

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 7, 2024

3:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Mike Prax, Chair
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Vice Chair
Representative Jesse Sumner
Representative Zack Fields
Representative Genevieve Mina

SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator James Kaufman, Vice Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative CJ McCormick
Representative Dan Saddler

SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Löki Tobin
Senator Forrest Dunbar

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL AND OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

RETCHENDA GEORGE-BETTISWORTH, DSW, MSW, Chair
Alaska Citizens Review Panel
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Alaska Citizen Review Panel.

KIM GUAY, Director
Office of Children's Services
Department of Family & Community Services
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Office of Children's Services.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:33:39 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON called the joint meeting of the House and Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committees to order at 3:33 p.m. He announced the Senators present, then passed the gavel to Chair Prax. Representatives Mina and Prax and Senators Giesel, Kaufman, and Wilson were present at the call to order. Representatives Fields, Sumner, and Ruffridge arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION(S): Alaska Citizen Review Panel and Offices of Children's Services

[3:35:15 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the only order of business would be presentations on the Alaska Citizen Review Panel and the Office of Children's Services.

[3:35:38 PM](#)

RETCHENDA GEORGE-BETTISWORTH, DSW, MSW, Chair, Alaska Citizens Review Panel, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Alaska Citizen Review Panel [hard copy included in the committee packet]. Congress created the Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) as part of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to help child protection systems be more responsive to community needs. A CRP is a mechanism for public participation in child protection. Federal mandates direct CRPs to examine policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies and conduct public outreach and recommendations. The

state mandate, AS 47.14.205, directs the state panel to evaluate the extent to which the department is effectively carrying out its responsibilities. Alaska CRP (ACRP) was formed in 2002. Membership is voluntary and is expected to reflect the diversity of the state. The ACRP has three primary functions: evaluating policies and procedures for consistency and compliance with state and federal laws; public outreach to gather feedback; and advocacy. ACRP is independent of the Office of Children's Services (OCS), but both entities work collaboratively to target specific goals in relation to system challenges in Alaska's child welfare system. ACRP's long range plan encapsulates the following enduring priorities: reciprocal engagement; public outreach; collaborative relationship with OCS; CRP education development; and healthy CPS system. The 2022-2023 CRP round table found that frontline workers do not feel valued; wellness time was not given; workers must work outside their scope; there is a need for increased access to mental health services; and there is a perceived lack of follow-through on promised changes. Supervisors and managers report a lack of staff as their biggest challenge; HR delays prevent them from hiring qualified applicants; they need to be considered in worker wellness and retention; and unreliable technology and a lack of resources adds to the workload. The 2022-2023 annual report recommendations for a healthy CPS system include the following: dedicated agency improvement team and workplace culture assessment; improved communication; increased transparency; integration of culturally relevant practices; employee advocacy groups; assessed benefits and bonuses structure; technology improvements; and management training. In Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 24), ACRP plans to utilize OCS staff surveys to identify advocacy opportunities around retention, recruitment, and staff well-being; assess OCS intake policies and procedures, and the practices around referrals to support services; and assess PCS hiring practices.

[3:52:37 PM](#)

GEORGE-BETTISWORTH, PhD, in response to a series of committee questions, stated that money should be put towards technology to improve those systems within OCS; OCS is working toward meeting some of the recommendations identified in the annual report; 2022-2023 recommendations focused on technology and the integration of culturally relevant practices to create a more holistic assessment; the inability to access behavioral health services impacts the overall wellbeing of children; Alaska lacks an adequate workforce to meet the state's behavioral health needs; the negative impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as

higher rates of anxiety and depression, continue to be seen; a healthy workforce, or lack thereof, negatively impacts children and their safety; better training practices, preparation, incentivization and recognition through better pay may help with OCS turnover.

[4:12:02 PM](#)

KIM GUAY, Director, Office of Children's Services (OCS), Department of Family & Community Services (DFCS), gave a PowerPoint presentation on OCS's response to the 2022-2023 ACRP report [hard copy included in the committee packet]. The rate of turnover in OCS has continued to increase since 2020, which is costly, creates instability for children in care and their families, and impacts agency morale. Last year, OCS adopted the U.S. Surgeon General's framework for workplace mental health and wellbeing. Centered on worker voice and equity, the framework has five essential branches that are grounded in human needs: protection from harm, opportunity for growth, mattering at work, work-life harmony, and connection/community. In response to committee questions, she said OCS is actively trying to listen to its workforce with fireside chats and job shadowing; positive reinforcement is critical for "mattering at work," however, sometimes its not enough to balance the overwhelm from the workload and the difficulty of the work itself; the workforce has changed dramatically in recent years, as fewer applicants have college degrees and fewer are applying overall; OCS is trying to figure out how much training to invest, given that the average length of stay of a welfare worker in the U.S. is 18 months; if workers make it to two years, they usually stay with the organization; OCS identified certain competencies related to human connection that are screened for when hiring; two years ago, OCS shifted its tribal compact funding towards prevention activities with the ultimate goal of keeping Alaska Native children out of the system.

[4:45:19 PM](#)

MS. GUAY resumed the presentation and addressed the 2023 OCS annual staff survey. Staff are requesting the following: pay increases; technology improvements; focus on mental health; a streamlined Online Resource for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) process; onboarding support; investing in training; adjusted on-call hours; retention bonuses; and more communication from supervisors. The ORCA system was launched in 2004 and encompasses the division's fiscal system, case management, and foster parent payments. The system is antiquated and will

require an estimated \$50 million update, of which 50 percent would be funded by the federal government. OCS is actively working on workplace communication by implementing its "fireside chats," a return to in-office work, a newsletter, regional staff meetings, and a leadership summit on trainings. In response to a series of committee questions, she acknowledged that OCS is inherently reactionary. The answer, she said, is not child protection, its prevention. OCS struggles with child placement and a lack of available foster homes, in addition to insufficient mental health providers. She further highlighted the disproportionate number of Alaska Native children in state care and emphasized the importance of OCS's work with tribes.

[5:03:30 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 5:03 p.m.