



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

323 E 4th Ave
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 269-4000
Fax: (907) 269-3901
1-800-478-4444

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Representative Les Gara
State Capitol, Room 511
Juneau, AK 99801
Representative.Les.Gara@akleg.gov

Dear Representative Gara,

I am writing in response to an inquiry raised during the House Finance Budget Sub-Committee regarding the reasons for growth in the number of children in protective custody in the Mat-Su region in recent years. We believe several factors have contributed to the dynamic including growth in the total population in the borough, increased protective services reports from the community, organizational practice changes intended to prevent child fatality and repeated maltreatment, and increased length of stay for children in protective custody.

First, it is well known that the Mat-Su borough population growth has led the state for a number of years. According to the Department of Labor population estimates, the borough grew 12% between July 2011 and July 2016 (from 91,775 to 102,598 residents) while the state of Alaska population grew less than 3% during this time. This has very likely increased the need for all social services in the area and increased the number of families served by the Office of Children's Services as well.

Second, the Office of Children's Services has experienced an increase in number of child maltreatment reports received from the community over the last two fiscal years. This may be partly or entirely a result of the aforementioned increase in total borough population. We suspect it may also be influenced by the increase in illicit drug use as both the nation and the state of Alaska have recognized significant increases in the misuse of prescription opioids, heroin and other drugs. While we are not able to discern this with certainty given our current data available, we believe it is very likely a significant factor.

South Central Region Child Reports of Maltreatment, SFY 2011-2016

| SFY | Statewide Total Reports | South Central Total Reports | South Central Screened In | Percent Change in Screened In Reports from Previous Year | South Central Screen In Rate |
|------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 2011 | 16148 | 3528 | 1498 | -- | 42.5% |
| 2012 | 16255 | 3234 | 1449 | -3.3% | 44.8% |
| 2013 | 15663 | 3121 | 1417 | -2.2% | 45.4% |

| SFY | Statewide Total Reports | South Central Total Reports | South Central Screened In | Percent Change in Screened In Reports from Previous Year | South Central Screen In Rate |
|------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 2014 | 15917 | 3118 | 1541 | 8.8% | 49.4% |
| 2015 | 15952 | 3432 | 1755 | 13.9% | 51.1% |
| 2016 | 16889 | 3733 | 2011 | 14.6% | 53.9% |

Third, the Office of Children's Services operates under the principle of Continuous Quality Improvement toward the protection of children and prevention of repeated maltreatment. Toward this end, we have been modifying practices to intervene more effectively when children are determined unsafe or at high risk of future harm. These efforts have included centralizing intake functions to increase accuracy of initial screening decisions, emphasis on effective interventions that result in behavioral change and safe care giving rather than compliance based case planning (where parents check activities off of to-do list but are not held accountable to make real change), and focused emphasis on special populations such as high risk infants and children repeatedly reported for child abuse and neglect. The totality of these program changes has likely influenced both the number of maltreatment reports being screened in for investigation, the number of children entering protective custody and also the length of time they remain placed out-of-home while parents participate in remedial services.

Given the complex nature of social issues and the numerous variables that may influence the number of children in protective custody, we acknowledge there may be other causes that we have not yet identified. Various community circumstances such as local economics, substance abuse, and the inability of the behavioral health system to meet existing demands on an already fragile system of care are also factors to consider. We welcome your and the other committee members' thoughts on any other reasons we may have missed.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,



Christy Lawton
Director

Cc: Darwin Peterson, Legislative Director, Office of Governor Bill Walker