

State of Alaska  
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**Alaska Office of Children's Services operations evaluated**  
*Reports released today in conjunction with Senate and House HES hearings*

**Background**

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services contracted with ACTION for Child Protection, Inc., a national child welfare organization, in May 2006 to conduct a study and evaluation of the operations of Alaska's Office of Children's Services. The cost of the study was \$121,200.

ACTION evaluated OCS operations in four areas: organizational structure, community relationships, effectiveness of Policy and Procedures, and training curriculum.

Findings and recommendations from the reports will be shared with OCS staff, stakeholders, tribal partners, legislators, and interested members of the public.

**Overview: The reports, consultant findings and recommendations**  
**Review of the Office of Children's Services Organization**

This report measured the effectiveness and efficiency of OCS using three methods: an on-line staff morale survey; focus groups with 55 OCS employees in Juneau, Anchorage and the Mat-Su; and 32 individual interviews with employees.

- **Findings** of the staff survey indicated that employees are interested in improving the agency, based on the 70 percent survey response rate. Positive response to the survey suggested that personal efficacy is important to OCS employees. The areas needing greatest improvement, identified by 79 percent of employees, was the need to feel included in agency decision making. The survey also indicated that relationships and communication between OCS staff and management needed to be addressed.
- Most focus group participants felt agency leadership did a good job of articulating the agency purpose; most felt a sense of mutual support within their offices; most supported the new safety assessment model. Areas identified as problematic included communication; leadership; training; turnover/workload; policy design/distribution; and system support problems.
- In the interview section of the review, results were consistent with staff morale surveys and focus groups indicating that OCS employees are committed to the work they do, but are hopeful about making changes to improve the agency.

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- **Recommendations** included increasing staffing capacity at the front line level; improving structure, clarifying roles and increasing communication among management and administration; and adding suggested services for children and families.

### **Review of community relationships**

This review explored impressions community professionals and the general public holds of OCS; professionals' impressions of how effective OCS is in carrying out its child protection responsibilities; and the relationship between OCS and community agencies.

- **Recommendations** included:
  - dealing with the challenge of retaining good staff in direct service positions and having enough resources to achieve manageable workloads;
  - increasing responsiveness from front-line workers, particularly returning phone calls;
  - improving OCS's public image; creating open dialogue opportunities between OCS staff and community professionals;
  - gathering feedback from key organizations and professionals on a regular basis; gathering regular feedback from families served; gathering regular feedback from foster parents;
  - continuing efforts to improve coordination and communication with Alaska Native tribes;
  - conducting cultural sensitivity training for workers and supervisors;
  - improving sharing of information between OCS workers and others such as schools and foster parents; and
  - encouraging open and transparent work with other community agencies.

### **Review of the effectiveness of policy and procedures for child safety intervention and investigations**

This report examined eight policy sections of OCS, focusing on the front end of intervention services, such as intake, investigation, and safety intervention. The goal was to evaluate such things as policy substance and content; guidance and direction; clarity of the intervention approach; form and writing.

- **Recommendations** included:
  - Identifying a philosophical base for policy to reflect beliefs and values related to mission, purpose for intervention, and who OCS seeks to serve; and a systematic approach to intervention;
  - collecting examples of policy for comparison from other states;
  - increased clarity of writing and structure in policy; writing new policy rather than revising current policy;
  - employing particular criteria and seeking out resources and guides when developing and writing the new policy; and establishing a method for reviewing policy drafts to assure criteria and goals are met.

### **Review of training curriculum for child safety intervention and investigations**

This review of the OCS Training and Orientation for New Employees (TONE) curriculum was done to evaluate the extent to which staff development and competency building contribute to effective practice and decision-making associated with safety intervention and investigation.

- **Recommendations** included:
  - discussing impact of current legislation on practice and decision-making; having staff consider the agency’s mission with respect to intervention;
  - creating a more linear curriculum; and
  - adding significant information related to safety planning.

## **How the reports will be used**

- The findings from these reports, which corroborate concerns and suggestions OCS has received from the federally-mandated Citizen Review Panel and others, will be used to help OCS continue ongoing systems reform work.
- OCS head Tammy Sandoval will continue to meet with staff, tribal partners, stakeholders and interested parties to share information and recommendations from the reports.
- Several of the reports mentioned the need for improved communication. A number of efforts are under way in this area, such as creation of an employee newsletter, increasing face-to-face meetings with OCS leadership and staff; creating open dialogue opportunities with key organizations, professionals, families, foster parents, Alaska tribes.
- Sandoval plans to conduct an annual “staff morale survey,” similar to the one done by the consultant as part of the report to measure effectiveness and efficiency of the OCS organization.

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