

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

March 28, 2007

1:36 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Bettye Davis, Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Vice Chair
Senator John Cowdery
Senator Kim Elton
Senator Fred Dyson

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Overview: Office of Children's Services Improvements and Challenges

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record.

WITNESS REGISTER

Karleen Jackson, Commissioner
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in presentation

Tammy Sandoval, Deputy Commissioner
Office of Children's Services (OCS)
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in presentation

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS called the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [1:36:18 PM](#). Present at the call to order were Senators Thomas, Cowdery, Elton, Dyson, and Chair Davis.

PRESENTATION: OCS SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS announced the presentation of the OCS system improvement and challenges.

KARLEEN JACKSON, Commissioner for the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), introduced herself and Tammy Sandoval, and said that she would give a briefing of the history of the review, and Ms. Sandoval would talk about the results of the review.

She said that over a four-year period ending in 2005, there were four different leaders of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and a certain period of instability. In 2005 Ms. Sandoval took over the agency; since then stability has improved. The office decided to plan for the future and examine its relationship with its citizen review panel. The OCS subsequently chose to bring in a consultant, from a group that provides technical assistance for all 50 states, to look at the OCS's organization, its community involvement, and policy procedure and training. The review was completed in November 2006, at which point the Department of Law advised on how to best disseminate the information. The report contains a substantial amount of information, and has been made available to various branches of the government; it will help make a plan for improvement for the OCS. Social workers have one of the hardest jobs in the state of Alaska.

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TAMMY SANDOVAL, Deputy Commissioner of the OCS, said that the office had the contractor look at four different areas of interest in the OCS. There was an online employee morale survey conducted, focus groups were consulted, and individual interviews took place.

She said that the things found to be in most need of improvement are employee inclusion in decision making, trust, and openness and communication. On the other hand, most staffers say that their job motivation is high, they receive good job support, and want to perform well. Other positive findings included forthrightness in participation, mutual support within offices, and support of the new work assessment model. Communication is, however, inconsistent in various arms of the OCS, and decision making and policy are not transparent enough. Problem employees are not sufficiently dealt with and training is inadequate, salaries are too low, and degree requirements are too high.

She continued to list recommendations from the surveyed employees, and issues the OCS is going to address and is currently addressing: improvement in communication, the continuation of the survey process, safety assessment, and retention and recruitment. The resolution of even minor issues is also necessary to help workers in the OCS have smoother workdays.

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She explained that the second report deals with community relationships, which are often the most visible elements of the OCS. Interviews were conducted with statewide agency heads and with clients around the more populous areas of the state. The report indicates that the work of the OCS is generally positively viewed at the regional and statewide levels. Line staffers, however, are often slow to return phone calls to clients; the office's work in general is appreciated, but some elements of service delivery must be improved.

She said that several key agency heads expressed concern over the Mat-Su regional offices and their lack of cooperation with community agencies. The OCS's work with tribal communities has improved, but could still do so further. Recommendations included retention of staff, improvement of the public image, and improvement of community relations; supervisors are key to this.

She said that action taken by the OCS so far has included missives sent out to the statewide staff, annual surveys, improved confidentiality measures within the department, and a FAQ forum on the OCS website. It has worked extensively on improving the option of placing Alaska Native children in tribally-licensed foster homes as well.

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She said that the third report examined policy and procedure throughout the entire abuse or neglect case review process; clarity of evaluation and the written elements of OCS reports were evaluated. The evaluation found that policy can be written in confusing ways, written reports were not always clear, and there were too many assumptions in policy that would be unclear for a new worker due to complexity, obscurity, or other factors.

She continued to explain the faults found within OCS policy by the report, including ineffectual guidance and direction, non-

policy requirements, out-of-date wording, and the need for a philosophical base for the OCS.

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She said that the report recommends rewriting the policy rather than correcting it, and establish a method for reviewing policy drafts to be sure that they meet criteria and effectively provide direction, regulation and support. Necessary correction of these faults will take a lot of time and a high level of effort; a plan hasn't been outlined yet, but it will be made soon.

She explained the last element of the report, which looked at the new OCS employee training program, Training and Orientation for New Employees (TONE). The training on information collection was found to be too general and the curriculum was not specific. Although TONE does promote a holistic look at OCS care, it tends to be too focused on the legality of issues instead of family-oriented care. On the whole, the training is unclear, too general, and needs to be improved.

[2:12:54 PM](#)

She said that the report also showed a too-vague relationship between safety assessment decision and the resulting safety planning; the report recommends the adoption of the Safe Families Act, which is what the federal government uses to measure efficacy. The federal government will come to the state in 2008 to evaluate the OCS, so the same foundation logic should be used. The mission of safety planning should also be made more apparent in the curriculum, and case management should be better explained.

She said that the OCS has been working on these issues in the past year and they have been steadily improved with the help of a TONE advisory group. The OCS is also utilizing information from other states' new worker training programs to improve its own.

[2:16:58 PM](#)

MS. JACKSON thanked the committee again for its interest in the OCS, which helps the office continually improve itself. Confidentiality is a major concern, but it shouldn't be a reason for reduced or limited service. The OCS is also looking for ways to better work with community partners and have open discussions

in the spirit of improvement; there is lots of work to be done on the office in the future.

2:18:57 PM

SENATOR ELTON said that he's not an expert on the OCS but thinks the office is very important. He's pleased to see it taking the advice of the reports, but he's bothered by the extent of the issues facing the OCS because it will limit their powers for helping children. He asked how it would be possible for the OCS to improve itself without hiring more staff.

2:21:12 PM

MS. JACKSON said that part of the dilemma is that funding too many new positions would overwhelm the system; existing workers need to be retained and improved more than new workers need to be recruited.

2:22:31 PM

MS. SANDOVAL said that there are many things in the OCS that can be improved, mostly communication with local partners; the culture of the organization needs to be improved most immediately. Training can be a burden on the organization, so retaining current staff is the most important issue currently.

SENATOR ELTON said that it seems to him that staff burnout and turnover are real problems, caused by having staffers do too much while being paid too little. He said that he doesn't understand how better communication can happen without more personnel; as the report showed, interest in the job isn't the problem, but rather the overwhelming work load. He suggested giving people more assistance in the offices so they feel less overwhelmed in their jobs.

MS. JACKSON said that there are some positions open currently, and those need to be filled first. Even with unlimited resources, staff additions might not be able to be put to effective use.

SENATOR ELTON said that the tourism industry, for example, asks for money right away rather than waiting for better preparation.

2:27:39 PM

CHAIR DAVIS said that she understands both sides of the issue, and agreed that the existing structure needs improvement before new people are hired. The OCS feels that it has a lot of pressure on it, and now with the reports it will become more prepared and ready for change. The agency is on the cusp of positive change, and is moving in the right direction. Lots of people in the agency feel that their jobs are important, and so the agency has a lot to work with. She asked if the agency is more prepared for the upcoming federal assessment than it was for the previous assessment in 2003.

MS. SANDOVAL replied that the OCS is better prepared and focused now, even though there is room for improvement in family outcomes.

[2:31:29 PM](#)

SENATOR COWDERY asked for the differences in staff and frontline workers' backgrounds.

MS. SANDOVAL explained the difference in necessary degrees for three different positions within the OCS.

SENATOR COWDERY related a personal story of his staff's experience with case workers, and asked if the OCS still offers field experience opportunities.

MS. SANDOVAL replied that it does.

SENATOR COWDERY said that the OCS has a reputation of inefficacy, but it still is a positive entity and people should judge for themselves.

[2:35:51 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVIS said that there's a concern about overrepresentation of minorities in the system, and asked what the office is doing to change this.

MS. SANDOVAL said this issue is a huge priority for the OCS, and that she thinks it's a relatively new issue to the social work field. The office is learning new activities that look at racism throughout the leadership and front-line levels; it's a hard subject, but the OCS is facing it head-on and is involving tribal partners and all interested to be part of the cultural sensitivity training advisory group.

CHAIR DAVIS said that that's good, but she's more concerned about the prevention of abuse. She asked if there's any prevention system in the OCS for working with kids still living at home.

MS. SANDOVAL said that she's been trying to improve this area for the last 22 years, and it's her main priority. It's one of the elements of the new safety model, and distinguishing the line between at-risk and unsafe environments is important for the agency. Removal from the home should be a last resort for a child.

[2:41:34 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVIS asked if there are any options for improving this area through grants, and said that Ms. Sandoval could respond to her later. She added that she is impressed with the OCS's candor in talking about the report.

MS. SANDOVAL said that the OCS has been presenting the new safety assessment model and the results of the reports to different public agencies.

SENATOR COWDERY asked what percentage of abuse issues are alcohol or drug-related.

Ms. SANDOVAL said the number is huge, if not exact.

[2:43:19 PM](#)

SENATOR ELTON said he would like to know how long it takes to fill an OCS position, and why it takes a particularly long time. He said his recollection is that the Alaska OCS has a higher case load than other states.

CHAIR DAVIS thanked the OCS for its good work and efforts for improvement, and asked if there are any policy changes that need to be made.

MS. SANDOVAL said that she couldn't think of anything at the time and that too much can't be done in too short a period of time. The agency needs to catch up on current issues before making new changes.

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Davis adjourned the meeting at [2:46:21 PM](#).

