

Children's Services

MISSION:

*... promote stronger families,
safer children.*



Tammy Sandoval, Office of Children's Services Deputy Commissioner.

"The future is bright for the children and families served by Alaska's Office of Children's Services. All of us at OCS continue to assess and re-evaluate the system for improvement and to ensure stronger families and safer children."

—Tammy Sandoval,
Deputy Commissioner

Alaska is only as healthy as its citizens, especially its children. To this end, the Office of Children's Services works to provide a strong and secure safety net for the state's most vulnerable families and children. Its mandates include keeping children safe in their homes whenever possible and helping families stay together. The OCS brings prenatal care to mothers and nutritional education to families, and identifies developmental delays and disabilities early so families can get maximum support.

The OCS works in partnership with families and communities to support the well-being of Alaska's children and youth. Services enhance the ability of families to give their children a healthy start, to provide them with a safe and permanent home, to maintain cultural connections, and to help them realize their potential.

Until the department reorganization, the division — formerly known as the Division of Family and Youth Services — focused mainly on protecting children from abuse and finding safe places for children who could not remain at home. The new Office of Children's Services strives to protect children and support families. The expanded division

includes Family Nutrition Services, to promote optimal health habits through education, breastfeeding support, obesity prevention, and supplemental food packages; coordination of prevention services to families at risk for child abuse and neglect; and early, home-based intervention and planning services through the Infant Learning Program for children at risk for developmental delays and their families.

In such a vast system, streamlining paperwork is one of the most urgent needs. To that end, OCS has implemented Online Resources for Children of Alaska (ORCA) — a single-system, information management system — for case management, information sharing and error-free payment system. ORCA streamlines burdensome paperwork for more efficient case management, thus allowing caseworkers to spend more time working with clients, and closely monitoring payments to foster families. See page 5 for more details.

New initiatives include Family to Family, which began in Alaska in February 2004 with several goals, including a facilitated, team-decision-making meeting with parents of children being considered for removal from their homes, and recruiting

more foster families, especially in the neighborhoods from which most of the children needing foster care come. See page 5 for more details.

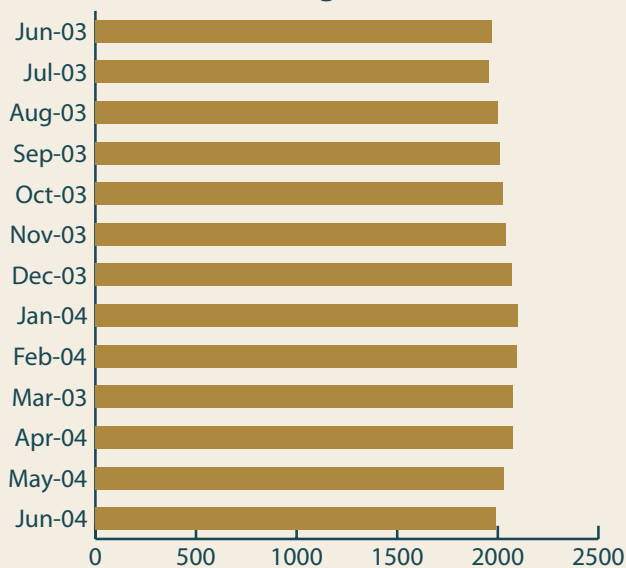
Another recent initiative is Resource Family Assessment, which allows OCS licensing staff to complete a more in-depth assessment of families interested in providing out-of-home care. The Resource Family Assessment will be completed for all families interested in either foster care or adoption.

Accomplishments 2003-05

Highlights

- The OCS created a Native Rural Recruitment Team in June 2005 with Native leaders to address the shortage of Native resource families in rural Alaska.
- The Alaska Children's Trust kicked off its social marketing campaign in September 2005. The campaign is aimed at raising awareness and preventing child abuse and neglect. A statewide toll-free parent support line has been established where professionals are available to answer parenting questions or refer parents who need additional resources to organizations providing relevant services in their communities.

**Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care each month
June 2003 through June 2004**



What we continue to work on

The OCS is putting the final touches on ORCA — Online Resources for Children of Alaska — and plans to bring it up to fully functional status as a measurement tool. See page 5 for more details. The OCS division is also implementing a new statewide model for conducting home studies when licensing families for foster care.

To address the chronic shortage of qualified and trained staff members, the OCS will recruit and retain staff through stipends for students in social worker degree programs at University of Alaska Anchorage and Fairbanks. Along the same lines, the OCS is developing a worker satisfaction survey to improve worker retention and decrease burnout.

The OCS is also striving to decrease the disproportionate number of Alaska Native children in state custody. One strategy is the Kinship Care initiative, which has been piloted in the northern region of the state and is now expanding statewide. In this program, child welfare agencies and tribes share a commitment to improving the way to identify, partner with and support kinship caregivers. Another strategy to this end is the Disproportionality Breakthrough Series. OCS and tribal leaders around the state are meeting and exploring all the possible ways to keep children within their own families and cultures whenever they may need to be placed outside of their home for their safety.

Ketchikan social worker believes in families, avoids burnout

“We can’t make all risks go away, but we can hopefully reduce the risk to children. What is so important is you have to believe in families.”

—Debbie Watier

The troubled young woman had passed through the doors of the Ketchikan Office of Children’s Services more than once, beginning as a youth and continuing when she was an adult and a parent for the first time. “She wasn’t able to find the strength or belief in herself to get out of a violent relationship so she used alcohol as a way to cope,” recalls Debbie Watier, a Ketchikan social worker for the last 13 years. “We networked and united with several agencies to help her understand that we believed in her and that she was valued.”

Watier remembers that the Ketchikan staff encouraged an “open, caring relationship” between the young woman and the foster parent who eventually adopted the child. But as is so often the case, the story doesn’t end there. Eventually, the young woman had another child. Although she had left the abusive relationship, she continued to struggle with substance abuse and depression — and neglected her second child as a result.

“We once again united with other agencies, and we included the young woman in our planning. We asked her what she needed to be able to raise her baby,” Watier explains. “She wanted more than anything not to lose another child.”



Debbie Watier, a Social Worker IV, supervises the Ketchikan OCS office.

Because of the belief that Watier and others had in the young woman, she found the support and strength she needed to change her life. “She tackled her problems head-on,” Watier says. “She gave up substances — with lots of support from all of us — and her child is now in school.” Although the young woman continues to touch base with Watier and other service providers when she struggles with parenting issues, “she provides safe, appropriate parenting to her child,” Watier says.

Watier operates with a common-sense philosophy that has prevented the burnout so common among social workers. “You can’t change families, but you can sure change the approach,” she says. Her attitude makes her one of the many highly valued employees of the Office of Children’s Services, Deputy Commissioner Tammy Sandoval says. “Ms. Watier’s case management style is inclusive of the children and families we serve,” Sandoval notes. “She is diligent about including community partners in child protection work.”

Watier, a Social Worker IV, now supervises the Ketchikan office, where the emphasis is on cooperating with other agencies to keep families whole and healthy. “In a small community, we know we can’t do this alone,” Watier says. “We’re dependent on other organizations.”

Watier says her job is not “to fix families.” It’s to offer families options to address their problems. “We can’t make all risks go away,” Watier explains, “but we can hopefully reduce the risk to children. What is so important is you have to believe in families.”