

## HHSS Committee HB 363 DFCS Follow Up

**Rep. Fields-** “North Star is appalling, why is North Star not being fixed?”

The Office of Children’s Services is a utilizer of the services provided by North Star and other private health care services. The Department of Family and Community Services does not license or enforce regulations that govern North Star’s operations. The Department of Health provides the necessary licensure and clinical oversight. DFSC provides documentation of concerns as necessary to law enforcement and licensing authorities.

**Rep. Fields-** “At what point do we say North Star is no good and stop using that place?”

The department would only be able to stop using North Star if we have another acute hospital setting for children under 13. Currently, there is no other option in Alaska. If the Division of Health Care Services were to revoke licensure from the Department of Health or if North Star Hospital were to lose accreditation, OCS would not be open to continue use of the facility.

**Rep. Fields-** “Has the department attempted to work with tribal health providers, providence, or other options instead of North Star?”

The Department of Family and Community Services continues to work with the Department of Health to identify alternative options to North Star. At this time, North Star is the only acute care facility in Alaska who offers psychiatric services to those under the age of 13. In addition to North Star, AK Child and Family, Providence Discovery and the Alaska Psychiatric Institute provide services to those over the age of 13. These are the only options available to receive these services within Alaska.

**Rep. Prax—**“Standard procedure for the Office of Children’s Services (OCS), an acute psychiatric facility is not the first choice in guessing, how does the decision to North Star get made?”

The Department works to with medical providers to identify the correct level of care for youth in state custody. In some cases, hospitalization is the appropriate treatment option.

**Rep. Prax-** “How does OCS determine that the care at North Star is quality care and kids are not being abused?”

The Department relies on many private medical providers to care for youth in state custody. North Star is licensed by The Department of Health - Health Care Services Division and they conduct inspections of North Star in response to licensing requirements and complaints. Furthermore, North Star is accredited by [The Joint Commission](#) who also oversees the quality of care the facility provides.

**Rep. Ruffridge-** "Current process, DFCS is broad in their services, could we have a person in the department whose job is to determine a less restrictive facility? We don’t have an in house mental health professional. We have partnered with mental health facilities in the past. We can get back to you on that about less restrictive facilities.”

OCS has the Medical/Mental Health Unit composed of Nurse Consultants and a Mental Health Clinician. It is this unit's mission to ensure there is no lesser restrictive setting available for children in care. This team does not advocate for children to be placed in a certain level of care as this would be a conflict of interest.

In the event a child requires a placement to a *Residential Psychiatric Treatment Center*, OCS employs a team decision making meeting which includes the parties to the child's case and the nurse consultant.

In the event a child requires admission to an out of state *Residential Psychiatric Treatment Center*, OCS presents the need for out of state placement to the Out of State Placement Committee. This committee is composed of representatives from OCS, the Division of Juvenile Justice, and the Department of Health. The committee recommendation is then presented to the court and a judge makes the final decision. A placement out of state cannot be made without approval from this committee and the courts.

**Rep. Prax-** "The child doesn't have an advocate unless it's OCS correct?"

In all Child in Need of Aid proceedings, the child does have an appointed guardian ad litem (Department of Administration- Office of Public Advocacy), who acts as an advocate for a child. The child is also entitled to appointment of an attorney under Alaska Court Rules (Child in Need of Aid- Rule 12.1).

**Rep. Prax-** "Does OCS give instruction to North Star to prevent abuse and over treatment?"

OCS does not act as the experts in treatment mental health issues. We do, however, stay apprised of the treatment children are receiving. We also routinely check in on the children as part of ongoing case worker visits and the Medical Mental Health Unit team.

**Rep. Ruffridge-** "OCS does a lot of checking in on kids in North Star, has OCS noticed any of the going ons mentioned in the public testimony by the foster care children? Kim—we have noticed issues over the years for sure. We have noticed issues over the years. Yes. We are trying to address them. What is it you are doing to try to address these problems?"

The department has an open line of communication with North Star leadership. They are continually making strides to improve the quality of care for the children who are receiving their services. Questions about the current practices at North Star hospital are best answered by North Star itself or the Department of Health.