

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 10, 2011

3:05 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Wes Keller, Chair
Representative Alan Dick, Vice Chair
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative Bob Miller
Representative Charisse Millett

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Bob Herron
Representative Sharon Cissna

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

- HEARD

OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- HEARD

ALASKA CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

SUSAN HEUER, Chair
Citizen Review Panel
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint, "Alaska's Citizen Review Panel" and answered questions.

CHRISTY LAWTON, Acting Director
Central Office
Office of Children's Services

Department of Health and Social Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified and answered questions during an update by the Citizen Review Panel.

PAM KARALUNAS, Chapter Coordinator
Alaska Children's Alliance
Chugiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint, "Alaska Children's Alliance Update on CACs 2011."

BRIAN MESSING, Program Manager
Southeast Alaska Family Evaluation Child Advocacy Center
Alaska Children's Alliance
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified and answered questions during the PowerPoint presentation by the Alaska Children's Alliance.

JESSICA LAWMASTER, Program Manager
Haven House, Kenai Peninsula Alaska Children's Alliance
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified and answered questions during the PowerPoint presentation by the Alaska Children's Alliance.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:05:35 PM](#)

CHAIR WES KELLER called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:05 p.m. Representatives Keller, Dick, Millett, and Miller were present at the call to order. Representative Seaton arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION(S): Citizen Review Panel

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CHAIR KELLER announced that the first order of business would be a presentation by the Citizen Review Panel.

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SUSAN HEUER, Chair, Citizen Review Panel, introduced the PowerPoint entitled "Alaska's Citizen Review Panel." [Included

in members' packets] She stated that the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) was currently comprised of seven volunteer members, slide 1, "Citizen Review Panel: Who." In response to Chair Keller, she explained that the CRP members would travel to a larger hub community, and split into groups of two for visitations to smaller surrounding communities. These visitations would focus on discussions with staff from the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and its community partners, as shown on slide 2, "What," and then report on the findings. She stated that they did not visit with any of the cases.

REPRESENTATIVE DICK, referring to slide 3, "Where," asked about the communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region.

MS. HEUER replied that the CRP had prioritized its visitations for communities with the biggest crises.

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REPRESENTATIVE DICK encouraged visitations to interior Athabascan villages.

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MS. HEUER addressed slide 5, "Why" and slide 6, "Benefits of CRP," and reported that there was a CRP in every state for "grassroots feedback from the communities and the families about how well services are being delivered." She stated "We're the eyes and ears of both the public and for you and OCS and we take this very seriously." She explained that CRP had the unique function of identifying and advocating for the ancillary services that OCS could not request, offering as an example, the Western Region in Bethel. She outlined the presentation, slide 7, "Overview of presentation," to include the prior year's recommendations, a response from OCS on the CRP annual report, and reviews and recommendations from this year.

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MS. HEUER discussed slide 8, slide 9, and slide 10 "CRP recommendations from our work last year, Recommendations to OCS." These recommendations included a need to acknowledge and address the discrepancy between rural, bush and urban child protection; a concern for OCS front line workers to have adequate support staff to allow a focus on social work, not paperwork; and a suggestion that the training for new OCS workers be modified to better reflect the on-the-ground reality

of the job. She moved on to slide 11, slide 12, slide 13, and slide 14, "CRP recommendations from our work last year, Recommendations to the Legislature." These included a need to acknowledge and address the discrepancy between rural, bush and urban child protection; a need to clarify which agency assumed fiscal responsibility for transportation of children to a child advocacy center (CAC); a request for capital budget funding for housing and facility work for OCS and its workers; and a request that Alaska standardize the resources available to all state agencies, including internet and housing.

REPRESENTATIVE DICK asked about the time sensitivity for the transportation of children to a CAC.

MS. HEUER reported that it was necessary within hours.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked to clarify which was necessary in a few hours, financial responsibility or response.

MS. HEUER explained the delays caused by discussion of responsibility during requests for transportation.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked to clarify that the response for transportation was the same in rural and urban areas.

MS. HEUER offered her belief that there was "some kind of a glitch in the statutes that makes that discussion possible, and so that needs to be resolved so kids just get on the next plane and go."

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked who to contact if legislators were made aware of a two to three week delay for transportation and evaluation.

MS. HEUER suggested that this was a question for Ms. Lawton.

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MS. HEUER, explaining that a lack of housing in rural areas was a major impediment to OCS staff recruitment and retention, asked that a housing budget be created.

CHAIR KELLER asked if there had been any comparison for this as an issue in urban areas.

MS. HEUER replied that this was primarily a retention factor for rural areas.

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MS. HEUER, referring to slide 14, stated that the resources available to all state agencies should be standardized. She opined that OCS had fewer resources to utilize for retention.

MS. HEUER, addressing slide 15, "OCS Response to CRP Recommendations," and referred to the alleged discrepancy for child protective services in urban and rural areas. She stated the OCS response to be: "Safety is safety, regardless of location. They have the same expectations; the resources have been allocated to accomplish this." She expressed encouragement that it was the statewide policy; she opined, however, that this was not the practice. She related that OCS had acknowledged staff retention problems to be a barrier.

MS. HEUER moved on to slide 16, "OCS Response to CRP Recommendations." She noted that almost every OCS line worker interviewed had expressed the need for more support staff. She relayed that OCS had acknowledged this problem, and was studying the workloads in OCS offices statewide. She stated that one suggested solution was to reallocate jobs throughout the state for a more equitable caseload. She reported that OCS was also studying the best ratio of support staff to social workers.

MS. HEUER spoke about slide 17 "OCS Response to CRP Recommendations" and stated that the OCS response to training for new workers was to update the training curriculum and create a supervisor strategic plan. She expressed her encouragement for the OCS responses to the issues.

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MS. HEUER, directing attention to slide 18, "CRP: This year's report card," stated that in prior years there had been criticism of OCS from both communities and CRP. She acknowledged that OCS had worked hard to comply with the requirements of the federal Program Improvement Plan, reflecting in an improvement of child protection policies.

MS. HEUER pointed to slide 19, "Visited Bethel & Wasilla," and reported on the two site visits each to both Bethel and Wasilla. She reported on the difficulties of recruitment and retention in Bethel, and she stated that the Wasilla office "had its own

unique set of challenges." She offered her belief that, as policies were implemented and staffs were trained, things would change.

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MS. HEUER addressed slide 21, "2011 CRP Recommendations," and stressed that OCS needed financial support to hire more clerical staff.

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MS. HEUER shared slide 22, "2011 CRP Recommendations," renewed the CRP request to standardize resources for state agencies, and pointed specifically to internet connections and housing as two critical issues.

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MS. HEUER moved to slide 23, "2011 CRP Recommendations," and suggested an external audit of the Wasilla OCS office as a step toward the resolution of its problems.

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MS. HEUER concluded with slide 24, "Most importantly," stating the Bethel and Wasilla staff concern that the stress and workload did not allow for the desired level of child protection. She opined that caseload responses were reactive, not proactive. She offered support to the OCS requests for staff redeployment. She stated: "the Wasilla office is in crisis."

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CHAIR KELLER expressed his appreciation for this constructive work with OCS.

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REPRESENTATIVE MILLER asked what Bethel and Wasilla specifically needed, and if that was possible for the legislators to offer.

CHAIR KELLER asked to wait for the OCS response.

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REPRESENTATIVE MILLETT suggested that housing in rural Alaska was a problem for most state agencies.

MS. HEUER agreed, but pointed out that some agencies had housing, whereas OCS did not. She reflected on the savings from not having a continual retraining due to a lack of staff retention.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked if this was a request for permanent or transitional housing.

MS. HEUER replied that it was for permanent housing.

Office of Children's Services

[3:39:20 PM](#)

CHAIR KELLER announced that the next order of business would be a presentation by the Office of Children's Services.

CHRISTY LAWTON, Acting Director, Central Office, Office of Children's Services, Department of Health and Social Services, reflected on the evolving relationship between OCS and the CRP, noting that it was now an effective working relationship. She updated the progress of the Western Region, in Bethel, and confirmed that it now had its own management and administrative structure. She reported that some of the key leadership positions were still unfilled, but that Bethel had full staffing for the front line positions. She affirmed that OCS was working hard to find staff.

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MS. LAWTON expressed her disagreement with CRP regarding the difference for child protective services in rural versus urban areas. She opined that it was an equitable response, but she recognized the problems for very small understaffed offices in making effective, timely response. She suggested that some of the rural offices were not aware of all the resources available, and that OCS was developing a better system for information dissemination.

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CHAIR KELLER asked for details about the transportation decisions.

MS. LAWTON explained that a protective services report was filed by a worker, in partnership with the regional staff. She pointed out that staff in rural communities often arranged directly with the transportation carriers, with payment to be paid at a later date.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked about the coordination of responsibility between Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO), Alaska State Troopers, and OCS personnel for villages without OCS staff.

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MS. LAWTON explained that once an OCS staff received a report, they contacted the local law enforcement, VPSO, or tribal representative in that community and, dependent on the nature of the report, requested accompaniment for the initial assessment and investigation.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked how OCS would become involved, if the initial report was placed with the VPSO.

MS. LAWTON replied that a call for concern to OCS would come from the VPSO, the Alaska State Troopers, or a tribal representative. If necessary, OCS would organize the collaborative effort with the necessary agencies, including contact with the child advocacy centers. She clarified that it was OCS's responsibility for the necessary evaluations and assessments for child maltreatment.

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MS. LAWTON, responding to the CRP recommendation for more support staff, stated that there was agreement to the need for more social service associate staff, and that a suggestion for evaluation had been included in the strategic plan to the supervisors. She confirmed her need to better understand the equitable positioning of clerical administrative and social service associate staff throughout OCS offices. She shared that research was being conducted for optimal staffing numbers.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON reflected on the difficulties encountered with the OCS data programming and asked if this had been resolved.

MS. LAWTON reported that \$1 million had been invested in rural area improvements. She confirmed that there were still more delays than for the systems with fiber optic cable connections.

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MS. LAWTON, in response to Chair Keller, explained that the pilot project for increased internet speed and program performance was completed in Bethel, but was still being implemented in other rural offices. She confirmed that this was not as effective as the fiber optic connections. She pointed out that a program had been installed to improve the speed and performance for the OCS program.

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CHAIR KELLER asked about the pay range for front line workers and social service associate staff. He asked if there was an option to hire support staff without licensing.

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MS. LAWTON provided that the starting pay for a frontline social worker or children's service specialist was about \$39,000. She clarified that not all social workers were licensed; those who have a degree in social work are required to have a social work license, but those classified as children's services specialist are not. She responded that the scope of work for volunteers would vary, but often it was difficult to find staff to orient and supervise the volunteers.

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MS. LAWTON, responding to the suggestion for improved training, reported that new worker training had been increased from two weeks to four weeks. She shared that there were many ideas for more specialized continued professional development training.

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MS. LAWTON confirmed that OCS was continuing its efforts for staff retention, which would alleviate much of the work load issues.

MS. LAWTON, in response to Representative Millett, said that there were 215 Level 1 or 2 social workers, and 6 Level 3 facilitators. She replied that the average retention was 18 months.

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MS. LAWTON agreed with an earlier statement that the OCS Wasilla office had many complex issues and challenges. She reported that a case by case evaluation to review procedures, and examination of the supervisory and management levels, were top priorities for creating a healthy, productive, effective working environment. She pointed to the rapid increase of case loads in Wasilla, without the corresponding increase in resources, as a problem.

CHAIR KELLER asked how the Wasilla OCS caseload compared to the other offices in Alaska.

MS. LAWTON replied that the significantly higher caseloads in Wasilla did not allow workers the time to make a proper evaluation.

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CHAIR KELLER pointed to previous audits of OCS, and opined that these had not resulted in a justifiable use of those resources necessary to do the audit, as the tendency was to find fault rather than solutions.

MS. LAWTON endorsed a multi faceted approach for a strategic plan to implement the review process, and that there was a search for the correct methodology. She affirmed that the Wasilla family to family project had not received the necessary nurturing.

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REPRESENTATIVE MILLER asked what the Alaska State Legislature could do for more effective, efficient change.

MS. LAWTON replied that once the problems were identified, most of the work could be accomplished within OCS.

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REPRESENTATIVE MILLER suggested that more rural housing would help.

MS. LAWTON replied that housing would help with retention. She asked for support to increase the public perception of the value for OCS staff.

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MS. LAWTON, in response to Representative Seaton, explained that TDM, team decision making meetings, were facilitated by OCS staff members and included the parents, the child, family members, the OCS worker, and support people during discussions for making a placement change for the child.

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CHAIR KELLER offered his belief that engagement of the community was the answer to many of these problems. He declared that policy decisions should not reflect that the state would immediately become a surrogate parent.

Alaska Children's Alliance

CHAIR KELLER announced that the final order of business would be a presentation by the Alaska Children's Alliance.

PAM KARALUNAS, Chapter Coordinator, Alaska Children's Alliance, introduced the other attending members, and asked the committee for ongoing support for child advocacy centers (CAC).

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MS. KARALUNAS presented a PowerPoint, "Alaska Children's Alliance Update on CACs 2011." [Included in members' packets] She directed attention to slide 2, "Alaska Children's Alliance," which stated that the group's mission was to "promote a culturally appropriate multidisciplinary response to child maltreatment throughout Alaska." She moved on to talk about slide 3, "National Children's Alliance," which set standards for CACs, and provided support, training, technical assistance, and accreditation. She talked about the history of the Children's Alliance in Huntsville, Alabama. She presented slide 4, "Alaska Children's Alliance provides:" and stated that ACA provided

technical assistance and support, and offered limited funding through national grants. She spoke about the statewide projects, slide 5, which included the TeleCam medical peer review, the biennial Alaska Child Maltreatment Conference, the forensic photography training, and the statewide data collection.

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MS. KARALUNAS directed attention to slide 6, and spoke about the Alaska specific projects, which included: training for tribal entities for regional CACs, development of satellite CACs, and training for effective support volunteers.

MS. KARALUNAS reported that there were ten CACs, slide 7.

BRIAN MESSING, Program Manager, Southeast Alaska Family Evaluation Child Advocacy Center, Alaska Children's Alliance, clarified that the CACs worked together, and he spoke about the individual CACs: slide 8, Anchorage; slide 9, Bethel; slide 10, Copper River Basin; and slide 11, Dillingham.

MS. KARALUNAS, in reference to the Copper River Basin CAC, said that OCS and public safety were both located nearby.

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REPRESENTATIVE DICK asked about the CAC funding.

MS. KARALUNAS replied that Senator Stevens had directed federal funding to the model, and that funding for the last two years had come entirely from the state.

REPRESENTATIVE DICK asked the time sensitivity for an evaluation, if there was to be prosecution.

MS. KARALUNAS replied that child sexual abuse generally went on for a very long time, often without any forensic evidence. She offered her belief that forensic evidence was most obtainable for 72 hours.

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JESSICA LAWMASTER, Program Manager, Haven House, Kenai Peninsula Alaska Children's Alliance, explained that quicker was better for the forensic interview. She pointed out that the need for safety was more unique in rural communities.

MR. MESSING noted that all the CACs were regional. He presented slide 12, Fairbanks; slide 13, Juneau; slide 14, Kenai Peninsula; slide 15, Kodiak; slide 16, Mat-Su; and slide 17, Nome.

MS. LAWMASTER listed the core components of CACs, which included: slide 18, "A child and family friendly environment for coordination of investigative process;" slide 19, "A child forensic interview should be conducted at a CAC... by interviewers who have specialized training;" slide 20, "The multidisciplinary response investigation reduces duplicative interviews, so basically this response, instead of trying to fit children into the adult system... brings all of the different professionals to that child;" slide 21, "The specialized non-traumatic medical exam... so a child can get a head to toe exam, or a well child check exam...it might be important for that child to hear from a medical professional that his or her body is okay, regardless of what happened to them;" slide 22, "On-going support and follow up for the family throughout the system process;" slide 23, "Culturally competent services... Bethel actually has forensic interviewers that are bilingual that can conduct forensic interviews in English and in Yupik;" and slide 24, "CACs provide collaboration with mental health services for earlier response to referrals."

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MS. LAWMASTER discussed slide 25, "Case Review:" and stated that all the centers had monthly child abuse case reviews, which enhanced the process and allowed for efficient sharing of information. She explained slide 26, "Case Tracking," and reported that all the CACs used a comprehensive national data base case tracking system through the National Children's Alliance. She stated that CACs provided "community awareness, education, and outreach, so we are constantly out in our communities," slide 27.

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MS. KARALUNAS pointed to slide 28, and established that child sexual abuse was significantly linked to an increased risk for suicide attempts, depression, illicit drug use, and other "things that kill us as adults." She moved on to slide 29, "Did you know?" which estimated the annual cost of child abuse to be \$103.8 billion. She presented slide 30, "Why the CAC Model?" and stated that prior to the CAC, the system would further

traumatize the child and the family. She stated, slide 31, that it now cost less per case, and it took less time to prosecute cases. She reviewed slide 32, "Our Children Deserve Nothing Less!" and mentioned that this child friendly, collaborative, supportive environment made sense. She offered slide 33 and stated that 35 percent of the children seen at Alaska CACs were boys, and that 65 percent were girls.

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MS. KARALUNAS directed attention to slide 35, "Numbers of children served," and offered additional information to anyone interested in the numbers in their area.

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REPRESENTATIVE DICK asked if the location of the CACs within the community was critical.

MS. KARALUNAS replied that it needed to be easily accessible, but in a subdued, less obvious setting.

REPRESENTATIVE DICK offered his belief that the best location was next to a clinic.

MS. KARALUNAS, in response to Representative Dick, said that the Copper River Basin CAC was more isolated.

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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 4:53 p.m.