

**ALASKA OFFICE OF CHILDREN SERVICES**

**RESULTS OF THE**

**2016 ANNUAL STAFF SURVEY**

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Commissioned by



**Alaska Citizen Review Panel**

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*Alaska Citizen Review Panel evaluates the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies for effectiveness in discharging their child protection responsibilities. The Panel is mandated through CAPTA 1997 (P.L. 104-235), and enacted through AS 47.14.205.*

## **About Alaska Citizen Review Panel**

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**AUTHORITY:** The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is federally mandated through the 1996, 2003, and 2010 amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and authorized through Alaska Statute Sec. 47.14.205. The Panel operates under a set of operating guidelines, available on the Panel’s website.

**FUNCTIONS:** The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems to be more responsive to community needs and opportunities in providing child protection services through evaluation and public outreach. In Alaska, the designated child protection agency is the Office of Children’s Services (OCS). Therefore Alaska CRP:

Evaluates the extent to which OCS is effectively discharging its child protection responsibilities under:

- The State Plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under 42 U.S.C. 5106a(b);
- Child Protection Standards under federal and state laws; and
- Any other criteria that the CRP considers important to ensuring the protection of children

Conducts public outreach and gathers public comment on current OCS procedures and practices involving children and family services.

The Panel is not a grievance redress mechanism, and thus is not equipped to address any concerns on individual cases.

## **Acknowledgements**

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This report is a group effort. Fifteen students in a graduate research methods course in the public administration program, at the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP), University of Alaska Anchorage, worked on various components of it. The project was supervised by the instructor for the course, with assistance from a Community Engaged Student Assistant (CESA). All contributors are listed below:

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The PADM 604: Research Methods in Administration is a graduate-level basic course in research methods. All students are required to take the course as part of their program towards a Master in Public Administration (MPA) degree. Each year, students in the course work with a public or private client organization on a real-life research project, addressing questions important to the organization.



## Acronyms

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AAG	Assistant Attorney General
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
ARO	Anchorage Regional Office
CBPP	College of Business and Public Policy
CCEL	Center for Community Engagement and Learning
CEU	Continuing Educational Units
CFSR	Children and Family Services Review
CPS	Child Protective Services
CRP	Citizen Review Panel
CWA	Child Welfare Academy
GAL	Guardian ad Litem
ICWA	Indian Child Welfare Act
IRB	Institutional Review Board
IT	Information Technology
NEW	New Employee Welcome
NRO	Northern Regional Office
OCS	Office of Children’s Services
ORCA	Online Resources for Children in Alaska
PSS	Protective Services Specialist
QA	Quality Assurance
SCRO	South Central Regional Office
SDP	Staff Development Plan
SKILS	Standards, Knowledge, & Insight Leading to Success
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SRO	Southeast Regional Office
SSA	Social Service Associate
TONE	Training and Orientation of New Employees
UAA	University of Alaska Anchorage
WRO	Western Regional Office



## Contents

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<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART I: 2016 OCS STAFF SURVEY RESULTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>6</b>
Sample characteristics	6
Guiding documents	7
Practice Model	7
Manuals and other documents	10
Communications	11
Within the agency	13
External communications	14
Employee supports	15
Supervision	15
IT Support	16
Office space and safety	17
Training of frontline workers	18
Tenure and retention	23
Tenure	24
Retention	24
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>28</b>
Frontline work continues to be difficult	28
What can help?	31
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>PART II: FRONTLINE WORKERS TRAINING, AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF LEARNING</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>35</b>
The importance of ‘learning transfer’	35



Influence of work environment on learning transfer	36
Supervisor support	37
Communication climate	37
Learning transfer and tenure	38
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>39</b>
Data Collection	39
Secondary data	39
Qualitative interviews	40
Sample	40
Measures/variables	40
Perception of Learning	41
Supervisor Support	42
Communication Climate	43
<b>Findings</b>	<b>45</b>
Work environment and perception of learning	45
Perceptions of learning and tenure	46
Structural supports and opportunities for continued learning	46
On-the-job Learning	47
Additional formal training	48
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>51</b>

## List of Tables

---

Table 1: Respondents by their job title	6
Table 2: Most chosen topics for additional training (number of respondents)	23
Table 3: Work environment factors and influence transfer of learning: adopted from (Lim & Johnson, 2002)	37
Table 4: Number of respondents each year that responded to SKILS related questions	40
Table 5: Descriptive statistics of the Perception of Learning Scale by survey year	42
Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of the Supervisor Support (Supervisor Feedback) Scale by survey year	43
Table 7: Items of Communication Climate Scale, by survey year (marked by 'X' if asked)	43
Table 8: Descriptive statistics of Communication Climate Scale by survey year	44
Table 9: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product-moment Correlations between work environment factors and perception of learning, using the 2016 data	45
Table 10: Descriptive statistics of perception of learning by tenure of frontline worker	46

## List of Figures

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Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by OCS region	6
Figure 2: Perceptions regarding OCS' Practice Model	8
Figure 3: Perceptions on Practice Manual and other policy documents that guide workers' jobs	11
Figure 4: Communications within OCS	12
Figure 5: Perceptions on communications regarding policy and procedures	13
Figure 6: Communications with partners and the community at large	15
Figure 7: Perceptions on supervision	16
Figure 8: Perceptions on available support	16
Figure 9: Type and timing of the training received by frontline workers	18
Figure 10: Frontline workers perceptions about SKILS	19
Figure 11: Frontline workers' perceptions on other trainings	21
Figure 12: Tenure of respondents at OCS, by position title	24
Figure 13: Reasons that employees continue to work at OCS	25
Figure 14: Percentage of respondents that identified a strategy among their three most strategies for retaining staff at OCS	27
Figure 15: Relationships between factors of the work environment and perception of learning, using 2016 survey data	45



## Executive Summary

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) recommended in 2015 that the Office of Children Services (OCS), Alaska's designated child protection services (CPS) agency, critically examine the various survey instruments used to collect data from stakeholders. Particularly, in light of OCS' efforts to curb the high turnover rate among frontline workers, CRP recommended that OCS restructure the annual employee survey and summarize the results to yield actionable recommendations for supervisors and upper management.

OCS responded by requesting the CRP to lead the effort in restructuring the annual staff survey for the year 2016. In collaboration with OCS, the CRP recruited the help of a graduate class (Research Methods in Public Administration) at the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). Students in the course were asked to examine the survey questions, restructure the survey instrument, collect data, and report the summary results.

In addition to summarizing survey responses, the class required students to identify specific research questions pertaining to training of frontline workers. Students worked in groups of three or four and pursued distinct but related research questions. Two groups used data from the 2016 survey, one group used data collected by OCS during the years 2012-2014 using older versions of the staff survey, and another group collected data through interviews of a small sample of frontline workers from the OCS Anchorage Regional Office (ARO). The interviewees are certainly not a representative sample of the entire frontline workforce at OCS. However, some of their insights are informative and help put the survey data in context.

### Part I

The 2016 OCS Annual Staff Survey included 122 questions, organized into seven sections. Part I of this report presents the results of the 2016 survey. Overall, the survey revealed some interesting and important themes for OCS to consider:

Guiding documents: OCS adopted a practice model to guide the work of the agency. In addition, a lengthy policy manual – compilation of all relevant statutes, agency policies, and procedures – lays out many specifics of OCS work. A majority of the employees felt that the state and regional managers, and their unit supervisors support the implementation of the practice model, and provide leadership consistent with the practice model. They felt that they receive any policy updates in a timely manner. However, most employees felt that they do not have adequate means to provide feedback on policies, and felt that their feedback is not considered.

While the employees and leadership at all levels seem to largely understand the practice model, most employees felt that the community at large does not understand the practice model. OCS serves some of the most vulnerable children and families, and often in highly emotionally charged situations. It is immensely important for these children and families, and OCS' employees that the community at large broadly understand OCS' practice model, the agency's purpose, and the nature of its work. It is extremely difficult for a frontline worker to perform their duties in a community if the worker believes that the community does not understand their professional obligations.

Communication: Formal mechanisms exist and are well utilized to communicate any updates by management to the frontlines. Far fewer employees felt that they have opportunities to convey their



thoughts to the management. Most employees felt that communications with external partner agencies and the community at large are very limited.

Employee Supports: Most workers felt that their supervisors are their most valuable support. Supervisors are available and provide timely and important feedback. Most of them also felt that they have adequate office space and supplies, and meaningful and timely IT support. Several workers had many specific suggestions for improving the Online Resources for Children in Alaska (ORCA), OCS' case and data management system. The worker's safety in the field is a continuing concern despite many recent safety measures adopted by OCS.

Training: All frontline workers are required to attend a three-week training course at the Child Welfare Academy upon hire by OCS. Most workers did not feel that this training session prepared them adequately for the challenges of the job. Cross-cultural training is recognized as being the most valuable, among the other trainings and orientation.

Tenure and retention: Anecdotal sources indicate that the average tenure of a frontline worker at OCS is one year. Retention of employees, particularly frontline workers, is a major challenge for OCS. Most employees reported that they continue to work at OCS because they believe their personal abilities and aptitude suits the job. Additionally, most of them also value the benefits of a state job. While more than 40% of the workers believe in the practice model of the agency, more than 50% of the workers credited the support they receive from their coworkers, and particularly from their supervisors, for continuing with OCS.

Findings of this report are presented to distinguish the perspectives of frontline workers from those of all other employees at OCS, and to inform the agency leadership in their efforts to curb the high turnover rate among frontline workers. This survey is limited by various factors. Many important topics were only given a cursory mention. We recommend that the survey be expanded to cover a broad array of topics and designed in a systematic way to better inform management.

## **Part II**

This part is a compilation of four related but distinct student reports. Specifically, we examined structural factors such as supervisory support, communications climate, and other supports that would improve transfer of learning from classroom to practice setting.

We found that:

- Frontline workers report almost universal appreciation of their supervisors. However, supervisors do not seem to have any active role in transfer of training from classroom to the workplace. Redefining the supervisor's role in assisting with transfer of learning would be beneficial.
- Workers value on-the-job learning experiences. The few interviewees reported the high value of on-the-job training in addition to the two- or three-week training they receive at the Child Welfare Training Academy.

# **PART I: 2016 OCS STAFF SURVEY RESULTS**



## Introduction

The Office of Children’s Services (OCS) conducts an annual staff survey.<sup>1</sup> The Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) finds this an important survey to assess the causes for the chronically high turnover rate among frontline OCS workers. CRP reviewed the survey results document published by OCS in 2012 and 2013. In order to understand the causes for high turnover among frontline workers, CRP requested a summary of responses of just the Protective Services Specialist (PSS) I, II, and III – commonly referred to as frontline workers<sup>2</sup>. OCS requested and received feedback from CRP on the survey instrument used in 2014. After reviewing the survey results document in 2015, CRP recommended in its 2015 annual report that OCS revise the survey instrument, and consider examining the responses of just the frontline workers (Alaska Citizen Review Panel, 2015). In response to this recommendation on the structure of the survey and its results, OCS requested CRP to lead the effort in conducting the survey. The CRP recruited help from a graduate class – Research Methods in Administration – taught in the Public Administration Program at the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). The class instructor and primary author of this report is also the Chair of the Alaska CRP. The class had 15 students, coauthors of this report. The Center for Community Engagement and Learning (CCEL) at UAA provided a student assistant for the class.

OCS provided us the 2014 version of the staff survey instrument. Since this is the first time that OCS is collaborating with CRP on a project, and the first time an external group is conducting the staff survey, OCS requested not to add any new sections (topics) to the existing survey. However, to add clarity and improve response rates, we could change some of the questions, and restructure the survey. Therefore, our tasks were:

- Critically examine the survey instrument, make necessary changes, and redesign the survey.
- Field the survey online and collect data.
- Summarize the survey data to generate actionable recommendations.

Part I of this report summarizes the 2016 staff survey results. In response to the concern regarding high turnover rates among frontline workers, we presented the results for two groups – frontline workers, and all other positions.

## Methodology

We critically examined each question and the overall structure of the 2014 version of the survey. The entire class examined the survey instrument, and individual questions within, and reviewed the questions for structure and clarity. Discussions were both in person during class time, and online using the Blackboard – an online class management tool available through UAA. The final instrument

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<sup>1</sup> OCS Staff Survey has been an annual exercise for several year according to Bernita Hamilton, Social Services Program Officer and head of Quality Assurance at OCS. Ms. Hamilton spoke to the class on March 22, 2015 and answered several questions.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Frontline workers’ may include many other positions. OCS tracks the turnover rates among the Protective Services Workers (PSS) I, II, III; and shares the data with the CRP. These positions were referred to as ‘frontline workers’ in the two OCS’ workload studies in 2006 and 2012, past CRP reports, and OCS response to the reports. For the purposes of this survey, in response to the high turnover rate among the PSS I, II, and III positions, we considered frontline workers to include just these positions. Social Service Associates (SSAs) and Office Assistants (OAs) are referred to as ‘support staff’ in the 2012 workload study. We followed this convention.

for the 2016 version of the survey was finalized and was reviewed by OCS' senior management. The final instrument included 122 questions separated into seven sections:

1. Practice Model
2. Communications
3. Organizational and Supervisory Support
4. Staff training and other staff development activities
5. Retention
6. Resources: ORCA and IT
7. Demographics

We used Qualtrics survey suite, available through UAA to conduct the survey. A link to the survey was sent to the Director of OCS, which was then forwarded to all employees of OCS on March 9, 2016. The survey was open for 24 days, and closed on April 1, 2016. The Director sent three reminders (March 17, March 23, and March 29) to improve response rate.

The entire project was reviewed and approved by the UAA Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were presented a consent form on the first screen. If they consented to participate in the anonymous and voluntary survey, they would indicate so, and proceed to the survey. If they declined consent, they would be directed to the final screen thanking them for their participation. A response was counted as complete if the respondent reached the final page of the survey, either by consenting and completing the survey or by declining consent, allowing Qualtrics to close the survey as complete.

We received 375 responses. However, 94 of these were incomplete. Out of the 94 incomplete responses, 23 respondents did not get past the consent form. Seventy-one agreed to respond by providing consent, but only two of them answered more than 50% of the 122 questions. In order to avoid counting multiple instances of survey responses from the same respondent, we excluded all incomplete attempts from the final analysis. Out of the 281 completed responses, nine declined to respond to the survey by indicating their reluctance on the informed consent form. The final dataset included 272 complete responses.

OCS has approximately 500 employees, resulting in a response rate of 54.4%. However, turnover rate among frontline workers has been approximately 30% over the last decade. Other positions also experience turnover, but this data is unavailable to us. Considering the high turnover rates, the actual number of employees that had the opportunity to respond to this survey is likely lower than 500, and the response rate is likely higher. Nevertheless, this response rate is low compared to the more than 70% response rates in previous years. Response rates are dependent on many factors including the respondent's perception of survey administrators, accessibility of the survey, structure of the survey, etc. The Quality Assurance section within OCS administered this survey in past years. Additionally, incomplete surveys could be counted as complete with missing information. We do not know if this was the case in previous years. The final 54.4% response rate is comparable to the average response rate of an organizational survey of 52.7% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

We downloaded all data from qualtrics into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. No individual identifying information was collected. However, since the survey collected

information on individual’s position and region, it is possible to identify individuals. Therefore, this report does not provide any information on smaller groups.

## Findings

We found that several questions in the 2014 survey instrument were either unclear or difficult to interpret. The survey covered a variety of topics but had several challenges with transitioning between topics. There were many double-barreled (two questions in one) questions. Some questions included very broad or vague terms (ex: philosophy’) that may not have the same meaning to all respondents. Several questions were edited to improve clarity. Double-barreled questions were simplified. Response options on several questions were standardized, and questions were grouped into coherent sections.

### Sample characteristics

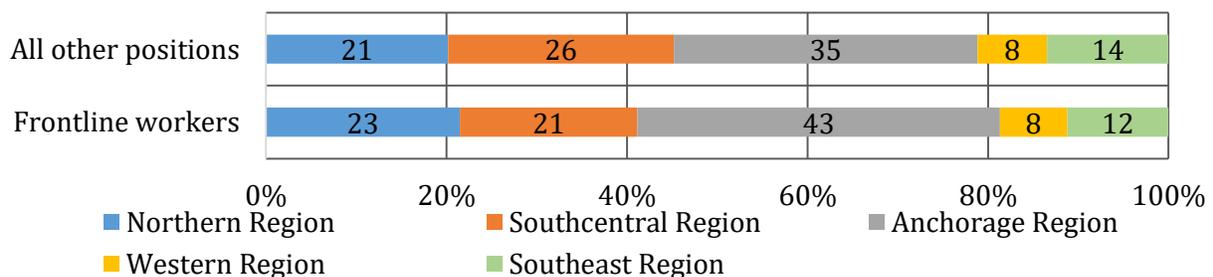
Table 1: Respondents by their job title

Job Title	Number of respondents	Percentage of total
Children's Protective Services Specialist I, II, III (Frontline workers)	113	42%
All other*	152	56%
<i>Children's Protective Services Specialist IV</i>	34	13%
<i>Administrative/Clerical Support Staff</i>	30	11%
<i>Community Care Licensing Specialist I, II, III</i>	22	8%
<i>Other</i>	66	24%
Missing	7	3%
Total	272	

\* Job titles with less than 20 respondents are not presented here. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Sample included employees from all ranks at OCS. Respondents chose from 14 different identified titles, only four of which are shown in Table 1. Protective Service Specialists I, II, III (frontline workers) formed the largest cohort (113 out of 272, 42%) of respondents. Approximately 56% (152 out of 272) were from 12 other specific positions included as choices in the survey. Thirteen respondents had titles that were not listed as a choice, and seven did not answer the question.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by OCS region



Representation of OCS regions in the sample is shown in Figure 1. Percentages of frontline workers in each region is approximately the same as the actual proportion of these positions among regions. Therefore, this sample is a representative sample of frontline workers by region. Employees in all other positions include a diverse array of positions ranging from the regional manager to the social service associate (SSA) and licensing staff in each region. Since this is not a homogenous group, results for this group are difficult to interpret. We did not check for representativeness. In addition to staff in regional offices, there is a large cohort of employees that work in statewide positions (special program officers, senior administrators, etc.). Twenty-three (23) respondents identified themselves as associated with the state office, not included in Figure 1, and an additional 23 did not provide their region.

### ***Guiding documents***

#### Practice Model

“At its most basic level, a child welfare practice model is a conceptual map and organizational ideology of how agency employees, families, and stakeholders should unite in creating a physical and emotional environment that focuses on the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and their families. The practice model contains definitions and explanations regarding how the agency as a whole will work internally and partner with families, service providers, and other stakeholders in child welfare services. A practice model is the clear, written explanation of how the agency successfully functions” (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2008, p. 1)

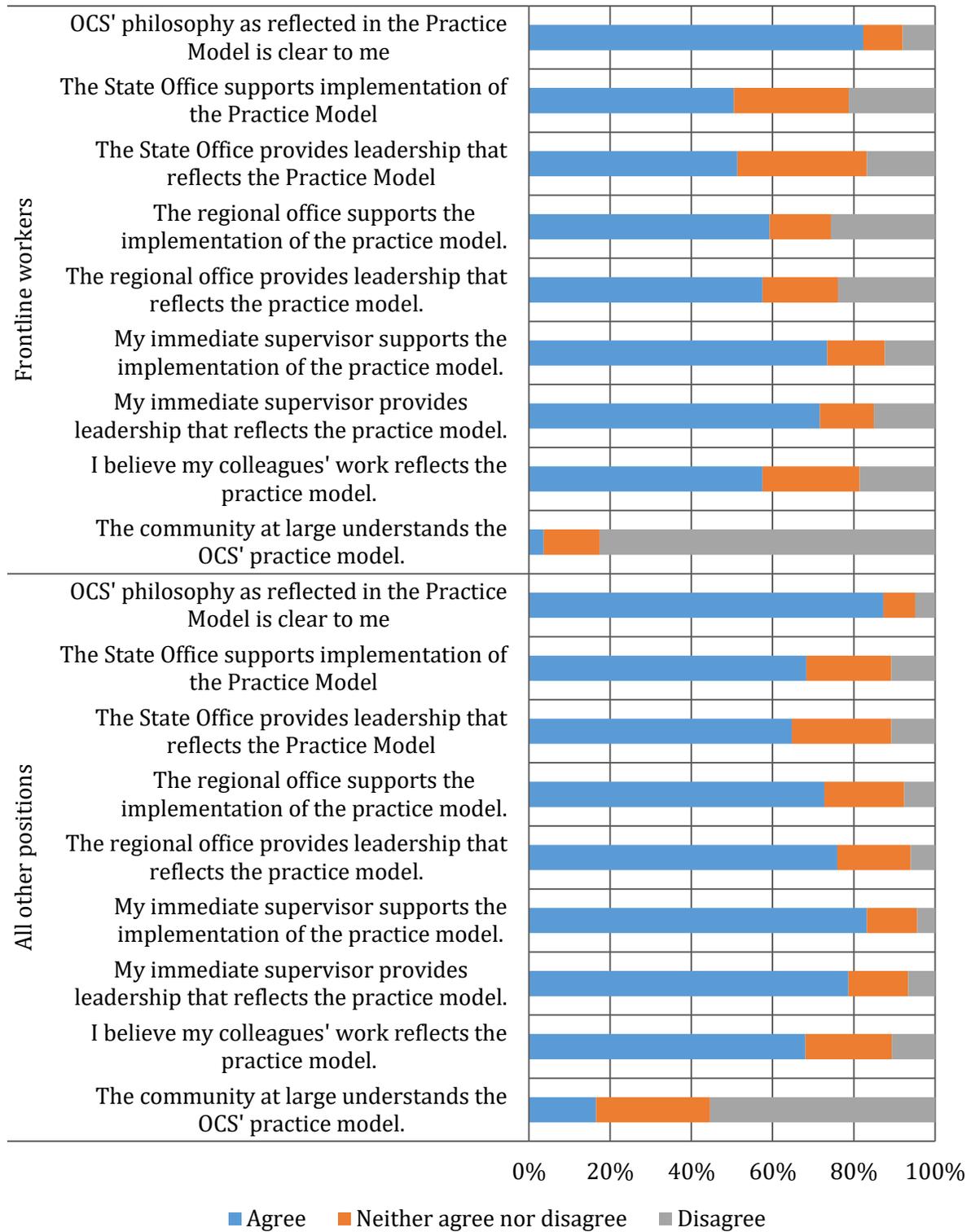
OCS adopted the current practice model almost a decade ago. It has five components – intake, initial assessment, family services, resource families, and service array. This 5-component practice model guides all aspects of OCS’ work and is in concert with the following seven outcomes monitored by the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR):

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- The continuity of family relationships and cultural connections is preserved for children.
- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

Ten factors, organized into three categories, drive the implementation of a practice model. (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2011):

- Leadership
  - Commit to the practice model
  - Pace implementation and be flexible
  - Be inclusive and transparent
- Competency
  - Train managers, supervisors, staff and stakeholders
  - Provide experience and coaching

Figure 2: Perceptions regarding OCS' Practice Model



- Designate staff and support champions
- Align staff selection and evaluation systems
- Organization
  - Evaluate progress and outcomes through quality improvement
  - Use feedback loops
  - Revise policy and procedures and create tools that support the practice model

Thus, it is important that employees actively engage with it, thoroughly understand it, and cultivate practice behaviors that adhere to it. Respondents to this survey were presented two statements each with respect to the state office, regional office, and their immediate supervisor:

- “The [...] supports implementation of the practice model”.
- “The [...] provides leadership that reflects the practice model”.

In addition, they were also presented with an overall statement “OCS philosophy as reflected in the practice model is clear to me”, and “I believe my colleagues work reflect the practice model.” These questions did not cover all the 10 factors listed above, and we could not add questions to the survey.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on each statement on a five point scale (1 indicating ‘Strongly Agree’, to 5 indicating ‘Strongly Disagree’) or choose to indicate “Not Applicable”. For ease of interpretation, the five-point scale is collapsed into a 3-point scale by combining the ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ options under ‘Agree’, and ‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Disagree’ options under ‘Disagree’.

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of agreement on all statements, separated by frontline workers and all other positions. The percentage distribution on all six statements is similar between both groups, with slightly higher percentages on agreement with each statement for all other positions. Similarity in response patterns is indicative of the overall common perceptions.

Overall, employees think that leadership at all levels supports implementation of the practice model and provides leadership that reflects the practice model. The clearest pattern in this series of responses is the increasing agreement as the leadership level is closer to the respondents’ personal experience. The number of respondents agreeing with either of the statements was highest with respect to the supervisor. Frontline workers have most interaction with the supervisor among all levels of leadership. They agreed less on either statement with respect to the regional office, the next level of leadership. Agreement with either statement was lowest with regard to the state office, the highest level of leadership within the agency. This may be an indicator of lower frequency of interaction between frontline workers and leadership at higher levels. In such a large agency with complex functions, it is not unusual that frontline workers may feel less informed about the leadership at higher levels. This may also be the reason a larger percentage of respondents among both groups were undecided on each statement as the level of leadership got farther from their practice setting.

While over 80% of the frontline workers and over 90% of all other positions thought that the ‘philosophy as reflected in the practice model’ is clear to them. Less than 60% of the frontline workers and less than 70% of all other employees thought their colleagues’ work reflected the practice model. This may mean that each individual employee believes they understand the ‘philosophy’ of OCS and

the practice model, but a lesser percentage of them agree with each other. In other words, the frontline workers' understanding of the philosophy of practice model, or the practice model, seems to vary between employees. However, 'philosophy of practice model' is admittedly very vague, with large potential for multiple interpretations.

"Few government agencies have greater potential power over an individual than a child welfare agency. With the exception of the criminal justice system, which may take one's money, one's freedom and, in some states, one's life, it is difficult to imagine a more fear-inspiring authority than the power to take away a person's children" (Office of the Alaska Ombudsman, 2012). Given the nature of the work and the extent that its mandate authorizes OCS to reach into the lives of families and children, it is extremely important that communities understand the purpose and methods of OCS. Such an understanding directly affects the effectiveness of OCS and the safety and wellbeing of the families and children served by the agency. Frontline workers have the most extensive contact with families and children served by OCS. While the community members may not understand all the nuances of the complex practice model, they should at least have a basic idea in order for them to trust the offered help, and actively engage with the frontline workers. Four out of 109 frontline workers (just 4%) and 23 out of 139 (17%) in other positions agreed that the community at large understands the OCS practice model. Much of the agency workforce clearly believes that the community they serve does not understand the framework that guides that service.

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*OCS employees' perceptions on how well the community understands OCS' practice model, and by extension, the purpose and nature of the workers' interaction with these families and children, is highly illustrative of the difficulties OCS has with public perceptions of the agency. This makes it very difficult for frontline workers to engage with the families and community at large.*

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### Manuals and other documents

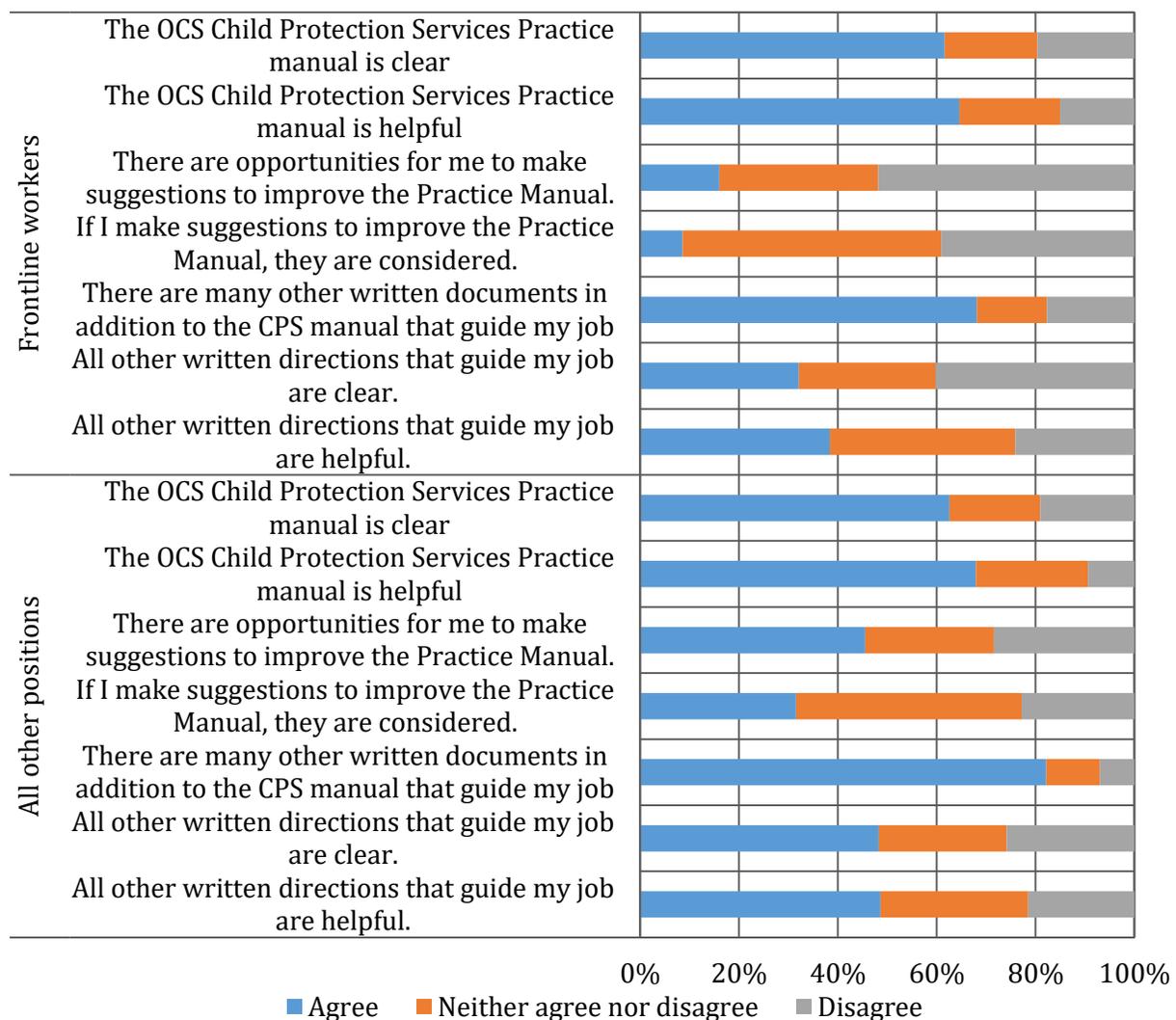
OCS Practice Manual is a compilation of policies and procedures the agency is legally required to either implement or follow. It is an expansive document covering a diverse array of topics, and is more than a thousand pages long. All OCS employees are expected to be aware of the Practice Manual, be able to access it regularly, and use it in their work. In addition to the Practice Manual, other documents often guide their work. These may be protocols that were developed to address a specific practice, or other documents that inform individual workers of developments in the agency directly relevant to their work. These manuals and policy circulars all would reflect the practice model.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on six statements about the practice manual and other documents. More than 60 % of the frontline workers strongly agreed or agreed that the practice manual is clear and helpful. Approximately 30% of the frontline workers also thought that other written documents were clear, and about 40% thought that these are helpful. However, only about 15% thought that they have opportunities to provide suggestions for improving the manual, and less than 10% thought their input would be considered (Figure 3). Regardless of how long they

have been at OCS or in their current job, frontline workers' perceptions of policy documents and circulars did not differ significantly.

*While most of them felt that the manuals and policy circulars are clear and helpful, employees do not feel like they have opportunities to provide suggestions to improve these documents, and have very little confidence that their suggestions will be considered. Without adequate feedback loops, achieving consistency in practice can be very challenging.*

Figure 3: Perceptions on Practice Manual and other policy documents that guide workers' jobs



All other employees responded similarly to these statements, albeit with higher percentages of agreement. Since this group includes senior managers, statewide positions that lead specific sections

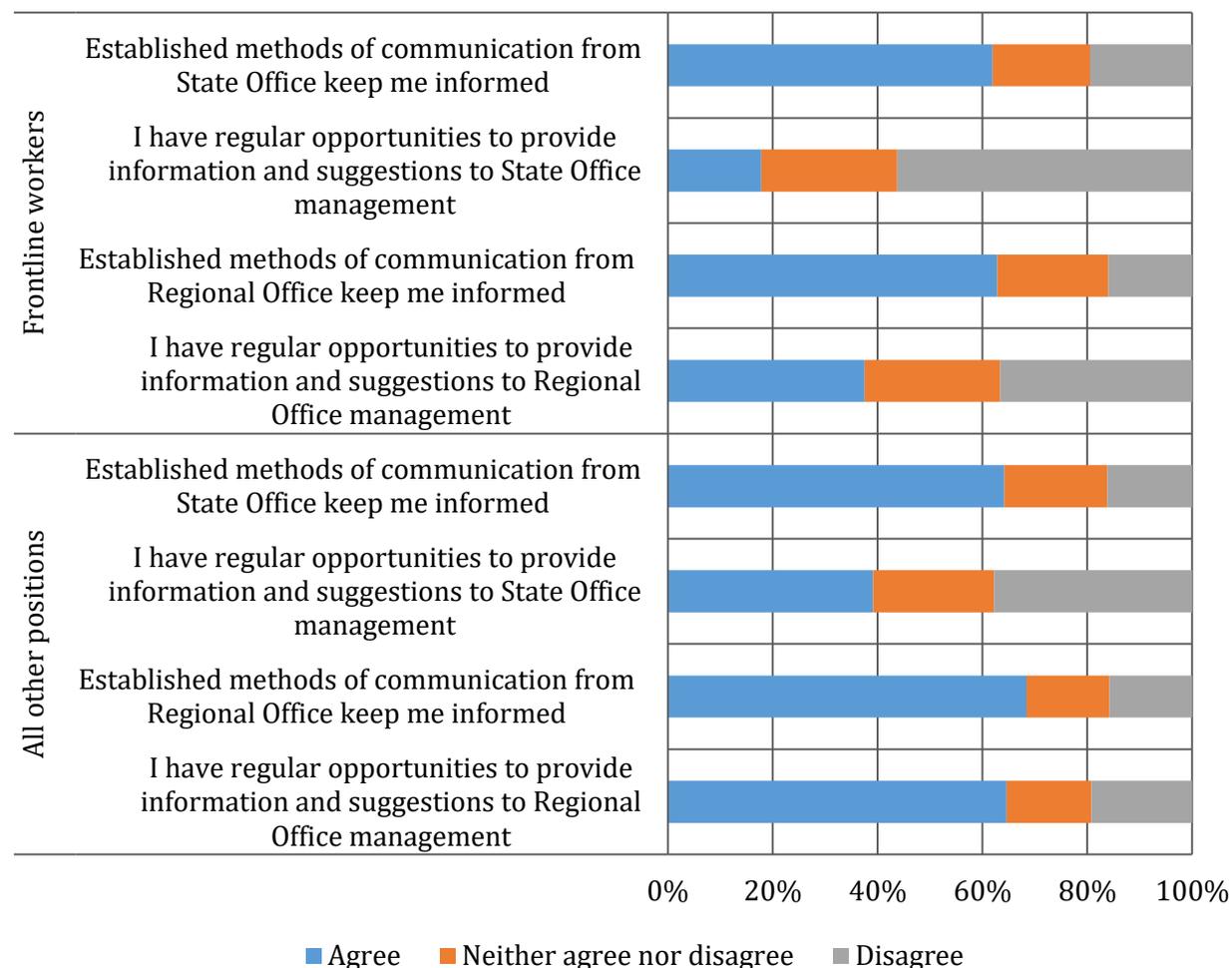
or programs, they are likely to have more regular and clear opportunities to provide input into the agency’s policy-making process. Even then, only about 30% felt that their suggestions are considered.

**Communications**

OCS is a large government bureaucracy with approximately 500 employees, spread across the state, organized into 5 regional offices and 20 field offices. As in any large government agency, particularly with high turnover rates, remote supervision is not uncommon. Leadership is distributed between Juneau, the state capital, and Anchorage, the largest city in the state. Communications within the agency is a practical challenge, and OCS uses multiple tools for internal communication.

OCS works with numerous service providers through contracts and grants. In addition, OCS workers refer children and families to many services offered by other providers across the state. Communication between the agency and external partners is extremely important for efficiency and effectiveness.

Figure 4: Communications within OCS



Within the agency

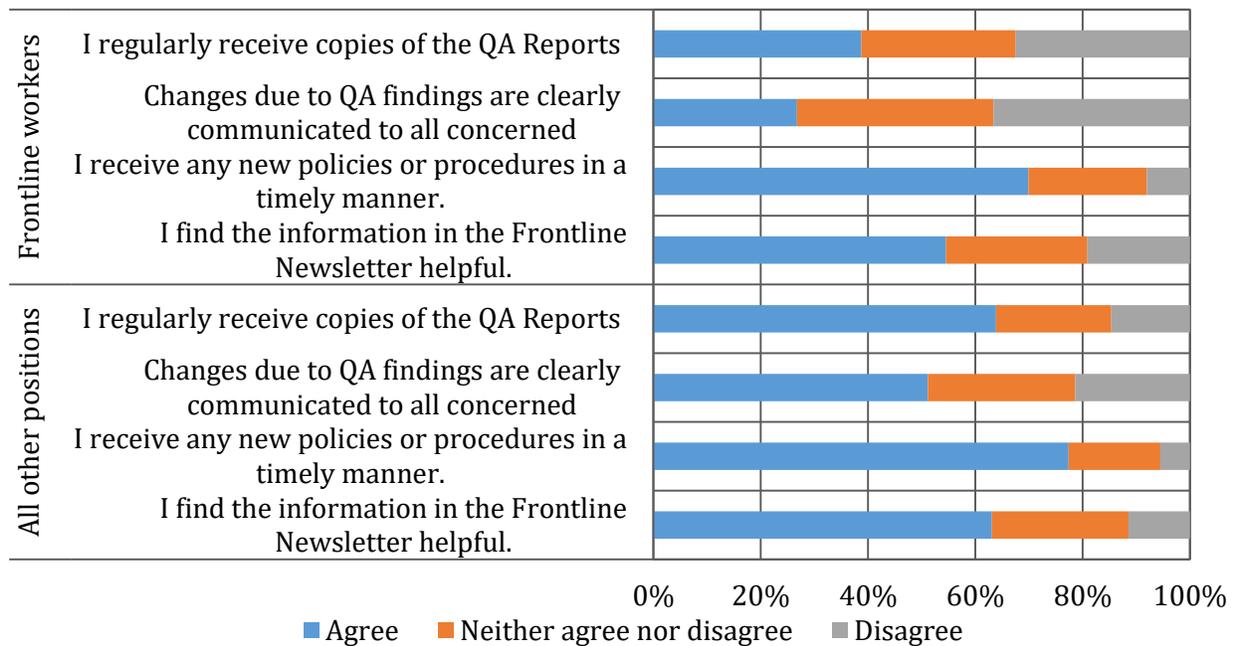
Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on two statements concerning communication between them and the state office, between them and the regional office, and between OCS and the various partner agencies and the general community:

1. Established methods of communication from [...] (through memorandums, meetings, etc.) keep [...] informed of the activities of the agency.
2. [...] have regular opportunities to provide information and suggestions to [...]

As shown in the top half of Figure 4, more than 60% of the frontline workers agreed that established channels of communication from the state office and the regional office keep them informed. Although less than 20% agreed that they have opportunities to provide information and suggestions to the state office, and less than 40% agreed on the same concerning the regional office. This pattern is similar to the one noticed about the practice manual and other documents in the previous section.

*Communications to the frontlines from the state and regional offices seems to be structured and reach most frontline workers. However, frontline workers seem to find it very challenging to reach the higher levels of leadership with suggestions for improvements. The patterns are similar for employees in other positions.*

Figure 5: Perceptions on communications regarding policy and procedures



Quality Assurance (QA) unit within OCS conducts periodic reviews of individual field and regional offices. These reviews are taken very seriously by the management and the workers alike, and can have significant impact on many aspects of that office’s workflow and personnel.

Less than 40% of the frontline workers strongly agreed or agreed that they receive copies of the QA reports regularly, and even fewer said that changes because of findings from these QA reports are communicated to all concerned (top half of Figure 5). It may be that the QA reports and resulting changes shared and discussed with unit supervisors, and only portions that are directly relevant to frontline workers may be shared with them on an as-needed basis. More than 60% of the other positions (bottom half of Figure 5) said they receive QA reports in a timely manner, and Over 50% said resultant changes are communicated to them regularly.

On receiving communications about new policies and procedures, almost 70% of the frontline workers and even more workers in all other positions feel they receive them in a timely manner. Frontline newsletter seems generally informative and helpful.

### External communications

The inherent challenges of CPS work provides many obstacles for smooth relationships with the community at large. There are “growing concerns over the abilities of the traditional child welfare system to protect children and help families, particularly given the limited capacity of CPS to address heavy caseloads reflecting complex issues; a bureaucratized, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that features adversarial investigations; inadequate and fragmented service delivery that frequently does not address underlying family problems and stresses” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, p. 8).

Communications with the community at large, and the community’s understanding of child protection work are extremely important in maintaining constructive relationships for the agency and achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

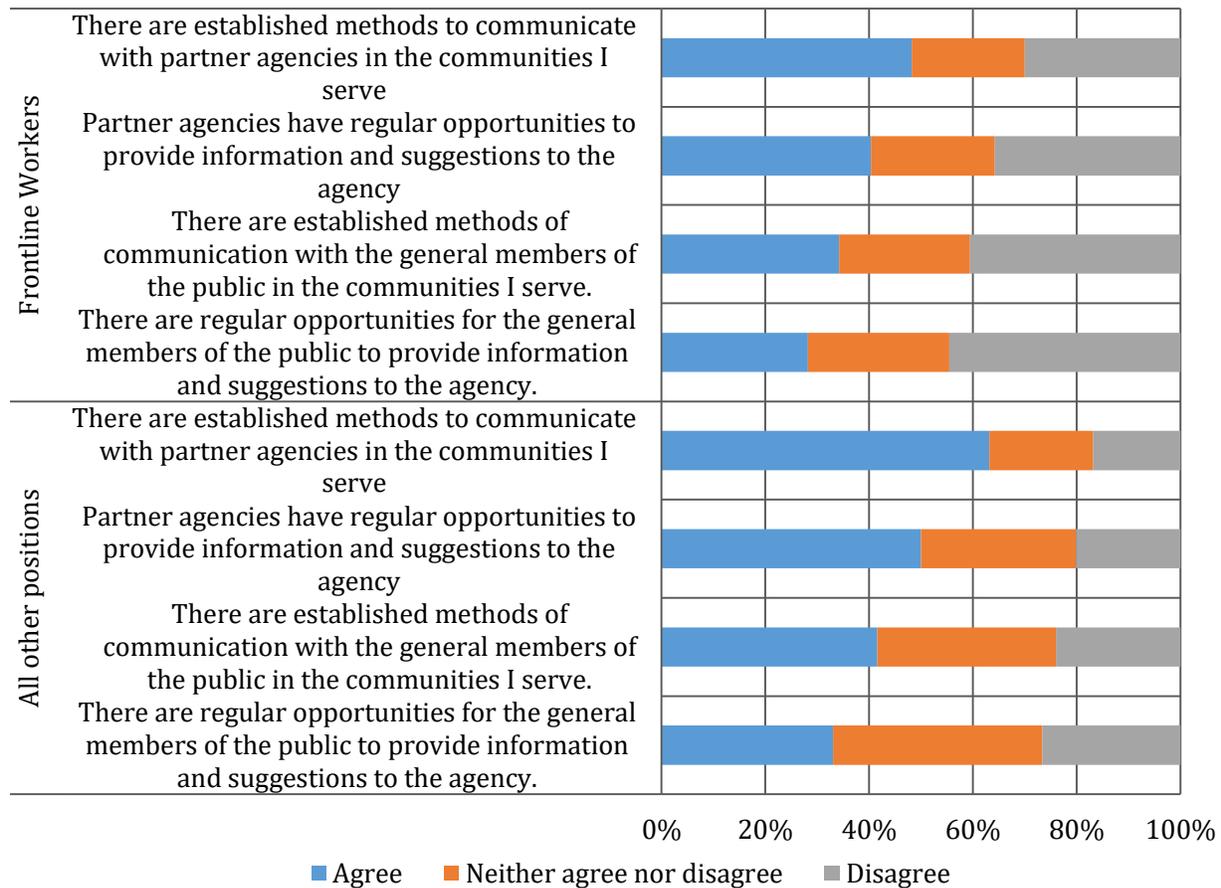
Almost 50% of the frontline workers (top half of Figure 6) felt that partner agencies receive communications in an organized manner, but only 40% felt that these agencies have opportunities to provide information or suggestions back to OCS. While patterns are similar, higher percentages of workers in all positions (bottom half of Figure 6) agreed on these items. While almost 40% of workers in both categories indicated that there are established methods of communication with the public, about 30% in both categories agreed that the community has opportunities to provide information and suggestions to the agency.

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*OCS employees feel that there is little communication from the agency to the community, and fewer feel that the community at large has opportunities to communicate with the agency. It is no surprise that employees feel that community at large does not understand the OCS practice model.*

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Figure 6: Communications with partners and the community at large



**Employee supports**

All agencies provide various supports for their employees, increasing employee performance. This includes meaningful and instrumental supervision, comfortable and convenient office space, technical assistance with the hardware and software, and safe and collegial working conditions. The survey asked respondents specific questions covering each of these topics.

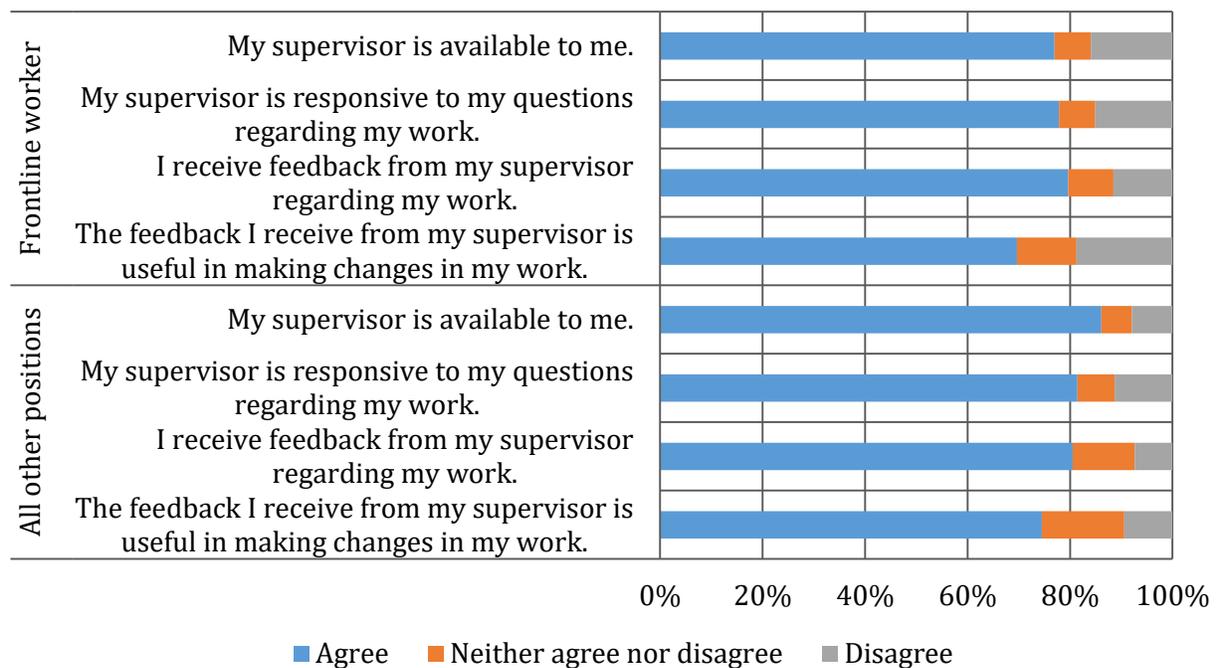
Supervision

Supervision of workers is an important factor in effective child protection work. Respondents were presented four statements regarding their perceptions of supervision they receive. As shown in Figure 7, workers in both categories overwhelmingly agreed that supervisors are available and responsive to them, and they receive useful feedback from their supervisors.

*Frontline workers and all other employees agree that their immediate supervisors are available, responsive, and provide useful and timely feedback.*

“CPS supervisors serve as a critical focal point for the successful achievement of agency goals and caseworker practices that strengthen families. Supervisors act as conduits in translating agency objectives into caseworker performance, as well as in using caseworker feedback to inform agency policies and priorities” (Salus, 2004). There is much written about the importance of supervision in child protection, and challenges involved. It is important to note that OCS frontline workers and all employees in general have such highly positive impression of their immediate supervisors. As noted later in the report, supervisors are an important source of support, advise, friendship, and guidance for frontline workers.

Figure 7: Perceptions on supervision



### IT Support

Frontline workers at OCS are required to enter all their case documentation into the ORCA data system. Millions of dollars were spent over the last decade in designing and installing this secure system, with considerable support from the Children’s Bureau. ORCA allows more efficient and consistent case management, effective supervision, agency-wide data management, and outcome monitoring.

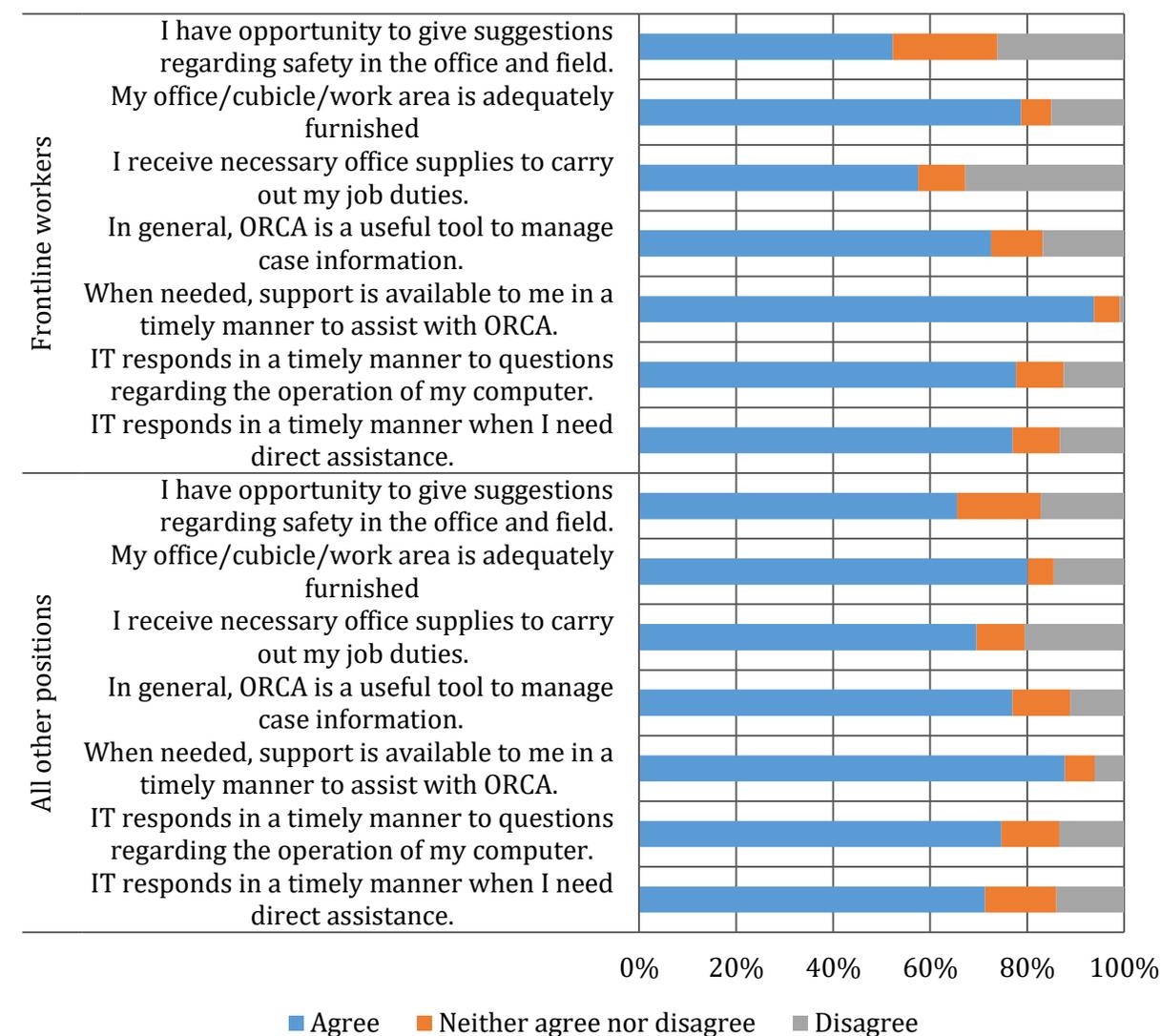
The survey included two specific statements about ORCA and two other statements about general Information Technology (IT) support (Figure 8). More than 75% of employees (both the frontline workers and all other positions) thought that ORCA is generally a useful tool, and an overwhelming majority thought that they have timely support with ORCA. Similarly, more than 75% of respondents in both categories agreed that they receive timely support with their IT needs.

Office space and safety

Almost 80% of the employees (both frontline workers and those in all other positions) at OCS agreed that their offices are well furnished, and that they receive necessary supplies to carry out their job duties.

Safety of OCS’ workers has been a concern in recent years. Frontline workers are more vulnerable to threats of attacks and a few such attacks materialized. Given the personal nature of OCS’ intervention in families’ lives, such threats are to be anticipated. OCS instituted a series of measures to ensure the safety of workers across the state. The survey did not include statements to assess any of these improvements. However, one statement assessed if workers have adequate opportunity to provide suggestions regarding their safety. About 50% of the frontline workers and more than 60% of the employees in all other positions agreed.

Figure 8: Perceptions on available support

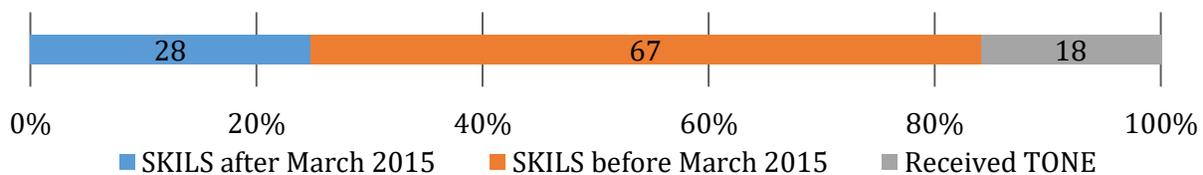


### **Training of frontline workers**

OCS has been investing in training of its workforce over the years. Similar to many other CPS agencies across the nation, OCS does not require a degree in social work or allied fields of study to be recruited as a child protection worker with the agency. While this strategy broadens the pool of potential recruits for an agency suffering more than 30% annual turnover among the frontline workers, it also creates training challenges due to lack of basic social work skills necessary to work with vulnerable children and families. Turnover has been high for over a decade, resulting in continuing training challenges.

Upon hire, all frontline workers attend a mandatory two- or three-week<sup>3</sup> Standards, Knowledge & Insight Leading to Success (SKILS) training, offered through the Child Welfare Academy (CWA), affiliated with the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). SKILS covers a broad array of topics that align with the OCS' practice model<sup>4</sup>. The Staff Development Plan (SDP)<sup>5</sup> requires some pre-SKILS activities that include a series of online trainings and other activities that orient the new workers towards working at OCS and preparing them for SKILS training. Like any other education and training program, SKILS is periodically modified, with new or improved modules each year.

Figure 9: Type and timing of the training received by frontline workers



### ***The current SKILS training module replaced Training and Orientation of New Employees (TONE), an older module, in January 2009. Training of frontline workers***

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<sup>3</sup> All workers are required to attend the first two weeks. Workers assigned to the Initial Assessment unit are not required to attend the third week that focuses on family services.

<sup>4</sup> We did not assess this alignment. We believe it to be aligned since CWA designed the curriculum under a contract with OCS.

<sup>5</sup> Every employee has an SDP upon hire. This document provides guidelines on the training and orientation of new workers in the first few weeks and months. SDP outlines specific activities prior to attending SKILS and immediately following SKILS.

activities that include a series of online trainings and other activities that orient the new workers towards working at OCS and preparing them for SKILS training. Like any other education and training program, SKILS is periodically modified, with new or improved modules each year.

Figure 9 shows that approximately 85% of the current frontline workers were trained after SKILS replaced TONE. The survey presented six statements on adequacy and usefulness of training workers received. Three statements were about workers' perception of SKILS and three were about other relevant training and orientation.

Figure 10: Frontline workers perceptions about SKILS

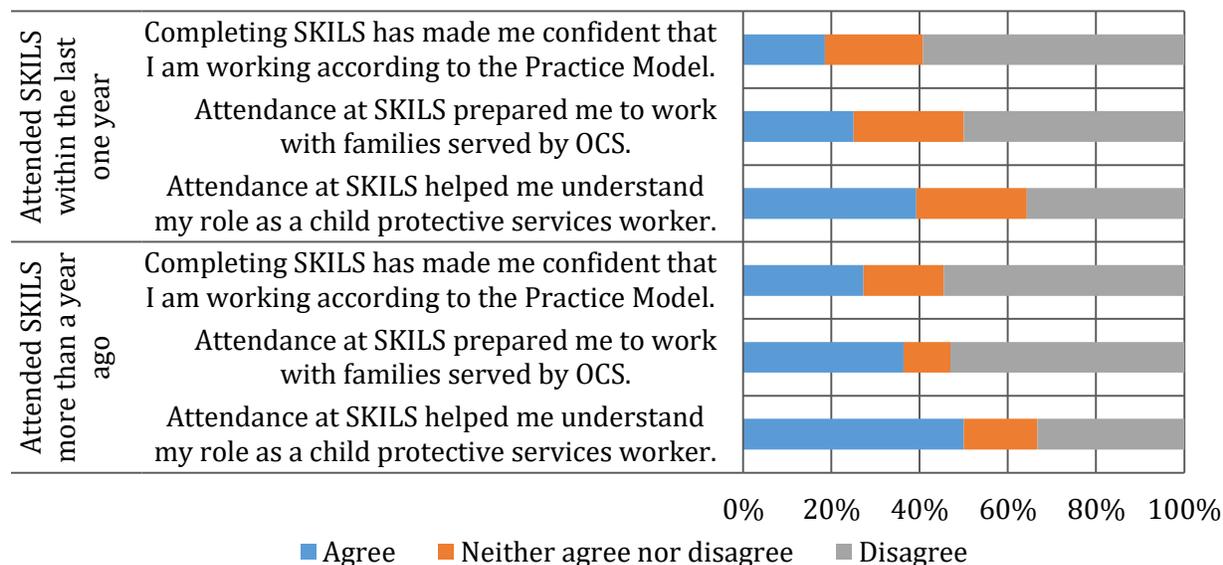


Figure 10 shows the frontline workers' perceptions on the expected benefits of SKILS. Only responses from those who attended SKILS are presented here. The top half of the figure shows perceptions of workers that attended SKILS in the last year, and the bottom half shows perceptions of frontline workers that attended SKILS prior to that.

As noted earlier, it is important to remember that workers seem to differ in their understanding of the Practice Model. Each respondent may have interpreted these statements differently. Less than 20% of the workers that attended SKILS in the last year felt that it made them confident that they are working according to the practice model; a little over 20% felt that it prepared them to work with families served by OCS; and almost 40% felt that it helped them understand their role as a child protection services worker. Among those that attended more than a year ago, the proportion of workers that agreed on each of the statements is slightly higher.

While the above proportions seem alarmingly low, this information is very limited by several factors. These results cannot be interpreted as evaluative of the training efforts through CWA. Several assumptions are inherent in the three statements. Due to limitations of this project in designing and adding new questions, we could not collect further data to be able to examine these assumptions and control for the associated factors.

- These statements assume that the respondents are aware of, knowledgeable about, and understand the OCS practice model to an extent to judge the alignment of SKILS and the

practice model. The broad array of topics covered in a two or three-week period can be quite overwhelming, and more so for someone without any child protection or social work background. Among those that attended SKILS in the last year, some may have attended only a few months before this survey, and may not have had enough time to assimilate all the material they obtained during SKILS. The survey neither asked for respondents' educational background prior to attending SKILS nor the amount of time since.

- The statement “Completing SKILS has made me confident that I am working according to the Practice Model” assumes that the workers have an understanding of the Practice Model prior to attending SKILS, and that SKILS would reinforce their understanding and confirm that their practice aligns with the Practice Model. This assumption is highly problematic given most workers attend SKILS very soon after beginning work at OCS, and would barely have the time to understand the Practice Model.
- They assume the workers are considerably aware, knowledgeable about, and understand the actual role of a child protection service worker. Child protection is one of the most demanding professions, and workers on the frontlines are under tremendous pressure to meet multiple competing demands in highly emotionally charged circumstances. Arguably, it takes considerable time to not only acclimatize to the professional culture, but also to the particular agency's culture.
- These statements assume that the families served by OCS are homogenous. As high as the caseloads are at OCS, a worker may not have experienced the diversity of families served by OCS. A workers understanding of the Practice Model is likely to improve with the number of diverse families they serve.

Moreover, the average tenure of a frontline worker in their position at OCS is said to be one year.<sup>6</sup> It takes some time to assimilate the knowledge from SKILS. Approximately 10-13% of the material learned in a training actually transfers immediately to a practice setting (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). We examined if longer tenure (3 years or more, data not shown here) in the position may influence their responses to these statements. We found no statistically significant difference in agreement on any of these statements. In fact, workers who have been in their positions for longer than three years agreed less on each of these statements. SKILS may have been modified to better align with the practice model and to better meet the needs of the workers based on recent feedback. Therefore, workers that received SKILS training in the last two years may have received improved training than previous trainees. It is also possible that material they learnt is still fresh in the minds of recent trainees, and workers with longer tenure may not have retained much or remember the details from the training they had several years ago. These contradictory findings certainly need further investigation to adequately understand the gap between training that is provided and the training that frontline workers need.

The survey included four additional statements pertaining to learning and preparedness, presented in Figure 11. We assumed that these additional trainings<sup>7</sup> are offered immediately before or after SKILS, or during SKILS. Therefore, we used the same one-year breakdown to present the results. A

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<sup>6</sup> This is anecdotal, and we did not confirm this.

<sup>7</sup> OCS Child and Family Services Plan lists a number of possible trainings available to workers. The survey did not include specific questions on each of these trainings.

higher proportion of those that received these trainings within the last year (the top half) agreed that the cross cultural training helped them to work with diverse population, and their orientation to the agency was adequate. Again, this may be indicative of the relatively recent exposure they had to the material compared to those that received these trainings more than a year ago, or it may be indicative of the improvements to the curriculum in recent months and years. In comparison, more among those that received these trainings more than a year ago agreed that they received adequate training on Online Resources for Children in Alaska (ORCA), the online data system OCS uses for case management. This may be indicative of the longer experience these workers had with ORCA.

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*There seems to be considerable gap between the training offered to frontline workers and the skills they need to perform their duties. It is not clear from the data we collected if this gap can be bridged through a modified curriculum or through additional training opportunities post SKILS.*

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This gap between training they receive and the skills they need to perform their duties can be bridged in multiple ways. While continuing to work on strengthening the curriculum may be necessary<sup>8</sup>, structural opportunities to support learning on the job are important. Supervisors play a very important role as one of these structural supports. Given the positive impressions regarding supervisors, workers may already rely heavily on them for learning the necessary skills.

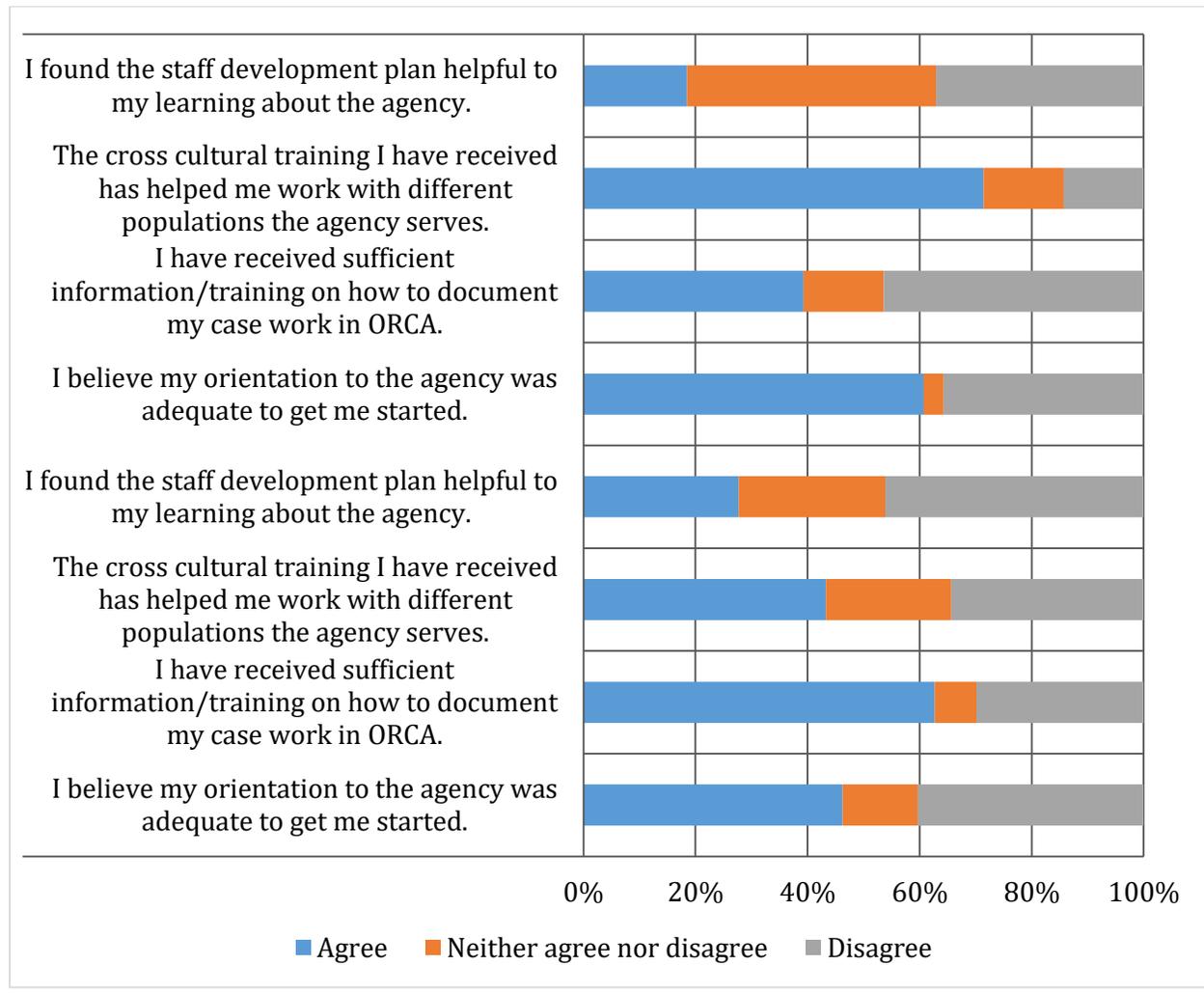
It is important to note that training and preparing a new staff member is an extended affair, and does not begin and end with a two- or three-week training in a classroom setting (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007). OCS has a Staff Development Plan that outlines specific activities that new employees must participate in prior to SKILS and immediately following SKILS. Very few workers found the Staff Development Plan (SDP) helpful to learn about the agency. We did not examine a SDP of the agency. SDP may not be designed as a learning tool, or activities identified within SDP may or may not facilitate learning about the agency or its practice model. Therefore, we cannot assess the role of the SDP in workers' assimilation of the contents of any of the trainings available to them.

While these perceptions on training and orientation are informative, it is difficult to conclude anything about the adequacy or utility of the training offered to OCS frontline workers. In addition to the assumptions listed above, the survey did not include any questions on structural opportunities available within the agency for continued learning. The CWA offers additional training opportunities through online webinars, materials, and even a smartphone app. These opportunities are available to OCS workers at their convenience. We do not know if these are required or optional. The survey did not ask if and to what extent these opportunities are availed by workers.

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<sup>8</sup> Note that this study did not assess the training curriculum, and this statement should not be interpreted as identifying a need to revise current curriculum. As in any teaching enterprise, curriculum is always revised based on continuing feedback from trainees. This is standard practice.

Figure 11: Frontline workers’ perceptions on other trainings (cross-cultural training, ORCA, orientation to the agency, and staff development plan).



*A separate evaluation of the adequacy and effectiveness of training offered to OCS workers would be useful. Such an assessment should consider the both the classroom training and other structural opportunities available within the agency.*

However, the survey asked respondents to indicate additional topics for training. Respondents could choose from 31 suggested topics, or suggest other topics not included among the choices. Table 2 shows the 10 most chosen topics by frontline workers, by those in all other positions, and the total sample. We present these choices by categories of workers to assist better targeting of training opportunities.

Table 2: Most chosen topics for additional training (number of respondents)

Rank	Frontline Workers	All other positions	Total Sample
1	Substance Abuse - Alcoholism, Heroin, Methamphetamines (64)	Substance Abuse - Alcoholism, Heroin, Methamphetamines (53)	Substance Abuse - Alcoholism, Heroin, Methamphetamines (117)
2	Trauma Impact on Children (44)	Excel (44)	Trauma Impact on Children (82)
3	Secondary Trauma (42)	Supervisory Management Skills (42)	Secondary Trauma (80)
4	Providing Testimony (40)	Trauma Impact on Children (38)	Providing Testimony (69)
5	Case Plan Development (38)	Secondary Trauma (37)	Court Procedures (62)
6	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (37)	ORCA (34)	Excel (61)
7	Clinical Issues (36)	Substantiations (29)	Clinical Issues (60)
8	Child Attachment (36)	Court Procedures (28)	Supervisory Management Skills (60)
9	DSM V (35)	Providing Testimony (28)	Child Attachment (59)
10	Forensic Interviewing (35)	Time Management (28)	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (59)

Training on substance abuse was most preferred across both groups. Both groups also requested trauma-related training and court-related training. Beyond these, there are considerable differences in preferred trainings between frontline workers and all other positions. Frontline workers seem to prefer additional training on direct service-related topics, while employees in other positions preferred management and process-related topics.

Twenty-nine respondents typed in additional topics not covered by the choices offered. Most frequently mentioned topics are:

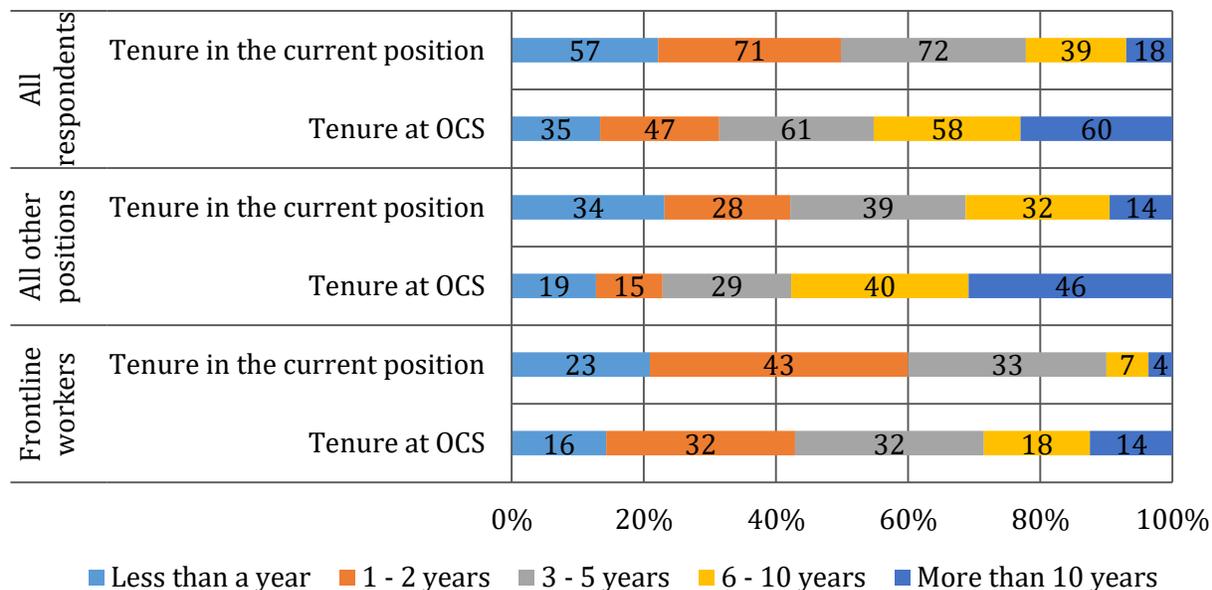
- Licensing – workers mentioned that licensing units are no longer offered through SKILLS, but their duties require the knowledge of investigations and interviewing.
- ICWA – training on the new ICWA regulations, ICWA requirements in all phases of casework, and specifically for rural areas.
- Culture – no specific aspect was mentioned.

### ***Tenure and retention***

As in most CPS agencies across the nation, approximately 30% of all its frontline workers at OCS change every year (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). Turnover happens when a worker leaves their position, whether moving to a different position within the agency or leaving the agency. This is an important metric for CPS agencies because each worker is assigned cases, and their relationships with families and children are disrupted with every instance of turnover. Turnover data is compiled by OCS and is closely followed to understand its patterns, causes, and consequences. This

survey did not include any direct questions related to turnover. However, it included two questions about tenure (in the current job and at OCS), and several questions about retention.

Figure 12: Tenure of respondents at OCS, by position title



### Tenure

Among the frontline workers (bottom two bars in Figure 12), a little over 40% have been at OCS for less than three years, and 60% of them have been in their current positions for less than 3 years, indicating that 20% moved positions within the agency. Among all employees (the top two bars in Figure 12), approximately 30% have been at OCS for less than 3 years, and almost 50% were in their current positions for less than 3 years.

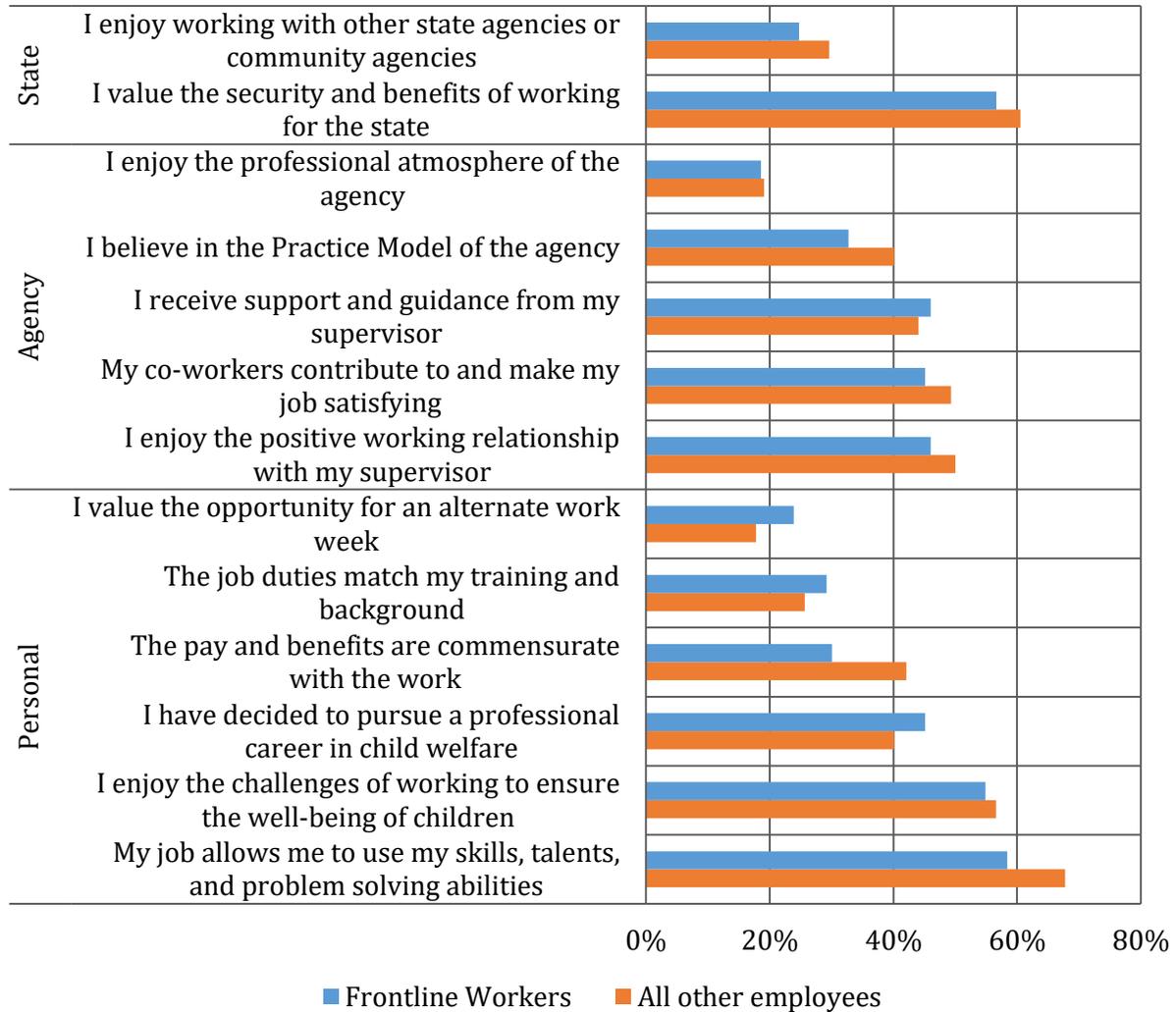
### Retention

CPS work is very emotionally taxing. Consequently, retention of workers at OCS has been a perennial challenge as with most CPS agencies. The survey included thirteen statements to assess the reasons workers choose to continue to work at OCS. Admittedly, several other potential factors that may motivate continued employment with OCS.

Figure 13 shows all thirteen statements divided into three groups, and the percentage of frontline workers and all other employees that identified each reason to continue at OCS. Two hundred and seventy two (272) employees (everyone in the sample) responded to these statements. More than 50% of both frontline workers and all other employees identified three reasons to continue at OCS – their jobs allow them to use their skills, talents, and abilities; they enjoy the challenge to ensure child well-being; and they value the security and benefits of working for the state. OCS jobs seem to appeal to the natural selves of those who consider ensuring well-being of children to be a welcome challenge. Coupled with the benefits of a state job, these positions seem ideal to those who want to make a difference in children’s lives.

Among other personal factors, almost half the workers, regardless of their tenure in their current positions, consider their positions as foundational for a career in child protection. Less than 30% said that the match between their job duties and their training is a reason for continuing with OCS. However, the statement did not differentiate between training prior to joining the position versus training they received upon hire. The opportunity of an alternate workweek mattered more to frontline workers than all other employees.

Figure 13: Reasons that employees continue to work at OCS



*Individual skills and aptitude, benefits of a state job, and support from supervisors and coworkers are major reasons for most OCS employees to continue with the agency.*

In contrast to the above statements on professional aspirations and inherent aptitude, OCS as an agency that presumably offers the ideal professional opportunity for those with matching abilities and aptitude is less of a reason for them to continue with the agency. Among the agency-related statements, roles of supervisors and coworkers seem to be very important factors for 45% of the frontline worker to continue at OCS. While more than 30% of the workers continue because they believe in the agency's practice model, they seem to consider the professional atmosphere of the agency as the least contributing factor. Most concerning is the respondents' low rate of choosing 'professional atmosphere of the agency'. While OCS employees did not choose the agency's professional atmosphere as a reason to continue with OCS, it may not indicate that the agency lacks professional atmosphere. This result only says that this is not one of the main reasons workers continue at OCS. All other employees responded similarly on all these items.

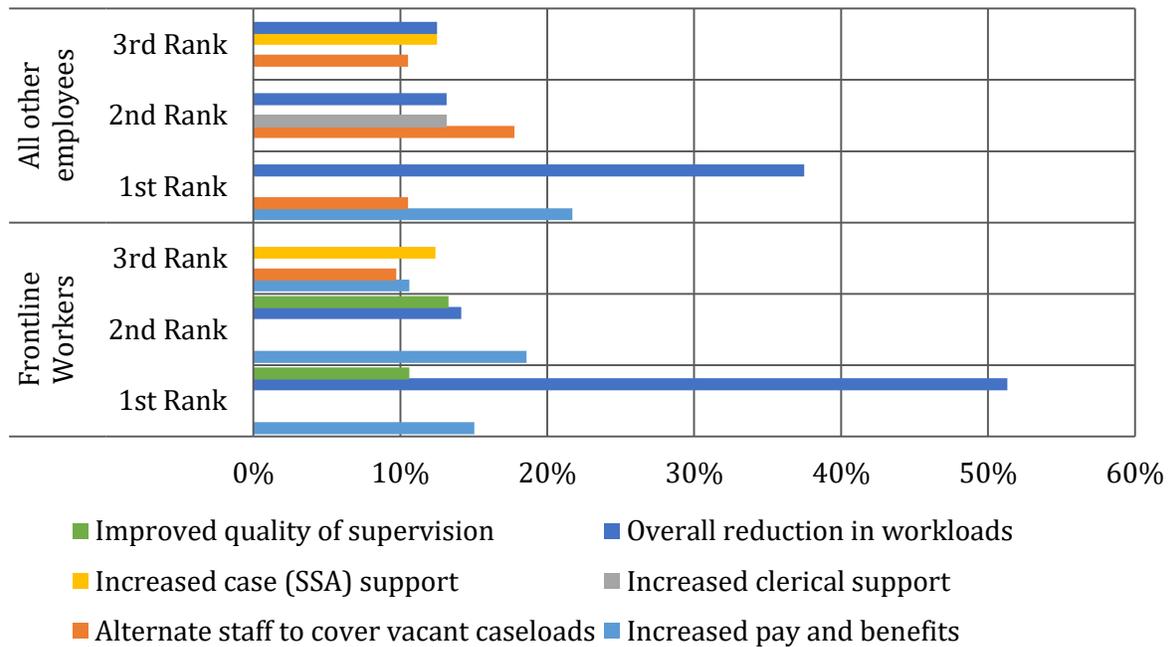
Respondents were also asked to identify the top three out of the following thirteen strategies to retain staff:

1. A better work environment (i.e. office space, furniture, supplies, etc.)
2. Opportunities for the alternate work week
3. Improved relationships with stakeholders, such as Tribal Staff or GAL's
4. Increased pay and benefits
5. Alternate staff to cover vacant caseloads
6. Increased recognition for work accomplishments
7. Greater autonomy in work decisions
8. Increased clerical support
9. Increased opportunities to influence agency policy and procedures
10. Increased case (SSA) support
11. Overall reduction in workloads
12. Improved quality of supervision
13. Increased opportunities to attend trainings

Each respondent ranked his/her top three suggestions. Figure 14 shows the top three preferred strategies within each rank, by both frontline workers and all other employees. For example, among the frontline workers, more than 50% ranked 'overall reduction in workloads' as their most preferred strategy. Another 15% chose 'increased pay and benefits' as their most preferred, and a little over 10% of them chose improved quality of supervision as their most preferred.

The most suggested strategy by both the frontline workers and employees in all other positions is 'reduction in workloads'. Workload on a case may include meeting with the children and birth parents (sometimes separately), meeting with foster family, ensuring that the birth family follows the case plan, ensuring that the children in out-of-home placement are safe and their needs are being met, attending court, ensuring adequate demonstrable progress on the case, communicating with all responsible parties, and an immense amount of documentation. With the recent increase in the number of allegations and the total number of children in out-of-home care, workload is probably higher for many workers across the agency.

Figure 14: Percentage of respondents that identified a strategy among their three most strategies for retaining staff at OCS



Following are some common strategies that other state CPS agencies use to reduce/manage workloads and caseloads (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010):

1. Staffing: Recruitment of new staff; retention of existing staff; reallocation of existing staff; maintain a cadre of specialized staff.
2. Improving worker effectiveness: Training and professional development; supervision; design teams; tools and technology; quality assurance.
3. Implementing program and practice changes: Prevention and early intervention; permanency initiatives; other systems reforms.

OCS or one of its partner agencies and organizations in Alaska may be implementing some of these strategies. OCS staff responding to the survey identified four of these strategies among their most preferred strategies in Figure 14 – staffing strategies: increase Social Service Associate (SSA) support, hire alternate staff to cover vacant caseloads, and increase clerical support; improving worker effectiveness: improved quality of supervision. All respondents also identified increasing pay and benefits of staff.

*While the benefits of a state job was identified as one of the top reasons to continue at OCS, clearly, many do not feel that the current pay and benefits package is sufficient to retain staff at desired levels.*

## Discussion

The Alaska Citizen Review Panel's recommendation in 2015 discussed the need for a critical examination of the survey instrument and subsequent reporting of results. Commenting on the previous survey reports, the Panel noted "results were summarized for the entire workforce, without any delineation between different positions. It was impossible to know the responses of those in PSS positions as opposed to those in managerial positions. Since the turnover is so high among PSS positions [almost 30% for more than a decade], it will be important to know the opinions of those in PSS positions on important issues such as pay and reasons for staying or leaving their positions." (Alaska Citizen Review Panel, 2015, p. 18). In response, we summarized the results of the 2016 OCS Staff Survey by frontline workers (PSS I, II, III positions) and all other positions. Beyond the CRP's recommendation, no other specific research questions guided the analysis.

More than 150 individuals in positions other than PSS I/II/III responded to the survey. However, since this group is not homogenous, it is difficult or impossible to conclude anything definitively without compromising identity. Therefore, we focused specifically on frontline workers.

It is important to note that the survey questions were only modified to add clarity and we did not add any new questions. Therefore, much of this information is not very different from what is already known to OCS leadership. However, results presented here certainly should equip unit supervisors and senior managers with empirical evidence of their frontline workers' opinions on several things.

### ***Frontline work continues to be difficult***

Child protection work is emotionally taxing, and workers suffer significant secondary trauma. Nevertheless, besides the safety and security of working in a state job, many workers continue to work at OCS because they believe in the practice model and identify themselves with what they believe is the best way to serve vulnerable children and families. One respondent offered this explanation on the nature of their work:

*"Our system is one of the most intrusive systems in the world. Our policies read in black and white, while we are challenged to serve families that are gray. When I serve a family, it is like taking in trauma and pouring out love, no matter how challenging and unnatural I feel as a state representative."*

This is illustrative of the general challenges that CPS workers face. With high turnover rates, serving the needs of the some of the most vulnerable children and families is extremely challenging for OCS. It only makes it worse if the community does not understand the nature and content of a frontline workers' job. Most respondents disagreed that the community understands OCS' practice model. One can imagine the plight of a frontline worker visiting a traumatized child or a family, with the belief that the community support around the family not having a clear understanding of the purpose or intent of the worker's visit, or of the practice model, that guides his work.

Workers also disagreed that community members have meaningful and established methods to communicate with OCS. Communications with the community not only clarifies the expectations on both sides, but also helps tailor the services to the needs and aspirations of the community. It is often said that child protection is not all about OCS; it is a community responsibility. However, if the

community is uncertain or unclear of OCS' charge, it is difficult to imagine a constructive working relationship between OCS and the community.

Retaining workers in such challenging positions is difficult and necessary at the same time. OCS has been reporting high turnover rates among their frontline workforce for more than a decade. While this rate fluctuated between 25% and 35%, and has been at the lower end of that range in recent years, it is rather stunning to note that as many as 60% of the frontline workers have been in their positions for less than 3 years. Workers suggested several ways to improve retention. While OCS continues to work on the most obvious strategies of improving pay and reducing workloads, some of the suggestions from respondents to this survey address many pieces of the puzzle.

Most prominent is the perceived culture of the agency, best illustrated by the perceptions of workers on their ability to communicate and provide suggestions to the senior management. While there may be established channels of communications, perception that their suggestions are not considered is illustrative of the level of empowerment they feel. With high turnover among their ranks, it is a continuing challenge to feel positive and supported:

*"Since I have been here, I've already seen several people from my batch leave. Caseloads have to be moved, family relations are disrupted - retention affects the quality of our work as well as the morale of the workers left behind. It becomes shaky territory."*

*"Morale really makes a difference in offices. If there is a black cloud and most are burnt out and only getting through the day, the office greatly feels the situation and people start quitting. Until something changes to focus on morale in the agency, I feel it will keep going on this rollercoaster that never ends and creates a really challenging work environment."*

*"The work place can be negative and accusatory at times. That should be changed."*

Much of this concern about workplace may be stemming from, as one worker put it, the stress of 'taking in trauma and pouring out love'. Arguably, everyone at OCS is contending with similar levels of stress. However, frontline workers seem most vulnerable given their lack of experience, having to make decisions that can significantly alter a child's or family's life circumstances, and being directly exposed to the dissatisfaction of the community members.

OCS is mandated to respond to allegations of child maltreatment, and must respond to all allegations that meet the thresholds set by law. Consequently, OCS has little control over the number of allegations received. It is common that OCS workers are stretched too thin in all fields and regional offices across the state. High workloads are not uncommon in many CPS agencies. The Child Welfare League of America (1999) suggests the following workload/caseload standards:

- Initial assessment/investigation: 12 active families a month per worker
- Ongoing services: 17 active families per worker and no more than 1 new case for every 6 open cases
- Combined assessment/investigation and ongoing services: 10 active ongoing families and 4 active investigations per worker
- Supervision: 5 social workers per supervisor

While these standards are dated, and likely unreal for the situation OCS finds itself in, they provide a point for comparison. Workload is much higher for OCS workers. One worker simply put it this way:

*“New and creative solutions need to be found. You can't keep dumping the cases on us without new approaches and new resources to assist with that new extra workload.”*

Another worker said:

*“I feel like no-one has acknowledged the 50% increase in workload. ‘Active Efforts’ are not being made in many cases. Workers are putting out fires and are flustered and flabbergasted.”*

OCS had two different workload studies completed in the recent past – 2006 and 2012. Each workload study recommended additional positions, and the Alaska legislature funded some of these positions. Frontline workers seem to continue to be under severe pressure for the same reasons as they were before the new positions were added each time.

While the work is challenging, there are safety concerns that OCS has been discussing for some time. Field workers, especially in the rural areas, feel unsafe. One respondent to the survey asks bluntly:

*“Field workers are not safe when performing their duties .Expected to interact with the same clients that Law Enforcement and Probation does, with little to no protection. What will it take before workers, investigators are given greater protection in the field?”*

Despite the difficulties in the workplace and threats to their personal safety in the field, many OCS employees are proud to be in their positions. Some of the many positive comments included how workers take pride in their abilities to help families and children, that their jobs allow them to make a real difference, and they are well supported by their supervisors. One worker said:

*“I found true personal friends from this work place that treated me like a family. There are employees here that not only value the wellbeing of Alaska's vulnerable children and families but also care for the wellbeing of co-workers as well. I believe I am well supported by some co-workers that encourage me to grow personally and professionally. They are my heroes and champions in this work place.”*

Some like the challenge of working in child protection, and the opportunity it presents to help vulnerable children and families:

*“I enjoy working with the families toward reunification. I believe it matters to not only these families, but also our community and society overall.”*

*“I believe in, and use my skill set to work with family's to promote family preservation. I am able to assess the needs of those family's I work with and respond with recommendations and referrals that will best promote a healthy environment and decrease the chance of removal of children.”*

*“I believe in the foster youth and genuinely want to help them and be an advocate for their continued well-being”*

This contrast among frontline workers’ perceptions may not be an established pattern, but certainly illustrates the mixed feelings of frontline workers. While they feel well supported by their immediate supervisors, such support does not seem adequate to overcome the immensity of the task at hand, emotional stress associated with child protection work, and lack of adequate knowledge and training to handle it all.

### ***What can help?***

Most frontline workers take pride in their personal abilities and aptitude, and appreciate the opportunity they have to serve children and families. However, they do not see OCS as offering the most conducive structure that affords them that opportunity. While there are a few calls for a total overhaul, most desire significant changes in several components of OCS structure and operations.

Most workers do not feel like they have established channels of communication to convey their thoughts and suggestions to the upper management, and even fewer feel that their suggestions will ever be considered. They did not agree that the community understands the purpose and nature of their work.

One common concern of everyone at OCS is training of frontline workers. Training is often cited as an important means to help frontline workers in their jobs, and to help agencies retain workers. Many respondents of this survey see SKILS training as a useful first step, but well short of equipping them to perform on the job. It is important to note that training a new employee is an extended affair, beginning with initial orientation, formal training, and many structured or informal training opportunities on the job. SKILS is a classroom based training for a two- or three-week period. Such packed training sessions are necessary but not sufficient to meet all training needs of new workers. There is considerable evidence to show that supervisors, coworkers, personnel from partner agencies, and continued structured training opportunities within the agency are all important resources for training workers. Workers acknowledge their dependence on supervisors for continued training, but also recognize the associated limitations.

*“When a worker is thrown onto the floor there is a giant learning curve - you learn most of it as you go. The most important thing to a beginning worker is a supervisor who is supportive.”*

*“I think direct supervision is what keeps employees sound and solid. It is 90% of why employees stay put.”*

In addition to good supervision and adequate training, many suggestions pointed to the need to invest in technology that enables efficiency. Ability to access ORCA from the field, availability of tablet computers and cell phones in the field, availability of safety equipment in the field, and computer software issues have all been mentioned.

The Online Resources for Children in Alaska (ORCA) system garnered most number of open-ended comments. Most employees at OCS interact with this system at some level, and profuse suggestions can be expected about a software case management system for a complex agency. ORCA was designed with substantial support and encouragement from the Children’s Bureau as part of a national movement towards automated case management systems. Tens of millions of dollars were spent for its design and implementation, and it consumes millions each year for improvements and maintenance. Respondents had many specific suggestions for changes.

Overall, frontline workers seem to report impossible working conditions, and are hoping for an urgent need for significant changes on several fronts. While the current budgetary and policy climate may not allow for all they would like to see, this report identifies some immediate needs that could be met simply through improved communication. More long-term and concrete action seems

desirable in improving training opportunities, on-the-job support, safety issues, and workload management.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. This was a volunteer effort, and a learning experience for a group of graduate students from University of Alaska Anchorage. With more time and resources, this study could be improved in many ways.

Response Rate: The overall response rate was 54.4%. This was calculated based on 272 completed responses and an approximately 500 total number of employees. With a high turnover rate at OCS, we do not have accurate counts of actual employees available to answer this survey during the three weeks when it was open. The survey was not restricted by a password or other means but disallowed multiple responses from the same IP address (computer). This meant that the same respondent could begin multiple instances of the survey on different computers. Therefore, it is possible that some of the respondents began the survey on one computer and left it unfinished, and began another attempt on a different computer and finished it. This could have led to several instances of incomplete responses that would have been repeat responses if they had finished. It also means that the same respondent could have answered the survey multiple times – a practice referred to as ‘ballot box stuffing’. We could not completely eliminate the possibility of ‘ballot box stuffing’ without collecting some identifiable information. It was decided early on that identifying information would not be sought from respondents. A quick check of the data did not reveal any obvious signs of ‘ballot box stuffing’.

While 54.4% response rate is very healthy for any social science survey, and is typical of any organizational survey, it is considerably lower than the response rates reported by OCS for the same survey in previous years. One possible explanation for this relatively lower response rate in 2016 may be the way incomplete responses were treated in past years. We considered only those responses that reached the final screen of the online survey as complete. Respondents would have reached this screen either refusing to consent or by completing the survey. Qualtrics provides the option of closing the incomplete responses as ‘complete’ when the survey is no longer active. We do not know how this option was handled in past years.

Survey Design: Our role in designing the survey instrument was very limited. We were provided the survey used in 2014. The 2014 version was developed over the years through input from senior managers and supervisors at OCS. It was extensive, and included more than a 100 questions grouped into several disparate sections. We were allowed to add clarity to existing questions, and reorganize the survey instrument. OCS requested us not to add any additional sections (topics) to the survey. Thus, we did not explore many topics in any detail to inform the analysis.

This also meant that many topics only got a cursory mention in the survey. Secondary trauma is an example. Many workers identified secondary trauma as a major concern and identified training on this topic to be among the most desirable. However, this survey included only one direct question about secondary trauma. Another example is the staff development plan. This plan dictates the activities of new workers for the first few weeks and months. There was only one question addressing this plan.

Another related concern is the terms used in the survey. Words such as ‘philosophy’ and ‘leadership’ are very broad and respondents may not have common understanding of these words. These are multi-dimensional concepts that capture many aspects of the practice of OCS. Simply asking if the respondents agreed “state office provides leadership...” could be understood in multiple ways. A common practice is to either provide an exact definition of the term, or ask specific questions addressing the more commonly understood dimensions of the concept.

It will be useful for OCS if the survey is expanded to focus on specific issues relevant to frontline workers and other groups of employees in the agency. If data is gathered on each issue periodically, such data over time will help OCS management to make informed and strategic decisions. With a considerably long tradition of conducting this survey, OCS is well placed to continue the effort.

## **PART II: FRONTLINE WORKERS TRAINING, AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF LEARNING**



## **Introduction**

Part II is a compilation of four separate student reports for the class. Collectively, we pursued several research questions using data from the 2016 survey; some data from the surveys conducted in 2012, 2013, and 2014; and six interviews with frontline workers in the Anchorage Region. Students in groups of three or four, under the direction and supervision of the instructor, identified research questions, and used research methods they learned during the semester. All students were enrolled in the graduate class, “Research Methods in Administration” taught in the Public Administration program in the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA).

In order to provide a structured learning experience, students were asked to focus on training and perceptions of learning of frontline workers. Training of frontline workers is important in their preparedness for the complexities of their job and in their understanding of new practices and legislation (Wehrmann, Shin, & Poertner, 2003). Much effort and resources are spent on training frontline workers. Training of frontline workers is identified as a strategy to retain workers, and is supported by the federal government through the Title IV-E and IV-B programs. However, little is known about the effectiveness of training of frontline workers.

Documented challenges exist. Recent evidence suggests that training of CPS workers is severely limited by resource constraints (Collins, 2008), perhaps only 10-20% of learning from training is transferred into practice (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005; Hoffmann & Freeman, 2014), and a study by the Job Task Force of the Louisiana Office of Community Services as cited by Ellett and colleagues (2007) found that newly hired workers require approximately two years to gain skills, knowledge, and propensity to work independently. While the quality of training is important, its utility is influenced by the support workers receive in their job (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009), communications within the agency, and opportunities for continued learning. Moreover, quality of training influences retention of workers.

Alaska’s Office of Children’s Services (OCS) contracts with the Child Welfare Academy (CWA) at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) to train frontline workers. Training provided through the CWA was never evaluated. The data available to us did not facilitate any evaluation of training. However, few questions allowed us to explore relations between workers’ perception of training and various other factors that are related to training effectiveness. We explored organizational communication, supervisory support, tenure, and explored the availability of training opportunities for continued learning for workers on the job.

### ***The importance of ‘learning transfer’***

We were interested in the concept of ‘learning transfer’ – the transfer of material learned during training to the practice setting. While the concept is not new, ‘learning transfer’ received increased focus in the context of child protection training in recent years. New legislation and an extensive federal review system compelled many state CPS agencies to design and deliver extensive training to their workforce. Relatively older concept of ‘learning transfer’ became relevant as the efficiency and effectiveness of these training efforts are being assessed (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). For training to have an impact, the transfer and application of material learned in training is essential (Khan, Khan, & Khan, 2011). Curry and colleagues (2005) cite several studies that indicate a 10% - 13% of learning that actually transfers, resulting in a loss of 87-90 cents per training dollar.

CPS professionals come from a mix of academic and professional backgrounds (Hoffmann & Freeman, 2014). Regardless of their backgrounds, CPS professionals are expected to implement evidenced-based interventions and be knowledgeable in a wide range of topics (Collins, Kim, & Amodeo, 2010) ranging from forensic and motivational interviewing skills, domestic violence, court proceeding, and much more. Consequently, the training of CPS workers is a significant enterprise for most CPS agencies, and training that is adequate and relevant is an important factor in achieving organizational goals, higher efficiency, and effectiveness (Khan, Khan, & Khan, 2011). With high turnover rates (20% or more), CPS agencies frequently train large numbers of new employees, consuming substantial resources in training costs (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Hoffmann & Freeman, 2014). While training alone does not guarantee improved job performance, it is widely accepted that training, along with other factors, is vitally important (Khan, Khan, & Khan, 2011).

A focus on learning transfer is important to OCS because it is shown to be a predictor of quality results (Kirkpatrick, 1959; Khan, Khan, & Khan, 2011). ‘Transfer of learning’ or ‘learning transfer’ is the ability to retain knowledge and skills, and then apply them to work in practice. Baldwin and Ford (1988) define “transfer” as the “generalization of learned material to the job and the maintenance of trained skills over a period of time on the job” (p. 65). Many factors that influence ‘transfer of learning’ have been previously identified. For example, Huczynski and Lewis (1980), Baldwin & Ford (1988), and Gielen (1996) all identified three primary groups of factors: trainee characteristics, training design/experience, and work environment. In a more recent review of research, Blume and colleagues (2010) confirmed many of the same findings, but found that the relationships between all the predictors and learning transfer are inconsistent across studies, indicating the need for further research.

We did not have any data on the individual trainee characteristics or the training design/experience. The survey included some questions on the work environment. Therefore, we focused on various factors that constitute work environment.

Additionally, data was from a series of annual cross-sectional surveys. Learning transfer and effectiveness of training efforts are best assessed using a longitudinal survey effort, measuring skills or abilities before and after the training effort, and possibly after 3 or 6 months of the training. Such a design allows for assessment of retention and application of the material learned. Due to the limitations of the survey design, which was necessitated by the nature of the project we undertook, we had to rely on limited number of questions on the perception of learning from the training frontline workers attended. In previous versions of the survey, only those that attended this training within 12 prior to the survey were able to answer this set of questions. The 2016 survey allowed all those that attended the training since 2009 when the current training module was implemented. Thus, instead of actually assessing training transfer, we had to use perception of learning as an indicator.

### ***Influence of work environment on learning transfer***

Many factors contribute to transfer of learning within the work environment. Lim and Johnson (2002) offer a helpful taxonomy of two subgroups of factors – work system related, and people related (Table 3). This study also focused on work environment as defined by supervisor support and communication climate.

Table 3: Work environment factors and influence transfer of learning: adopted from (Lim & Johnson, 2002)

<b>Work system related factors</b>	<b>People related factors</b>
Open communication climate	Support from supervisors
Change-resistance climate	Support from coworkers
Opportunity to use training	Availability of a mentor
Pace of work flow	
Match between training and department goals	
Availability of tools to apply training	
Reward for training	

Supervisor support

A majority of research has focused specifically on supervisor support. The supervisor’s support towards training and subsequent application of newly learned skills has been largely verified as having a positive influence on learning transfer (Govaerts & Dochy, 2014; Gregoire, Propp, & Poertner, 1998; Wehrmann, Shin, & Poertner, 2003; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Furtis, Schramm, Richardson, & Lee, 2015). However, while there is much literature confirming this association, there also are studies that indicate supervisor support may not be as influential on the transfer of learning as others have found (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Burke & Hutchins, 2007). This divergence in the literature indicates that the subject requires further examination and suggests that supervisor support may not be the largest contributing factor in the transfer of learning in certain organizational contexts. These differences could also indicate that other organizational factors directly influence the level of importance that supervisor support holds in the learning transfer phenomenon.

A strong definition of supervisor support aids in understanding its influence on the work environment on the transfer environment. After reviewing 99 studies about the attitudes and behaviors of supervisors relative to training transfer, Govaets & Dochy (2014) offered a holistic definition of supervisor support: “The role of the supervisor in transfer of training can be defined as a multidimensional role with the aim of optimizing trainees’ use on the job of knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in training. It entails the supervisor’s adoption of a potential variety of specific behaviors and/or attitudes before, during and after training” (p. 87) Further, the authors identified 24 operational behaviors and attitudes that reflect supervisor support including feedback to employees on the use of their training or overall job performance, coaching employees in their training development through assistance, advice and problem solving and training content alignment with the organization’s practice model by acting in accordance with training.

Communication climate

While supervisor support within the work environment is an important predictor of transfer of learning, the literature also calls for broadening research efforts to gain a better understanding of other complex factors within work environment. Morrison (1997) identified the importance of a well-maintained learning environment and suggested that work environment must promote staff development and be supported by the “culture and structures of the organization” (p. 40). To include a “continuous learning culture,” Kontoghiorghes (2004) examined a number of additional work

environment factors besides transfer climate and found they were also significantly related to the motivation to learn, thus influencing a positive transfer of learning. Hence, the overall learning environment, which includes the work environment, is a multidimensional foundation that supports effective training in the workplace.

An indicator of a learning organization is the presence of effective communication channels that allow employees to both receive information and provide feedback to the organization (Fitch, Parker-Barua, & Watt, 2014). Communication of policies and other organizational goals reflects the culture of an organization (Luongo, 2007; Furtis, Schramm, Richardson, & Lee, 2015). Applying ideas from Beer's (1984) 'Viable System Model' to a child welfare agency, Fitch and colleagues (2014) found that organizations that had effective communication feedback mechanisms readily implemented new knowledge and skills throughout the organization, enabling them to better respond to client needs.

According to Beer (1984), a viable organization is one that continuously learns and improves services to its clients by maintaining strong feedback mechanisms and communication channels. Within a child welfare agency, it is important that different levels of the organization (executive director, program managers, supervisors, and front-line workers) have established channels of communication. It is also important that supervisors and front-line workers clearly understand and follow the policies and procedures of the organization. In addition, it is equally important for the supervisors and front-line workers to be able to provide feedback to the agency so it can adjust policies in order to better enable workers and improve services to the community. Another critical component of a viable organization is that it not only maintains communication channels within the organization, but that it maintains them with the community in which it operates as well. Maintaining feedback mechanisms to gain information external to the agency is key to developing the ability to adapt and better serve the needs of a complex environment (Fitch, Parker-Barua, & Watt, 2014).

Very little research examines the effects of organizational communication – as a factor of the work environment – on the transfer of learning. Better understanding its role in influencing not only learning transfer, but also the transfer climate, is beneficial and contributes to the existing knowledge of the learning transfer phenomenon.

### ***Learning transfer and tenure***

Components of learning transfer are found to have a significant impact on tenure and retention of CPS workers (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). Prior research by Graef, Potter, and Rhode (2002), as cited by Curry and colleagues (2005), identified five sets of factors that influence turnover: reasons for staying, reasons for leaving, focused on the differences between those who stay and those who leave, focused on intentions to leave, and factors that are statistically associated with turnover. In addition to all these factors, Curry and colleagues suggest, “training and development programs have often been recommended as staff retention interventions without adequate evidence of their effectiveness” (p. 935). There is very little research evidence on the impact of pre-service training on worker retention. The training offered by CWA is not uncommon, but most research evidence available is focused on Title IV-E partnerships between child protection agencies and schools of social work for providing opportunities for in-service workers to gain professional degrees. Moreover, since we are limited by data, time, and resources, our analysis included exploring relationships between these concepts. .

## Research Questions

We pursued the following research questions:

- How are supervisor support and organizational communication climate related to transfer of learning among OCS employees?
- What is the relationship between organizational communication and supervisor support among OCS employees?
- Does the perception of supervisory support vary by tenure of the worker?
- What is the relationship between perception of learning and tenure of frontline workers?
- What are the structural opportunities available for workers to continue learning on the job?

## Methodology

While all questions are related by the concepts students chose to explore, each student group worked independently. They submitted their reports to the instructor, and the instructor compiled this final report from students' work.

### *Data Collection*

Three different sources of data were used to answer the above questions. Data from a series of cross annual cross-sectional surveys from the years 2012 through 2014, and 2016 were used to answer the first four questions. We conducted the 2016 OCS Staff Survey. Methods in collecting the 2016 data are described in Part I.

### Secondary data

We used partial data from the annual staff survey conducted in 2012, 2013, and 2014. The survey was administered by the employees of the QA section within OCS. While responses were anonymous, the survey instrument or the data collection process was not reviewed by an Institutional Review Board. This was not necessary for the purposes of the survey during those years. Nevertheless, we were informed that the responses were voluntary and anonymous.

While most questions repeated over the years, small changes were made, or a few questions added each year in response to comments from various employees. Surveys were conducted using Survey Monkey, an online survey tool. The surveys were open for approximately three weeks each year, and approximately three reminders were sent during the survey period each year to promote a high response rate. Response to the surveys has been relatively high in past years, with the 2014 survey having a 71% response rate out of 486 employees. (Placeholder1)

We obtained partial data from 2012, 2013, and 2014 survey. The final data set included 46 questions on topics covering State Office Communications with the Field, Regional Office Communication with the Field, Staff Training and Development, SKILS, and Resources. Only those respondents who responded "yes" to attending SKILS in the past year were asked to respond to the SKILS section in the survey.

The final dataset included 1,038 responses covering three years – 322 in 2012, 371 in 2013, and 345 in 2014. We did not have access to information on how the survey was closed and how incomplete responses were handled. Therefore, we did not examine for completeness of responses each year.

Respondents were not required to provide a response to every question on the survey resulting in the number of responses per question to vary from the total number of respondents to the survey each year.

### Qualitative interviews

We worked with Ms. Sara Childress, Manager of the Anchorage Regional Office (ARO), to identify eight frontline workers for semi-structured interviews. All eight interviewees were contacted by email. The interviewees did not always respond immediately, and some were contacted over the phone for an appointment. We were able to successfully complete six interviews. All interviews were conducted by a pair of students. One asked questions and carried the conversation while the other student took detailed notes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview was approximately 30 to 45 minutes long.

All three students that conducted the interviews coded the first transcript independently, and a coding scheme was identified. Codes represented structural opportunities within OCS that enabled workers to continue their learning process initiated during their initial SKILS training. This scheme was used to code the remaining transcripts.

### **Sample**

Since we focused on frontline workers, the sample was reduced to participants who identified themselves as a Children’s Protective Services Specialist I, II, III. We further limited the sample to include only those that attended SKILS training as opposed to TONE, which is no longer in use. SKILS is the entry-level training all CPS workers receive when they first begin with OCS.

Respondents to the 2012-2014 surveys were screened for SKILS attendance during the 12 months prior to the staff survey. Only those that attended the training in the previous 12 months preceding the survey were asked questions about the impact of attending SKILS training on various things. In contrast, all respondents were asked to respond to these questions in 2016. The final sample for each year is shown in Table 4.

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Table 4: Number of respondents each year that responded to SKILS related questions

Year	Total <i>N</i>
2012	67
2013	56
2014	55
2016 <sup>a</sup>	95

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<sup>a</sup> The sample in 2016 included those that attended SKILS since its first iteration in 2009. Samples from previous years includes only those that attended SKILS in the 12 months prior to taking the survey.

### **Measures/variables**

While the format and a few questions were slightly altered to improve simplicity and clarity for the 2016 version of the survey, the items in the survey largely remained unchanged from previous years. As a result, there are certain limitations that should be considered before making inferences from the results. Briefly, we constructed scales for some of the variables. The scales as described below certainly possess limitations in their operational validity. The survey items used to construct the

scales were largely inadequate for truly measuring the concepts. For example, the measure of total perception of learning by using the three questions in the survey about SKILS. Those three items certainly do not provide a thorough understanding of how frontline workers at OCS perceive all the training they receive, so it merely served as an indicator. Such limitations apply to other two scales as well. A more complete discussion on the limitations of our scales and findings will be provided in the discussion.

As our research questions indicate, we were primarily interested in the frontline workers perceptions of leaning, relationships between perception of learning (as a predictor of learning transfer), supervisor support, and communication climate. We selected specific survey items to construct scales for each of the below concepts. All items used in each scale were measured on a 5-point Likert Scale of agreement with 1 as 'Strongly Agree' and 5 as 'Strongly Disagree'. For easy interpretation, we re-coded the variables so that 1 is "Strongly Disagree" and 5 is "Strongly Agree". Below, each of the scale variables are listed and a brief discussion on the survey items that were used to construct the scales is provided.

### Perception of Learning

Caetano & Velada (2007) found that an employee's reaction to a training event predicted the successful transfer of that training to their work. They found that positive perceptions of the actual training course and content, as well as whether or not the learned material would be useful on the job, resulted in a higher transfer of learning. Lim and Johnson (2002) also examined the relationship between perceptions of learning and learning transfer and found that employees who felt they had opportunities to use the material they had been trained on in the job resulted in a higher perception of training transfer. On the other hand, they found that if there was a lack of opportunity to apply material learned in training on the job, and a lack of understanding of the material, then there would be a lower perception of learning transfer.

Typically learning transfer is measured through pre and post training assessments (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). However, perception of learning, particularly utility reactions (i.e., the employee's perception of the usefulness of the material) and the perception that there are opportunities to apply the material learned are of notable importance to this study because of the cross-sectional nature of the surveys.

Perception of learning is a predictor of learning transfer. A common measurement of perception of learning is whether the material learned is useful on the job (Caetano & Velada, 2007; Lim & Johnson, 2002). The OCS frontline workers' perceptions of the usefulness and helpfulness of the training they have received will therefore be used as an indicator of whether or not they would transfer their learning. Three items were used to measure total perception of learning (e.g., *SKILS helped me understand my role as a CPS worker, SKILS prepared me to work with families, SKILS made me confident I am working according to the practice model*). Scores on the scale range from a minimum of 3.0 to a maximum of 15.0, higher scores indicating a better perception of learning ( $\alpha = .910$ ).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of the Perception of Learning Scale by survey year

Survey year	N	Mean ( $\mu$ )	Std. Deviation (SD)
2012	64	9.0	3.5
2013	56	10.0	3.0
2014	53	10.1	3.3
2016 <sup>a</sup>	93	8.5	3.3
<i>Attended SKILS within the last 12 months</i>	27	8.4	3.3
<i>Attended SKILS prior to the last 12 months</i>	66	8.5	3.4

<sup>a</sup> The sample in 2016 included those that attended SKILS since its first iteration in 2009. Samples from previous years includes only those that attended SKILS in the 12 months prior to taking the survey.

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of perception of learning for each survey year. The sample for 2016 included frontline workers that attended SKILS within the previous 12 months, and those that attended prior to that. There was no statistically significant difference between these two groups in 2016 on the perception of learning.

### Supervisor Support

The variable ‘supervisor support’ was informed by the attitude and behavioral indicators provided by Govaerts & Dochy (2014). The specific indicators we used were *feedback*, *coaching* and *alignment*. *Feedback* represented the participants’ perception of whether or not their supervisor provided them with information relative to their use of training or general work performance. Two items were used as indicators of the overall perception of supervisor *feedback* (e.g., *I receive feedback from my supervisor; the feedback I receive from my supervisor is useful.*) *Coaching* represented the participants’ perception of their supervisor’s general support as experienced through their supervisor’s availability and responsiveness. Two items were used as indicators of the perception of supervisors fulfilling a *coaching* role (e.g., *my supervisor is available to me; my supervisor is responsive to me*). Training *alignment* represented the participants’ perception of whether or not their supervisor supported the agency’s goals and values. Two items were to indicate supervisor *alignment* with the organization’s goals and values (e.g., *my supervisor provides leadership that reflects the practice model, my supervisor supports implementation of the practice model.*) The scale ranges from 6.0 to 30.0, higher scores indicate a better perception of supervisor support within OCS ( $\alpha = .957$ ). Since respondents in 2016 were allowed to respond to questions supervisor support regardless on when they attended SKILS, sample is much larger than for previous years.

Surveys from 2012 through 2014 had only two questions on supervisor support – pertaining to *feedback*. Therefore, we could not compute a Supervisor Support scale. However, we computed a two-item Supervisor Feedback scale, scores ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 10. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for both scales by survey year.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of the Supervisor Support (Supervisor Feedback) Scale by survey year

Survey Year	N	Mean ( $\mu$ )	Std. Deviation (SD)
<b>Supervisor Feedback Scale</b>			
2012 <sup>a</sup>	55	8.2	1.9
2013 <sup>a</sup>	44	8.1	2.1
2014 <sup>a</sup>	41	7.6	2.4
<b>Supervisor Support Scale</b>			
2016 <sup>b</sup>	94	23.4	6.7
<i>Attended SKILS within the last 12 months</i>	28	24.9	5.9
<i>Attended SKILS prior to the last 12 months</i>	66	22.8	7.0

<sup>a</sup> Survey years 2012-2014 did not include six items on supervisor support. Scores reported here are for a two-item Supervisor Feedback Scale

<sup>b</sup> The sample in 2016 included those that attended SKILS since its first iteration in 2009. Samples from previous years includes only those that attended SKILS in the 12 months prior to taking the survey.

### Communication Climate

‘Communication’ is informed by the viable system model proposed by Fitch, Parker-Barua, & Warr (2014). Communication was measured using two primary indicators: *descending communication channels* and *ascending communication channels*. These indicators measure the perceived strength of the agency’s communication of policies and procedures, as well as the current feedback mechanisms.

Table 7: Items of Communication Climate Scale, by survey year (marked by ‘X’ if asked)

No	Items of the scale	2012	2013	2014	2016
	<b>Ascending Channels</b>				
1	There are regular opportunities for me to provide information and suggestions to state office management.		X	X	I have regular opportunities to provide information and suggestions to State Office management.
2	There are regular opportunities for me to provide information and suggestions to regional management.		X	X	I have regular opportunities to provide information and suggestions to Regional Office management.
3	There are opportunities for me to make suggestions for changes and upgrades to the policy and procedure manual and they are considered.	X	X	X	There are opportunities for me to make suggestions to improve the Practice Manual.
4					If I make suggestions to improve the Practice Manual, they are considered.
	<b>Descending Channels</b>				

5	There are established methods of communication from state office through memorandums and meetings which keep me informed of the activities of the agency.		X	X	Established methods of communication from State Office (through memorandums, meetings, etc.) keep me informed of the activities of the agency.
6	There are established methods of communication from my Regional Office through memorandums and meetings which keep me informed of the activities of OCS.		X	X	Established methods of communication from Regional Office (through memorandums, meetings, etc.) keep me informed of the activities of the agency.
7	When policy and procedures are developed, they are disseminated throughout the agency in a timely manner.	X	X	X	When policy and procedures are developed, I receive them in a timely manner.

Table 7 shows all the items used in computing the scale. *Descending communication channels* represented participants' perceptions of the strength of OCS's overall communication to its employees. Three items were used to assess the strength of agency *descending communication* (e.g., *established methods of communication keep me informed, when policy and procedures are developed, I receive them in a timely manner*). *Ascending communication channels* represented participants' perceptions of the strength of feedback mechanisms between front-line workers, supervisors, and the agency itself. For feedback mechanisms to be considered strong, it is important for there to not only be opportunities to provide feedback, but the ideas must also be considered. Four items were used to assess the strength of agency *ascending communication* (e.g., *I have regular opportunities to provide information and suggestions, if I make suggestions they are considered.*)

Table 8: Descriptive statistics of Communication Climate Scale by survey year

Survey Year	<i>N</i>	Mean ( $\mu$ )	Std. Deviation ( <i>SD</i> )
2013 <sup>a</sup>	42	20.8	3.8
2014 <sup>a</sup>	39	19.4	5.0
2016 <sup>b</sup>	88	21.1	5.0
<i>Attended SKILS within the last 12 months</i>	26	22.9	5.4
<i>Attended SKILS prior to the last 12 months</i>	62	20.4	4.7

<sup>a</sup> Survey years 2013-2014 included only six items on supervisor support. Scores reported here are for a six-item truncated Communication Climate Scale

<sup>b</sup> The sample in 2016 included those that attended SKILS since its first iteration in 2009. Samples from previous years includes only those that attended SKILS in the 12 months prior to taking the survey.

However, only two questions (items 3 and 7) were asked in 2012, and six were included in 2013 and 2014. We further simplified item 3 into two items for the 2016 version. Therefore, we computed two scales – one with seven items for 2016 version of the survey, and a truncated with six items for the

2013 and 2014 versions of the survey. The 2016 scale ranges from 7.0 to 35.0; higher scores indicate a better perception of the communication climate within OCS ( $\alpha = .821$ ).

## Findings

### *Work environment and perception of learning*

We considered two factors of the work environment – supervisory support and communication climate. Table 9 and Figure 15 provide a summary of the results using data from the 2016 survey. Surprisingly, the perceptions of how frontline workers feel about the support they receive from their supervisors and the training they received at SKILS were largely not related ( $r = -.097, p > .05$ ). While this is not what we were expecting to see, it is not completely abnormal considering the findings of Chiaburu and Marinova (2005), as well as Burke and Hutchins (2007). In contrast, how frontline workers felt about the communication climate in OCS and how they perceived their training at SKILS were related ( $r = .298, p < .01$ ). This indicates that as the communication climate within the organization improves, so will perceptions of training. Furthermore, the frontline worker perceptions of total communication climate and supervisor support were also related ( $r = .255, p < .05$ ), which indicates that these factors of the work environment may affect each other.

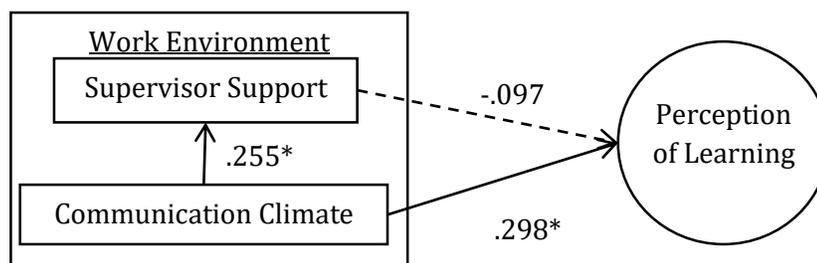
Table 9: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product-moment Correlations between work environment factors and perception of learning, using the 2016 data

Scale	1	2	3
1. Total Perception of Learning	–		
2. Total Communication Climate	.298**	–	
3. Total Supervisor Support	-.097	.255*	–
Mean	8.46	21.10	23.40
SD	3.332	5.042	6.713
Range	3.0-15.0	7.0-35.0	6.0-30.0

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

Figure 15: Relationships between factors of the work environment and perception of learning, using 2016 survey data



Note: Values are Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients. Solid lines represent significant relationship between concepts (\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ ). Dotted lines represent non-significant relationships.

Although with truncated scales of both Supervisory Feedback (instead of Supervisory Support) and Communication Climate, we found the same statistically significant relationships using the 2012-2013 data. There was no statistically significant correlation between Supervisory Feedback and workers' perception of learning. Communication climate had a positive correlation with workers' perception of learning ( $r(81) = 0.499, p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, Supervisory Feedback and Communication Climate had a strong positive statistically significant correlation ( $r(81) = 0.409, p < 0.01$ ).

**Perceptions of learning and tenure**

We considered the possibility of examining how tenure varied across different levels of perception of learning. In other words, it would be interesting to know if perception of learning and tenure are correlated. However, the structure of the questions did not allow us to explore that.

We examined if perception of learning differed by the length of tenure of the frontline workers. As shown in Table 10, the mean perception of learning did not differ significantly by tenure, either in their current job or at OCS. One-way ANOVA test did not reveal any significant differences between any of the groups. This indicates that the workers do not see any change in the knowledge they gained through SKILS over their tenure. Application of knowledge leads to critical thinking and better assimilation and higher transfer of learning (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005). This could also mean that workers do not have the opportunities to reflect on the link between what they learned through SKILS and the specific tasks on the job. Alternatively, there may be a gap between the content of SKILS and a workers' specific tasks on the job.

Table 10: Descriptive statistics of perception of learning by tenure of frontline worker

	2016			2012-2014		
	<i>N</i>	Mean ( $\mu$ )	Std. Deviation ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>N</i>	Mean ( $\mu$ )	Std. Deviation ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Tenure in the current job</b>						
Less than 1 year	22	8.3	3.0	104	9.9	3.2
1-2 years	41	8.6	3.6	27	8.6	3.8
3 years or more	27	8.3	3.3	5	9.4	4.5
<b>Tenure at OCS</b>						
Less than 1 year	15	8.3	3.4	89	9.8	3.2
1-2 years	32	8.3	3.5	30	8.9	3.9
3 years or more	45	8.7	3.3	16	10.3	3.5

**Structural supports and opportunities for continued learning**

As mentioned earlier, learning transfer is facilitated by adequate supports for on-the-job training, supervisory support, support from coworkers, and other training opportunities. We interviewed six frontline workers from the Anchorage Regional Office (ARO) to explore the available such structural supports. While such an effort is common in research endeavors like this, we did not have the time or resources to conduct a thorough exploration. These findings are certainly are not generalizable. We only could contact six frontline workers, and the Regional Manager of ARO greatly assisted in

identifying and contacting them. Therefore, there was no sampling plan nor any attempt to be representative. However, we believe these preliminary findings add value to the report, and will be useful for OCS to consider while planning for similar efforts in the future.

Our research question was to identify organizational supports that workers perceive exist within OCS for their continued learning and transfer of learning after completing their SKILS training. We suspected that a three-week intensive SKILS training is likely not sufficient to impart all the skills necessary to perform a frontline workers' job. Our suspicion was confirmed by almost every interviewee. One interviewee said *"That's definitely, very true about SKILS, (TL- yeah) it focuses on motivational interviewing (TL-yeah). The practice model, the basics, which you definitely do need to know, but I definitely walked into my first day, and, I was like, 'what do I do?' when I got transferred my first case, that's when it was all on-the-job training"*. While classroom has its limitations, it has its role too: *"SKILS focuses on motivational interviewing, the practice model, basics, which you definitely do need to know."* However, it was clear from the interviews that much is learned on the job.

We identified two major themes. Below is a description of each theme:

### On-the-job Learning

There were several comments about the opportunities that workers have to learn on their jobs. However, very few of them are structured or planned. There were four different types of on-the-job learning identified by interviewees:

Peer support: Interviewees recognize this to be the most important source of learning on their jobs. One interviewee said, *"I don't think I could do the job I do without my coworkers or my supervisor"*. Workers value the SKILS training they receive before they begin their job, but, as one interviewee put it: *"Class for two[three] weeks is good, but not till really into [the job], in a situation and have questions to ask, someone experienced to help you prioritize that, that for me was the best tool"*. Another said: *"The best training that I received was from working with other case workers who have been here longer than me, the people who were here, that took me under their wing"*. They all recognize that they *"just learn so much from other people that have done it for a long time"*. One worker said: *"every case is different, you need that support, every case brings up unique situations, you can't go out expecting that you'll know everything, what that looks like, and so it's/ you need that support, without that you'll drown"*.

Field Experience: Interviewees clearly recognize the limitations of a classroom, and stressed the importance of making connections between material they learn in SKILS and the experience they gain in applying that material in their job. They pointed out *"it's really just through supervision, and staffing cases, staffing with other workers, just bouncing ideas with other people, that's how you really learn to do the job"*. Talking about ORCA, one worker said: *"learning our system is mostly by doing it, just clicking through, trying to learn, trying to remember how to do stuff, you have to try things a couple times to remember how to do it"*. This method is not particularly easy, as one worker put it: *"went to court on my own, went to meetings on my own. That was difficult, but it also helped me learn right away, being out in the field, I knew exactly what questions to ask. It helped me know what I was getting into"*. Interviewees mentioned a New Employee Welcome (NEW) training program specific to ARO workers. This program allows new workers to experience the life of an OCS' client. One interviewee mentioned that workers really appreciate the learning opportunity: *"The NEW training was really*

*great I think because you actually had to be out in the community, learn how to take the people mover, learn how to access resources that we ask our clients to access and not realize like this is tough. You know, so I think that was a really important like real reality training”.*

Observational learning: While living through the experience of a client is a powerful experience, observing another, a more experienced worker, is a very meaningful learning experience. Interviewees stated, *“So, in my experience, the best training that I received was from working with other case workers who have been here longer than me, the people who were here, that took me under their wing, that were like ‘come on, let’s go out and do this home visit’ and then I was able to just observe their style”.* Another worker said: *“There is nothing in the world better than shadowing a seasoned worker and watching their “mad skill”, it’s pretty awesome, there’s nothing like it”.* However, workers did not report a formal mentorship program at OCS.

Supervisory support: As mentioned earlier, most frontline workers derive high levels of support from their supervisor, and agreed that supervisors provide timely and useful feedback. Interviewees agreed with this larger conclusion: *“my supervisor was my mentor. I was super fortunate to have a strong supervisor the first time I went out, and then she was promoted and moved on”.* Another interviewee said, *“I think the best way, for me for ongoing training and learning how to do my job is, just through supervision”.* Interviewees reported how their supervisors did more than just overseeing their work. Supervisors were also mentors, support persons, friends, and colleagues. Many benefit from supervisors that reach out to support their workers with resources both for professional and personal growth.

#### Additional formal training

Most comments about formal training were directed at SKILS. While interviewees pointed out the many limitations of SKILS, they had very few other formal trainings past SKILS. One interviewee mentioned a 5-month coaching program that trains supervisors and managers to be experts on the OCS practice model. Another worker mentioned “Child First”, which the worker said is the only other formal training available past SKILS. According to this worker, even this training is not available to all workers. Other interviewees mentioned a series of formal training opportunities they had:

- NEW (New Employee Welcome) program – specifically “A day in the life” was mentioned as the most useful and meaningful part.
- Child First
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Trauma-informed care
- Healthy Families
- Knowing Who You Are
- Engaging Women in Treatment
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment

However, these trainings are optional as opposed to SKILS being mandatory. There seems to be some mandatory trainings, but they seem to be few. One interviewee mentioned a monthly training that takes place during a mandatory meeting. This training could be on any topic relevant to their practice.

In addition to SKILS, CWA offers several other resources through their website. Some of the interviewees mentioned the CWA app as a useful tool. Interviewees reported that they find some of these useful, but they are not mandatory. One interviewee said that those that have a graduate degree and need to maintain their continuing educational units (CEU) are more motivated to use those resources. For those that do not need CEUs, there seems to be no other incentive.

Interviewees commented about ORCA training being too short during SKILS. While workers spend considerable amount of their time on their jobs using ORCA (some estimated it to be about 50%), they do not get adequate training on using ORCA. There was almost complete unanimity on the inadequacy of training on ORCA.

## **Discussion**

The training of CPS workers is an essential component of the OCS mission to decrease abuse and neglect, as well as to strengthen families so they are able to provide safe and permanent homes for children. We examined factors of the work environment, specifically supervisor support, communication climate, and structural supports for continued learning. We examined the effect of tenure on perception of learning. Surprisingly, communication climate has a more positive association with perceptions of training than supervisor support, which does not appear to show any relationship. We found no difference in perception of learning regardless of how long a worker was in their job or at OCS. This may just be the result of limitations of the survey instrument. Through our interviews, we found that on-the-job learning is extremely important for workers, and formal trainings are valued but not as utilized as the workers wish.

Our research shows that communication climate and supervisory support are positively related. As the communication climate improves so does the supervisory support. This observation concurs with the literature. Now that a proven relationship is established, changes in communication climate and supervisor support may yield results that are more positive. In addition, OCS workers regard supervisors highly but the supervisor's current role in transfer of learning seems minimal. As found by others, additional work environment factors at OCS may have a stronger influence on learning transfer (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Burke & Hutchins, 2007).

We found that communication climate is positively associated with perceptions of learning. The relationship was weak, indicating that OCS could cultivate perceptions of learning by focusing specifically on the development of stronger feedback channels. We found no relationship between tenure and perceptions of learning. This could be because of the structure of the questions in the survey. Respondents were only answering about their perceptions of SKILS, and were not asked about how their experience enhanced their understanding of SKILS.

Through the interviews, we found that workers find the many on-the-job learnings to be extremely valuable. Specifically, they value the experiences they have while following a senior worker, discussions they have with their peers, and opportunities that allow them to work together on a case. They particularly valued the "A day in the Life" part of the NEW training being offered to the ARO workers. Other formal trainings offered intermittently at OCS or available through CWA are valued, but not widely utilized.

## **Limitations**

There are many limitations. Primarily, this was a class project, and we were limited to 15 weeks. If we did not have OCS support the class with help in distributing the survey and recruiting subjects for the interviews, we would not have been able to complete this project.

Another major limitation was our inability to create a new survey instrument. While this would have been very time consuming within the time frame of the class, it would have allowed us to explore many topics in more detail. Most surveys are designed to collect data that would help answer research questions identified prior to designing the survey instrument. In addition, effectiveness of training is often measured by a pre- and a post-test design where trainees are tested before and after a training session. For example, all fourteen articles on the effectiveness of child welfare trainings from 1990-2009 reviewed by Collins, Kim and Amodero (2010) included both a pre and post survey written specifically to evaluate training. We did not have that opportunity. Instead, the survey participants for this study took the training at different times; therefore, each respondent could have received different content or a different training method. While valuable information was gained by this research project, the results must be considered in view of the survey instrument's limitations.

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