

**Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children**

**August 17, 2021**

**Alaska Regional Hearing**

**Virtual Utqiagvik Site Visit: Children and Youth Services**

**Recording:**

<https://commissiononnativechildren.org/media/video/virtual-site-visit-children-and-youth-services/>

**Commissioners Present In-person:**

Gloria O’Neill, Chair; Dr. Tami DeCoteau, Vice-Chair, Melody Staebner, Carlyle Begay, and Donald Gray.

**Commissioners Present Virtually:**

Dr. Dolores (Dee) Subia BigFoot, Anita Fineday, Elizabeth Morris, Dr. Leander R. McDonald, and Jesse Delmar.

**Commissioners Absent:**

Stephanie Bryan

**Detailees, Staff, and Contractors:**

Ronald Lessard, Department of Education

Eileen Garry, Department of Justice

Regina Gilbert, Department of the Interior

Tiffany Taylor, Department of the Interior

Lisa Rieger, Cook Inlet Tribal Council

Joshua Franks, Cook Inlet Tribal Council

Miriam Jorgensen, Native Nations Institute, University of Arizona

Kyra James, Native Nations Institute, University of Arizona

Stacy Leeds, Leeds Consulting

Briana Moseley, Kearns & West

**Agenda: 9:30 AM – 10:30 AM AKT - Virtual Utqiagvik Site Visit: Children and Youth Services**

**[Transcript]**

Chair O’Neill  
00:00      Good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us this morning. My name is Gloria O’Neill and I serve as Chair of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children. And I want to welcome you to our Alaska regional hearing and want to thank the panelists for joining us this morning. We have just finished with our first panel with the leadership of the Office of Children’s Services with the State of Alaska and excited to hear from the Children and Youth Services with Utqiagvik community. Before we get started, I would like to ask the

Commissioners who are here today, both online and in person to please introduce yourselves. Let's start with the Commissioners who've joined us virtually.

Commissioner McDonald 00:57 My name is Leander McDonald. I'm a Commissioner and I am the President of United Tribes Technical College located in Bismarck, North Dakota, and a member of the Spear Lake Dakota Nation. Good morning.

Commissioner BigFoot 01:17 Good morning. I'm Dee BigFoot. I'm a faculty at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. And I am from the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma and affiliated with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana where my children are enrolled.

Commissioner Fineday 01:38 Good morning. My name is Anita Fineday. I'm joining you from Minnesota this morning. I'm a member of the White Earth Tribal Nation. And I work for Casey Family Programs on the Indian Child Welfare team. Thank you.

Chair O'Neill 01:58 Those of us in the room. You want to make sure your microphone is on.

Commissioner Staebner 02:06 Hello, I'm Commissioner Melody Staebner. And I am enrolled in the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota and I coordinate the Indian Education for Fargo and West Fargo School District.

Commissioner Gray 02:16 Morning. My name is Don Gray and I am a shareholder of Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation and honored to be here. Thank you.

Vice-Chair DeCoteau 02:29 Hello Dr. DeCoteau, Tami DeCoteau. I'm a licensed clinical psychologist out of the State of North Dakota and a member of the MHA [Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara] Nation and Commission Vice Chair.

Chair O'Neill 02:41 And again, my name is Gloria O'Neill and I have the privilege to serve as Chair of the Commission along with President/CEO of Cook Inlet Tribal Council located here in Anchorage. Wanted to let you all know that we have several other staff members and detailees-members of the federal agencies along with our technical adviser who are supporting our work of the Commission and they are all with us today. Just in the being thoughtful of everyone's time and being respectful, we I want to acknowledge their presence, but I don't want to take our time to introduce everybody. But we will have a list of all those present today. And before we go ahead and introduce our panelists, I just want to let you know a little bit more about the Commission.

We are an 11-member Commission established by Congress to conduct a comprehensive study of all issues affecting American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian children from prenatal to age 24. The bill that created us was co-

sponsored by former Senator Heidi Heitkamp from North Dakota and Senator Lisa Murkowski from Alaska. We all know that Native children youth experienced severe health and social economic disparities compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the US. And even though the federal government has a trust responsibility to provide for the education, health, and safety of Native children, complex programs and limited resources have not been successful to address all of these disparities. We also know that historical trauma and intergenerational cycles of poverty contribute to the disproportionate health and well-being challenges faced by Native children and families today. But we also know that there's incredible strength, resilience, in who we are in our Native communities. So we are created to address the challenges and build on the strengths to find creative ways to change the trajectory of all Native children for the better. We will be looking at all issues affecting Native children and youth including health, mental health, education, early childhood development, child welfare, and juvenile justice, we'll be looking at doing a deep dive in data and research, identifying best practices, and models of collaboration, and most importantly, hearing directly from Native communities, including our children, and other experts on better how to support our children moving forward. We once we've completed our study, we will issue report with our recommendations and how to move the needle on outcomes of Native children in a positive direction. The report and recommendations will be submitted to Congress along with the Executive Branch. So, thank you to our panelists who are here today. I really appreciate and look forward to the information that you will be providing. And I would ask, maybe is it is it Wendy? Who will be leading the panel, but I would ask that you introduce yourselves, please.

Wendy Nethken 06:08 My name is Wendy. Wendy Nethken. I am the staff manager for the Utqiagvik Office amongst others, and I'm actually located in Fairbanks. And I'll have Rachel and her staff introduce themselves.

Rachel Aumavae 06:23 Hello, everyone. I'm Rachel Aumavae. And I'm the supervisor for the Utqiagvik Office of Children's Services Office. Thank you for the opportunity.

Lupe Lavaka 06:44 Good morning. I'm Lupe with the Utqiagvik Office.

Evelyn 06:48 Hi, I'm Evelyn with the Utqiagvik Office.

Jenny York 06:53 Good morning. I'm Jenny, I work with the Barrow Office as well. And I'm currently working in Nome. I'm happy to be here. Thank you very much.

**I. Panel: Children and Youth Services**

- **Wendy Nethken, Staff Manager for the Utqiagvik Office (Fairbanks)**
- **Rachel Aumavae, Supervisor for the Utqiagvik Office of Children's Services**
- **Lupe Lavaka, with the Utqiagvik Office**

- Evelyn, Utqiagvik Office
- Jenny York, Utqiagvik Office

Chair O'Neill 07:11 Miss Nethken, are you going to share a presentation? Or do you have an order of your panel?

Wendy Nethken 07:21 No, it's not I'm sorry. I was not asked to do that. I'm not sure what information you're looking for.

Chair O'Neill 07:29 Oh, I'm just wondering if you have a presentation prepared for the Commission or what was your sense of how we engage in conversation?

Sarah Abramczyk 07:40 This is Sarah Abramczyk checking. I met everyone earlier. Yes. Yeah, our Utqiagvik office had just been presented with the opportunity to do more of a question/answer panel for you all. So no, they do not have a prepared presentation. That was what we have done with you all earlier this morning.

Chair O'Neill 08:03 Thank you. Thank you for the clarification. I really appreciate it. Would you like to start the panel with some comments about your work?

Wendy Nethken 08:18 So okay, so the Utqiagvik office, I'm just to tell you a little bit about the Office Children's Services there. We are a relatively small office. We have Rachel who is the supervisor and she has a staff of three caseworkers and one, social services associate and she does a lot of our admin as well. And they serve the local Utqiagvik population, as well as all of the surrounding villages and communities there. So they do a lot of work in their own community, and then a lot of travel out to the surrounding communities to work with those families. And that's just a quick overview of that office. The vast majority of the population that we serve there is Alaskan Native, though we do have some diversity, and the Utqiagvik office has also been in those surrounding villages.

Sarah Abramczyk 09:37 If the Commission was interested, we could go into a deeper dive on how a case progresses through OCS if you wanted that many details or if you just want, oh, I see heads nodding.

Chair O'Neill 09:49 I think as we get such a great overview this morning on the number of Alaska Native children statewide who are in the system and you you've given us kind of that broad brush, it would be great to then know how the state works with some of the local offices. And then in particular, it'd be really helpful for us to know how you do your work with the local Tribal community. And maybe when you work in the village, with a family.

Sarah Abramczyk So, Wendy or Rachel, if you just wanted to maybe start with like the intake process and getting a PSR assigned, and then what your staff actually do to respond.

10:17

Wendy Nethken 10:32 So I can do the intake portion. We have centralized intake. So all of our reports are made to our centralized intake unit, which is located in Anchorage, they take the report and see that it meets the criteria for us to respond to and if so, that report of harm gets screened in and sent to Rachel. And then Rachel, if you want to talk a little bit about what you and your staff do, once you receive that.

Sarah Abramczyk 11:07 One small addition, we do have one staff member identified who also screens that and sends that to the Tribe, if identified, so they are notified as well.

Rachel Aumavae 11:22 So as soon as it's sent over to me, as the supervisor, I'll determine what the timeframe on it is. So depending on the priority, it'll tell me whether or not I need to send a worker out within 48 hours 72 hours. And then I'm sorry, that's 24 hours. And then so at that point I will determine which worker, depending on their caseload is able to take that one. Most times we might have one that's specific to initial assessments, which is Lupe Lavaca, who's on the line. And we typically assign the assessments to Lupe. At that point in time, she will invite our Tribal partners to come out with us. And depending on whether or not they have staff, they'll be able to send out a worker with her. Most times, they unfortunately don't have the staff or capacity to send somebody out with us. And so we are sure to just keep them in the loop as far as communicating with them, letting them know what's happening, as far as decisions go on cases. After Lupe has gone out, and then all the essential interviews with family members, collaterals, which are community members, anybody that has a sense of how parents, parent their children, she'll staff with me as her supervisor, and at that point in time, we'll determine what level of OCS intervention is needed at that time. And then from there on, we'll go ahead and you know, if it's a case where they're kind of on the borderline where we may need to get involved due to the impending concerns of major [inaudible] talk to them to see if they would voluntarily work with us with our Open for Services Unit. And through that unit, the children will remain in home with the parents on an in-home safety plan. While we provide services to the family, if it meets the level of us having to remove the children at that point in time, we file a petition with the court, we go through the normal court process, parents do have the ability to request for attorney at that time to represent them. And we of course, include our Tribal partners throughout that whole process. So even before we get to the point of filing the petition, we're on the phone with them, letting them know, Hey, this is what's going on with the family. Do you have any idea whether or not we can work towards the least intrusive plan? So is there any other family members or community members that you know that we could potentially do out of home safety plan with. And if they unfortunately, don't have any idea who we could work with for a least intrusive plan, then that's when we move on to the more intrusive plan, which is the petition to the court. And then at that point in time, they do have

the ability to stay on as a legal party to the case they do have the ability to receive discovery for each of the cases that we work on. And like I said, anytime we're dealing with any big decisions on a case, we're usually including our Tribal partners on those decisions. When we get to the case planning part of the case, we do involve the Tribes and ask them if they have any idea. One piece that's been very helpful with regards to the work that we do out of our office is the cultural continuity piece. So really working with the Tribe to determine that there's Tribal services that can be offered to the family to be able to maintain that Native connection with their Tribe. And so there is a new, and maybe Sara can speak on this a little bit further, there is a new grant with regards to us being able to reach out to Tribal partners to potentially pay people to, you know, just help mentor parents along the way, while providing cultural education or activities that could assist them through their case planning process. Is anything else I may have missed?

Wendy Nethken 15:32 Do you want to touch on the visits that are provided to us, the family contact?

Rachel Aumavae 15:38 Yes, so for the family contact visits, we do work with the local shelter here, which is run by the Borough its Children and Youth Services. Through their reunification program, they provide supervised family contact visits. We also have Evelyn, our SSA, who supervises the first two contacts, we try to have her supervise the first two contacts with the family. And then at that point in time, we'll either refer it out to Children and Youth Services, or as ASNA [Artic Slope Native Association] which is one of our other Tribal partners, who have the ability to provide family contact visits. And then I did have a list of services, if you'd like me to go through it, just with regards to what's working for us here in this local office and what is not really working well, I could definitely go through that for you all as well.

Wendy Nethken 16:44 I see head nods, so give that a shot.

Rachel Aumavae 16:46 Okay. So anytime we're assuming custody of kids, there's a list of services that we want to make sure that we're including in their case plan. And so when we initially remove a kiddo, you know, out of home, whether it's with relative placements or with a foster placement, we have to ensure that their medical, dental and vision needs are being met. And so we do work with the foster parent upon initial removal to try to get them there et-stat appointment within 30 days of the removal. And then we work with ASNA Social Services, as well as our hospital here, then we provide the foster parents or whoever has placement of the children with a medical consent form to ensure that they are meeting the children's medical needs, when it comes to their education needs. We education needs we make sure that we're working with the Tribe, as well as the parents and then also our local school district to make sure that the children are, you know, register for school and, and receiving

special needs services, if needed. As far as cultural continuity, we do try to work with our Tribes to try to get them set up with services. We have in the past work with our Tribe to get Native foods and Native arts and things like that, to send out to children who are not locally in town, just so that they can have a piece of home and so I know Leah Warburgen in our Fairbanks office, she'll usually have like Native potlucks and things like that. And she typically works with the Tribes in our region to get whale for kids for those particular potlucks. As far as the services for cultural continuity in the past, they used to have a youth program through the Tribal court. However, I believe due to staffing, they no longer have that available. So we are very slim to none as far as cultural continuity, supports and things like that here in town. We do work with the local college, to try to get our kiddos set up for camps and things of that sort to provide that extra connection to their culture. And then for the kiddos who are placed at the Children and Youth Center, which is the shelter here in town. CYS does a really good job with keeping them connected with cultural continuity. So making sure that they're going to faith based events, community events, and then pretty much all of the cultural events in town. For mental and behavioral health, typically, whenever we assume custody of kiddos we do make a referral over to Integrated Behavioral Health to try to get them behavioral health assessments. Unfortunately, due to staffing and change over there, it hasn't been the best process for us. And there have been a lot of delays with regards to them being able to provide services to our kiddos. And so the only the only agency here in town that's been pretty consistent with providing behavioral health support has been Children Youth Services, because they have the therapists there at the center. But she just recently left, so I'm not exactly sure how that's going to work out. As far as meeting developmental needs for children under the age of three, we do work with the program and infants and children program. And they actually had, well they had two workers here, I think it's just one now but she's pretty consistent. We currently have one kiddo that's going through their program and she meets with the family multiple times a week. As far as other services that we provide, we do have our legal department and our wonderful SSAs like Evelyn, who, when we assume custody of kiddos, we get all of their legal documents requested. So their birth certificates, Social Security cards, all of those great things and their BIA cards. So we get all of that requested for them. And then we have a service array unit. So it's now centralized in Juneau. And so anytime we need, you know, funding requests for special things like emergency clothing vouchers, or sports or activities or anything like that, we typically go through our service array unit to see if they're able to offer up support to children's in custody. Trying to think. We also have AWIC that's the shelter for Abused Women and Children here in town. And they provide food boxes to our families. So for the cases that I spoke about with the In Home Services, anytime they're running low on food, or anything like that, we typically will reach out to AWIC and they assist us with food boxes for the families.

Chair O'Neill 22:11 Thank you that was very helpful. Just wondering, is are we at the place where you'd like us to open up the panel for questions. Do you have additional information to share? Are we okay to go with questions? So I really appreciated the sequencing of the panels because I think it gave us a really good idea of the coordination within the State of Alaska from the broader policy approach to the local community. And my question is, I have two: one when you cannot find an appropriate placement, for example of a child that you removed, do you, how often do you send children out of the North Slope area into Fairbanks for placement? On average? And how long are the kids in out of home placements with when they're in the system? Do you have a length of time?

Rachel Aumavae 23:28 Go ahead, Wendy.

Wendy Nethken 23:30 Yeah, I don't know that I have that data in front of me. I don't know Sarah, if you have any of that handy. We, I can say in terms of the placement piece. We we're pretty good at being able to find relatives or other local supports that can take the children in but we do have to send children outside of it Utqiagvik at times. And we do send them here to Fairbanks but we also send them to the Anchorage and Wasilla area. And sometimes that is the preferable placement for them. Which seems a little counterintuitive at times because it's farther away than Fairbanks is. But our families from Utqiagvik are more likely to go to Anchorage than they are to Fairbanks just because of the flight schedules and how convenient it is to move around within Alaska. And so placing children in Anchorage actually means that while they're farther from their home, they're are quicker access and so family contact is easier for families to do there. And we're also a lot more likely to be able to have other family members or people that these children know in the Anchorage community than we are in the Fairbanks community. And so while we may not have them placed. Sometimes we can have them placed with people that they know or people from that used to live in at Utqiagvik or any of those villages. We do also have the ability there, if they are placed with a family that doesn't have those connections, we have more ability to get them connected with people that they know seeing their extended relatives, their cousins, their grandparents, things like that. A lot of that is much more likely to happen in this community than the Fairbanks one. Rachel, do you I know you probably don't have the numbers in front of you. But do you have a feeling for how often?

Rachel Aumavae 25:45 I was looking at the list of cases that I have on my whiteboard. And so what I can tell you is that we our workers here in this office, we work really, really hard to keep the children here on Slope. And so if it means us working up until 9/10 o'clock at nighttime, we will do that. And so we really do work with our Tribal partners. And one of the workers that we do have here in our office, she is an Alaska Native born and raised here in Utqiagvik . And so we have a little gem here in the office. And so anytime we're kind of in a pickle, or are trying to figure out who's related to

who all we need to do is just go to that worker and say, Hey, Asi do you happen to know this family and she'll give us a whole family tree. And she used to work for social, MVB Social Services. And so she's got a huge wealth of information with regards to who's related to who in town. And so that's how we've been able to really work our connections and work with our service partners to keep kids here on Slope. But just looking at the cases that we have listed out, I'd say less than 20% of the kids that we have in custody are off Slope.

- Wendy Nethken 27:02 I will also say that the children that have to leave the Utqiagvik office are also most often are children who have the more significant behavioral needs, or the more significant needs for services, things like that. That's a struggle that we have is being able to find homes that are equipped and have the skill and patience needed for some of our kids. But also being able to provide those homes with supports for the caregiver. We're pretty limited on that as well. And that's been a reason that we've had some kids have to leave Utqiagvik is that we don't have any homes who are up for taking children with a higher level of needs, with the limited supports that we can offer to the caregiver themselves.
- Rachel Aumavae 28:01 Right. And with the local youth shelter, they were prior to COVID able to offer respite care for providers. However, due to COVID. They're not able to do that anymore. And so it's been really tough to be able to keep kids on Slope that they've got extra behavioral challenges.
- Commissioner McDonald 28:18 Madame Chair.
- Chair O'Neill 28:26 Yes, we have Dr. DeCoteau and then Dr. McDonald. Dr. DeCoteau.
- Vice-Chair DeCoteau 28:31 Thank you. Thank you for that great presentation and the detailed information. I just have one question, Rachel, you had talked about funding to pay people to provide mentoring to families and cultural activities. If a child is placed outside of their natural home is that is that service still available, and then if they're placed outside of their village is that service available to foster homes or even non-Native foster homes?
- Wendy Nethken 29:02 At this point, that funding is limited to parents to any parent with an open case and an active case plan. So at this point, we haven't been able to extend that service out to children or to the caregivers, the foster parents or relative caregivers.
- Rachel Aumavae 29:26 We also have our Tribal Title IV-E prevention grant that was really the stage to the person who tried to implement Family First and allowing for our, sorry, Title IV-E

Tribes to provide those prevention plans with the families that they are able to serve.

Wendy Nethken 29:52 We though don't have anybody in the Utqiagvik area who has accepted that yet. So we have that and some of the other offices that I manage, but we don't have that in our Utqiagvik office yet, hopefully.,

Rachel Aumavae 30:11 Hopefully, its much needed.

Chair O'Neill 30:13 Dr. McDonald.

Commissioner McDonald 30:17 Thank you, Madam Chair. Thanks for sharing. I appreciate it sounds a lot like home for me on our reservation. I had one question in regard to support for the families and I'm thinking that maybe a lot of these kids are placed in a relative home relative care. And here in North Dakota, they call it relative care, and there's money available. I can't remember if it's IV-E, but it's probably is from the state. And then. But for if the child is placed in relative care, the family gets like \$104 per kid or something like that. But if they're placed in an eligible foster care home, then that the amount is like 362 bucks or something, and so those are North Dakota rates, and I know it's more spendy up your way. But it's just, you know, and a lot of times you say, hey, that's my family. I don't need money to take care of my family. And some of these are grandma's family members. And so but they really do need that money. And they and they need that higher level of compensation for them. So is there something similar like that occurrence within your community, for those caregivers, whether family or is there is there a difference between family members and non-family member?

Rachel Aumavae 31:51 So we have when we first placed with relatives as we mentioned earlier this morning, we have our emergency relief support funds. So relative care providers are able to have two months of a stipend to help them care for the children and that is \$500 per child per month and that's available for two months during the either licensing process or doing during the process and family getting set up with other public assistance funds. We fund our ERS program through our Kinship Navigator Funds that is federal funding and then our Foster Care Licensing stipend is slightly more than our ERS program if they choose to get licensed. We also have our foster care special need funds that is typically out of our general fund that we can provide additional help with clothing, emergency clothing, diapers, wipes, other basic needs.

Wendy Nethken 32:56 We find that most of our families do accept the fund, the cost of living up there is such that we don't really have any families who say they can take additional children on without some assistance. And in the Utqiagvik area we have a we do have a higher number of families relative families that do go forward with the

licensing process than we do in some of the other offices that I watch. So we do have a higher number of relative caregivers if that are getting that financial assistance from the state.

Commissioner McDonald 33:36 And you have higher rates up there getting certification?

Wendy Nethken 33:41 Yep.

Commissioner McDonald 33:44 Thank you. Thank you very much.

Chair O'Neill 33:46 So what is it what is a gallon of milk down this store in Utqiaġvik? Just to give some of our Commissioners and understanding of the cost of living?

Rachel Aumavae 34:01 I'll defer to Lupe on that one because I rarely shop at the local store here.

Lupe Lavaka 34:12 Hi. I would say roughly around 10, \$10 for half a gallon right. Oh no for a full gallon. Yeah.

Chair O'Neill 34:25 Yeah, so that's just for a gallon of milk and you can only imagine with heating your homes and gasoline to drive so it's very expensive to live in the community.

Commissioner McDonald 34:39 Madam Chair.

Chair O'Neill 34:40 Yes.

Commissioner McDonald 34:41 I just want to share with your visitors. Our panelists that I would just up there two years ago, and that milk. Yeah, that milk. It was not that I bought a gallon of milk. But I was we were on tours and the community members were sharing me some of the challenges of living in North Slope. And we and apart were part of the Tribal College group. And so we're up there and hosted by your Tribal College. And we're able to visit the community and do the tour, and then also visit the college. So we were really appreciate the hospitality everybody was great to us treating us, like family. So we, we appreciate it that I appreciate you sharing today. Thank you.

Chair O'Neill Thank you. Commissioner Fineday.

35:24

Commissioner Fineday 35:31 Thank you. Thank you for your presentation. It is I know it is really interesting. And you do have special challenges. I might have missed this somewhere. I just wondered how many Tribes are there in the area that you serve?

Rachel Aumavae 35:55 So the two main Tribes that we work directly with is the Native Village of Barrow, and they cover all of Barrow proper, and then ASNA covers I'm sorry, there's also ICAS, who covers Point Lay, and then ASNA the covers all of the other five surrounding villages.

Commissioner Fineday 36:16 Do you know how many that is?

Rachel Aumavae 36:19 There's a total of six surrounding villages ASNA covers five, Point Lay is covered by ICAS. And MBB is covering Barrow. Three.

Commissioner Fineday 36:31 Okay, thank you.

Commissioner Delmar 36:35 Madam Chair, Delmar.

Chair O'Neill 36:36 Commissioner Delmar, can you introduce yourself, please?

Commissioner Delmar 36:40 Yes, I am so sorry. I'm sort of late for this meeting. My name is Jesse Delmar. I'm a Commissioner and calling in from Arizona. Just a quick question from my experience, I am involved with the International Association of Chiefs of Police and also the, I am currently serving as president of the Native American Law Enforcement Association. My question is from a law enforcement perspective, I know that protecting children law enforcement they have a critical role in protecting children across. So my question is, how much support do you get from law enforcement if it's local, or even from the state?

Rachel Aumavae 37:37 I can speak to our relationship with the local police department here at Utqiaġvik. So with regard to Utqiaġvik, with the North Slope Borough we have an amazing relationship with them. And so anytime a worker needs to go out to a home, they're at the home prior to our workers being there. They are very supportive of us. And there was one point in time where we even had a situation where we had a team who was having a lot of challenges and was very aggressive. They were willing

to have an officer stay with us overnight in the office just to ensure that we were our workers were safe. And so for all of the villages, we also have to travel to they have a officer stationed at each village. And so they pick us up and they take us around to wherever we need to go and they drop us back off to the airstrip, when it's time for us to go. So I can proudly say that we had amazing officers in this region.

Wendy Nethken 38:40 One of the benefits as well for the ATF region is that those law enforcement officers are in all of the individual village communities as well. And so they are local to that community. They have those positive relationships with the other people in that community that we're able to partner with. We have a big struggle. I also oversee the Kotzebue office. And so it's I get to see both sides of it where, in Kotzebue, we have no local law enforcement in any of our village communities. And so being able to navigate that is a lot different and has some more complexities to it. And so it's I can't speak enough about how great that relationship is with the law enforcement with OCS. But also how helpful it is that our local law enforcement for the most part, have a really positive relationships with the communities that they're there locally located in.

Chair O'Neill 39:49 Thank you, Commissioner Delmar.

Commissioner Delmar 39:50 Yes, thank you.

Chair O'Neill 39:53 Well, I just I also want to introduce Commissioner Carlyle Begay and Commissioner Elizabeth Morris joined a little bit late but they've been listening to the conversation and wondering if other Commissioners have comments or questions of our panelists. Yes. Are you on?

Commissioner Begay 40:16 Yes. Madam Chair. I don't have any questions.

Chair O'Neill 40:18 Yes. Thank you. Commissioner Gray.

Commissioner Gray 40:22 Thank you, Madam Chair. Rachel, thank you for the overview that you provided this morning. I greatly appreciate that. I guess I have two questions unrelated to each other. The first question is, I believe, somebody spoke about the report of harm. And then based on the investigation of the report of harm that's being, I believe, reported to Juneau, then you make a determination as to whether what the escalation of services that might be needed. I'm curious it to and you may not have

the information in front of you, but how often? Do you keep track of where or who is calling in on that report of harm? Is that coming from families? Is that come in from law enforcement? School? You know, do you have any statistics as to do the communities know how to file a report of harm case?

Rachel Aumavae  
41:30

We definitely don't have that information. Obviously, outside of the school year, our reports from the school are not as straight-line. We have a lot of mandatory reporters from service providers, medical providers. But absolutely we do get reports from family, as well with concerns in their own family. It's pretty varied across the board on who our reporters are.

Commissioner  
Gray  
41:56

Thank you. That my second question is, if the Commission could make an impact, a positive impact for the those that you serve, what kind of recommendations or support would you envision needing?

Jenny York  
42:21

I am, I'll jump in there. So one of our biggest barriers to keeping kids in our community, in my experience, is a lack of daycare services. We desperately need programs that are relative families can turn to when they're all of a sudden handed, you know, four or five children to take care of, and they're working a full-time job. We desperately need that service and communities. We also need programs for foster care training for relative families. A lot of times what our agency expects out of our relative caretakers and how families, you know, care for their children, is different. For example, in small communities, children often, you know, ride on ATVs, and things of that nature. A lot of times without helmets. And so relative caretakers don't know necessarily all of the safety requirements that they have, and we'll get reports and that you know, so and so was driving around the village with a foster child in the back of a pickup truck, which wouldn't be alarming normally, but it is to our agency, and so that can disrupt placement. And so with training for our foster care families and daycare services are a very big need.

Commissioner  
Gray  
43:52

Thank you, Jenny, I actually really appreciate you saying that I was a Native Village of Barrow foster parent for several years. It's been several years. But the challenges that we had here in Anchorage on accepting kids from the village is we didn't meet the income guidelines for needing daycare. So yes, the \$500 a month helped, but it actually didn't cover the cost of the full cost of daycare. So it was supplementary to having to pay or having to put a foster kid in daycare throughout the day, and then you incur the additional costs of medical appointments, you know, and all of the other standard costs that come along with that. So you know, it's great to have families step up and become foster parents. But more often than not, especially in today's economy, both parents are working and they're taking on foster children that then need to go into daycare throughout the day and the supplemental income that they're provided doesn't actually cover that cost. I appreciate you saying that.

Wendy Nethken 45:05 One of the problems that we have in Utqiagvik is we can pay for daycare for children who are in care whether that's a relative or a licensed foster home, we're able to pay for that childcare up to a certain dollar amount, which covers the vast majority of the childcare costs. The problem is that we can only do that for daycares that are licensed by the state. And in Utqiagvik, the need for daycare is so high that most of the local providers don't go through the state licensing, which puts a cap on the number of children that can have in their home. They can go over that cap if they're an unlicensed daycare, and be able to receive more money for that. So we have very few licensed daycare providers, which is what we're able to provide that payment for.

Chair O'Neill 46:05 Commissioner Staebner.

Commissioner Staebner 46:06 I am Commissioner Staebner. And I just have a question a wondering I guess. Commissioner Gray mentioned the report of harm. And I work in a school district and one thing we've been worried about with this whole COVID and distance learning is the safety of some of the children in their homes. And I'm just wondering, I guess about, you know, are you seeing like an increase or decrease in numbers of reports coming in about the safety of children during this time?

Sarah Abramczyk 46:39 We definitely saw a decrease in our reports during COVID during the pandemic. A pretty significant. I don't have the exact numbers. However, it was pretty significant decrease. However, what we found was that our, the number of petitions filed for custody remained about the same. So there was a little bit of comfort in that knowing that the children that really, really needed us, we're still reaching us, despite not being in the public school system.

Commissioner Staebner 47:14 Thank you.

Chair O'Neill 47:17 Other questions or comments from Commissioners? I have a question so many times when we have our conversations, we talk about the system. And my question is more about the child, children, and families. From your work experience, what and you think about your real successful cases, what do you want us to know, as Commissioners, as we draft this report to Congress? What does success look like? How could we bring the appropriate supports to children and families, so that we are thoughtful about reunification, and in cases where there isn't reunification options? How can we be most supportive?

Rachel Aumavae 48:18 So successful cases from me would be to be able to reunify children with their parents with of course, them having that behavioral change, ensuring that they are

going to be safe with their children moving forward. But that isn't always the case for our cases. And so the next step would be finding those children permanency whether it be with relatives here in town, or a forever home, and so that would be the success for us. We currently have two kiddos there at CYS has been there for quite some time until, you know, success for them at this point is finding permanency.

Sarah Abramczyk  
49:06

I also think about that continuity, a caseworker and a family's life. And for OCS our current retention rates, our turnover rate gets over 57% for our frontline staff. And we have made it a priority to recruit and retain our Protective Services staff. However, we still haven't found the secret sauce of finding the right people who want to stay and have the ability to stay. This is a really, really difficult job.

Commissioner Delmar  
49:42

Right. Madam Chair? Delmar.

Chair O'Neill  
49:46

Yes. Commissioner Delmar.

Commissioner Delmar  
49:47

Yes. Thank you, Rachel and, Sarah. My question I think you sort of answered Sarah is aside from what they Madam Chair asked you about success. I was going to ask you about the challenges that you have currently.

Wendy Nethken  
50:09

I just want to add a piece to what Sarah said, I know, across the state, but especially in Utqiagvik, that one of the difficulties that we have with staffing is that the compensation is not necessarily what it needs to be to keep our staff here, that community is a if you want a job, that is a good community to be in, there are lots of agencies that are hiring, and there are lots of options for compensation that are higher than ours, for comparable work, or less stressful work. And so that's a difficulty that we have with this line of work in that community. I mean, across the state, but in Utqiagvik, in particular.

Rachel Aumavae  
51:08

Right, and for other essential positions here in the community, the offer of housing as well. And so with the housing shortage, it is very hard to compete with another agency that's willing to provide housing for their workers.

Wendy Nethken  
51:25

We also see this problem with our service providers, which greatly impacts our families, is that our service providers also struggle with having qualified consistent, staffing there as well. And so that continuity, we know how much it impacts the family when their caseworker changes, but it's just as impactful when their therapist changes when you know, all of these other providers that we're we are able to put in place. The consistency there as well impacts families. And when those

change, we typically see a setback in extension of how long it takes us to reunify families or make positive moves moving forward.

Chair O'Neill 52:21 Commissioner Delmar, did you get your question answered?

Commissioner Delmar 52:24 Yes, certainly. Thank you. Thank you.

Chair O'Neill 52:27 So I just I know that we've had I think most every Commissioner asked questions. Commissioner Morris, do you have any questions to ask or have comments?

Commissioner Morris 52:46 Oh, I was wondering about the reasons for turnover.

Wendy Nethken 52:52 So, I do exit interviews with all of my staff who leave. And so I can't give you data on it. But I can give you my personal experiences. And there, there's a variety. There's, you know, typical life changes, obviously, people moving someplace else, but the ones that relate to the job. What I see most often, in all of my offices is a combination of the work is really hard. And not everybody is the right person to do this job. The personal resilience that a person has is a big factor in how successful they can navigate the stressors of this job. I see the compensation, like I said, they can make more money at other places and doing less time and spending more time with their families. So the ones the reasons that relate to the job, those are the chosen I see most often is either the person is not the right fit for the job. They don't have the interest, the passion, the resilience. I mean, sometimes the combination of those, or quite frankly, they can be paid more somewhere else.

Commissioner Morris 54:16 Right. Okay, that's understandable. Thank you.

Commissioner Begay 54:21 Madam Chair. I've got a follow up question to that point.

Chair O'Neill 54:23 Yes. Commissioner Begay.

Commissioner Begay 54:27 I imagine that recruitment and retention is one of the biggest challenges as you look at those employees that seem to be cycling through your communities. Are there any challenges or recommendations that you may have in terms of

recruitment, retention, any federal programs you can think of that may aid in that effort?

Sarah  
Abramczyk  
54:57

I'm not aware of any federal programs, necessarily. But you know, of course, that may possibly increase pay and benefits. Child Protection staff being deemed as first responders because they're not first responders. But we're really first responders because we are on call, that's what we hear a lot from our staff is that being on call after hours and on weekends, you don't get to shut off that that part of you, you're constantly working, you're constantly waiting for that phone to ring. Yeah, we're working a lot with our university on offering, you know, education and stipends for our staff to continue their education. I think that is a big retention effort on offering our staff that ability. Really, it's also an increase of a work life balance, it's getting the right number of people to reduce cases where people can feel our staff can feel like they're doing the work that they want to do with families, instead of the number of cases making it impossible for them to do the type of social work they want to do.

Chair O'Neill  
56:19

And I, you know, that's a great question that you bring up Carlyle, because like everywhere else in the nation, Alaska is really getting hit with what we call the resignation boom. And going into the Pandemic, we were in a recession. And so what that means is that we lost a lot of workers who migrated out of the state. And so not only I'm sure there's the state really reeling from this and trying to figure out how to recruit and retain qualified staff across the board across state government here. But for example, even within CITC, when we have the ability to pay more, because of the, you know, private nature of our organization, we have something like well over 60 positions open right now and growing. And so it's a big issue within the state, we have more access in the urban areas to recruit. And we probably have more tools in our toolbox to at you know, give the incentives. But when you get out to rural Alaska, I think it's probably really difficult coupled with the high cost of living, the choice to live in the place. And then also, you know, where you're competing with all of this talent in the state that we're we don't have access, like the lower 48 states have access to employee basis, or employee pool. So I it's an issue that we're all dealing with, but I you know, historically child welfare has really dealt with this because of the high burnout rate of the work. Anyway, I just want to say, I know we have one more Commissioner with a question, and then we'll we'll close. So Commissioner Fineday.

Commissioner  
Fineday  
58:21

Thank you, Madam Chair. And this might be a question for Wendy or, Sarah. I just wanted to clarify that turnover rate, for OCS it's across the state. Isn't that right, that OCS has a higher turnover rate? It's not just your region. Right?

Sarah  
Abramczyk  
58:45

Correct.

Commissioner  
Fineday  
58:47

Thank you.

Commissioner  
Gray  
58:48

Madam Chair.

Chair O'Neill  
58:49

Yes.

## II. Wrap Up

Commissioner  
Gray  
58:50

I just wanted to recognize OCS in that we were originally, we were planning on doing a site visit in person today. So their ability to transition from anticipating hosting a Commission to doing something virtually online. We greatly appreciate that flexibility, and your flexibility and being able to transition that quickly. And so, I greatly appreciate all of the time that you took on walking through the case and the whole nine yards and hopefully we didn't feel like we put you guys on the spot.

Chair O'Neill  
59:37

I just want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart, thank you for your service and your sacrifice and supporting our most vulnerable children and families. You know, I can only imagine the stress that you have in your everyday life, but I really appreciate your hearts in this work. It's some of the most important work in our communities. And I want you to know how much I appreciate it and how much I support you and your work. And again, thank you for being so flexible. With schedules today. Unfortunately, because of the increase of COVID cases, we had to do the right thing and stay here in Anchorage. But, we want you to know that, that we're with you in this and we're however we can support you at the national level, we will be very thoughtful and put those recommendations forward.

Sarah  
Abramczyk  
1:00:34

Thank you very much for the opportunity. And thank you for saying thank you, because I, you know, these faces you're looking at on this panel are definitely some significant rock stars within an agency, and they are the heart of the agency. And the one thing I can say about OCS is, we all have a lot of heart. And so we appreciate being able to share that with you. And if you have any follow up questions or want any data in the areas we talked about, we're happy to provide that to you.

Chair O'Neill  
1:01:08

I think I'm gonna give our closing comment to Dr. McDonald.

Commissioner  
McDonald  
1:01:20

Thank you, Madam Chair. On behalf of all those Commissioners, we know that a lot of these guys that are serving as Commissioners have a vast amount of experience in working with primarily Tribal communities, and they see what happens out there we know firsthand of some of the experiences that you have, or familiar what happens and, and the heart that that's needed in order to do that work. We really appreciate you sharing with us today. And, and, and really from really from the frontlines to, to the that extension of give your communities out to Anchorage and I didn't really hear Fairbanks very much. But you know about how those, those partnerships have to work in order for all of us to come together to care for these kids. So it's just a tremendous amount of work. And but it sounds like you guys have been working well together. And I think that's a model for all of us to work towards to try and make sure that our children are safe. Thank you very much for your service.

Chair O'Neill  
1:02:41

Right, and if there's anything that you would like to share in writing, we are available to receive that I know we've been sending a lot of the information to Caleb King. Thank you, Caleb, who's with CITC. So if there's anything else that you'd like to share, or bring our attention to please send it our way. But thank you again for your time today. And we support you and your work and wish you well. And then for the Commissioners that the next panel begins at 1:15 Alaska time and so we will see you then and enjoy your break.

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**

[Transcript completed by Kearns & West]