



National Association of Public
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

How States are Implementing the Fostering Connections Act

Alaska's At-risk Children

During November 2009, Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services Division of Office of Children Services investigated 1,226 allegations of abuse and neglect, with the majority of the cases being neglect (812). Of those investigated, 364 were substantiated during that month. These involved 263 Alaskan children.¹

As of November 2009, there were 1,999 children, a significant number under 4 years of age, and young people in the state's foster care system. This represents a slight decrease from the previous year of 2,090 children in care and comes mainly from the urban area of Anchorage. Approximately, 562 children live in a relative foster home and 856 live with a non-relative caregiver. Nearly 150 children were in an institutional setting and more than 150 are either in a pre-adoptive placement or a trial home visit. In 2009, Alaska received an Adoption Incentive award of \$224,000 for increasing the numbers of adoptions from foster care.²

Alaska's Budget Landscape

Oil revenue accounts for nearly 90 percent of the state's general revenue and with crude prices falling the state is experiencing a budget deficit.³ For SFY 2010, Alaska needs to fill a \$1.3 billion dollar gap hole. Anchorage alone faced a \$9 million short fall and that is expected to double this year.⁴

Over the past five years, the state's legislature has funded 70 additional front-line positions.⁵ However, there has been a hiring freeze last year, which was lifted in July 2009.⁶

P.L. 110-351 State Options

Guardianship Assistance Program

Alaska will implement the Guardianship Assistance Program, most likely in mid-2010. The state must make changes to its administrative code and estimates the implementation will take approximately six months to achieve. The state's current program, which has been operating since 1990, allows children over the age of 10 to participate when adoption is not the best option. Families do not need to be licensed, but must pass criminal background checks.⁷

Alaska's law requires that relatives be considered first when an out-of-home placement is sought, so relatives are identified early on. The 2000 Census indicates that 10,423 grandparents were living in households with one or more of their grandchildren under the age of 18.⁸ The most recent Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) showed that Alaska provides resources to relative placements as needed. Particularly children in these arrangements are eligible for Alaska's version of CHIP.⁹

Support to eligible young adults aged 19, 20, or 21.

Alaska would need legislative action in order to implement the older youth option. Several bills have been introduced, but nothing has passed yet. In November 2009 there were 68 young people ages 18 and older in Alaska's foster care system. In most cases youth leave the state custody at the age of 18. However, instances occur where a young person may remain in care until 19 when it is in their best interests to do so. The youth's consent is not needed. After 19, the young person must consent to remaining in care and this can continue until 20. If a young person leaves care at 18, they are unable to come back. The state created and implemented a judicial checklist to enable judges to more readily determine whether or not a youth is prepared to be released from state custody.¹⁰ The youth is always encouraged to participate in the court proceedings.¹¹

Statistics indicate that 38 percent of young people who leave state custody at 18 become homeless. The state provides crisis housing assistance with a one-time financial support of up to \$5,000 for rent. Alaska allows youth leaving custody

to apply for two months rent at 100 percent. The third month rent is paid at 50 percent and the fourth month is paid at 25 percent.¹²

Alaska has four Independent Living Specialists (ILS) one in each of the four regions and a Statewide Coordinator to provide assistance for youth transitioning to adulthood. The ILS monitor the youth while in custody and assist the primary caseworker in determining what services the youth needs while in custody and then become the primary worker once the youth leaves state custody. While in custody, the ILS can provide aid in funding for tutoring and accompanies youth to the annual education conference held at one of the state universities. The Coordinator and the Regional ILS also works with the Youth Advisory Group (Facing Foster Care in Alaska) to provide support for youth to advocate for themselves and other foster youth. Youth also have the opportunity to participate in IL training on topics that will aid them in dealing with life on their own. Participants are given a gift card to encourage their participation in these training opportunities.¹³

Support to eligible youth who exit care to guardianship or adoption after age of 16.

It is unclear at this time if the state will be able to expand these programs.

Alaska Tribes

There are a few tribes interested in operating their own IV-E program however, the SACWIS requirements are a barrier. There are 226 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. Approximately 60 percent of children in state custody are Alaska Native. The Office of Children's Services, in collaboration with tribal child welfare leaders and Casey Family Programs, is working to decrease this disparity.

The state's new practice model includes guiding principles that collaboration with Alaska Native Tribes in fundamental to best practice. Ongoing efforts to improve outcomes for native children include strategic planning with the Tribal State Collaboration Group, local plans between tribal and state partners, and Undoing Racism Training. The Collaborative Leadership Program and the Breakthrough Series Collaboration offered by Casey Family Programs and implemented locally, is designed to build collaborative leaderships that will create better outcomes for children, families, tribes and communities.

In addition, in April of 2009, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, together with 15 other Alaska Title IV-B tribes/tribal organizations, applied for and received an award for assistance to further tribal efforts related to disproportionality and building tribal capacity. The project will assist Tribes and Tribal organizations, the Office of Children Services and the Court System to develop a targeted strategy and action plan for addressing systems change with a keen focus on several crucial issues impacting Native families in the arena of Indian Child Welfare. Issues identified include:

- Reducing disproportionality in out of home placements through supporting full compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act by the State of Alaska
- Building tribal/state cooperation and capacity in key Indian Child Welfare programs and institutions, including tribal courts, tribal foster care licensing, and tribal Indian Child Welfare data/reporting/evaluation systems

Through another collaboration OCS, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and the Native Village of Eklutna received a grant of \$500,000 a year for five years to provide prevention services to Native families and Native children in the Anchorage area.

P.L. 110-351 Mandatory Provisions

Relative Notification

New forms are being developed to ensure compliance.¹⁴ Alaska is working on streamlining the process for all notifications and anticipates the process which includes the new relative notification requirement to be implemented within six to nine months.

Education stability

Alaska has had programs in place for some time that address educational needs of foster children. OCS meets with Attorneys General, Guardians ad litem, local school administrators, foster youth, foster parents, and local judges to help improve educational outcomes for children in custody. Independent Living funds are used for tutors when concerns about education are brought to the social workers' attention.¹⁵

Sibling Connections

Alaska's policy and practice is that all youth should be assisted in compiling documents that list known relatives, their addresses, and their phone numbers, including siblings. Visitation between siblings has always been important to the agency.¹⁶ Foster care recruitment is being redesigned in order to identify adults willing to care for large sibling groups. Sibling connections are identified as a strength for the state in the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs).¹⁷

Transition plan for children aging out of foster care

ILS participate in six month reviews of youth sixteen and older. Exit plans are developed for all youth seventeen and older and a final plan is developed prior to the youth being released from state custody. The exit plan includes the needs of the youth and a list of services available to address the needs. IL resources are also explained to the youth prior to leaving state custody. Prior to leaving custody, policy and procedures requires that youth have an exit plan that addresses the issue of family resources. Attempts are made to give youth physical addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses so they can maintain contact.¹⁸

Health oversight and coordination

Alaska requires that all children in foster care receive a medical evaluation and that any recommendations from the EPSDT screening are dealt with. The state tries to keep the child with the same doctor through out the life of the case. In Alaska, youth can receive Medicaid up to the age of 21 if they meet the financial requirements. Over 60 percent of the youth in state custody are Alaska Natives. Alaska Natives are eligible for care from the native health care system. Additionally, the state's SACWIS system interfaces with the state's Medicaid system, which maintains immunization records. Records can be obtained electronically and are part of the case file.¹⁹

Family Connections Grants

Alaska did not receive a Family Connections Grant.

Opportunities & Challenges

A major challenge for Alaska has been the vast area to cover. The state relies heavily on alternate means of transportation, such as boats, ATV's, snow machines and sea planes in order to visit children and support at-risk families.

In the end of 2009, the state began to implement a new practice model which is child safety intervention driven and defines how families are treated in the system. This is seen as an opportunity to help strengthen the state's child welfare system. The practice model has been integrated into the state's Program Improvement Plan which implementation started during the same time frame.

Conclusion

Alaska recently submitted an updated Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) which included a list of accomplishments. Over the last five years, the state has made measurable strides and decreased the number of children in out-of-home placement and increase the number of children achieving permanency, particularly with adoptions. Front-end staff have worked diligently to keep children from coming into care in the first place by providing up-front services, particularly to those from native cultures. Additionally, Alaska has decreased the number of children placed out-of-state in residential treatment facilities and decreased the number of children in in-state congregate care.²⁰ Over the past two years overall caseloads have decreased by 7 percent.²¹

¹ Statistical Information, State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children Services.

² Ibid.

³ Reuters February 4, 2009

⁴ Alaska Public Radio, July 23, 2009.

⁵ Pipeline, Department of Health and Social Services, Issue 36, January 2010.

⁶ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ GrandsPlace.org-For Grandparents and Special Others Parenting Children, Legal Resources Information (pulled January 4, 2010)

⁹ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.

¹⁰ Pipeline, Department of Health and Social Services, Issue 36, January 2010.

¹¹ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.

¹² NAPCWA, 2004 Youth Services Survey.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.

¹⁵ NAPCWA, 2004 Youth Services Survey.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.

¹⁸ NAPCWA, 2004 Youth Services Survey.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pipeline, Department of Health and Social Services, Issue 36, January 2010.

²¹ Interview with Office of Children's Services, November 18, 2009.