

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 5, 2009

3:00 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Bob Herron, Co-Chair
Representative John Coghill
Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Sharon Cissna

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Wes Keller, Co-Chair
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative Lindsey Holmes

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: OCS CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL: RESPONSE FROM OCS
DIRECTOR TAMMY SANDOVAL

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No Previous Action to Record

WITNESS REGISTER

FRED VAN WALLINGA, Chair
Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP)
Willow, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a Power Point of the Alaska
Citizen Review Panel report on the Office of Children's Service.

SUSAN HEUER
Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified and answered questions on the
Alaska Citizen Review Panel report on the Office of Children's
Service.

TAMMY SANDOVAL, Director
Central Office
Office of Children's Services (OCS)

Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified and responded to the CRP report.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:00:59 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR BOB HERRON called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:00 p.m. Representative Herron was present at the call to order. Representatives Cissna, Coghill, and Lynn arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representatives Seaton, Holmes, and Keller were excused.

Presentation: OCS Citizen Review Panel: Response from OCS Director Tammy Sandoval

[3:02:08 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR HERRON announced that the only order of business would be a presentation by the OCS Citizen Review Panel with a response from OCS Director Tammy Sandoval.

[Included in the members' packets were copies of the Power Point presentation, "Alaska's Citizen Review Panel."]

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FRED VAN WALLINGA, Chair, Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP), presented a Power Point titled "Alaska's Citizen Review Panel" and cited the background of the Alaska Citizen Review Panel. He explained that the CRP was mandated by state and federal law, as shown on slide 3, "Mandate for the Group."

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MR. VAN WALLINGA reported on slide 4, "CRP Vision," that the CRP role was to enable the Office of Children's Services (OCS) to implement its policies and procedures in a culturally sensitive and consistent manner across the state. He went on to recount the CRP membership on slide 5, "Who are we?" and slide 6, "Current members." He introduced the members who were present.

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MR. VAN WALLINGA summarized the CRP Duties, which included an evaluation of the OCS, on slide 7, "CRP Duties" and slide 8, "CRP Duties, (continued)."

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MR. VAN WALLINGA indicated that the latest CRP focus included a review for the addition of a fifth service region, slide 9, "Our focus for the past year."

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SUSAN HEUER, Alaska Citizen Review Panel, mentioned that the group did not investigate individual cases. She discussed slide 10, "What we've been doing," and slide 11, "What else we've been doing," which reported attendance at teleconferences, meetings with OCS partners and staff, and national conferences.

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MS. HEUER summarized slide 12, "A couple more things we did," slide 13, "Where some of us have been," and slide 14, "We've met with..." and informed the committee that CRP had attended conferences in more than ten Alaska communities with key local citizenry, which included counseling center staff, state troopers, tribal representatives, and health aides.

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MS. HEUER acknowledged significant improvements to the OCS delivery of child protection services, as shown on slides 15 and 16, "OCS is improving due to... ," which included key personnel changes, system changes, and increased responsiveness and collaboration.

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MS. HEUER referenced slide 17, "Issues of concern," and said CRP would talk about hiring freeze, standardization, and a proposed Region 5.

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MS. HEUER addressed the hiring freeze, highlighted on slide 18, "Issues of concern." She stressed that OCS had a protective role in public safety, and that this freeze would increase the

risk of departure of already overloaded workers should vacancies remain unfilled.

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MS. HEUER addressed the creation of a new Bethel-based Region 5, as explained on slide 19 and slide 20, "Issues of Concern Region 5." She relayed the strong support for a smaller, more culturally focused region as it would be in the children's best interest.

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MR. VAN WALLINGA added that this new region would be comprised primarily of bush communities with tribal representation.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL stated his consideration for the issue, but advised that the budget would still need to be addressed. He recounted that the current region was comprised of the judicial district in Fairbanks, the OCS office in Mat-Su, and the support services in Anchorage. He analyzed that organizational changes might better serve the Bethel region.

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MR. VAN WALLINGA acknowledged that the funding was not available, but that a search for a solution was kept in the forefront. He mentioned that there was strong vocal support from the line workers, the tribes, and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) workers.

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CO-CHAIR HERRON asked if the regions were based on geography or population.

MR. VAN WALLINGA said that he did not know.

CO-CHAIR HERRON asked about the staff vacancy rate for each of the regions.

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA offered her belief that many of the problems were generational.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL commented that the caseload for proposed Region 5 would be ICWA and that many of the issues would be cultural.

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MS. HEUER agreed that cultural bonding, travel limitations, and other issues unique to the Bethel area were important. She informed the committee that the Bethel region did not feel they were heard, which led to a very high staff turnover due to worker frustration.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL reconfirmed that the interconnectedness of state and tribal courts made this a unique area.

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MR. VAN WALLINGA offered his belief that OCS and ICWA workers in Bethel needed to collaborate to better understand each group's restrictions.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL offered his perception that this collaboration would provide a positive example for the rest of Alaska.

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CO-CHAIR HERRON asked to identify the communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim (Y-K) Delta that did not want to be part of the Bethel hub.

MR. VAN WALLINGA clarified that the workers and the community members did want to be part of the Bethel hub, but that the OCS supervisors did not.

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MS. HEUER reviewed slide 21, "Issues of Concern, Many solutions to problems..." and explained that the OCS Director lacked the discretionary powers for resolution to many problems.

MS. HEUER continued on to slide 22, "Issues of Concern, Standardization..." and addressed the lack of standardization

for support services among state agencies, which included worker housing and high speed internet access.

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MS. HEUER requested support for the concerns listed on slide 23, "We'd like your help to address these concerns," which included an OCS exemption to the hiring freeze, and resolution to the lack of standardization of services among state agencies.

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MS. HEUER cited some very positive, enthusiastic results of recent CRP and OCS collaboration.

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MS. HEUER shared slide 24, "Benefits of CRP," which recapped the unique volunteer role of the CRP advocacy for child protection.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL noted his appreciation for all the CRP help.

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CO-CHAIR HERRON asked if the regional problems were due to distance or culture.

MR. VAN WALLINGA replied that travel was part of the problem. He explained that although the procedures were similar, there was a rural uniqueness.

CO-CHAIR HERRON agreed that there were differences between rural and urban communities.

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TAMMY SANDOVAL, Director, Central Office, Office of Children's Services (OCS), Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), agreed that CRP was a valuable tool for OCS.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL observed that the hiring freeze and Region 5 were the most important issues to discuss.

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MS. SANDOVAL, in response to a question from Co-Chair Herron, replied that a waiver for an exception to the hiring freeze had been submitted.

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CO-CHAIR HERRON asked if the waiver criteria were available.

MS. SANDOVAL offered to speak to the justification for the request.

CO-CHAIR HERRON repeated his request for a list of waiver criteria.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL suggested that this was a public safety policy issue, which would be resolved through the Office of the Governor.

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MS. SANDOVAL explained that the need to provide for the safety and protection of children was the rationale for the waiver request.

CO-CHAIR HERRON asked if the request encompassed all four regions.

MS. SANDOVAL replied that it did.

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MS. SANDOVAL explained that she did not know the reasons behind the formation of the four regions. She agreed with the uniqueness of the Bethel area, and she suggested that OCS and CRP collaborate to review and possibly reorganize the division of the direct services for the area.

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MS. SANDOVAL noted that an administrative clerk had been hired in Wasilla to solely focus on the Bethel region, and that OCS had requested an exception to travel processes for the Bethel region, in recognition of the unique challenges.

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MS. SANDOVAL confirmed that OCS and CRP had shared many ideas, including an updated live response phone system, and a staffed toll free hot line.

MS. SANDOVAL shared with CRP the success for the co-location of OCS front line workers with other field professionals in a multi disciplinary setting.

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MS. SANDOVAL stated that she had responded to each of the recommendations from the CRP June report, which included CRP training on the safety assessment model. She announced that the results from the federal Child and Family Services review were due. She revealed that the report would state that OCS, along with every other state, had not substantially achieved the measureable outcomes. She assured the committee that a plan to remedy and implement improvement strategies was in process.

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MS. SANDOVAL, in response to a question from Representative Coghill, said that she was not exactly sure when the report would be issued.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL detailed that scrutiny of OCS came from three areas: Program Improvement Plan (PIP), CRP, and the legislature. He asked how the Online Resources for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) was working.

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MS. SANDOVAL explained that there was a federally tiered system to reward satisfactory compliance. She reported that this system was comprised of seven systemic factors, which included case management systems. She expressed her belief that the ORCA case management system was now extremely functional, and that OCS would pass this federal factor. She relayed that connectivity was the problem with ORCA, not the program.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL asked if the money the legislature had appropriated for staff training was effective as a retention tool.

MS. SANDOVAL responded that, within six months, she expected to see a difference in retention based on the training. She explained that a revised curriculum had been developed, which was implemented in November for supervisor training and in January for core worker training. She cited that workers were now more prepared and better able to do their jobs.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL asked if this was a continuing education credit or a standardized methodology.

MS. SANDOVAL reported that this was now a standard training. She explained that it had required a critical analysis to determine what training was missing, and then development for those areas.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL recounted that the Ombudsman report indicated that some OCS supervisory staff were either ignorant of, or reluctant to implement, some of the law. He allowed that this was a "way we've always done it" attitude.

MS. SANDOVAL replied that she was not familiar with the report. She related her disappointment, and disclosed that OCS placed great importance on family, extended family, and non-nuclear family.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL acknowledged that there was some disparity between the statute standard and the ICWA standard.

CO-CHAIR HERRON commented on the institutional memory within OCS and ICWA.

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MS. SANDOVAL responded that during the past four years OCS had embraced the idea of institutional racism and the over representation of Native Alaskan children. She related that OCS had reviewed the reasons for this overrepresentation. She acknowledged that she had focused too closely on creating a Region 5, as opposed to focusing on what could be done without spending a lot of money.

CO-CHAIR HERRON acknowledged that departments, legislatures and organizations all dealt with partisanship, and he noted the ease of falling back into institutional practices.

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA shared that caseload was a difficulty in many occupations, and that staffing to national standards might be a solution for retention. She expressed a desire for determining a dollar value for issues that were not resolved at an early stage, in order to measure the long term cost.

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MS. SANDOVAL, in response to Co-Chair Herron, explained that the federal review was in September, at the end of which OCS received the preliminary findings. She shared that OCS had just received a courtesy copy of the report, with an opportunity to respond within two weeks. She disclosed that the final report would be mailed a few weeks after the OCS departmental response.

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MS. SANDOVAL, in response to Co-Chair Herron, allowed that the most alarming disclosures in the report were the need for improvement to the safety and risk assessments for children, and the low rate of home visits. She stated that the rate of home visits had improved since the report. She reiterated her request for more field staff.

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REPRESENTATIVE LYNN asked about the notification for home visits.

MS. SANDOVAL revealed that notice of the visit depended on the type, purpose, and stage of the case.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL asked about the flexibility of scheduling for workers, in order to reduce the stress level of staff.

MS. SANDOVAL granted that employees had that scheduling flexibility. She noted that several workers had four day work weeks, which allowed for home visits, as the work day was longer. She provided that staff could also flex their work schedule so as to not work overtime.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL asked if this was determined by the local area manager.

MS. SANDOVAL explained that permanent alternative schedule requests were made through the state office however the unit supervisor would make case by case decisions for temporary adjustments.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL asked about the pay range for a first year social worker.

MS. SANDOVAL reported that a Child Services Specialist 1 was pay range 15, which started at about \$42,000 per year.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL recounted that even given that pay range, the turnover was high. He explained that the staff needed to use their own cars, and then request reimbursement. He concluded that the staff had a lot of responsibility.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL continued and asked how the practicum for the University of Alaska BSW program was working.

MS. SANDOVAL informed the committee that although there were new partnerships with the University, there could be more collaboration with the schools of social work. She mentioned that she regularly visited with students at the end of the school year to encourage them to start a career with OCS.

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REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL remarked that the front line social worker required an investment in training. He offered his belief that new Bachelor of Social Work graduates brought a more contemporary view than the more historical view of the management staff. He allowed that this could create some tension. He perceived that job turnover was more often precipitated by the management than by the difficulty of the job.

MS. SANDOVAL agreed, and promised to continue evaluations.

REPRESENTATIVE COGHILL recommended an investment in the supervisory staff training.

CO-CHAIR HERRON agreed that these were very difficult jobs.

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REPRESENTATIVE LYNN asked if the home visits were dangerous.

MS. SANDOVAL disclosed that OCS had the ability for a criminal background check before the visit. She said that law enforcement would provide support if the situation appeared to be dangerous.

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA commented that adequate training was essential.

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MR. VAN WALLINGA lamented that connectivity for the ORCA program was slow, that work spaces were sub-standard, and that there needed to be staff housing. He suggested that the federal review held OCS to an unfair standard, as travel was made difficult by weather. He reiterated that the rural areas had unique problems and he voiced the need for a Region 5.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 4:50 p.m.