

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 30, 2025

3:17 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Genevieve Mina, Chair  
Representative Andrew Gray  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Donna Mears  
Representative Mike Prax  
Representative Justin Ruffridge  
Representative Rebecca Schwanke

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

KIM KOVOL, Commissioner  
Department of Family & Community Services  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Department of Family and Community Services overview.

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Department of Family and Community Services overview.

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the Department of Family and Community Services overview.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:17:02 PM](#)

**CHAIR GENEVIEVE MINA** called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:17 p.m. Representatives Schwanke, Mears, Gray, Prax, Fields, and Mina were present at the call to order. Representative Ruffridge arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**OVERVIEW: Department of Family and Community Services**

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CHAIR MINA announced that the only order of business would be the Department of Family and Community Services overview.

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The committee took an at-ease from 3:18 p.m. to 3:19 p.m.

[3:19:27 PM](#)

KIM KOVOL, Commissioner, Department of Family & Community Services, as co-presenter, began a PowerPoint [hard copy included in the committee file] on slide 1, an introduction to the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). She said DFCS was founded on July 1, 2022, by Executive Order 121 and spoke to the care that DFCS provides to Alaskans. She highlighted Alaska Pioneer Homes and its mission as a state entity. She also discussed the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) and its goals as an institute.

[3:23:17 PM](#)

CLINTON LASLEY, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Family & Community Services, as co-presenter of the Department of Family and Community Services overview, described the work of the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), slide 7. He emphasized the vast scope of communities that DJJ serves. In response to Representative Prax, he noted that information regarding the "restorative justice model" can be found on the DFCS website.

[3:25:53 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER KOVOL, in response to Representative Schwanke, spoke about the capacity of both API and the Pioneer Homes. To Representative Gray's observation of the high budget for the Pioneer Homes, she explained that the Pioneer Homes deals with elders who need immediate care and assistance, which is associated with an increased level of staffing and more equipment. She also shared those categories that influence the wait list for the Pioneer Homes: the number of people seeking to use each home, the location of each home, and the capacity of each home.

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MR. LASLEY, in response to Representative Gray, acknowledged that the Fairbanks Pioneer Home does not meet the needs of the elders who utilize it and said that DFCS has considered models for a veterans' home.

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MR. LASLEY resumed the overview. He highlighted the Coordinated Health and Complex Care Unit, slide 9, that was developed within DFCS. He explained that the unit works across all four divisions of the department, allowing focus toward improving healthcare systems. He responded to questions from Chair Mina and Representative Gray. He noted that the department has a complex care committee that works with the Department of Health (DOH), with the goal of making system-level improvements, and the committee must bring in more community providers. He suggested that the building of a complex residential home would be a step in the right direction toward addressing foster children experiencing chronic behavioral health issues after being moved multiple times. He emphasized that homes are needed that address specific needs.

COMMISSIONER KOVAL added that DFCS has had many conversations with partners around Alaska in looking to address the need for behavioral health care in Alaska. She emphasized that these services require much collaboration with community partners.

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DEPUTY COMMISSIONER LASLEY resumed the overview. He displayed a graphic on slide 10 that highlighted the various needs of someone seeking services from DFCS.

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COMMISSIONER KOVAL discussed the fundamental guiding principles of DFCS, slide 11. She emphasized the work that the department does to improve the lives of those who utilize the services that it offers, in addition to the important partnerships DFCS fosters with other community and local agencies. She highlighted the department's ability to provide safe, person-centered, social-emotional care.

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MR. LASLEY covered the next few slides and highlighted the various ways that DFCS has worked to improve its work culture and his desire to take care of the employees in his department. He said DFCS has implemented town hall gatherings to find out how it can better serve staff and discover the unique challenges that arise. He emphasized that he is working to increase training, to reduce turnover rates, and to improve recruitment of staff. In response to Representative Gray, he related that all 10 beds at API are occupied daily, and there is a waitlist for API's services. He continued to slide 16 to list a series of ongoing improvement initiatives currently underway at DFCS.

[3:52:12 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER KOVAL listed a series of future improvement opportunities across Alaska that the DFCS is looking to undertake in the coming years, slide 17. She said she hopes to increase foster home recruitment. In response to Representative Gray, she gave some statistics related to providers and foster family homes.

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KIM GUAY, Director, Office of Children's Services, Department of Family & Community Services, in response to a question from Representative Gray regarding an emergency placement stipend for temporary placements, stated there are currently emergency homes being paid at the current rate, but there may be some regulation change in the future.

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COMMISSIONER KOVAL, in response to a line of questions from Representative Prax, said DFCS would like to have foster families available from different cultures and backgrounds, and

a larger number of families should bring more variety. She emphasized the many pieces to this puzzle and specified there is a difference between treatment foster homes and regular foster homes. She commended Representative Prax for his willingness to help.

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COMMISSIONER KOVAL responded to questions from Representative Ruffridge. Regarding the effect of the base rate for foster parents on recruitment and retention, she said that the number of foster parents has increased but DFCS will have a better understanding of the reasons for this increase at the end of the year through its annual report. She noted there are multiple pilot programs occurring for transitional youths at different points in their foster care experience.

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COMMISSIONER KOVAL responded to questions from Representative Fields. Regarding recommendations from a December ombudsman report, she stated that DFCS met with the Ombudsman in September, where the department explained the improvements that it was already implementing. She explained that these improvements were then included in the report as further recommendations. Regarding Medicaid waiver services, she noted there are different teams that work with youth and partner with DOH to ensure enrollment is occurring.

MR. LASLEY, regarding the issue of security, acknowledged that there have been many instances where DFCS has been threatened by community members. He said the department is providing contracted security guards to protect the safety of DFCS staff. He said DFCS has not yet considered hiring security guards from within the department, but emphasized the extra security that comes from hiring outside the department.

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REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE thanked the members from DFCS and asked the department to consider where there may be opportunities for the Alaska State Legislature to help connect DFCS to tribal entities and leverage some of the resources available through tribal health partners.

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MR. LASLEY responded to Representative Gray. Regarding capacity within Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) facilities, he noted that the McLaughlin Youth Center in Representative Gray's district remains at full capacity at nearly all times. He discussed how DFCS has attempted to move funds to better assist youth facilities. He added that most youth facilities are also near full capacity. He stated that the department is trying to serve as many youths as they can in the least restrictive environments possible.

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COMMISSIONER KOVAL commented regarding the future opportunities DFCS recognizes to expand foster care, transform youth services, expand services at API, and centralize data. In response to Representative Prax, she suggested that the Alaska State Legislature could put DFCS "out of business" by improving "upstream services." She highlighted that the best support for families results from asking what is best for them rather than assuming what is best for them.

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CHAIR MINA thanked the presenters for the overview.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 4:16 p.m.