

Office of Children's Services Response to the Citizen's Review Panel's 2007 Report

The Office of Children's Services concurs with the findings of the Citizen's Review Panel's 2007 Annual report. The division is appreciative that the panel utilized selected sections from the Action for Child Protection Report to summarize their recommendations. This approach allows OCS to focus all of our efforts toward improving practice standards in a similar manner rather than employing a scattered approach to meet the priorities of two different key reports.

OCS' initial response to the Action for Child Protection reports was, "We can do it all." However, the realistic limitations of day-to-day practice and management challenges has supported the panel's assertion that, "OCS cannot possibly implement all the recommendations...in the upcoming year" (p. 8). The Citizen's Review Panel goes on to request that OCS provides a "List of priorities for implementing," the recommendations of the Action Reports and to recommend involving community partners in determining priorities.

It is the perspective of OCS that our major initiative to utilize the principles of child safety decision making to inform practice, from the initial screening of the protective services report to the establishment of permanency, provides us with the opportunity to meet the recommendations of both the Action for Child Protection and Citizen Review Panel reports. Further, the OCS Senior Leadership Team has identified key areas of improvement because we believe progress on these issues will result in attainment of the objectives implicit in the reports recommendations.

OCS' action steps are part of our ongoing effort to improve practice. The heart of our practice revision effort is the regulation of practice standards that has evolved into an initiative to improve all aspects of child protection practice. This initiative involves tribes, the Court Improvement Program and interested community stakeholders.

The key areas and action steps identified by OCS are:

I. Curriculum Development

OCS has regular meetings with the UAA Family and Youth Services Training Academy to improve the Training and Orientation of New Employees (TONE) and is exploring a new training program for supervisors. These efforts have already resulted in the integration of the Safety Assessment and Safety Planning processes into the curriculum. The inclusion of an additional \$ 427,000 for OCS training in the governor's budget is cause for optimism that the training needs of caseworkers, social services associates and supervisors will be greatly improved in the future. Effective training has been shown to correlate with higher retention of employees. Improvement in training is continuous. The curriculum will be updated as OCS's philosophical base and policies and procedures are developed and refined and as new training needs emerge. Please refer to the attached 2007 Employee Survey Report and

note that respondents identify training as the most important issue. **Measure:** OCS will inform the Citizen Review Panel of curriculum changes on an ongoing basis.

II. Philosophical Base

The Citizen Review Panel Report recommended that OCS, “Design an official, systematic approach to intervention that fully operationalizes the OCS philosophical base and spells out, in detail, the basis of intervention.” We believe this recommendation is essential in that the citizens of Alaska, children and families served by OCS and our staff need to be aware of the “heart and soul” of our mission. Our key values should inform workers’ actions and decisions. We believe that our mission should guide our work with families and children and that all of our services need to clearly and effectively further at least one of our major goals:

- Strengthen families
- Keep Children Safe
- Decrease Disproportionality
- Develop a Quality and Stable Workforce
- Strengthen Community Partnerships

OCS is working toward developing an employee selection process that will include a video depicting the realistic challenges and rewards of child protective services. Research from other states that have required applicants to view similar videos has shown this strategy to be effective in building a workforce committed to child protection. **Measure 1:** The Regulating Practice Program Management Team (aka Safety Assessment Project Management Workgroup) will write a white paper describing OCS’ philosophical base. This workgroup is comprised of OCS upper level managers and tribal partners. **Measure 2:** The completed white paper, distributed to OCS staff, tribal state attendees, Citizen Review panel and other interested parties will be the measure of success.

III. Institute a Standing Policy and Procedure Committee to Re-write OCS Policies

Kristie Swanson was recently hired to fill the Program Administrator position in OCS’ State Office. This position is responsible for the development and management of policies and procedures. A committee will be formed by the end of January to begin re-writing OCS policies in accordance with the recommendations of the Action for Child Protection report. This committee will begin working on policies essential to regulating practice standards related to child safety decision-making and then begin going through the OCS Protective Services Manual. As with any organization committed to continuous improvement, policy writing and revision will occur for an indefinite period of time to ensure that policies are always up to date and reflective of best practice. This group will include front line workers and supervisors. Policies will be reviewed by the Program Management Team prior to implementation to ensure they are consistent with established criteria. **Measure 1:** List of group members and meeting times. **Measure 2:** Consistent production of new policies on a monthly basis.

IV. Communication Policy

This issue was seen as sufficiently important to warrant consideration separate from other policy issues. The Senior Leadership Team believes that establishing guidelines for communication that reflect respect, cultural sensitivity and a positive, problem-solving approach is essential. We further believe that communication guidelines should set the tone for communication with clients, stakeholders and within OCS. Consequently, in addition to policies informing method and style of communication, each field office will be considered to explore and monitor this issue in staff meetings. Supervisors will be encouraged to engage in problem solving with their staff to develop ways of ensuring timely responses to phone calls. Staff managers and children's service managers will be tasked with monitoring field offices' response times to phone calls on an ongoing basis. Consistently prompt and courteous communication is seen as the single most important improvement OCS could make to serve families and improve the division's image. **Measure:** Managers will report response time for workers returning phone calls and report this in monthly managers' meetings on a monthly basis. Complaints about workers not returning calls will be explored by managers for the purpose of developing strategies to improve response time. A decrease in the number of valid complaints about workers not returning calls will be the ultimate measure of success.

As work on these major areas progresses, the OCS Senior Leadership Team will continuously assess the impact on all of the recommendations listed in the Action for Child Protection reports and make necessary adjustments to ensure that no issue remains unresolved.

During the past year, OCS has enjoyed working with the Citizen Review Panel. We perceive our relationship with the CRP as open and trusting and recognize their genuine commitment to improving the safety of children and stability of Alaskan families.