

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT.OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Office of Children's Services

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Fred Van Wallinga, Chair
Citizen Review Panel
PO Box 751
Willow, Alaska 99688

Dear Chair Van Wallinga and Panel members:

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services, and the children and families we serve, thank you for the inordinate amount of time you have invested toward improving Alaska's child protection system. Your findings and recommendations are very important to our ongoing success.

Enclosed please find my response to the Annual Report dated June 30, 2005. I hope you will agree that the strategies I have outlined will ultimately improve our system. I look forward to continuing our work together and achieving our vision - *Stronger Families and Safer Children* - for all of Alaska.

Sincerely,

Tammy Sandoval
Deputy Commissioner

Enclosure

Response to Citizens Review Panel 2005 Annual Report

This document includes excerpts (in italics) from the Citizen Review Panel's (CRP) first annual report. The annual report lists the CRP's findings of concerns, goals and recommendations for the Office of Children's Services. Following each of three sections is the OCS response to the CRP's findings.

- 1) CRP Concern: *Observations and concerns regarding staff include: low morale; a lack of supervisor support that includes a reluctance to make difficult decisions about personnel issues; the high turnover of talented line social workers who leave for reasons other than high caseloads.*

Goal: Improved morale and reduce staff turnover through the implementation of Internal Quality Assurance of Personnel including Supervisors and Social Workers.

CRP Recommendation: *OCS will ensure that the Quality Assurance section is evaluating all areas of operations and being responsive to the information gathered by creating positive and proactive goals for change by:*

- *Following Policy and Procedure*
 - Ensure accountability through supervisory case reviews and personnel related issues.*
 - Establish a process for system checks- tracking adherence to Policy and Procedure,*
 - Incorporate training topics into daily practice*
- *Provide Adequate Training:*
 - Consistent implementation and training of Policy and Procedure.*
 - Ensure that Policies and Procedures are applied equally across the state.*
 - Clearly communicate service goals*
 - Develop an OCS Code of Ethics in response to alleged incidents of unethical behavior.*
 - Publicly post the Code of Ethics to make it available to line workers and the public.*
- *Employee Satisfaction:*
 - Conduct annual employee satisfaction surveys.*
 - Conduct exit surveys for all staff*
 - Compile, implement and track survey results and report to CRP June 2006.*
 - Determine if an agency independent of OCS should evaluate employee satisfaction.*

1) OCS Response:

The OCS shares your concern that staff experience low morale and adequate supervisory support. We also believe one of the keys to our success is to better retain our qualified staff and reduce turnover.

As a point of clarification, OCS does not have its own Internal Quality Assurance of Personnel. Rather OCS works within the Department of Administration's personnel system and has key administrative staff that work as liaisons between OCS and the state personnel system.

Recruitment and retention of quality front line workers and supervisors is extremely important to OCS. In the past year, a work group comprised of several staff at varying levels worked to further assess and provide recommendations to OCS Administration about how to improve recruitment and retention. One such recommendation was to allow Children's Services Specialists (CSS) to be hired in place of Social Workers at the III and IV levels in the same manner as they are at the I and II levels. Current law requires that social workers can only be hired if they are licensed or eligible to be licensed within one year. Providing flexibility in this area would allow qualified CSSs to apply for promotions. Most recently the rules have been changed to include the option of hiring CSSs at the III level. However, the IV level, the supervisory level, is still being considered and additional work with the Department of Administration will have to be explored.

Another way in which the recruitment and retention of staff is being addressed is through the University of Alaska Anchorage. OCS currently has a contract in place with UAA to fund a half-time position to specifically recruit front line social workers to OCS. Additionally, we work with both UAA and UAF by providing stipends to students in exchange for a commitment to work with OCS upon graduation, as well as, offer stipends to current employees to obtain their BSW or MSW.

Adherence to Policy and Procedure (P&P) will always be an ongoing challenge. P&P is ever changing to keep up with federal laws, state laws and our own internal improvements. The restructuring of our Quality Assurance Unit in the past year has greatly assisted in monitoring the work by staff with the families we serve. Quality Assurance happens at four levels – Supervisory Case Review, Administrative Case Review, On-site Case Review and Regional Continuous Quality Assurance Teams have formed to review the results of the other three arms of QA and implement improvement plans as necessary.

Reevaluation of the training needs of OCS, especially front line workers and supervisors, is currently in process. We have requested technical assistance from the National Research Center for Child Protective Services to assess our expectations of supervisors and deliver the necessary training designed to strengthen their skills. OCS contracts with UAA to provide most of the training of OCS staff. Discussions have been underway with UAA regarding review and revision of current curriculums to include changes in P&P, best practice standards and new federal and state laws. Additionally, all staff will be trained in the next six months to conduct more effective initial assessments at the point of investigation. Standardization of practice statewide is always considered and implemented in the changes.

The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics is the OCS adopted conduct code for the staff members directly involved in providing services to clients. The code sets forth the values, principles, and standards of the social work profession. The Code of Ethics is referenced in P&P, section 1.6, and the expectations are communicated at the onset of employment with OCS. Each new employee is required to sign and date an acknowledgement form stating that they have received the NASW Code of Ethics pamphlet, understand its' content and will abide by the prescribed standards.

The Department of Health & Social Services completed an employee satisfaction survey in 2003. A copy of that survey and the results can be made available if so desired by the CRP. Due to the ongoing intensive work being completed within our Quality Assurance Unit, there are no specific plans to institute an annual employee satisfaction survey. Exit surveys are mailed to every employee resigning from OCS. Work is being completed to improve the response rate and data is being compiled as to the reasons for the employee's departure.

- 2) CRP Concern: *There is a breakdown in communication with external agencies resulting in unnecessary barriers to collaboratively and effectively help children.*

Goal: Improved interagency collaboration through the implementation of External Quality Assurance.

CRP Recommendation:

- *Gather information from stakeholders through surveys, including:*
 - *Clients/consumers*
 - *Foster Families*
 - *Community representatives*
 - *Collaborative Agencies*
 - *Foster children*

Stakeholder Surveys should contain question(s) pertaining to effectiveness of staff implementation of policy and procedures.

Document how OCS is being responsive to the information gathered from the surveys.

- *Improve relationships and communication with foster families.*
- *Break down barriers with stakeholders through increased training, and by consistently following Policy and Procedure. (e.g. Allow other agencies to participate in case conferences).*
- *Client and consumer resolution process:*
 - *Implement complaint resolution process.*

- *Develop Flow chart for appeal process for public access.*
- *Develop an appeals process or evaluate the existing appeal process if one already exists.*
- *Implement monitoring of process of how individual complaints are addressed.*
- *Insure that complaints are resolved involved in a timely manner to the greatest possible satisfaction for all.*

2) OCS Response:

Improved partnership and communication with our consumers, with our community partners, and with one another within the Department has become a mantra for OCS. We recognize the need for improvement and purposeful work has begun to improve all of our working relationships to better serve children and their families. Efficient and effective responsiveness to voice and e-mail messages is a stated expectation of all OCS staff.

Another task of the Quality Assurance Unit is annual surveys of foster parents, tribal partners, judicial leaders, service providers and consumers. Last years' surveys have been completed and final reports have been written. Copies of all five reports can be supplied upon request. Currently, the survey tools are being reviewed and revised to assure all the right questions are being asked of our families, foster parents and community partners. Results from Quality Assurance efforts are incorporated into regional Performance Improvement Plans.

In addition, more specifically in response to improving relationships and communication with foster families, OCS has a contract with Alaska Center for Resource Families to help recruit, support and retain foster/resource families. We work closely with them to improve our practice and implement changes based on their feedback from the work they do with foster families.

Currently, there is a work group assigned to develop regulations regarding our grievance procedures stemming from legislation signed into law in July 2005. Once this work is complete, our grievance procedures will be widely distributed among our offices, including expectations for successful resolution of complaints. Additionally, our grievance procedures will be posted on our new and improved OCS website, currently under construction.

- 3) *CRP Concern: Lack of knowledge, awareness and consideration of cultural issues among staff impacting foster care licensing, placement issues, and working with diverse populations.*

Goal: OCS will decrease barriers to cultural concerns and families becoming licensed foster families.

CRP Recommendation:

- *Increase the number of minority/diverse population foster home options.*
- *Train of OCS workers on the regional cultural issues to increase competency of diverse populations and special needs.*
- *Create a cultural brown bag lunch or cultural education sessions for OCS staff.*
- *Make it a priority that foster families will receive adequate training on Policy and Procedures.*
- *Improve relationships and communication with foster families.*

3) OCS Response:

The OCS has several initiatives currently in process aimed at improving practice with the many diverse populations of Alaska and increasing cultural competence of all staff. In 1993, the Tribal/State Collaboration Group (T/SCG) formed to address ongoing child welfare issues. The Group meets 3 times yearly in a statewide face-to-face forum. In July 2004, data was distributed at T/SCG that indicated that there were a disproportionate number of Native Alaskan children in state custody. In November 2004, with the support and leadership of Casey Family Programs, our first state convening to address “disproportionality” was held at which time State and Tribal leaders made a commitment to make disproportionality the T/SCG focus.

OCS is actively participating in the work of increasing our awareness and cultural competency at all levels. We have a state plan and several local work plans to address disproportionality. There is one central office staff member who chairs a Native Rural Recruitment Team dedicated to the recruitment of Native Alaskan foster homes. We are revamping our training curriculums with UAA to incorporate best practice at all levels to include issues related to cultural competency. OCS is committed to this work and has made it a priority within the past year. This work will continue until resolution.

In summary, OCS is addressing all of the concerns raised by the Citizen Review Panel. We look forward to being able to report our progress and we have every belief that our efforts will not go unnoticed. We appreciate being able to respond to the concerns and recommendations put forth. Again, thank you for your commitment to the children and families served by the Office of Children’s Services.