTHER IMPORTANT WORK THIS YEAR

Every year, during the course of its work, the Panel comes across various issues of importance to the delivery of child protection services in Alaska. Many of these issues are interconnected, and overlap with the goals for that year. Below are issues the Panel considered during 2015-2016. These are reported here to give the readers a more complete account of the Panel's work, and also to help readers understand the depth and scope of the Panel's work. While its mandate is broad and covers everything that the state and local child protection system does in Alaska, the Panel is limited by the available resources. Thus, this list does not include several other issues that could have been considered during this year.

Backlog of Initial Assessments (IA)

The panel was focused on this issue since 2012. In the summer of 2012, the panel witnessed OCS grapple with a backlog of over 4,000 IAs across all its field and regional offices in the state, and recommended that the agency seek a systematic effort towards a structural transformation in policy and practice to avoid a similar backlog in the future. Further, the CRP also noted that the 2012 backlog appears to be part of a pattern of similar backlogs occurring



previously in 2004 and 2008, and predicted that OCS will likely see a spike in backlogged IAs again in 2016 in the absence of a systematic structural change in policy and practice.

CRP's 2014 annual report first noted this challenge and was informed that a senior administrator from OCS state office is leading an effort to continuously monitor the status of IAs. The panel noted the periodicity of backlogs over the previous decade and noted that one-person monitoring "does not seem to address the underlying problem that leads OCS to have 1,000 open IA cases in no time if not closely monitored" and suggested "OCS develop a more systemic solution to this problem". In response, OCS intended to "continue addressing this systemically through a continuous improvement framework. This includes such things as continuing to closely monitor assessment completion, fostering a culture of accountability, seeking efficiencies through paperwork reduction, using support staff to complete tasks, and minimizing required actions for assessments involving children deemed safe and at low risk of future harm so resource can be focused on children and families with the greatest need".

Subsequently, the panel's 2015 annual report documented the continuing rise of backlogged IAs. There were close to 3,000 backlogged IAs by April 2015, just three years since the 2012 cleanup. Again, the panel noted the need for a systematic approach, and recommended OCS explore a systematic approach. Specifically, the panel recommended that OCS examine the nature of IAs that have been open past 45 days, 60 days, 90 days, and 120 days to gain a better perspective of the challenges in closing such IAs. In addition, the panel noted the challenges emanating from a redesigned central intake system, and suggested revisiting a differential response system that many other states implemented. In response, OCS constituted an "internal committee developing a pilot project focused on modifying our initial assessment program with the goal of developing policies and procedures that will allow for both increased speed of initial assessment completion while enhancing informed child safety decision making. It is expected that the first phase of the pilot project to begin during the first calendar quarter of 2016".

By June 2016, OCS had 3,560 open IAs, of which 1833 have been open longer than 90 days. OCS identified excessive workload and other related challenges like turnover and supervision as the root causes of this backlog. Since these are not new challenges, OCS continued efforts to stay current with new reports, and paid increased attention on high risk infants as a special population within IA. In addition, OCS implemented Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback in May 2016 to help focus on the children most at risk of repeat maltreatment. Despite these initiatives to focus on high priority children, the IA backlog continued to be a challenge, indicating that the root causes of IA backlog needs a direct and systematic approach towards structural change in policies and practices of the initial assessment process.

An OCS internal memo dated March 24, 2017 addressed to all OCS employees identifies the first steps towards such a change. As of the date of this memo, OCS had 4,133 active IAs, with only 1,088 that were open for less than 45 days. That is, almost 75% of active IAs by March 24 2017 were past due. The memo also recognizes that "prior attempts to ameliorate the IA backlog have been successful, but only temporarily", and "well intentioned, but misguided attempts at technical solutions have resulted in the creation of multiple methods for documenting the assessment summary, lack of consistent documentation necessary to legally defend maltreatment findings and case decisions, assessment tools serving only as case closure requirements rather than assisting in decision making, created unrealistic job expectations, and supported an organizational culture of leaving work incomplete." This is a damning assessment of efforts thus far, and an unfortunate situation despite CRP's consistent recommendations for three years to pursue a structural solution.



Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that the memo identified the following steps towards a structural solution:

- A clinical approach to safety and risk assessment, dependent upon sufficient information gathering, targeted documentation, critical thinking and application of professional standards will be fully embraced.
- Protective Services Specialists and Supervisors will be empowered to focus on families most in need by making the steps in the assessment protocol and tools in the assessment process discretionary, to be used according to their professional judgment, rather than mandated to create a paper trail.
- The safety and risk assessment processes will be streamlined by minimizing the amount of documentation required and having only a single method for documenting the assessment summary.
- The six question summary will no longer be required; instead, relevant contact notes will be required for all significant contacts made during information gathering process.
- The FRAN will no longer be required; instead, risk assessment will be integrated into clinical assessment of the family.
- Documentation standards will be established emphasizing minimally required, critically important information necessary for decision making and legal defensibility. Emphasis on minimally required.
- Other efficiencies will be explored such as finding a way to integrate multiple overlapping PSRs into a single assessment summary.
- The timeframe for compiling an assessment will be extended to 60 days with extensions granted only in extraordinary, case-specific circumstances.

The panel finds these latest efforts encouraging, and will continue to monitor and assist OCS' efforts in resolving this long-standing challenge. Recent count of overdue IAs (as of June 27, 2017) stands at 3,722. This is 10% less than what was reported in the March 24 internal memo. OCS expects to have a more concrete set of changes in the next couple of months.

Moving CRP out of OCS

Alaska CRP began operations in 2002 in response to the 1996 federal amendments to CAPTA. It was authorized anew by Alaska's state statute in 2005. The state statute added \$64,300 in an adjoining fiscal note for a part-time CRP coordinator, and funds for panel's travel. The panel's operations expanded in the ensuing years, and the budget increased to \$100,000 by 2010. The federal statute requires each state to provide adequate staff support to CRPs. OCS hired an independent consultant through a bidding process to provide staff support to the panel. Since the panel does not have an independent legal identity, and thus cannot have its own accounting infrastructure, this contract mechanism forms the only conduit for disbursement of CRP funds.

The approved agency budget for the fiscal year 2016 included \$100,000 for CRP activities. A bidding competition meant that potential bidders, to be competitive, quoted less than budgeted amount for performing CRP tasks. The winning bid was \$82,700. The panel was informed that the remaining funds will be made available to the panel through this contract mechanism if and when the need arises. The panel, through the contractor, submitted a request for additional funds to perform its mandated functions in January 2016. This request was denied by the Office of the Commissioner of DHSS citing grave budget situation. The panel was informed that all contracts and grants were being cut. However, the panel is neither a contractor nor a grantee. It is a statutory mechanism for public participation in child protection, and its budgeted amount cannot be limited by a potential contractor's bid based on their initial assessment of the cost to perform their functions. The panel requires the ability to add to or otherwise change its planned activities during the year as need arises. The unexpected cut to the panel's budget in the middle of a fiscal year meant that the panel could not perform its planned activities.



During the same year, both the consulting contractor and OCS leadership indicated having common concerns over the panel's leadership. While none of these concerns were clearly stated, the panel followed its operational procedures adopted in January 2015 and addressed these concerns. The panel's vice chair led the panel in the absence of the chair and examined the charges. Subsequently, the panel (without the chair) issued a letter unanimously supporting the direction of the panel, and the leadership of the chair. With unresolved concerns, the contractor terminated the contract, and the panel requested OCS to immediately hire another contractor and ensure a smooth transition. A new contractor was hired by December 2016.

The inherent existence of a conflict of interest in the agency hiring staff for a body that reviews the agency's work can be overcome with clear regulations and defined roles and responsibilities for all involved. However, despite the 2005 state statute directing the DHSS Commissioner's office to institute regulations for CRP operations, such regulations were not enacted. The panel operated until 2015, a full decade since the 2005 statute, without any operational guidelines or regulations beyond the state and federal statutes which are necessarily vague. Further, the panel was alerted in Late 2014 that it was violating state Open Meetings Act (§ 44.62.310.) by keeping its meetings private, which has been the practice for some time. In light of the often tenuous relationship between CRP and OCS over the years, and the panel's own violations of state statutes, the panel suggested an external evaluation of the CRP operation. Due to lack of action from OCS or DHSS, the panel conducted its own self-evaluation as part of its work during the 2015-2016 work year and identified several areas for improvement. This led to recommendations for an external evaluation of the panel's operation and structure, and its relationship with OCS. OCS cited lack of resources for such an evaluation.

The panel's leadership shared its continuing concerns with legislative leadership. Subsequent conversations with several legislators during the 2017 legislative session and during the panel's presentations to the House and Senate Committees on Health and Human Services in March 2017 made it clear that the current structural configuration of CRP within the DHSS and OCS is not optimal. A draft bill now proposes to move the CRP into the state's Ombudsman's Office. This was briefly discussed during the legislative presentations in March 2017. All concerned parties are working through the procedural steps to ensure such a move is the most constructive and meaningful next step in enhancing the work and effectiveness of Alaska CRP.

A CRP is a mechanism for public participation in child protection, and is intended to help state and local child protection services systems to be more responsive to the needs of the communities, families, and individuals being served by these agencies. While the panel's primary function is to review those agencies' policies, procedures, and practices, such a review is expected to be constructive and in collaboration with those CPS agencies. It is not unusual for a review to cause tenuous moments in the relationship between the reviewers and those being reviewed. However, we believe that such tenuous moments should not define the relationship and cloud the statutory obligations or intended purpose of the exercise. Regardless of the panel's location within the state bureaucratic infrastructure, CRP and OCS must share a constructive and collaborative relationship. Alaska CRP must continue to strive to be an objective, independent, and legitimate mechanism for public participation; and OCS must continue to invest in integrating the panel into its community engagement activities, and in its serious consideration of the panel's recommendations.

Reorientation of Alaska CRP

While the legislature considers relocating the CRP, efforts to improve CRP-OCS working relationship began immediately following the termination of the last staff contract in July 2016. In a series of meetings with the senior leadership at OCS in the following months, a consensus emerged that the CRP should be fundamentally reoriented, and current understanding of it reconsidered. Alaska CRP, as many other state CRPs, is primarily perceived to be a watch dog



agency. While review is the primary function of a CRP, a closer examination of congressional record during the deliberations leading up to the 1996 amendments to CAPTA provides a more complex picture.

CRPs were intended to help CPS agencies be more responsive to community needs. Despite some incendiary language pitching CRPs as agencies that would hold CPS agencies accountable in a very public way, the panels were expected not only to review, but also to advocate for more resources for the agencies and a better understanding of the agencies' purpose and work. Specifically, CRPs are to help raise awareness of the challenges of a CPS worker's job. Therefore, a CRP review should be constructive and in collaboration with the CPS agency for such a review to lead to meaningful change. In addition, the CRP has a clear role in conducting public outreach to not only inform its review but also inform the public about the role of the CPS agency. A CRP's advocacy may include advocating for the CPS agency or its workforce.

The CRP presented these details to OCS senior leadership and both agreed to a participatory evaluative framework in order to transform an often adversarial relationship into a collaborative one. Overall, under the new framework, OCS agreed to participate in CRP's activities, and better integrate CRP into its activities. Specifically, the following challenges are being discussed at this time:

Is CRP a stakeholder? CRP's participation in the CFSR process as an illustration:

The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is an extensive review of a state's child protection services system. Each state was reviewed twice and the third round is currently underway. Alaska's review period began in May 2016 and ended in April 2017. All cases handled by OCS within this 12-month period were reviewed, in addition to systemic factors such as OCS' responsiveness to community and its data management system. OCS began preparing for this review at least two years in advance. Alaska CRP has not been part of OCS' initial efforts in preparing for the Round 3 CFSR.

Despite many attempts by the CRP to be involved in conversations and participate in the review process, the panel was only informed of the progress being made within OCS, but was not invited to participate. Since CFSR is a significant review exercise, CRP continued to ask for progress updates on OCS' preparation for CFSR during OCS-CRP monthly meetings. Eventually, CRP received an invitation to attend a quarterly stakeholder teleconference scheduled for April 30, 2016. These quarterly meetings were set up to review progress on the 2014-2019 Children and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and prepare the Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR) due on June 30 that year, and to generally engage the spectrum of stakeholders in OCS work. We believe such meetings happened in the previous planning periods too. CRP attended every quarterly meeting since April 30, 2016. In addition, CRP participated in preparatory meetings with federal reviewers, and planned to participate as a reviewer on the CFSR review team. CRP reviewed and provided feedback on the Statewide Assessment document prepared by OCS as part of the CFSR review. Due to unforeseen health challenges, the CRP representative trained to be a reviewer had to withdraw from the review team. CRP was invited as a stakeholder to be interviewed by the review team, and one of the members was interviewed.

All review activities of this round of CFSR are now complete, and a final report will be issued in July. Preliminary results were shared with CRP during the most recent quarterly call on June 28, 2017. While many areas of OCS operation are found to be needing improvement, there were some positive takeaways. It is important to recognize that CFSR is not a grading mechanism where a CPS agency's performance is issued a pass/fail grade. It is a mechanism to promote continuous quality improvement and motivate CPS agencies to be on a path to improved performance. The standards against which any CPS agency is judged are deservedly high. The likelihood for most CPS agencies of meeting those standards are low.



Therefore, interpreting the results of a CFSR as simple pass or fail defeats the purpose of the exercise. A CFSR's focus is not to find if a CPS agency is failing, but the areas where it may need improvement. Therefore, the Program Improvement Plan (PIP) that a CPS agency must prepare following a CFSR is extremely important, and must propose plans with respect to each area identified as needing improvement. OCS is currently gearing up to prepare its next PIP. This plan will need to address every area that the CFSR identified as needing improvement. Just as OCS tried to engage stakeholders in preparing its CFSP, APSR, and the CFSR, it is inviting all stakeholders to participate and contribute to the PIP. CRP is invited as a stakeholder, and the first meeting yet to be scheduled will be held in Anchorage.

However, as the panel continues to clarify to OCS, CRP is not a stakeholder. Rather, it should be understood as a mechanism for stakeholder engagement. The CRP should be empowered to share the responsibility of stakeholder engagement. Alaska CRP currently reaches out to many stakeholders across the state through the year in trying to assess the impacts of OCS' policies, procedures, and practices. It strives to inform the public of the role of OCS and improve general awareness about OCS policies, procedures, and practices. Through consistent efforts over several years, CRP demonstrated its ability to perform a wide variety of tasks. It gained a reputation for being independent. It is not unreasonable to suggest that OCS can benefit from strengthening the panel

Recommendation 5: *OCS should work with CRP to strengthen CRP's ability as a robust mechanism for public participation, and rely on it to improve public awareness of the nature and content of OCS work.*

further and leveraging its independent voice to better engage the community to dispel many myths about the agency and its work. Therefore, we reiterate the recommendation from last year: *OCS should work with CRP to strengthen CRP's ability as a robust mechanism for public participation, and rely on it to improve public awareness of the nature and content of OCS work.* In rejecting this recommendation, OCS cited the panel's own lack of capacity to complete its work as planned for the year. However, this reasoning completely ignoring the haphazard staff support the panel had through the year. We respectfully question the wisdom in not investing to improve the capacity of the panel and then disregarding the panel for lack of capacity, and reiterate the previous year's recommendation.

OCS' role in CRP's work:

Traditionally, CRP conducted its activities independently, and OCS responded to CRP's comments or criticisms of OCS policies, procedures, and practices. CRP always identified its prioritized list of goals for the year based on a long list of issues/concerns it accumulated over the years. Its calendar of site visits and particular sites to visit were identified based on perspectives it gained over time about the health of a field or regional office. While CRP consulted with OCS staff in several field offices across the state through the year, and met with senior leadership every month, its review was not informed by OCS' own perception of the challenges and opportunities in resolving those challenges. The workflow was always led by a completely independent CRP review, followed by a completely independent OCS response. Rather predictably, OCS' response has always been to either fully embrace the recommendations on obvious challenges that were always evident, or provide reasons why CRP recommendations cannot be accepted. The sustained and constructive public dialogue that congress intended between OCS and its spectrum of stakeholders, through the CRP as a medium, is yet to be realized in Alaska. This is evident from the fact that none of the planning documents (CFSP and APSRs) mention CRP in any efforts to identify or resolve any of the challenges facing OCS. It is hard not to conclude that CRP exists because of a statutory requirement, and not for any practical purpose that OCS would acknowledge.



As Alaska CRP began critically examining its own role, it became increasingly clear that the autonomy enjoyed by the CRP has been at the expense of necessary engagement by OCS. While CRP should have the autonomy it currently enjoys, this should not preclude OCS from participating in CRP's activities. For a more meaningful review, OCS should participate in CRP's review, outreach, and advocacy activities by providing OCS' own perspectives on various challenges and related opportunities. The annual CRP report-OCS response cycle should be considered a continuing dialogue between OCS and all its stakeholders. However, this does not limit OCS in engaging with stakeholders through other means such as the Tribal State Collaboration Group (TSCG, which is a special forum for discussing the challenges and opportunities common to OCS and Alaska Native organizations). By not actively participating in CRP activities, and not finding instrumental role for the CRP in its community engagement activities, OCS is losing the opportunity to leverage an existing statutory mechanism.

Recent conversations led to an agreement on two specific changes that could improve OCS-CRP relationship. First, the current six-month gap between CRP annual report and OCS response will be shortened to three months. Therefore, OCS is expected to respond to this annual report by September 30, 2017 instead of December 31, 2017. This allows for a better continuity in the dialogue. Second, OCS agreed to participate in the CRP's annual fall retreat and provide input in preparing the panel's work plan for next year. This will allow CRP to identify challenges that are also of high priority to OCS, be informed of OCS' current efforts on resolving those challenges, and identify and pursue opportunities that may yield an optimal resolution of those challenges. This will allow for CRP to conduct its review, outreach, and advocacy activities in pursuit of possible resolutions of challenges, maintain a constructive tone in its criticism, and provide citizens an "integral role" in Alaska's child protection policy and practice. Such a relationship between Alaska CRP and OCS should be possible regardless of the CRP's location within or outside OCS.

Recommendation 6: OCS should continue to work with CRP to identify a clear working relationship under the participatory evaluation framework.

Hosting the 16th National CRP Conference

Alaska CRP attended the National CRP conference for some years before 2011. It resumed its attendance at the national event in 2015. The opportunity to host the conference was offered to the Alaska CRP, and we accepted it for the 2017 conference. In preparation for the 2017 conference, we participated in organizing the 2016 National Conference in Arizona, and began preparing for the 2017 conference in Alaska immediately after.

The panel is proud to have hosted the 16th National CRP Conference in Anchorage Alaska in May. The conference was attended by 160 representatives from 22 states. Attendees included CRP volunteers, CRP coordinators, and CPS staff from across the country. The entire cost of the conference was close to \$100,000 and sponsors included the UAA's Institute of Social and Economic Research, College of Health, College of Business and Public Policy, School of Social Work, and Center for Community Engagement and Learning; Alaska Children's Trust; Chugach Alaska Corporation; and Denali Daniels and Associates. The event was held on UAA campus in Anchorage, with a cultural evening at the Alaska Native Heritage Center.

The conference key note speaker was Ms. Debra Schilling Wolfe, Director of the Field Center for Children's Policy and Practice & Research. Other speakers included prominent people from Alaska's child protection enterprise. The panel made a concerted effort to include all stakeholders of Alaska's child protection enterprise in planning and hosting the event. The conference was well received, and attendees greatly appreciated the content shared by speakers from across the country. The panel greatly appreciates the help, support, and participation of many that contributed to a grand event. This event



also helped raise awareness among the general public in Alaska about Alaska CRP's work and impact on the state's child protection enterprise. The Panel wishes to particularly thank the Institute of Social and Economic Research in donating approximately \$30,000 worth of staff time and \$5,000 in cash. We are proud to have set a high standard for the National CRP Conference, and look forward to participating in future conferences.

Grand Jury Investigation

Alaska Citizen Review Panel received a letter from Alaska Department of Law (DOL), Office of Special Prosecutions on January 18, 2016 with a recommendation from the Grand Jury investigation. Representative Tammie Wilson (R-North Pole) submitted a request on September 2, 2016 to the Department of Law for a Grand Jury investigation into "how the Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS), Office of Children Services (OCS) is complying with its statutory duties." She asked that the Grand Jury conduct a formal investigation and submit a written report. A grand jury under the Third Judicial District in Anchorage reviewed the matter and "determined that the Alaska Citizen Review Panel, pursuant to Alaska Statute 47.14.205 et.seq., is statutorily required to address the concerns raised by Representative Wilson." Upon instructions from the Grand Jury, the Department of Law forwarded all materials submitted by Rep. Wilson to the panel.

Rep. Wilson submitted a list of fifteen allegations, many of them broad in scope. These allegations seems to have emanated from her review of 51 OCS cases. A case-by-case summary review was also submitted. Subsequent conversations with the Supervising Assistant Attorney General clarified that the panel should consider these allegations as part of its mandated functions, and follow its procedures in responding to them.

While the panel has a review function, it is hardly an investigative body. The panel's review is to assess if OCS' policies, practices, and procedures are being responsive to the needs of the children, families, and communities served by the agency. The panel's review is limited to OCS as the state's designated child protection agency. Thus, upon careful review, only the following allegations fall within the panel's scope for consideration. Original allegations submitted by Rep. Wilson were in a bullet list. They are reworded for clarity, and corresponding bullet number is noted in parenthesis).

1. Case plans often lack input from parents whose children are in OCS custody, and thus are unreasonably demanding and may take many years to fulfil (bullet # 4).
2. Case workers withhold evidence or fabricate evidence, and commit other fraudulent acts (bullet #5)
3. Family reunification is not prioritized, and very little resources are spent on this effort (bullets #10, #11)
4. OCS' staff do not consistently follow the agency's policies as outlined in the long and cumbersome policy manual (bullet #12)
5. Relative searchers are often inadequate, leaving many willing relatives helpless while their kin are in foster care (bullet # 15)

In a series of bullet points, Rep. Wilson claims that there are false incentives for OCS to remove children and retain children in foster care for longer time than necessary. The panel recognizes that there may be some agency policies and practices that may create such false incentives. Such policies and related false incentives will be unearthed in the normal course of CRP review as described in response to allegation 4 below. Beyond such agency policies, this allegation is addressing incentives stemming from policies and decisions made by actors beyond Alaska's OCS, and thus are not within the scope of a CRP review. Nevertheless, the panel recognizes these as important issues to examine, and encourages Rep. Wilson to use her authority as legislator to marshal necessary resources for an appropriate entity to address them. While all five allegations above are within the panel's scope for review, the panel can only address #3 and #5 during the next work year.



Allegation 1 resonates with the findings of most recent Round 3 CFSR that concluded in May 2017. Only 60% of the OCS cases had adequate “child and family involvement in case planning” (Item 13 of the CFSR). Further only 21% of the cases met the federal standard in workers visits with parents (Item 15 of the CFSR). Both these items are identified as areas needing improvement, and OCS must address these items in their Program Improvement Plan (PIP), due later this year. The panel will closely monitor OCS’ response to these items.

Allegation 2 can be addressed through a systematic review of a sample of cases. The state Ombudsman’s Office recently completed such a review of two cases involving Interstate Compact on Placement of Children (ICPC). Such a thorough review is time consuming and the panel will need additional resources and technical capacity. Recruiting volunteers to conduct such a review is challenging at best. Although CRP is statutorily authorized to review cases, we have been unsuccessful thus far for reasons including panel’s own structural and organizational challenges.

Allegation 3 is well within the panel’s scope, and fits well into its current review template. This goal will be considered for the panel’s next work plan in August 2017

Allegation 4 is broad, and covers the entire review function of the panel. The primary focus of the panel’s review is to assess if OCS is following its policies, and if those policies are being responsive to the needs of the community. OCS policy manual, referred to in this allegation, is a compendium of all agency policies, and runs over a thousand pages. The panel picks 4-6 areas of OCS policy and practice each year, and reviews the policy pertaining to these areas. The panel also examines specific practices while on site visits. These site visit reports are submitted to both the House and Senate HSS Committees, and are available to the public on the panel’s website. In effect, addressing this allegation should be a continuing effort, and the panel is established with that as its primary purpose. While the panel strives to fulfill its responsibilities, it cannot review every OCS’ policy and practice every year with the current capacity, nor is it prudent to be doing so. We encourage Rep. Wilson and others to continue to be engaged, and bring attention to the challenges of providing child protection services in Alaska.

However, the panel recognizes that OCS’ policy manual is cumbersome, difficult for OCS employees to use, and intimidating for anyone else. Many OCS workers over the years made it clear to the panel during its site visits that OCS manual is extremely difficult to use. The document is accessible in a PDF format online. Employees may have other ways to access it. The version online is a hodge-podge of all the agency policies, updated at varying times, with inconsistent page numbers. The entire manual should be separated into individual policies and classified in some meaningful way as it suits OCS staff, and should be posted as a web page with hyperlinks to individual policies. Many of these policies are interlinked. Such interlinks should be made obvious for users. In an attempt to simplify and improve the manual’s accessibility, the panel began an effort in 2014 to prepare flowcharts explaining the decision-making sequence outlined in each of the policies included in the manual. This work is in progress.

Allegation 5 is well within the panel’s scope, and fits well into its current review template. This goal will be considered for the panel’s next work plan in August 2017.

In addition to a list of allegations, Rep. Wilson also submitted documents alleging the following:

6. OCS hires case workers with no formal social work training, but their positions require them to perform professional social work tasks. This put children and families at risk of receiving less than optimal services and in some cases, causes actual harm.



Workforce issues are endemic at OCS. The panel noted many times in the past that turnover among frontline workers is extreme, and has consistently been over 35% for the last 15 years. This allegation specifically refers to the qualifications, training, and skills of OCS case workers and their suitability to the tasks to be performed. OCS revised their job classifications multiple times in recent years, and the current workforce includes those with formal training in social work and those without such formal training. We believe OCS agrees that formal training in social work is desirable. However, we sympathize with OCS and recognize the difficulty in recruiting workers with such formal training.

Nevertheless, the panel recognizes the challenges inherent in this mismatch between worker skills and assigned tasks. To address this allegation, a detailed study mapping the correspondence of tasks being performed and the skills of the workers performing those tasks is necessary. Data necessary to conduct such a study should already be available within the existing data systems. The panel cannot conduct such a study with its current capacity and level of access to necessary data.

Finally, the panel would like to observe that Rep. Wilson's office first reached out to the panel on June 6, 2014 asking the panel to intervene in two specific cases. She was informed that the panel does not intervene in cases, and it focuses on systemic issues. In an email on June 20, 2014, the panel responded that CRP is statutorily authorized to review cases, but do not have the capacity to do so. Therefore, we requested that Rep. Wilson's office either assist the panel in building its capacity to perform this function, or her office review a sample of cases and provide systematic evidence. The panel received summary results of her offices' review in a letter dated October 20, 2015. Her office reviewed an unknown number of cases. However, no supporting documentation nor the total number of cases reviewed was submitted to the panel. This letter requested the panel conduct a broad-based sweeping review of the entire OCS operations. The panel responded on November 5, 2015 and suggested that such a broad investigation is beyond the scope and capacity of the CRP. We also noted in that letter that OCS is reviewed by 10 different review mechanisms from different perspectives, and Rep. Wilson could convene all review mechanisms to find common ground and potentially conduct such a review. The panel did not hear back from Rep. Wilson, and received the recommendations from the Grand Jury on January 18, 2017.

This timeline helps illustrate a vital point about the panel's role and responsibility. The panel is a statutory mechanism to conduct a constructive review of OCS' policies, procedures and practices. The panel's process is necessarily slow, and is most meaningful if it is in collaboration with OCS. In this case, we believe valuable time was lost in pursuit of alternative mechanisms to perform what appears to be explicitly a CRP's task. Grand Jury's recommendation citing relevant Alaska statutes confirms this. The panel's November 5, 2015 response to Rep. Wilson explained the need to strengthen the panel, and enable it to perform the review she identified. We admire her persistence, and hope to thoroughly address the allegations listed above. We anticipate barriers in the course of this work, and we hope to receive necessary support to overcome them.

CRP has a statutory role, and it should not only be supported to perform its role, but also be held accountable to do so. Rep. Wilson's efforts and the Grand Jury recommendation reinforce this.



PROGRESS ON 2016 RECOMMENDATIONS

The CRP had five recommendations in the June 2016 Annual Report. OCS responded to each recommendation on December 31, 2015, a complete six months since the panel's recommendations. CRP recommendations mostly focused on CRP's role and its relationship with OCS. Below is CRP's observation of the progress in response to each of those recommendations, a complete six months after OCS response to these recommendations. We hope this adds to the continuing public dialogue as mandated by Congress. OCS is a complex agency with many moving parts. Several initiatives have multiple impacts that may not always be intentional and will likely impact one or more areas of practice. Therefore, our observations may be limited.

Recommendation 1: Consider assigning the CRP a significant role in implementing various priority areas of "Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children: Strategic Plan 2016-2020". With its statutory authority, CRP will be an asset for OCS in implementing this strategic plan.

Beyond inviting CRP to participate in the Priority Area Working Groups, and sharing the meeting minutes of those groups that met consistently, OCS did not assign any specific role to the CRP. However, our consistent participation in the Community Engagement Workgroup allows the panel to demonstrate the significant overlap between the goals and objectives under this priority area, and CRP's own mandated functions. As a result, this workgroup is actively considering ideas to either seek CRP's leadership in conducting some of the activities, or leveraging CRP's current activities to meet some of the goals and objectives of this workgroup.

Recommendation 2: Tribal State Collaboration Group (TSCG) should consider a dialogue with the leaders of Alaska Native for-profit corporations to garner their support and any resources they may be able to leverage to enhance child protection services.

OCS deferred implementing this recommendation to the decision of the Tribal Caucus leaders of the TSCG. The panel is not aware of any further developments.

Recommendation 3: The enterprise of CRP should be evaluated by an external entity to assess its effectiveness, with particular attention to:

- A. Internal structure and process of CRP in order to improve efficiency.
- B. CRP-OCS statutory relationship in order to ensure clear roles and responsibilities.

An evaluation as suggested was welcomed but OCS cited lack of resources to initiate such an evaluation. As mentioned earlier, the panel's persistent efforts at clarifying roles and responsibilities of CRP, OCS, and the CRP coordinator, and to reform the mechanisms that facilitate this three-way relationship lead us to reach out to the legislature for a substantial reorganization. A bill to move the CRP into the state's Ombudsman's Office is being considered. All concerned parties are aware of this proposal. Regardless of the success of this proposed bill, we believe this will provide an opportunity for all to critically examine the challenges facing Alaska CRP.

Recommendation 4: OCS build on CRP's survey effort by:

- A. Viewing training of frontline workers as a longer enterprise that extends beyond SKILS, and evaluate the entire enterprise for effectiveness.
- B. Including special sections in the annual staff survey, focusing on a topic of interest, and repeating this periodically every two or three years.
- C. Identifying other similar survey efforts that OCS conducts, and leveraging resources from external entities such as CRP to conduct them.



The CRP was informed that OCS will resume conducting the employee survey. We haven't received any information if this survey was conducted since the CRP-conducted survey in the Spring of 2016. Thus, we have no evidence to suggest that OCS now views training as an enterprise that includes anything beyond the 2-3 weeks of training provided to the newly hired workers. The panel is aware of HB 151 approved by the House and transmitted to the Senate, and its provisions to increase the length of training. We are also not aware if the employee survey has any special sections as recommended. OCS did not share any other recent survey efforts. Thus the panel is not aware if OCS surveyed any stakeholder groups since this recommendation, and if those surveys were redesigned to avoid the limitations we found in the employee survey.

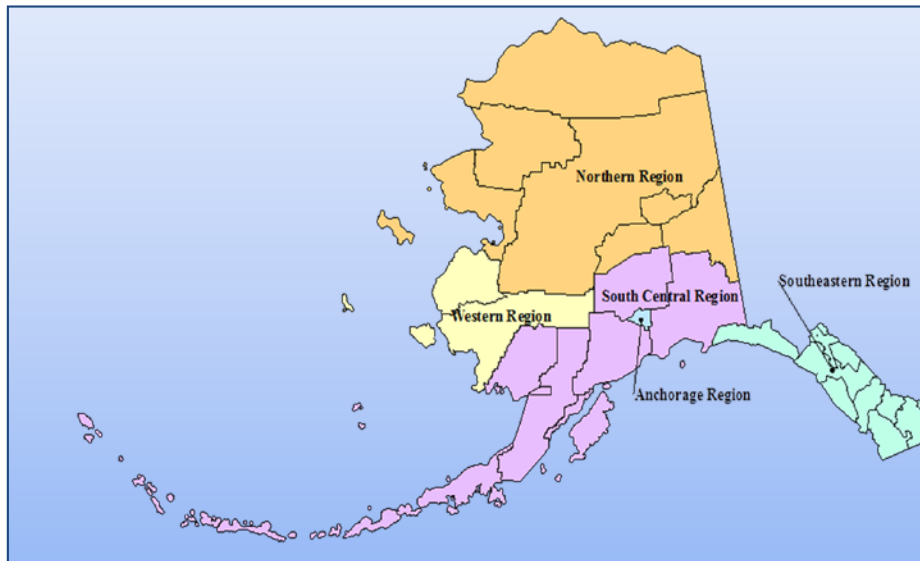
Recommendation 5: OCS should work with CRP to strengthen CRP's ability as a robust mechanism for public participation, and rely on it to improve public awareness of the nature and content of OCS work.

As described earlier, OCS agreed to fundamentally reorient Alaska CRP and their perceptions of it. The agency's leadership agreed to participate in the panel's August retreat and provide input into the panel's work plan for next year. In addition, they agreed to shorten the time between the CRP report and OCS response.

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. Summary of the proceedings of meeting with Commissioner Davidson
2. BIA Providers Conference Survey Results Report
3. Comments to the Senate HSS Committee
4. Comments to the House HSS Committee
5. Brochure of the 16th National CRP Conference



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.