

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 3, 2005

3:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Peggy Wilson, Chair
Representative Paul Seaton, Vice Chair
Representative Vic Kohring
Representative Lesil McGuire
Representative Sharon Cissna
Representative Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Tom Anderson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW(S): CHILDREN IN NEED OF AID

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous committee action to report

WITNESS REGISTER

MARCIE KENNAI, Deputy Commissioner
Central Office
Office of Children's Services (OCS)
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the overview regarding children in need of aid.

JAN RUTHERDALE, Assistant Attorney General
Human Services Section
Civil Division (Juneau)
Department of Law (DOL)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Assisted in presenting the overview regarding children in need of aid.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR PEGGY WILSON called the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [3:02:24 PM](#). Representatives Wilson, Seaton, [Gardner], and Kohring were present at the call to order. Representatives McGuire and Cissna arrived as the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW(S)

CHILDREN IN NEED OF AID

CHAIR WILSON announced that the only order of business would be the overview regarding children in need of aid.

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MARCIE KENNAI, Deputy Commissioner, Central Office, Office of Children's Services (OCS), Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), presented the overview regarding children in need of aid. She said that the OCS is an agency specializing in intervention, offering only limited prevention services. The OCS only becomes involved in a family's life if it receives a report from either a [member of the] community or a mandated reporter that a child is being harmed. Any reporter can remain anonymous if he/she so chooses. When such a report is received by any of the OCS's 28 offices, a series of questions is asked of the person making the report in order to determine how serious the situations is, whether intervention is called for, and how quickly the OCS needs to act in its investigation.

MS. KENNAI said that during the initial screening process, the OCS uses an actuarial-based decision-making tool, which is also used nationally, in order to make its determination in accordance with three categories of priority. Emergency situations are considered priority one referrals, and warrant a visit with the child within 24 hours; situations that are considered priority two referrals warrant a visit with the child within 72 hours; and situations that are considered "lower level reports" warrant a visit with the child within seven days. When conducting an investigation, the OCS will go to the child's home, school, or other location in order to look at the child directly, and will conduct interviews with the parents and others that have information. At that point in time, a determination is made as to whether the report of harm is substantiated.

MS. KENNAI added:

Throughout the course of the investigation, if we feel that the child is in danger ... or in a situation where there might be imminent harm, we can take emergency custody. [When we] take emergency custody, we need to be in court within ... 48 hours of filing a petition. So we file the petition within 24 hours, and we need to be in court within 48 hours. And so there are some checks and balances in the system; ... [for example, the] OCS might file a petition and intervene, but the court ... will hear the facts surrounding the case to determine if [the] OCS should continue to have custody. Of course some of those investigations result in ... the case not being substantiated. We [can] then refer the family for services if [we think] they're at risk. We do contract with providers in a variety of communities [in order to provide] family preservation services, ... so families who have some risk, but who do not rise to the level where the children need removal, would be referred for those community-based services.

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JAN RUTHERDALE, Assistant Attorney General, Human Services Section, Civil Division (Juneau), Department of Law (DOL), assisted in presenting the overview regarding children in need of aid. She relayed that statewide within the DOL's Human Services Section, there are 24 attorneys representing the DHSS, with 19 of those attorneys working on child in need of aid (CINA) cases. She said that her division starts working with the OCS well before the aforementioned petitions are filed. She elaborated:

A social worker will call and say: "I have a case. ... Here are the facts. Do I have enough to go forward or not?" And we'll provide legal advice for that. ... There's two types of petition: ... emergency and nonemergency. ... An emergency [petition] is filed within 24 hours of the emergency custody being taken, and there are certain grounds for taking emergency custody; [there have] ... to be very serious reasons for taking the child before actually going to court. For nonemergency petitions, obviously we go to court first, ask for custody, ... and then it's up the court.

And so it gives us [the] ... power to protect the child when that needs to happen, but it also requires us to get into court very quickly - within 48 hours ... - so that the evidence can be tested. And that's done at the temporary custody hearing, the initial hearing, and ... there's two things that the state has to prove ... at that hearing. One is that there's probable cause ... that the child is a child in need of aid. It's a low standard. It's not [a] preponderance of the evidence, which is the standard at trial.

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MS. RUTHERDALE, in response to a request, explained that emergency custody would be warranted if the child has been subjected to physical abuse - or is at substantial risk of being physically abused - and his/her injuries are such that they're life threatening or require immediate medical attention; if the child has been abandoned; if the child or a sibling has suffered sexual abuse; or if the child has been neglected - which involves a failure to provide shelter, clothing, food, medical attention, or necessary supervision - or physically damaged and requires immediate medical attention or the situation is life threatening. She relayed that AS 47.10.011 outlines the basis for going to court. During the investigation process, the surrounding circumstances have to be evaluated by a social worker to determine whether court action or emergency action is really warranted.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked whether there are situations in which the state would move to take custody of a child without removing him/her from the home.

MS. RUTHERDALE said yes. She mentioned that at that first hearing, the State must show probable cause that it should remain involved in the child's life pending the next court hearing, or must show probable cause that the child should be removed from his/her home. In the latter situation, there would have to be real evidence that allowing the child to remain at home would be contrary to the welfare of the child. She noted that in Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) cases, it must be shown by clear and convincing evidence, which is a higher standard than probable cause, that allowing the child to remain at home would put him/her at risk of substantial physical or emotional damage.

MS. RUTHERDALE offered her belief that at least in Juneau, the ICWA has raised the bar for all cases, in that the court has become so accustomed to using the standard of clear and convincing evidence that it now uses it in all [CINA] cases; this, however, may be due to the fact that in most cases in Juneau, the Native heritage of one or both parents makes the child eligible for the ICWA standard.

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MS. RUTHERDALE, in response to a another question, said that the ICWA standard provides good guidance for situations in rural Alaska because it requires the court to look at the community norms in determining whether a child should remain at home. She noted that once probable cause is found and either temporary custody or temporary supervision is granted, the court has to set an adjudication hearing within 120 days; that adjudication hearing is the trial, the CINA trial that determines whether that child is in need of aid.

MS. KENNAI explained that during that 120 days, while the case is in temporary custody status, the OCS works with the family to try to find solutions to the issues that caused the problem and to develop a "permanency plan" for the child - and this might include placing the child with another family member or in a foster home, and providing services and guidelines to the parents. Then at the adjudication, the OCS can provide the court with a progress report and recommendations based on the work that the OCS does with the family. This work, incidentally, can go on beyond the time of the adjudication hearing.

MS. RUTHERDALE added that the hope is that the family will be able to leave the system as a result of the home situation improving.

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MS. KENNAI said that the OCS generally begins working with a family with the long-term goal of reuniting the child with his/her parents - reunification; this goal is achieved in almost 60 percent of OCS cases, though it can often take time and resources. She noted, however, that if a child is in OCS custody for the last 15 out of 22 months, federal law requires the OCS to consider plans for adoption if the parents have not been successful in changing their behavior in a given amount of time. That federal requirement can be overridden if the OCS has

reasonable cause to believe that the parents just need a few more months but are succeeding in treatment; in such situations, the OCS can go to court and request that it grant an exemption to that federal requirement.

MS. KENNAI relayed that children often come to the OCS's attention because of a parent's addiction or mental illness, but it can take seven or nine attempts at [substance abuse] treatment before recovery is actually successful, and the OCS cannot wait long periods of time before taking action. Instead the OCS and the court must make difficult decisions about moving toward termination of parental rights at the 15-month timeline. At the 12-month timeline, the OCS will go back to court, and the court reviews the permanency plan. Additionally the OCS is required by federal law to perform an internal administrative review of the permanency plan every six months.

MS. KENNAI mentioned that in addition to large caseloads, the inherent conflict in attempting to meet both a child's needs and a parent's needs can lead to high burnout rates and high turnover rates for OCS employees. "Just the difficult nature of removing children from their families or making the decision to terminate parental rights is ... a tremendous, heart-wrenching decision for us," she added.

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MS. KENNAI, in response to a question, said the OCS would like to see parents be clean from their addictions for at least six months, that the OCS gives parents a lot of opportunities to succeed in treatment, but sometimes the necessary resources are not available for those parents, particularly in remote areas of Alaska. There are many factors that can make it difficult for parents to recover so as to possibly get their children back, and the OCS considers those factors when working with parents and then presents that information to the court as evidence that termination of parental rights at that point in time might possibly be premature.

CHAIR WILSON asked what happens if the parents leave the state with their children.

MS. RUTHERDALE said that if the State has custody, such an action would be considered custodial interference in the first degree, which is a felony if it involves taking the children out of state, and could subject the parents to criminal prosecution; the State can also have law enforcement retrieve the children.

She noted that even when the State has only been granted supervision of a child rather than custody, there is a presumption by the court that the parent is cooperatively working with the State. She said that if she has any inclination that a parent might leave the state with the child, she would ask for a court order specifically prohibiting such action. As a practical matter, she remarked, there are several types of parents: there are parents who are really trying and are working at changing their lives so as to get their children back; and there are parents who are trying but, for any number of reasons, just aren't succeeding - such parents generally don't opt to just run away out of state with the children.

MS. RUTHERDALE noted that at one point in time, the attitude of the State was one of seeking reunification at all costs, and this resulted in many children simply drifting from foster home to foster home because the State wasn't willing to terminate parental rights and find permanent homes for the children. A lot of the parents that the OCS is dealing with now were those children, who never had a chance to experience permanency. The federal government, via the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1977, has said that parents do have rights, but there is a time limit - they don't have rights forever. As a result, Alaska law now requires the OCS to make sure that the children are getting a permanent home.

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MS. RUTHERDALE said that when the 12-month review is conducted, the OCS doesn't have to terminate parental rights, and often doesn't, as long as the OCS can document a compelling reason, which are outlined in a list, for not doing so. She offered the following examples:

The kid's 16 years old ... and really the permanent plan is emancipation or getting [him/her] enough services so that when [he/she] turns 18 [he/she] can go forth in the world. Or ... maybe the child has such significant issues [himself/herself] that [he/she] just [isn't] adoptable, and nobody wants to make [an orphan] out of [him/her]. ... The whole point of terminating parental rights is to free [children] for adoption, and so we don't want to terminate parental rights just for the sake of it. But another really main one is, we don't terminate because the parents are showing progress and maybe [it'll] take

them a little longer, but that's okay - they're moving in the right direction.

And I've had cases where ... we've gone in at 12 months and said, "You know, they're making progress but we're just not sure it's going to work," or, "They're not making progress," and we go and file a termination petition within the next few months, and set the trial for, say, three months. So now six months have gone by, and during those six months, the whole process of saying, "It's not working; we're going to terminate," has galvanized the parent and they suddenly turn around, and we go into court [and] say, "We're dismissing the termination petition; we're placing the children back." So I think it's good because it's a wakeup call to the parents to say, "We can't wait forever for these kids - you do it now or not ever."

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER, noting that she has been a contract guardian ad litem for some years, raised the issue of visitation. She said that according to her experience, when parents are not making progress, they often are only allowed supervised visits with their children and so don't have the opportunity to snatch their children away. However, what she has found and what raises a concern for her is that these supervised visits are being conducted in surroundings that are not necessarily the most conducive to family bonding.

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MS. RUTHERDALE relayed that at least in Southeast Alaska, there are alternative settings for visitations that can offer a more homelike setting, but agreed that there is a lack of resources, a lack of people to actually supervise the visits, most likely due to cutbacks in funding. She acknowledged that without visitation, the bonding between parents and children can be lost, and that visitation can encourage parents to stay in treatment by reminding them of why they are there in the first place.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked how often, on average, during the first month of out of home placement, do children get to see their parents.

MS. KENNAI first replied, "Not often enough," but then added:

We know this is an issue, and ... certainly when the feds came here and reviewed Alaska's system, visitation was a big issue for us. It was an issue that we were not doing well with. So we are trying a lot harder now; I think we are getting better, but [there is] certainly not enough [visitation]. What I would like to tell you is that there is some very exciting work going on in Anchorage - and we will begin to spread this around the rest of the state as soon as we can; ... we are beginning to work with foster parents differently, we will begin to recruit them differently, and we will begin to redefine their role. And one of their roles will be to supervise visits between parents and children.

And at this particular time, the way we currently work with foster parents, we really don't have those expectations. And so we are moving forward. We have a demonstration project in Anchorage called "Family-to-Family [Initiative]"; it is funded by the Rasmuson Foundation and we receive a lot of technical assistance from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, but it is changing the way we work, and we're beginning to see some wonderful results in Anchorage. And so we're going to kind of redefine our recruitment message as we begin to go out and look for foster parents; we will say this is an expectation, because we do believe that that is part of their responsibility. In addition to that, we do ... have some supervised visitation contracts around the state. ...

But supervised visitation is only necessary when we really think the parent is a danger. We should have opportunities to ... allow the biological parent to visit in the foster home or take [his/her child out] to lunch. We are required ourselves to visit every child every month; we are required by federal law to make sure that the parents and the child are visiting every month. And so we need to meet our own requirements and our own policy. Some of this is due to caseload and our own lack of resources and the

ability of workers to have the time to do that. ... I thank all of you who were here last session for giving us 26 new positions, because that has made a big difference in our ability to move forward and to make these things happen, and they are in the child's best interest.

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CHAIR WILSON, referring to Representative Gardner's previous question, asked how many visits would be enough.

MS. KENNAI, noting that the requirement is one visit per month, suggested that at least two visits during the first month would be good, as would weekly visits. "It keeps a parent motivated, ... especially in the beginning," she added.

MS. RUTHERDALE, in response to comments, said her experience is that social workers try to arrange for frequent visits of lengthy duration, and sometimes even daily contact. The one-month requirement is simply a federal minimum. She pointed out that parents can get the court to review whether more visits, even supervised visits, are in order; when such happens, there are different entities around the state that can provide the supervision.

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA, noting that she has been a foster parent, mentioned that there seems to always be a need for more foster parents and that there is a tremendous amount of turnover. She asked [Ms. Kennai] to comment.

MS. KENNAI said:

A major part of our system reform ... [involves] working with foster parents - it's that whole foster parent piece. ... We're changing the way we license foster parents so that we put intense home studies up front. ... Right now we do kind of a cursory home study on foster parents; people who come to apply to us to be a foster parent meet certain standards that are set forth in statute and policy, and then they are licensed if they meet those standards. Most of our adoptions ... that take place [involve] ... foster parents who are adopting the children in their homes.

At the point they request to adopt, we do a thorough home study, a thorough family assessment.

We are moving that process to the front end so that starting in February, where we will begin in Anchorage - and we can only begin in Anchorage, again, because of staff resources - to do intense home studies; in addition to looking at whether a home meets standards, we will begin to really do a family assessment. We've had all our licensing workers trained about two weeks ago. We had some expert consultants come in to train all of our licensing workers on how you do a family assessment, because right now they're not doing them. And so this will change - moving forward.

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MS. KENNAI continued:

The other thing we are changing is that we will have two types of workers: we'll have the worker who actually does the home study and the licensing, and then we will have [foster] family support workers - ... or what we're calling resource family support workers. And so that is part of the budget package; in the positions that I have requested, I have requested 10 new, what I call, foster parent staff, or resource family staff, so that we will be able to have workers who do nothing but have the time to chat [with, to visit, at least monthly, every foster parent. That is, it doesn't matter if you have a child in the home, you may be between children, but you still have some things you need to talk about or improve upon - some training needs - whatever it is. So we will be creating that staff.

MS. KENNAI, in response to a comment, offered her understanding that the aforementioned proposed home studies, the proposed family assessments, will be more intensive than what prospective foster parents are currently undergoing. And again, those family assessments will be done up front rather than waiting for foster parents to make an adoption request. She suggested that the proposed studies will allow the OCS to screen foster families better and get to know them better and, thus, support them better. She mentioned that most other states already have this piece, and it has simply been missing from Alaska's system.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER, noting that she is also a former foster parent, said she applauds the movement in that direction because one of the most important things she was able to do for the children in her care was to mentor their birth parents and support them. She noted that most parents who've had their children removed from the home are not bad parents; rather they are simply struggling with a lot of issues and need assistance. She asked whether the proposed family assessments will create a delay in licensing new foster parents.

MS. KENNAI said the OCS does currently place children in unlicensed "friendly" homes - though there may no longer be federal funds available for such homes - and would like to be able to expedite the proposed family assessments as much as possible.

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MS. RUTHERDALE mentioned that there are provisions for the emergency licensing of homes, and that the OCS is not allowed to place a child with non-relatives unless their home gets an emergency license. She suggested that perhaps the issue of emergency licensing can be addressed while the prospective foster parents are undergoing the proposed family assessment.

MS. RUTHERDALE, returning to the issue of the legal process, explained that in addition to the initial hearing and the adjudication hearing, there can also be a disposition hearing to determine what will happen with the child after he/she is adjudicated a child in need of aid. She mentioned that the vast majority of OCS cases are settled out of court, and that the adjudication hearing and disposition hearing are essentially part of a bifurcated hearing, the parts of which occur about two months apart; this allows OCS staff time to prepare a pre-disposition report, which provides the court with information regarding the family's problems and OCS proposed solutions. She noted that at the [adjudication] hearing, a guardian ad litem will be appointed to the child and is charged with looking out for the child's best interest, the parents can have their attorneys present, and, in cases involving Alaska Natives, there could also be a tribal representative present; having all of these representatives at the initial hearing is part of a system of checks and balances that allows the court to see the whole picture.

MS. RUTHERDALE mentioned that permanency hearings occur yearly after the child is initially removed from the home, and that any move toward terminating parental rights must occur within six months of filing the [custody] petition - though as a practical matter, the latter generally happens within three to four months of filing the [custody] petition.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER raised the issue of establishing paternity.

MS. RUTHERDALE said that the OCS is usually able to establish paternity at the outset of the hearing.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked what services are available for children who reach the age of majority before being able to go home and, thus, don't have permanent homes.

MS. KENNAI said that every child in State care who reaches the age of 16 is assessed so that when he/she comes of age, he/she can receive support and training so as to facilitate his/her transition into adulthood and independence. She mentioned that there are now four new positions filled with people, one in each of the OCS's regions, who do nothing but make sure that every child has a permanency plan and is receiving - prior to "aging out" - the life skills he/she will need when he/she reaches the age of majority. She noted that the OCS can now provide services, some transitional housing funds, and educational training vouchers - courtesy of the federal government - to any child when he/she is 18-21 years old if he/she has been in foster care on or after his/her 16th birthday. Additionally, the University of Alaska has some scholarships available for foster children who are aging out of the system.

MS. RUTHERDALE added that the OCS can now keep a child in State custody until he/she is 19 without his/her consent if the court determines that doing so would be in his/her best interest, and can keep a child until the age of 20 if he/she consents to it.

MS. KENNAI, in response to a question, acknowledged that there are children who age out of the system who are ending up homeless, but added that she does not have any specific statistics regarding this issue. She mentioned that the OCS now has a youth advisory board - made up of OCS system alumni - that provides the OCS with feedback about the services it provides.

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MS. KENNAI mentioned that in situations involving a relative who lives out of state but who is willing to take custody of the child, the OCS is required to work within the bounds of the interstate compact regarding the placement of children; this requirement can sometimes delay placement but never prevents it. Returning to the issue of permanency plans, she mentioned that adoption is certainly an option, especially if the parents are not complying with the OCS's reunification efforts, since long-term foster care is not the OCS's preferred option for a permanency plan, though there are cases where the child becomes bonded to the foster parent or relative but that adult, for one reason or another, does not wish to move forward with formal adoption or guardianship procedures. She mentioned that healthy reunification, even if it occurs after the child reaches the age of 18, is something that the OCS is beginning to focus on by way of the set of services being offered to all children age 16 and older. She also mentioned that guardianship can be part of a permanency plan, particularly in instances where parental rights are not or can not be terminated - for example, in "tribal" cases, termination of parental rights is not culturally relevant.

MS. KENNAI, with regard to cases involving a "tribal child," said there is an "order of placement" preference in such cases: the first preference is to place the child with a relative in the tribe, the second preference is to place the child with a non-relative member of the tribe, and the third preference is to place the child with a member of an unrelated tribe.

MS. RUTHERDALE noted, however, that statute precludes the OCS from placing a child with a non-relative unless there is a good reason for such placement; this means that in all cases, if there is a relative that is fully capable of caring for a child, the OCS is required to [consider the placement of the child with that relative as a first preference].

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER offered her understanding that guardianships can be subsidized, whereas adoptions are generally not; thus guardianship might be a preferred option if, for example, the child has special needs.

MS. KENNAI clarified that the OCS can subsidize both guardianships and adoptions, though the subsidies for

guardianships are state funded and the subsidies for adoption can be either federally funded or state funded. Another distinction is that in cases involving adoption, the parental rights must be first be terminated, whereas in cases involving guardianship, parental rights do not have to be terminated. For example, if grandparents are raising the child, they may not wish to have their adult child's parental rights terminated, and so guardianship provides a sense of permanency and gives the grandparents certain rights.

MS. RUTHERDALE added that the only thing a guardian can't do is give consent with regard to marriage, the armed services, and adoption.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked whether tribal guardianships are recognized and, if so, whether they differ from any other type of guardianship.

MS. KENNAI said both tribal guardianships and tribal adoptions are recognized, but noted that tribal adoptions, under the ICWA, do not require termination of parental rights but do require sanction by the tribal court.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked whether all tribes have tribal courts.

MS. RUTHERDALE said that a lot of tribes do not have tribal councils set up, and so don't have the capability of sanctioning an adoption.

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MS. KENNAI mentioned that members' packets include some charts that provide statistics regarding reports of harm. She noted that the OCS is beginning to see a preponderance of very young children coming into care, characterized this as a disturbing trend, and relayed that the OCS would be focusing on prevention efforts and developing some "caseloads" just for young children. She mentioned that perhaps methamphetamine laboratories ("labs") might be contributing to the aforementioned trend. She also mentioned the OCS's new program, Online Resources for the Children of Alaska (ORCA), which is an automated case management child welfare information system that has just become operational.

MS. RUTHERDALE added that when a child is born in a hospital and it is determined that the child has been exposed to a controlled substance or alcohol, a report of harm is filed, and more often than not that child will come into OCS custody.

MS. KENNAI, in response to a question, said that the OCS is just beginning to look at data - provided by the ORCA system - and predict trends. Additionally, the OCS is starting to develop what it calls "self evaluation teams," which will look at regional data with an eye towards trying to determine what that data means.

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MS. KENNAI referred to a chart providing statistics about children released from OCS custody, and noted that almost 60 percent of those children are released to their biological parents. In conclusion, she explained that the OCS has federal requirements it must meet; that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has recently published regulations pertaining to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1977, which established "child and family service" reviews that lasted at least six months and provided agencies with comprehensive self assessments; that the OCS, as result of that assessment, established and began implementing a program improvement plan; that as part of that improvement plan, the OCS has created a quality assurance unit that will objectively review regional data. She added:

We have some ... aggregated outcomes that we need to meet. ... We really ... hold ourselves responsible for those cases that we know about. And so once we know about them - and we work with the family and we work [with the] children - we are responsible for whether ... those children are maltreated again. And so one of the measures is "repeat maltreatment." The national standard is 6.1 percent; at the time of the federal review, Alaska was at [23.4] percent - ... way below the national standard. We are right now at 15.5 percent, and so we have met our goal; in our program improvement plan, ... we committed to ... 22 percent, but we are down at 15.5 percent and hopefully will continue to move in the right direction.

For those children who come into our care and custody, we are measured on ... [whether they are] abused while they are in our care. The national standard for that

was .57 [percent]; at the time of the review, we were at 1.91 [percent]. We committed to achieving 1.7 [percent], and we are [now] at 1.2 [percent] - again, moving in the right direction. ... Placement stability: [a measurement pertaining to] ... the number of times a child moves within 12 months of [him/her] coming into care. States, Alaska as well, are seeing children moving far too often. So the national standard for that was 86.7 [percent]; at the time of the review, we were at 70.6 [percent]. We are moving in the right direction - we are [currently at] 72.2 [percent].

[With regard to the] length of time [it is taking] to achieve reunification, we are not doing quite as well we'd like to do. ... The federal government expects us to achieve reunification within 12 months, [and] the national standard [is] 76.2 [percent]; at the time of the review, we were at 58.3 [percent], and we are now at 54.1 - we are not going in the right direction and so that is something we are trying to focus on. [With regard to the] length of time to adoption, the federal government asks us to try to achieve adoption - for those children whose plan is adoption - within 24 months. [The] national standard [is] 32 percent; at the time of the review, we were at 21.8 [percent] and we've dropped to 18.7 [percent] - again, not going in the right direction.

MS. KENNAI offered her belief that the last two sets of statistics are a reflection of the OCS caseload size and ability to keep those families visiting, the number of cases on the court's dockets, the number of assistant attorney generals available to help with such cases, and the availability of reunification services. She noted that the OCS is into the second year of its program improvement plan and that it is ahead of itself in terms of achieving the plan's goals.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked whether the OCS measures user satisfaction.

MS. KENNAI said that the OCS does look into complaints received and keeps data on them, but doesn't generate a customer satisfaction survey; as part of its quality assurance process, the OCS interviews stakeholders, and there is also now a citizen

review panel, which will provide both the OCS and the legislature with feedback regarding Alaska's child protection services.

CHAIR WILSON thanked Ms. Kennai and Ms. Rutherford for the overview.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at [4:46:23 PM](#).