

ALASKA OFFICE OF CHILDREN SERVICES

RESULTS OF THE

2016 ANNUAL STAFF SURVEY

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Alaska Citizen Review Panel

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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.

Executive Summary

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) recommended in 2015 that the Office of Children Services (OCS), Alaska's designated child protection services (CPS) agency, critically examine the various survey instruments used to collect data from stakeholders. Particularly, in light of OCS' efforts to curb the high turnover rate among frontline workers, CRP recommended that OCS restructure the annual employee survey and summarize the results to yield actionable recommendations for supervisors and upper management.

OCS responded by requesting the CRP to lead the effort in restructuring the annual staff survey for the year 2016. In collaboration with OCS, the CRP recruited the help of a graduate class (Research Methods in Public Administration) at the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). Students in the course were asked to examine the survey questions, restructure the survey instrument, collect data, and report the summary results.

In addition to summarizing survey responses, the class required students to identify specific research questions pertaining to training of frontline workers. Students worked in groups of three or four and pursued distinct but related research questions. Two groups used data from the 2016 survey, one group used data collected by OCS during the years 2012-2014 using older versions of the staff survey, and another group collected data through interviews of a small sample of frontline workers from the OCS Anchorage Regional Office (ARO). The interviewees are certainly not a representative sample of the entire frontline workforce at OCS. However, some of their insights are informative and help put the survey data in context.

Part I

The 2016 OCS Annual Staff Survey included 122 questions, organized into seven sections. Part I of this report presents the results of the 2016 survey. Overall, the survey revealed some interesting and important themes for OCS to consider:

Guiding documents: OCS adopted a practice model to guide the work of the agency. In addition, a lengthy policy manual – compilation of all relevant statutes, agency policies, and procedures – lays out many specifics of OCS work. A majority of the employees felt that the state and regional managers, and their unit supervisors support the implementation of the practice model, and provide leadership consistent with the practice model. They felt that they receive any policy updates in a timely manner. However, most employees felt that they do not have adequate means to provide feedback on policies, and felt that their feedback is not considered.

While the employees and leadership at all levels seem to largely understand the practice model, most employees felt that the community at large does not understand the practice model. OCS serves some of the most vulnerable children and families, and often in highly emotionally charged situations. It is immensely important for these children and families, and OCS' employees that the community at large broadly understand OCS' practice model, the agency's purpose, and the nature of its work. It is extremely difficult for a frontline worker to perform their duties in a community if the worker believes that the community does not understand their professional obligations.

Communication: Formal mechanisms exist and are well utilized to communicate any updates by management to the frontlines. Far fewer employees felt that they have opportunities to convey their

thoughts to the management. Most employees felt that communications with external partner agencies and the community at large are very limited.

Employee Supports: Most workers felt that their supervisors are their most valuable support. Supervisors are available and provide timely and important feedback. Most of them also felt that they have adequate office space and supplies, and meaningful and timely IT support. Several workers had many specific suggestions for improving the Online Resources for Children in Alaska (ORCA), OCS' case and data management system. The worker's safety in the field is a continuing concern despite many recent safety measures adopted by OCS.

Training: All frontline workers are required to attend a three-week training course at the Child Welfare Academy upon hire by OCS. Most workers did not feel that this training session prepared them adequately for the challenges of the job. Cross-cultural training is recognized as being the most valuable, among the other trainings and orientation.

Tenure and retention: Anecdotal sources indicate that the average tenure of a frontline worker at OCS is one year. Retention of employees, particularly frontline workers, is a major challenge for OCS. Most employees reported that they continue to work at OCS because they believe their personal abilities and aptitude suits the job. Additionally, most of them also value the benefits of a state job. While more than 40% of the workers believe in the practice model of the agency, more than 50% of the workers credited the support they receive from their coworkers, and particularly from their supervisors, for continuing with OCS.

Findings of this report are presented to distinguish the perspectives of frontline workers from those of all other employees at OCS, and to inform the agency leadership in their efforts to curb the high turnover rate among frontline workers. This survey is limited by various factors. Many important topics were only given a cursory mention. We recommend that the survey be expanded to cover a broad array of topics and designed in a systematic way to better inform management.

Part II

This part is a compilation of four related but distinct student reports. Specifically, we examined structural factors such as supervisory support, communications climate, and other supports that would improve transfer of learning from classroom to practice setting.

We found that:

- Frontline workers report almost universal appreciation of their supervisors. However, supervisors do not seem to have any active role in transfer of training from classroom to the workplace. Redefining the supervisor's role in assisting with transfer of learning would be beneficial.
- Workers value on-the-job learning experiences. The few interviewees reported the high value of on-the-job training in addition to the two- or three-week training they receive at the Child Welfare Training Academy.