

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 12, 2015

3:03 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Paul Seaton, Chair
Representative Louise Stutes
Representative David Talerico
Representative Geran Tarr
Representative Adam Wool

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Liz Vazquez, Vice Chair
Representative Neal Foster

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

- HEARD

SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 27

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to hearings on and plans for permanent placement of a child in need of aid; relating to school placement and transportation for children in foster care; relating to foster care transition programs; relating to emergency and temporary placement of a child in need of aid; relating to the confidentiality of information regarding child protection; and amending Rule 17.2, Alaska Child in Need of Aid Rules of Procedure."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 27

SHORT TITLE: DHSS DUTIES;CINA; FOSTER CARE; ADOPTION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) GARA

01/21/15 (H) PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/15
01/21/15 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/15 (H) HSS, JUD
02/11/15 (H) SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE INTRODUCED
02/11/15 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/11/15 (H) HSS, JUD
02/12/15 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

CHRISTY LAWTON, Director
Central Office
Office of Children's Services
Department of Health and Social Services
Juneau, Alaska

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

TRAVIS ERICKSON, Social Services Program Administrator
Central Office
Office of Children's Services
Department of Health and Social Services
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the overview by the Office of Children's Services.

DIWAKAR VADAPALLI Chair
Alaska Citizen Review Panel
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the annual report from the Alaska Citizen Review Panel.

REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SSHB 27 as the sponsor of the bill.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:03:13 PM](#)

CHAIR PAUL SEATON called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:03 p.m. Representatives Seaton, Wool, Talerico, and Stutes were present at the call to order. Representative Tarr arrived as the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW: Office of Children's Services

3:03:50 PM

CHAIR SEATON announced that the first order of business would be an overview from the Office of Children's Services (OCS).

3:05:16 PM

CHRISTY LAWTON, Director, Central Office, Office of Children's Services, Department of Health and Social Services, directed attention to the PowerPoint, entitled "OCS Division Overview." She stated that the mission of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) is to work in partnership with families and communities to support the well-being of Alaska's children and youth, slide 2. She reported that the services were designed to enhance families' capacities to give their children a healthy start, to provide them with safe and permanent homes, to maintain cultural connections, and help them realize their potential. She shared that the vision is "Safe Children, Strong Families." She reported that there were 508 full-time positions, with 1 part-time position within the division, and the Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget was \$143,709,600, which was 5.34 percent of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) overall budget. She relayed that, in any given month, OCS works with about 11,469 individuals. She moved on to slide 3, "Families We Serve," and clarified that this is directed more at the parents. She stated that, although these parents love their children, they often have their own traumatic history including addiction, exposure to violence, and economic struggles. She pointed out that many paired with partners from similar backgrounds. She stated that once the addiction and violence was taken away while treated for mental illness, these were by and large caring, loving parents.

MS. LAWTON moved on to slide 4, "Continuum of Care," and listed the six primary program areas. The first is prevention/early intervention services, which include the infant learning program for up to age three. This program assesses children with developmental delays or possible risk factors, and all children with substantiated maltreatment. If these children qualified, they receive on-going services for preparation prior to entering the school system. The next service on the continuum of care is intake, which is the process for reporting concerns. She reported that there are five regional intake units, which receive and screen more than 15,000 protective services reports

annually. These intake units collect information for assessments of actions by the division. She explained that the next service on the continuum of care, initial assessment (IA), is also known as an investigation, and occurs after a report was screened-in and met the criteria for investigation. These investigations had been determined to warrant a worker going to the home to check on the child's safety. She acknowledged that this was a "pretty intrusive, pretty scary process," but it was necessary to review the history and any criminal records, and interview the children and the parents. It could then be decided whether family services were necessary to keep the children safe. She moved on to family services, which comprises the bulk of the staff, and includes foster care cases that are ongoing and need longer-term intervention. She explained that the case workers develop case plans to remediate the challenges that brought the children into care. She described resource families as a generic term to describe licensed foster parents, as well as relative providers. This program is responsible for recruitment of foster and adoptive parents and subsidy to the children. She explained that this is when OCS matched children with services and families that could best meet their needs. She mentioned that service array are grant based programs, or contracts, and are used to supplemental the work of the case workers and provide more services to the families.

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MS. LAWTON addressed slide 5, "Service Population," and reported that more than 15,000 reports had been received by OCS for children with alleged maltreatment in FY 2014, with almost 10,500 children and their families subject to an assessment for child safety. She pointed out that almost 7,000 of these resulted in investigations where an OCS staff went and knocked on the door. She shared that there were an average of 600 investigations to initiate which required that case workers be in the field and in the homes of families across the state. Each of these investigations were handled in a timeframe based on the report which determined the necessity for the rapidity of response.

MS. LAWTON explained slide 6, "Service Population (continued)," and noted that almost 2,400 children are being served in home placement or foster care. She pointed out that the case workers drove, flew, used snow machines, or boats to make monthly contacts, as required for a monthly face to face contact with every child, and contact every other month with a parent. This required a lot of travel, with more than 18,000 visits to

children and 4,100 visits to their parents by workers in 2014. She declared that this is an even bigger logistical challenge given the remoteness of Alaska and the turnover of case worker staff.

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MS. LAWTON moved on to slide 7, "Children in Placement," depicting the 5 regional offices, Anchorage, Northern, Southcentral, Southeast, and Western, and the 25 field offices. She relayed that the Anchorage region typically has the largest number of children in out-of-home care, followed by Southcentral, and the Northern regions. She reported that some of the offices were only staffed by one or two persons, and many were key points for serving the surrounding villages.

MS. LAWTON discussed slide 8, "Children Out-of-Home Care," and stated that there was significant growth in the past five years. She said some of that increase had been a result of the evaluation process for risk and safety, in an attempt to reduce maltreatment. She stated that OCS was also seeing a lot of increased severity in the reports. She shared that any child in hourly custody had to be in a licensed facility. She stated that 43 percent of the children were with a non-relative foster family, while about 35 percent were with foster homes specifically licensed for a relative child. She expressed a desire for more child placement in relative homes, although this continues to be a challenge. She reported that OCS is attempting to streamline and simplify some of its licensing process.

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MS. LAWTON shared slide 9, "Service Population Demographics," which depicted the overrepresentation of Alaska Native children; although Native children comprise 20 percent of the child population, they comprise about 62 percent of the children in foster care. She stated there are some clear racial disparities, as OCS recognizes that Alaska Natives did not abuse their children at a higher rate than other families. She pointed out that this phenomena happened throughout minority cultures in the U.S. She said that OCS is working closely with its tribal partners for ways to respond and deal with issues of institutional racism and cultural issues that were a norm for a community, and not neglect.

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MS. LAWTON addressed slide 10, "Where do kids go when they leave?" She noted that OCS has a responsibility to ensure that kids do not linger in foster care, with a primary goal of reunification with their home. She allowed that about 50 percent of the kids were successfully reunited with their parents, although the national average was around 60 percent. She declared that OCS had a low rate of reentry for kids, after returning to their home.

[3:19:47 PM](#)

MS. LAWTON directed attention to slide 11, "Pressing Concerns," stated there were a lot of pressing concerns. She addressed the disproportionality and disparate outcomes of the Alaska Native population in the child welfare system, pointing out that these children were reported to OCS at a higher rate than other children and the outcomes were poorer than those of other children, as they often had more placements and didn't see the educational success. She said there were insufficient resources to enhance the tribal infrastructure, and she spoke about the creation of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, which had provided funding to tribes to serve Native children, although this federal funding had remained stagnant. She stated that there were insufficient resources to enhance much of the tribal infrastructure, and expressed her desire to share OCS resources, training, and expertise. She moved on to discuss child abuse prevention funding, noting that once OCS came into contact with families, it was often too little, too late. She relayed there could be a lot of savings if more was invested in prevention. Workload and retention continues to be one of the biggest challenges to OCS, which she describes as a "turn and burn" with frontline case workers. She reported that it takes about two years to train a caseworker and they usually leave in about one and one-half years, before they had even fully mastered skills. She shared that this is a national crisis. She addressed the growing foster care population and, based on the economic challenges, stated that there would be an increase.

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MS. LAWTON shared that OCS is working with the Division of Public Health in looking at the data on infant/child fatalities. She opined there appears to be an uptake in fatalities for infants under 12 months, possibly attributed to unsafe sleeping arrangements, although there were often substance abuse factors. She noted that the medical examiner was often not able to make a

definitive finding, and no one was there to report what happened. She referenced the new Public Service Announcement (PSA) for safe sleep, and recognizes its challenges. She concluded by touching on the budget cuts, which lead to insufficient localized services and resources, especially in the villages and hub communities. She offered her belief that there would never be a complete service array, or the amount of licensed foster homes, and often there would not be the necessary tribal resources. She declared a significant need for the department and the state to work with the tribal partners in a way that had not been done in the past because they were the solution for working with the families to keep the communities whole and the families together.

[3:26:54 PM](#)

TRAVIS ERICKSON, Social Services Program Administrator, Central Office, Office of Children's Services, Department of Health and Social Services, directed attention to slide 12, "Did our intervention prevent additional maltreatment?" He pointed to the line graph on the left side of the slide, "Repeat Maltreatment," and reported that this was a federally established measure that meant that a child had been maltreated once, OCS had intervened, and then, within six months, the child had been maltreated a second time. He stated that we "want this rate to be very low," noting that the federal standard was 6.1 percent, while Alaska had consistently ranged between 11 and 12 percent, about twice the national standard. He directed attention to the bar chart on the right of the slide, "Repeat Reports," which he explained to be all the times OCS had worked with the families, as well as a snapshot for all the investigations open to OCS on Jan 26 2015. He reported that there were 2,409 open investigations at that time, split into three categories. About a third, 839 of the families, were reported for the first time; 722 of the families had been reported for a second or third time to OCS; and 848 of the families had been reported many times before. He relayed that this revealed that OCS was operating with the same families quite frequently, resulting in a much higher rate of repeat maltreatment "than we want it to be." He expressed concern for child safety, noting that established addiction was a significant factor in more than 70 percent of these cases.

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MS. LAWTON directed attention to slide 13, "2014 - 2019 Priorities for Improvement," and reported that OCS was in the

first year of a federal five-year plan of primary goals and strategies to address the aforementioned pressing needs. She acknowledged the necessity to better assess and address risk and need, which includes the initial review and determination through the ongoing responsibility to assess for safety and risk, while evaluating the needs. She directed attention to the strategies for timely and quality case plans as well as improvement for decision making at intake and initial assessment. She stated that investigations were often handled by the least seasoned staff, although it was "one of the toughest jobs that we have." She shared that this was a paradigm that OCS was working on. She declared that another OCS goal was to examine timely and safe permanent homes for all children, as OCS was not meeting the standards for placement of children in foster care from zero to twelve months. She stated a goal for getting children home as quickly as possible, so they did not linger in foster care. She noted that the longer a child was gone from their parents, the less likelihood for successful reunification. She shared that the early and ongoing identification of relatives was a key element to placement. She said that this was a growth area for OCS, and that the process entailed continued development of the relationship with family members. She shared that continuous quality improvement was a growing area of emphasis in all areas of government, and that OCS was developing a clear plan based on its case reviews to better outline its policies and practices. She reported that the last federal audit review for the child welfare system in Alaska had been in 2008, which the state had failed, and that Alaska had been on a performance improvement plan for three years. She stated that Alaska was scheduled for round three of the Child and Family Services plan in May, 2017, and although OCS had expectations for a better review, they did not expect to pass, which would result in another performance improvement plan. She noted that there was an ongoing dialogue with the federal partners regarding penalties.

MS. LAWTON moved on to slide 14, "Moving Forward," and emphasized that OCS needed to be more pro-active in its efforts to collaborate with partners in and outside of state government. She offered her belief that OCS did more than most other branches, although it was not enough. She declared her support for the new Department of Health and Social Services commissioner [Valerie Davidson] and her priorities, stating that this would "help us give more boost and energy and ideas of how we can do that and where we can break outside the mold." She stressed that kids and families must be served as close to home as possible, pointing out the problems for many Alaska Native

families when children were separated from villages and placed in foster care in cities. She called for all Alaskans to report child maltreatment and to support any struggling families.

[3:36:25 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES directed attention to slide 2, and asked of the 508 employees how many were case workers.

MS. LAWTON replied that 286 of those employees were front line case workers. In response, she explained that the remainder were supervisors, managers, licensing staff, adoption staff, and support and clerical staff.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES moved attention to slide 6, which stated that the approximate 2,400 kids being served had to be seen once a month. She calculated that this was almost 29,000 visits in a year. She opined that OCS, with only 286 case workers, was not fulfilling that portion of its requirement.

MS. LAWTON acknowledged that it was a challenge, and that OCS had made big improvements on case worker monthly visits with children. She pointed out that many of the children were siblings placed together in one home. She agreed that the case workers were not always able to get there each month.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES expressed her concern that the numbers were not very factual, and consequently she was suspect of the other numbers. She asked for more specific numbers.

CHAIR SEATON suggested that the numbers for siblings in the same home be forwarded, and for determination of how far off OCS was from meeting the goal.

[3:40:06 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked about the criteria when someone called and requested help for a two-year old that was being abused. She said that she had a constituent who made that call four times before the young person died.

MS. LAWTON replied that policy dictated that all calls reporting child abuse or neglect had to be recorded as a report. She explained that there was then policy which guided staff through a review of the information from the recorder, the OCS system, and other sources, in order to "put together a picture of what we know and what level of abuse it is." She stated that

violence and active substance abuse were examples of criteria being reviewed, and this was put together with a combination of experience and information to make the best possible evaluation. She stated that collateral reporters, such as teachers and public health nurses, were also contacted for information. If a child was determined to be at risk or unsafe, then there was a screening for investigation.

[3:42:15 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked whether OCS made an at-risk determination prior to a visit to the home.

MS. LAWTON explained that, although OCS received more than 15,000 annual reports, they did not investigate all of them.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES expressed her concern. She asked about the OCS priority, whether it was to keep a child in their own home or to keep them safe.

MS. LAWTON replied that the priority and the duty was to keep children safe, and if that was not possible in the home, the child would be placed outside the home.

[3:43:31 PM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether the increase of children in placement from less than 1,000 to 2,400 was all distributed across state.

MS. LAWTON said that the increase was broadly across the state. She shared that OCS was working to better serve families, to reduce repeat maltreatment, and to improve its intact practices and screening process.

CHAIR SEATON asked about the time and the licensing procedure for a relative to become a placement provider for a child.

MS. LAWTON explained that if a relative could be identified and contacted immediately, a criminal background check and a child protection history check could be run, a worker could visit the home to ensure it was a safe and suitable residence, and the child could be placed immediately. She acknowledged that this process could take longer if the placement was in a different location, taking place after hours, or if multiple relatives came forward with conflicting information.

CHAIR SEATON asked whether the procedure and timeline for licensing for foster care had recently been streamlined, as there had been a long delay in the process during past years.

MS. LAWTON explained that a family had to complete an application packet, and that delays could result if any household members had any prior criminal information as those court records would need to be reviewed. She said that letters of reference were also needed. She noted that it would take longer if a variance for licensure was necessary, as this would require more information and research. She reported that once an application was completed, it should take 45 - 60 days.

[3:47:54 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked whether there was ever a situation where the child may be placed back in the home prematurely, possibly resulting in a subsequent removal.

MS. LAWTON replied that this did occasionally happen; however, in Alaska it was more often the case that OCS monitored far longer than necessary. She declared that, although there was a good rate of re-entry, there were challenges with substance abuse and other issues in the family that brought "additional bumps in the road."

[3:49:40 PM](#)

CHAIR SEATON directed attention to slide 9, and asked for clarification that 20 percent of the population is Alaska Native, but 60 percent of all the children in foster care are Alaska Native.

MS. LAWTON replied that 62 percent of the children are Alaska Native.

[3:50:05 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WOOL lauded the work of OCS, and recognized the inherent stresses.

MS. LAWTON, in response to a question from Representative Wool, said that there had been growth in the out-of-home care population, and that ten years earlier there were some policy changes, followed by additional significant changes five years later, which resulted in proportionately more cases proceeding to custody. She noted there was a pendulum swing, which had

been growing in the past five years from 1,800 to the current 2,400.

REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked whether the number of incoming reports is in parallel to the number of children in foster care.

MS. LAWTON replied that this had been the case; however, in the past three years, even though the number of reports remained somewhat static, OCS is responding in a different way and consequently, there is now more intervention.

REPRESENTATIVE WOOL, in response to Ms. Lawton, offered his belief that the standards had changed. He asked whether the percentage of Alaska Natives in foster care had remained constant.

MS. LAWTON replied that it had grown as the foster care population had grown, so there were proportionately more Alaska Native children.

MS. LAWTON, in response to Representative Wool, said that there was racism in Alaska, as well as the rest of the country, and that there were some biases for perceptions of people of other ethnicities. She offered her belief that perhaps families were reported as needing intervention more often than was necessary. She acknowledged that the OCS lens also came into effect, and the outcomes were different. She stated that race was a factor and a significant part of the problem, "and it's hard to sort of unpack all of that to figure out how you fix it, 'cause it's very complex."

[3:54:41 PM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether there had been any success for an increase in front line workers who represent the largest population demographic for foster children.

MS. LAWTON explained that OCS could not ask about race when hiring, so there was not any specific data. However, anecdotally, OCS did not do a very good job recruiting Alaska Natives and did not have very many Alaska Natives working in the offices in rural Alaska. She offered her belief that institutional culture and historical trauma were large contributing factors. She stated that it would be helpful to have more people representative of the families being served.

CHAIR SEATON asked whether there were skill sets or requirements for front line case workers that did not correspond with those of people from rural Alaska.

MS. LAWTON replied that OCS did include discussion for the Indian Child Welfare Act and culture in all its trainings and policies. She shared that there were also stand-alone curriculums designed to teach an understanding for cultural differences, the interfaces between different cultures, and the meaning of prejudice and bias. She declared that you cannot change a person's entire viewpoint. She said that OCS worked with its tribal partners for staff education of the culture, history, and people in specific regions.

CHAIR SEATON rephrased his question, and asked whether there were Alaska Natives working as qualified front line case workers in rural Alaska, or whether there was an educational component creating this hiring differential.

MS. LAWTON explained that, although it was not possible to track data on this race issue when it came to hiring, her experience showed that there were not a lot of Alaska Native applicants from rural regions. She relayed that working for OCS, with its reach and family connectedness in the community, as well as "the institution itself is a bit scary to work in," was a deterrent. She pointed out that the salaries and benefits offered by OCS did not always compete well with those offered by the tribal organizations.

[3:58:30 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked about the review failures by OCS and the subsequent reviews.

MS. LAWTON replied that OCS was reviewed in 2002, again in 2008, and would be reviewed again in 2017. She offered her belief that every state had failed these federal audits.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked whether OCS had made enough changes that there would be a possibility for passing in 2017.

MS. LAWTON offered her belief that OCS would pass in more areas of rating than in 2008, and she pointed out that OCS made continuous quality case reviews in the same manner and with the same instrument as the federal review. She explained that OCS had monitored the data for all 27 elements of evaluation, and

that, although progress had been made toward the federal benchmark, OCS would not achieve the marker to pass.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES asked in which areas OCS expected to have difficulty with passing.

MS. LAWTON replied that there were three categories with a variety of specific elements in each: safety, permanency, and wellbeing. Under safety, there was review for the timeliness of intervention, for whether the risk and safety for the needs of the family was assessed accurately, and what services were provided. She opined that, although OCS would do better in safety with better outcomes for wellbeing, it would not pass either component.

CHAIR SEATON asked for Ms. Lawton to provide the committee with a check list to allow for a better understanding to the evaluation process.

MS. LAWTON, in response to Representative Stutes, reiterated her understanding that every state had failed both review audits.

[4:01:51 PM](#)

MS. LAWTON, in response to Chair Seaton, reported that currently there were over 1,400 licensed foster homes, and that 451 were licensed for specific, or relative, children. She said that the need depended on the community, that Fairbanks continually had a need for more foster homes, and that OCS was continually trying to recruit.

[4:03:01 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked whether the aforementioned review failure was partly due to overwork, underfunding, and not enough foster parents.

MS. LAWTON replied that he was "absolutely correct," and that the standards, all the cases and all the elements, had to be achieved at 95 percent. She expressed agreement that this was, and should be, a high standard; however, given the complex nature of child welfare, it was a standard that child welfare agencies were struggling to meet. She stated that this failure was a reality that was representative of the systematic challenges of underfunding and worker turnover, and that any child welfare director in the country would echo these comments.

PRESENTATION: Alaska Citizen Review Panel

4:04:56 PM

CHAIR SEATON announced that the next order of business would be a presentation by the Alaska Citizen Review Panel.

4:05:33 PM

DIWAKAR VADAPALLI Chair, Alaska Citizen Review Panel, presented a PowerPoint titled "Alaska Citizen Review Panel," and listed the presentation outline which included a description of the Citizen Review Panel (CRP), its goals and recommendations for 2013 - 2014, its goals for 2014 - 2015, and some recent changes in the panel's work. He directed attention to slide 3, "What Does CRP Do?" explaining that the CRP had been set up in 1996 in response to a federal mandate, 42 U.S.C. 5106a(c), an amendment to the Child Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Each state was required to set up at least one CRP, and its mandate was to evaluate the agencies from a citizens' perspective and connect the public needs and perception with the agencies roles and responsibilities. He moved on to slide 4, "Brief History." He reported that the panel originally had a \$50,000 budget in 2002, which had increased to over \$100,000 per year. There was now increased autonomy and independence from the Office of Children's Services (OCS). He stated that CRP had worked to improve its methods of evaluation, and to better understand an agency with more than 500 staff. He shared that, as the CRP had between 6 - 8 volunteer members with one staff, it was necessary to be efficient and effective and use meaningful methods to produce a tangible and actionable report for the agency. He shared that relationships had improved as CRP worked to figure out its role and the agency tried to figure out where CRP fit. He stated that currently there was a good, constructive working relationship with OCS. He pointed to the next slide, "What CRP does not do," and stated that the panel had to evaluate and use its public outreach function. He reported that CRP was non-partisan and did not comment on proposed or pending legislation, and did not get involved in individual cases, as they were not hired to be social workers or micromanagers of any OCS operations. He stated that the panel would review systems, and individual components of an OCS function, but it would not evaluate the programs and it would not lobby. He declared that CRP advocated for kids, but that was where the advocacy ended. He stated that CRP could evaluate any OCS systems, slide 7, and that it produced an annual report every June which addressed specific policy documents and policy-practice gaps, slide 8. He

pointed out that the panel tried to offer recommendations that were meaningful and tangible, based on real information.

MR. VADAPALLI addressed the next slide, "Panel Membership," and acknowledged the difficulty for recruiting panel volunteers with a broad, statewide representation. He addressed the next slide, "OCS Offices," which depicted the locations for the 5 regional offices and the 21 field offices. He stated that the turnover rate for the front line positions, the protective service specialists (PSS), was 32 percent, and had remained over 30 percent for the last 10 years. He reported an average of 2,000 kids in out-of-home (OOH) care during the past 8 years.

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MR. VADAPALLI moved on to the next slides, "This Is How It Works." He explained that CRP looked at the differences for what was proposed to be done by OCS in response to its challenges, and what has actually been done by OCS to address these challenges to child protection. He reported that CRP started with an annual work plan which included several goals from a running list of concerns. He noted that, although the group was federally mandated to meet quarterly, given the amount of work, the group now held a public meeting each month. He reported that CRP had site visits every year to two or three different OCS regional or field offices. He expressed a desire for the group to visit each region annually to allow consistent comparisons. He shared that work was based on real data collected from surveys and constituents statewide, as well as data from OCS. He pointed out that the group also reviewed policies and documents, conducted further research, and presented an annual report after June 30.

MR. VADAPALLI shared slide 13, "During the 2013-2014 Year," and stated that CRP had four goals during the last year. The first goal, "what are the policy guidelines for screening PSRs?" was reviewed as there had been previous concerns for too many people being screened out. He pointed to the second goal, "What is the practice model for in-home service delivery (urban and rural)," as there was concern for a lack of a proper service model in the rural areas. He explained that the third goal, "IA backlog - without an increase in the workforce, what is the current plan for avoiding another backlog?" and asked how the 4000 case IA backlog had been caught up so quickly over the last few months. He shared the final goal, "Assess the need for OCS service in Unalaska," and questioned whether there might still be a need for this office and if so, "how do we deal with it." He

reported that CRP visited three sites during the past year, Barrow, Bethel, and Kodiak. He explained that the current decision for site visits would include a priority focus on the offices that appeared to have more challenges than others, although he acknowledged that all the offices and all the staff were overloaded and challenged.

MR. VADAPALLI addressed slide 14, "Goal 1: Screening PSRs," which depicted the monthly percentage of cases screened in and screened out since November, 2005. He pointed out that about 60 percent were screened in at the end of November, 2005, whereas only 40 percent were screened in at the end of May, 2011, although the percentage was again on the increase. He stated that CRP had investigated reasons for being screened-out and found that most applicants did not meet the screened-in criteria. Moving on to the next slide, "Goal 1: Screened-Out Cases," he described the bar graph for these regional PSRs which did not meet IA criteria in the past five years. He shared that in the upcoming year the CRP would delve more deeply to ascertain what was happening with the screened out cases. He concluded that the review of the screened-in and screened-out policy had revealed other smaller concerns, including mentions of the need for access to multiple media for submitting applications and supporting documentation. He added that persons who reported a concern should be notified that this was being attended to without requesting this action.

[4:24:31 PM](#)

MR. VADAPALLI shared slide 17, "Recommendations from 2013-2014," and opined that the in-home model may not be working in the rural areas, reporting that one in-home case worker in Bethel had 170 caseloads across 56 villages, a physical impossibility for maintaining the monthly visit requirements. He stated that it had proven difficult for CRP to receive more meaningful data in order to do its job, slide 18. He referenced slide 19, "Past Recommendations," and stated that, in 2008 and 2009, CRP had recommended that OCS continue working toward a Bethel service region. He acknowledged that this region had been created in 2010. He emphasized that a recommendation for local OCS relationships had been on its annual report every year since 2009, as there had been a concern from most site visits that OCS had consistent challenges in local relationships with working partners. He expressed a hope for a consistent structural approach to maintain the relationships, whether mandated or not. He addressed slide 20, "Past Recommendations," offering recognition of the difficult situation in Wasilla, and the work

implemented since 2011 to improve the culture within that agency. In 2012, CRP had established deadlines that required that all non-emergency petitions be filed allowing for supervision of families by the continuum of the legal parties, as social workers were overburdened and "sometimes things can fall through the cracks." He expressed hope that court supervision would help prevent this.

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MR. VADAPALLI explained slide 21, "Goals for 2014-2015," declaring that CRP had retained all four goals from the last year and added two more goals: learn more about the data system, ORCA, and its challenges and capabilities; and understand and assess OCS' foster care recruitment efforts.

MR. VADAPALLI addressed the next slide, "We Just Need To Find Common Language," which shared the issues plaguing all the CRP agencies nationwide. He stated that most OCS agencies would say there was not enough money, not enough people, lots of regulations, a process to work, one thing at a time, let's move slowly, and that these are sensitive issues; whereas, the citizens were concerned with a need for action and change now, and why can't this be done now. He declared that "sometimes it just doesn't connect and we need to find a common language. That's what CRP's are set up, really, to do." He emphasized that this was the challenge. Moving on to slide 23, "Who advises/reviews OCS?" he stated that the revised organizational flow in Department of Health and Social Services seemed to be in better alignment. He noted that every division with DHSS, except Public Assistance and Children's Services, had an advisory committee listed. He shared that it was necessary for the state to look at the support systems for OCS, and what could help with resolution to its bigger challenges. He pointed to the many review systems for OCS, which required a lot of time spent reviewing what they were already doing, which took away from time for servicing families and children in need. He suggested that all of this should be streamlined for efficiency.

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MR. VADAPALLI summarized the next slide "Changes in CRP Operation," listing the changes suggested for 2014 - 2015: adopted operational guidelines, resulting in open meetings; all CRP documents are now public, except confidential information specific to particular cases; and the panel website would now accept public comments to help identify and address systemic

issues. He clarified that the panel work was necessarily slow, as it did not jump on any crisis situation, but instead prioritized and addressed the systemic issues. He shared future CRP plans which included a systematic public outreach plan, a data sharing agreement with OCS, and a 3-way partnership between the University of Alaska School of Social Work, CRP, and OCS for case reviews.

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CHAIR SEATON directed attention to the CRP annual report which included these recommendations.

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REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked for clarification that, although the CRP relationship with OCS had begun in 2002, this relationship was still vague.

MR. VADAPALLI replied that, although it was still somewhat unclear and it was still being determined what the relationship should be and what the mutual roles were, it was now much better than it had been five years ago.

REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked if the CRP relationship with OCS was described as adversarial or cooperative.

MR. VADAPALLI replied that adversarial relationships were not productive and did not work, and although the panel was critical of the system with its evaluations, it tried to maintain a positive outlook.

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REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked if CRP offered constructive solutions to problems which had existed for many years.

MR. VADAPALLI directed attention to the turnover rate at OCS, about 32 percent of the front line worker positions over the past 8-9 years. He explained that CRP had been digging through details for information to the rates per region, and had discovered that a large percentage, which did vary by region, of those who leave resign from the agency. He declared the need to find out what that means, in order to address this. He offered a suggestion to perform exit reviews for a way to address the problems. One recommendation from CRP to OCS was to address housing in the rural areas. He pointed out that other

professions, including Public Safety and Teachers, had a housing allowance, whereas social workers did not have this allowance and they received lower pay, which contributed heavily to retention problems. He noted that, although OCS did not have the tools to deal with this, the Alaska State Legislature could. He reported that the OCS employee surveys were the only source of information for CRP to review regarding retention, but that these surveys were limited as they only listed why people would like to stay, and not why they were leaving.

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REPRESENTATIVE WOOL asked if this retention rate in Alaska was consistent with OCSs in other states.

MR. VADAPALLI replied that, although the retention rate was consistent with other states, "everybody having the same problem does not justify our problem." He surmised that Alaska had tools that may not be available elsewhere, so CRP wanted to ensure it could address what it could. He directed attention to the issue for case workers not being able to make all the visitations, and pointed out that OCS workers were not always able to coordinate with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) workers regarding home visits. He suggested that the State of Alaska initiate a program for certification of ICWA workers to legally offer support to OCS.

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CHAIR SEATON directed attention to the Alaska Citizen's Review Panel Report which contained its recommendations. He explained that, in the past, the CRP panel would offer its recommendations and then OCS would respond. He pointed out that he would prefer that the committee offer suggestions for ways that OCS and CRP could better work together. He declared his support for this model of accountability for the recommendations by the advisory committee.

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MS. LAWTON reiterated the four suggestions by the CRP: the practice elements and policies surrounding intake; the feedback to reporters; the procedures to the follow up; and the recommendation for sending information on protective service reports to case offices throughout the region. She declared appreciation for these recommendations, noting that these recommendations were generally not a surprise as OCS did meet

with CRP monthly. She expressed her agreement that intake had been an area under review for quite some time, and that OCS was adopting most of the provided recommendations with the hope for movement to a centralized intake system in order to increase its accuracy, skill level, response times, and ability for better knowledge about resources with uniformity among the five regional intake offices.

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MS. LAWTON moved on to the second recommendation for a model by OCS to serve in-home cases in rural Alaska and improve its data collection on those cases. She shared that this would allow work with the family to address the issues while the child stayed in the home, and that OCS was adopting that recommendation, as it was one of the primary goals in its five-year plan. She directed attention to the third recommendation for OCS to address the root of the initial assessment backlog problems. She explained that there was a backlog of investigations completed but not yet closed out, so they sat pending on case worker desktop. She declared that the root of the problem was work load and worker retention, as the completion of paperwork could sit and wait while a worker was out in the field. She stated that this was a continual problem rooted in the earlier referenced systemic issues. She allowed that even if OCS stayed on top of this problem, it would continue to be a problem as the work load grows with kids in out-of-home care. She addressed the fourth recommendation for a priority of improved relationships between OCS and its community partners. She expressed her agreement with this recommendation, and shared that it had been a struggle for OCS, as it was done well in some areas, and not done well in other areas. She explained that there was an interesting dynamic in small communities, particularly with relationships between individuals. She clarified that OCS workers were required to work with tribal workers under ICWA, however the relationship, the level of work, and the effectiveness could look different. She shared that OCS case workers would love to spend more time in the communities to get to know the grass roots people who were supporting families. She said that one of the challenges to that goal was the flight schedule. She expressed that this area had an expectation for improvement from her entire management team.

CHAIR SEATON asked that Ms. Lawton return to expand on ways to attain the recommendation for a certification of ICWA workers to utilize their ability as partners in the community. He

expressed his satisfaction that OCS was now working toward implementation of recommendations, as opposed to an earlier adversarial system, and he lauded both OCS and CRP.

HB 27-DHSS DUTIES;CINA; FOSTER CARE; ADOPTION

[4:52:25 PM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the final order of business would be SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 27, "An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to hearings on and plans for permanent placement of a child in need of aid; relating to school placement and transportation for children in foster care; relating to foster care transition programs; relating to emergency and temporary placement of a child in need of aid; relating to the confidentiality of information regarding child protection; and amending Rule 17.2, Alaska Child in Need of Aid Rules of Procedure."

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REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA, Alaska State Legislature, declared that his underlying guideline for foster care was the responsibility that, as we take children out of their homes, we become their legal guardians, essentially their parents. He asked, as parents, would these numbers and statistics for foster youth be tolerated. He stated that the proposed bill attempts to address solutions in a cost effective way. He relayed that 24 percent of foster youth end up incarcerated and 40 percent of foster youth end up either homeless or couch surfing. He directed attention to a recent study which indicated that foster youth have high ACE (adverse childhood experiences) scores because they are separated from their families and, in the foster care system, they bounce between homes. He shared that most states have allowed foster care until age 21, noting that in 12 states non-foster youth, on average, stayed at home until age 25. He explained that a child was emotionally harmed when taken from their parents and then placed in multiple foster homes, and that they were not ready to leave home and succeed at age 18. He reported that one provision of the proposed bill ensured that children were allowed to stay in foster care until age 21 if it was in their best interest. He pointed out that OCS would have to show to the court, at a status hearing, that it was in the child's best interest to release them prior to age 21. He explained that the goal of foster care was to find a permanent home within 12 - 24 months. He declared that Alaska did not do

this in many cases, resulting in even more harm to a child from the lack of a stable, nurturing home. He pointed out that one provision of the proposed bill stated that OCS, at the regular status hearings, must show that it had taken reasonable efforts to find a permanent home for a child. He explained that both of these provisions would help reduce the incarceration rates, the homelessness rates, and the ACEs scores. He stated that, under federal law, if a family moved within a reasonable distance, homeless youth were allowed to stay in the same school. He reported on studies which showed that each time youth were taken out of school in the middle of a term they would fall three months behind. He declared that the goal was for graduation from high school. He directed attention to another provision in the proposed bill, which stated that OCS should follow the nationally recognized standard to allow youth to stay in the same school through the end of the term. He addressed a problem as aired by Alaska Native organizations and OCS for the sharing of information when a child needed help even though the situation did not necessitate placement in foster care. This provision would allow OCS to work with the tribes and share its information so that the community could help with the challenges faced by the child. He referenced another provision in state law that declared that foster children were only entitled to a "basic education." As no other children in Alaska were only entitled to this "basic education," the proposed bill would delete this provision from state law. He offered his belief that the term was offensive, and he proposed to insert language recommended by OCS which entitled foster children to education or vocational education. He stated that another goal for foster children was to help them succeed. He noted that other provisions of the proposed bill requested that OCS work toward placing children with a relative, when this was the best placement possible. He pointed out that in many communities and cultures in Alaska the extended family was "almost like the immediate family and treated and revered as such." He explained that OCS was currently federally required to do a diligent search for placement with family or friends within 30 days of taking a child from their home. He said that, as there was not any legal requirement for continued search for family placement after that 30 day period, or any requirement for family placement in lieu of any emergency placement, that this was now a provision in the proposed bill. He offered to explain the reasoning in much more detail, as there was a lot of evidence in support. He declared that none of these provisions would cost a lot of money. He directed attention to an issue that OCS was also researching, "what do you do with a child who actually is succeeding, who comes out of foster care, so no longer is

entitled to this daily reimbursement rate..." He offered an example of a child successfully living in a school dorm, but who could no longer afford the cost. He allowed that the daily reimbursement rate could not be paid as they were no longer in custody, and yet we wanted them to succeed. He shared that a provision, since removed, in the proposed bill would have allowed payment up to the daily reimbursement rate to support youth to stay in dorms for job training or higher education. As this provision had a fiscal note of more than \$2 million, the provision had been removed, although OCS was continuing to seek a solution. He reminded the committee that there were 2400 foster youth not living with their families, and they were among the most vulnerable children in the state.

[HB 27 was held over.]

[5:05:07 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 5:05 p.m.