

Alaska Forensic Child Interview Roundtable

*Report and Recommendations
To the Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force*



**Discussions held on
April 21-22, 2009**

Roundtable Facilitator - Diane Payne, Children's Justice Specialist,
Tribal Law & Policy Institute ~ Alaska Office
Report Compiled by Tribal Law & Policy Institute staff

Author's Note: Nothing in this report should be considered an endorsement or recommendation of a specific curriculum or course of action at this time. There were many ideas and opinions voiced during this meeting, and the group make a significant step in identifying current practice, gaps and related information to improve forensic interviewing of children in Alaska. However, there was no attempt to reach consensus on any topic or issue relating to this complex problem.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Alaska Forensic Child Interview Roundtable was developed in response to a range of concerns discussed at meetings of the Alaska Children's Justice Task Force (hereinafter referred to as "CJA Task Force") over the past few years. The Task Force had been asked to endorse a new forensic interview training curriculum developed outside of the state and some Task Force members commented that even a new curriculum would still need to be tailored to meet Alaska's unique needs. The Roundtable was organized for two primary functions (1) to identify, catalog and share information about current forensic child interview practices in place in Alaska and any regional specific adaptations being used in the course of investigations into criminal child abuse; and (2) to seek input from current forensic child interviewers and criminal child abuse investigators as well as the faculty for the current forensic child interview curriculum regarding gaps and omissions in the training currently provided.

Diane Payne, Children's Justice Specialist for the Tribal Law and Policy Institute (TLPI) and a Task Force member, agreed to coordinate the event, facilitate the interdisciplinary discussion group and compile the report. Following invitations to approximately twenty five individuals representing rural and urban law enforcement investigators, child advocacy center-based forensic interviewers, prosecutors and

consultation with Tammy Sandoval, Deputy Commission of the Alaska Office of Children's Services (OCS) for appropriate OCS participants, the group convened on April 21-22, 2009. The Alaska Children's Alliance (ACA) coordinated the travel and lodging for participants outside of Anchorage.

In addition to the issues raised by the Task Force, in preparation for the session, Diane Payne consulted with members of the ACA at their annual meeting, talked individually with representatives of the Department of Law, Criminal Division and spoke with representatives of the Alaska State Troopers and OCS, and past Family Services Training Academy staff to identify major topics for discussion.

The Alaska CJA Task Force identified individuals representing law enforcement (both municipal police and state troopers) and child advocacy center staff who have or were currently in roles where they were investigating criminal child sexual abuse and conducting forensic interviews to participate in this discussion. The CJA Task Force requested at least two criminal prosecutors from the Department of Law and discussed the configuration of the group to assure there were representatives from different regions of the state so the discussion was broadly reflective of statewide issues. Also invited were the OCS faculty members for the Family Services Training Academy where the only forensic child interview approach is currently taught to state employees in Alaska.¹ Although some individuals from Fairbanks, Wasilla and Metlakatla were unable to attend, they were invited to make additions and to comment on the first draft of this report before finalization.

CJA Task Force members who attended the Roundtable were Diane Payne (facilitator), Pam Karalunas, coordinator of the ACA, Cindi Stanton and Teresa Foster. The Task Force set aside up to \$10,000 for the logistical costs involved and asked participants (and their agency) to donate their time to this important discussion. The roundtable group participants represent approximately 185 years of experience in roles with responsibility to respond to child abuse and child victimization. An estimated total of 380 child interviews were conducted by seven interviewers in the group over the last two

¹ The University of Alaska Anchorage has a contract with OCS to provide the training for OCS staff; as a courtesy law enforcement officers, including Alaska State Troopers, are invited to attend the training component on forensic interviewing of child sexual abuse victims. The curriculum currently used is Advanced Intensive Sexual Abuse Interviewing Skills (AISAS).

years. About 65 of those children interviewed were under the age of 3. A list of these participants is found on page 21.

The Process

The roundtable agenda is attached to this document and this report generally tracks the sequence of the agenda. It begins with an overview of Forensic Interviewing as an Investigative Tool which led to a discussion of multidisciplinary team issues. Then each forensic interviewer (and instructors) was asked to provide responses to several questions including what they do to prepare for the interview, what protocol or approach they use in the questions and what they do post-interview. Then there was a discussion of what is working and what is missing in the current training available in Alaska and the current forensic interview practice. From this dialog the group discussed challenges in conducting forensic interviews in small groups. One group focused on Tribal communities and rural Alaska and the other group focused on urban areas. From these lists of challenges the group identified areas that were common throughout the state and those that were unique to rural and urban areas generally.

On the second day of the roundtable, the participants discussed concerns about the qualification and readiness skills of those who do forensic interviews as well as the challenges and benefits of peer reviews of forensic interviews. Finally, the group identified core elements and topics that should be found in all training curricula used to prepare professional in Alaska to interview children in any part of Alaska. The group also discussed a number of additional training topics that would be helpful, and should supplement the core training and made available throughout Alaska. In closing, the group made a list of recommended steps for the CJA Task Force to consider in addressing the delivery of consistently high quality forensic interviewing of Alaska's child victims.

Tribal Law and Policy Institute staff members Melissa Valdez Taylor and Mona Evan were present to take notes on the discussion and assisted with the development of this report. To assure group safety and promote open and frank discussions the group agreed that no one would be quoted in the roundtable report. Therefore, none of the comments or views provided in this report is attributed to a specific individual (or agency)

with the exception of the opening comments of the representatives from the Alaska Department of Law.²

Nothing in this report should be considered an endorsement or recommendation of a specific curriculum or course of action at this time. There were many ideas and opinions voiced during this meeting, and the group make a significant step in identifying current practice, gaps and related information to improve forensic interviewing of children in Alaska. However, there was no attempt to reach consensus on any topic or issue relating to this complex problem.

² Reviewed and approved by Teresa Foster and Susan Mitchell prior to finalization of the report.

APRIL 21-22 MEETING REPORT

Forensic Interviewing as an Investigative Tool: Strengths and Weaknesses

Teresa Foster, J.D. and Susan Mitchell, R.N., J.D.³ provided an introductory framework for the roundtable discussion providing comments on how forensic interviewing is used as an investigative tool. Following is a synopsis of those comments.

Prosecutors do not conduct forensic interviews but must prepare children to be effective witnesses and draw out the facts about the abuse when cases go to court. Often the information gathered by OCS is not complete enough for the prosecutor to draft specific charges. At the same time, however, the information needed for OCS purposes would not otherwise be admissible in the criminal case but for the fact that it is tied in with the investigative interview. Prosecutors must also be concerned about discovery issues, evidence rules and a number of other issues relating to the child's statements and the family dynamics. CAC interviews should be done with the goal of the health and well-being of the child but strictly forensically sensitive to any prosecution or exoneration.

Clearly, everyone understands that a primary goal of all agencies involved in the interviewing and investigations of crimes against children is to ensure their safety and well-being. In addition, the multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach provides for a coordinated response to child victims and creates a system of investigation and prosecution of child abuse that ideally results in the least trauma to the children/adolescents and families. This approach is most commonly utilized in locations in Alaska that have access to a child advocacy centers.

Considering the use and values of the forensic child interview, some benefits are:

- One event for the child and family. Agencies that need the forensic interview are prosecution, social services and law enforcement.
- Consistency, spontaneity, forensic sensitivity to ascertain events and perceptions from the child in having one interview.
- Although a single interview is preferred, some benefits to having more than one interview include separating law enforcement and OCS information, allowing the child to be rested and alert if the interview is lengthy or complex, and

³ Department of Law, Criminal Prosecutors

allowing for follow-up with information that was not known at the time of the initial interview.

Some of the challenges and disadvantages of the current forensic interview practice are:

- Interviews can be very lengthy and difficult for children
- Either too little information is obtained because the interviewer's discipline may not need all the details required for a prosecution, or too much information is obtained and information becomes part of the record that is collateral or distracting in the criminal investigation.
- Investigators and prosecutors need very specific information which may not be obtained from an OCS interview, thus a second interview is needed.

Benefits of the MDT approach (when it is working well) are that successful community coordination of child abuse cases follows the development of interagency agreements and guidelines. These agreements provide a framework to coordinate the handling of cases through formalizing collaboration among agencies. The interagency agreements should identify specific tasks in the intervention process and clarify the role and responsibilities of the participating agencies. Guidelines should explain how the agencies work together to investigate, prosecute, and provide support to the child victim and family. Without an understanding of how the MDT and related protocols work, further trauma to the child and duplication of efforts are likely to occur.

DISCUSSION

Following this framework on prosecution considerations, the group discussed the MDT approach and using child advocacy centers to conduct the forensic interview during criminal child abuse investigations in Alaska. For instance, it was acknowledged that there are times – such as when weather prevents transporting the child - when law enforcement must conduct an interview in the field. A number of participants commented that these should be the exception rather than the rule. While weather challenges and transportation costs hinder utilization of child advocacy centers for forensic interviews sometimes, several commented that the MDT approach to the investigation can still be used.

A significant challenge to quality forensic interviewing is limited opportunity to acquire sufficient experience in interviewing children and then in maintaining the

expertise needed to conduct skilled interviews.⁴ Some pointed out that while law enforcement is responsible for determining whether a crime has been committed, who committed the crime and other relevant information, law enforcement officers – without further training specific to child sexual abuse and child development⁵ - do not all have the basic skills to interview child victims and witnesses. Investigators with the Office of Children’s Service (OCS) have a different role. Their primary responsibility following a child abuse report is to assess the child’s safety and to determine if the placement outside the home is required.

Another major concern in Alaska is how the child abuse response system responds to diverse cultures. The issues include cultural practices, norms and beliefs, children and families whose first language is not English, and cultural issues of trust for the government systems. The group acknowledged that addressing this dynamic is a particular challenge in rural Alaska because of the fairly regular staff turnover among professionals. Law enforcement often has a difficult time gaining trust from victims of crime while trying to investigate and preserve safety. For example, children who rarely see or interact with law enforcement except when they arrive to arrest or remove a relative or their friend’s relative from their neighborhood or village may not believe that law enforcement has come to help make the child safe, especially if the child has been told to fear or shun law enforcement.

In this discussion, comments were made about the need for and importance of having training that addressed child sexual abuse investigations overall. While the forensic evidence of a case is the *key evidence*, it is not the only evidence. A good forensic interview can lead an investigator to obtain information in other areas of the investigation such as information that assists in the suspect interview leading to confession, interviews with collateral witnesses, a medical exam and a search for other physical evidence or collateral evidence that supports the child’s report. Continued training and cross-training of peers must be seen as a standard opportunity available for professionals particularly because of the high child abuse response system staff turnover in rural Alaska.

⁴ An inexperienced interviewer may not be skilled enough to solicit the information from a child that is necessary to determine if a crime has occurred, if the child is unsafe or to provide adequate and detailed information for prosecution of a suspect.

⁵ It was the consensus that the standard training in dealing with children taught at police or trooper academy was not sufficient for full interview involving allegations of child sexual abuse. While one may have good rapport with children, have children of their own or other positive skill sets for dealing with children, the scrutiny that child interviews are placed under for legal purposes go far beyond the initial training skills.

The opening commentary from a prosecution perspective led to discussion regarding why some child sexual abuse cases may not go to trial and on plea agreements in child sexual abuse cases. This discussion included identifying the roles of the civil and criminal agencies involved in this process and identified the strengths and challenges of the multi-disciplinary approach and other issues of concern to prosecutors in Alaska.

Some reasons discussed regarding why cases may not go to trial are:

- Many cases are not referred for prosecution because of the difficulty in completing investigations, and many cases are not referred due to insufficient evidence
- Many cases are resolved with a plea agreement when the risk of a not guilty verdict is high, as well as other reasons.
- Prosecutors and others must consider whether going through trial will further traumatize the child, although a well-prepared child can be an excellent witness in court.
- Sometimes confession/admissions in child sexual abuse cases give leverage to an acceptable plea agreement that protects the child, yet punishes the perpetrator.
- The sheer volume of cases, especially in rural Alaska, the logistics of rural trials, and the limited law enforcement and prosecution resources are some reasons for encouraging plea agreements.
- Not enough resources not enough prosecutors

Further discussion occurred around issues about plea agreements and how the quality of the forensic interview of the child and the suspect interview may affect the ability of the prosecutor to suggest a plea agreement. Prosecutors explained that plea agreements are necessary because Alaska does not have the resources allocated to try every case. However, it is important to keep in mind that both parties have to agree on the terms of the agreement. It was explained that for the child victim, plea agreements also can bring closure and safety which is good even if the plea agreement is not perfect. A thorough forensic interview can also identify the full spectrum of abuse, which is very important to the prosecution in determining when to propose a plea agreement and what level of plea is appropriate.

Forensic Interviewer Description of Current Child Interview Approach & Protocol

The group shared approaches to forensic interviewing used in their communities, and although many had attended several training events, the discussion centered around four primary approaches – RATAAC, APSAC, NCA and AISAIS.

In this dialog we learned that an estimated total of *380 child interviews were conducted by seven interviewers in the group over just the last two years*. Because young children often present a challenge to the skills of interviewers, the participants were also asked to specify how many children were 3 years old or younger and these seven interviewers indicated that about 65 of those children interviewed were under the age of 3. There was also discussion about the approach to post interview activities that included meeting with the child victim's non-offending parents, discussing next steps with families and de-briefing or staffing with MDT members. These activities post-interview often hold some benefit to interviewers who receive feedback from peers and their MDT members.

Elena Aluskak – Bethel Tundra Women's Coalition Child Advocacy Center Manager has conducted over 150 interviews in the last two years. 30 percent of those interviews were with children under the age of 6. Elena uses a culturally adapted form of the RATAAC or Corner House protocol.

Monica Chase – Family Advocate for the Kawerak Child Advocacy Center in Nome and has only conducted 4 interviews; one was a four year old from a village. Monica has received training on APSAC, RATAAC and NCA training and completed the Forensic Interviewing of Native Children and Child Sexual Abuse Investigations Training (4 days, including a live clinic with child volunteers) provided by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute.

Sherry Ferno – Investigator with the Alaska State Troopers who has conducted child interviews at Alaska CARES in Anchorage and Stevie's Place in Fairbanks and is currently working with the Children's Place in Palmer. In the last two years Sherry has conducted 115 interviews, two of those children were two year olds. Sherry was trained on the AISAIS model provided in Alaska.

Kim Horn – Detective with the Juneau Police Department, she conducts child sexual abuse interviews at the SAFE Child Advocacy Center in Juneau. In the last two years Kim has conducted 30 interviews 6 of those interviews involved children age five and under. One child came to Juneau from a surround village. Kim received training on the NCA model and completed the Forensic Interviewing of Native Children and Child Sexual Abuse Investigations Training (4 days, including a live clinic with Native child volunteers) provided by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute.

Jessica Lawmaster – Is new to Alaska, previously from Oklahoma, now working at the Kenai Peninsula Child Advocacy Center. In the last two years Jessica has conducted over 300 interviews. 13 interviews while in Alaska and two were children under the age of five. Jessica uses the APSAC, RATAAC/NCA protocol.

Brian Messing – Is a child advocate and has been with the SAFE Child Advocacy Center in Juneau for 7 years. Brian has conducted 60 interviews over the last two years, 20 interviews of children under the age of five. Brian uses the NCAC/RATAAC/AISAIS methods and completed the Forensic Interviewing of Native Children and Child Sexual Abuse Investigations Training (4 days, including a live clinic with Native child volunteers) provided by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute.

Cindi Stanton – Is an Investigator with the Anchorage Police Department. Cindi has 8 years of experience in the field and has conducted 8 child interviews in the last two years. Cindi uses the AISAIS model and is trained as a co-trainer of this specific model. Cindi has also completed the Forensic Interviewing of Native Children and Child Sexual Abuse Investigations Training (4 days, including a live clinic with child volunteers) provided by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute.

Description of Forensic Interview Protocols Used in Alaska

RATAAC is a CornerHouse protocol, CornerHouse is a partner with NDAA/APRI in providing the “Finding Words” Forensic Interview training sessions. RATAAC is a mnemonic device each letter stands for a different stage of protocol: **R**apport, **A**natomy Identification, **T**ouch Inquiry, **A**buse Scenario and **C**losure. The forensic interview is based on the semi-structured RATAAC® protocol that has been designed through clinical experience and the review of empirical research to maximize the child’s ability to communicate his or her experience. The Forensic Interviewer conducts the interview in a manner that is developmentally appropriate for a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional abilities.

APSAC is the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children it is a national nonprofit organization focused on meeting the needs of professionals engaged in all aspects of services for maltreated children and their families. The curriculum is a 4.5 day and includes the following components.

- Overview of Forensic Interview Issues and models: Lessons from the research
- Child interview methods and techniques: question types and question design
- Child interview Methods and Techniques: use of media
- Child development concepts
- Linguistic issues

- Eliciting details and other law enforcement concerns
- Interview practicum
- Interviewing reluctant children
- Interviewing skills with specific populations (cultural and age considerations) 2004 or/ culturally diverse children (2006)
- Interviewing children with disabilities
- Interview practicum, continued
- Interviewing teenagers
- Legal considerations & effective testimony
- Interview practicum, continued
- Mock court

AISAIS is **Advanced Intensive Sexual Abuse Interviewing Skills**: This 18 hour session is Alaska Specific. This is a mandatory training for all OCS SW I-V's who have worked a minimum of six months and have completed TONE, and CORE 103 and 104. The training introduces forensic interviewing skills to the OCS worker and their law enforcement/judicial partners. It will develop knowledge, understanding, awareness, and skills for interviewing children who are the alleged victims of child sexual abuse. While this training targets child sexual abuse, it is practical and applies to all other types of abuse cases requiring forensic interviews. The training is a combination of lecture, group discussion, and other activities. Each trainee will demonstrate forensic interviewing skills gained in the training by conducting a thirty-minute videotaped "mock" interview with an adult actor posing as a child victim. In addition to directly increasing worker skills, this training will increase statewide consistency and create a common language when approaching forensic interviews of children.

NCAC The National Children's Advocacy Center has developed a Child Forensic Interview Model, which is forensically sound, flexible, and may be used by a variety of professionals including law enforcement, social workers, and child interview specialists. This interview model can be adapted for children of different ages and cultural backgrounds. The model can be used when questioning children who are suspected to be victims of sexual or physical abuse, as well as children who have witnessed violence perpetrated on another person.

Roundtable Discussion: Forensic Interview Training and Practice Issues with Child Victims

During this session Diane guided the members through a discussion process with a goal of determining, “What is working regarding the forensic interview training and usual practices with child victims and what is not working and can be improved upon. Responses are summarized in bullet form below.

What is working now?

This discussion focused on what participants felt were strengths in the current system, training curricula, and practices.

- In Anchorage the co-location of law enforcement, social workers and child advocates.
- Bilingual interpreters respond well to families in Bethel
- Everyone seems to be using a protocol in response to child victimization (except on the Kenai Peninsula due to difficulty in getting the protocols signed by AST)
- Agencies collaborating utilizing the MDT approach seems to work well everywhere in Alaska.
- Prosecutors believe that CAC’s are making a difference in how cases are being handled.
- Group agreed that Pre-screening efforts prior to interviews is working well.
- SAFE in Juneau practices debriefings post interviews.
- In Anchorage the coordination with military bases prior to interviews works well
- Group concurs that having trained professionals especially professionals trained on the same or similar model works well.

What’s missing?

The group identified areas where there are gaps, inconsistent practice, challenges around certain types of cases and other “missing elements” both regionally and throughout Alaska.

- Prosecutors expressed a concern regarding the practice of debriefings. Concerns are based on the form and how they are being conducted. Whether or not a paper trail is part of this practice give rise to issues that are concerning particularly should the information become discoverable.
- Anchorage has a large diverse population because of this forensically trained interpreters are needed. Including interpreters for Hmong, Russian, Spanish and other groups.
- Community education is needed throughout Alaska, especially among certain groups (ethnic & religious). Professionals see confidentiality breaches and re-victimization due to a lack of education/understanding regarding sexual assault/abuse.

- Advanced trainings are needed throughout the state for professionals regarding children with disabilities.
- Cultural competency skills need to be developed among MDT members throughout the state. It is important for all professionals who work or provide services to children and families in rural Alaska to get to understand what it is like to live in a village and to know about the lifestyles and culture of those individuals they serve.
- There are too few rural prosecutors and they simply do not have the time to participate in MDT's
- In some situations throughout Alaska OCS and Law enforcement need to improve their coordination of efforts prior to investigations a situation was mentioned where OCS jumped the gun and removed a child prior to Law enforcement conducting interviews.
- Statewide training is needed for professionals on "Defending the interview".
- Statewide training is needed for professionals regarding conducting Child on child interviews
- Basic minimums are needed statewide for all professionals who conduct child interviews.
- Statewide issue peer reviews lack feedback from prosecutors
- While single interviews are great professionals should obtain openness to conducting multiple interviews. This may occur when an unskilled interviewer does not obtain enough information for a prosecutor to take the case to trial.
- There is a need in the Bethel region and perhaps in other parts of rural Alaska for ICWA workers to provide follow-up services to families who return to the villages.
- Juneau is seeing a new for a cell phone protocol. Cell phone usage is becoming more prevalent in the villages as well.
- A statewide protocol/guide book should be developed for professionals, including law enforcement, in the field, who may not have had child sexual abuse interview training. Specifically, a "pre-interview" guideline should be developed of how far to question or probe and when to stop and request direction, obtain support or turn the child interview over to someone with specific child sexual abuse forensic interview training. This guideline would be taught in all basic academy or orientation sessions to preserve the often fragile or sensitive evidentiary admissions of children.
- More prosecutors need specific training from child abuse specific seminars and prosecutor specific training on these issues.

Roundtable Discussion: Challenges Interviewing Children in Child Sexual Abuse Cases

Members broke up into two groups for this discussion. A group represented the concerns of rural communities while the other group represented urban concerns. Each group identified a large number of challenges many concerns of both groups were duplicative so in the end these challenges were captured below and identified as statewide challenges that need to be addressed.

Rural Challenges:

- Transportation is a big issue in rural Alaska. Weather conditions and long distance cause delays in investigations and is often responsible for long delays in service delivery.
- Staff turnover continues to remain a problem in many remote parts of rural Alaska.
- Inconsistency in the way cases are investigated and handled remains an issue in rural Alaska.
- The lack of resources retaining qualified staff, funding to purchase recording equipment and maintaining a facility and funding is needed to provide the child continued safety and well-being.
- Confidentiality is an ongoing critical issue, particularly in small rural communities. More public education is needed to encourage understanding and assist in developing community specific policies and procedures that protect the victim. People who work in schools and public agencies should be responsible for educating the general public.
- Training regarding mandated reporters is needed in many areas of rural Alaska.
- Outsiders (service providers) are not readily accepted or trusted in many communities.
- Shortage of “Home grown” professionals.
- Sexual Offenders returning to the village or other small community units where they continue to interact with their former victim is a problem
- Revenge Reporting a perception among many native communities that if a report of abuse is made it is a result of a need for revenge. Reporting is looked down upon in some faith based organizations.
- The Faith community needs training and educational resources as well.

The Urban group listed the following challenges:

- Challenges with diverse languages/cultures and ages of child victims. Not enough interpreters.
- Keeping up with technology is challenging.
- There is a need for resources to deal with kid on kid cases, families need resources.
- Conducting large family interviews is difficult because of space issues.
- Specialized units are needed.
- Sexualization of Media (children have more exposure to nudity through video, TV and other media so it is sometimes not clear where child learned sexual information)
- Better communication and collaboration between agencies.
- Cell phone protocols are needed.

When the groups reconvened they reviewed their lists discussed the finding and combined their concerns into the following statewide issues:

Statewide issues:

- Transportation (distance/weather) issues for victims and Law enforcement
- Safety/emotional well being of child (not enough mental health professionals)
- Confidentiality (educating communities about abuse)

- Forgiveness component (cultural/education) area for future trainings
- Revenge vs. Reporting (cultural/component) area for future trainings.
- Lack of training for Faith Communities area for future trainings.
- Coordination to set up interviews and inform families
- Trust issues (cultures/groups)
- Language/culture/age etc, challenges
- Kid on kid cases
- Lack of resources for families regarding kid on kid cases
- Large families limited space in interviewing room
- Use of helpers (limited)
- Cell phone communication between children and others (protocol development)

Purpose of the forensic interviews: what outcome do we want?

During this session the group discussed their respective goals for the forensic interview and provided their views regarding outcomes and end results. The following bullets represent those outcomes identified and acknowledge that the criminal investigators have different needs and priorities in the forensic interview than OCS workers who are responsible primarily for determining safety.

- Details about what happened
- Child safety
- Uncorrupted pure forensic interview
- Child perspective
- Family support
- All but in a way that minimizes repeated trauma to the child
- Services to the family
- Disclosure
- Covered legal basis without the clutter
- Information to determine whether a crime was committed and who committed it so that the child can be protected.
- Who, what when, where and how – nothing more and nothing less.

Qualifications For Conducting Forensic Interviews With Alaska Children

Members brainstormed and engaged in discussion regarding whether or not there should be some requirements for qualifying to conduct forensic interviews of children in Alaska. The facilitator asked the group to think beyond what they felt was possible and think about what is best for children of Alaska. Should there be basic core elements of

training and skills required as pre-qualifications before a law enforcement officer, OCS staff or CAC staff conducts a forensic interview?

While the group agreed that essential components in forensic interviews is or should be required of professionals, not everyone agreed that requiring interviewers to obtain or meet a set of pre-requisites prior to conducting interviews of children is even a possibility in Alaska. This concern is largely due to the diversity of Alaska and particularly because of the threat of staff turnover in the very remote parts of Alaska.

Roundtable Discussion: Forensic Child Interview Curriculum

The group discussed the “Essential Components” below and because there was not time to reach a consensus, these are listed according the outline of topics posted during the discussion. If there is an opportunity for a longer discussion, there it would be desirable to make a decision rather than only have an inventory of components, thus achieving consensus on pre-requisites for professional forensic interviewer training. These lists were not fleshed out or discussed beyond the stage of identifying them for future evaluation, but are presented here to promote that discussion.

For certain trainings the group identified other individuals (such as patrol, all OCS investigators, VPSOs) whom they believed should also have basic knowledge of the following topics.

Basic Essential Components in Forensic Interviewing

- Intro-Guidelines/Rules, Purpose
- Rapport
- Developmental Assessment
- Abuse information – details
- Anatomy – Childs terms
- Closure

Group Brainstorming Pre-requisites and Areas of Knowledge Professionals should obtain prior to a child interview.

The question was raised as to “what basic information related to conducting an interview should be provided to all law enforcement including VPSO’s, dispatch and all patrol, OCS and all CAC staff”. The group suggested that these individuals should have training on the following minimum topics to enhance their understanding of the

importance of responding to crimes against children and the specific skills needed to conduct a quality forensic interview.

- Law: knowledge of the elements of a crime
- Legal Standards
- Dynamics of child sexual abuse/child maltreatment
- Question techniques for children
- Interagency coordination protocol
- Call out and referral process – should be provided to law enforcement, OCS staff, assigned prosecutors, investigation professionals and child in need of aid Assistant Attorney Generals.
- Normal child development variables
- How to respond to child sexual abuse/child abuse disclosures
- Cultural awareness/language/cultural dynamics, i.e., pace, volume, language (not leading) child respect and body language, child respect, power space.
- Research regarding custody issues
- MDT protocols.

During this final stage of the session, the group discussed a number of skills and knowledge sets *are not being* adequately provided here in Alaska. The group prioritized the listed topics with some being more urgent than others. The list is categorized into **basic skills (1)** and **advanced supplemental skills (2)**

The suggested basic skills listed are:

- Development disabilities
- Cultural responsive communication
- Detail focused training
- Vicarious trauma
- Responding to child in crisis
- Pediatric anatomy and physiology (same level as SART training)

The advanced supplemental skills listed are:

- Formal extensive training for helpers
- Legal training to defend interview techniques
- When to do additional interviews or extended interviews
- Incorporating questions about computers and photos
- Identifying parental coaching
- Basic knowledge of drugs and they affect the persons look etc.
- Perpetrator/offender behavior and profiles, grooming and animal abuse
- Complaints/victimization
- Responses to trauma on child/secondary

Next steps

During this final stage of the session the group discussed the next steps, the following bullets represent the areas of training requests, issues of concern or just general requests from members.

- Determine the statewide need for forensic interview training – OCS/everyone.
- Which model to utilize: AISAIS vs. other models RATAAC, NCA, APSAC, etc.,
- Training for AST – Currently uses AISAIS until another model recommended.
- ACA forensic interview standards for certification 40 hours forensic interview training (new standards/certification for CACs under NCA).
- Explore funding issues regarding required standards for CAC's.
- Ongoing training opportunities.
- Basic components added to forensic interview training.
- Advanced topics recommendations for the forensic interview training.
- Group follow-up via teleconference.

Roundtable Participants (in alphabetical order)

Elena Aluskak is the Child Advocacy Center Manager at the Tundra Women's Coalition in Bethel. Prior to taking the role of manager in 2008, Elena was a full time forensic interviewer for over 6 years, often interviewing in the Yupik language. She has interviewed hundreds of children. In the last two years Elena has interviewed about 150 children.

Monica Chase is a child and family advocate for the Kawerak Child Advocacy Center in Nome for 2 years. Following recent training, Monica began to do interviews and is the only interviewer at the Kawerak Advocacy Center at this time. She has conducted 4 interviews. She also provides community education and outreach to multiple communities within the Bering Strait Region.

Sherry Ferno is an Investigator with the Alaska State Troopers and has conducted child interviews at Alaska CARES in Anchorage and Stevie's Place in Fairbanks in the past and currently does most of her investigative interviews at The Children's Place in Wasilla. In the last two years Sherry has conducted about 115 interviews.

Teresa Foster, J.D. is a Criminal Prosecutor for the State of Alaska Department of Law. She is the training coordinator for criminal prosecutors and has specialized in sexual assault and sexual abuse crimes. She lives in Fairbanks but prosecutes rural sexual assault cases all over the state. Teresa has over 29 years of prosecutorial experience and does not conduct forensic interviews but is involved in preparing children for court and reviews forensic interviews conducted by investigators. Teresa is a member of the Alaska CJA Task Force.

Kim Guay is with the Anchorage office of the Alaska Office of Children's Services and has over 10 years of child protection experience. She does not conduct interviews currently, but has done interviews in the past and is currently an AISAIS co-trainer at the University.

Kim Horn is a Detective with the Juneau Police Department and conducts child sexual abuse interviews at SAFE Child Advocacy Center. She has been with the Juneau Police Department for two years and has conducted about 30 interviews in the past two years.

Pam Karalunas is the Statewide Coordinator of the Alaska Children's Alliance, a state chapter of the National Children Alliance and has worked in the field of child abuse for 23 years. Pam does not conduct forensic interviews but as the director of Stevie's Place in Fairbanks, she reviewed many interviews and has had forensic interview training. Pam is a member of the Alaska CJA Task Force.

Jessica Lawmaster came to Alaska in late 2008 and is the manager of the Kenai Peninsula Child Advocacy Centers. She has interviewed hundreds of children through her previous work in Oklahoma, where she worked for 6 years in child advocacy centers prior to coming to Alaska. In the last two years Jessica has conducted about 300 interviews.

Brian Messing is a child advocate and forensic interviewer at the SAFE Child Advocacy Center in Juneau. He has conducted about 60 interviews over the last two years.

Susan Mitchell, R.N., J.D. is a Criminal Prosecutor for the State of Alaska Department of Law, and is based in Dillingham. She has over 15 years of experience as a prosecutor, defense attorney and emergency room nurse, and thus has been involved with child abuse victims in a variety of settings. Susan does not conduct forensic interviews but is involved in preparing children for court and reviews forensic interviews conducted by investigators.

Cindi Stanton is an Investigator with the Anchorage Police Department and supervises the Crimes Against Children Unit. She has done a large number of forensic interviews of children in the past as an investigator but has only conducted about 8 interviews as a supervisor of the unit. She is also an AISIAS trainer.

Katie TePas is a Program Coordinator II for the Department of Public Safety, Domestic Violence Training Program in Anchorage and has worked for the Alaska State Troopers for 10 years. Katie attended the roundtable as a general representative of the Alaska State Troopers and does not conduct forensic child interviews.

Stephanie Vaughn has 30 years experience in child protection doing intake, investigations and permanency, as well as providing training to state employees. She is the new program coordinator for the AISIAS training center at the University of Alaska and does not currently conduct forensic child interviews

Individuals invited, unable to attend.

Bruce Janes, sergeant for the Metlakatla Police Department in SE Alaska.

Lori Markkanen, director of Stevie's Place in Fairbanks.