

2019



OCS Response to Citizen's Review Panel (CRP) Recommendations



OFFICE OF
CHILDREN'S
SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services' Office of Children's Services (OCS), I want to thank the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) for their partnership in efforts to improve the child welfare system in Alaska. The CRP serves as a mechanism for public participation in child protection policy and practice, as well as a system to evaluate OCS compliance with federal and state laws. I appreciate the opportunities I have had to have mutual information sharing and communication with the panel.

June of 2019 was a very busy month for OCS leadership. We received federal approval for our Program Improvement Plan (PIP) stemming from the 2017 Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). We also submitted our final Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR) for the 2014-2019 Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP). We additionally submitted our new CFSP for 2020-2024. Recognizing that the welfare and safety of Alaska's children must encompass a broad and collaborative approach, the preparation for this five year plan included the engagement of stakeholders to create a new vision for Alaska's child welfare system. I have added this below for your review.

Fundamental to the provision of OCS services is the commitment that every family is treated with dignity, respect, and with consideration to their family and cultural values. With this in mind, OCS has also updated our mission and vision statements along with our workforce values and guiding principles.

MISSION STATEMENT

Ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children by strengthening families, engaging communities, and partnering with tribes.

VISION STATEMENT

Safe Children, Strong Families

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **Safety** — Every child has the right to be safe.
- **Family** — Children remain in their home whenever possible.
- **Strength** — Families have specific strengths and cultures that are valued.
- **Success** — Empower children and youth to succeed.
- **Permanency** — Foster care is temporary. Every child deserves a safe and permanent home.
- **Community** — Community Partnerships are essential to engage and support families.
- **Connection** — Children need lifelong connections to their family, community and culture.

- **Tribes** - Tribes and OCS have a respectful government-to-government relationship.

CORE VALUES OF AN EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE

- **Hope — Motivates us**
We anticipate success. We are a strengths based organization. We support and empower people on their journey to success.
- **Integrity — Directs us**
We are trustworthy. We are reliable, authentic, and loyal. We do what we say we will do. We have the courage to do the right thing.
- **Respect — Guides us**
We honor all people. We value the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people. We treat others the way we want to be treated.
- **Empathy — Leads us**
We seek to understand. We work to listen and understand the unique perspectives and feelings of others.

OCS is excited about the strategies embedded in our PIP, as well as the CFSP, and we are pleased to see that several of the recommendations of the CRP align with our strategic goals.

Thank you again for your partnership and joint efforts aimed to improve outcomes for vulnerable Alaskans.

Natalie Norberg, Director

Alaska's Vision for Child Welfare

Empower Communities to Strengthen Families and Prevent Child Abuse

Develop a skilled and stable child protection workforce

- Recruit and develop workforce with continued enhancement of competencies and core values.
- Promote workforce wellness and retention.

Partner with Tribes and community agencies to provide support and services to families

- Strengthen families through Community engagement and connection to services.
- Statewide expansion of cultural services.



Prioritize identified essential child protection services

- Ensure early placement with relatives, timely initiations, monthly caseworker visits are conducted, and caseplanning is family centered and timely.
- Create a culture that values the prioritization of essential services.

Build a culture dedicated to evaluation and continuous quality improvement (CQI) informed by data driven decision making

- Implement best-practices and agency activities based on CQI.

CRP GOAL ONE

Assess Family Reunification Efforts and Best Practices

The panel would like to continue an examination of OCS efforts in promoting family reunification as a goal for children in OCS custody.

OCS Response

OCS is aligned with the CRP in its continued examination of OCS efforts to promote family reunification as a priority permanency goal if removal of children from their family home is necessary. OCS continues to view workforce retention and the ability to consistently link families to needed community services as primary factors that impact all child welfare outcomes, including family reunification rates.

Efforts made to enhance workforce retention and stability:

1. Created a safety officer position to help address workforce safety issues.
2. Working to extend the contract for the Employee Assistance Program to allow for onsite clinical support services and debriefing.
3. Coverage of rural offices with weekly on/off work schedules and flexibility around work station location.

CRP Recommended Action 1.1

Early and consistent involvement of community partners in the initial assessment process.

OCS Response

OCS has implemented policy and procedures to involve Tribal partners at the very beginning of the initial investigation/assessment process. Tribes are notified of both screened in and out reports of child maltreatment regarding their Tribal members. The protective services specialist initiating the investigation is required to make efforts to include the Tribe when appropriate by inviting Tribal social workers to participate in the child, parent and collateral interviews throughout the investigation and assessment process. Additionally, the OCS practice model encourages engagement with family members, friends and community partners in the development of and participation in safety plans aimed at keeping families safely together until the investigation is completed, and a determination is made regarding the level of intervention needed.

The early and consistent identification and assistance with accessing community support services for families in crisis is an area OCS is committed to improving. New strategies and initiatives underway to assist with this work include:

- Partnering with the Division of Behavioral Health during the rollout of new community based services made available through Medicaid, under the 1115 Behavioral Health Medicaid waiver, to ensure priority referrals for families involved in the child welfare system.
- OCS has implemented a hotline number and centralized e-mail address for help with purchasing special items or emergency supplies for foster children. This allows for Resource Families and OCS staff to quickly access necessary items for the safety and well-being of children. Currently this is provided for our Southeast and Western offices and will be implemented statewide by January 2020. OCS is also undergoing efforts to expand this special needs hotline for services, as well as goods.

CRP Recommended Action 1.2

Prioritization of building relationships with the biological parents to increase buy-in to their family reunification plan.

OCS Response

A stable workforce is integral in building relationships with parents. OCS views family engagement as a central role in the ability to promote the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system, and is vital to successful practice.

Specifically, OCS provides family engagement training to all new OCS employees and on-going training for current employees. Several of the strategies in the PIP are intended to improve parent engagement through supervisory coaching, judicial involvement to increase parent buy-in and staff mentoring. Staff are also provided with the [Cultural Resource Guide](#) to include culturally appropriate services on case plans intended to increase parental engagement.

CRP Recommended Action 1.3

Provide mentorship continuing the culture shift within OCS of prioritizing family reunification.

OCS Response

In 2018, OCS established a case worker mentoring program to support new workers transitioning from classroom training to field work. The OCS mentor program serves as a statewide transfer-of-learning link between the mandated Child Welfare Academy (CWA) core classroom instruction and the practical application of knowledge and skills within the field by workers. This includes prioritizing efforts for family reunification and linking families with the appropriate services. Through one-on-one mentoring relationships with the new worker and guidance for the worker's supervisor on how best to support the worker, this program will enhance statewide competencies and aid in the retention of child welfare workers in Alaska.

OCS has five statewide mentors that are assigned a cohort of new frontline child protective services specialists at each initial training Standards, Knowledge & Insight Leading to Success (SKILS) class. The mentor meets with each mentee face-to-face in the field within two weeks of completion of SKILS. Field based activities, group trainings and meetings center on core competencies for three months based upon the individual's initial date of hire. The mentor provides weekly feedback to supervisors. At three months, the mentor will in conjunction with the specialist and supervisor complete an informal competency based evaluation for the purposes of developing an individual training plan.

At six months, the mentor provides formal feedback to the worker. At this time, the formal assignment of the mentor to the mentee is dissolved, unless identified that a longer mentor/mentee relationship is necessary to aid in the support of application of practice by the worker and identified in an ongoing training plan.

CRP GOAL TWO

Evaluate OCS Staff Wellness Efforts and Community Engagement

OCS Response

OCS appreciates the CRP focusing on employee wellness efforts as it is imperative to the agency's goal to retain skilled and quality staff. OCS has been developing a five year employee recruitment and

retention plan as a PIP strategy as well as a requirement from HB 151. This plan contains key wellness and retention efforts including the implementation of longevity bonuses, educational vouchers, wellness leave, consistent practices for staff acknowledgment, critical incident debriefs and more.

CRP Recommended Action 2.1

When possible allocate resources for employee wellness initiatives

OCS Response

OCS agrees with this recommendation from CRP. OCS continues to work with the Department of Health and Social Services' Human Resources and the Commissioner's Office to secure the ability to provide incentives for OCS employees directly related to enhancing employee wellness.

OCS is also working to flexibly staff rural offices where it has been difficult to retain staff. This is through letters of agreement where employees are able to apply for rural positions despite living in urban areas of Alaska. The department provides for travel and housing while they work alternate schedules to maintain safety of children in rural areas.

OCS has also allocated for an OCS safety officer. This position serves as the statewide coordinator of safety programs within OCS to ensure a safe physical environment for all employees. The safety officer is responsible for the development of safety plans and training, as well as implementing occupational safety and health policies. The position also provides individualized, real-time worker safety strategies to address threats experienced by OCS employees.

CRP Recommended Action 2.2

Place problematic workers in centralized locations for increased support, monitoring and guidance.

OCS Response

Due to the confidential nature of personnel matters involving the move of an employee to an alternate worksite, OCS is unable to provide a detailed response to this recommendation.

CRP Recommended Action 2.3

Share successful wellness initiatives internally with other OCS offices.

OCS Response

OCS fully agrees with this recommendation, and has been making efforts to include successful wellness initiatives on the agendas of numerous leadership meetings. The OCS statewide Change Management Leadership Team's monthly meeting provides an opportunity for regions and groups to report on successful initiatives aimed at improving wellness and retention of employees. OCS regional managers share ideas and work hard to engage community partners to help support and appreciate OCS case workers through donated goods and services, such as securing volunteer chaplains, volunteer clinical staff to provide critical incident debriefs, or food for appreciation luncheons.

CRP GOAL THREE

Region-Specific/Culturally – Appropriate Training for OCS Staff

OCS Response

OCS appreciates the input from CRP regarding the OCS training plan with a focus on community

resources. OCS, through partnership with the CWA, has added a sixth week to new employee SKILS training. This sixth week of training will be focused on the specific region the new employee will be working in. Input from the OCS regional Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) specialists is included during the development of the training agenda.

OCS has on staff five regional ICWA specialists and a statewide ICWA coordinator, whose primary duties are to assist OCS workers identify and help develop positive working relationships with the Tribal governments/entities responsible for oversight on OCS cases involving children that fall under the jurisdiction of ICWA.

Region specific and culturally appropriate training is embedded throughout SKILS training currently. In the first week of SKILS new staff learn to use their ICWA handbooks to determine contact information for Tribes, identify placement preferences and other ICWA definitions. An orientation to the Cultural Resource Guide is also provided. Cultural communication differences are discussed and mock interviews are practiced. There is opportunity for Tribal members to participate in a panel discussion to provide insight to new OCS staff about their roles and how they can work with them to improve family outcomes.

ICWA II training, formerly known as Advanced or Specialized ICWA, is now a two day training provided regionally onsite at OCS offices or other community locations, rather than at the CWA in Anchorage. It is co-facilitated by an OCS regional ICWA specialists and a Tribal partner at the regional and local level. This allows for regional/local specific information to be shared and encourages early collaboration.

Many OCS field offices include an in-person orientation at the local Tribal social services office as part of the official onboarding for new OCS case workers. Additionally, the Anchorage OCS office hosts/ provides onsite office space for Tribal employees with the Nome Eskimo Community, Bristol Bay Native Association, Kawerak and Association of Village Council Presidents Tribal child welfare programs.

CRP Recommended Action 3.1

Prioritize collaboration with Tribal partners in internal and external OCS communications.

OCS Response

OCS agrees with this recommendation and will continue to prioritize collaboration with Tribal partners. During the 2017 CFSR, OCS responsiveness to the community was rated as an area of strength for Alaska. OCS ICWA specialists model and provide guidance to OCS staff on appropriate and respectful communication with Tribes.

CRP Recommended Action 3.2

Utilize training events as an opportunity to build relationships through cross-cultural networking.

OCS Response

OCS agrees with this recommendation from the CRP and is open to ideas on how to expand what is currently in place. OCS engages Tribal partners during new and on-going employee training. Discussion panels with Tribal representatives occur in ICWA I and II trainings. Each region has a Regional Tribal State Group that plans annual cross-cultural networking opportunities that include Tribal representatives and other community providers.

CRP Recommended Action 3.3

Local offices should seek to collaborate with local Tribal partners to provide region and cultural specific training for caseworkers as part of initial orientation process.

OCS Response

Tribal State Collaboration Group was restructured during 2014 to bring a focus to regional based efforts. Each region then formed their own Regional Tribal State Groups to identify their own strategies to enhance local partnerships and collaboration. These Regional Tribal State Groups incorporate training opportunities into their annual events.

Efforts to collaborate with local Tribal partners to provide region and cultural specific training is on-going for the provision of ICWA I and II and other parts of SKILS. Recently the Blanket Exercise was added to SKILS, which provides an experiential learning activity that walks participants through Alaska Native history. This provides new staff with an increased awareness of the impact historical trauma has on the families they work with.

OCS also provides Knowing Who You Are (KWYA) workshops to all new employees within the first two years of employment. KWYA provides a framework for participants to identify and explore their identity in order to understand how ones race and ethnicity impacts personal and professional interactions. Through participant sharing regional and cultural specific knowledge is gained.

CRP GOAL FOUR

Awareness of Tribal-State Strategic Plan

OCS Response

The Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children Strategic Plan, hereinafter referred to as the “Plan” was finalized in May of 2016. The guiding principles of the Plan’s vision and mission are to keep Alaska Native children safe within their own culture and to align systems of care through the cultivation of a respectful government-to-government collaboration between the State of Alaska, Tribes and Tribal organizations. Workgroups were established to work on the following goals and priorities:

1. Respectful Government-to-Government Collaboration & Partnership
2. Tribal Self-Governance
3. Embrace & Implement the Spirit of the Indian Child Welfare Act
4. Child Welfare System Alignment
5. Community Engagement
6. Culturally Specific Services and Supports

Workgroups made meaningful progress toward the achievement of the Plan goals. As of July 2019, the workgroups accomplished many of the objectives and deliverables outlined in the initial Plan. The goals and work items that remain represent long-term activities incorporated into existing workgroups or initiatives within OCS and the Tribal-State Collaboration Group.

The continuation of the mission, vision, principles and values of the Plan are sustained in the current work of the Tribal-State child welfare system. OCS, Tribes and Tribal organizations will continue to work collaboratively and respectfully to keep Alaska Native children safe, close to home and within their own cultures. OCS and Tribes are committed to addressing the systemic ramifications of racism and historical trauma. This ongoing collaboration will increase culturally relevant supports to Alaska Native children and families within their home communities.