

**02/11/14  
PRESENTA-  
TION:  
ALASKA'S  
CITIZEN  
REVIEW  
PANEL**

<TARGET><BILL></BILL><SUBJECT>02-11-14 PRESENTATION  
ALASKA'S CITIZEN REVIEW  
PANEL</SUBJECT><COMM>HHSS28</COMM></TARGET>

# Alaska's Citizen Review Panel



The House Committee on Health and Social Services

State of Alaska

February 11, 2014

# Panel's mandate

“The CRP shall examine the policies, procedures, and practices of State and local agencies and where appropriate, specific cases, to evaluate the extent to which State and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their protection responsibilities.”

# Panel members

The CRP is composed of

- volunteer members
- broadly representative of the state,
- with expertise and experience in the field of child maltreatment prevention

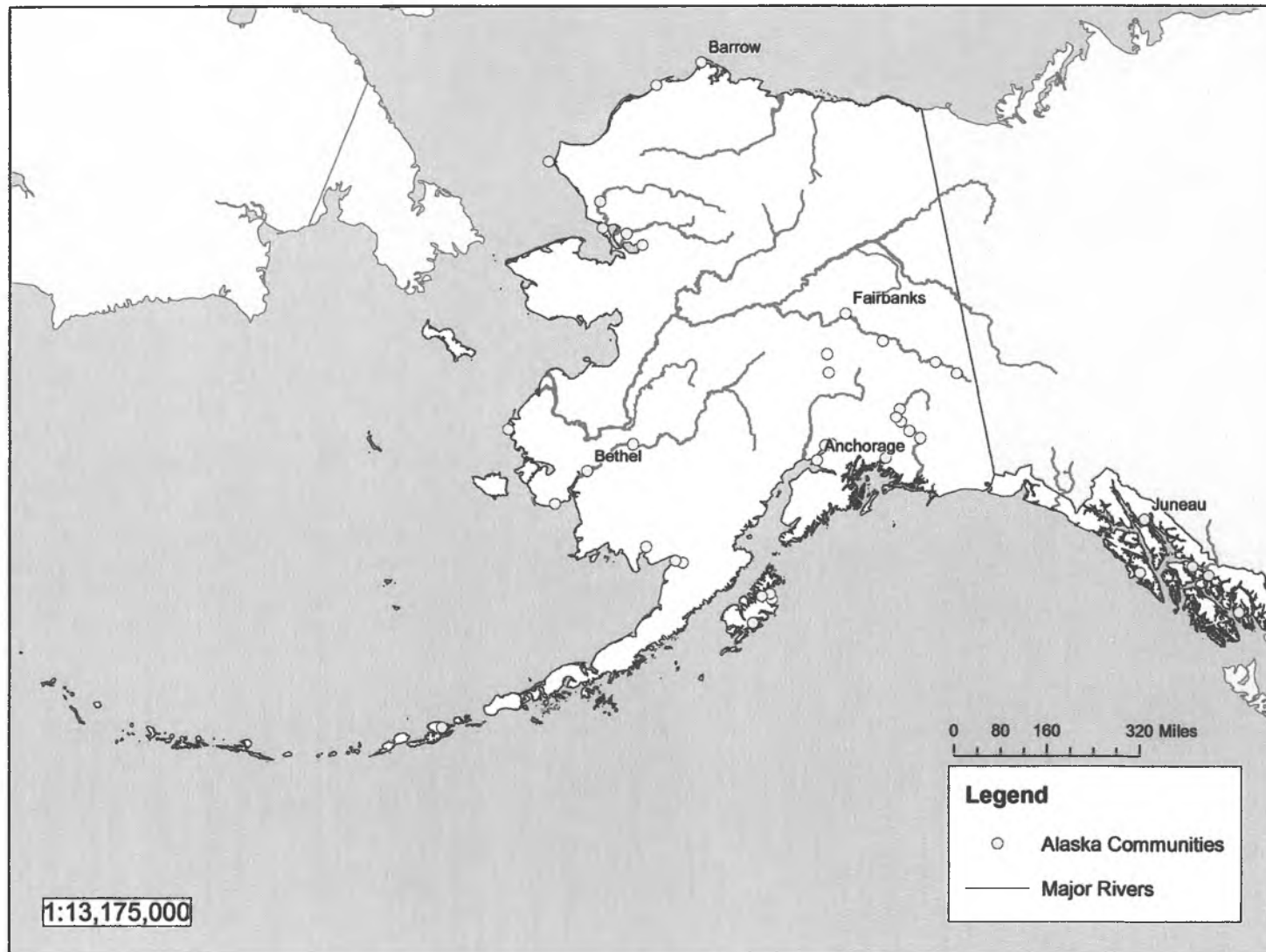
Seven members – Anchorage; Juneau; Wasilla; Haines

## Panel's annual activities

- At least two teleconferences per month
- Two site visits per year
- Annual report

Translates to approximately more than 1000 volunteer hours

# Site visits since 2002



**2012-2013**

## **Recommendations and response**

**1. Reduce staff turnover**

- A new recruiting video being developed
- Week-on; week-off scheduling
- Travel team

Afterhours work standardization remains to be done

**2. Deadlines for non-emergency petitions**

- A multi-agency team working on potential options to improve in-home program model

# 2012-2013

## Recommendations and response

### 3. Staff Western Region

- Several key functions are still served by staff in other regional offices
- Travel team contributing heavily to reduce workload

### 4. Improve data compilation efforts

- Additional training from national sources
- Access to Chapin Hall data

# 2013-2014

## Work Plan Goals

1. Screening decisions
  - Screened-in and screened-out decisions have been rising
  - Consistency in screening-decisions are of concern
  
2. In-home practice model
  - Urban vs. rural differences
  - No legal oversight
  - Extreme workloads in rural areas

# 2013-2014

## Work Plan Goals

3. Initial Assessment (IA) Backlog
  - IA backlog has been a problem in the recent past
  - Establish a file review process
  
4. Service needs assessment in Unalaska
  - Unalaska field office has been closed due to low caseloads
  - CRP is concerned about unmet needs

# 2013-2014 Site Visits

Barrow

Sept 2013

Kodiak

Jan 2014

Bethel

Jan 2014

## Major concerns identified:

- OCS-Tribal local relationships
- Regional Intake
- Continued staffing challenges
- Local and regional partnerships
- Lack of basic resources

# 2013-2014

## Current Concerns

### OCS – Tribal Relationship

- Agreement with Native Village of Barrow
- Local relationships in Kodiak and Bethel

### Regional Intake

- Regional intake is mostly disliked by local communities due to the delay in response
- Perceptions of “unfamiliarity” and “lack of confidence”

### Housing for rural OCS employees

- Lack of housing options is a debilitating factor in recruiting and retaining OCS workers in rural areas

# 2013-2014

## Current Concerns

### In-home cases

- No consistent model for in-home cases in rural areas

### Screened-out cases

- The number of screened-out cases has been increasing while the number of screened-in cases are on the rise.

### IA Backlog

- OCS has been working on avoiding any backlog in Initial Assessments; CRP has been monitoring this effort.

# 2013-2014 Current Concerns

## OCS Budget

- OCS provides a public safety function just like Troopers
- Already challenged to meet demand
  - Horrendous case loads and too few workers
  - No budget for essential supplies
- Cuts will endanger children



[www.crpalaska.org](http://www.crpalaska.org)





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## Alaska's Citizen Review Panel

**Who:** The CRP is composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the state, including members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

- Susan Heuer, Anchorage (Chair)
- Dana Hallett, Haines
- Pat Hefley, Juneau
- Kristin Hull, Wasilla
- Steve McComb, Palmer
- Stella Schuchardt, LCSW, Fairbanks
- Diwakar Vadapalli, Ph.D., Anchorage

**What:** To provide oversight to the Office of Children's Services and gather public input on how well the child protection system is working. The Panel does this primarily by visiting different regions of the state and talking to OCS staff and partner agencies about how well the system is working. The Panel produces an annual report for OCS which is also distributed to all members of Legislature.

**Where:** Statewide! Since 2008 we're been to the following communities.

- Anchorage
- Aniak
- Barrow
- Bethel
- Cantwell
- Chitina
- Copper Center
- Delta Junction
- Dillingham
- Fairbanks
- Gakona
- Glennallen
- Healy
- Hooper Bay
- Juneau
- Kenny Lake
- Ketchikan
- King Salmon
- Kodiak
- Kwigillingok
- Naknek
- Northway
- Nuquisut
- Palmer
- Petersburg
- Point Hope
- Saint Mary's
- Sitka
- Tok
- Unalaska
- Valdez
- Wainwright
- Wasilla
- Wrangell

**When:** The Panel has been active in Alaska since 2002.

**Why:** The Citizen Review Panel is mandated by state and federal law. The Panel was created through the federal Child Abuse Prevention & Treatment Act (CAPTA); Keeping Children & Families Safe Act of 2003 and through Alaska statute Sec. 47.14.205.

**How:** The Panel receives funding from the state to operate and contracts with an outside firm for staff support.

### **CRP: Positive trends at OCS**

- OCS has increased transparency and improved relationships with partners.
- OCS has ongoing efforts to keep children in their homes. Removal is traumatic on children even when necessary, so efforts to serve families without removing the children is a positive goal.
- OCS continues to get closer to meeting requirements set forth by the federal government in the Child and Family Services Review from 2008. Progress on those issues has not compromised good performance on other measures.
- OCS is working to combat staff turnover. Scheduling of required initial training has been improved to speed new workers into carrying caseloads. OCS has created recruitment videos to help prospective workers understand what the job entails.

### **This year the CRP visited Bethel & Kotzebue**

- Bethel
- Kotzebue & three surrounding villages  
(going in April)



### **2012 CRP Recommendations**

1. That OCS take aggressive action to reduce staff turn-over. Housing is critical to retain staff in rural areas. No matter how excellent the policies and practices of OCS are, they will fail without staff to implement them.
2. That OCS establish deadlines that require non-emergency petitions to be filed allowing for supervision of the family by the continuum of legal parties without necessitating the removal of the child.
3. OCS should provide Western Region with a full complement of supportive (e.g., adoption specialist, intake supervisor, etc.) positions identical to those offered in all other regions. We support an external audit of the Wasilla OCS office
4. We encourage OCS to enhance data compilation efforts to facilitate better understanding of child welfare issues in the state and promote evidence-based practice.
  - Aligning OCS regional boundaries with established census boundaries
  - Compiling and releasing data at a regional level.



# **Alaska Citizen Review Panel**

## **2012 Annual Report**

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## Mission and Mandate

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### MISSION

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is committed to reviewing and evaluating the practices and procedures of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and in making recommendations relative to its findings to ensure the safety and the well-being of the children of Alaska.

The CRP will achieve this commitment by examining the policies and procedures of the Office of Children's Services, and collecting feedback from collaborating agencies; examining, where appropriate, specific cases; evaluating the extent to which the agency is carrying out its child protection responsibilities; and preparing and making available to the public an annual report.

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### MANDATE FOR THE GROUP

The Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) is federally mandated through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA); Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003. The CRP is also mandated through Alaska Statute Sec. 47.14.205.

"By allowing the Panels to have complete access to child protection cases, by requiring Panels to publicize their findings, and by requiring states to respond to criticisms and recommendations of the Panels, the Committee intends to subject states to public criticism and political repercussion if they fail to protect children." (United States Congress, House Report 104-081, 1995, p.1)

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### DUTIES ASSIGNED TO THE GROUP

**Summary of duties** The CRP shall examine the policies, procedures, and practices of State and local agencies and where appropriate, specific cases, to evaluate the extent to which State and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.

## CRP duties

- Evaluate OCS compliance with federal and state laws, examine policies and procedures for consistent statewide implementation, review cases with fatalities or near fatalities. The CRP shall evaluate the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under:
  1. The State Plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under 42 U.S.C. 5106a(b);
  2. Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and
  3. Any other criteria that the CRP considers important to ensuring the protection of children, including the level and efficiency of coordination of foster care and adoption programs in the state and a review of child fatalities and near fatalities.

In carrying out the responsibilities listed above, the CRP shall examine the policies, procedures, and practices of OCS, and, where appropriate, evaluate specific cases of child abuse or neglect.
- Maintain confidentiality. A person attending a CRP meeting or a CRP member or CRP staff may not make any disclosure related to information obtained during a review by the CRP. A violation is subject to a civil penalty of up to \$2,500 for each violation.
- Conduct public outreach. The CRP shall conduct public outreach and gather public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving children and family services.
- Produce an annual report. The CRP shall prepare and make available to the governor, the legislature, and the public an annual report containing a summary of its activities and recommendations for the improvement of child protection services in the state.
- Meet at least every three months. The CRP is required by law to meet every three months. Additional meetings and/or teleconferences are scheduled as needed.

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## DUTIES ASSIGNED TO OCS RELATED TO THE CRP

HSS support. The Commissioner shall, by regulation, establish policies and procedures necessary to carrying out the duties of the CRP.

- Cooperation with state panel. OCS shall provide the panel access to information on child abuse or neglect cases that is necessary for the CRP to carry out its duties.
- Report response. Not later than six months after the date on which the report is released, OCS shall submit a written response that describes whether or how

OCS will incorporate the recommendations of the CRP (where appropriate) to make *measurable* progress in improving the child protection system.

## Membership and Staff Support

**Required membership** The Panel shall be composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the state, including members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

### Current membership

Susan Heuer, Chair, Anchorage

Dana W. Hallett, Haines

Pat Hefley, Juneau

Kristin Hull, Wasilla

Steve McComb, Palmer

Stella Schuchardt, Fairbanks

Diwakar Vadapalli, Anchorage

### Former members who left the group during this reporting period

BJ Coopes, Anchorage\*

Bonnie Edmondson, North Pole

Jeanne Evans, Bethel\*

\*These members were never active. They applied, were interviewed for and joined the Panel, but then had changes in their life circumstances that prevented them from having time to participate in the Panel.

**Desired membership** The CRP would like to meet its requirement to be broadly representative of the state by widening the geographic and racial and ethnic diversity of the membership. The group is working to recruit new members from underrepresented areas of the state as well as a greater diversity of child-centered expertise and backgrounds.

**OCS liaison** Christy Lawton, Director, is the current liaison between OCS and the CRP.

**Staff support** Staff support is provided by Sylvan Robb and Nancy Lowe of Information Insights.

## Meetings and Activities

### Group meetings

August 26, 2011	Teleconference
September 16, 2011	Teleconference
October 8, 2011	In person – Anchorage
November 1, 2011	Teleconference
December 6, 2011	Teleconference
January 3, 2012	Teleconference
January 20, 2012	In person – Wasilla
January 31, 2012	Teleconference
March 9, 2012	In person – Anchorage
April 3, 2012	Teleconference
April 24, 2012	Teleconference
May 8, 2012	Teleconference
June 5, 2012	Teleconference
June 21, 2012	Teleconference

### Other activities

August 8, 2011	Teleconference with Christy Lawton, Director
August 11, 2011	Webinar: Staff attended webinar presented by National CRP Resource Center
August 23, 2011	Webinar: Panel training with OCS ORCA expert, Tim Huffman
September 14-15, 2011	Bethel: Pat Hefley, Steve McComb, and Sylvan Robb met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
October 5-6, 2011	Kenai and Soldotna: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Stella Shuchardt, and Sylvan Robb met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
October 7, 2011	Anchorage: Panel training on practice model at Child Welfare Academy by Tammy Sandoval
October 31, 2011	Teleconference: Susan Heuer and Sylvan Robb met with research staff from the Ombudsman's Office

	staff and partnering agencies
November 8, 2011	Teleconference with Christy Lawton, Director
November 21, 2011	Fairbanks: Kristin Hull, Stella Schuchardt, and Sylvan Robb conducted file review of in-home cases with Kim Guay of OCS
January 18-19, 2012	Palmer and Wasilla: Panel members met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
February 6, 2012	Juneau: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Pat Hefley, and Sylvan Robb met with Senator John Coghill and staffer Rynnieva Moss and Representative Herron
February 6, 2012	Juneau: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Pat Hefley, and Sylvan Robb testified before Senate Health and Social Services Committee
February 7, 2012	Juneau: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Pat Hefley, and Sylvan Robb met with Speaker Chenault and Representative Hawker and Representative Gara
February 7, 2012	Juneau: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Pat Hefley, and Sylvan Robb testified before House Health and Social Services Committee
February 8, 2011	Juneau: Susan Heuer, Dana Hallett, Pat Hefley and Sylvan Robb met with William Streur, Commissioner of HSS, Mike Lesman, Governor's Office, and Christy Lawton, Director
March 7, 2012	St. Mary's: Steve McComb and Kristin Hull met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
March 7, 2012	Hooper Bay: Stella Schuchardt and Pat Hefley met with partnering agencies
March 7, 2012	Bethel: Susan Heuer and Sylvan Robb met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
March 8, 2012	Bethel: Panel met with local OCS staff and partnering agencies
March 22, 2012	Teleconference with Christy Lawton, Director and Travis Erickson, Program Administrator
April 10, 2012	Teleconference with Christy Lawton, Director
April 18, 2012	Teleconference with Christy Lawton, Director

April 19, 2012	Wasilla: Kristin Hull and Steve McComb with several members of the Wasilla OCS office staff
June 5, 2012	Teleconference with Travis Erickson, Program Administrator and Michael Isom, Western Region CSM

### Annual activities

Although the CRP was formed in May 2002, the group has been active and functional only since 2004. This has been another very active year for the Panel. While the group met face to face just three times this year, it held 11 regular teleconferences and seven additional teleconferences with guests in attendance. The Panel conducted two site visits in the Bethel region (one of which included a trip to two regional villages), one to the Palmer/Wasilla area, and one to Kenai/Soldotna. A subset of the Panel traveled to Juneau to present to the Senate and House Health and Social Services Committees and meet with legislators and other key personnel in Juneau. Additionally the Panel conducted its first file review in Fairbanks.

This year also included a great deal of training. The entire Panel attended a webinar on OCS' data system, ORCA and a full day of training at the Child Welfare Academy on OCS' current practice model. In January one Panel member, Stella Schuchardt, attended half of SKILS training that new OCS workers attended. Panel staff also attended a webinar conducted by the National CRP Resource Center.

This has been another transition year for the Panel's membership. One member left the Panel after years of service. Two new members were added this year that bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the Panel. Pat Hefley is retired from his position as Deputy Director of the Department of Health and Social Services. Diwakar Vadapalli is a professor at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at UAA who used worked as an ICWA worker in Sleetmute for several years. This year the Panel also successfully recruited two additional members, but both experienced changes in circumstances that didn't allow them the time to actively participate in the Panel.

We conducted three major regional site reviews this year. In October, we visited Kenai and Soldotna marking the first time the Panel has visited communities on the Kenai Peninsula. In January, we visited Palmer and Wasilla. We especially wanted to go and see firsthand the impact of the Compression Planning conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in October. In March we traveled to Bethel and two villages in that region—St. Mary's and Hooper Bay. Two Panel members and staff also visited Bethel in September for a short review.

We collected a great deal of regional data personally through these community site visits. We interviewed local OCS staff and staff from the following types of partnering

agencies regarding what is working and what needs improvement in their relationship with OCS and how we can help facilitate those efforts.

- Child advocacy center staff
- Counseling center staff
- District attorneys
- Foster parents
- Guardians ad litem
- Health aides and public health nurses
- Health clinic staff
- ICWA workers
- Judges and court personnel
- Local police department officers and supervisors
- Municipal representatives
- OCS staff at all levels
- School principals, teachers, nurses and counselors
- State troopers
- Tribal representatives

As part of our public outreach we presented testimony to the Alaska Senate and House Health and Social Services Committee about our activities and recommendations. While in Juneau we also met with the Commissioner of Health and Social Services, William Streur and numerous individual legislators. We also continue to maintain our website for public outreach at [www.crpalaska.org](http://www.crpalaska.org).

As more people become aware of our existence we receive more calls from dissatisfied citizens. As in the past, we have informed citizens that we do not intervene in individual cases, but encourage people to avail themselves of either the OCS grievance process or to open a case with the Ombudsman's Office. At their invitation, we had a teleconference with a staffer from the Ombudsman's Office to discuss OCS related cases. When we are aware of cases, however, we do try to monitor complaints with an eye out for patterns of concerns and problems.

As was the case last year as well, rather than branching out into new regions of the state, this year the Panel tried to remain focused on areas we have previously visited that we felt still merited our attention: Bethel and Palmer/Wasilla.

Last year we recommended that OCS improve the prominence of the telephone number to report child abuse in telephone books around the state. Our understanding is that this is in the works and will be reflected as new directories are published. We look forward to seeing those changes.

Director Christy Lawton has been our OCS liaison for the entire year. We have been pleased with the direct communication and access this affords us. Due to Ms. Lawton's long tenure with OCS, the Panel had an existing relationship with her. She has been open and forthcoming in her dealings with the Panel thus far. We look forward to continuing to work with her to improve child protection in Alaska in the coming year.

Susan Heuer continues to serve as chair of the Panel. We will elect a new vice-chair at our next meeting; the position is currently vacant.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are presented in priority order.

### **Recommendation 1: That OCS take aggressive action to reduce staff turn-over.**

In 2011 the turn-over rate for OCS staff was 34%. The mean rate since 2004 was 34.6%; there were some fluctuations, but the rate has held quite steady over the last eight years. OCS has a target turn-over rate of 20%. We know OCS has made efforts to address this problem. However, in eight years no progress has been made. Clearly a new and creative strategic plan is called for that would get at the root of the problem and address it.

Having this high a turn-over rate makes everything else OCS is trying to accomplish that much more challenging. Each year one-third of the workers are new. There is a lot to learn on this job and experience is invaluable. Additionally, having such a high turn-over rate means the agency is rarely fully staffed. Until new staff are hired, the workload on remaining employees increases. Even after a worker is hired, the time it can take for that individual to wait to attend SKILS plus five weeks it takes for SKILS to be completed can add up to four to six months. Every line worker lost disrupts the office they worked in for close to a year before their replacement is hired, trained, and experienced enough to carry a full case load. In single worker offices, turn-over causes a huge rip in the fabric of child safety until the next worker is in place. Turn-over also causes there to be multiple workers on a case, which either means workers need to start over at the beginning of a case, or worse, the new worker doesn't have time to start at the beginning and proceeds without a full understanding of the case.

The Panel has suggested that funding be allocated so that OCS may offer decent housing as a recruiting and retention tool in rural communities where housing is a challenge.

Currently there are many resources that are available in numerous state departments that are not standardized. We acknowledge and agree that not all departments have the same needs nor do they require being treated the same in all circumstances. However, if Alaska values the safety of its children it must not prolong the time it allows the Office of Children's Services to continually be under-resourced.

One resource that is available to some state agencies as a recruitment tool for rural workers is housing. We feel this would enable OCS to recruit and retain workers in these challenging communities much more easily. Having consistent staffing not only improves individual cases, but allows OCS to develop a presence in the community. For the same reason people talk of the positive impact a 'police presence' can have on a community, being able to rely on the same OCS worker, who knows the community

allows OCS to have this same positive, preventive presence in a community. The value of this cannot be underestimated.

The Panel asks that OCS be allowed to find solutions to this problem; using different methods in different communities as appropriate. The Panel is aware that other state agencies offer housing for their personnel in rural areas. Schools and Troopers in some rural communities have recognized that being able to offer decent housing makes it much easier to recruit qualified workers to remote communities and retain them. OCS would like to be able to use this recruiting tool as well since attracting applicants to rural positions is difficult. We recommend this issue be explored and a plan developed. Since the model already exists in other departments, the issue may be one of funding rather than logistics or having to pilot a project.

There is a window in a child's life in which to make an impact. There are children right now who are aging out of that window without positive intervention from OCS because the office in their rural community is understaffed or unstaffed. We do not think it is too strong a statement to say that lives are at stake. Even if no child dies from abuse, negative life-altering events are occurring. OCS needs to be fully staffed in rural areas to combat these issues. The easier it is to recruit and retain workers, the better for Alaska's children.

**Recommendation 2: That OCS establish deadlines that require non-emergency petitions to be filed allowing for supervision of the family by the continuum of legal parties without necessitating the removal of the child.**

Currently, when OCS has safety concerns about a child which are too great to screen out but require some intervention on the part of the agency, the family is referred to the "in home" designation. A social worker is required to work with the parents on the safety issues, make referrals for services, and visit the home to check on the child. The parents' participation with OCS is voluntary. OCS does not have legal or physical custody and no other legal parties are involved. This has not been an effective way to work with families with dysfunctional behaviors who need more information and resources to make the behavior changes necessary to keep their children safe. Further, there is marginal accountability in the OCS system to make sure that workers are engaging with families on this informal basis.

We are recommending that in these instances, OCS file non-emergency petitions which give OCS legal custody but allow the child to remain at home with the parents who retain physical custody. This allows for court oversight, the parents are able to have an attorney appointed to represent them, the Tribe (in an ICWA case) is a party, and a guardian ad litem is appointed for the children. The result is more support and involvement of the parents while protecting the legal rights of the parents, the children, and if applicable, the Tribe. This also ensures the accountability of OCS.

Currently there are two ways that a family can be referred to “in home” services. The first is at the Initial Assessment (IA) stage. When a Protective Service Report is made to intake, it is sent to IA where an in-depth investigation happens within 45 days. During those 45 days, the parents can voluntarily place their child somewhere else, out of home, while they work with the social worker and access services through an out-of-home safety plan. At the end of 60 days, if the parents have not remedied the concerns, OCS already has a requirement that a non-emergency petition be filed. Up to that point, the parents’ participation is voluntary. The non-emergency petition, if granted by the court, brings the parents and child under the scrutiny of the court but the child remains at home with the parents. This protocol is in place and is happening in Anchorage. Compliance needs to be ensured statewide.

The second way a family can be referred to “in home” is a direct referral from Initial Assessment as a result of the investigation. This would occur when the parents have not documented sufficient progress during the assessment period and OCS considers the child to be at continued risk. These cases tend to be put on the back burner of the social worker’s caseloads and there are no clear deadlines for monitoring progress, closing cases in a reasonable time, or filing a non-emergency or emergency petition. When a parent is not making progress, the CRP is recommending that OCS establish a deadline for filing non-emergency petitions with an in-home safety plan. The involvement of the court and other legal parties provide oversight and resources to the family and there are more eyes on the child to ensure safety while they remain placed in the home.

The CRP is also recommending OCS develop protocols to file non-emergency petitions in two other situations. It is not unusual to have parents who refuse to cooperate with OCS either during the IA process or after a referral to “in home” services. They do not return phone calls, access services, or allow workers in the home to visit the child. In this situation, OCS should develop a protocol to file a non-emergency petition to ensure the safety of the child.

The second situation involves actual numbers of Protective Service Reports (PSR) and their impact on the trauma experienced by children over time. Currently there is no intervention based solely on the number of PSRs. Frequently Child In Need of Aid (CINA) petitions have 10-30 prior PRSs listed in the petition. OCS may or may not have been formally involved. The CRP recommends that OCS determine a benchmark number of PSRs that would trigger a non-emergency petition to be filed, regardless of the status of individual PSRs. When children live through years of abuse and neglect, the impact is disastrous on their emotional well-being. When reporters call multiple times, something is wrong and OCS needs to evaluate the safety of that child from a different perspective.

Non-emergency petitions catch the children in the middle and increase the ability to keep them safe in their homes while giving parents the opportunity or extra push to

change their behaviors. They are in families where the safety concerns never rise to the level of removing them from home but where they are in situations that have escalating safety concerns over time. The goal is to improve the safety of children and reduce multiple Protective Service Reports within the same family. The current OCS practice is too informal with limited oversight to monitor the actual improvement of parental behavior and ensure that children are safe.

**Recommendation 3: OCS should provide Western Region with a full complement of supportive (e.g., adoption specialist, intake supervisor, etc.) positions identical to those offered in all other regions.**

While Western Region is the smallest region in with only three field offices, it is currently not staffed like a full-fledged region. There are a number of positions that the other regions all have, but Western Region does not. The region should be provided with the equivalent administrative support professionals that make other regions cohesive: a psychiatric nurse, an adoption specialist, an independent living program worker, ICWA reviewers, non-ICWA reviewers, licensing workers, travel coordinator, etc. Western Region as a region is expected to provide the same services as other regions, so it should have the same resources. We understand that it is expensive to provide these positions and that the positions have not been provided to date because of the small number of field offices, but OCS needs to devise a solution to address this issue. Even though Western Region only has three field offices, those field offices serve 56 villages.

Without these positions in Western Region there is a lack of efficiency; children and families in the region are receiving lesser service. It would be natural for the workers in other regions who are currently providing these services to Western Region to be more responsive to workers from their own region—those right down the hall—before those hundreds of miles away. Travel is impacted; the region can't make timely decisions because it lacks a finance person, licensing decision are slower and made without regional and cultural knowledge. We heard during our visits to the region how the lack of these positions is impacting morale and leads workers in Western Region to think they are being set up to fail as a region. Based on community feedback from OCS and community partners, there continues to be broad support and expectations that senior leadership will continue to make decisions to support the WRO. The CRP recommends that a plan be developed on how and when to get this essential group of professional support services in place in WRO.

**Recommendation 4: We encourage OCS to enhance data compilation efforts to facilitate better understanding of child welfare issues in the state and promote evidence-based practice.**

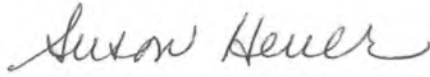
- Aligning OCS regional boundaries with established census boundaries. CRP greatly appreciates the efforts of OCS in compiling data and using evidence in establishing policies and practices. Such efforts are evident in tracking home visits out of the Wasilla office. However, use of data on several other indicators is limited due to the distinct regional boundaries of OCS. For example, OCS collects and releases data on 'number of children in out-of-home placements' for each region. A quick look at the data shows that Anchorage has the largest number of children in out-of-home placements. However, examining the rate rather than the absolute number of children shows that the Western Region has the highest number children in out-of-home placements per every thousand children. Such insights are possible only if census data can be used in conjunction with data collected by OCS. The current regional boundaries do not coincide with any other known boundaries for which census data may be available, making it difficult to measure the extent and severity of any specific concern regarding child protection. Such alignment allows for better evidence collection and improves policies and practice. CRP recommends that OCS realign their regional boundaries to coincide with either the census boundaries or other administrative boundaries such as the ones used by the Alaska Department of Labor. CRP also recommends that OCS be supported in realigning their boundaries.
- Compiling and releasing data at a regional level. Currently OCS releases reports on all the indicators specifically mentioned in AS 47.05.100. However, with the current push towards regional intake, and to better understand the regional disparities in child protection and safety in Alaska, compiling data on all those indicators at a regional level would be useful. CRP appreciates the limitations of confidentiality due to small numbers. Despite this limitation, we encourage OCS to examine the possibility of releasing data at a regional level, where possible.

## Commendations

We believe that all OCS staff have very challenging jobs striving to make a difference in the lives of children and families. Staff in the Wasilla office have worked especially hard to embrace change and their efforts are yielding good results. We commend them for being willing to try new approaches and working on establishing new relationships with families and community partners.

We commend Bonnie Edmonson for her work as a member of the Citizen Review Panel. She brought a unique and valuable perspective to the Panel.

Respectfully submitted by the Citizen Review Panel:



Susan Heuer, Chair

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



Dana W. Hallett, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



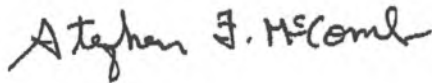
Patrick Hefley, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



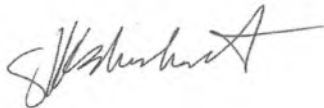
Kristin Hull, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



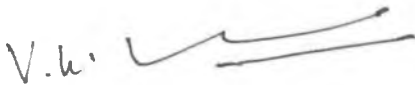
Stephen F. McComb, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



Stella Klein Schuchardt, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012



Diwakar Vadapalli, Member

Electronically signed  
June 30, 2012

# 2012

## OCS Response to CRP Annual Report



State of Alaska

Department of Health & Social Services

Office of Children's Services

## Executive Summary

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (OCS), I wish to extend my sincere appreciation for your dedication and efforts to improve the child welfare system on behalf of the families of Alaska. The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) provides a venue for stakeholders, families, and staff to have a voice through your grass roots community outreach that might not otherwise be heard. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for staff to share their concerns or suggestions in a confidential manner that helps them to speak freely and without hesitation. Those voices are important to the OCS leadership and help to guide our efforts with enhanced insight into the various challenges that vulnerable Alaskans face every day.

OCS continues to focus on our goals related to enhancing community and Tribal partnerships; decreasing disproportionality, increasing our rate of staff retention, and steadily improving our safety, permanency, and well being outcomes. While these and other priority work efforts are critical and essential to improving services to families OCS serves, they are not easily achieved. These efforts in addition to increasing federal requirements continue to add more to the already full plates of everyone in our workforce. Layer upon layer is added every year that impacts our ability to do everything to the optimal level necessary. Focusing in on one area often causes unanticipated shifts in others, to which we are constantly trying to balance. Despite the constantly changing policy and practice, additions to everyone's responsibilities, challenging circumstances facing both rural and urban staff related to worker turnover and the everyday demands this work brings with it; our staff continues to make every effort to rise to occasion. The staff at OCS is committed and passionate about what they do and I wish to use this opportunity to publicly recognize them for the important public service they provide every day to Alaskan families to which often goes largely unrecognized.

After reviewing the OCS response to your recommendations, please don't hesitate to contact me so that I may clarify or provide additional information to the panel. I look forward to another year of productive partnership.

*CHRISTY LAWTON, DIRECTOR*



**CRP Recommendation 1:**

That OCS takes aggressive action to reduce staff turn-over.

**OCS Response:**

The Office of Children's Services, like many public child welfare organizations, has long struggled with retaining staff. As noted by the CRP, a high turnover rate undermines efforts to provide quality child welfare services and negatively impacts outcomes for children and families. In the past two years, numerous programmatic changes have been made which we anticipate will directly or indirectly affect staff retention, but acknowledge there is a great deal of additional work necessary to correct this pervasive problem.

**Recruitment:**

Earlier this year, we produced a "Realistic Job Preview" video featuring OCS workers discussing various aspects of their jobs with an emphasis on working in rural communities. This is becoming a common recruitment strategy nationwide and is aimed at helping those considering a career in child welfare to gain an accurate idea of the requirements of the position. We believe that this, along with other efforts, will help better match applicants to positions for which they are a good fit and will increase the likelihood of success and satisfaction on the job. This video is available for viewing at:

<http://vimeo.com/44692712>

**Initial Training:**

The initial staff development program has been significantly revamped to help new employees focus on learning the skills necessary for their position and expeditiously prepare them for field work. These modifications have involved classroom training, on-line modules, and on-the-job learning experiences.

An on-the-job staff development plan has been instituted which guides new employees early learning over the first six months of employment, efficiently making the most of previously unstructured time between classroom trainings and providing statewide consistency. In addition, we have modified the training schedule and refocused our new employee classroom based training curriculum resulting in a more focused education which prepares new employees to start fieldwork with appropriate support and mentoring, as quickly as possible. New employees are now ready to start fieldwork within one month from their hire date, offering faster relief to those workers with higher caseloads.

#### Single job class:

For many years, OCS employees worked under two separate job classes: Social Worker and Children's Services Specialist. After an extensive job classification study, the two job classes conjoined into a single job class in July 2012 titled Protective Services Specialist.

The job class has three ranges from the entry level through specialist, one supervisory level, and two manager levels. This change resulted in an increase in pay for many employees and created a career ladder for those interested in a career in child welfare. These changes are consistent with recommendations from the child welfare staff retention literature.

#### Travel Team:

In spring 2012, OCS created a team of traveling child welfare professionals who work throughout Alaska based upon the needs of the organization. Schedules and assignments vary based upon conditions at the time, but generally involve two week deployments to small rural field offices to ensure continuity of services for children and families when permanent positions are vacant. In addition to meeting the needs of children and families, the presence of these traveling workers provides relief to other local staff whose workload has become overwhelming during the time of staff shortage.

#### Strategic Planning:

Staff retention remains a top priority for OCS and we continue to work at improving our retention of qualified employees. With funding support from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, we are currently working with Agnew: Beck Consulting to identify specific strategies to implement in the coming year to improve retention with a focus on recruiting those who are committed to working long term in child welfare with emphasis on retaining workers in high turnover areas of the organization.

### **CRP Recommendation 2:**

That OCS establishes deadlines that require non-emergency petitions to be filed allowing for supervision of the family by the continuum of legal parties without necessitating the removal of the child.

#### **OCS Response:**

The Office of Children's Services is in agreement with recommendation 2 for several reasons. We believe that the idea of "voluntary" participation in child protective services is misleading in that most families engaging in services on a "voluntary" basis do so due to their concern or belief that if they do not participate, the state will move to take legal action to attempt to force cooperation up to and including custody of their children.

While it is questionable that the filing of a legal petition increases a parent's motivation to engage in services or makes them want to change their behaviors, it does provide a mechanism for due process. Legal oversight provides for the parents to be fully informed in their decision making as it relates to disclosing maltreatment, agreeing to safety plans and case plans, and engaging in services. The provision of this infrastructure of people and processes provides increased collaboration, oversight, accountability, and timeliness in the delivery of appropriate and effective services.

The filing of a non-emergency petition requesting "supervision" would leave the parent as both the legal and physical guardian, but engage the appropriate legal parties and court reviews that would ensure the case moves forward, the in home safety plan is sufficiently monitored, and that the case is resolved within a timely manner.

This process would also support OCS programming efforts in that it raises the "visibility" of in home cases within the case system. Currently in smaller field offices, the in home cases may receive lower priority than out of home placement cases due to "court cases" being seen as more important and the overall work load demands on worker's time. As a result, resources tend to be directed at the out of home cases. Exceptions to this are that in some of the larger field offices "specialty units" provide for excellent service delivery to in home cases.

OCS wants to ensure that all families receive a full array of safety planning, case planning, and opportunities for parents to engage in services. There are parents who are motivated to make changes and fully work with the agency as voluntary case participants. For those families, the filing of supervision will provide the due process to insure they are fully informed and their rights protected. We believe that filing for "supervision" of in home cases through the courts, regardless of the parent's motivation, will facilitate improved care.

In 2013, OCS intends to form a sub workgroup to begin development of a plan to implement the needed changes and to engage the Court Improvement Project group to gain support for the effort and assistance with the mechanics of the changes it will necessitate. Once a full evaluation of all the factors involved, identifying the needed changes and the potential impact to the collective system, a more specific timeline for completion will be established.

In regards to the additional recommendation of setting a standard or threshold for when multiple past reports would automatically trigger the filing of a non-emergency petition, OCS does not concur. Each case needs to be independently evaluated when a report is received. This evaluation includes examination of prior OCS history with the family along with current information that is known in order to determine the level of intervention required. Scrutinizing past history at both the intake and initial assessment levels is already standard practice. That is one piece of the overall assessment of safety that

collectively helps us understand the current family functioning and guides the decision making on opening a case for initial assessment or service.

### **CRP Recommendation 3:**

**OCS should provide Western Region with a full complement of supportive (e.g., adoption specialist, intake supervisor, etc.) positions identical to those offered in all other regions.**

#### **OCS Response:**

The Office of Children's Services is committed to the successful development of the Western Region. As a new region with many unique challenges, we intend to continue investing in the success of this region until they operate as effectively and independently as any of the other four OCS regions. Full independence will take some time and we hope this process will continue to evolve over the coming year with the region taking on increasing independence as the natural progression of organizational development permits. However, this is largely dependent on the evaluation of workload statewide and determination of where and how any adjustment to staffing levels are appropriate, such that additional PCN's might be freed up for use in the Western Region.

During the past year and a half, we have focused on meeting immediate needs, workload stabilization, and filling key leadership positions in the Western Region. Among the key leadership positions filled during this time are the Protective Services Manager II (regional administrator), Protective Services Manager I (staff manager), Administrative Officer, Indian Child Welfare Act Specialist, St. Mary's Protective Services Supervisor, Bethel Protective Services Supervisor, and Independent Living Specialist. The increased leadership and stability this has provided has been extremely positive and improvements are becoming more apparent, both within and outside of OCS. There are still other functions being conducted outside of the Western Region such as supervision of Child Protection Intake and travel coordination. If continued stability in the workforce within Western remains somewhat stable, we will also be able to more accurately explore and assess the capacity of current positions to determine if other duties could be added that would increase the ability of the region to be entirely self-sufficient.

### **CRP Recommendation 4:**

We encourage OCS to enhance data compilation efforts to facilitate better understanding of child welfare issues in the state and promote evidence-based practice.

#### **OCS Response:**

We appreciate and understand the reasoning behind this recommendation, but are not able to take any action towards implementation at this time. This is due to the lack of capacity our staff and SACWIS system have presently to take on such an endeavor. As it

stands now, we have lengthy lists of technical and practical enhancements that are in the queue for developer and programmer time that will occupy the next several years at a minimum. While aligning with the census data would help in some ways, it isn't the ultimate solution. Many other departments/divisions have boundaries set differently that have been in place for decades that may or may not be in line with those of the census. Making this type of change may only be realistic if it were one that the entire state system decided to align to in one major undertaking such that our systems and data could all be more easily compared, manipulated and communicated.

OCS has been however, continuing efforts to drill down in the data that we provide statewide to provide more detail at both the regional levels and the office/community level. This has been a priority of the Tribal-State Collaboration Group as well and we recently had success with data with outcomes related to disproportionality, that while not perfect, is getting close to what both the Tribes and OCS would like to have readily available. We will continue those efforts as time and resources allow.

In regards to the use of data to ensure "best practice", we certainly agree. That is why since the implementation of ORCA in 2004, that enabled OCS to have much more sophisticated means to regularly generate reports and data from all angles, we have become increasingly cognizant and focused in using this data to guide decision making and evaluate our practice. It is routinely considered as we assess the efficiency and effectiveness of training, policy, and on the job coaching methods that all lend themselves to ensuring the idea or specific "model" that is intended, is in fact the one being replicated by staff and that is being done so with the highest level of fidelity we can achieve. While, we certainly continue to have more needs for data than our current resources can keep up with, we are certainly far more advanced in those endeavors and the practical use of data than ever before.



# Alaska's Citizen Review Panel



# Citizen Review Panel: Who

- The CRP is composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the state, including members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.
- Susan Heuer, Anchorage (Chair)
- Dana Hallett, Haines
- Pat Hefley, Juneau
- Kristin Hull, Wasilla
- Steve McComb, Palmer
- Stella Schuchardt, LCSW, Fairbanks
- Diwakar Vadapalli, Ph.D., Anchorage



# Citizen Review Panel: What

To provide oversight to the Office of Children's Services and gather public input on how well child protection is being delivered statewide. The Panel does this primarily by visiting different regions of the state and talking to OCS staff and partner agencies about how well the system is working. The Panel produces an annual report for OCS which is also distributed to all members of the Legislature.



# Citizen Review Panel: Where

Statewide! Since 2008  
we've been to the following  
communities.

- Anchorage
- Aniak
- Barrow
- Bethel
- Cantwell
- Chitina
- Copper Center
- Delta Junction
- Dillingham
- Fairbanks
- Gakona
- Glennallen
- Healy
- Hooper Bay
- Juneau
- Kenny Lake
- Ketchikan
- King Salmon
- Kodiak
- Kwigillingok
- Naknek
- Northway
- Nuquisut
- Palmer
- Petersburg
- Point Hope
- Saint Mary's
- Sitka
- Tok
- Unalaska
- Valdez
- Wainwright
- Wasilla
- Wrangell



# Citizen Review Panel: When

The Panel has been active in Alaska since 2002. We have teleconferences at least monthly and meet in person at least four times a year, typically in conjunction with a site visit.



# Citizen Review Panel: Why

The Citizen Review Panel is mandated by state and federal law. The Panel was created through the federal Child Abuse Prevention & Treatment Act (CAPTA); Keeping Children & Families Safe Act of 2003 and through Alaska statute Sec. 47.14.205.



# Benefits of CRP

- Seven volunteer members all contributing a minimum of 250 active hours annually
- We're the eyes and ears of the public for the Legislature and OCS
- Unique function of identifying and advocating for ancillary services that OCS cannot request
- Jointly we can achieve a vastly improved child protection system for the children of Alaska



# Positive Trends at OCS

- Increased transparency, improved relationships with partners
- Efforts to keep children in their homes
- Improvement in items identified by 2008 CFSR (federal review)
- Efforts to combat staff turnover



# Issues CRP is monitoring

- Safety of children
  - Investigations into reports of harm (Initial Assessment)
  - In-home/resources
- Recruitment, retention (housing)
- Data
- Need for more support staff



# 2013 CRP Areas of Concern

Safety of children

- Initial Assessment to investigate reports of harm
- In-home/resources



# 2013 CRP Areas of Concern

## Staff turnover

- Need for improved recruitment and retention
- Housing as an element of problem



# 2013 CRP Areas of Concern

## Data

- Regional boundaries need to align with Borough and Census Area boundaries
- More data need to be available on the web

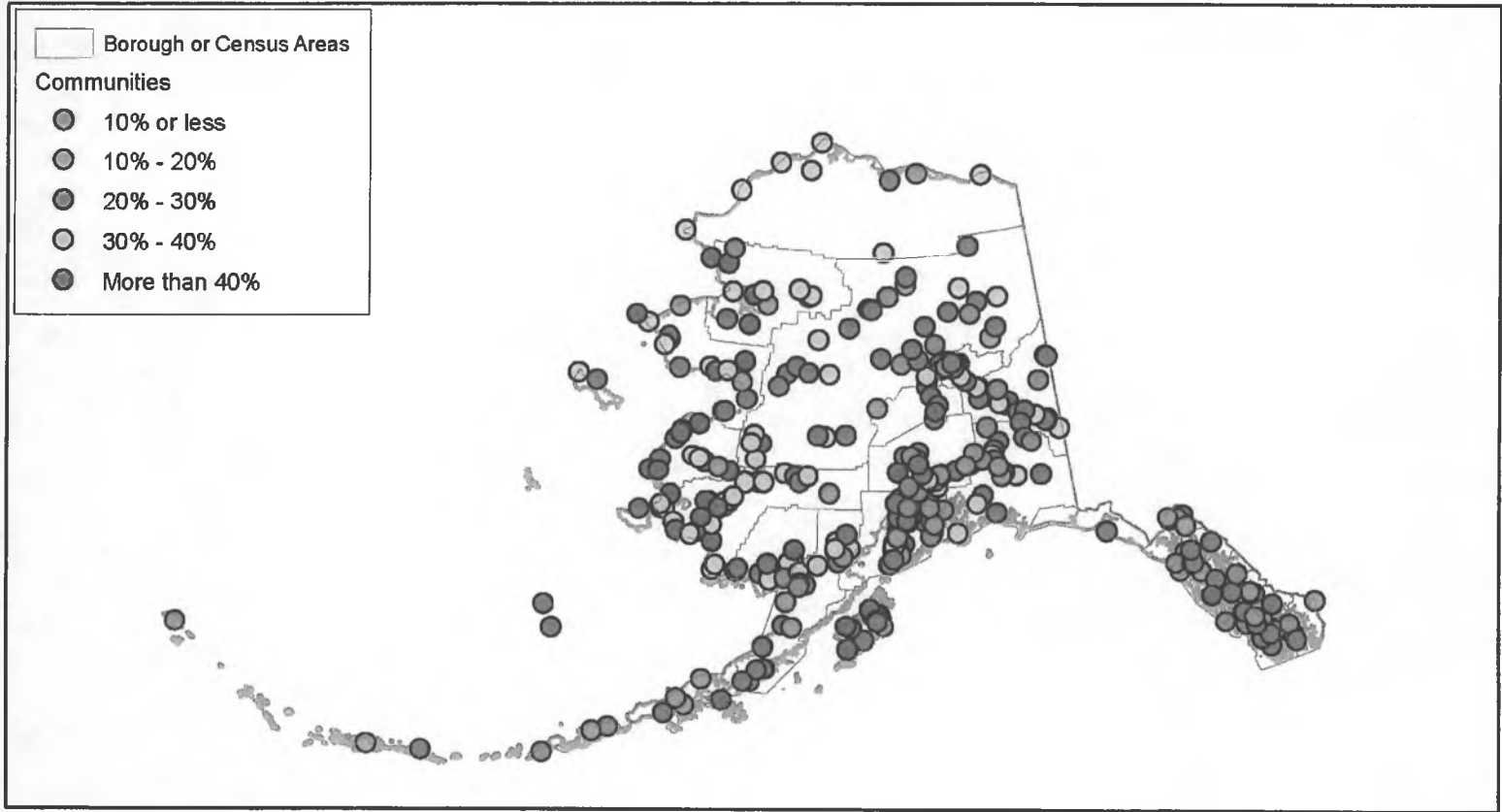


# Illustration

Region	Total Population	Population 18 years or younger	Number of victims	Victims as a percentage of total victims for the State	Victimization rate – Number of victims per 1000 children
Western	24,364	9,297	260	9.05%	28
Anchorage	291,997	75,834	996	34.67%	13
Northern	137,332	37,005	751	26.14%	20
South Central	170,660	44,963	688	23.95%	15
Southeastern	65,449	15,241	178	6.20%	12

If regional boundaries were aligned with either Census or AK DOL regional boundaries, this data can be used to understand issues such as the impact of neglect or abuse and school performance; or relationship between Abuse and neglect and other public health indicators.





0 65 130 260 390 520 Miles

Children as percentage of total population, by community



# Availability of Data

- Currently available regional-level data
  - Children in placements, by age race
  - Number of substantiations, victims, and perpetrators for the calendar year from 2006 through 2010
- It would be useful to have:
  - Allegations, substantiations, victims, and perpetrators, on a monthly basis for each type of maltreatment



# 2013 CRP Areas of Concern

Number of support staff need to be increased

- Workload study completed, but not yet released
- More efficient use of resources to allow more tasks to be handled by support staff



# Support for Legislative Issues

- Support for the \$490,000 increment in the Governor's supplemental projects to improve safety at the Anchorage OCS office
- Support for other increments in the Governor's budget



# Alaska's Citizen Review Panel



For more  
information,  
please visit our  
website

[www.crpalaska.org](http://www.crpalaska.org)

