

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

March 29, 2007

3:01 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Peggy Wilson, Chair
Representative Bob Roses, Vice Chair
Representative Anna Fairclough
Representative Mark Neuman
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative Sharon Cissna
Representative Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES - OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous committee action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

KARLEEN JACKSON, Commissioner
Department of Health & Social Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced the overview presentation.

TAMMY SANDOVAL, Deputy Commissioner
Central Office
Office of Children's Services (OCS)
Department of Health & Social Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the overview for the Office of Children's Services.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR PEGGY WILSON called the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [3:01:49 PM](#). Representatives Wilson, Gardner, Roses, Seaton, and Fairclough were present at the call to order. Representatives Cissna and Neuman arrived as the meeting was in progress.

Overview: Office of Children's Services

[3:02:21 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced that the only order of business would be an overview from the Commissioner of the Department of Health & Social Services and the Deputy Commissioner, Office of Children's Services (OCS).

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KARLEEN JACKSON, Commissioner, Department of Health & Social Services (DHSS), introduced the presentation. She informed the committee that she and Deputy Commissioner Tammy Sandoval of the Office of Children's Services are presenting their plan for improvements to the OCS system. Commissioner Jackson noted that during the years between 2001 and 2005, there were four different agency directors of OCS. Current Deputy Commissioner Sandoval has 20 years experience in child protection services and has been with DHSS since 2004. Commissioner Jackson praised Ms. Sandoval for the work she has done so far. She explained that one of the first steps taken to stabilize OCS was to contract with an outside consultant, ACTION for Child Protection, Inc., to study and evaluate internal operations. Through collaboration with the Department of Law (DOL), the incoming attorney general provided approval for the report to be released in March, 2006, and a copy of the report was provided to each committee member. She said that the report has been discussed with OCS staff statewide, the Citizens' Review Panel (CRP), the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee, and the press. Commissioner Jackson informed the committee that, although there are no surprises in the report, members of her staff are personally impacted by the recommendations therein.

TAMMY SANDOVAL, Deputy Commissioner, Office of Children's Services, (OCS), relayed her office's intent to look at issues not covered by a 2003, federal review, or by the CRP. The first area to be reviewed by the contractor's internal report, that was begun in November, 2006, was the organizational structure of the interface between OCS state and local offices. The second

aspect was to review community relationships. Third, the policy and front-end procedural review and a safety assessment model were studied. Fourth, a review of the Training Curriculum and Orientation of New Employees (TONE) was requested.

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MS. SANDOVAL continued to say that OCS management wanted to study its effectiveness and efficiency. Employee morale, job satisfaction, turnover, and retention were critical areas of concern. A job satisfaction survey was taken and employee interviews were held. She listed findings that indicated that there is a high level of dissatisfaction among employees in many areas; however, there also remains a high level of job motivation and she expressed her belief that OCS has a strong foundation on which to build.

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MS. SANDOVAL continued to note that the majority of OCS's front-line staff, who are overworked and are in the limelight, indicate that their job motivation is high, they believe that they are supported by management, and they are happy in their positions. The author of the report noted that employees have many positive feelings about their responsibilities, but they are concerned about how to complete their tasks. In addition to other problems, communication inconsistencies exist between local, regional, and state offices. These communications problems continue within offices, and the majority of those who responded to the survey felt that employees are not held accountable for their work. Training is considered inadequate, workloads are unmanageable, salaries are low, the requirement that supervisors hold a degree in social services is unreasonable, the case management information system (ORCA) is not current, the organizational climate is dysfunctional, and too much clerical work is required of front-line staff.

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MS. SANDOVAL pointed out that the contractor provided the following recommendations: review efficiencies specific to each region; clarify authority, responsibility and accountability of administration at each level; increase clerical support; create a support group for workers; develop an exceptional training program for everyone; reduce work load; reassess the degree requirement for supervisors; have an ORCA expert in every office; physically separate regional and field offices; develop

a communications strategy link to the mission of the agency; add services to children and families; expand the family to family program; and continue to decrease the over representation of minority children in the child welfare system.

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MS. SANDOVAL described some of the steps OCS is taking to address problems raised by this report and others. She stated that this year OCS has begun a newsletter, The Pipeline, and that the staff morale survey will be continued annually. In addition, the new safety assessment process will also be continued. She relayed that the budget allows for six new front-line positions for her office, and that retention of employees will be a focus for management. She reported that OCS is working with the Department of Administration towards promoting from within to prevent the loss of experienced staff. Regional managers are reaching out to the judicial system and the community to talk about the new safety assessment model. Lastly, Ms. Sandoval stressed that her office is always searching for ways to prevent child abuse and neglect through prevention programs and federal grants.

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MS. SANDOVAL called the committee's attention to the portion of the review on community relationships. The contractor was asked to do focus groups on 12 key community stakeholders, in addition to the Mat-Su, Anchorage, and Juneau field offices, and the state office. The report indicates that, generally, professional agencies' view of OCS was more positive than views held by the general public. The majority of professionals view OCS as highly effective in investigating reports of child maltreatment; however, the review reported that a wide variation exists between offices in the quality of work and procedures involving the sharing of information. Several key informants cited the difficulties in internal procedures and community work in the Mat-Su office. Throughout the report, communication continued to be the main issue.

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MS. SANDOVAL relayed that there needs to be more cooperation with tribes on investigations and on the placement of children. Further recommendations are that OCS should: retain successful staff; achieve manageable workloads; improve responsiveness; return phone calls; support and conduct regional outreach

activities with community stakeholders including families, foster parents, and professionals in related fields; enhance the skills of supervisors; continue cultural sensitivity training; develop guidelines on the sharing of information; and maintain transparent and open working conditions at local offices. Ms. Sandoval acknowledged that OCS has had limited success in community relationships. In October, 2005, she issued a program instruction of the policy for returning phone calls and email. Also, surveys of families, tribal organizations, foster parents, service providers, and the judicial community are posted online; however, she recognized that there continues to be a communications gap. In addition, Commissioner Jackson has issued policy and procedures guidelines regarding the sharing of information, in order to foster inter-agency relationships. She described OCS's response to the CRP request for clarification regarding confidentiality. In conjunction with the DOL, guidelines were developed, distributed, and put in statute by legislation. Nevertheless, confidentiality remains a troubling issue.

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MS. SANDOVAL told the committee that, in September of 2006, work with tribal partners on disproportionality was begun by inviting them to participate in investigations in cases where a tribal affiliation is known. Extensive work with DOL will continue to establish tribally licensed foster homes. She added that the new safety assessment model is being discussed at the local level in communities.

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MS. SANDOVAL pointed out that the policy and procedures review was the final area studied by the contractor. OCS specifically wanted to know whether its policies and procedures support the practice of decision-making on the part of staff. Lacking in the policy was the reference to the mission of the organization, the objective of a intervention, or the desired results. The reports author explained that these references would provide a critical foundation for employees on the goals and methods of OCS. Additionally, the writing was not precise and policies are unclear. The report found that, in the policies, there is an assumption that the reader will know what is not stated.

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MS. SANDOVAL provided examples of confusing policies and explained that the federal government continues to establish new policies and regulations and, despite the passage of HB 153 and subsequent bills, the distribution of new policy and procedures has fallen behind. Organization of OCS policy is vague and confusing, and the numerous and significant problems with the current policy led the author of the report to suggest that new policy must be written, rather than a revision of the old. Ms. Sandoval said that there must be many people involved, including community stakeholders, in order to write a new policy and procedure manual.

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MS. SANDOVAL referred to the last report that is on the training and orientation of new employees. Findings indicated that the training for information collection is too general for an accurate safety assessment. For example; the imprecise use of definitions of the abuse, neglect, maltreatment, risk, and safety of children. When the curriculum was written, although OCS states its family centered orientation, there is an emphasis placed on the legalistic issues and mandates of the child in need of aid petition. Ms. Sandoval added that the curriculum focus of investigations is on risk and maltreatment, and that OCS is now in the process of moving to a safety assessment model. Recommendations of the reviewer urge the employment of the safety assessment model as the foundation of training for case workers. She stressed that this shift will bring everything into alignment. Additional recommendations are: define who OCS is serving; structure investigations into a linear format; and spend more time on safety planning. Ms. Sandoval observed that her office had identified problems with TOME before the internal review was ordered, and its recommendations will be fully integrated into the revisions already under consideration. She stated that tribal partners, regional offices, and stakeholders will be involved to assure that concerns of disproportionality will be addressed in the revised training procedures.

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REPRESENTATIVE ROSES stated his appreciation for the efforts of OCS to respond to this comprehensive self-review. He said that he has been involved in undertaking personnel studies, primarily in schools, and that issues of insufficient support from supervisors, and communications problems, are not uncommon. He

asked how OCS will provide sufficient time to implement improvements and the continuing education of employees.

MS. SANDOVAL responded that this is an essential issue. She explained that classes for existing employees are provided. However, it is difficult for front-line workers to make the time to attend. She described her attempts to talk with her staff about workload and burnout, and emphasize to them that when the staff will not take the opportunity to refresh, improve their education, and be mentored, they will not be able to continue their work.

[3:49:02 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ROSES asked whether OCS employees are part of a collective bargaining unit

MS. SANDOVAL said yes.

REPRESENTATIVE ROSES questioned whether Ms. Sandoval has coordinated with the bargaining unit to evaluate ineffective employees through the union.

MS. SANDOVAL replied that the state has a personnel system, in conjunction with the union, to evaluate employees on an individual basis. She said that, according to staff comments, some problem employees have not been disciplined.

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REPRESENTATIVE ROSES observed that when dealing with a collective bargaining unit, the grievance process is available. Therefore, formal evaluations and work self-assessments are especially valuable. He opined that weak personnel systems encourage employee burn out.

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REPRESENTATIVE NEUMAN stated that changes at OCS have been discussed before, and he said that he could not see that any progress has been made. Representative Neuman asked for specific management changes for the Mat-Su area. He noted that Mat-Su cases have been referred to the Anchorage OCS office and slow responses from the Mat-Su office continue to be a problem. He opined that how the OCS Mat-Su office deals with the public is an ethics issue. He suggested that the Mat-Su staff be asked whether there is a cyclical nature to the issues there; that

might help them discover what is not working and facilitate change.

3:57:03 PM

COMMISSIONER JACKSON replied that continuing education for employees is an issue that is larger than OCS and DHSS alone. Also, she said, there has been a justified culture of confidentiality around protecting children. This confidentiality, however, should not shield the office from the investigation of problems. She agreed that OCS front-line workers have some of the hardest jobs in state government. Nonetheless, the problems OCS faces must be corrected by systems changes. For example, correcting confusing policy and improving training for employees. Commissioner Jackson assured the committee that this presentation is not a budget exercise but an overall plan for the next four years. She expressed her commitment for making changes in her department.

3:59:00 PM

REPRESENTATIVE NEUMAN repeated his previous questions regarding the changes for the Mat-Su office.

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MS. SANDOVAL answered that she is maintaining the safety assessment model to improve practices on the front-line, and that has been issued in memoranda from her office. She will establish whether these expectations are not being fulfilled and will then follow up with employees. Regarding the Mat-Su office, she assured the committee that she and the Commissioner Jackson have plans to address the problems there. State personnel rules prevent her from public disclosure about these plans at this time.

4:01:22 PM

CHAIR WILSON observed that the commissioner of the Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) should be able to assist OCS with the evaluation of employees. There is a similarity to how DEED manages teaching and administrative staff. These written evaluation procedures are very helpful when staff members are unsuccessful in their responsibilities and do not respond to additional training efforts.

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REPRESENTATIVE ROSES clarified his statement that documentation is helpful, but the ideal solution is to identify a problem and provide the means for someone to correct the situation and improve their performance. When people self-reflect they may be their own harshest critics. Representative Roses observed that employees rarely leave their jobs because they are happy with what they are doing. He stressed that positions in each department of the state are being deleted because they can not be filled. He suggested that filling positions with mentors, or quality assurance experts, to assist failing employees would be invaluable.

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COMMISSIONER JACKSON agreed that that the positions removed from her budget are positions that are not needed in their present capacity. She affirmed that management is sometimes in a myopic position; too close to identify a particular need. Hence, there is the need for contracting an internal review.

[4:07:00 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA reflected on the history of OCS and how chronic, entrenched problems are difficult to correct. She cautioned that people are more comfortable with past systems and behaviors, no matter how dysfunctional. She suggested the value of re-hiring employees, who left disgruntled, versus bringing in new employees. These previous workers will be familiar with the issues and may be willing to work towards improvements. Representative Cissna opined that good exit interviews reveal important information for management. She commended OCS workers that know the mission is important and added that a structure that allows workers to translate the mission statement to their own position is necessary. Her personal experience is that many other states are struggling with the same issues; in fact, one solution is to, with technology and software, connect the mission and corrective measures taken to the performance of workers in each region.

COMMISSION JACKSON agreed that many helpful policies and procedures do exist in other states.

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA continued to state the importance of changing the public perception which is that "this is a problem

that will never be solved." She opined that there are citizens working against OCS; however, the volunteers of the CRP could be very helpful to change public opinion.

COMMISSIONER JACKSON affirmed that, at its inception in 2002, the role of the CRP was not clear, and an adversarial situation ensued. However, a new partnership is being forged with them and its collaboration is now welcomed.

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MS. SANDOVAL added that, when the CRP came to their recent meeting, it was a tipping point in its relationship with OCS. The CRP was the first group briefed on the internal review report and an agreement was made to work side by side in a more meaningful way. In fact, as recently as last week, she traveled with a CRP member to Bethel. The Bethel office staff debriefing was part of what was shared with a panel member and Ms. Sandoval expressed her enthusiasm about the new beginning of the partnership with the CRP.

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA observed that the new administration's retention of the commissioner and [deputy commissioner] is a positive factor in rebuilding the foundation for DHSS and OCS.

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CHAIR WILSON agreed. She expressed her gratitude for how far Commissioner Jackson and Ms. Sandoval have brought their departments.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked about the problems with ORCA. Her understanding was that the intent of the system was to improve the sharing of information and recordkeeping.

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MS. SANDOVAL responded that ORCA was developed from another state's model. Moreover, constant changes in federal and state laws, and new mandates and rules, have to be programmed and add demands on the system. She stated that the "level of effort time" to make ORCA a working system is not there yet. Ms.

Sandoval assured the committee that ORCA will perform as needed at some point.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER commented that computerized systems are supposed to save on paperwork but that does not seem to be the reality. She asked whether the front-line workers will still have too much paperwork.

MS. SANDOVAL answered that the front-line workers will say that ORCA does not save time. However, she is confident from her past experience that it will, eventually.

4:25:00 PM

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER said that there are three parts to the child protection field: identifying a child in need of removal from the home; a plan for the child; and the permanency plan. She asked whether better permanency outcomes are being achieved.

MS. SANDOVAL responded that OCS passed its federal performance improvement plan that mandated improvements in those areas. Permanency is being achieved more quickly; however, OCS is not at a satisfactory federal standard level yet.

4:26:28 PM

REPRESENTATIVE NEUMAN pledged his support to assist in garnering funding for the department. The safety of the state's children is a top priority.

4:27:30 PM

REPRESENTATIVE FAIRCLOUGH said that she appreciated the department's efforts toward transparency and improvement. She expressed her desire to learn more about the safety assessment model and how it will help the front-line workers make determinations. Also, she asked how the contractor was chosen for the study. She then asked whether the reported turnover rate and employee morale levels for OCS workers are consistent with national standards, and if those statistics can be attributed to the difficulty of the work. Representative Fairclough suggested that community outreach might be part of every OCS worker's job description. Working with schools, or representing OCS in a different capacity, will broaden the possibility of being more than a crisis intervention person, and enable a front-line employee to spend some time working more positively in their community. She recalled that, in her

experience in crises intervention, a two-year turnover rate for employees was the norm. She also supported a union partnership, as suggested by Representative Roses, to look at morale and training. Finally, she reflected on the truancy issues for the Mat-Su area, and how other problems in the region may affect that office's success.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER noted that the Office of Public Advocacy (OPA), Department of Administration (DOA) maintains a successful guardian ad litem program with good morale and longevity of personnel.

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REPRESENTATIVE ROSES stated that federal Title 1 program schools have home school coordinators that work only during the school year. These social workers may be available to work for OCS during the summer season, as temporary replacements, for the full time workers. Additionally, he suggested that rotating schedules through temporary administration positions would provide a respite for crisis intervention workers and prevent burnout.

[4:37:10 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON stated that the internal review was a tough report, and that the governor has shown wisdom in keeping the commissioner, and deputy commissioner, in their positions to continue the needed reforms. He expressed confidence that the work will be done and he pledged his support for the commissioners.

[4:38:29 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON predicted that finding community support will be very difficult. She suggested looking at other state's models for direction. She then offered to form a subcommittee for assistance, if necessary, and encouraged Commissioner Jackson and Ms. Sandoval to ask for help.

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REPRESENTATIVE ROSES suggested that changing public perception may be difficult; however, OCS is the responsible agency in many

crisis situations and as a proactive, versus a reactive agency, positive public relations will result.

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COMMISSIONER JACKSON expressed her belief that the public, the committee, and the state will work together for children's safety in Alaska.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at [4:42:04 PM](#).