STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

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Susan Heuer, Chair
Citizen Review Panel
Office of Public Advocacy
900 W. 5th Ave., Suite 525
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Chair Heuer:

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services, our other partners and our stakeholders in the child protection system, thanks to you and your panel for the 2009 Citizen's Review Panel annual report. Enclosed please find our response to your findings and recommendations.

I truly appreciate each panel member for the time and efforts freely contributed to the most important of visions – Safe Children and Strong Families. I look forward to another year of productive partnership.

Sincerely,

Tammy Sandoval
Director

Enclosure

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) is thankful to the Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) for their diligence in examining policies, procedures and practices that then inform recommendations toward systems improvement of the OCS. We know that we cannot do the work necessary to prevent, reduce and remedy child maltreatment without the assistance of all of our community partners. In 2009, the CRP and OCS continued its collaborative work to ensure the safety, permanency and well being of the children of Alaska. We believe we have forged a very effective partnership.

2009 proved to be another active, but very productive year for the OCS. Again this year, there was a federal audit for which to prepare and host. In July of 2009, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) conducted a secondary review of the Title IV-E Foster Care Program to determine the level of Alaska's compliance with federal mandates. Secondary reviews are mandated when a primary review determines a state not in substantial compliance with Title IV-E requirements as was the case for Alaska in September of 2006. Reviews ensure compliance with IV-E eligibility requirements and validate financial claims for federal reimbursement to ensure that payments were made on behalf of eligible children.

In November, the ACF determined the OCS to be in substantial compliance with federal eligibility requirements and with the allowable percentage case error and dollar error rate of 10 percent. The OCS was commended for its efforts to improve the program since the September 2006 review and provided with recommendations for continued improvement. The next review will be held within three years of July 2009.

Another federally mandated milestone that was reached this year is the Program Improvement Plan (PIP) was approved on December 1, 2009. The PIP is the corrective action plan to address areas needing improvement as identified in the Child and Family Services in September 2008. A copy of the PIP document can be viewed/downloaded at - http://hss.state.ak.us/ocs/Publications/2009_pip.pdf . The OCS will need support and assistance from every one of its stakeholders in completing the PIP in the required 2 year period. The foundation of the PIP and that of the entire OCS, is our Practice Model Overview. This document seeks to create a conceptual map and represent our organization's ideology to how staff, stakeholders and families served within the system will partner together to engage in child welfare services. See - http://hss.state.ak.us/ocs/Publications/2009_practicemodel.pdf.

As we did last year, we continued rolling out Family to Family (F2F) within OCS, this year to Wasilla. The F2F Initiative is now almost 5 years old and we have begun institutionalizing the core principles and practices statewide, therefore we are going to soon drop the phrase "Family to Family Initiative" and instead, refer to the particular associated practices, to demonstrate our commitment to the work being fully incorporated into OCS' repertoire.

The following are the responses to the specific recommendations made in the CRP 2009 Annual Report:

Recommendation 1 - That resources for state departments be standardized.

While the OCS can only request and encourage state government to allocate resources to increase support for the safety of our children, we are appreciative that the CRP has included this recommendation in the 2009 report. We also recognize the concerted efforts of the Administration and the Legislature to increase the resources available to OCS in the past several years. Since 2005, we have been given 70 new frontline positions and a net increase of close to $12 million.

OCS completely agrees with your observations regarding the extremely slow Internet connection speeds in our rural offices. Unfortunately, the solution is far from simple and the problem is not exclusive to OCS. Many rural offices in Alaska have Internet connectivity issues.

Department and OCS information technology staff believe that the best and only effective solution to Internet connection speeds is for some entity; be it state, federal, or private, lay a fiber optic cable from Anchorage to Western Alaska. The cost of this enterprise is in the tens of millions if not hundreds of millions of dollars. Even if funding becomes available, a solution will not be realized for several years.

Knowing that the best and most permanent solution is out of immediate reach, we aggressively remind our state Enterprise Technologies staff of the problems in our rural offices and seize any and all alternate solutions. For example, OCS was able to dramatically increase Internet speeds in our Kodiak office by partnering with our federal peers. To quote Mary Gray, our Social Worker IV Supervisor in Kodiak: "It has utterly changed our productivity for the better."

Recognizing that our Bethel, St Mary's, and Aniak offices are some of the most adversely affected offices, we were able to work with the Governor's Office to secure funding for the purchase of 17 laptop computers that now allow the field workers from those offices to enter case notes and keep up on their email correspondence while in the field. Once the field worker returns to their respective office, the case notes can then be uploaded into ORCA.

OCS is also working with our Information Technology partners on new technologies for compressing the size of the Internet signal being transmitted through the satellite to and from our rural offices. This is a difficult and expensive solution, and there is a high risk that the technology will not work in Alaska. Because we believe that if there is a chance it will help our rural offices, we must at least try.

We also agree that the ability to provide rural housing would positively impact retention of staff in the rural areas. We have taken the issue to DHSS administration and learned that while there are some existing models in other departments; those models were grandfathered in, making the effort to provide housing a little more difficult for OCS. We have learned that we may be able to provide housing by leasing existing rental property, but must charge workers for rent. When vacant, the OCS would need to continue lease payments, dipping into already stretched operating funds. This option has not been discounted, and we will continue to determine where the most need is and explore options available to us.

Recommendation 2 - That OCS continue to work toward having a fifth service region headquartered in Bethel.

While the OCS believes there is merit to the CRP recommendation to establish a fifth, 'Southwest' service region for the Bethel area, again this year the Governor's Proposed FY2011 Budget does not include such a request for OCS. The CRP reports that the current South-central region's 12 field offices, Bethel included, are twice as many as the region with the next largest number of field offices (Northern region). The current South-central region includes 37% of Alaska's land area and 30% of Alaska's population. This newly proposed region includes an area of the state with the highest rates of sexual assault. It is culturally distinct due to its large Yup'ik population. Communities in this area are geographically and culturally closer to Bethel than Wasilla, the current region's headquarters. These communities represent off-road, small and rural communities and villages.

OCS believes having a fifth service region headquartered in Bethel could result in an increase in local knowledge of families; familiarity with the available service array; an increase in cultural competency of OCS staff; better support, retention, supervision and management of OCS staff; a savings in OCS travel expenses; and improved outcomes for children and families in the region.

While the CRP has created considerable public support for this area of the state standing as its own region, it is important to note that this recommendation is contingent upon other State of Alaska priorities.

Recommendation 3 - Supporting and developing the relationship between OCS & ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) workers.

The OCS agrees wholeheartedly with this recommendation. It is precisely our intent to continue to collaborate with tribal agencies to best serve Native Alaskan children and families. For several years OCS and tribes (Tribal State Collaboration Group) have come together three times a year to meet, discuss and plan our collaborative work to improve outcomes for Native Alaskan children in the state's custody. TSCG addresses all policies related to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and state compliance with ICWA.

In the past several years, both OCS and tribes have agreed on the value of cross training and have begun to invite one another to training as a means of increasing collaboration, shared education experiences and improved cultural competency of state staff. One example of such training is "Knowing Who You Are" (KWYA) training. Please see http://www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/KnowingWhoYouAre/ for more information about the specific 3 phase training that has been mandated for all OCS staff involved in child and family decision making.

Most evident of the commitment by OCS to collaborate with tribes is the work of the Federal Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center (IC). In April of 2009, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, together with 15 other Alaska Tribal Organizations, applied for and received an award of assistance to further TSCG's efforts related to disproportionality within the state child welfare system. The IC will assist tribes, OCS and the Court System to develop a targeted strategy and action plan for addressing long term systematic change with a keen focus on several crucial issues impacting Native families who come to the attention of OCS.

Additionally, last year, state and tribal work expanded to include working together on child maltreatment prevention, in that an Alaskan Team was selected to attend a National PREVENT conference to develop culturally competent strategies related to reducing the rates of child maltreatment in the Native communities in Alaska.

The OCS continues to develop and support ways to empower tribes to intervene with families before an OCS intervention is warranted and to be involved in an Alaskan Native family's OCS intervention from the very beginning. Given the past history of state involvement with tribes, this work will be ongoing and critically reviewed to assure improvement in communication, trust and outcomes for families.

Recommendation 4 - OCS should explore any and all means to relieve social workers of some of their paperwork burden.

Like most of the challenges facing Alaska's Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers, the paperwork aspect of the job is an area of concern for CPS workers in many other states. CPS management across the nation strives to balance the necessity of meaningful family contact with the requirements of documentation and reporting a type of public service that is subject to legal review and strict federal funding rules. The OCS completely agrees with the recommendation that caseworkers should be spending as much of their time as possible with the children and families they serve. We will continue to explore and implement ideas that can decrease time spent on administrative duties and increase the time our staff spends doing work in the field with families.

Transcription services or 'dictation services', as referenced in CRP report, was being utilized throughout the OCS Anchorage, Fairbanks, Ketchikan, Kenai, Wasilla, Homer and Unalaska offices during 2009. On average, approximately 32 caseworkers used the service each month. The availability of transcription services is explained to all new caseworkers when they attend the new employee orientation training provided by the UAA Family & Youth Services Training Academy. To increase transcription services usage in 2010, OCS management intends to focus on a promotional effort by identifying super-users of the service and asking them to deliver presentation and training opportunities to their peer groups. (As a side note to the dictation services issue, the Juneau OCS has also been using the transcription product Dragon Speak and the Fairbanks OCS recently started piloting this tool as well.)

In another effort to help caseworkers better manage the administrative requirements of their job, as noted above, the OCS distributed Netbooks to our Bethel, St. Mary's and King Salmon offices in October of 2009. These mini laptops will allow staff to access their State of Alaska e-mail accounts and word-processing applications while in travel status or otherwise away from their office computers. This tool is expected to help caseworkers maximize the hours in a work day, decreasing the amount of work waiting for them when they return to their desks and thereby increasing the amount of time available to them to make family contacts. The original distribution of Netbooks is being considered a pilot project. If implementation is deemed successful, the OCS intends to purchase more Netbooks and deploy this tool to all rural offices across the state.

The OCS agrees that having more Social Services Associates (SSA) would greatly assist the front line worker in completing their plethora of tasks; however, new appropriations are determined through the Governor's priorities and the will of the legislature. In lieu of no new proposed positions in the upcoming fiscal year, OCS will continue to review its staffing and workload levels around the state and propose current position relocations or reassignment of tasks between job positions if deemed necessary to manage workload.

In summary, OCS continues its efforts to change the culture and improve the practice of CPS work in Alaska. Systems reform will continue during 2010 and each year thereafter. Recruitment of quality staff, their development, and the support they're provided remains a top priority. We recognize that the safety of many children and the strength of many families are reliant upon our ability to retain the most competent of staff and provide the most effective of services Alaska has to offer.