

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

January 26, 2023

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator James Kaufman, Vice Chair
Senator Löki Tobin
Senator Forrest Dunbar

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Cathy Giessel

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

KIM KOVOL, Acting Commissioner
Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided an overview on the Alaska Department of Family and Community Services

MARIAN SWEET, Assistant Commissioner
Department of Family and Community Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions concerning the Office of Children's Services during the overview of the Department of Family and Community Services.

CLINTON LASLEY, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Family and Community Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information on Designated Evaluation and Treatment Facilities during the overview of the Department of Family and Community Services.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:15 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Dunbar, Tobin, Kaufman, and Chair Wilson.

OVERVIEW

DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

[3:30:40 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced the consideration of an overview by the Department of Family and Community Services.

[3:31:40 PM](#)

KIM KOVOL, Acting Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), Anchorage, Alaska, stated that she is new to the commissioner position for the newly formed Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). She said she has 25 years of experience in the private sector in executive leadership, management, licensed facilities, organizational development and restructuring, logistics, and working in the human and social services realm with youth and adults. She also served as Governor Dunleavy's Special Assistant, focusing on domestic violence and sexual assault, missing and murdered indigenous persons, human and sex trafficking, homelessness, foster care, childcare, eldercare, opioids and fentanyl, and suicide prevention. She is committed to helping Alaskan families facing challenging circumstances in their lives navigate complex systems. She expressed appreciation for the support and dedication of others working at DFCS. She spoke about various hobbies she enjoys.

[3:33:31 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 2 and said the mission of DFCS is "To provide support, safety, and personal well-being for vulnerable Alaskans." She met with department leadership to discuss what the mission means and together developed a department vision and guiding principles that support each division and reinforce the department's commitment to Alaskans:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Vision
Service First

We will:

- Strengthen lives through meaningful connections with families, communities, Tribes, and providers.
- Provide safe, person-centered care with integrity and dignity to the Alaskans we serve.
- Advance an agency culture that prioritizes the well-being of our workforce.
- Mobilize innovative solutions to complex challenges

[3:34:44 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 3, an organizational chart of DFCS. She noted that directors and deputy directors are a consistent presence in each division since the department's reorganization, including leadership in the Commissioner's Office.

[3:35:11 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 4 and said DFCS's divisions are:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Commissioner's Office
Finance & Management Services
Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API)
Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)
Alaska Pioneer Homes (APH)
Office of Children's Services (OCS)

API, DJJ, APH, and OCS provide direct services available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Most department staff work directly with constituents and providers in facilities or the community.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 5 and spoke to DFCS's collaboration with DOH in 4 areas:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Complex Care

- Identifying solutions to address systemic gaps in access to care for Alaskans with complex needs

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Improving the continuum of care

- Establishing a coordinated system across departments to ensure person-centered care

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Shared IT Resources

- Developing a roadmap to separating resources

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Information Technology Debt

- Seeking contractors and modernizing systems to improve efficiency and quality of service

[3:36:59 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said that a department focusing on families and communities would encompass many priorities that ebb and flow because communities and families are unique. Her office conversed with frontline staff, supervisors, executive leadership, community partners, residents, and clients. The conversations identified four key priorities to focus on: complex care systems, tribal partnerships, the culture of DFCS, and workforce support.

[3:37:31 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL advanced to slide 7 and stated that complex care placement for youth and adults is rising. It is not a new concern, but the complexity of acute needs has magnified. All four of the department's direct service divisions find appropriate levels of care and care locations for individuals. The Commissioner's Office created a Complex Care Coordination Unit. This unit will establish a single point of contact for the department and its partners. It will be central to coordinating complex care and placement activities within DFCS's service divisions. The unit will establish a network of existing placement options for adults and youth while endeavoring to oversee long-term facility development within the state. Partnering with healthcare providers, medical centers, and clinics to expand services will take time. DFCS will work with providers across the country to support the needs of Alaskans when appropriate placement within the state is not possible.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said DFCS works with all facilities in becoming Medicaid or Third-Party payor eligible to reduce the use of Alaska's General Fund. Complex Care Systems Coordinator Makayla Viray is the first employee to hold the position and is working hard with support from DFCS's Family Coordinator Tammie Wilson. Through the Governor's FY 2024 budget, the department will continue to build on the complex care unit. It will add a complex care system coordinator, a social services associate, and a deputy director of operations.

[3:38:55 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL stated that care coordination is complex because it requires internal and external assistance. Every client's case is unique and requires thoughtful consideration and collaboration with many agencies and organizations. The goal is to prevent anyone from being institutionalized and find a family-like setting that meets the individual's everyday needs. She provided an experience from her first day as acting commissioner to demonstrate the importance of having a coordinator to eliminate redundancy and improve service efficiency. Slide 8 depicts the number of entities DFCS staff may connect to assist one individual.

[3:41:39 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL advanced to slide 9 and said that DFCS is increasing its statewide connections and outreach. It is encouraging the department's tribal liaison to lead tribal engagements by creating new relationships and connecting with long-standing partners. Department representatives attend the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Provider's Conference, and the National Indian Nations Conference. DFCS is excited about forthcoming opportunities. Each division within DFCS provides positive life-changing services to Alaskans. The staff works with families and individuals needing support, resources, and solutions. A comprehensive communication plan is being developed, including a calendar of important dates, community events, and a Facebook platform. The department is also changing the organization's internal culture by increasing efficiencies and empowering staff through mentorships.

[3:42:26 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON said the Tribal Child Welfare Compact within the Office of Children's Services (OCS) began with five tribes and expanded. He asked whether OCS plans to continue the expansion of the compact.

[3:42:50 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL responded that the Tribal Child Welfare Compact would be discussed later in the presentation.

[3:43:01 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked what Alaska plans to do if the Supreme Court reverses the decision in Haaland v. Brackeen.

[3:43:16 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that the case is currently under review with the Supreme Court. DFCS listened to the hearing in November and learned that the court would decide by June. DFCS has determined it will follow the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) until changes occur.

[3:44:09 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 10 and said divisions within DFCS provide positive life-changing services to Alaskans with 24-hour crisis response comes many challenges. Families and staff face difficult and emotional scenarios. Community and connectivity are initiatives the department is addressing. DFCS is developing a comprehensive communication plan. A calendar to document and celebrate important department and community events is on the department's website. Also, there is a Facebook page showcasing public services. Stakeholder involvement has increased statewide. The department has asked Alaskans for suggestions on optimizing their time when seeking assistance. Residents responded that they want to know what services the department offers. So, the department is sharing knowledge and information. It is tearing down barriers to efficiencies and empowering staff through mentorships.

[3:45:54 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 11 and said Governor Dunleavy's People First Initiative provided workforce stabilization incentives for the Office of Children's Services staff. Other divisions are evaluating similar programs. A department referral program to stabilize the workforce is being developed. Rural sites are offering alternate workweek agreements and flexible work schedules. Partnerships with the University of Alaska, the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, and the Child Welfare Academy are forming to foster practicum placements and internships. DFCS is applying for SkillBridge through the Department of Defense (DOD). SkillBridge continues to pay service members their salaries for up to 180 days while they receive full-time training in programs outside of the military.

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CHAIR WILSON asked if OCS still has its loan repayment program as part of its workforce innovations.

[3:47:06 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL deferred the question to Ms. Sweet.

[3:47:23 PM](#)

MARIAN SWEET, Assistant Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services, Juneau, Alaska, replied that OCS no longer has the loan repayment program. However, it is considering the Support-for-Service to Health Care Practitioners III (SHARP III) program. The program offers an option to pay off a student loan directly or receive incentive bonuses to pay off the loan.

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CHAIR WILSON commented that use by the government was not the initial intent of the SHARP program. Private entities would pay the state of Alaska to receive a tax benefit, which in turn benefited private individuals. He opined that there now would be a cost to the state. He found SHARP's development interesting and suggested the SHARP committee speak to the legislature.

[3:49:56 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 13 and stated that Heidi Hamilton is the Alaska Pioneer Homes (APH) director. Ms. Hamilton oversees 400 positions within APH. The homes provide activities of daily living, nursing services, recreational and social programs, medication assistance, dietary needs, housekeeping, and meal preparation. There are several levels of assistance offered. The division has a budget of \$1.4 million. Alaska has six homes with occupancy rates ranging from 80 - 97 percent. The Anchorage home maintained the lowest occupancy rate since 22 of its rooms are vacant for remodeling and fire safety improvements. Only 50 percent of residents in the Anchorage Pioneer Home have family living nearby. There are fewer options for elders living outside of Anchorage and Mat-Su.

CHAIR TOBIN requested that DFCS send the committee a list of deferred maintenance needs.

[3:52:23 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 15 and spoke to the successes and challenges facing Alaska Pioneer Homes:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Successes

- Completion of Complex Care Neighborhood in Anchorage
- Resident Wi-Fi installed in four homes
- Increased coordination with community providers for complex care needs
- On-line waitlist application development

Challenges

- Increasing age and needs of residents
- Increased number of elders on waitlists
- Building maintenance
 - Supply chain and workforce challenges delaying projects

[3:54:47 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR said he supported the idea of complex care neighborhoods and asked for its location in Anchorage.

[3:55:03 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL stated the complex care unit is in the Anchorage Pioneer Home on the fourth floor.

SENATOR DUNBAR said he thought she was referring to small homes in a neighborhood.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL clarified that wings within APH buildings have neighborhood names.

[3:55:36 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that as a child in Cordova he recalls visiting a care facility. He asked whether an Alaska Pioneer Home was ever located in Cordova.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL stated her belief that it was not part of the state system.

[3:56:04 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked for the wait time for entry into a home once a person is on the active list.

[3:56:28 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said the answer would depend on the facility's location so the data would be sent to the committee. She commented that the age of people moving to the active waitlist has increased and it is taking longer to enter an APH facility.

[3:57:09 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked if the rate increase schedule passed by the legislature a couple of years ago meets pioneer home expectations.

[3:57:35 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL deferred the question to Mr. Lasley.

[3:57:40 PM](#)

CLINTON LASLEY, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services, Juneau, Alaska, stated the rate increase went into effect in 2021. It has done well. The pioneer home waitlist has continued to grow. The active waitlist numbers among the various homes range between 60 and 115. There was a concern when the rate increase went into effect that there would be a downturn in the number of individuals applying to the waitlists. The monetary increases passed by legislation have kept pace with the cost-of-living increases.

[3:58:53 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked how the new Social Security increase has affected the percentage of change to residents' rates.

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MR. LASLEY answered that the amount varies based on the resident and their level of care. There was an 8.5 percent rate increase through Social Security. However, APH rates are slightly higher due to fuel, transportation, and contract increases. The increase APH received was significant and is keeping pace with inflation so that services can continue to be received.

[4:00:14 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 16 and stated that Chief Executive Officer Scott York has led the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) since 2020. He has four years of behavioral health and corporate leadership experience. There are five inpatient units with 80 licensed beds and 323 full-time positions at API. API is currently the only location within Alaska that provides competency restoration treatment for individuals the court finds to be incompetent to stand trial. Its budget for FY 23 is over \$58 million. As of January 26, 2023, API's census is 74, the highest since 2019. API has begun developing a comprehensive plan to ensure it meets Alaska's needs in continual care. Community and jail-based outpatient competency restoration programs are developing partnerships with the Department of Corrections.

[4:01:35 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 18 and stated some of API's successes:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Chilkat Adolescent Unit reopened May 2021
- Reopening of the Denali Unit as a dedicated service location for adults with neurocognitive disabilities
 - Patient on staff assaults in our adult population decreased 55% in past year
- Becoming a teaching hospital
 - Clinical site for medical students, nursing students, and recent reinstatement into the Alaska Psychology Internship

[4:02:43 PM](#)

MR. LASLEY turned to slide 19 and said that during the Department of Health and Social Services' bifurcation, most of what moved to the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) was "pick and place." DFCS acquired some services from the Division of Behavioral Health by Executive Order 121. The services included:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Designated Evaluation and Treatment Facilities (DET)

- Bartlett Regional Hospital - 12 beds
- Fairbanks Memorial Hospital - 20 beds
- Mat-Su Regional Hospital - 16 beds

Designated Evaluation and Stabilization (DES)

- Ketchikan Medical Center

Disproportionate Share Hospital Funding (DSH)

Secure Patient Transport Program

The work of these services aligned with the divisions assigned to DFCS. In 2020 Ashley Christopherson was named the Designated Evaluation, Stabilization, and Treatment Coordinator. Mr. Lasley likened the position to that of an air traffic controller who watches over individuals in crisis throughout the system to ensure that none are languishing in emergency rooms or correction facilities. Instead, individuals are placed into an appropriate facility as quickly as possible.

MR. LASLEY said the state receives an annual disproportionate share hospital federal allotment to cover the cost of DSH hospitals that serve a significantly disproportionate number of under resourced individuals. The funding helps reimburse hospitals that meet the criteria and perform the evaluation, stabilization, and treatment services for the state.

Designated facilities provide psychiatric inpatient services for individuals experiencing a psychiatric crisis who are on a voluntary or involuntary hold. Designated evaluation and treatment facilities provide both psychiatric evaluation and treatment, while designated evaluation and stabilization centers only provide evaluation and stabilization services. State hospital-designated facilities provide critical service and a continuum of care for Alaskans by supplying an additional 40 beds for evaluation and treatment services. Some individuals requiring these services need secure transport to deliver them to a facility safely. DFCS staff coordinate transportation as needed. The budget for this component that moved to DFCS is approximately \$14.5 million.

[4:05:44 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked that funding for the share hospital fund be clarified.

[4:06:01 PM](#)

MR. LASLEY replied that it is federal funding that was initially in the Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Behavioral Health. It is pass-through funding. The funding was moved to the new Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) to manage the contracts. There are a variety of DET and DES facilities in hospitals across the state that DFCS works with listed on slide 19. DFCS also has agreements with other hospitals in Alaska. Out of the \$14.5 million, DFCS provides about \$7 million to hospitals to support individuals in crisis.

[4:06:55 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked that eligibility requirements for DSH funding be shared.

[4:07:09 PM](#)

MR. LASLEY stated he would provide the committee with the eligibility requirements for DSH funding.

[4:07:31 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON stated the information could be useful when the committee holds another hearing on the Certificate of Need. He

said Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) had undergone significant changes since 2019 when it was at risk of losing accreditation through the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS). He asked for an update on API.

[4:08:08 PM](#)

MR. LASLEY replied that the API's census score speaks to the stabilization it has achieved due to the great work of its employees. Since 2018 when the hospital was in crisis, many systems have been put in place to improve daily operations at the hospital. An active governing board meets monthly and works directly with the hospital's leadership. CMS visits the hospital, but there have been no significant findings.

[4:09:08 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 20 and said Kim Guay has worked for the Office of Children's Services (OCS) for 22 years and has been the director since 2021. The agency is primarily responsible for ensuring the safety of Alaska's children. It investigates child abuse and neglect reports and administers the foster care system. OCS has 21 offices in five regions statewide. The locations of the main offices are Anchorage, Wasilla, Bethel, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Smaller offices in areas such as Kenai, Saint Mary's, Utqiagvik, and Sitka exist. OCS has over 600 positions and a budget of nearly \$200 million.

[4:10:08 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN said that in 2012 she participated in an insightful program called Knowing Who You Are. She said she recognizes that children with foster parents may not have the same ethnic identity. Children need to feel seen and heard. Parents need the support of resources. The program helped fulfill these needs but has not been offered for two years. She asked for an update on the program.

[4:11:05 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said she would provide the committee with a list of programs the department oversees.

[4:11:35 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 21 and said the Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact began in 2017. The 32nd legislature passed House Bill 184, which codified it. She thanked the legislature for passing an operating budget last year that included an amendment to increase the budget for this compact. Along with the increased funding that Governor Dunleavy pledged,

the budget for the compact went from \$1.6 million to \$5 million. Negotiated funding emphasized prevention to address the disproportionate number of Alaskan Native children who come into state custody. Eighteen cosigners, representing 170 tribes, share the funding. Cosigners can be creative and innovative in utilizing prevention funds. For example, cosigners can use these funds to offer the Positive Indian Parenting classes, which include culturally relevant components, child-rearing practices, strength-based cultural approaches to passing down parenting skills, traditional behavior management, and a support group, all while engaging in cultural and healing activities and crafts.

[4:12:48 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON recalled that another portion of the compact focused on kinship care placement. He asked that information about kinship placement be shared with the committee since it is less traumatizing for a child and more cost-effective for the state.

[4:13:22 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied she would provide the information to the committee.

[4:13:28 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 22 and stated that Governor Dunleavy's People's First Initiative included several items to support the efforts of OCS in managing the secondary trauma that its frontline staff experience. The division has a mental health clinician to support employee well-being and provide critical incident debriefing. OCS offers a variety of positions and has created 26 positions that are undergoing recruitment. Retention incentives and the field training compensation program are in the final stages of approval with the Department of Administration.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said the Alaska Impact Alliance is a coalition of community, partners, tribes, and the state focusing on child welfare and prevention work, which the Alliance facilitates. Governor Dunleavy's initiative supports older foster youth ages 18 to 21 to help them as they begin their adult lives. The initiative bolsters support for foster care providers who take in children with complex needs. The funding increases vocational opportunities and financial assistance for housing, transportation, and other identified needs.

[4:14:45 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 23 and stated that OCS is starting to see a decrease following a rapid increase in case-carrying staff turnover from late 2019 through 2021. The turnover rate for case-carrying staff decreased from 59.4 to 55.5 percent. OCS still needs to address the high vacancy rates for case-carrying positions. Stability in the workforce at OCS means consistency for families. House Bill 151, enacted in 2018, requires caseloads to be assigned based on the number of months an employee has worked for OCS:

<u>Months</u>	<u>Maximum Caseload</u>
0-3	6
4-6	12
6+	13

However, due to vacancies from turnover, the statutory requirements are difficult to achieve for case workers past their six months of employment. Some regions have higher caseloads than others, which means more seasoned caseworkers have caseloads higher than 13. It is challenging for smaller offices to balance caseloads. OCS consistently evaluates how to reduce the burden on frontline workers, including centralizing administrative functions and utilizing Letters of Agreement for alternative and flexible work schedules.

[4:16:24 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR commented that 55 percent turnover is shockingly high, rendering a workforce almost nonfunctioning. He recognizes the difficulty of the environment. He asked what solutions to lowering the turnover rate staff suggested. He opined that the compensation package does not match employees' stress levels.

[4:17:38 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that DFCS has constant dialog and feedback with frontline staff. There are many reasons for the high turnover. Staff can commute by plane to accommodate them for the high cost of housing in rural areas. However, commuting is tiring, and some communities prefer to have a caseworker who lives in the area. In Bethel, transportation to one outlying village is by a ramshackle skiff, but it is faster than flying. The department tries to address the needs of the community and staff. For seven months, the department has been working on creating retention bonuses and will be able to offer them soon. Fewer people with social service degrees or like service are applying for positions with the department. Thirty percent of current frontline staff do not have a social services degree. DFCS is hopeful that its partnership with UAA will

increase that percentage. There are opportunities, but they can not happen fast enough to meet the need. Labor shortages and recruitment are problems that the nation is facing.

[4:21:20 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN echoed Senator Dunbar's comment on high turnover. However, it is exciting to see the implementation of opportunities and solutions that were put forth by past career staff. Progress is on the horizon.

[4:22:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON stated that when he began in 2017-2018, the legislature passed House Bill 151 by former Representative Les Gara. A recently released report on House Bill 151 discusses workforce caseloads and high turnover. A lot of money has gone into fixing issues that OCS faces. He stated he has a lot of concerns and that there will be a joint presentation on February 14th by the Citizens Review Panel, and OCS will be able to reply to the review.

CHAIR WILSON opined that there are culture problems within Alaska's workforce. He asked how DFCS measures culture change.

[4:24:14 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL stated she had been a newly formed department commissioner for 210 days and did not have an answer. She opined that leadership has stayed with the department and is willing to work to improve the issues that it is facing. She has traveled statewide listening to staff, clients, and partners' concerns and is ready to address the problems and support individuals. She looks forward to the future when she reports to the committee that retention rates are up, there are no vacancies, staff are satisfied, and fewer children are in the state's legal care.

[4:26:08 PM](#)

SENATOR KAUFMAN asked for an overview of how deployment stages for needed improvements and initiatives are managed.

[4:26:49 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that complex care had been DFCS's biggest kickoff. She recounted a hectic event on her first day as commissioner that led to addressing agency communication. She stated that at the Improving Lives Conference, her keynote speech centered on a child that utilized social service programs for 17 years and a mother that struggled to navigate the system to help her child. She declared she is

passionate about improving the department because that child is her son.

[4:29:19 PM](#)

SENATOR KAUFMAN asked if the department has a strategic management plan with a timetable for development and deployment.

[4:29:50 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that the department had established guiding principles and settled on a vision. The principles will be shared with staff and be a part of daily work. The department hopes to develop one, three, five, and ten-year strategic plans while being creative with its budget.

[4:30:30 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL moved to slide 24 and said Director Shannon Dilley has worked for the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) for 25 years and provided information about DJJ as follows:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission:

- Hold juvenile offenders accountable for their behavior.
- Promote the safety and restoration of victims and communities.
- Assist offenders and their families in developing skills to prevent crime.

Facilities / Offices / Staff:

- 6 Youth Facilities
- 13 Probation Offices
- 426 Full Time Positions

FY2023 Budget: \$60,950.5

[4:31:55 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL turned to slide 25 and said critical staffing shortages forced DJJ to temporarily combine the detention and treatment units at Johnson Youth Center in Juneau and the Fairbanks Youth Facility in 2022. One in six DJJ facility positions is vacant. The staff have handled challenges well. They continue to prioritize and provide innovative, evidenced-based services for youth.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said DJJ has taken several steps to address staffing challenges, including a salary study for Juvenile Justice Officers that started in January 2023. Internal workgroups focus on recruitment strategies, agency culture, and other improvement efforts. Program improvements include specialized treatment units for females, violent offenders, substance abuse, and neurobehavioral units. These programs address the individualized needs of the youth in Alaska's care.

[4:32:53 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL advanced to slide 26 and expressed appreciation to Senator Wilson and his colleagues for the passage of HB 105 that went into effect July 1, 2021. House Bill 105 was an omnibus piece of legislation that updated the definition of DJJ staff and facilities and brought Alaska into compliance with federal law related to minors waived into the adult justice system. Previously minors 16 or older arrested for certain serious crimes were sent directly to adult jail. Adult facilities have difficulty managing these youth, often housing them in segregation units. Since the implementation of House Bill 105, 15 minors facing adult criminal charges have been held in DJJ facilities pending the outcome of their criminal cases or upon reaching the age of 18. Two waived minors are housed in DJJ facilities at this time. DFCS appreciates its partnerships with the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Corrections in this effort.

[4:33:58 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked if the closing of the DJJ facility in Nome has impacted villages in the surrounding area and where Nome youth are housed.

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that closing facilities and services impacts communities. Youths are transported to other facilities depending on charges, treatment plans, and staffing levels.

[4:34:59 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL said she brings a heart of service to the commissioner position. She has connected with staff, partners, and constituents at sites throughout Alaska. She looks forward to collaborating with current partners and establishing new ones. She is grateful for resilient employees who help Alaskans address very stressful and complex situations. She noted it is humbling to listen to individuals express both accolades and criticisms as DFCS explores solutions that are in the best interests of individuals.

[4:37:08 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked for a summary of any information technology (IT) challenges DFCS may be experiencing following the bifurcation of the Health and Social Services Department.

[4:37:42 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that DFCS is facing technology challenges. Like DOH, DFCS faces a technology debt with legacy issues that need addressing. OCS is finishing a study of its Online Resource for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) system. There are opportunities for matching federal and state funds to offset the cost of replacing the system. The new system must be able to communicate with partner systems to avoid delays in services to constituents. DFCS and DOH are working together to prioritize needs as implementations begin.

[4:39:21 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated he appreciates DFCS's push to offer online applications. IT upgrades are expensive but crucial.

[4:40:14 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN stated that keeping children in their communities is important to her, and she appreciates the department's work.

[4:41:05 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON thanked DFCS for the update. He stated the services the department provides are crucial and should be supported.

[4:43:03 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wilson adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 4:43 p.m.