

OCTOBER 31, 2022

GOVERNOR'S PARENT/FOSTER
PARENT COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL
REPORT

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Throughout this document (*) denotes a recurring issue or recommendation that was shared among multiple subcommittees.

To the extent that funding, personnel, and other general resources are made available as needed, the recommendations of the council are as follows:

MEMBERSHIP, ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARENT/FOSTER PARENT COUNCIL

The Governor's Parent/Foster Parent Collaborative Council (the Council) was established through Administrative Order No. 330, recognizing that the Office of Children's Services (OCS) partners with families, tribes, and communities in supporting the safety, permanency and well-being of Alaska's children and youth. As growth continues within the foster care system, and Alaskan children experience rates of abuse and neglect far greater than the national average, the Council was established for members to provide insight from their experiences with the child welfare system, and recommendations for system-wide improvement to both the Office of the Governor and OCS.

The recommendations and feedback included in this report address the following areas:

- components of support, treatment or other services that would be most valued and utilized by resource families,
- effective recruitment and retention of resource families,
- policies and procedures that may impact a foster family's ability to provide safe, nurturing care,
- training opportunities for resource families and OCS protection specialists,
- child welfare system's performance strengths and weaknesses,
- strategies to increase effective communication between foster parents, parents, and OCS.

The Council was divided into 5 subcommittees: foster parents, caseworker support, youth voice, disparate outcomes data and mental health. The recommendations throughout this report have been compiled through meetings of the Council, reviewing data, and other resources listed at the end of this report.

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The Council would like to thank everyone who participated in the meetings and developed the recommendations included in this report.

FOSTER PARENT SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

CASEWORKER ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY PRACTICES ⁱ

Between foster parents and the OCS Team

Recommendation 1: OCS needs a new, comprehensive data system capable of supporting more efficient information sharing with resource families (such as key medical history, copies of authorization letters, Medicaid numbers, upcoming court dates, appointments, meetings, etc.). A data system that promotes case transparency and communication between applicable team members and offers a platform of accountability between OCS caseworkers and supervisors.

We recommend that if, in whatever data system developed and used by OCS, updated case notes are not entered every 30 days or key checkpoints within a case's timeline has not been met, OCS supervisors are automatically notified, and the case reviewed. We further recommend that findings for the delays be entered into the data system.

Recommendation 2: In order for resource families to know what is happening in a child's case and to prepare their families and children accordingly, it is recommended to develop and implement a training plan for OCS workers and all stakeholders who are involved in Child in Need of Aid cases regarding updated OCS policy. This would promote the increased sharing of information with resource families, allow for more case details to be shared, so resource families can make informed decisions on placements and receive updated case status information on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 3: Caseworkers shall be fully aware of available resources. Upon placement all resource families are given a placement packet to include the following:

- List of updated and accurate Medicaid covered providers (medical, dental, and therapeutic) grouped by location, as well as how to obtain special funding when none of the above services are available through a Medicaid provider,
- Information on WIC (who qualifies, how to sign up, and locations),
- The Clothing Voucher/Special Needs hotline number (as well as information regarding what "special needs" are and how to apply for special funding to cover them),
- Information regarding respite care (requirements and process), and
- Other location-specific supports and resources.

Recommendation 4: Resource families are to be given names and contact information for their foster child's team including the guardian ad litem, caseworker, supervisors, and ICWA worker (if applicable) upon accepting placement. Information to be included in the placement packet and updated upon any changes to listed personnel. Placement worker shall provide the information to the resource family within 7 business days of a child being identified as a Child in Need of Aid.

CASE TIMELINES ⁱⁱ

Federal regulations list the following permanency goals (in order of goal preference):

- Reunification: child should be back in the home within 12 months of coming into care,
- Adoption: child should be in a finalized adoption within 24 months of coming into care, and
- Guardianship: child should be in a finalized guardianship within 18 months of coming into care.

Children discharged from Alaska state custody in SFY 2020-2022 spent an average of 25 months in care (median: 21 months). This number that does not reflect new cases where children re-enter foster care again and again. Permanency needs to be established within legal timelines. The mental and emotional health of children needs to be a forefront consideration.

Recommendation 1: Have the court assign a 3rd party case manager to each case whose purpose is to provide accountability to OCS by monitoring adherence to state and federal timeline guidelines, and to ensure that good cause to deviate from these are substantiated and documented with the court.

FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT

Babysitting

Recommendation 1: Repeal recently passed changes to 7AAC 67.120 that raised the minimum age of babysitters from 14 years old to 16 years old as it aligns with the reasonable, prudent parent standard in AS 47.10.084(d), which states: “When the child is placed in foster care, the foster parent has the right and responsibility to use a reasonable and prudent parent standard to make decisions relating to the child.”

Help with Transportation

Some resource families are taxed with the requirement to accommodate travel to and from visitations, and therapy sometimes up to 5 times a week (often over 30 miles each way. This puts an unreasonable and unsustainable burden on resource families. We propose that all regions of the state handle transportation in the same manner with the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Contract with an outside transport company or hire more SSA's to provide transportation as a common practice.

Recommendation 2: Foster parents shall be given 48-hour notice of family contact visitation, until a recurring visitation schedule can be established.

Recommendation 3: Restructure the current mileage reimbursement process to use an online mileage reimbursement form which would omit the caseworker as a middleman and provide ease of use for both foster parents and caseworkers who are already taxed for time.

Services for Children in Careⁱⁱⁱ

Child-appropriate mental healthcare should be readily available to every child entering the foster care system. Sitting on a waitlist for 1+ years before receiving such care is not an option. When Medicaid providers are not available within a reasonable time, special funding needs to be quickly approved to cover a non-Medicaid provider. The process should be standardized and streamlined.

*Recommendation 1: All children in care should be offered counseling/therapies appropriate for their need and the process should begin at intake.

*Recommendation 2: The caseworker shall initiate the process of scheduling a mental health evaluation within 30 days of removing a child from their home.

Recommendation 3: OCS shall provide services and recommended follow-up to children irrespective of payee.

Recommendation 4: Streamline and make the application process for 1115 Medicaid waiver easier to navigate for providers.

Foster Care Stipend

Despite significant cost of living increases, there has been no increase in the foster parent stipend to reflect current inflation.

Recommendation 1: The foster care stipend base rate shall be increased to reflect inflation. Consider an additional “cost of living” line that would self-adjust monthly to reflect real-time fluctuations in the Consumer Price Index.

Recommendation 2: Consider the needs of the specific child, offering an augmented rate evaluation automatically based upon difficulty-of-care to decrease placement changes, and better equips families to care for a child’s needs that are above and beyond the norm.

Recommendation 3: Increase the amount allocated for “baby-sitting and pre-school expenses” to more accurately reflect reasonable need and the costs incurred. Conduct ongoing review and recalculate the formulas annually and adjust as appropriate.

Licensing Investigations & How They Are Handled

Foster parents are treated as ‘guilty until proven innocent’ and have valid reasons to fear losing bio/adoptive/foster children while being investigated, even if the report is unfounded. If the report is unfounded, the foster family simply receives a letter from the court and foster children who have been removed are often not returned. There is no follow up from OCS and no attempt to repair the broken relationship or damage done between the foster family and OCS.

Recommendation 1: Include Resource Family Advisory Board licensing investigation handout within the red folder and upon initiation of an investigation. Licensing workers shall include discussion on investigation procedure and the rights of resource families during initial licensing and renewals.

Recommendation 2: Consider the foster parent’s history, the source of the report, and never remove (or threaten to remove) children without just cause.

Recommendation 3: Have a 3rd party representative assigned to the resource family at the initiation of any investigation (like a guardian ad litem (GAL)) that walks through the process with the resource family, explaining the process and their rights, and holding OCS accountable for anything that may be mishandled or misconstrued. They could also walk the resource family through any decision, appeal, or complaint process.

Recommendation 4: In replacement of, or in addition to the standard, legal letter a foster family receives once an investigation is closed, OCS will conduct a debriefing once an investigation is concluded to discuss why it happened and what the findings were.

REUNIFICATION & HOW FOSTER PARENTS CAN HELP ^{iv}

Current OCS policy and practice does not adequately support partnerships between the resource family and birth parents.

Recommendation 1: OCS shall implement system and policy changes that support foster parent/birth parent partnerships (i.e., “Shared Parenting Model”). Some practices that could be adopted include the following:

- Comfort Calls: “Immediately upon placement, or at most within the first 24 hours after a child is placed in a foster home, the placement worker facilitates a call between the foster and birth parents to establish an initial connection” (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020, p. 16).
- *Ice-Breaker Meetings: “Face-to-face meetings between birth parents and foster parents to share information about the child and to begin the process of developing a birth parent/foster parent relationship” (CHAMPS Policy Playbook, 2022, para. 5). These would be regular, informal visits between the resource family and birth parents, supervised by OCS/involved tribe/3rd party designated supervisor. They could consist of unstructured playtime with a child in care, or something more structured, such as completing a holiday craft or working on the child's “life book” together.
- *Reinstate 3-month case review to include the entire team in all regions (currently not allowed in Northern and only biannually elsewhere). OCS would reinstate in person case reviews statewide, including all members of the child’s team (birth family, foster family, caseworker, GAL, Tribal worker if applicable) and would occur every 3 months (rather than every 6 months) with the purpose of keeping the team members up-to-date, open lines of communication between all members, and ultimately foster a more trusting relationship. Overall helping to facilitate a quicker reunification for the family with stronger supports.
- On-Going, Regular Contact: Provide alternative contact methods to safely allow for phone calls, texting, and picture sharing between foster parents and birth parents. Provider dedicated time at the beginning of each child-parent visitation to allow for connection and information sharing between foster parents and birth parents/Regular, birth parent inclusion at child-related appointments.

- Obtain lifeline cell phones through the service array for youth and children in care.
- Foster-Parent/Birthparent Led Transition Plans: “Birth and foster co-parents with a strong relationship are in the best position to develop a placement transition plan that will protect the child’s relationships and maintain consistency between homes” (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020, p. 20).
- *Encouraged and Normalized Post-Reunification Relationship: “In remaining connected after the placement ends, the foster parent can both smooth the child’s transition from foster placement back to the birth parent and offer ongoing support to the birth parent, which may include childcare, coaching, and other emotional support. The foster parent’s ongoing presence in the child’s life after reunification also averts the grief and trauma of a permanent separation by maintaining the continuity of the caregiving relationship, further supporting the success of the reunification” Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020, p. 5).

Recommendation 2: OCS shall partner with Alaska Center for Resource Families (ACRF) to facilitate staff and resource families training on any such “shared parenting” policies and practices that are to be implemented.

CASEWORKER RETENTION & RECRUITMENT

Caseloads and resulting turnover rate are far too high, resulting in extended case timelines, disrupted permanency, loss of foster families and ultimately undesirable outcomes for the children in care.

*Recommendation 1: To address retention, lower caseloads and increase wages to reflect the type of traumatic work they experience as well as trauma/emotional support like they are offered to a first responder.

Recommendation 2: To improve caseworker morale, foster a positive relationship between foster parents and caseworkers and encourage a strong work ethic, we recommend implementing a Foster Parent Choice Award. This award would be presented quarterly, after foster parents in each region nominate a caseworker, for going above and beyond and ensuring best outcomes. The chosen team member in each region would receive a ‘Thank you’ letter from a nonprofit (such as Beacon Hill) recognizing their outstanding service and commitment to the children in care and the families who serve them. They would also receive a gift basket, or gift card to a local business.

CASEWORKER SUPPORT SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

*Top 3 Main Topics from Caseworker Subcommittee
(These topics were derived from the 2022 Staff Survey Report)*

STAFF TURNOVER

Recommendation 1: Increase the mentor program capacity with more Protective Services Specialist (PSS) III positions to mentor more PSS staff as needed. This could support OCS workers not having to travel independently to field visits and having a partner would help make the experience safer, more supportive, and often more efficient; especially when interviews need to occur privately and alone with several family members during a single visit.

Recommendation 2: Funding for more mental health clinicians in each region to address secondary trauma and burnout in staff.

Recommendation 3: Hire a professional Training and Resiliency Manager (or team) to professionally evaluate how OCS can be a stronger support for their staff.

DECREASE CASELOADS / ON-CALL WORK, EVENINGS & WEEKENDS

Recommendation 1: Decrease case load requirements and duties by centralization of administrative tasks and increasing wages for support staff that meets the cost of living in Alaska (i.e.: Office Assistant I base pay rate in Anchorage, AK is currently a salary range 8 at \$16.67/hour).

*Recommendation 2: Suggestion for law enforcement to partner with OCS – specifically during the ‘on-call’ hours (late evening/night/early morning).

LACK OF RECOGNITION/WORKERS FEELING UNDERVALUED/CASEWORKER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Recommendation 1: Higher level decision as to whether OCS caseworkers should be classified as a “First Responder.”

Recommendation 2: Provide an immediate 20% pay raise to all staff at the Office of Children’s Services.

Recommendation 3: Provide a two-step pay increase for all staff with a bachelor’s degree and a four-step increase for all staff with a master’s degree.

Recommendation 4: Secure temporary housing and transportation in rural communities for OCS staff (example: Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue, Rural Northern/Western)

*Recommendation 5: Formal annual events with media coverage and increased public awareness of recognition specifically for employees (or people who work with victims of maltreatment as whole)

YOUTH VOICE SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Governor's Foster Parent/Parent Advisory Council surveyed 74 current and former foster youth ages 14-26 throughout the state. Based on feedback from those surveys and expertise within the Youth Voice Subcommittee we propose the following recommendations:

YOUTH VOICE/CHOICE

Recommendation 1: All children and youth are legal parties to their OCS case. We recommend all children aged 10 and older receive formal notice of any meetings, hearings, visits, financial assets (PFD, SSI, Credit Reports etc.), or decisions regarding their life, and certification that the youth received the notice.

FAMILY CONTACT HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS AN OVERARCHING THEME, ESPECIALLY AMONG SIBLINGS

Recommendation 1: While family contact is already a requirement, this often does not play out in practice. We recommend a centralized unit or dedicated staff to focus on ensuring all cases have a family contact plan and for periodic reviews that family contact is happening. Furthermore, dedicated funding to support regular contact for families separated geographically. Expanding on existing community resources that support family contact. Increase family contacts from quarterly to monthly.

OCS WORKER TRAINING AND STANDARDS

*Recommendation 1: The child welfare workforce in Alaska is experiencing immense challenges. With a nearly 60% turnover rate among frontline staff, as well as a shift in hiring practices to move away from degrees and those with social experience. We recommend specialized training for newly hired OCS staff and incentives for degreed or experienced professionals to draw a more advanced workforce with knowledge of ethics, trauma, and family engagement.

APPROPRIATE SCREENING FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

*Recommendation 1: While it is a requirement for children in foster care to be screened for specific behavioral health needs, there is often a gap or lag in assessment and lack of appropriate services. We recommend that children and youth in foster care are screened timely based on developmental age and medical needs of the child. We further recommend the OCS Mental Health Unit- or appropriate internal entity regularly review that children receive services based on screening recommendation for mental health care.

SUPPORT FOR LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Recommendation 1: There are currently 7 Regional Independent Living Specialist at OCS assigned to more than 900 Independent Living Service Eligible Youth ages 16-21 in and out of custody. We recommend supporting the expansion of the Independent Living Program through use of regional contractors, expansion of the age to 14-26, and Life Skills training and development based on regional needs among youth.

FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT, SCREENING & OVERSIGHT FOR APPROPRIATE FOSTER HOMES

Recommendation 1: In youth survey responses a major theme was continuously highlighted specific to inappropriate actions by foster parents. This committee is aware of specific training and policy efforts already in effect but want to lift this as an issue that youth overwhelmingly shared.

ONGOING & CONTINUED COMMUNICATION AMONG GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP AND THOSE WITH LIVED-EXPERTISE

Recommendation 1: Lived-Expertise should hold the same value as that of a Subject Matter Expert. It is our recommendation that the state support Lived-Expertise of current and former foster youth, birth parents, foster parents and child welfare specific constituency groups through stipends, honorariums, or contracts to show the value of the expertise and time shared. This is a best practice standard. We recommend this as direct support or contracts with existing agencies already hosting these efforts.

DISPARATE OUTCOMES SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

PREVENTION & AFTERCARE / SUPPORTS FOLLOWING REUNIFICATION

In-Home Safety Planning

Recommendation 1: State of Alaska to provide funding to support preventative services to assist at-risk families, families with a safety plan, and children who have recently returned home.

- This person would help to identify and eliminate risks/barriers, walking along and assisting the parents to ensure their children are safe. This role could be filled by a professional community member who wants to be involved but may not be able to foster and is trained and background checked.

Community Outreach

Recommendation 1: Greater community outreach

- Back to our roots "Moms Club" model of close community/family-like support/organic relationship and mentoring. Having one in every town, (could be virtual). In the mother's club, a mother would be designated to talk to the mom, like a mentorship.
- PSA to reframe what fostering is, why foster. Education on why people become foster parents.
- Community Education PSA: Myths of child welfare involvement-when to call for help.
- Highlighting Cultural Programs/Community Wellness Programs
- Community celebrations of successes: reunification, adoptions, getting through a rough time.

Recommendation 2: Create a public service announcement (PSA) that explains the role of child protective services, foster care, and identifies services available to families.

Recommendation 3: Create a PSA of what fostering means, and why someone would want to become a foster parent.

Recommendation 4: Create a PSA, that shows a lived-in home as being adequate and safe to be a foster home.

*Recommendation 5: Provide quarterly education to law enforcement to facilitate a connection to family or friends who can provide immediate safety to children who may be at risk for emergency removal.

Recommendation 6: Create a Warmline/Careline where at-risk families can ask for help without fear of OCS involvement.

DATA

Recommendation 1: State to use data-informed practices to monitor out of preference placement homes.

Recommendation 2: Education on data to inform the community of children in custody, and education of what resources are available.

FOSTER FAMILY RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Preference Placements and Responsibilities

*Recommendation 1: Quarterly Team Review- All regions of the state hold a quarterly review for the whole team including birth family and foster families.

GOAL: Increase communication between OCS, foster family, birth family, tribe. The team would facilitate.

GOAL: Conversations with the team regarding ICWA/preferential placement.

*Recommendation 2: Foster Parent Advocate- Paid position that is neutral to assist foster parents to navigate and learn the system.

Recommendation 3: Monthly OCS/Tribal Meeting- OCS/tribes meet monthly to review preference placement when a child is placed in an out of preference placement home, even if the family has the tribe's approval.

GOAL: To move child(ren) to a preference home as quickly as possible. Require monthly reviews between OCS and tribes to review cases when a child is in an out-of-preference placement home, even if the family has the tribe's approval.

Recommendation 4: Cultural Packets- Alaska Center for Resource Families (ACRF) and tribes will share or create an informational packet on their region, culture, tribal resources and contact information for the tribal representative.

GOAL: To provide foster families with information on culture and the contact information for the tribe.

Recommendation 5: All Child in Need of Aid proceedings have a 6-Month Review where the proceedings are casual creating a youth friendly atmosphere. Resource families are invited as participants to the reviews.

*Recommendations 6: OCS shall facilitate ice breakers between the resource family and birth family, to connect them on a regular basis and develop a positive relationship. Not left up to the foster parents. Guidance and availability to assist in facilitation.

*Recommendation 7: Shared Information- Providing foster parents with a list of pertinent questions to ask such as who the caseworker is, tribal workers, ACRF, onboarding information/frontloading, who's the child's tribe, is there extended family around, what are the

expectations, asking what relationships the child has (ACRF possible do Zoom education).

Recommendations 8: Dispelling Myths create a public service advertisement that there is to need to be perfect or have a lot to foster.

*Recommendations 9: Improved Relationship between the caseworkers and foster families-
Reference Foster Parent Subcommittee Recommendations regarding Accountability.

STATE / TRIBAL EFFORTS FOR RECRUITMENT

Recommendation 1: Invite foster homes to recruitment and retention efforts with state/tribal.
Power of sharing stories.

Recommendation 2: ICWA families sharing what it means to foster.

Recommendation 3: Support and fund dance groups to create a song that is a story of being a foster family. Have the dance professionally recorded, use as an advertisement for recruitment and retention.

Recommendation 4: Create a PSA that shows a lived-in home as being adequate and safe to be a foster home.

MENTAL HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

TIMELY MENTAL HEALTH FOR FOSTER YOUTH ACT

Recommendation 1: The Timely Mental Health for Foster Youth Act:

- Would require the state (OCS) to provide an initial developmentally appropriate mental health screening to foster youth within 30 days of entry into care.
- Screening would happen at the initial EPSDT/required (within 30 days) medical appointment.
- If a mental health concern is identified in the initial screening, referral for ongoing clinical support/intake would be sent out.
- The screening should be professionally implemented.
- Utilize an evidence-based screening tool, request recommendations from a team of mental health professionals. (Similar to an ACES screening, simple 10 questions etc.)
- Increase Medicaid billable providers trained in infant and early childhood mental health.
 - State of Alaska should be responsible to create the process within the overall system. This should not fall on the caseworkers as they are not overall equipped to handle this. Continue to work with behavioral health on developing behavioral health screening recommendations and screening tools.

THERAPY

*Recommendation 2: Utilize family therapy, and culturally relevant programs, services, and referrals.

- Families should be referred for family therapy at the start of their case plan to provide the parents with clinically recommended strategies to assist with secure attachment and ongoing healing.
- Utilize peer support groups for parents from the start of their case.
- Provide more funding for existing peer support groups.
- Utilize agencies that are trained in FAN (facilitating attuned interactions) or a similar infant early childhood mental health model of services.
- Utilize culturally relevant programs, services, and practices for families.
- Families with youth under the age of 5 should be referred for evidence-based practice to assist with secure attachment bonding.
 - Circle of Security
 - Child Parent Psychotherapy

EMERGENCY HOME & CRISIS STABILIZATION HOME WORKGROUP

Recommendation 1: Create a statewide workgroup to explore concerns and barriers to increasing emergency homes and crisis stabilization homes.

- Increase Emergency Homes/Crisis Stabilization Homes

- Prevents youth from staying at OCS offices or hotels
- Prevents possible need for higher levels of care, or hospitalization
- Medicaid Billable, grant funded or both
- Sign on Bonus for staff (\$10,000 similar to DOC bonus)
- Possible start up grant funding to establish a home
- Available in every region

REGIONAL SCREENING TEAMS

Recommendation 1: Create a screening team in ALL regions.

- Purpose of the screening team would be to take an approach at accessing, staffing, and providing services for all youth and families as they come into care.
- Possible members of the screening team
 - OCS Caseworker/Supervisor/Psych Nurse
 - Clinicians/Behavioral Health Staff
 - Children's Home Director
 - ICWA staff / Tribe
 - CAC
 - Advocacy Agencies
 - Visitation Agencies
 - Therapeutic Foster Care Agencies/Placement Agencies
 - Medical Professionals
 - Educational Professionals
 - Peer Support Agencies
 - Public Defender Agency, CASA/GAL (Office of Public Advocacy)
 - Infant Parent Mental Health Clinician
- How would it work?
 - Participating agencies would have a minimum of two representatives identified to participate in the team.
 - Communicate/staff on which agency would provide the needed services.
 - Re-Occurring weekly meetings to staff each new CINA case.
 - Services/Referrals would begin immediately and not wait until the child's behaviors or needs were out of control. With hopes of preventing a need for higher level of care.

FOSTER PARENT RESPITE HOMES

*Recommendation 1: Onboard more foster parent respite homes.

- Create a process for OCS documentation and funding for respite placements. It should not be a transaction from foster parent to foster parent. It should reflect in ORCA that there is a temporary placement change between licensed providers.
- Increase the daily rate for stipends.

- Increase of FP support groups with childcare provided.

INCREASE EDUCATOR TRAINING

Recommendation 1: More training for educators (early childhood and district) regarding trauma, historical trauma, and resiliency.

- Target the educators in the more rural areas as they are more commonly hired from the lower 48.
- Create a team of trainers that go into school districts, childcare programs, head starts and preschools statewide and work with the educators prior to the start of the school year as well as throughout the year.

REUNIFICATION

*Recommendation 1: Birth and Foster parent partnership program

- Advisory group to bridge the gap (systems level). Statewide with potential to go regionally.

*Recommendation 2: More frequent visitation for youth that have been removed from their region.

- Monthly visitations, not quarterly.
- State to provide internet access for video visitations for families that are actively engaged in their case plan.
- Agency to assist with bridging the relationship between foster parents and birth parents.
 - Grant funded

Recommendation 3: In person services with helping the bio parent to know their limits, know what's happening and be successful.

- Possibly a group/team effort including the foster parent.
- Transitional bridge from foster parent to birth parent.
- Team approach to developing a transition plan when child is returning home, or when a child is relocating through the ICPC process.
 - Clinically recommended transition plan that includes specific steps that follow the individual child's emotional/mental health development and timeline.

ⁱ **BACKGROUND:** When asked their primary reason for closing their community care licenses, resource families in an online Alaskan foster care support group widely cited issues with the Office of Children's Services (OCS), with poor communication, lack of caseworker honesty and integrity, and the need for transparency being specifically mentioned again and again.

These sentiments were more formally echoed in a statewide foster parent survey conducted earlier this year. Out of the 105 families that participated in the survey, 100% listed OCS "Honesty/Transparency" as a top issue they believed, if reformed, would make a positive impact in

the recruitment and retention of resource families.

Trust is at the foundation of any healthy relationship, and those between OCS and the resource families it partners with are no exception. It is particularly vital in relationships subject to high stress/high stakes circumstances, as these by nature are.

Clearly there is work to be done.

While communication and integrity are often subject to caseworker individuality, we believe higher consistency can be achieved with systems of accountability built into OCS structure and policy.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

Statewide Foster Parent Survey (2022): https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-3_FvRRiXydm2ufDULMnGZic1frKY77a/view?usp=sharing

ii **BACKGROUND:** Molly*, 3.5 weeks old, was picked up by her foster parents from Providence NICU in May of 2019. She had spent the first weeks of her life in medication assisted withdrawal for substances she had been exposed to in-utero. Molly's biological parents, in the throes of addiction, chose not to see her for over 15 months. They gave birth to her baby brother, Henry* (also removed and placed with the same foster family), had a single visit each with the children together when Henry was a month old, and then disappeared from their children's lives again until after Molly's 2nd birthday. Despite 2 years of near-total abandonment, parental rights were not terminated. Following a short incarceration, Molly's and Henry's biological parents started treatment plans, engaged with OCS for the first time, and now, a year later, a trial home visit is scheduled to start within the next month or two. Sadly, this 'happy ending' doesn't come without great cost. Molly is over 3 years old now, and Henry is 2. They have only ever lived with their foster family and, due to their abandonment and young ages, know them as their mama, daddy, and siblings. Until this last year, that knowledge was uncontested. Their transition to their birth parents is being guided by a child therapist, due to the advocacy of their foster parents, and all are actively working to build up parental attachment to their biological parents, in an effort to reduce the potential for trauma. Their foster family, too, is actively grieving the loss of two children they've embraced as their own for years, and are not anxious to be a part of a system that allowed this to happen after so much time had passed without the biological parents even remotely engaging in service plans.

Johnny* was placed with his foster family in January of 2017 at 3 weeks old. He remained with them until 8 months old, whereupon he was reunited with his parents for two months, and then placed back with his foster family. He remained with them until he was 4 ½ years old. At that point, a tribe intervened and in June of 2021, with a mere 24 hours' notice to his foster family, Johnny was sent to live with a half uncle and aunt in Texas. The foster family was allowed some Facetime contact for a time, but then all communication was cut off and birthday and Christmas presents returned. His foster mom related, "I know it was so hard for him and I feel like we abandoned him." She confessed that the experience was gut wrenching and that they are still devastated.

In 2018, Gov. Bill Walker signed HB 151 (Children Deserve a Loving Home Act). On page 4, the act recognizes, "numerous studies establish that children undergo a critical attachment process before the time they reach six years of age; a child who has not attached with an adult caregiver during this critical stage will suffer significant emotional damage that frequently leads to chronic psychological problems and antisocial behavior when the child reaches adolescence and adulthood; and it is important to provide for an expedited placement procedure to ensure that all children, especially those under the age of six years, who have been removed from their homes are placed in permanent homes expeditiously."

FURTHER RESOURCES:

2018 HB 151 "Children Deserve a Loving Home Act": <https://www.akleg.gov/basis/Bill/Text/30?Hsid=HB0151Z>

iii **BACKGROUND:** Every child that enters Alaska's foster care system has experienced trauma in one form or the other. When we look at the reasons children were brought into state custody originally, the trauma from the removal from their home and family, and the disruption from subsequent placement changes,... these children have a lot to process and heal from. Left untreated, stressors are often externalized and expressed as many of the "behaviors" that have, unfortunately, become a defining label of sorts for foster children. These behaviors can contribute to even more placement changes, compounding trauma. Consider the following sober statistics from ChildrensRights.Org:

"It is estimated that up to 80 percent of the over 400,000 children in foster care in America suffer from a mental health issue compared to 18-22 percent of the general population of children." (Child Mental Health & Foster Care, para. 2)

"As many as 60 to 80 percent of children with severe mental health conditions demonstrate a positive response to therapeutic treatment, but less than 25 percent of children in foster care have received any mental health services after a year in state custody." (Child Mental Health & Foster Care, para. 3)

"Youth in foster care experience PTSD at two times the rate of US war veterans." (Child Mental Health & Foster Care, para. 4)

"Because their trauma is often untreated, children living in foster care engage in behavior that is symptomatic of the trauma they have experienced. That is the primary reason why one-third of foster youth crossover into the juvenile justice system, spending at least one night in detention." (Child Mental Health & Foster Care, para. 5)

Mental health needs to be a priority.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

Child Mental Health and Foster Care: <https://www.childrensrights.org/newsroom-fact-sheets-childmentalhealth/>

^{iv} **BACKGROUND:** The benefits that can grow out of a thriving birth parent/foster parent partnership are numerous and significant for all parties involved: child(ren), birth parents, foster parents, and even caseworkers. Consider the following quotes, taken from “Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A State and Local Leader’s Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation”.

“Birth and foster parents working collaboratively to parent a child can provide a level of consistency and quality parenting that birth and foster families in tension with or isolation from one another simply cannot.” (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020, p. 3)

“As co-parenting partners, birth and foster parents can avoid painful and damaging conflicts, freely share vital information about the child’s needs, facilitate smooth and mutually-beneficial visits, collaboratively plan for transitions, preserve the child’s relationships with both families, avoid unnecessary placement disruptions, limit the child’s experience of grief and loss due to being placed in foster care, and support positive long-term outcomes for both parents and children.” (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020, p. 3)

Intentional, policy-supported birth-parent/ foster-parent partnerships (eg. “shared parenting”) in child welfare are not without precedent. North Carolina, Illinois, and Virginia have all implemented shared parenting policies and may be a good resource for designing our own.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A State and Local Leader’s Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation:

<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sec3f22c53ca04100a128ff2369207b82>

CHAMPS Policy Playbook: Policy 1- Support Relationships Between Birth and Foster Families: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/support-relationships-between-birth-and-foster-families/>

Birth Parent/Foster Parent Relationships to Support Family Reunification:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/parents/reunification/>

North Carolina SHARED PARENTING Participant Training Workbook: <https://files.nc.gov/ncdhhs/documents/files/dss/training/Shared-Parenting-Participant-Workbook-6-2019.pdf>