

An Expert Review of Community Relationships

A Report Prepared by

ACTION for Child Protection, Inc.

For

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Executive Summary

Findings

The first component of the study explored the impressions community professionals and the general public holds of OCS. The results were mixed.

- Generally, professionals value and respect the work of OCS. Professionals' views of OCS tend to be more positive than views held by the general public whose impressions are based primarily on media reports, typically in response to high profile cases. OCS is considered to be in a no-win situation since it will be criticized by some for being too quick to remove children and by others for failing to remove children from the home.
- Managers at the Regional and Central Office level are viewed in a highly positive manner by community professionals and are reported to be very responsive when professionals contact them with questions or concerns. Without exception, the Director of OCS was praised for her strong leadership, energy and openness to change.
- OCS staff at the line level is not viewed in as positive a manner as managers. Although they are recognized as being hard working and dedicated, line workers are also viewed as overwhelmed, defensive, guarded, and reluctant to explain or account for decisions made on cases. A common theme throughout the focus groups, key informant interviews and surveys is that line workers are slow to return phone calls, and it is not unusual for calls not to be returned at all.
- Even the harshest critics of OCS expressed their appreciation for workers and supervisors who they acknowledge have very difficult jobs and are working under very challenging conditions, e.g. heavy workloads, high expectations, limited resources.

The second component of the study explored professionals' impressions of how effective OCS is in carrying out its child protection responsibilities.

- The majority of community professionals view OCS as being somewhat to highly effective in investigating reports of child maltreatment. Responsiveness to reports and addressing the safety of children received the highest ratings. The new safety assessment model is viewed in a positive manner and as a step in the right direction. Areas of tension related to safety center around reasonable efforts and how many "chances" a family should be given before children are removed.
- Wide variation exists in the quality of work, ability to form positive working relationships and level of responsiveness from worker to worker and office to office. Some workers are viewed as very responsive and easy to work with, and

others have a reputation for not returning phone calls and generally being difficult to work with. How well OCS staff communicates with other professionals during an investigation and their willingness to share information are two areas where inconsistencies in practice are most likely to occur. The perception of community professionals is that the inconsistencies are more a matter of personalities and the culture in offices than a problem with policy and procedures. Utilization of the Child Advocacy Centers across the state is another example of inconsistent practice between offices. Some OCS offices work well with their local Child Advocacy Center, and others do not fully utilize the Child Advocacy Center in their community.

The third and last component of the study explored the relationship between OCS and community agencies.

- Most professionals described the working relationship between their agency and OCS as positive. Factors detracting from a positive relationship include lack of responsiveness, poor communication, and lack of consistency across caseworkers. Factors identified as contributing to a positive working relationship include open and candid communication, regular meetings that provide a forum to discuss policy and practice issues, mutual respect, and professional interaction.
- Communication between OCS and community agencies was identified as one of the top areas where disagreements or conflict are likely to occur. Forty percent of the respondents to the electronic survey identified communication on cases and 35% identified general communication and openness as areas that are most likely to produce conflict. Communication is of greater concern to community professionals than case decision making. School officials, in particular, expressed the desire to have a freer exchange of information on cases and more feedback on cases they make a report on. Other professionals expressed the need for more dialogue on respective roles and responsibilities.
- OCS's efforts to develop better relationships with the tribes were recognized by many of the professionals who participated in the focus groups. Although progress has been made, the perception is that significant issues remain. Better coordination with the tribes during child maltreatment investigations involving Alaska Native families is one area identified as needing improvement. Another area that was frequently mentioned during the study is the placement of Alaska Native children in foster homes without exploring relative placements first. When relatives surface later on in the case, OCS is reluctant to remove the child from the foster home where he/she has formed attachments. With the majority of children in care being of Alaska Native descent, this is viewed as a major issue needing to be addressed by OCS. Another issue is whether the licensing of Alaska Native foster homes should be done by the tribes or OCS. There is a strong desire on the part of the tribes to license their own homes based on standards and policies to be developed jointly with OCS.

- Observations from the Mat-Su Valley area focus groups underline the importance for developing and improving community collaboration. Relationships with allied community agencies can be strengthened to produce a more effective collaborative community child protection approach. Agreement is apparent concerning the need to create opportunities to strengthen the general quality of working relationships by discussing better ways to work together and ways of achieving consensus in key areas of mutual interest and interdependence.
- Focus group participants in general believe that sustainable change and improvement in community relationships in the Mat-Su Valley can grow and be maintained through the guidance and support of supervisors and managers in that OCS office. Notably dynamic leadership and involvement from the Mat-Su Valley Office managers and supervisors can have a significant influence in particular on increasing effective collaboration and cooperation at the case level. Regional Office managers can be instrumental in supporting; encouraging; and expecting effective interaction and interdependence among community and OCS staff with respect to processing decisions and managing cases.

Recommendations

- By all accounts, OCS has dedicated and competent staff at all levels. The challenge is in retaining good staff in direct service positions and having sufficient resources to achieve manageable workloads. Without addressing these two issues, it will be very difficult for OCS to provide quality services on a consistent basis and to carry out its child protection responsibilities in a highly effective manner.
- In addition to the issues of staff retention and workload, there are other steps OCS can take to improve community relations and to increase its effectiveness. One of the most frequently cited complaints about OCS was lack of responsiveness on the part of line workers. Failure of staff to return phone calls in a timely manner impacts their ability to work effectively with other professionals on individual cases and also impacts the agency's ability to establish positive working relationships with other agencies. Without discounting the impact that heavy workloads have on the ability of workers to return calls in a timely manner, it should be made clear to staff that it is unacceptable for phone calls not to be returned. One small step that could reap significant benefits in terms of public relations is to improve responsiveness at the line level. Establishing clear expectations and standards for the return of phone calls and sending a strong message to staff about the importance of returning calls in a timely manner would be a good first step.

- The need to improve the public image of OCS was one of the top recommendations that emerged from the focus groups and key informant interviews. A concerted effort to educate the public about the work of OCS and to share information on high profile cases are two important components of a public relations campaign. Public awareness efforts should include media outlets, e.g. newspaper, television, radio, as well as community presentations.
- Support and encourage local offices to conduct community outreach activities to educate professionals about their role and responsibilities and the legal constraints they are working under. Regular brown bag lunches and other forums where an open dialogue can occur between OCS staff and community professionals can go a long way in improving working relationships. These forums could be organized in a way that provides an opportunity for OCS staff to present on a particular topic or “hot issue” as well as for informal discussion.
- Develop a system to gather feedback from key organizations and professionals on a regular basis. This could be done most efficiently at the Regional Office level using both in-person and telephonic conversations. A list of questions/issues to be addressed could be generated similar to the process used for key informant interviews in this study. A process such as this will help to identify areas that are working well as well as hot issues that need to be addressed. It could also help to highlight inconsistencies between local offices.
- Develop a system to gather feedback from families that have been served by OCS. Gathering feedback from families served will accomplish the dual purpose of helping to create a culture of customer service in offices and to identify areas needing improvement.
- Another stakeholder group that it is important to gather feedback from on a regular basis is foster parents. Given the critical role that foster parents play in the child protection system, it is important to get their input on what is working well and areas needing improvement. Foster parents could also be some of the best ambassadors for the agency if they feel their work is valued and that they are part of the team working on behalf of the children in their care.
- Supervisors are the key to ensuring good practice and decision making. They also set the tone for interactions with community professionals and how collaboratively staff works with other agencies. To a large extent, supervisors establish the culture in a unit and office which can promote positive relations with community professionals or work against the development of positive relationships. And, perhaps most importantly, supervisors influence the attitudes of workers towards the families they serve. Attitudes can range from a belief that all families need support and the potential for child maltreatment exists in every family to parents who maltreat their children are “bad” people and no amount of services are going to turn them into “good” parents. Efforts should be made to focus on the supervisory level for staff development and training.

- Given the high percentage of children in care coming from Alaska Native homes, it is important to continue efforts to improve coordination and communication with the tribes. Cultural sensitivity training for workers and supervisors is also critical to OCS's ability to serve Alaska Native families effectively.
- Develop clear expectations and guidelines on the sharing of information on cases. A common complaint that emerged from focus groups and interviews was the unwillingness or failure on the part of some OCS staff to share information on cases. Areas where breakdowns in communication or disagreements are most likely to occur regarding the sharing of information are multi-disciplinary teams, schools and foster parents.
- Encourage local and regional offices to work in an open and transparent manner with other community agencies. Of particular importance is for OCS offices to keep community agencies informed about constraints they are working under. Community agencies want to work in partnership with OCS and to share the responsibility for serving families and keeping children safe. To feel like full partners, community agencies want to be kept informed about barriers to quality service, e.g. workload, legal constraints and to work with OCS to address those barriers. Many of the professionals who participated in the study said that they would be more accepting of decisions that are made or action taken by OCS that they might not agree with if they understood the basis for that action.

Report Part 1

Community Focus Groups

General Overview

Six focus groups were held with the following community groups in the Mat-Su Valley Office area:

- School Personnel
- Law Enforcement
- Medical Professionals
- Foster Parents
- Child Advocacy Center
- Citizen Review Panel

An additional focus group was conducted with county CPS workers by request of OCS.

A total of 30 community representatives participated in the focus groups. Five of the focus groups were held in Wasilla the week of August 7, 2006. The focus group with the Citizen Review Panel was held in Anchorage on September 19, 2006. Participants expressed appreciation for being given the opportunity to provide input into the study and hope that the study will result in positive changes in OCS.

The identified purpose of the community focus groups was:

- To identify participant observations and opinions about:
 - The relationships between the Office of Children's Services and other agencies in the community; and
 - The effectiveness of the Office of Children's Services staff in carrying out their child protection responsibilities.

This report is divided into two sections. The first section contains the results from all of the focus groups in aggregate form. The second section contains a breakdown of the results from each focus group.

Section I

How OCS is viewed in the community

Focus group participants were asked the following question:

- From your viewpoint, based on what you observe and hear, how is the Office of Children’s Services viewed in your community?
 - By the general public?
 - By professionals?

The general consensus of focus group participants is that the public has a fairly negative view of OCS. Much of what the general public knows about OCS is based on newspaper stories, typically on high profile cases. Another source of information is friends, relatives, and neighbors who have been involved with OCS. Several participants offered the opinion that the public fears OCS and that OCS has a reputation for “yanking out children.” One school official said that OCS is viewed as the Gestapo by families; they can jump through all of the hoops and still do not get anywhere. Another participant expressed the opinion that the public views OCS as “a predatory, arrogant, self-serving, vindictive organization that is there to tear families apart, not help. Predatory means their first reaction is to take the child away.”

A participant described the public’s relationship with OCS in the Wasilla area as a paradoxical love/hate relationship. The public believes that intervention is required in some situations but wants services to be offered in a way that will help the child and family, not tear them apart. Another participant offered the opinion that OCS is in a no-win situation because they will be criticized if they remove a child or if they do not remove a child. Confidentiality is viewed as a barrier to OCS sharing information on high profile cases and to the public having a better understanding of what OCS does. Several focus group participants offered the opinion that a public relations campaign is needed to improve the image of OCS. Focus group members discussed how the view of OCS has changed over time. They used to be viewed in a much more positive way in the Wasilla area and were considered a helping agency. They are no longer viewed that way, but the community still has the expectation that they should be a helping agency.

Most of the focus group participants were in agreement that professionals have a more positive view of OCS than the general public. Generally, OCS is viewed by professionals as being overworked and understaffed with high caseloads. Even though many of the participants were very critical of OCS, they acknowledged the difficult nature of the job and voiced their support and respect for what OCS does under many demands and pressures.

Professionals see variations from worker-to-worker and office-to-office. Some workers and offices have a reputation for being rude and difficult to contact. Concerns were expressed that community and OCS relationships across all offices could benefit from respect for community professionals; maintenance of privacy and confidentiality in communication and in particular with case discussions; accountability for actions taken and

decisions made; openness in information sharing and case management on cases involving community professionals; and respect for families that influences all work with cases.

Effectiveness

Focus group participants were asked how effective the Office of Children's Services is in carrying out their child protection responsibilities.

The opinions expressed by focus group participants on the effectiveness of OCS were overwhelmingly negative. The most common reason given for a negative view of OCS is a lack of communication; either that OCS staff do not get back to professionals after they make a report, or that OCS staff refuse to share information with other professionals for confidentiality reasons. School representatives and some members of the Child Advocacy Center board expressed the opinion that there is confusion about the respective roles of OCS and law enforcement and the types of reports that are handled by each. Sometimes schools will notify both OCS and law enforcement because they are not sure who to report to. School officials also expressed confusion about what type of case OCS handles and what they do not handle and the priority system they use in assigning cases.

High turnover was identified as a major barrier to OCS' effectiveness. The high turnover increases the workload of the remaining workers who already have caseloads that are too high. This impacts the quality of work they are able to carry out in many ways, including communication with other professionals. One focus group participant expressed concern that inexperienced OCS workers are getting very complicated cases that they are not prepared to handle.

Another focus group participant expressed the opinion that OCS does not always respond to the safety needs of children. The opinion applied to experienced workers as well as new workers. A more general concern was that OCS gets caught up in the details of a case and loses sight of the bigger picture and what will keep children safe. An example that was given was the tendency on the part of some OCS workers to adhere to strict timelines at the expense of ensuring a solid criminal case. Rather than operating on an individual case basis and recognizing the need for a different approach in some situations, these workers refuse to deviate from policy even if it would work out better for the child in the long run by ensuring successful prosecution and incarceration of the perpetrator.

One category of cases that focus group participants identified as falling through the cracks is child-on-child abuse, especially sexual abuse. The screening criteria OCS use for this type of report is not clear. In most situations, OCS will not accept or screen in for investigation reports of

child-on-child abuse, so it is difficult to address these cases since OCS is the entry point into the system. Of particular concern to focus group participants is the difficulty in getting services to either the victim or abuser and the possibility of the child accused of abusing the other child having been victimized him/herself. Another category of cases perceived as falling through the cracks is older teens that are abused or neglected by their parents. OCS considers older teens as able to take care of themselves and, therefore, not their responsibility.

Foster parents reported that they have noticed OCS workers are visiting children in foster care on a more frequent basis this past year. They reported wide variations in how responsive workers are when they call with questions or concerns. A common complaint of foster parents is OCS staff not sharing complete information on children placed in their care. One foster parent, who provides care for teenagers, said that the teens in her care wanted her to speak on their behalf and share that they feel safe with workers and believe them to be honest with them. They also like the local Independent Living program and its coordinator and appreciate her follow-through and responsiveness.

Law enforcement officials expressed the most positive view of OCS's effectiveness. They rated OCS 10 on a scale of 1-10. Law enforcement's opinion is that joint investigations go well and that they have worked well together to build a strong case in complex situations. Law enforcement officials believe a clear understanding of each other's role and responsibilities is one reason they work so well with OCS.

Relationship between OCS and Community Agencies

Focus group participants were asked to describe the relationship between their agency and the Office of Children's Services and to identify areas where they are in sync and areas that produce tension or where conflicts are most likely to occur.

The most positive views of the relationship between their agency and OCS were expressed by school personnel and law enforcement officials. School officials reported that their relationship with OCS is generally good and that they believe they are in sync philosophically and share a common mission of protecting and educating children. Law enforcement officials said that any conflict that occurs is over individual cases rather than between specific investigators and workers. They have seen an improvement in communication and trust between their agencies in recent months. It was believed to be important that leadership in the Mat-Su Valley Office provide support for supervisory authority and effectiveness in that office. It was suggested that community professionals can contribute to supervisory effectiveness by appropriately involving and dealing directly with supervisors.

There is a need for improvement in the relationship between OCS and key professionals in Wasilla. Improvement can be characterized by open and respectful behavior that includes community professionals who are central to cases. The quality of relationships will depend on effective sharing of information and the ability to effectively manage confidentiality in ways that do not limit involvement and participation of key professionals in cases. Notably participants indicated that working relationships work well with respect to responses from OCS at night and on weekends. Reasonably considering the dynamics of interaction and relationship occurring at other than normal office hours could provide interesting direction for improving relationships in general.

The relationship between OCS and the Child Advocacy Center (Children's Place) in Wasilla can be enhanced in order to assure that both entities function more effectively. Collaboration between the two entities depends upon sharing information; egalitarianism; and a search for common ground with respect to objectives and how cases are viewed and handled. Participants are in favor of more effective conflict resolution. Observations occurred concerning the importance of best interests of children as the overarching influence in collaboration between the Child Advocacy Center and OCS.

Cross training; intervention and communication protocols; co-staff general discussions not confined to specific cases; and an acceptable conflict resolution process were seen as potential ways of enhancing collaboration. Agreement was in general concerning the importance of leadership for both entities developing common objectives related to cases and collaboration.

Foster parents expressed varied opinions about how OCS has worked with them. One voiced the belief that OCS does not tell the foster parents the truth about the child, and that they (foster parents) have not been treated well by the workers. Others voiced the opposite experience of being treated well by OCS workers. Foster parents believe that relationships have worked well when foster parents and OCS workers made joint decisions about the child. The most contentious area of tension and conflict is more often with adoption than foster care, particularly with regards to subsidy payments and service resources available to them after an adoption has been finalized.

Citizen Review Panel members identified their role and responsibility being with quality assurance. In that vein they observed they can provide feedback and input to the quality improvement process. Participants believed that quality assurance necessarily includes identification of strengths and need for improvement. There is a hope that a sharing of the same expectation for growth and development can exist between the

Citizen Review Panel and OCS. There is already a perception of growing directness and honesty within the process and exchange.

How Disagreements are Resolved

Focus group members were asked to report on how disagreements on cases are resolved.

Generally, focus group participants reported that they are able to work out disagreements on cases by discussing it with the worker involved, the worker's supervisor or bringing the case to a MDT meeting. The MDT is viewed as playing a critical role in agencies being able to work together effectively and to resolve disagreements on cases. There have been problems in the past with OCS not being willing to bring cases to the MDT or to share information at team meetings, but that situation has improved recently and there is hope that it will continue to improve. If disagreements cannot be resolved through discussions with the worker and supervisor, most focus group participants reported that they feel comfortable going up the chain of command.

Foster parents expressed uncertainty about "what the next level" is if there are disagreements between foster parents and OCS workers. They are fearful of disagreeing too much out of fear that children may be removed from their home or they might be "blackballed" and not receive future placements. Foster parents would like to have a mediator available to help bridge gaps in cases where there is conflict because of the power differential between them and the OCS worker.

Participants acknowledge that the citizen review process can be challenging but can be an asset to supporting effective community relationships. Improvement in collaboration was noted along with opinions supporting decreasing conflict and differences and increasing the felt need for joint involvement; interaction; and objectives.

Resolving Issues over Systems Issues

Focus group members were asked how conflicts over broader systems issues are addressed, e.g., communication; roles and responsibilities; coordination on cases; and philosophical differences.

The MDT has formed a Protocol Team comprised of supervisory level members only for the specific purpose of addressing systems issues. At the Huntsville training, it was suggested that frontline workers be involved as well to help with the distribution of information to line staff. There has been a problem in the past with workers not using protocol that was hammered out at the Protocol Team meeting because they were not aware

that the protocol existed. It is believed that the Protocol Team meetings are a more appropriate forum to discuss systems issues rather than the MDT meetings, where specific cases are discussed.

School officials reported that they regularly sponsor interagency meetings to talk about how agencies can work more effectively together. They view this as a proactive approach rather than a reactive one.

How Relationships Can be Improved

Focus group participants were asked to identify ways the relationship between their agency and the Office of Children's Services could be improved.

Communication was identified by focus group members as the number one way to improve the relationship between their agency and OCS. Focus group members expressed the opinion that improved communication on cases, as well as more opportunities to meet to discuss working relationships and respective roles and responsibilities, would go a long way in improving relationships between agencies. OCS could see immediate improvements in relationships with other agencies if workers would return phone calls promptly. It was also suggested that OCS host open forums, as brown bag lunches, to discuss issues and to educate professionals about hot issues like the sharing of information. If community professionals understood the constraints OCS is operating under in the sharing of information, it would be easier for them to accept it when OCS workers cite confidentiality as the reason they cannot share information.

Foster parents identified the need for OCS workers to be accessible during and after hours. They expressed concern about how difficult it is to connect with OCS workers and to have their phone calls returned.

Law enforcement officials expressed the opinion that significant progress has been made in improving their relationship with OCS. They believe it is a matter of setting aside egos, stop finger pointing, and a willingness to sit down to talk. They also believe that the OCS local managers need to be willing to do the same and to trust others, including their own supervisors and staff, to do the job.

Participants agree that effective community collaboration depends on openness and trust which is not easily achieved but must be worked on diligently and in a planful manner. Agreement was high that basic to trust is understanding and that community professionals and OCS staff can benefit from gaining greater understanding of existing differences and similarities with respect to purposes; responsibilities; and methods. A common belief is that enhancing effective community collaboration is more likely to be maintained when processes exist to reduce conflict and

enhance relationships that are not centered upon or influenced by specific cases. In other words, participants favor relationship building strategies that occur in proactive ways separate from case management. Such strategies could be grounded on two way communication and regular meetings between staff and leaders.

Suggestions for Improvements from Community Professionals

Focus group members were asked what advice they would give to the Director of Children's Services to improve their child protection efforts.

Funding was identified as one of the primary ways to improve OCS's child protection efforts. OCS is perceived to be seriously understaffed and under-funded which seriously hampers its ability to be effective in protecting children and working with families. It was also suggested that OCS support staff so they can do the job they were trained to do.

A related suggestion was to focus on the professional development of workers and to offer incentives to workers and allow them to attend training. Having the opportunities to attend conferences and talk informally with other professions is viewed as a way for OCS workers to build knowledge and relationships.

Communication was another frequently mentioned suggestion for improving OCS's child protection efforts. Agencies would like to see more open and frequent communication with OCS on specific cases as well as to discuss roles and responsibilities. They would like to see OCS reach out more to community professionals to educate them on the laws, regulations and policies they are operating under and to discuss issues such as confidentiality and the sharing of information.

Public education and awareness activities were also seen as a way to improve OCS's child protection efforts. Focus group members would like to see OCS do more positive press releases and to educate the public on their role and responsibilities and the work they do everyday on behalf of children and families.

Other suggestions include:

- Conduct a caseload study – Hire a professional group to conduct an internal audit of caseloads. Conduct focus groups and involve OCS employees. Compare findings from the audit with other areas. The findings can be used to support a presentation to the legislature to request more funding.

- Intra-communication among foster parents – Allow foster parents to talk with previous family placement to discuss the child. It will help fill in gaps in the child's life and assist the foster parents to avoid situations that may negatively impact the child.
- Documented sources about the child for workers – It can be helpful to have some type of checklist from the workers about the child and his or her background.
- Foster Parent Board – Establish a board of foster parents and youth to meet quarterly to talk and problem solve about issues that are relevant to them. Use discussions to give feedback to the agency. Have more meetings where foster parents can share information among them and learn from each other about resources.
- Birth certificates – Give foster parents a copy of the birth certificate and social security card.
- Counselor in the office – Foster parents can benefit from having access to a counselor to discuss issues without the youth being present.
- Working with birth families – Clarify how foster parents will be involved in working with birth parents. Some expressed fear that this is to occur in the foster parents' homes. They expressed an understanding of the need to work with birth families but not within their personal premises.
- Resources – Set up more local resources, not just programs. Have a company donate funding for entertainment for foster families and children. Reduce paperwork for some requirements such as travel reimbursement. Explore possibility of foster parents receiving some type of benefits – health insurance or retirement plan.
- MDT's – Publicize the existence of the MDT to the community and use it. Another focus group participant recommended that OCS establish clear guidelines for how OCS works with the MDT.
- Ethics Committee – Consider setting up an ethics committee for decision making. The medical profession has a model, and it is considered helpful to review case decisions.
- Personnel – Hire the right persons in the position and focus on local managers knowing expectations. Change supervision or personnel if the persons cannot carry out the mission or change his or her attitude. Accountability is lacking throughout the organization.

- Confidentiality – Clarify confidentiality policy and issues.
- Increase collaboration with the community.
- Focus on customer service – Improve things you are doing well and improve things you are not doing well. When you quit seeing yourself as something to improve, then it isn't working.
- Central office staff (including the OCS Director) needs to get out to the field offices and know what is going on at that level.
- Be a leader – Don't be heavy handed, but support the workers to do what they need to do. Bring in outside agencies; OCS is not in this battle alone.
- Make sure that all staff is on the same page as far as the mission. Keep communication lines open.
- Have a greater focus on cultural diversity. Provide more training to staff on cultural diversity.

Section II

How OCS is Viewed in the Community

School Personnel:

OCS is viewed as being overworked and understaffed with high caseloads. The staff are good people, but the re-organization of the agency and unclear definitions about what cases the agency handles create a negative image. The school personnel believe that the general public has a paradoxical almost love/hate relationship with OCS. There are people in the community, especially relatives of students, who believe that some intervention and services should be offered to a family; however, rather than call OCS, the interested persons will come to the school hoping that a report by the school will result in some help for the students. The school personnel reported that the district had a good experience with OCS over a 20 year period of time. They (the schools) believe that the perception is not favorable in certain cases because OCS cannot always share all information due to confidentiality. They also expressed an opinion that the image is often influenced based on who the professionals are working with within the agency.

Law Enforcement:

Law Enforcement believes that the public perceives OCS as the “bad guys,” and better public relations are needed to change perception. The agency needs to educate the public about its responsibilities. The law enforcement (troopers and police) perceive OCS as doing a good job, and in joint investigations the troopers have a favorable impression. The officers want to build a strong criminal case, so they have worked with OCS toward more flexibility and understanding about each other’s role to accomplish this end.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

Foster parents believe that the public does not have a favorable perception of OCS. They indicated that they believe the public forms its opinion from what they read and hear and often that’s through newspapers. The public fears OCS because they take children away. If the public understood OCS’s job, they believe it would improve the public image.

The professional community, they believe, asks OCS to do its work and have unreal expectations of the agency. There should be more explanation about what OCS can and cannot do. There have been jurisdictional issues about case responsibility in the past between counties, and the children are caught in the middle. Policy changes within OCS are not observed consistently across the state, and local offices do not work well with each other.

Medical Professionals:

The medical professionals believe that the public has a poor view of OCS and particularly of certain staff. They believe that OCS is telling families who the reporters are, which they consider a problem (one foster parent expressed this understanding too). It is thought that the public gets its information from the media, and often there are gaps in the information.

The medical professionals believe that OCS is rude and difficult to contact. An example of the unprofessional behavior is the use of speaker phone when an OCS worker and pediatrician are consulting on a case. The professionals wonder if reporting a suspected case will really result in help for the child.

Child Advocacy Center:

The staff and board members of the Center believe that OCS is viewed negatively by the public and “yanks out children.” The public is fearful and families have expressed a need for help, but they do not call OCS.

Professionals understand the difficulty of the job and respect what OCS does under many demands and pressures; however, it is not viewed as a committed partner in a partnership. It appears that OCS wants to be in control, lacks trust with other professionals, is defensive if questioned and secretive about its work. Communication, especially with the health care community, is a big barrier.

Citizen Review Panel:

Some participants observed that the public likely holds the traditional view of child protective services as primarily child removers. Whether this is a pervasive public attitude or not it was observed that OCS can continually and actively influence public perceptions through public relations strategies and through effective case by case intervention. Well established acceptable and preferred case practice and decision making ought to be consistently apparent from community to community.

Opinions note the positive view most professionals have of OCS and how the community professional community can be an asset in promoting and supporting positive public perceptions of OCS. Obviously a sense of team buttressed by shared values and common objectives between community entities, community professionals and OCS can have definite affect on the OCS image but more importantly can contribute to a systematic and community based approach to child protection.

Effectiveness

School Personnel:

The effectiveness of OCS is impacted by the confusion by the schools about the priority and type of report that should be handled by the agency and those that should be handled by the troopers (law enforcement). Effectiveness is also hampered by the lack of communication between the schools and OCS after a report is made. The schools do not routinely hear from the agency about how a case is progressing. If the school initiates a conversation, the OCS caseworkers have been straightforward, but the agency does not consistently initiate the feedback.

Law Enforcement:

Law Enforcement believes that OCS does a good job, a 10 on a scale of 1-10. Joint investigations go well. They have worked well together to build a strong case in complex situations. They understand each other's roles.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

OCS's effectiveness in carrying out CPS is impacted by several factors: lack of internal communication; a perceived secretive system about decision-making; failing to volunteer information on the children; lack of knowledge about the children; and inconsistent treatment of foster parents by workers.

On behalf of a group of foster teens, one foster parent shared some comments about the OCS workers. The teens expressed feeling safe with the workers and believed them to be honest with them. They like the local Independent Living program and its local coordinator. They like the follow-through and how responsive the coordinator is to them.

Medical Professionals:

Since OCS is viewed as sharing very little information about a case, the medical professionals could not express an opinion about how effective it is in carrying out CPS responsibilities. In the hospital setting, OCS is believed to be more responsive since it must be included in an initial plan for the child. In ongoing cases, the hospital does not know what is occurring in an ongoing case. Some believe that safety concerns for the child are not always addressed, and children are not safe.

Child Advocacy Center:

The Advocacy Center professionals believe that effectiveness in carrying out CPS responsibilities is impacted by several issues. The lack of communication and lack of clarity about confidentiality issues is a problem. The professionals expressed a view that not all workers respond in the same way, but some are rigid about handling cases and sharing information. There is confusion about definitions of reporting child abuse and which cases OCS responds to for investigation. There appears to be a lack of consistency in screening criteria, and cases in some categories fall between the cracks, particularly those involving older teens. It appears that OCS does not want to use community resources.

Citizen Review Panel:

Improvement of OCS as a systematic, well structured and effectively managed service delivering organization is desired by participants. Agreement exists concerning the significance of consistent application of policy and procedure across all jurisdictions that are highly responsive to diversity. Preparation and training to effectively deliver well planned culturally sensitive intervention is necessary for OCS staff.

Staff turnover and balancing staff experience with complexity of assignment were viewed as crucial issues in need of attention. Supportive supervision is a necessary ingredient to maintenance and guidance of casework staff.

Participants cite the importance of community based child protection which surrounds OCS with regard to shared responsibility and resources from the broader community. Reasonably participants observe that OCS succeeds in its mandates and responsibilities to the extent that the community shares in supporting that success.

Relationship between OCS and Community Agencies

School Personnel:

The schools believe that their relationship with OCS is generally good. If there are areas of disagreement, it is usually directed to a particular case. OCS managers have been responsive through meetings and telephone conversations if problems have occurred. The school's opinion is that OCS' responsibilities are not clear, and there are individuals who have expectations that are beyond the boundaries of what the agency can offer. Resolving disagreements at the worker level is the preferred method of resolving conflict.

Law Enforcement:

Areas that produce more tension and conflict have to do more with isolated cases between specific investigators and workers. Usually, the problem is worked out and both groups have recently tried to improve the trust between their agencies. OCS and law enforcement are communicating more and are open to each other in planning judicial approaches.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

Foster parents have varied opinions about how OCS has worked with them. One voiced the belief that OCS does not tell the foster parents the truth about the child, and they (foster parents) have not been treated well by the workers. Others voiced the opposite experience of being treated well by OCS workers. The general view by the foster parents is that often it depends on the worker as to the treatment and communication received by the foster parent.

The foster parents believe that relationships have worked well when foster parents and OCS workers made joint decisions about the child. The most contentious area of tension and conflict is more often with adoption, but

they believe it can be just as true for foster care. Foster parents and adoptive parents do not believe that they can disagree with OCS's decisions or views without being "blackballed" by the agency. If they do, it will result in the children being removed or no additional children being placed in the home. They (foster parents) believe that they are not respected for their opinions and, foster parents on occasion, have agreed with agency decisions when they did not believe that it was in the child's best interest. Other beliefs are that there are personality clashes between some OCS workers and foster/adoptive parents.

Foster parents shared a specific example about the financial and service resources available to them as an illustration of the lack of information shared with the foster parents. Adoption subsidy and additional supplement to the foster care board payments were examples of disagreement and misunderstanding by foster parents and how intimidated they are about requesting these resources. They (foster parents) believe they will be penalized if they ask OCS for these resources.

Medical Professionals:

The relationship between the medical profession and OCS appears tenuous at best because of perceived rude behavior by OCS workers, primary care physicians being left out of information sharing about the child, and refusals by OCS to share information due to confidentiality. The medical group believes that the one area that seems to work best is the response from OCS at night and on weekends.

Child Advocacy Center:

The Center professionals believe that, on those occasions when the relationship is not good, (such as areas of disagreement between the Center and OCS) certain reports are not brought before the MDT for staffing. Several Center professionals expressed particular beliefs about local OCS leadership and the office exerting power and control over less than significant details.

Citizen Review Panel:

Participants summarize their role as participating in a process to build and improve child protection within communities. Collaboration, cooperation and coordination between the panel and OCS are necessary parts of that process of improvement. Balancing assessment and recommended strategies related to enhancing child protection program effectiveness is fundamental to the process. Participants consider that this quality

improvement process must be mutual and interactive between the panel and OCS.

How Disagreements are Resolved

School Personnel:

If there are areas of disagreement between schools and OCS, it is usually directed to a particular case. OCS managers have been responsive through meetings and telephone conversations if problems have occurred. The school's opinion is that OCS's responsibilities are not clear, and there are individuals who have expectations that are beyond the boundaries of what the agency can offer. Resolving disagreements at the worker level is the preferred method of resolving conflict.

Law Enforcement:

Areas that produce tension and conflict have to do more with isolated cases between specific investigators and workers. Usually, the problem is worked out and both groups have recently tried to improve the trust between their agencies. OCS and law enforcement are communicating more and are open to each other in planning judicial approaches.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

The foster parents are not aware of "what the next level" is in terms of ways to resolve disagreements. One foster parent expressed being comfortable in dealing directly with the workers when a problem occurs or going to the worker's supervisor.

Medical Professionals:

Disagreements have been resolved with the medical professionals by going personally to supervisors. It was expressed that the upper management at the local level responds and is willing to "come to the table and talk."

Child Advocacy Center:

In the future, if disagreements surface, the professionals plan to go to the source and discuss the problem. This has not been how disagreements have been handled in the past, but now procedures are being put into place to be clearer about how the conflict will be addressed.

Citizen Review Panel:

When we first turned in our report on the Mat-Su Valley Office, community professionals said that things got worse. They did not even want to talk to us anymore. Getting the OCS Director involved in cases in the Mat-Su Valley Office has made a difference.

*How Conflicts over Systems Issues are Resolved***School Personnel:**

Several groups meet regularly in the borough and the district sponsors multidisciplinary meetings four times a year. Participants include staff from social services, mental health, substance abuse, law enforcement and other community resources. The purpose of each meeting is to set up a proactive approach to larger systems conflicts.

Law Enforcement:

Broader systemic conflicts are being handled through the MDT's and more open communication. Law Enforcement and OCS workers know how to contact each other at any given time. Both are trying to educate the public about which agency to call for reports. Within the MDT, protocols are being drafted, and each participating agency is responsible for drafting its respective responsibilities for handling cases. All these efforts will help with case coordination.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

The foster parents mentioned the Alaska Center for Resource Families group as a helpful community support to foster parents. Another source, expressed by one foster parent, was fosterparents.com to chat with other foster parents across the county.

Medical Professionals:

Hope was expressed by the medical professionals that, with participation on the MDT's, the broader systemic conflicts will be addressed. Knowing what constraints OCS has about sharing information with primary care providers will improve relationships.

Child Advocacy Centers:

For conflicts involving the broader systemic issues, a Protocol Team is in place to discuss systemic issues. In the past, the members were from the supervisory level, but, based on recommendations from the Huntsville

training, including front line workers will be beneficial. It is hoped that OCS will be more forthcoming and share information and become less defensive if certain changes are made.

How Relationships Can be Improved

School Personnel:

The two ways to improve the relationship between the schools/district and OCS are: 1) improve the communication; and 2) review the regulations/laws/policy to clarify expectations of OCS. There should be mutual re-enforcement of the positive job that both groups do for children and families.

Law Enforcement:

Law Enforcement believes that it has made progress with OCS to improve the relationship. They believe that it is a matter of setting aside egos, stop finger pointing, and a willingness to sit down to talk. They also believe that local managers should be willing to do the same and trust others, including its own supervisors and staff to do the job.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

Foster parents believe the relationship between foster parents and OCS can improve if communication without threat improves. Also, OCS workers need to be available to contact during and after hours. It is difficult to connect with OCS workers and just as difficult to have messages returned.

Medical Professionals:

Suggestions about ways to improve the relationship between the medical community and OCS include returning phone calls, open forums such as brown bag lunches to discuss issues, education about sharing of information, and more staff.

Child Advocacy Center:

The relationship between the Advocacy Center and OCS can improve if several things happen. Better communication is needed. The attitude of key players needs to improve or they should "go away." OCS needs to trust community professionals to do their respective jobs. The Advocacy Center believes that OCS is a fear-based, closed system, and there needs to be more transparency in sharing knowledge. OCS needs to truly partner with the community agency.

Citizen Review Panel:

The relationship between OCS and the Citizen Review Panel could be improved through more two-way communications instead of operating under gossip and innuendo. Panel members need to pay attention to the Chinese proverb “seek to understand before being understood.” Panel members should go out with a social worker for the day to gain a better understanding of the job.

Another suggestion was to have the Citizen Review Panel meet with the OCS Director on a regular basis rather than on a crisis basis. Panel members believe there is honesty in their relationship with the OCS Director, but do not believe they have that across the agency. Panel members also expressed the opinion that there has to be free and open dialogue down the line. “OCS has to realize we can help them accomplish their mission if they cooperate with us.”

Suggestions for Improvements by the Stakeholders

School Personnel:

- Funding – OCS needs a bigger budget since it is seriously underfunded. It needs more staff to carry out its responsibilities.
- Awareness and public education – OCS should not fund the problem but use funding to seek solutions. There should be public education about how the community services can work together to seek solutions.
- Communication – The agency needs to communicate with the schools about what they are supposed to be doing and about case specific issues.
- Study of the child protection system – The schools want to see results based on the study. They want to see a specific Action Plan.

Law Enforcement:

- Educate the public – Do more press releases and do positive public releases.
- Conduct a caseload study – Hire a professional group to conduct an internal audit of caseloads. Conduct focus groups and involve OCS employees. Compare findings from the audit with other areas. The findings can be used to support a presentation to the legislature to request more funding.

- Additional funding – Law enforcement believes that there is public support for more money to go for child protection. They believe there are key legislators who will support the funding, and law enforcement will be willing to help with the message for additional funding from the state legislature.

Foster/Adoptive Parents:

- Intra-communication among foster parents – Allow foster parents to talk with previous family placement to discuss the child. It will help fill in gaps in the child's life and assist the foster parents to avoid situations that may negatively impact the child.
- Documented sources about the child for workers – It can be helpful to have some type of checklist from the workers about the child and his or her background.
- Foster Parent Board – Establish a board of foster parents and youth to meet quarterly to talk and problem solve about issues that are relevant to them. Use discussions to give feedback to the agency. Have more meetings where foster parents can share information among them and learn from each other about resources.
- Birth certificates – Give foster parents a copy of the birth certificate and social security card.
- Counselor in the office – Foster parents can benefit from having access to a counselor to discuss issues without the youth being present.
- Working with birth families – Clarify the rumor that foster parents are hearing about working with birth families. Some expressed fear this is to occur in the foster parents' homes. They expressed an understanding of the need to work with birth families, but not within their personal premises.
- Resources – Set up more local resources, not just programs. Have a company donate funding for entertainment for foster families and children. Reduce paperwork for some requirements such as travel reimbursement. Explore possibility of foster parents receiving some type of benefits—health insurance or retirement plan.

Medical Professionals:

- Communication – Have more dialogue to express concerns. Have OCS reach out to all professionals including the medical community.
- MDT's – Publicize the existence of the MDT to the community and use it.
- Professional development of workers – Offer incentives to workers and allow them to attend training. Having the opportunities to attend conferences and talk informally with other professionals will build knowledge and relationships.
- Ethics Committee – Consider setting up an ethics committee on decision-making. The medical profession has a model and it is considered helpful to review case decisions.

Child Advocacy Center:

- Communication – OCS needs to communicate better with partners and set standards and guidelines for communication.
- MDT's – Establish some clear guidelines for how OCS works with the MDT.
- Personnel – Hire the right persons in the position and focus on administrators knowing expectations. Change supervision or personnel if the persons cannot carry out the mission or change his or her attitude. Accountability is lacking throughout the organization.
- Training – Offer training opportunities to staff so they will know how to do a better job.
- Confidentiality – Clarify confidentiality policy and issues.

Citizen Review Panel:

- Increase collaboration with the community.
- Support staff so they can do the job they were trained to do. They need to feel like someone has their backing.

- Focus on customer service – Improve things you are doing well and improve things you are not doing well. When you quit seeing yourself as something to improve, then it isn't working.
- Central office staff (including the OCS Director) needs to get out to the field offices and know what is going on at that level.
- Be a leader – Don't be heavy handed but support the workers to do what they need to do. Bring in outside agencies; OCS is not in this battle alone.
- Make sure that all staff is on the same page as far as the mission. Keep communication lines open.
- Have a greater focus on cultural diversity. Provide more training to staff on cultural diversity.

Report Part 2

Key Informant Interviews

General Overview

Interviews were conducted with 18 professionals representing the following agencies/organizations:

- Alaska State Troopers, Ketchikan;
- Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority;
- Court Improvement Project;
- Children's Justice Act Task Force;
- Division of Juvenile Justice;
- Ombudsman's Office (Three representatives from this office were interviewed together);
- Alaska Children's Trust;
- Alaska Children's Services;
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council;
- Attorney General's Office;
- Alaska Center for Resource Families;
- Alaska Cares (Child Advocacy Center);
- Anchorage Public Schools;
- School of Social Work, University of Alaska;
- Office of Public Advocacy; and
- Resource Center for Parents and Children, Fairbanks.

Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in-person during the week of September 11, 2006. The remaining five interviews were conducted by telephone.

Working Relationship with the OCS

Key informants were asked to describe their working relationship with the Office of Children's Services, e.g., how long, frequency of contact, type of contact, responsiveness of OCS staff, and the level of staff interacted with most frequently.

The majority of professionals interviewed had a long-term working relationship with the Office of Children's Services (OCS). The number of years ranged from 1 ½ to 25 years of working together. The average was 11.2. The frequency of contact ranged from daily to quarterly. Professionals having case specific contact with OCS had more frequent contact, as one might expect. Those having contact at a program, policy or systems level reported less frequent contact including weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly. Five professionals reported having case specific contact with OCS. The other professionals reported contact at the program, policy or systems level.

Response time on the part of OCS varied greatly depending upon the level of staff contacted. Managers at the Regional and Central Office level are viewed as providing a quicker response than direct service staff, usually immediate or within a day. Line staff are typically much slower to respond, and professionals reported that they sometimes have to call line staff four or five times to get a response and it can take a few days or up to a week to reach them.

The level of staff the key informants have contact with most frequently is at the management level in Regional Offices or the Central Office. Contact was also reported at the social worker and supervisor levels.

OCS's Reputation

Based on what they have heard and observed, key informants were asked to describe how OCS works with other agencies; e.g., what is their reputation in the professional community and hot spots where conflicts are likely to occur.

The key informants have a more positive view of management staff than line workers. Generally, they believe the agency is moving in the right direction with recent reform efforts and view managers and administrators as being very open to suggestions and criticism and to working collaboratively with other agencies. Without exception, the key informants expressed confidence in the Director of OCS and believe she is providing strong leadership. (Some referred to Tammy Sandoval as the Deputy Commissioner and others referred to her as the Director of the Office of Children's Services. The title will be referred to as the Director of OCS in this report.) The only negative opinion expressed about the management level had to do with the difficulty in implementing change successfully because of the change in administration every time there is a change in governors. Someone called managers who are resistant to change "We-Be's" or tomorrow you'll be gone but "We Be" here.

At the line level, key informants report great variation in the quality of work from worker-to-worker and office-to-office. Everyone expressed concern about the high turnover rate among line workers and the impact that has on the quality of service provided to families and morale in the agency. Generally, social workers are viewed as hard working, dedicated people who are overwhelmed by the nature of the work and high caseloads, which are exacerbated by the high turnover. Key informants also have the impression that social workers do not receive the support they need to do the difficult job they are being asked to do. On the other hand, several key informants expressed the opinion that social workers are not held accountable and that social workers who are not performing adequately should be terminated. Several key informants reported that social workers have a reputation for not returning calls and not giving a basis for action they take.

At the agency level, there is a perception among some service agencies that some providers are treated better than others. One key informant said that OCS works best with Family Preservation and In-Home services and Substance Abuse Treatment Centers. This person also said that professionals talk among themselves about being treated poorly but are reluctant to report their problems out of fear of repercussion, e.g., loss of referrals or termination of contract.

Some of the key informants expressed the opinion that OCS's working relationship with other agencies goes up and down. When there is a serious injury or child death case and OCS comes under criticism, there is a tendency to go internal and not work collaboratively. When things die down, they begin reaching out again and working collaboratively with other agencies. One key informant expressed hope that the new confidentiality legislation will open up communication between OCS and the public which will improve the public's perception of OCS. When OCS could not share information on a case that is in the media, the public thought they had something to hide and just assumed they had done something wrong.

A major frustration of principals and school personnel is when they make reports to OCS and OCS does not get back to them with feedback on action taken. The school also feels when there is a child in school that might pose a risk to other children, OCS should be more assertive with the parents to set up an appointment with the school to talk about it rather than leaving it up to the parents. (An example was given of a case where one boy sexually assaulted another boy in the restroom at school. OCS knew this boy had a history of sexual perpetration but was leaving it up to the parents to notify the school.)

Several key informants expressed concerns about the Mat-Su Valley Office and its reputation for being difficult to work with. The Mat-Su Valley

Office had a very good reputation a few years ago but are now viewed as being “hunkered down,” not willing to share information with other agencies, not being willing to give a basis for action taken on cases, and not returning phone calls. There is a general perception that agencies in the Wasilla area are not working together.

All of the key informants voiced support for the staff of OCS and acknowledged the very difficult nature of their jobs. Even people who had very harsh criticism for their work expressed respect for the work that OCS does.

Hot Spots in Working Relationships

- *Responsiveness on the part of OCS staff was frequently cited as a hot spot.* Professionals can go for days without a response from a worker or supervisor.
- *Lack of communication or a coordinated approach to working with families.* This leads to misunderstanding and conflict.
- *Conflict around OCS’s legal mandate around reasonable efforts.* If other professionals do not understand this legal mandate, they can be critical of OCS for not removing children sooner. Even when other professionals understand OCS’s legal mandate, they can sometimes disagree about how far to go in trying to rehabilitate a family or how many chances parents should be given before children are removed.
- *When OCS places a child in a mental health facility because there is a bed available even though the child does not need that level of care.*
- *Transfer of cases from Investigation to Permanency – information can fall through the cracks.* The Permanency Worker has to get to know the family and put a case plan together. That takes time. The new social worker might have a new take on things. That can be confusing to the family and slow things down.
- *Turnover or illness can cause someone new to cover a case.* It is frustrating when a caseworker shows up in court but doesn’t know anything about the case.
- *Lack of communication between the social worker and foster parent on placements and removals and what happens while the child is in the foster home.* Foster parents are not treated as team members.

- *Conflict over kids that are deemed incompetent to stand trial – typically because they are FAS or low I.Q.* OCS staff cannot understand why the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) cannot take custody if the youth cannot stand trial. These kids usually end up going out-of-state because they cannot be served in the cognitive-based treatment programs in Alaska.
- *There can be conflict with defense attorneys over treatment issues and restrictions on visitation.* OCS does not pay for treatment for parents. There can be long waiting lists for services. If parents need supervised visitation, it can be difficult to have visitation be more frequent than one hour per week.
- *Conflict arising when the OCS social worker and provider agency do not agree about the progress a family is making or what should happen with the case.* The social workers do not always listen to the professional opinions of providers. It is difficult to resolve disagreements, because OCS has all the power and control and providers are reluctant to go above the social worker.
- *Conflict can occur on cases that come in during the middle of the night.* Law Enforcement and the Child Advocacy Center must respond, but the OCS worker does not come in even though the OCS worker has to give direction on the case. It is difficult for other professionals to understand why OCS cannot get called out in the middle of the night when they play such a critical role in cases.
- *When children are removed, usually in the middle of the night, and the school is not notified before the foster parent shows up at school with the kid.*

Responsibility for Receiving and Investigating Reports

Key informants were asked to assess how OCS carries out its responsibility for receiving and investigating child maltreatment reports. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being highly effective and 1 being highly ineffective, key informants were asked to rate the job OCS is doing. The ratings given by the key informants ranged from 2 to 8 with most of the ratings falling in the 7 or 8 category. The 2 rating was directed at the Mat-Su Valley Office specifically. The only other rating below 5 was a 3, and the reason given for that low rating was the high turnover rate resulting in a high number of vacant positions.

Similar to how OCS is viewed by professionals in the community, how effective they are perceived to be in receiving and investigating reports

varies greatly from worker-to-worker and office-to-office. Everyone acknowledged that workload is a major factor in the quality of investigations, and the general impression seemed to be that OCS is doing the best it can with the resources it has. The exception was the Wasilla Office. Workers and supervisors in that office are perceived to be more entrenched and less cooperative. People in the community are afraid to report problems for fear of retribution. One key informant talked about a state trooper who used to be very outspoken about the problems in working with OCS, but he has been silenced and will not speak out anymore. Another concern expressed about the Wasilla Office is that the staff does not communicate with other professionals involved in a case and does not call the school back when the school makes a report.

One key informant expressed the opinion that the Anchorage Office's response to reports is cyclical. About 2 ½ years ago, there was a significant decrease in the number of kids coming into custody. Everyone connected with the courts noticed the decrease. It was not explainable by any services that were provided to families that would make it possible to keep more kids in the home. The perception was that it was a policy decision not to take reports and/or not to take kids into custody. Then, about seven or eight months ago, it changed and the number of kids coming into custody is back at a reasonable number again. This person stated that for a period OCS could go out 15 times on the same case and not take custody.

In regards to how well OCS is doing in assessing safety and taking appropriate action to protect children, most of the key informants expressed the opinion that OCS is doing a good job in assessing safety. Some inconsistencies were noted in the criteria used to assess safety and there are disagreements at times whether or not children should be removed from the home. Several people acknowledged the no-win situation that OCS is in because they will be criticized when they remove children and will be criticized when they leave children in the home. One key informant expressed concern about the safety of social workers in the Wasilla Office who are going into homes that are used as meth labs.

Key informants reported inconsistencies from worker-to-worker and office-to-office in how well OCS staff communicate and coordinate with other professionals during the investigation. The perception is that it is more a matter of personalities and the culture in offices than a problem with the policies and procedures. There is a tendency on the part of some workers and offices to just go out and interview the child when a report comes in and not to coordinate with other agencies. Schools often complain that they make a report and then are not contacted during or after the investigation.

OCS was criticized by some of the key informants for not being more careful about pursuing relative placements. The perception is that it is common for OCS not to place children with relatives or not even look for relatives. When relatives surface months or years later, OCS says the children cannot be moved because they have bonded with the foster family. This robs the children of an opportunity to be with family.

Another criticism that was expressed was the attitude on the part of some social workers towards families that are in the system. The mentality of some OCS staff seems to be that parents are not worthy of respect because they are in the system and have done something wrong. Some workers have the attitude that the parents will never be good enough no matter what they do.

Impressions of OCS Staff

Key informants were asked their impression of the staff of OCS, e.g., how are they to work with, how responsive they are to questions and concerns, and how easy it is to work out disagreements.

Managers at the Regional and Central Office levels are viewed in a very positive manner and are considered very responsive and non-defensive. Without exception, the Director of the Office of Children's Services was praised for her strong leadership. The Director and Deputy Directors are viewed as energized and being open to change and rethinking processes. Other comments made about the leadership of OCS include that they are professional, committed, hard working and receptive to other people's views and opinions. The only criticism expressed about the management level is that the agency always promotes from within so there is never the opportunity to get new blood or ideas infused into it.

Impressions of line staff are not as positive. The agency is viewed as chaotic and dysfunctional at the line level because of turnover in staff. Social workers are generally seen as overwhelmed, defensive and guarded. Responsiveness varies from worker-to-worker. Some are wonderful to work with, and others never respond to calls. Some workers give the impression that cases should go the way they want them to go and that they have trouble listening to other perspectives. An example was given in regards to the Regional Placement Committee and how to handle a case of a runaway girl. The Department of Juvenile Justice does not think you should lock up runaways because it is considered a violation of a youth's rights to lock him/her up if a crime has not been committed. The approach OCS wants to take in that case is to lock the girl up to provide treatment. The OCS worker will tell DJJ that, if the girl is not locked up and she runs away and gets hurt, then it is DJJ's fault. There is not a willingness of the OCS worker to listen to other points of view or to talk it through.

Supervisors are viewed more positively and as more responsive than line workers. Key informants generally expressed satisfaction with the responsiveness of supervisors when they contact them with concerns. They also report they are generally able to work out disagreements when they take them to supervisors or further up the chain. Everyone makes a good-faith effort to resolve disagreements, but there are times they have to agree to disagree. Supervisors are viewed as very good at explaining the process and why a case is being handled the way it is.

Specific concerns expressed include:

- *Adoption and Permanency Unit in Anchorage – They are following one set of policies to get to an outcome that may not be in the child's best interest.* The focus is to get kids into permanency as quickly as possible without considering the long-term consequences with independent living. It may not be in a child's best interest to be adopted or to pursue a legal guardianship if it makes him/her ineligible for independent living services. There is not a lot of dialogue on this issue. OCS is the decision maker and does not listen to other points of view about what is in the child's best interest.
- *Line workers are micro-managed because of the new computer system.* Every decision a social worker makes has to be checked off by a supervisor. It is a waste of time. ORCA has completely changed how the work is done and has led to micro management.
- *OCS social workers come from different ethnic and economic backgrounds than the families they serve.* They have biases based on the backgrounds they come from.
- *Some OCS workers choose this field with the idea they will save children.* On the way to saving children, they might dismantle families. This creates a loss of culture in the Native community because the culture is not passed down to the next generation.
- *The tone used by staff in the Fairbanks Office is not appreciated.* We are on the same side, and they still respond to us in a curt manner. It makes me wonder how they work with other agencies.

In spite of the criticisms the key informants expressed about line workers, they still consider OCS staff in general to be caring, compassionate, hard working and wanting to do a good job. They attribute most of the problems at the line level to be the result of high caseloads, turnover, fatigue and the difficult nature of the job.

Relationship with OCS

Key informants were asked to rate the relationship between their agency and OCS on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the best possible working relationship and 1 being the worst possible relationship. Most key informants rated the relationship between their agency and OCS very high. Ratings ranged from 4 to 10 with most falling in the 8 or 9 categories. Reasons for giving lower ratings centered on lack of responsiveness, poor communication and lack of consistency across caseworkers. Key informants who expressed a more positive view of their relationship with OCS cited the open and candid nature of their relationship, regular meetings that provide a forum to discuss policy and practice issues, mutual respect, and professional interaction.

A specific concern was expressed regarding the importance of openness and trust between OCS offices and community professionals. Mutual support and understanding was viewed as contributing to avoiding defensiveness and conflict. Reinforcement and support were identified as necessary dynamics that must occur within community – OCS collaborative relationships in general and case specific in particular as people and offices change and evolve. In particular these dynamics are necessary in complicated and challenging cases.

Measures that could be taken to improve relationships:

- *Law Enforcement would like to see regular meetings (every other month or quarterly). This way they could talk about cases but also talk at a systems level about how to improve communication and coordination.*
- *Mental Health agencies would like to see OCS do a better job of providing information necessary for preauthorization prior to placement. They would also like caseworkers to seriously consider the needs of the child and what level of care is needed rather than taking a shotgun approach by referring to all residential programs and, whichever one responds first, that is where the child goes.*
- *Collaborate and partner more with other agencies. Remember that other agencies are a resource and can help OCS.*
- *Schools would like to improve communication and feedback. Schools find it offensive when the OCS worker comes in and wants to interview a child but gets upset when he/she is asked to show a picture ID and the form they are supposed to have with them. Another problem occurs when OCS does not notify the parents when kids are interviewed at school and the parents find out about*

the interview and call the school. Teachers are supposed to remain anonymous when they report unless it goes to court. But OCS often lets the parent know that the school reported. The OCS worker might not volunteer the information but will confirm the identity of the reporter when the parent guesses.

- *Guardians Ad-litem would like to see a better understanding of the difference in the roles.* OCS staff need to depersonalize it when the Guardian Ad-litem criticizes action taken by OCS. We should have supervisory level staff interact more frequently. Regular meetings could help with communication and understanding our roles.

How OCS Could Improve Its Child Protection Efforts

Key informants were asked to identify ways that OCS could improve their child protection efforts.

Reducing turnover and retaining good staff were the measures mentioned most frequently that OCS should take to improve its child protection efforts. This issue was mentioned by all the key informants that were interviewed and was woven throughout their responses to all of the questions. The high turnover is perceived to be having a negative impact on the quality of work and the agency in multiple ways. The remaining staff, already stretched thin by high caseloads, is overloaded even more by absorbing the uncovered caseloads. Staff morale is also impacted which affects the quality of work and the attitude of social workers towards the job. All of this affects the way that OCS staff interacts with staff from other agencies and the way OCS is viewed by those agencies.

One of the suggestions given for improving the retention rate was easing social workers into the job by assigning only three or four cases after they complete training. This will give them the opportunity to feel they are in control of their caseload and to develop some confidence in their work before they are given more cases. A full caseload should not be assigned until social workers have been on the job for a year.

Improved supervision, increased support, and more training were also mentioned as ways to improve the retention rate. One key informant talked at length about the lack of support social workers feel from the system. This key informant mentioned the multiple levels of oversight and the “crushing bureaucracy” as factors that contribute to a lack of autonomy on the part of social workers. Another key informant talked about the need to make supervisors more accessible to workers and to reduce the divide between managers and social workers. In regards to training, it was suggested that OCS define the competencies necessary to be a successful worker and provide opportunities for caseworkers to obtain those

competencies. It was also suggested that supervisors receive training on effective coaching skills so they can serve as mentors to caseworkers.

A fundamental problem acknowledged by many of the key informants is the criticism that OCS comes under by other agencies and the public. OCS is an easy target. Improving the image of OCS and increasing understanding and awareness of the difficult and important job they perform for children and families were also mentioned as measures that could improve staff morale and the retention rate of staff.

Another suggestion for dealing with the workload issues and improving the retention rate was increasing the number of support staff so that social workers could focus on casework. This was mentioned as a particular problem in rural areas. The lack of technology in rural areas and updated equipment in all areas of the state were also mentioned as problems that could be addressed quickly and have a significant impact.

While all of the key informants believe it is important to reduce turnover, several of them also expressed the opinion that burned out workers should be encouraged to move to other positions, resign voluntarily or be terminated. A respite system to give caseworkers a break was identified as a way to avoid burnout and to increase the effectiveness of social workers and their satisfaction with the job. Flexibility regarding work hours and job sharing were also mentioned as measures that could increase satisfaction with the job and avoid burnout.

In addition to the divide that was mentioned which exists between managers and social workers, there is also a perceived disconnect between OCS staff in upper level positions and direct service staff. It was suggested that all of the “bureaucrats” have opportunities to interact with direct service staff and to know what it is like to work at that level. It was also suggested that it is important for upper level management staff to understand what it is like to be a family involved with OCS.

Improved availability and access to treatment services were also frequently mentioned as measures that could improve the effectiveness of OCS. Difficulty in paying for services and long waiting lists were mentioned as problems in getting families involved with services in a timely manner. A delay in services can have a negative impact on families in many ways including families becoming discouraged and being less motivated to follow through with the case plan. This can be a particular problem for parents with drug and alcohol issues. In addition to getting families involved with services quickly, continuity in the provision of services was also identified as important. Disruption in services when a program is ended or an agency folds is considered a significant barrier to families reaching their treatment goals. Inadequate visitation services were also frequently mentioned as a problem that needs to be addressed. The

perception is that the average amount of visitation is one hour per week, which is considered inadequate if the case plan is reunification. Making visitation available at times more convenient for parents was also identified as a priority.

Several suggestions were made to improve communication and coordination with schools. A recommended first step is to get people together from the school and OCS who are known as problem solvers, and ask them to come up with a plan to improve communication between the two agencies. Improving the feedback loop to schools was also recommended. It was suggested that schools be notified immediately when a child has been placed and will be coming to school, even if the child stays in the same school. It is still important for the school to know that a child has been placed in case the child starts acting out his/her anger and frustration at school. The school is then in a better position to know how to respond to the behavior problems.

Other suggestions for improving the child protection efforts of OCS include:

- *Make sure that mental health placements are mental health placements and not placements of convenience for a bed.* If more beds are needed for placements, that need should be addressed. Children should not go into mental health placements if they do not need a mental health placement.
- *Improve communication between foster parents and OCS.* Foster parents should not be viewed as second class citizens. With enough support, they would do the job forever.
- *Improve the amount of time from termination to adoption and guardianship.* It can take six months to get a home study done.
- *Improve utilization of Child Advocacy Centers.* Some offices use them and others do not.
- *Allow communities to have more say in the process of identifying what programs and services are needed.* Professionals in communities know the families that live there and what services are needed to meet their needs.
- *Allow tribes to license foster homes.* It should be a partnership with the tribes and OCS coming to the table and developing standards for Native homes. The tribes are not asking OCS to give them full responsibility and control over the licensing standards and process.

- *Consolidate the reviews so that social workers do not end up duplicating court hearings through administrative reviews.*
- *Lobby the Legislature and the Governor to fund OCS adequately. It is seriously understaffed, and the turnover rate is too high.*

Report Part 3

Community Relationship Survey

Introduction

The purpose of the survey was to cast a wider net for collecting information about the community's relationship to OCS, beyond focus groups and key informant interviews. Additionally, the survey results provide confirmation of major findings occurring from the focus groups and key informant interviews. One hundred sixteen (116) surveys were distributed electronically. Forty-four (44) responses were received.

Survey Results

1. What discipline or professional affiliation do you represent?

Law Enforcement	0%
Child Advocacy Center	9.1%
Judge	2.3%
Attorney	18.2%
Education	18.2%
Legislator	0%
Citizen Review Panel	0%
Other, specify	52.3%

Others that completed the survey included court administrator, tribal social services or tribal organization, early intervention birth to three, family support services – counseling, non-profit agency, domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy and parenting program.

2. How long have you worked with the Office of Children's Services?

Less than a year	9.1%
1 year	9.1%
2 – 3 years	11.4%
3 – 5 years	22.7%
5 – 7 years	11.4%
7 – 10 years	15.9%
Over 10 years	20.5%

3. How often do you have a meaningful interaction or conduct business with the Office of Children’s Services?

Daily/Routinely	38.4%
Weekly/Often	29.5%
Monthly/Occasionally	22.7%
Quarterly/Infrequently	2.3%
Other, specify	9.1%

Clarification of other included: meaningful contact is occasional but more often when sharing a client in common; new to the job and haven’t had personal contact; not a direct service provider so only involved as an executive from time-to-time; and hardly ever.

4. What staff level have you found most responsive, helpful, easiest to work with?

Managers	22.7%
Supervisors	31.8%
Caseworkers	34.1%
All are responsive	27.3%
None are responsive	2.3%

5. Based on what you have heard and observed, please rate the public’s view of the Office of Children’s Services.

Very Positive	0%
Positive	7%
Neutral	11.6%
Negative	58.1%
Very Negative	23.3%

6. Based on what you have heard and observed, please rate how professionals view the Office of Children’s Services?

Very Positive	4.7%
Positive	18.8%
Neutral	25.6%
Negative	39.5%
Very Negative	11.6%

7. How would you rate the working relationship between your agency and the Office of Children’s Services?

Very Positive	14.0%
Positive	55.8%
Neutral	14.0%

Negative	16.3%
Very Negative	0%

8. How clear are the roles and responsibilities between your agency and the Office of Children’s Services?

Clear	39.5%
Somewhat Clear	39.5%
Ambiguous	9.3%
Vague	9.3%
Unclear	2.3%

9. How would you rate the responsiveness of the Office of Children’s Services’ response to child maltreatment reports?

Highly Responsive	18.6%
Generally Responsive	48.3%
Somewhat Responsive	20.9%
Generally Non-Responsive	9.3%
Highly Non-Responsive	9.3%

10. In your opinion, how effective is the Office of Children’s Services in investigating reports of child maltreatment?

Highly Effective	9.3%
Generally Effective	39.5%
Somewhat Effective	39.5%
Generally Ineffective	11.8%
Highly Ineffective	0%

11. How effective is the Office of Children’s Services in addressing the safety of children during child maltreatment investigations?

Highly Effective	14.0%
Generally Effective	41.9%
Somewhat Effective	34.9%
Generally Ineffective	9.3%
Highly Ineffective	0%

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

12. The Office of Children’s Services does a good job communicating with other agencies when conducting a child maltreatment investigation.

Definitely Agree	4.8%
Agree	23.8%
Somewhat Agree	38.1%
Disagree	21.4%
Definitely Disagree	14.3%

13. The Office of Children’s Services does a good job of coordinating its activities with other agencies during child maltreatment investigations.

Definitely Agree	4.8%
Agree	23.8%
Somewhat Agree	38.1%
Disagree	23.8%
Definitely Disagree	7.1%

14. When I have questions or concerns about a case, they are addressed in a prompt and competent manner by the Office of Children’s Services.

Definitely Agree	7.1%
Agree	26.2%
Somewhat Agree	40.5%
Disagree	16.7%
Definitely Disagree	9.5%

15. What are areas in which your agency and the Office of Children’s Services are most likely to disagree or experience conflict over? (Select up to 5)

Approach to case practice	25.0%
Case decisions	30.0%
Direction and management of a case	37.5%
Information sharing on cases	40.0%
Quality of intervention/service	20.0%
General communication and openness	35.0%
Follow up on cases	30.0%
Confidentiality	7.5%
Authority for cases and decision making	20.0%

Feedback on what is going on in cases	30.0%
Response to concerns	30.0%
Decision making about reported child maltreatment	12.5%
Respect for capacity, expertise	25.0%
Understanding of agency purposes, strengths, limitations	20.0%
Use of information in cases	7.5%
Collaboration or involvement	30.0%
Other	22.5%

16. How are conflicts and disagreements addressed? (Select up to 5)

Collaboration	41.9%
Competition	2.3%
Negotiation	25.6%
Through relationships	46.5%
General processes (meetings, written communications)	60.5%
Higher level deliberations	9.3%
Case-by-case deliberation	41.9%
Power and authority	16.3%
Pressure from official authority or key individuals	20.9%
Ignored	16.3%
Not resolved	30.2%
Other	20.0%

Comments concerning “other”:

- When things go well they go quite well.
- Once we have made it clear that we can help with communication between social workers and parents, foster parents, etc., we are often utilized for home visits, rapport-building, positive reinforcement for parents working their case plans, helping teens acquire needed documents (such as Certificate of Indian Blood), and much more.
- When you have a good worker and all parties are informed of the plan and decisions, it works well. If you have a set plan and everyone that is part of the case works together as well as the families, it works for you not against you. It works smoothly and with progress. But if only the worker makes decisions and does not involve the tribe and excludes you, it won't work.

17. What are areas that work smoothly or that your agency and the Office of Children’s Services are in agreement on? Select as many as apply.

Case practice	23.1%
Case decision making	17.9%
Case responsibility	33.3%

Communication generally	56.4%
Communication concerned with cases	41.0%
Access to and use of resources	30.8%
Case jurisdiction and authority	33.3%
Purposes and limits of your agency and OCS	30.8%
Community approach	28.2%
Quality of intervention and services	23.1%
Other	2.6%