

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

FINAL REPORT

Alaska Child and Family Services Review

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau**



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

**Administration for
Children and Families**

Region X

2201 6th Ave., Ste 600

Seattle, WA 98121-1827

September 18, 2000

Jay Livey
Commissioner
Department of Health and Social Services
PO Box 110631
Juneau, AK 99811-0630

Dear Commissioner Livey:

The Administration for Children and Families in collaboration with the Alaska Division of Family and Youth Services recently completed a review of the Alaska Child and Family Services (CFS) program to determine substantial conformity with the State plan requirements found in titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. This review was initiated in December, 2001 with an analysis of data related to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children involved with the Division of Family and Youth Services and a statewide assessment of areas seen as critical to the effective functioning of the State's child welfare system. During the week of June 24 to 28, 2002 an on-site review of 50 cases and interviews with a wide range of key stakeholders in your child welfare system were completed. The final report on this CFS Review is enclosed.

We appreciate the amount of time and effort that you and your staff committed to the planning and implementation of the CFS Review. While this was a joint federal/state team effort, we would especially like to thank Theresa Tanoury for her oversight and guidance, and we extend our appreciation as well to Tim Fox for taking primary responsibility for organizing this review.

The State can take pride in those areas found to be strengths in its child welfare system. We have determined that the Division of Family and Youth Services is operating in substantial conformity in three of the systemic factors that comprise the child and family services reviews.

Also, as indicated in the report, we have determined that the Division of Family and Youth Services is not operating in substantial conformity in the seven outcome areas and four of the seven systemic factors. A Program Improvement Plan (PIP) is required to address each outcome

and/or systemic factor determined not to be in substantial conformity. The PIP must be submitted to my office for approval within 90 calendar days from the receipt of this letter. An estimated penalty of \$189,618 is applicable to this level of non-conformity. However, we are suspending the withholding of funds associated with this penalty during the period of the approved PIP. If we determine that the State is successful in rectifying any of the areas that are in non-conformity, either through successful completion of the PIP or through a subsequent review, we will rescind the withholding of Federal funds associated with those areas at that time.

My staff will assist you in developing the PIP to ensure that the Division of Family and Youth Services establishes an action strategy for bringing each of the identified areas up to a level of substantial conformity as specified in 45 CFR 1355.35. To the extent possible, those involved in the CFS Planning process and members of the review team, including those who are not employees of the Division of Family and Youth Services, should be actively involved in developing the PIP.

The major elements required in the PIP include the priority assigned to the State's work on each area of non-conformity, the necessary action steps associated with improving each area of non-conformity, identification of the individuals responsible for carrying out the various steps, identification of the geographical areas of the state involved, and establishment of time frames for carrying-out the required improvements. We will work with your designated staff to determine jointly the time frames, the specific content, and the process for evaluating the State's progress and achievements with respect to the PIP.

We wish to remind you that Federal regulations, at 45 CFR 1355.37, require that the State make available for public review and inspection all statewide assessments, reports of findings, and PIPs developed as a result of a CFS review. Therefore, we urge you to consider how you will respond to inquiries concerning these documents and prepare to make the information available as required in regulation. Since the information is available to the public, the Administration for Children and Families is obliged to respond to inquiries regarding such information as well.

We also wish to note that the State may enter into a voluntary PIP to strengthen any areas that were determined to be in substantial conformity as noted in the attached report. We will be happy to discuss the provisions for developing a voluntary PIP at your request.

In accordance with Federal regulations, at 45 CFR 1355.32 (b) (2), we will conduct the next full CFS review of the Alaska Division of Family and Youth Services 2 years from approval of PIP.

Pagr 3 - Jay Livey

John Henderson and Lois Ward, of my staff, will continue to work in the development of your PIP and to assist in identifying federal and other resources to best address your technical assistance needs. Please be assured that we look forward to working collaboratively with you to assist you in your efforts to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families in Alaska.

Sincerely,

/s/

Stephen Henigson
Regional Administrator

CC: Director, Office of Regional Operations,
Commissioner, Administration on Children, Youth and Families,
Children's Bureau Associate Commissioner,
Director, Office of Public Affairs,
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and External Affairs

Enclosure

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Child and Family Services Review
ALASKA

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) assesses State performance during a specified time period with respect to seven child welfare outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being and with respect to seven systemic factors. The assessment is based on information from the following sources:

- The Statewide Assessment prepared by the State child welfare agency – the Alaska Division of Family and Youth Services (DFYS);
- The State Data Profile prepared by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- Reviews of 50 cases from three areas of the State; and
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three counties and the State capital) with a wide range of stakeholders including children, parents, foster parents, various levels of State and local DFYS personnel, collaborating agency personnel, school personnel, service providers, court personnel, legislators, and attorneys.

The on site review in Alaska occurred during the week of June 24, 2002.

With regard to the assessment of outcomes, a key finding of the review of Alaska’s child welfare programs is that the State is effective in preventing children’s re-entry into foster care. The case review process found only one case in which a child re-entered foster care within 12 months of discharge from a prior episode, and the State Data Profile indicates that the State’s rate of foster care re-entry for fiscal year (FY) 2000 (4.6 percent) meets the national standard for foster care re-entry (8.6 percent). In addition, the State was found to be effective in placing children in foster care in close proximity to their biological families and with siblings when possible and in the children’s best interest.

The CFSR also found, however, that Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with the seven safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes under assessment. For example, the State data for FY 2000 indicated that the State did not meet the national standards for repeat maltreatment, maltreatment of children in foster care, length of time to achieve reunification, length of time to achieve adoption, and stability of foster care placement. In addition, case reviews and stakeholder interviews revealed a lack of consistency on the part of DFYS with regard to protecting children, promoting their permanency, and ensuring their well-being.

A significant concern identified through the CFSR was the lack of success in many cases with regard to achieving permanency for children in foster care. For example, Permanency Outcome 1—Children have permanency and stability in their living situations—was

found to be not achieved in 78.3 percent of the foster care cases reviewed and efforts to achieve finalized adoption in a timely manner were a matter of concern in 70 percent of applicable cases. In a substantial percentage of cases, the review determined that DFYS was not effective in ensuring stability for children in their foster care placements (item 6), in establishing appropriate

permanency goals in a timely manner (item 7), or in achieving permanency goals in a timely manner (items 8, 9, and 10.)

Another area of concern related to Child and Family Well-Being Outcome 1—Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs. Case reviewers determined that this outcome was substantially achieved in 28 percent of the cases. In a large number of cases, reviewers found that children and families were not receiving needed services (item 17) and were not being involved in the case planning process (item 18). In addition, in many cases, the frequency of DFYS caseworkers’ face-to-face contact with children (item 19) and parents (item 20) was determined to be insufficient to monitor children’s safety or to promote attainment of case goals, including permanency goals.

Safety issues also were found to be a concern for the State. Maltreatment was found to recur within a 6-month period in 26 of the 50 cases reviewed. In addition, the CFSR revealed that DFYS is not consistently responding to maltreatment reports in a timely manner (item 1), and is not consistently effective in maintaining children safely in their own homes (item 3) or in managing the risk of harm to children (item 4).

With regard to the systemic factors assessed, the CFSR determined that the State is in substantial conformity with the factors related to training for child welfare staff and child caregivers, the Information System and to the agency’s responsiveness to the community. However, the CFSR found that the State did not have a case review system or quality assurance system that were sufficient to support the attainment of positive outcomes for children and families. In addition, the CFSR found that the State was not in substantial conformity with the factors of service array and foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

The following is a summary of the CFSR findings regarding specific outcomes and systemic factors.

KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO OUTCOMES

I. SAFETY

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.

Status of Safety Outcome S1 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity for Safety Outcome 1. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was substantially achieved in 62 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.

The CFSR revealed that DFYS is not consistent in its efforts to ensure children's protection from abuse and neglect. With regard to timeliness of investigations, the case reviews found that in instances involving imminent risk reports (reports deemed priority 1), the agency responded within established timeframes. However, investigations of maltreatment reports not involving imminent risk (i.e., reports assigned a priority 2 or 3 level) were not always initiated within the timeframes required by State policy, and face-to face contact was not consistently established within timeframes that would ensure children's safety. Problems with responding to reports in a timely manner were attributed to high workloads (and the corresponding problem of high levels of staff turnover). Concerns also were noted regarding the lack of policy regarding timeframes for face-to-face contact with children who are the subjects of maltreatment reports. Finally, CFSR findings indicate that maltreatment recurrence is a significant challenge for DFYS. Information from case reviews and stakeholder interviews suggest that the high incidence of maltreatment recurrence may be due to the number of maltreatment reports involving alcohol abuse and/or to a lack of adequate services to ensure children's safety in their homes. A summary of findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 1. Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

Item 1 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS responded to maltreatment reports in a timely manner in 70 percent of the cases. However, in 30 percent of the cases, the agency did not respond to maltreatment reports in a timely manner, particularly reports assigned a priority 2 rating. Stakeholders and case reviewers expressed concern about the absence of policy guidelines regarding face-to-face contact.

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

Item 2 was rated an Area Needing Improvement for the following reasons:

- In 26 percent of the cases reviewed, there was a substantiated /indicated maltreatment report during the period under review that occurred within 6 months of another substantiated/indicated report.
- The incidence of repeat maltreatment reported in the State Data Profile was 23.6 percent, which does not meet the national standard of 6.1 percent.

Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Status of Safety Outcome S2 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was substantially achieved in 60 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.

A general CFSR finding was that the agency is effective in reducing risk by removing children from their homes and providing services to families. However, the agency is not as effective in maintaining children safely in their own homes. The key concern identified by reviewers was that the services offered to families did not address underlying issues contributing to the maltreatment. Another concern identified was that although services were offered to families, there often was insufficient agency monitoring of services. A summary of the findings for specific items assessed under this outcome is presented below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

Item 3 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS made diligent efforts to provide services to ensure children's safety while preventing their placement in foster care in 69 percent of the applicable cases. However, in 31 percent of the applicable cases, there were concerns relating to this item. The main concerns were (1) that services were inadequate because they did not address key problems, (2) that recommended services were not provided, and (3) that post-reunification services were not provided in some cases.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

Item 4 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that the agency was effective in efforts to reduce risk of harm to children in 68 percent of the applicable cases. However, in 32 percent of the cases, DFYS was not effective in its efforts to reduce risk of harm to children. The key concern identified was that DFYS was not consistent in monitoring families to ensure that family

members were participating in services, that change was occurring as a result of service participation, and that children continued to be safe. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that this problem may be due in part to a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of the various agency and non-agency workers involved with the family. Stakeholders also suggest that the agency is most effective in managing risk when it removes children from their homes, but less successful when the children remain in their homes.

II. PERMANENCY

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.

Status of Permanency Outcome 1 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following:

- 21.7 percent of the cases were rated as having substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 1, which is less than the 90 percent required for an overall rating of substantial conformity;
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children reunified who were reunified within 12 months of placement into foster care;
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing two or fewer placements during their first 12 months in foster care; and
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children adopted who experienced a finalized adoption within 24 months of entering foster care.

Although Alaska meets the national standard for the incidence of re-entries into foster care within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode, the CFSR revealed that achieving permanency and stability for children in foster care continues to be a significant challenge for the agency. Concerns were noted with regard to placement stability, establishing appropriate permanency goals in a timely manner, and achieving permanency goals in a timely manner. A summary of findings for specific items assessed under this outcome is presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

Item 5 was rated a Strength for the following reasons:

- Reviewers noted that re-entry into foster care did not occur in 86 percent of the applicable cases.
- The State Data Profile indicates that the re-entry rate for Alaska is 4.6 percent, which meets the national standard of 8.6 percent.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

Item 6 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 61 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children had placement stability and/or that placement changes were in the child's best interest. However, reviewers determined that in 39 percent of cases the children had not experienced stability in their placement settings during the period under review. In addition, the State Data Profile indicates that of all children in foster care for 12 months or less, 70.6 percent experienced no more than 2 placement settings, which does not meet the national standard of 86.2 percent.

Consistent with the case review findings and stakeholder comments, the Statewide Assessment noted that placement instability may be attributed to a lack of foster homes, which restricts the ability of workers to match the needs of children to the skills and training of the foster parents.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

Item 7 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 61 percent of foster care cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had established appropriate permanency goals for children in a timely manner. However, concerns were identified regarding this issue in 39 percent of foster care cases. Key concerns related to maintaining inappropriate or unrealistic goals for long periods of time. Case reviewers and stakeholders noted that although concurrent goals are being established for children, caseworkers tend to see what happens with one goal before actively working toward the other goal.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship or Permanent Placement with Relatives

Item 8 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that in 31 percent of applicable cases, DFYS had made, or was making, diligent efforts to attain the goals of reunification or guardianship. However, reviewers also determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to achieve these goals in a timely manner in 69 percent of the applicable cases. The primary concern identified was that DFYS was not providing the parents with the services necessary to bring about the changes required for reunification. Also, data from the State Data Profile indicate that the percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care (58.3%) does not meet the national standard of 76.2 percent.

Item 9. Adoption

Item 9 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 70 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to achieve adoptions in a timely manner. A key concern was that the cause of the delays could be attributed to case practice issues, including not making decisions in a timely manner. In addition, according to the State Data Profile, the percentage of finalized adoptions that occurred within 24 months of removal from home (21.8%) did not meet the national standard (32%).

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

Item 10 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because in one of the two applicable cases, it was determined that the agency had not provided the child with the services needed to support a successful transition from foster care to independent living.

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Status of Permanency Outcome 2 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that this outcome was substantially achieved in 65.2 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity. Although the State was not in substantial conformity for this outcome, the CFSR revealed that DFYS is effective in placing children in close proximity to their parents or close relatives and in ensuring that siblings are placed together, whenever appropriate. However, DFYS was found to be inconsistent with respect to facilitating and supporting visits between children and their parents and siblings, preserving children’s connections, seeking relatives as potential placement resources, and promoting or maintaining the parent-child bond. A summary of findings for specific items assessed relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

Item 11 was rated a Strength because in 100 percent of applicable cases, children were placed in close proximity to parents or close relatives, or placement in another community was justified based on the child’s needs.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

Item 12 was rated a Strength based on the finding that in 90 percent of the cases, siblings were either placed together or the separation was deemed necessary to meet the needs of one or more of the children.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

Item 13 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 68 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had made, or was making, concerted efforts to facilitate visitation. However, reviewers identified concerns with respect to this issue in 32 percent of the cases. The key concern pertained to the significant lack of visitation in some cases between children and their parents, particularly their fathers. Some stakeholders suggested that infrequent visitation could be attributed to high caseworker caseloads.

Item 14. Preserving connections

Item 14 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 74 percent of foster care cases, reviewers determined that DFYS made diligent efforts to preserve children's connections to family, community, heritage, faith, and friends while the children are in foster care. However, in 26 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DFYS did not make concerted efforts to maintain children's connections with extended family or, in the case of Native American children, with the traditions and customs of their Tribes. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, this issue is of critical importance because approximately 50 percent of the children in care are Alaska Natives. (Of the cases reviewed, approximately 70 percent were Alaska Native.)

Item 15. Relative placement

Item 15 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Although reviewers determined that the agency made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources in 70 percent of foster care cases, they also determined that in 30 percent of the cases, the agency had not made such efforts. One primary problem identified was that caseworkers were not fully exploring paternal relatives as placement options.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

Item 16 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 81 percent of applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS made diligent efforts to support the parent-child relationship for children in foster care. However, in 19 percent of applicable cases, reviewers identified concerns regarding this issue, particularly with regard to the inconsistency of agency efforts to locate absent fathers and to promote the relationship between children and their fathers.

III. WELL-BEING

Outcome WB1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

Status of Well-Being Outcome 1 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved for 28.0 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity.

Although reviewers did identify a number of cases in which DFYS was making concerted efforts to ensure that the families had enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs, there were a substantial number of cases in which this was not the case. In these cases, the service needs of children, parents, and foster parents were neither assessed nor addressed. In addition, the agency did not consistently involve parents and children in the case planning process. A serious concern noted by reviewers and stakeholders pertained to the infrequent visitation between caseworkers and the children and parents in their caseloads. In more than 70 percent of the cases reviewed, reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visitation with both children and parents was inadequate to ensure the child's safety or well-being or to promote attainment of case goals. A summary of findings for specific items assessed relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

Item 17 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS was effective in assessing the needs and providing appropriate services to children, parents, and/or foster parents in 52 percent of the cases. However, in 48 percent of the cases, reviewers identified concerns related to this issue. A key concern was that inadequate assessments resulted in a failure to capture and address underlying problems for both children and parents.

Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning

Item 18 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS appropriately involved parents and/or children in the case planning process in 48 percent of the cases. However, in 52 percent of the cases, reviewers noted that parents and children were not involved in case planning. The Statewide Assessment acknowledged this problem and attributed it to workload issues and difficulties engaging some parents.

Item 19. Worker visits with child

Item 19 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 72 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with children were not of sufficient frequency. Stakeholders attributed problems to high caseloads, worker turnover, weather, and transportation problems.

Item 20. Worker visits with parents

Item 20 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. In 28 percent of the cases reviewed, reviewers determined that visits with parents were sufficiently frequent and of sufficient quality to promote the safety and well-being of the child or enhance attainment of case goals. However, in 72 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with parents were not of sufficiently frequency or quality. In particular, reviewers determined that worker visits were not sufficiently frequent in 23 of the 27 in-home services cases.

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB2 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2 based on the finding that 79.5 percent of the cases reviewed were found to have substantially achieved this outcome. This is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity. A summary of findings for the specific item assessed for this outcome is presented below.

Item 21. Educational needs of the child.

Item 21 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS was effective in meeting children's educational needs in 79 percent of applicable cases. However, in 21 percent of the cases there were concerns relating to this issue. The key concern identified pertained to in-home services cases in which reviewers determined that DFYS was not responding to children's education-related issues.

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

Status Of Well-Being Outcome 3 - Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 65.2 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity. Reviewers identified a number of problems with respect to health services, including a lack of health screenings at entry into foster care, lack of preventive health and dental care, and not addressing medical needs. In addition, children's mental health needs were not adequately addressed by DFYS. A summary of findings for the specific items assessed for this outcome is presented below.

Item 22. Physical health of the child

Item 22 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS was effective in addressing children's health needs in 77 percent of the applicable cases. However, in 23 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that these needs were not adequately met. A key concern was that health screenings were not consistently provided at entry into foster care and preventive health and dental care was not being provided on a routine basis.

Item 23. Mental health of the child

Item 23 was rated an Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that DFYS was effective in addressing children’s mental health needs in 66 percent of the applicable cases. However, in 34 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children's mental health needs were not adequately met.

KEY FINDINGS RELATING TO SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Status of Statewide Information System –Substantial Conformity

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the factor of Statewide Information System.

Item 24. The State is operating a Statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.

Item 24 was rated a Strength because information on the status, demographic characteristics, location and goals for each child in foster care is retrievable from the State's data system.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Status of Case Review System – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Case Review System.

Item 25. Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child’s parent(s) that includes the required provisions.

Item 25 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because of the lack of clear goal-oriented case plans and the lack of a system to consistently and actively involve parents and children in case planning.

Item 26. Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review.

Item 26 was rated a Strength because periodic reviews are held in a timely manner and the quality of these reviews is reported to be excellent. Stakeholders commented on the meaningfulness of these reviews and noted that there is a good level of participation.

Item 27. Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter.

Item 27 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement because permanency hearings are not consistently held in a timely manner.

Item 28. Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Item 28 was rated a Strength because the State has implemented procedures for filing for termination of parental rights and is generally filing for TPR in a timely manner.

Item 29. Provides a process for foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child.

Item 29 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because foster parents do not consistently receive notice of permanency hearings and are not always afforded the opportunity to be heard in these hearings.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Status of Quality Assurance System- Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the factor of Quality Assurance System.

Item 30. The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children.

Item 30 was rated a Strength because the State has developed and implemented the necessary standards to protect children in foster care.

Item 31. The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented.

Item 31 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because the State does not have a statewide quality assurance process and has no formal process for clients or stakeholders to evaluate agency performance.

VII. TRAINING

Status of Training- Substantial Conformity

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Training.

Item 32. The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services.

Item 32 was rated a Strength because the agency has an initial training program and workers complete training before being assigned a caseload.

Item 33. The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.

Item 33 was rated a Strength because ongoing training is required and available.

Item 34. The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under Title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.

Item 34 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because foster parents are not consistently receiving initial core training and routinely provide care for children prior to receiving training. In addition, foster parents are not consistently completing ongoing training and DFYS does not monitor whether training is being accessed.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Status of Service Array-Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the factor of service array.

Item 35. The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.

Item 35 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because services are not available in sufficient quantity in either rural or urban communities. Shortages of services have a negative impact on prevention and reunification efforts, placement stability, and child well-being. Stakeholders noted shortages in foster placements, substance abuse services, mental health services, respite care, day care, culturally appropriate services, and home-based services.

Item 36. The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State's CFSP.

Item 36 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because Alaska has a shortage of services in both rural and urban communities.

Item 37. The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.

Item 37 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because service provision is influenced by availability rather than underlying needs of the children and families.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Status of Agency Responsiveness To The Community- Substantial Conformity

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community.

Item 38. In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with Tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.

Item 38 was rated a Strength because the State has an active Tribal-State collaboration group, some positive local collaboration efforts, and leadership that is accessible at all levels of the agency when questions or issues arise.

Item 39. The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered.

Item 39 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because involvement in the Child and Family Services Planning Process is limited to review and comment by key stakeholders instead of active involvement in setting goals and priorities.

Item 40. The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.

Item 40 was rated a Strength because the State has collaborative efforts to coordinate services among Federal and federally assisted programs.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Status of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention-Not in Substantial Conformity

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment and Retention.

Item 41. The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and childcare institutions, which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.

Item 41 was rated a Strength because the State has issued and implemented comprehensive new licensing standards issued December of 2001.

Item 42. The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or child care institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

Item 42 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because application of variances results in full licensing standards not being applied to all foster homes.

Item 43. The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children.

Item 43 was rated a Strength because criminal records checks are completed on all homes.

Item 44. The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

Item 44 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because the State does not have an effective recruitment plan and needs more recruitment strategies. Stakeholders identified several barriers to recruiting and maintaining foster homes, such as lack of day care and inadequate reimbursement.

Item 45. The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.

Item 45 was rated a Strength because the State utilizes the Alaska Exchange and the Northwest Adoption Exchange to seek placements for children.

INTRODUCTION

This document presents the findings of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for the State of Alaska. The findings were derived from the following documents and data collection procedures:

- The Statewide Assessment prepared by the State child welfare agency – the Alaska Division of Family and Youth Services (DFYS);
- The State Data Profile prepared by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- Reviews of 50 cases at three sites throughout the State; and
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three sites) with local and State-level stakeholders including children, parents, foster parents, all levels of child welfare agency personnel, collaborating agency personnel, school personnel, service providers, court personnel, legislators, and attorneys.

The key characteristics of the 50 cases reviewed are the following:

- 26 cases were reviewed in Anchorage, 12 in Mat-Su Borough, and 12 in Nome.
- All 50 cases had been open cases at some time during the period under review.
- 23 of the cases were “foster care cases” (cases in which children were in the care and custody of the State child welfare agency and in an out-of-home placement at some time during the period under review), and 27 were “in-home services cases” (cases in which families received services from the child welfare agency while children remained in their homes).
- In 25 of the cases, all children in the family were Alaska Native/American Indian; in 12 cases, all children in the family were Caucasian; in 3 cases, all children in the family were African American; in 3 cases, all children in the family were Hispanic; and in 6 cases, the children in the family were two or more races. In one case, reviewers did not identify the race/ethnicity of the children.
- Of the 50 cases reviewed, the primary reason for the opening of a child welfare agency case was the following:
 - Neglect (not including medical neglect) – 24 cases (48%)
 - Physical abuse – 11 cases (22%)
 - Substance abuse by parent – 4 cases (8%)
 - Mental/physical health of parent – 4 cases (8%)
 - Child’s behavior – 2 cases (4%)
 - Sexual abuse – 2 cases (4%)
 - Domestic violence in child’s home – 1 case (2%)
 - Other – 2 cases (4%)
- Among all reasons identified for children coming to the attention of the child welfare agency, neglect (not including medical neglect) was cited in 40 cases (80%), physical abuse was cited in 25 cases (50%), substance abuse by parent was cited in 21 cases (42%), and domestic violence in the child’s home was cited in 10 cases (20%).
- For 11 (48%) of the 23 foster care cases, the children entered foster care prior to the period under review and remained in foster care during the entire period under review.

The first section of the report presents the CFSR findings relevant to the State’s performance in achieving specific outcomes for children in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being. For each outcome, there is a table providing the degree of outcome achievement by site, a presentation of the State’s status with regard to substantial conformity with the outcome, and a discussion of each item examined as part of the overall outcome assessment. The second section of the report provides an assessment and discussion of the systemic factors relevant to the child welfare agency’s ability to achieve positive outcomes for children.

I. SAFETY

Safety Outcome 1

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	18	6	7	31	62.0
Partially Achieved:	7	4	3	14	28.0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	1	2	2	5	10.0
Not Applicable:	0	0	0	0	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
	National Standard	State's Percentage	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard	
Repeat maltreatment	6.1%	23.6%		X	
Maltreatment of children in foster care	.57%	1.91%		X	

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 1

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity for Safety Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following findings:

- 62.0 percent of the cases reviewed were rated as having substantially achieved this outcome, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing more than one substantiated or indicated child maltreatment report within a 6-month period; and
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing maltreatment from caretakers while in foster care.

The CFSR revealed that DFYS is not consistent in its efforts to ensure children's protection from abuse and neglect. With regard to timeliness of investigations, the case reviews found that in instances involving imminent risk reports (reports deemed priority 1), the

agency responded within established timeframes. However, investigations of maltreatment reports not involving imminent risk (i.e., reports assigned a priority 2 or 3 level) were not always initiated within the timeframes required by State policy, and face-to face contact was not consistently established within timeframes that would ensure children’s safety. Problems with responding to reports in a timely manner were attributed to high workloads (and the corresponding problem of high levels of staff turnover). Concerns also were noted regarding the lack of clear policy regarding timeframes for face-to-face contact with children who are the subjects of maltreatment reports.

With regard to maltreatment recurrence, CFSR findings indicate that maltreatment recurrence is a significant challenge for DFYS. Information from case reviews and stakeholder interviews suggest that the incidence of maltreatment recurrence may be due to the number of maltreatment reports involving alcohol abuse and/or to a lack of adequate services to ensure children's safety in their homes.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 1. Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: The assessment of item 1 was applicable for 33 of the 50 cases. Seventeen cases were not applicable because they did not involve reports of child maltreatment during the period under review. In assessing item 1, reviewers were to determine whether the response to a maltreatment report occurring during the period under review had been initiated in a timely manner. In Alaska, State policy requires that for reports classified as priority 1, an investigation must be initiated within 24 hours of the time the report is received by DYFS. For priority 2 reports, the investigation must be initiated within 72 hours of receipt; for priority 3 reports, the investigation must be initiated within 7 calendar days of the time that the report is received. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 1 was rated as a Strength in 23 (70%) of the 33 applicable cases (8 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 1 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 10 (30%) of the 33 applicable cases (2 of which were foster care cases).

This item was rated as a Strength when (1) the initiation of a response to child maltreatment reports occurring during the period under review was in accordance with agency policy for the risk level assigned to the report, and (2) face-to-face contact was established with the subject of the report in a timely manner. For the 10 cases rated as Area Needing Improvement, reviewers noted that the agency did

not respond to one or more reports of child maltreatment in accordance with the time frames established by policy or did not make face-to-face contact with the child in a timely manner. Of the cases rated as Area Needing Improvement, 5 were assigned a priority 2 rating, 1 was assigned a priority 3 rating, and 3 cases were assigned both priority 2 and 3 ratings.

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that DFYS is very responsive to allegations of physical abuse but does not always intervene in a timely manner when maltreatment reports involve allegations of neglect, particularly neglect resulting from alcohol abuse. In one site, a few stakeholders expressed concern that the agency's delay in initiating investigations, and particularly in making face-to-face contact with children, results in children not being sufficiently protected from harm even when reports do not involve physical abuse or imminent danger. Stakeholders also suggested that the lack of a clear agency policy regarding time frames for initiating face-to-face contact creates confusion as to what constitutes the initiation of an investigation and what is an appropriate response to ensure that children are adequately protected.

Other stakeholders voiced the opinion that because the more highly trained workers are available during the day, the response time is not as effective after hours as it is during the day. These stakeholders suggested that it would be useful if the agency used cell phones and pagers to access the more highly trained workers when necessary.

Stakeholders provided several reasons why the agency may not meet the established timeframes for initiating an investigation of a child maltreatment report or making timely face-to-face contact. These were the following:

- Inclement weather resulting in transportation issues (particularly in more rural areas of the State).
- Staff vacancies that result in increased workloads for remaining workers.
- Lack of concrete standards regarding face-to-face contacts.

In one site, it was noted that when inclement weather makes it difficult for the agency to respond, the agency often will use individuals in the local villages to "assess the situation." However, it is not clear whether these individuals are adequately trained to make the necessary safety assessments in allegations of maltreatment.

Determination and Discussion: Item 1 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 30 percent of the cases, DFYS did not respond to a maltreatment report in a timely manner. Although none of these cases involved a priority 1 emergency report, there were 5 reports in which it was determined that the risk of harm was sufficient to require a response within 72 hours (priority 2). A key concern expressed by stakeholders pertained to the absence of clear policy guidelines regarding face-to-face contact. According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS has a recognized procedure for conducting workload adjustments on child protective services reports. This procedure allows some reports that meet the criteria for investigation to not be assigned for

investigation due to lack of staff. However, this does not appear to explain the lack of timely responses to reports that were assigned for an investigation.

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: The assessment of item 2 was applicable for all 50 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether there had been at least one substantiated or indicated maltreatment report during the period under review, and if so, whether another substantiated or indicated report occurred within 6 months. The results of the assessment were the following:

- Item 2 was rated as a Strength in 37 (74%) of the 50 applicable cases (20 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 2 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 13 (26%) of the 50 applicable cases (3 of which were foster care cases).

Item 2 was rated as a Strength in cases in which there was no repeat maltreatment. Eleven of these cases were foster care cases in which the child entered foster care prior to the period under review and remained in foster care during the entire period under review. Ten cases were in-home services cases that were opened prior to the period under review and did not have a substantiated or indicated report during the period under review.

The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when there was at least one substantiated/indicated maltreatment report during the period under review and this report occurred within 6 months of another substantiated/indicated child maltreatment report. Among the 29 cases in which there was at least one substantiated or indicated maltreatment report during the period under review, 13 (45%) had at least one other substantiated or indicated report within a 6-month period.

In the majority of cases reviewed, there were multiple maltreatment reports over the life of the case. Although not all reports were substantiated or indicated, 14 cases had between 5 and 10 reports over the life of the case, and 21 cases had more than 10 maltreatment reports over the life of the case. Of these 21 cases, there were 4 cases with more than 40 reports over the life of the case, with 2 of these cases having more than 60 reports.

Some stakeholders and reviewers suggested that the repeat maltreatment rate may be even higher than the officially reported rate, because not all incidents of repeat maltreatment are being investigated. For example, if a new report is filed on an open case, the investigation may be delayed for weeks or even months, and sometimes no investigation occurs. Another concern, noted by reviewers in one site, is that reports that meet the State's criteria for investigation are being screened out instead of investigated.

Several stakeholders suggested that the rate of maltreatment recurrence is high because of the large percentage of cases involving alcohol-related neglect. A stakeholder in one site suggested that parental alcohol abuse is viewed by the courts as a temporary situation and, therefore, the courts are unlikely to support a request by the agency to assume custody in these cases. Several stakeholders noted that there are not enough treatment resources to serve the number of parents with alcohol abuse problems, and often a parent who is willing to seek treatment may have to wait 2 or 3 months to receive it.

Determination and Discussion: Item 2 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following:

- According to the State Data Profile, the State’s incidence of repeat maltreatment for 2000 was 23.6 percent, which does not meet the national standard of 6.1 percent.
- In 26 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that there had been two substantiated/indicated child maltreatment reports within a 6-month period, with at least one report occurring during the period under review.

Similar to stakeholder interviews, the Statewide Assessment attributes the State’s high incidence of maltreatment recurrence to the lack of treatment services and follow-up support services for alcohol abuse, particularly in remote areas. Also similar to stakeholder interviews, information provided in the Statewide Assessment suggests that maltreatment most often involves neglect cases and Native Alaska children.

The Statewide Assessment also notes, however, that the incidence of maltreatment recurrence within 6 months reported in the State Data Profile may not reflect the actual incidence. According to the Statewide Assessment, additional disclosures of prior incidents of abuse or neglect are included in the recurrence rate. For example, if a child who is receiving services because of a report discloses a prior incident, that incident becomes a report that enters the system with the date received rather than the date of the actual maltreatment occurrence. This results in increased rates of recurrence within the 6-month period. The Statewide Assessment also notes that the State’s definition of an unconfirmed report is very different than the Federal definition of an indicated report, but that unconfirmed reports are assumed to be equivalent to indicated reports for the Federal calculations of repeat maltreatment. According to the Statewide Assessment, when substantiated reports are counted, the recurrence rate drops to 20.3 percent (which is still above the national standard), and the total number of children in the group decreases by over one-half.

Safety Outcome 2

Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:

	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	14	9	7	30	60.0
Partially Achieved:	6	2	5	13	26.0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	6	1	0	7	14.0
Not Applicable:	0	0	0	0	

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 2

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was substantially achieved in 60.0 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.

A general CFSR finding was that the agency is effective in reducing risk by removing children from their homes and providing services to families. However, the agency is not as effective in maintaining children safely in their own homes. The key concern identified by case reviewers was that the services offered to families were not adequate to ensure children's safety and reduce risk of harm, and often did not address underlying issues contributing to the maltreatment. Another concern identified was that although services were offered to families, there was insufficient monitoring on the part of the agency to assess whether services were actually provided, whether parents were fully participating in services, and/or whether children continued to be safe.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 2 are presented and discussed below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: There were 36 cases for which an assessment of item 3 was applicable. Fourteen cases were excluded from this assessment because the children were in foster care for the entire review period or because there were no substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports or identified risks of harm to the children in the home during the period under review. For this item, reviewers assessed whether, in responding to a substantiated or indicated maltreatment report or risk of harm, the agency made diligent efforts to provide services to families to prevent removal of children from their homes while at the same time ensuring their safety. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 3 was rated as a Strength in 25 (69%) of the 36 applicable cases (8 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 3 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 11 (31%) of the 36 applicable cases (2 of which were foster care cases).

Twenty-four cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that DFYS assessed the family's service needs appropriately and provided or referred the family for services to meet those needs to prevent an initial placement (22 cases) or a re-entry after reunification (2 cases). One case was rated a Strength because the children were appropriately removed from the home to ensure their safety. Reviewers noted that the services offered in these cases appropriately targeted underlying needs and that the cases reflected coordination and collaboration among service providers. The services offered to families in these cases included (but not limited to) parenting education (e.g., parenting skills and information on child development), stress management, grief work, substance abuse assessment and treatment, anger management classes, domestic violence counseling, food vouchers, counseling, independent living services, mental health counseling, respite care, and medication management.

Cases were rated as Area Needing Improvement for this indicator when reviewers made one or more of the following determinations:

- Services were provided to the family, but they were not adequate to maintain the child safely in the home because they did not address underlying issues that lead to the abuse/neglect (9 cases).
- Services recommended by professionals based on assessments were not provided (2 cases).
- No services were provided after the family was reunified (2 cases).
- The child was removed from the home but reviewers determined that provision of services could have prevented removal (1 case).

In general, stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that in many instances the agency is effective in providing services to maintain children safely in their own homes. Stakeholders also noted that when DFYS is able to engage a family in services, it is effective in preventing removal. Some stakeholders reported that the provision of services, particularly culturally relevant services, is greatly facilitated by the agency's partnerships with other agencies and with the Tribes. However, in one site, stakeholders noted that children are being removed because the high workloads prohibit caseworkers from conducting a comprehensive needs assessment and providing services necessary to keep children safely in their homes.

A few stakeholders voiced concern about the lack of post-reunification services. They suggested that in some cases children are being reunified without the parent's substance abuse problems being adequately treated, and that the agency is not providing follow up in these cases.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 31 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to provide services that ensured children's safety while preventing their placement in foster care. According to the Statewide Assessment, although State policy supports pre-placement services and the agency has access to a family preservation program, there are concerns about the accessibility of these services to all families. The Statewide Assessment also notes that participants of a Roundtable, convened as part of the State's self-assessment, reported a shortage of prevention-oriented programs and a need for immediate crisis intervention services.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 4 was applicable for all 50 cases reviewed. In making this assessment, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to reduce the risk of harm to the children involved in each case. The assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 4 was rated as a Strength in 34 (68%) of the 50 applicable cases (20 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 4 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 16 (32%) of the 50 applicable cases (3 of which were foster care cases).

This item was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The risk of harm to children was appropriately managed by removing the children from home (including placing them with a relative on a voluntary basis) and providing or offering services to parents (17 cases).
- The risk of harm to children was appropriately addressed by removing the children from the home and seeking termination of parental rights (TPR) (7 cases).
- The risk of harm to children was appropriately managed by providing services to families to address risk concerns while the children remain in the home (10 cases).

The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- There was insufficient monitoring of families to assess ongoing risk, including whether parents were engaging in services (5 in-home services cases)

- The services provided to parents and children were not matched to meet the needs of the family or were insufficient to reduce risk of harm to children, usually due to inadequate assessments (7 in-home services cases).
- Children were left in their homes when the level of risk was too high and they should have been removed because parents were not engaging in services (as evidenced by continued maltreatment reports) (2 cases).
- There was insufficient monitoring of children in foster care during home visits (1 case).
- The foster care placement with a relative was not adequately assessed, leaving the children at risk of harm in their foster care placement (1 case).

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that DFYS recently began using a new risk assessment tool (structured decision making). Although training has been provided on the use of this tool, some stakeholders suggested that workers may not be using it consistently as yet, because it requires a major shift in practice from the prior assessment process. However, these stakeholders also indicated that they anticipate that appropriate use of the tool will increase with greater experience. Some stakeholders suggested that although assessments are improving, there is a need for greater service resources and for these resources to be implemented in the initial phases of a case.

Several stakeholders expressed concern about the fact that there is some confusion regarding the roles and expectations of the different agencies and players working with the families. For example stakeholders noted the following opinions: (1) dual track agencies do not monitor families to ensure that they are following through with services (and do not appear to view this as their responsibility); (2) DFYS does not always "take back" referrals from the dual track agencies when it is appropriate for them to do so; (3) dual track providers do not identify the existing level of risk when making decisions to close cases (4) in one site, the local Tribal Organization is expected to implement the services, but DFYS does not always follow up to see if this is being done and there appears to be a lack of clarity about responsibilities; and (5) the communication between the investigative and ongoing workers is not always sufficient to ensure complete exchange of information.

Other stakeholders expressed concern that children are being left in their homes when they should be removed due to the level of risk in the home. These stakeholders suggested that some children are not being removed because (1) there is a shortage of foster homes, and/or (2) workers are unwilling to involve the courts because they perceive that the courts require a high level of evidence before sanctioning a removal.

As noted previously, stakeholders indicated that there are insufficient services provided after reunification to support the reunification by monitoring the level of risk and preventing repeat maltreatment.

Although no stakeholders commented on the risk of harm to children in foster care, the incidence of maltreatment while in foster care reported in the State Data Profile (1.91%) is higher than the national standard (.57%), suggesting that this area of risk may be a challenge for DFYS.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 32 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS was not effective in its efforts to reduce risk of harm to children. As noted in the Statewide Assessment and in the stakeholder interviews, the State has recently implemented a Structured Decision Making model of risk assessment and provides training to all workers on using this model.

The case reviews and stakeholder interviews suggest that DFYS is most effective in managing risk when it removes children from their homes, but is less successful in managing risk of harm to children when the children remain in their homes. The key problem identified is a lack of follow up with families, which may be attributed in part to a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of the various agency and non-agency workers involved with the family.

II. PERMANENCY

Permanency Outcome 1

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	1	3	1	5	21.7
Partially Achieved:	8	3	3	14	60.9
Not Achieved or Addressed:	4	0	0	4	17.4
Not Applicable:	13	6	8	27	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
	National Standard (percentage)	State's Percentage	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard	
Foster care re-entries	8.6	4.6	X		

Length of time to achieve reunification	76.2	53.8		X
Length of time to achieve adoption	32.0	21.8		X
Stability of foster care placements	86.2	70.6		X

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME 1

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following:

- 21.7 percent of the cases were rated as having substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 1, which is less than the 90 percent required for an overall rating of substantial conformity;
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children reunified who were reunified within 12 months of placement into foster care;
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing 2 or fewer placements during their first 12 months in foster care; and
- The State did not meet the national standard for the percentage of finalized adoptions within 24 months of a child’s entering foster care.

According to the State Data Profile, Alaska meets the national standard for the incidence of re-entries into foster care within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. This is consistent with the case review finding that re-entries into foster care occurred in only one of the seven cases applicable for an assessment of this indicator. For the most part, however, the CFSR revealed that achieving permanency and stability for children in foster care continues to be a significant challenge for DFYS. Concerns were noted with regard to placement stability, the establishment of appropriate permanency goals in a timely manner, and the achievement of permanency in a timely manner.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 1 are presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Seven of the 23 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of foster care re-entries because they involved children who entered foster care at some time during the period under review. In assessing this item, reviewers determined whether the entry into foster care during the period under review had occurred within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 5 was rated as a Strength in 6 (86%) of the 7 applicable cases.
- Item 5 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 1 (14%) of the 7 applicable cases.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when there was one entry into foster care during the period under review, but the entry was not within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. The one case rated an Area Needing Improvement involved an entry into foster care that was a re-entry within 12 months of discharge.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Strength for the following reasons:

- Reviewers noted that re-entry into foster care did not occur in 86 percent of the applicable cases.
- The State Data Profile indicates that the re-entry rate for Alaska is 4.6 percent, which meets the national standard of 8.6 percent.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 23 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of Item 6. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the child experienced multiple placement settings during the period under review and, if so, whether the changes in placement settings were necessary to achieve the child's permanency goal or meet the child's service needs. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 6 was rated as a Strength in 14 (61%) of the 23 applicable cases.
- Item 6 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 9 (39%) of the 23 applicable cases.

Additional findings of the case reviews were the following:

- Children in 15 cases experienced no more than 2 placement settings during the period under review.
- Children in 5 cases experienced between 3 and 4 placement settings during the period under review.
- Children in 3 cases experienced 5 or more placement settings during the period under review (one child experienced 11 placement settings).

- Children in 13 cases experienced multiple placements prior to the period under review, with 6 children experiencing more than 10 placement settings prior to the period under review.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that a child experienced placement stability during the period under review or that changes in placement were in the child's best interest.

A rating of Area Needing Improvement for this item was assigned for the following reasons:

- Foster parents requested the removal of the children and reviewers determined that the agency had not made efforts to support foster parents in maintaining the placement (2 cases).
- Reviewers determined that the agency made an inappropriate match or placed a child in a foster placement that did not meet the child's needs (i.e., placed children in emergency foster homes or shelters as their initial placements, rather than attempting to find relatives or more stable foster homes at the time of removal) (4 cases).
- Reviewers determined that the current placement was unstable (one due to constant runaway episodes, one due to the foster mother being ill, and one due to the foster mother's application for adoption being rejected because of her age and health) (3 cases).

Stakeholders in one site noted that placements are stable in that site because the agency supports the foster families (who are mostly relative caregivers) with services and does not use shelter care or emergency placements on a routine basis. In contrast, stakeholders in another site noted that there is routine use of emergency foster homes at that site and, although children are supposed to stay in those homes for 1 -10 days, they often stay for longer periods of time. Stakeholders in the third site reported that children in that site experience placement instability because of the high turnover in foster parents, which was attributed to DFYS's insufficient efforts to provide the services and supports necessary to retain foster parents.

All stakeholders commenting on placement stability were in general agreement that when placement changes do occur, they are usually the result of a lack of proper matching of children and foster parents based on child's needs and foster parents' training and skills. However, stakeholders also acknowledged that effective matching often is difficult given the scarcity of available foster home placements.

In one site reviewers noted that each time a foster child came into a HUB community for medical care and stayed in overnight foster care due to flight schedules, the State information system (PROBER) counted the placement as a move. Including these placements inflates the number of moves as reported in PROBER.

Determination and Discussion: Item 6 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following findings:

- In 39 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the children had not experienced stability in their placement settings during the period under review.
- The State Data Profile indicates that of all children in foster care for 12 months or less, 70.6 percent experienced no more than 2 placement settings, which does not meet the national standard of 86.2 percent.

Information provided in the Statewide Assessment is consistent with the case review findings and the stakeholder comments. According to the Statewide Assessment, placement instability may be attributed to a lack of foster homes, which restricts the ability of workers to match the needs of children to the skills and training of the foster parents; poor matching is the primary cause of placement disruptions. The Statewide Assessment also notes that 21.5 percent of children in foster care had 6 or more placements, and 49.2 percent of those children had at least one residential placement, suggesting children with multiple placements may have significant behavioral and emotional issues.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 23 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 7. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had established an appropriate permanency goal for the child in a timely manner. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 7 was rated Strength in 14 (61%) of the 23 applicable cases.
- Item 7 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 9 (39%) of the 23 applicable cases.

The case review found that the children in the 23 foster care cases had the following permanency goals:

- 6 had a goal of guardianship.
- 7 had a goal of reunification.
- 10 had a goal of adoption, with 2 of these cases having concurrent goals of adoption and reunification.
- 2 had a goal of emancipation.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the goal was appropriate and had been established in a timely manner. Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the current goal was inappropriate and unrealistic (4 cases), and that workers seemed to ignore concerns and signs that the goal was not likely to be achieved. Cases also were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that a plan for reunification had remained in effect for too long (2 cases), or that there had been multiple goal changes over the years, with no real focus on any particular goal or plan and attainment of permanency unlikely to occur in the near future (3 cases).

There were 13 cases in which children had been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. TPR had been filed in 8 of those cases and achieved in 6 cases. For the five cases in which TPR had not been filed, compelling reasons for not filing were identified in three cases, but in two cases, no compelling reasons were found in the file. Although there were cases in which concurrent goals had been established, reviewers in two sites expressed the opinion that workers were not working toward both goals, but rather waiting to see what happened with one goal before working on the other.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue had differing perspectives on DFYS's effectiveness in establishing appropriate permanency goals in a timely manner. Stakeholders in two sites suggested that the permanency goals are appropriate in that they match the needs of the children. However, in one of these sites, stakeholders noted that there often are delays in establishing these goals because of the relationship between DFYS and the Tribes. Some Tribal stakeholders suggested that the Tribes are not comfortable with the timeframes established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). In addition, some stakeholders indicated they preferred to have the child in a non-permanent placement rather than have the child in a permanent placement with a family that is not related to the child. Several stakeholders indicated that foster parents should have more input into the permanency planning efforts.

There was general agreement among stakeholders that concurrent goals are being established. In one site, stakeholders noted that reunification is always the first plan, and concurrent planning does not begin until after adjudication. A few stakeholders suggested that there are delays in filing for TPR because of a lack of services for parents, including long waiting lists to obtain services. As a result, in some cases the State agency is not ready to file for TPR at 15 months because they cannot establish that reasonable efforts were made to reunify the children with their parents.

Determination and Discussion: Item 7 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 39 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had not established an appropriate goal for the child in a timely manner. According to the Statewide Assessment, establishing permanency goals is difficult for children with behavioral and/or mental health problems and children who are age 15 and older. Both case reviews and stakeholder interviews indicate that while concurrent goals are being established for children, concurrent planning is not consistently implemented.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship, or Permanent Placement With Relatives

____ Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Item 8 was applicable for 13 cases. In assessing these cases, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had achieved the goals of reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives for the children in a timely manner or, if the goal had not been achieved in a timely manner, whether the agency had made, or was in the process of making, diligent efforts to achieve the goals. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 8 was rated as a Strength for 4 (31%) of the 13 applicable cases.
- Item 8 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement for 9 (69%) of the 13 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the agency was making or had made concerted efforts to achieve the goal of reunification or guardianship. Reviewers reported that the permanency goal was achieved for 4 of the 13 applicable cases (2 guardianship and 2 reunification). In one case in which guardianship was the goal, the goal was achieved within 12 months.

This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not made diligent efforts to achieve the goal of either reunification or guardianship within 12 months (3 cases), or that the efforts made were insufficient to achieve the goal given the circumstances of the case (6 cases).

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that the agency is effective in working with parents toward achieving reunification but that reunification is not always achieved because of a lack of improvement in the parents' capacity to care for their children. Other stakeholders, however, indicated that there are agency-related barriers to reunification such as lack of clear goals in the case plans, failure to provide services to families in a timely manner, and lack of agency follow-up on service provision. This is consistent with stakeholder comments regarding long waiting lists for both in-patient and out-patient substance abuse treatment services. In one site, the presence of a "Balloon" worker was noted to have been extremely helpful in moving children to permanency. Workers from the State's "Balloon" permanency project are dedicated workers assigned to cases involving children who have been in foster care for long periods of time to move children towards permanency.

Most stakeholders praised Alaska’s subsidized guardianship program (which is offered to licensed foster parents as well as relatives), noting that it is a good option for children and is used on a frequent basis. However, a few stakeholders suggested that caseworkers are not using this option to its full potential and sometimes do not do the home studies or do not offer the families subsidies for guardianship.

Finally, a few stakeholders suggested that while the agency may take longer to return children to their homes, once reunification occurs it is generally successful, with children remaining safely at home.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following:

- Reviewers determined that in 69 percent of the applicable cases the agency had not made diligent efforts to achieve the goals of reunification or guardianship in a timely manner.
- Data from the State Data Profile indicate that the percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care (58.3%) does not meet the national standard of 76.2 percent.

Information from the Statewide Assessment suggests that the timeliness of reunifications is affected by (1) the lack of access and availability of services in the parents’ home community; (2) the general scarcity of alcohol treatment and in-home follow-up services, resulting in long waiting lists for services; and (3) the fact that children and parents have multiple problems that must be addressed before children can be safely reunified. The Statewide Assessment also notes that the data reported in the State Data Profile do not include children who are returned to their families on a trial basis without discharge from State custody. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, if these children are considered, the percentages of children reunified within 12 months of removal increases from 58.3 percent to 68 percent (which is still below the national standard).

Item 9. Adoption

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: 10 of the foster care cases were assessed for item 9. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether appropriate and timely efforts had been, or were being, undertaken, to achieve finalized adoptions. The results were the following:

- Item 9 was rated as a Strength in 3 (30%) of the 10 applicable cases.
- Item 9 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (70%) of the 10 applicable cases.

At the time of the review, adoption had been finalized in 2 of the 10 cases, but in both cases, the finalization did not occur within 24 months of the child's removal from the home. Also at the time of the review, four children with a goal of adoption were in an adoptive placement, three of them with foster parents and one with a relative.

This item was assigned a rating of Strength in three cases in which reviewers determined that diligent efforts were being, or had been, made to achieve a finalized adoption in a timely manner. In one case, adoption was the concurrent goal and reunification had not been completely ruled out. Reviewers noted that the caseworker had identified two potential adoptive placements and was working toward that goal while engaging in reunification efforts.

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that there were, or had been, unnecessary delays in attaining a finalized adoption. In all seven of these cases, reviewers determined that the delays were due to agency-related issues, such as lack of timely decisions and lack of follow up with the child and family. In one case, the reviewer noted that a parent's appeal on TPR was holding up the process, but that there had been a history of a lack of timely decisions and actions prior to filing for TPR.

Across sites, stakeholders commenting on this issue provided the following reasons for delays in achieving the goal of adoption:

- Filing for TPR very late in the case.
- Delays in the decision process regarding changing the goals to adoption.
- Court delays.
- Delays in addressing children's medical needs.
- Delays in searching for relatives as placement resources.
- Delays in conducting home studies (one stakeholder noted that families often have to wait for more than a year for a home study to be conducted).
- Difficulties finding families for children who have been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Exposure (FAE).
- Lack of a sufficient number of adoption specialists to assist workers.

In one site, stakeholders attributed delays in large part to the fact that the courts in that site are reluctant to grant TPR and require an exceedingly high degree of evidence and extended periods of time attempting reunification.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following:

- In 70 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to achieve adoptions in a timely manner; and

- The State Data Profile demonstrates that the percentage of finalized adoptions in FY 2000 that occurred within 24 months of removal from home (21.8%) did not meet the national standard (32%).

According to the Statewide Assessment the percentage of children exiting to adoption within 24 months increased dramatically from 1998 (9.8 percent) to 2000 (21.8 percent). In September 2001, a Simple New Adoption Process pilot project was launched that is expected to reduce by half the length of time it takes to achieve adoption. This project was developed in response to information from focus group participants indicating that the adoption process is time-consuming and cumbersome and needs to be streamlined. The Statewide Assessment also notes that the State also has implemented the Home Study Project designed to expedite home studies and Project Succeed, which helps search for families for specific children.

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Two of the foster care cases were assessed for item 10. In assessing these cases, reviewers were to determine if the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to assist children in attaining their goals related to other planned permanent living arrangements. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 8 was rated as a Strength in 1 (50%) of the 2 applicable cases.
- Item 8 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 1 (50%) of the 2 applicable cases.

The case rated as a Strength for this item received that rating because independent living services were made available to the child after she turned 17. In the case assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement for this item, reviewers noted that the child did not receive independent living services because of lack of funds for those services. Reviewers also noted that after the child was emancipated, she still needed services, but they were not available.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in one of the two applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not provided the child with the services needed to support successful transition from foster care to independent living.

Permanency Outcome 2

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	7	5	3	15	65.2
Partially Achieved:	6	1	1	8	34.8
Not Achieved or Addressed:	0	0	0	0	0
Not Applicable:	13	6	8	27	

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME 2

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that this outcome was substantially achieved in 65.2 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.

The CFSR revealed that DFYS is effective in placing children in close proximity to their parents or close relatives and in ensuring that siblings are placed together, whenever appropriate. However, DFYS was found to be inconsistent with respect to facilitating and supporting visits between children and their parents and siblings, preserving children’s connections, seeking relatives as potential placement resources, and promoting or maintaining the parent-child bond.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 2 are presented and discussed below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Of the 23 foster care cases, 21 were applicable for an assessment of item 11. Cases determined to be not applicable were those in which TPR had been attained prior to the period under review or in which contact with parents was not considered to be in the child's best interest. In assessing item 11, reviewers were to determine whether the child's foster care setting was in close proximity to the child's parents or close relatives. This assessment resulted in the finding that item 11 was rated as a Strength in all 21 (100%) applicable cases.

In the 21 cases rated as a Strength, children either were placed in the same community as parents or relatives (16 cases), or placement in a different community or State was necessary to meet the child's treatment needs (4 cases) or to place the child with siblings (1 case).

Stakeholders commenting on this issue were in general agreement that DFYS makes diligent efforts to place children near their families of origin and noted that the use of relative placements furthers this effort. Stakeholders in one site expressed the opinion that DFYS's efforts to engage the Tribes in making placement decisions have resulted in children being placed in their villages. However, stakeholders in this site also noted that placement proximity is more difficult to achieve for adolescents because of a lack of placement resources for this population.

Determination and Discussion: Item 11 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because in 100 percent of applicable cases, children were placed in close proximity to parents or close relatives or placement in another community was justified based on the child's needs.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Twenty of the 23 foster care cases involved a child with siblings who were also in foster care. In assessing item 12, reviewers were to determine whether siblings were, or had been, placed together and, if not, whether separation was necessary to meet the needs (service or safety needs) of one or more of the children. This assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 12 was rated as a Strength in 18 (90%) of the 20 applicable cases.
- Item 12 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 2 (10%) of the 20 applicable cases.

In 12 of the 20 applicable cases, the child was in a placement with at least one other sibling, and in 6 of these cases, the child was in a placement with all siblings. This item was rated as a Strength when siblings were placed together or when reviewers determined that children’s separation from some or all siblings was in the best interest of the siblings, usually because the separation was necessary to meet the treatment needs of at least one of the siblings.

Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement for this item when siblings were separated and reviewers determined that there was no justifiable reason for the separation.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that placement with siblings is a strength for DFYS.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the finding that in 90 percent of the cases, siblings were either placed together or the separation was deemed necessary to meet the needs of one or more of the children.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 13 was applicable for 22 of the 23 foster care cases. In the one case rated as not applicable for this assessment, there had been a TPR, the parents were no longer involved in planning for the child, and the child resided with all siblings. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine (1) whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to

facilitate visitation between children in foster care and their parents and siblings in foster care, and (2) whether these visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of children and families. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 13 was rated as a Strength in 16 (73%) of the 22 applicable cases.
- Item 13 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 6 (27%) of the 22 applicable cases.

The case review process revealed that visits between children and their mothers typically occurred with the following frequencies:

- Visits occurred on a weekly basis in nine cases.
- Visits occurred twice a month in one case.
- Visits occurred monthly in four cases.
- Visits occurred less than monthly in five cases, with no visits occurring in two of these cases.
- Visitation with mother was not applicable in two cases.

In three of the cases in which the mother and child visited less than monthly, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to promote greater visitation.

Visits between children and fathers typically occurred with the following frequency:

- Visits occurred on a weekly basis in three cases.
- Visits occurred twice a month in one case.
- Visits occurred less than monthly in ten cases, with no visits occurring in nine of the cases.
- Visitation with father was considered to be not applicable in eight cases.

In three of the ten cases in which visitation with fathers was less than monthly, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to promote greater visitation.

Visits between siblings in foster care typically occurred with the following frequency:

- Visits occurred on a weekly basis in four cases.
- Visits occurred twice a month in two cases.
- Visits occurred once a month in one case.
- Visits occurred less than monthly in seven cases, with two cases involving no visits.

In five of the seven cases in which visitation with siblings occurred less frequently than once a month, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to promote more frequent visitation.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined (1) that frequency of visitation between the child and mother, father, and siblings, was of sufficient frequency to meet the needs of the child and family, or (2) that the frequency was not sufficient, but the agency had made diligent efforts to promote more frequent visitation. Reviewers noted that caseworkers frequently promoted visitation by engaging providers and foster parents to help with visitation, and by providing transportation (including air transportation) to support parent-child contact.

Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when it was determined that (1) visits with siblings were not of sufficient frequency to meet the child's needs (4 cases), (2) the agency had not made sufficient efforts to locate the father and promote visitation (1 case), or (3) the quality of the visitation with parents was not sufficient to promote the child's goal of reunification (1 case).

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed concern that although in most cases siblings are placed together, when siblings are separated in foster care, there is little visitation. In contrast, reviewers noted that in cases in which siblings were separated, the foster parents facilitated visitation. A few stakeholders suggested that visitation is problematic because of worker caseloads and that it is often left up to the foster parents to arrange.

Determination and Discussion: Item 13 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 27 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to promote children's visitation with parents and siblings in foster care. According to the Statewide Assessment, comments from a variety of sources indicated that DFYS has difficulty complying with the visitation plans that are developed in case plans. This may be attributed to a lack of "family-friendly" facilities and to worker caseloads that make it difficult for them to provide more than 1 hour of supervised visitation per week. The Statewide Assessment noted that Anchorage has a new visitation center.

Item 14. Preserving connections

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Item 14 was applicable for assessment in all 23 foster care cases. In assessing item 14, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to preserve the child's connections to family, neighborhood, community, traditions, family, faith, and friends while the child was in foster care. The assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 14 was rated as a Strength in 17 (74%) of the 23 applicable cases.
- Item 14 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 6 (26%) of the 23 applicable cases.

Reviewers indicated that in 16 of the 23 cases, children's primary connections had been “significantly” preserved while they were in foster care, and in 7 of the 23 cases, children’s primary connections had been “partially” preserved. One case in which a child's primary connections were rated as partially maintained was appropriately rated a strength on the overall item. In 16 cases, the child was an Alaska Native, and in 14 of these cases, reviewers noted that the Tribe had been notified of the placement in a timely manner. Seven of the 16 Native children were placed with extended family or a Tribal family.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that critical primary connections were “significantly” preserved. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item when reviewers determined that connections with extended family had been “partially” preserved while the child was in foster care, and/or the child’s connections with the traditions and customs of his Tribe had not been adequately maintained in the placement.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed different perceptions with regard to the agency’s efforts to work with the Tribes to ensure that children’s connections to their heritage are preserved. While stakeholders in one site expressed the opinion that the agency does an outstanding job in adhering to the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), stakeholders in another site suggested that Tribes are not receiving notification early enough, although they acknowledged that there have been improvements in this area.

Stakeholders were in agreement that relative placements contribute to preserving children’s ties to their heritage and communities. Some stakeholders noted, however, that for Native children it sometimes is difficult to find relative placements. Stakeholders in one site indicated that many non-Native foster parents encourage participation of their foster children in cultural activities, will prepare Native foods, and will attempt to link children to members of the Tribe for specific activities. It was noted that Tribes generally will support non-relative or non-Tribal placements when the foster parents maintain contacts with the Tribe. However, in another site, it was noted that some non-Native foster parents do not give sufficient attention to cultural issues to help the child maintain those ties.

Determination and Discussion: Item 14 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 26 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to maintain connections to family, community, culture, faith, and friends for children in foster care. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, this issue is of critical importance because approximately 50 percent of the children in care are Alaska Natives. (Of the cases reviewed, approximately 70 percent were Alaska Native.)

Item 15. Relative placement

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 23 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 15. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives (both maternal and paternal relatives) as potential placement resources for children in foster care. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 15 was rated as a Strength in 16 (70%) of the 23 applicable cases.
- Item 15 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (30%) of the 23 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children were already placed with relatives (7 cases) or that children were not placed with relatives, but the agency had made diligent efforts to seek relatives and assess them as placement resources (9 cases). In most of these latter cases, relatives had been considered but not accepted. Of the seven children placed with relatives, two were placed with a maternal aunt or uncle, three with a maternal grandparent, and two with a paternal grandparent.

This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The agency had not explored relatives as potential placement resources (3 cases).
- The agency had not searched for paternal relatives, even though the maternal relatives identified were not interested in taking the children (3 cases).
- The agency had conducted a limited exploration of potential relative placements, not going beyond immediate relatives (1 case).

Stakeholders commenting on this issue suggested that lack of sufficient relative searches for children needing placement is a general problem for the agency, particularly for Native children. As one stakeholder noted, if the agency does not search for relatives early on, then the children usually end up in a “non-preference” placement.

Stakeholders expressed differing opinions regarding the role of ICWA workers in searching for relatives. Although some stakeholders suggested that for Native children, ICWA workers should assist the agency in seeking relative placements, other stakeholders reported that sometimes ICWA workers believe that DFYS is asking them to be responsible for this effort when the agency should be conducting the search and assessing the relatives.

Determination and Discussion: Item 15 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 30 percent of the cases, DFYS had not made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources. A primary problem identified was that workers were not fully exploring paternal relatives as placement options. The Statewide Assessment notes that 30 percent of children in foster care are in placement with relatives. This is consistent with findings of the review that 7 of 23 children in foster care were placed with relatives.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 16 was applicable for 21 of the 23 foster care cases. A case was considered not applicable for an assessment of this item if parental rights had been terminated and parents were no longer involved with the child, or if a relationship with the parents was considered to be not in the child's best interests. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to support or maintain the bond between the child and both of his/her parents through visitation and provision of services that promote bonding. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 16 was rated as a Strength in 17 (81%) of the 21 applicable cases.
- Item 16 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 4 (19%) of the 21 applicable cases.

This item was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that (1) there was a strong bond between the parent and the child that DFYS supported through facilitating frequent visitation or, (2) there was not a strong bond between the parent and the child, but DFYS made concerted efforts to promote bonding through frequent visitation or services designed to strengthen the parent-child relationship. These services included parenting classes, therapy/counseling, and in-home services designed to enhance parenting skills.

In two of the cases rated as Area Needing Improvement for this item, reviewers determined that DFYS had not made diligent efforts to locate or engage the father. In one case, reviewers determined that insufficient efforts were made to promote a bond between parent and child. In another case, the reviewers rated the case as Area Needing Improvement because the agency had not promoted the relationship prior to TPR nor subsequent to TPR despite evidence that the parent and child desire to maintain this relationship.

Stakeholders in one site noted that workers in that site made concerted efforts to support the bond between parents and children in foster care by ensuring that they had frequent contact with one another and by involving parents in decision making and in activities

such as taking children to medical and dental appointments. Some stakeholders noted, however, that efforts to locate absent fathers are not being consistently implemented throughout the agency and when attempts are made to find fathers, it is more likely to be related to filing for TPR than to building or maintaining a relationship with the child.

Determination and Discussion: Item 16 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 19 percent of applicable cases, the agency had not made diligent efforts to support the parent-child relationships of children in foster care. Information from both case reviews and stakeholder interviews suggests that a key concern with regard to this issue is the inconsistency of agency efforts to locate absent fathers and to promote relationships between children and fathers.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Well-Being Outcome 1

Outcome WB1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	4	6	4	14	28.0
Partially Achieved:	13	4	5	22	44.0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	9	2	3	14	28.0
Not Applicable:	0	0	0		

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 1

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved for 28.0 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity.

A general CFSR finding was that DFYS is not effective in its efforts to ensure that families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs. In many cases, the service needs of children, parents, and foster parents were neither assessed nor addressed and DFYS did not consistently involve parents and children in the case planning process. However, the key concerns identified related to caseworker visits with children and parents. In over 70 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the frequency and

quality of visitation with both children and parents was not adequate to meet the needs of the child or promote attainment of case goals.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 17 was applicable for all 50 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had (1) adequately assessed the needs of children, parents, and foster parents; and (2) provided the services necessary to meet those needs. The results were the following:

- Item 17 was rated as a Strength in 26 (52%) of the 50 applicable cases (15 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 17 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 24 (48%) of the 50 applicable cases (8 of which were foster care cases).

Reviewers made the following determinations from the case records and case-related interviews:

- Children's needs were assessed in 39 of the 50 cases and services were provided in 37 cases.
- Mothers' needs were assessed in 35 of the 47 cases for which an assessment of mothers' needs was applicable. Services were provided to mothers in all 35 cases.
- Fathers' needs were assessed in 12 of the 24 cases for which an assessment of fathers' needs was considered applicable. Services were provided in 10 of those cases.
- Foster parents' needs were assessed in 12 of the 21 cases involving foster parents and services were provided in 16 cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when there were no unmet assessment or service needs for the children, parents, or foster parents.

A rating of Area Needing Improvement was assigned to cases in which reviewers made one or more of the following determinations:

- Father's assessment/service needs were not adequately addressed (6 cases).
- Mother's assessment/service needs were not adequately addressed (13 cases).
- Child's assessment/service needs were not adequately addressed (15 cases).
- Foster parent's assessment/service needs were not adequately addressed (9 cases).

- Services provided to children did not meet their needs (2 cases).
- No services were provided (1 case).

Both reviewers and stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed concerns about the quality and comprehensiveness of services in cases that were referred to the dual track agency. Reviewers and stakeholders also both noted that while the agency conducts many assessments at the onset of a case, assessments are not always conducted on an ongoing basis. Stakeholders suggested that this may be attributed to the high caseloads that workers carry that prohibit all but the most essential activities. In addition, in one site, stakeholders noted that foster parents often are not getting their needs met and feel that they are not being heard by the agency.

Some stakeholders in one site suggested that workers are not always aware of the services that are available to families, and consequently the families do not receive those services. Stakeholders in another site suggested that service provision is limited by the poor quality of the case plans. As one stakeholder noted, “case plans for seriously abused children look like case plans for neglect.” There is no effort to identify and then address underlying family issues.

Determination and Discussion: Item 17 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 48 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not been effective in addressing the needs and services of children, parents, and/or foster parents. A specific problem identified from the case review process was inadequate assessments that resulted in a failure to capture and address underlying problems for both children and parents. Another concern was that foster parents are in need of services that they are not receiving. According to the Statewide Assessment, workers are required to develop case plans that assess families' priority needs and protective capacities. The Statewide Assessment also noted that participants of a Roundtable held during the State's self-assessment process indicated a need for more focus on the child, including medical, special needs, and assessment of counseling needs.

Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 18 was applicable for all 50 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether parents (including pre-adoptive parents or permanent caregivers) and children (if age-appropriate) had been involved in the case planning process, and if not, whether their involvement was contrary to the child's best interest. A determination of involvement

in case planning required that a parent (or child) had actively participated in identifying the services and goals included in the case plan. This assessment produced the following findings:

- Item 18 was rated as a Strength in 24 (48%) of the 50 cases (13 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 18 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 26 (52%) of the 50 cases (10 of which were foster care cases).

In assessing this item, reviewers made the following determinations:

- Mothers were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 31 cases. In 16 cases, the mother was not involved but should have been. There was one case in which the mother was not available to participate, and two cases in which the mother's participation was considered to be contrary to the child's best interest.
- Fathers were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 11 cases. In 18 cases the father was not involved but should have been. There were 16 cases in which the father was not available to participate, and 5 cases in which the father's participation was considered to be contrary to the child's best interest.
- Children were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 16 cases. In 16 cases, children were not involved although reviewers determined that they were old enough to have been involved. There were 18 cases in which reviewers determined that the children were not old enough to participate in the case planning process.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that all relevant parties had actively participated in the case planning process. The item was rated an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that one or more of the key parties had not been involved in the case planning process. Although fathers were most likely not to be involved in the case planning process, there were many cases in which mothers and children were not involved.

A Tribal stakeholder commented that there was no consultation with Tribes on case plan development. This stakeholder said that the Tribes and parents are told to sign the plans that are developed by DFYS and parents are considered non-compliant if they refuse. Some other Tribes commented that increased involvement, often earlier, was desirable.

Determination and Discussion: Item 18 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 52 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS had not appropriately involved parents or children in the case planning process. According to the Statewide Assessment, Roundtable participants reported that there had been a significant increase in parent participation in case planning recently, and noted that the time spent connecting with parents resulted in more successful engagement of the parents. However, social workers surveyed as part of the State's self-assessment process indicated that the initial case plan usually is not developed with parent involvement and that it is more common for workers to develop the initial case plan and

present it to family members. Lack of involvement in case planning was attributed in the Statewide Assessment to workload issues and difficulties engaging some parents.

Item 19. Worker visits with child

____ Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 50 cases were applicable for an assessment of item 19. In conducting this assessment, reviewers were to determine whether the frequency of visits between the caseworkers and the children were sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being and whether visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. The results of the assessment were the following:

- Item 19 was rated as a Strength in 14 (28%) of the 50 applicable cases (10 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 19 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 36 (72%) of the 50 applicable cases (13 of which were foster care cases).

Reviewers noted the following with respect to frequency and quality of visits for the 23 foster care cases:

- In 1 case, visits typically occurred once a week.
- In 1 case, visits typically occurred twice a month.
- In 8 cases, visits typically occurred once a month.
- In 13 cases, visits typically occurred less frequently than once a month.
- In 19 cases, reviewers determined that visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment.

Reviewers noted the following with respect to frequency of visits for the 27 in-home cases:

- In 2 cases, visits typically occurred once a week.
- In 1 case, visits typically occurred twice a month.
- In 3 cases, visits typically occurred once a month.
- In 21 cases, visits occurred less frequently than once a monthly.
- In 11 cases, reviewers determined that visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and children were sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that visits were not conducted with sufficient frequency.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that due to high caseloads, caseworker turnover, and weather and transportation problems most, caseworkers do not have a sufficient level of face-to-face contact with the children in their cases. A few stakeholders suggested, however, that some workers are visiting foster care children and their foster parents on a fairly frequent basis.

Determination and Discussion: Item 19 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 72 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with children were not of sufficient frequency to ensure their safety and well being. The State assessment noted that in 2002 the agency upgraded its worker-child contact requirements to require substantive individual face-to-face monthly communication. The new policy also requires the worker to contact the substitute care provider monthly. Previously, the contact standard for worker-child contact was based on risk, distance, and worker service level. The Statewide Assessment and the onsite review indicate, that workers experience difficulty visiting children in the homes in which they reside and meeting the contact standards for children in foster care, usually due to distance and high caseloads.

Item 20. Worker visits with parents

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 20 was applicable for 46 of the 50 applicable cases. Cases that were considered not applicable for an assessment of this item were those in which (1) parental rights had been terminated and the parents were no longer involved in planning for the child; or (2) the parents could not be located despite diligent efforts by the agency. Reviewers were to assess whether the caseworker had sufficient face-to-face contact with the children's mothers and fathers to promote attainment of the child's permanency goal or to ensure the child's safety and well being. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 20 was rated as a Strength in 13 (28%) of the 46 applicable cases (9 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 20 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 33 (72%) of the 46 applicable cases (10 of which were foster care cases).

In assessing item 20, case reviewers made the following determinations regarding workers visits with mothers:

- In 2 cases, mothers were visited weekly.
- In 3 cases, mothers were visited twice a month.
- In 8 cases, mothers were visited monthly.
- In 31 cases, mothers were visited less frequently than once a month, with one case involving no visits with mother.
- In 6 cases, visitation with mother was considered not applicable.
- For 30 of the 44 applicable cases, visits with mothers dealt with issues pertaining to attainment of the child's goal.

Reviewers made the following determinations regarding workers' visits with fathers:

- In 1 case, the father was visited weekly.
- In 2 cases, the fathers were visited monthly.
- In 29 cases, fathers were visited less frequently than once a month, with 8 cases involving no visits with father.
- In 18 cases, worker visits with fathers were not applicable
- In 19 of 32 applicable cases, visits with fathers dealt with issues pertaining to attainment of the child's goal.

This item was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of parents and children and that visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that visits were not sufficiently frequent to meet the needs of parents and children.

Determination and Discussion. This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 72 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with parents were not of sufficient frequency or quality to promote the safety and well-being of the child or enhance attainment of permanency. This was particularly challenging for in-home cases. In 23 of 27 in-home cases, reviewers rated this item as an Area Needing Improvement. According to the Statewide Assessment, in January of 2002 the State contact standard between parents and social worker was established at one time per month in the parent's home.

Well-Being Outcome 2

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	18	7	6	31	79.5
Partially Achieved:	0	1	2	3	7.7
Not Achieved or Addressed:	3	1	1	5	12.8
Not Applicable:	5	3	3	11	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 2

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2 based on the finding that 79.5 percent of the cases reviewed were found to have substantially achieved this outcome. This is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity. The findings for the item assessed for Well Being Outcome 2 are presented below.

Item 21. Educational needs of the child

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 21 was applicable for 39 of the 50 cases reviewed. Cases that were not applicable for assessment were foster care cases in which the children were too young to be enrolled in school or preschool, or in-home services cases in which the children did not have needs pertaining to education-related issues and the caseworker did not take any actions in that arena. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether children's educational needs were appropriately assessed and whether services were provided to meet those needs. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 21 was rated as a Strength in 31 (79%) of the 39 applicable cases (21 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 21 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 8 (21%) of the 39 applicable cases (2 of which were foster care cases).

Ten in-home services cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the caseworkers actively participated in efforts to assess children's educational needs and ensure that services were provided. In-home services cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item when reviewers determined that children in the family had education-related needs that should have been addressed by the caseworker, but were not.

Twenty-one foster care cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item because reviewers determined that either the DFYS caseworker or the foster parents took responsibility for ensuring that the children's education-related needs were met and educational records were documented in the case files. Foster care cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that educational needs were not fully assessed or addressed.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that when children are in foster care, the agency usually expects the foster parents to address any educational needs or issues and advocate for the children with the school system. Some stakeholders expressed the opinion that foster parents receive adequate information from the agency about the children's educational status, but others reported that many foster parents do not receive this information at the time of placement. Stakeholders in one site voiced concern that

caseworkers and foster parents do not understand the education system well enough to advocate for the children and that more training is needed in this area.

Determination and Discussion: Item 21 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 21 percent of the cases, the educational needs of children were not effectively and appropriately addressed. The key problem identified pertained to in-home services cases in which children had education-related issues to which the agency was not responding. Although the Statewide Assessment noted that maintaining children in their “home” school is challenging given the number of moves in foster care and transportation difficulties, this was a problem for only four of the foster care children in the 23 foster care cases reviewed.

Well-Being Outcome 3

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Anchorage	Mat-Su	Nome	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	18	7	5	30	65.2
Partially Achieved:	4	0	1	5	10.9
Not Achieved or Addressed:	4	3	4	11	23.9
Not Applicable:	0	2	2	4	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUCOME 3

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 65.2 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity.

The key problems identified with respect to physical health services were inconsistencies with regard to (1) providing health screenings for children at entry into foster care, and (2) providing foster parents with children's health records. The concerns identified with regard to mental health services pertained to inconsistencies with regard to assessing children's mental health needs and providing the necessary mental health services.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 3 are presented and discussed below.

Item 22. Physical health of the child

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 22 was applicable for 30 of the 50 cases reviewed. Cases that were not applicable for this assessment were in-home services cases for which no physical health issues were identified. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) children's physical health needs had been appropriately assessed, and (2) the services designed to meet those needs had been, or were being, provided. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 22 was rated as a Strength in 23 (77%) of the 30 applicable cases (19 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 22 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (23%) of the 30 applicable cases (4 of which were foster care cases).

Additional findings in the assessment of foster care cases for this item were the following:

- In 6 cases, the children did not receive a health screening at entry into foster care.
- In 2 cases, children had health needs that were not addressed.
- In 2 cases, children did not receive preventive health services (i.e., did not receive regular physical examinations).
- In 2 cases, children did not have regular dental check ups.
- In 7 cases, foster parents were not given health records at the time of placement.

Additional findings in the assessment of in-home services cases for this item were the following:

- In 3 cases, children had medical needs that were not addressed by the caseworkers.
- In 1 case, the child was not receiving needed dental services and the caseworker did not make efforts to ensure that this service was received.

In general, cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the children's health needs were assessed and services provided as needed, including regular preventive services. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that children's health needs (including dental health and a need for eye glasses) were not adequately addressed (7 cases).

Stakeholders commenting on this issue in one site noted that some of the remote villages have health aides that assist children and families in those communities and are in contact with doctors on a daily basis. Other stakeholders commenting on this issue reported that foster parents do not always receive health information on a child at the time of placement, and do not view themselves as responsible for arranging for the children's health screening at the time of placement.

Determination and Discussion: Item 22 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 23 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS was not adequately addressing the health needs of children in foster care and in-home services cases. A key problem identified was that children's health needs were not being appropriately assessed particularly at entry into foster care. According to the Statewide Assessment, State policy requires the care provider to arrange for a routine physical exam of a child within 30 days if the child is under three years of age and has not had an exam within the last 3 months, or if the child is over 3 and has not had an exam within one year. Alaska Native Health Services is a resource for medical and dental care for Alaska Native children; in rural areas community health aides are used to assist with medical care. Many communities have medical providers that accept Medicaid but few dentists are willing to accept Medicaid. The Statewide Assessment also noted that the State child welfare division has provided for medical and dental services when needed. Anchorage has a health passport program operating in three work units to track the medical care of children less than seven years of age and children with special health care needs. Eligible children's health needs are screened and tracked by a public health nurse co-located in the Anchorage office.

Item 23. Mental health of the child

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 23 was applicable for 41 of the 50 cases reviewed. Cases that were not applicable were foster care cases in which the child was too young for an assessment of mental health needs, and in-home services cases in which the children's mental health needs were not an issue. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) mental health needs had been appropriately assessed and, (2) appropriate services to address those needs had been offered or provided. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 23 was rated as a Strength in 27 (66%) of the 41 applicable cases (15 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 23 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 14 (34%) of the 41 applicable cases (5 of which were foster care cases).

For the 41 applicable cases, reviewers noted that children's mental health needs were "significantly assessed" in 26 cases, "partially assessed" in 9 cases, and "not at all assessed" in 6 cases. Reviewers also reported that mental health needs were "significantly met" in 24 cases, "partially met" in 9 cases, "not at all" met in 7 cases and one case was "not applicable" because it was assessed and no needs were identified.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength if mental health needs were "significantly" assessed and the children's mental health needs were "significantly" met. Some cases were also assigned a rating of Strength if mental health needs were partially assessed but significantly met. The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that assessments and services were provided "partially" or "not at all".

Stakeholder's comments on this issue primarily addressed the lack of mental health services across the State. Stakeholders also expressed concern regarding the lack of services for children who are diagnosed as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Exposure (FAE). Although there is a newly trained FAS team, it was noted that this team can serve only 12 children a year.

Determination and Discussion: Item 23 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 34 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DFYS was not meeting children's mental health needs. According to the Statewide Assessment, there is a general lack of mental health services, particularly culturally relevant mental health services. In addition, rural and remote areas receive mental health services on an itinerant basis and services are not always available during a time of crisis. Roundtable participants noted a need for more child psychiatrists and clinicians with knowledge of child development. However, the Statewide Assessment noted that there are mental health services for seriously emotionally disturbed children.

2. SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3X	4
Rating	1	2	3X	4

STATUS OF STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the factor of Statewide Information System. Findings with respect to the item assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 24. State is operating a Statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

This item was rated a Strength because information on the status, demographic characteristics, location and goals for each child in foster care is retrievable from the State's data system.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS' information system—called PROBER—can identify the demographic characteristics, legal status, placement, and permanency goals for children in foster care. The system was first developed in 1976 and efforts in the late 1990s to replace it with a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) failed when the development contractor was unable to fulfill the obligation. Alaska is in the process of hiring a new firm to develop and implement a SACWIS system called ORCA (Online Resources for Children in Alaska) by September 2004.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State believes that the data system does not meet its needs for a case management system and does not collect much of the data needed for the Federal data reporting requirements for the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) or the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

The Statewide Assessment identified the following strengths of the PROBER data system.

- Data are available in all offices.
- Information on reports of harm as well as placement and custody history on children placed in out-of-home care are collected and are accessible.
- Reports can be generated for local and central offices.

The problems identified were:

- It is difficult to combine data and generate reports.
- It is necessary to use other data systems such as the Provider Payment System and the Adoption DataBase to fill in information gaps.
- There are problems with the quality of the data.
- PROBER relies on replicated data base technology.

The Statewide Assessment notes that Roundtable participants complimented DFYS on fully utilizing PROBER despite its limitations. However, Roundtable participants also voiced concerns about the difficulties of entering data into the system and the fact that the ability to modify PROBER to meet changing needs is extremely limited.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed views consistent with information reported in the Statewide Assessment. Stakeholders noted that almost all workers have desktop access to the system, find the system's e-mail helpful, and use the system to find information on families. Stakeholders indicated that information on demographics, status, location, and goals are available in the information system. Some Stakeholders noted that they use some of the management reports generated by the system, but others indicated that they do not have confidence in the information included in these reports. The primary concern regarding the information in the system pertains to how up-to-date it is rather than its quality. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that there are delays in entering the data and that this may be due to the cumbersome data entry process. Stakeholders also noted that that one of the non-PROBER data systems is needed to obtain the location of children placed in unlicensed homes. Stakeholders expressed a need for a tracking system for reviews and hearings.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
		1	2X	3

STATUS OF CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Case Review System. Findings with regard to specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 25. Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child’s parent(s) that includes the required provisions.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 25 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because of the lack of clear goal-oriented case plans and the lack of a system to consistently and actively involve parents and children in case planning.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS policy requires that all casework activities be planned in conjunction with families, and that case plans should be discussed at each client visit with regard to the progress being made. Case planning is intended to include parents, care providers, Guardians Ad Litem, the child (if age appropriate), and a representative from the child’s Tribe for all Native children. Initial case planning is to begin within 1 week of removal of the child from the home and must be completed no later than 60 days after removal of the child from the home. The Statewide Assessment also reports that the plan must be structured to parallel Federal requirements and State initiatives in areas of safety, permanency, child and family well-being, and cultural continuity.

The following comments and concerns regarding case plan development and parent involvement were noted in the Statewide Assessment:

- Roundtable participants reported a significant increase in parent participation in case planning.
- Survey respondents noted that case plans often are written by and for social workers and service providers and not for parents and are developed or changed without much input from outside of the agency.
- Some case plans are developed with parents over the telephone due to high caseloads.
- Activities that support cultural continuity are not always addressed in case plans.
- Tribes need to be involved earlier in the case planning process.
- Lack of primary language and/or use of jargon can contribute to lack of understanding of case plans.
- Parental involvement is difficult when parents are in denial.
- Initial case plans frequently do not have parent involvement but are developed by the social workers and presented to the family.

The Statewide Assessment identified the following challenges to involving parents in case planning process:

- High caseloads.
- The fact that the parents' attorneys sometimes encourage resistance to involvement in case planning.
- The fact that the parents have limited abilities or disagree with agency involvement.

The Statewide Assessment also identified the following efforts to improve the case planning process:

- Development of a Parent Handbook that outlines the Child in Need of Aid process.
- The Administrative Review process.
- The implementation of Structured Decision Making (SDM) April, 2002.
- The provision of case planning training to all workers in the initial training.

In two sites, stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that parents and children are not being appropriately involved in case planning. Stakeholders in these sites noted that the general message is that parents are to be involved but that there is no system in place that ensures consistent involvement of parents or children in this process. In contrast, stakeholders in one site reported that in that site, case plans are developed in a timely manner and often involve not only parents but also all relevant service providers in a team approach. However, it was noted that at this site incarcerated parents usually are omitted completely from case plan development.

Stakeholders also noted other issues relevant to the case planning process, including the following:

- A lack of clarity in the expectations and format for developing case plans for in-home services cases.
- Some case plans in dual track cases are not goal oriented and do not include time limits and the responsibilities of providers.
- A lack of specificity in case plans involving children placed in foster care.

Case review information indicates that the agency was not effective in involving parents or children in the case planning process in 52 percent of the cases.

Item 26. Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

This item was rated a Strength because periodic reviews are held in a timely manner and the quality of these reviews is reported to be excellent.

According to the Statewide Assessment, administrative reviews are held every 6 months in accordance with Federal regulations. In addition to the administrative reviews, during the first year a child is in foster care, DFYS holds a case conference at 3 months and a permanency conference at 9 months. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, the State believes that these efforts are effective in reviewing every child in care in a timely manner. Administrative reviews are conducted by DFYS and may include parents, GALs, Tribal representatives and other community providers. DFYS employees facilitate the administrative reviews unless the child is Native American. When the child is Native American, the review is facilitate by the ICWA Specialist in the region

Roundtable participants noted that invited participants do not always receive notice of the reviews in a timely manner. Also, the current data system (PROBER) is not able to track and schedule reviews.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue were in agreement that there are reviews of the status of each child in foster care at least once every 6 months. Some stakeholders reported that the agency is in the process of developing a form for reviewers to track information that can be used to help identify practice concerns or areas needing improvement. Stakeholders said that there was a wide variety of parties participating in the reviews and that the reviews were meaningful. In two sites, stakeholders noted that workers encourage parents to participate in the reviews and support participation via telephone. Stakeholders estimated that 50 to 60 percent of parents

participate in these reviews. Stakeholders also noted that ICWA Specialists conduct reviews for cases involving Native children and also review cases every 30 days if Native Alaska children are not in ICWA-preferred placements.

A few stakeholders expressed concern that local citizens are not included as members of the administrative review board. A few stakeholders also noted that workers sometimes do not follow through on some of the Administrative Review recommendations.

Item 27. Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 27 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because permanency hearings are not consistently held in a timely manner.

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alaska State law mandates that the court hold a permanency hearing within 12 months after the date a child enters foster care to determine if continued placement, as it is being provided, is in the best interest of the child, and to develop a permanent plan for the child. The court must review the permanent plan at least annually thereafter until the permanency goal has been successfully achieved. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, permanency hearings usually occur on time, but there are sometimes delays caused by continuances requested by one or more parties to permit additional time to prepare for the hearings.

The Statewide Assessment also reported the following comments from Roundtable and survey participants:

- Permanency hearings are occurring in Anchorage and Fairbanks within prescribed timeframes.
- High caseloads of agency social workers and judges can interfere with compliance with timelines for permanency hearings.
- Permanency hearings are seen as helpful in moving cases to TPR or reunification.
- The practice of scheduling permanency hearings at the time of disposition in Anchorage and Fairbanks has enhanced the timeliness of the hearings.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that the timeliness of permanency hearings varies across the State because some courts have strict timeframes for the hearings while others do not. Identified barriers to timeliness of hearings were the scheduling of court dockets, the availability of parties, incorrect tracking from delayed dispositional hearings, and the court practice of granting

continuances. Stakeholders also noted positively that the agency convenes permanency planning conferences after the child has been in foster care for 9 months to prepare for the permanency hearing.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that the timeliness of permanency hearings would be enhanced if due dates for reviews and hearings could be tracked through PROBER.

In one site, timeliness of hearings was a key concern for stakeholders. In two sites, a lack of understanding of the roles of the court and the agency in permanency planning was noted. Stakeholders in one site noted a lack of understanding of the scope and purpose of permanency hearings. Stakeholders also noted that courts need to establish more of a balance between parents' rights and children's need for permanency. At present, parents' rights seem to receive greater consideration than children's needs.

Item 28. Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 28 was rated a Strength because the State has implemented procedures for filing for TPR and is filing in a timely manner.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS is required to report a compelling reason to the court if TPR is not being pursued within the required time frames. The findings of the case review process indicate that there were two cases out of 13 applicable cases that did not meet the time frame requirements for filing for TPR and that did not have compelling reasons noted in the case file.

State level stakeholders and stakeholders in two sites noted that filings are occurring within the Federal timeframes. Stakeholders at the third site noted some inconsistencies in the timeliness filings, but acknowledged that there are recent improvements in this area.

Stakeholders reported that the agency is not consistently documenting compelling reasons not to file for TPR. Stakeholders in one site noted a preference for choosing a compelling reason instead of filing because of a misconception on the part of the court that filing unsuccessfully for TPR would result in the need to return the child home. Stakeholders in another site noted court delays in hearing the TPR due to granting continuances.

Item 29. Provides a process for foster parents, preadoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child.

Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 29 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because foster parents do not consistently receive notification of permanency hearings and are not consistently provided an opportunity to be heard in accordance with ASFA.

According to the Statewide Assessment, State law requires that DFYS must provide notice to the parent(s), Tribe, foster parent or other out-of-home care provider, guardian, GAL, and grandparent of all court proceedings. Caregivers are given an opportunity to express their concerns in case conferences and administrative reviews. Grandparents were added to the list of people to be notified in response to recent State legislation.

The Statewide Assessment provided the following comments from Roundtable participants concerning this issue:

- Notice is not provided very far in advance of the hearing.
- Scheduling of Administrative Reviews is not always in accordance with foster parent's schedules.
- All parties are not always notified of court hearing changes.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that DFYS is not consistent regarding notifying foster parents or pre-adoptive parents of hearings and expressed concern about the timeliness of notices when they are provided. Stakeholders indicated that the State is attempting to resolve this issue by hiring people whose job it will be to track hearings and issue the notifications.

Stakeholders noted that foster parents do receive timely notice of 6-month administrative reviews and participate about 50-60 percent of the time. Stakeholders at one site noted that while foster parents have an opportunity to be heard at the beginning of 6-month reviews, they are excluded from the rest of the review. Some stakeholders reported that Tribes are not regularly notified of reviews and hearings.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2x	3	4

STATUS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the factor of Quality Assurance System. Findings with regard to specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 30. The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 30 was rated a Strength because the State has developed and implemented the necessary standards to protect children in foster care.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS has established standards for care through the Community Care Licensing (CCL) Manual and the Child Protective Services (CPS) Manual. Alaska has recently developed new policies to ensure the safety and well-being of children who come to the attention of the agency. These include:

- Evaluating children on whom four or more reports of harm are received.
- Forwarding reports of harm received on children in foster care for special review by the evaluation unit.
- Conduct new office-wide reviews by the Evaluation unit beginning in July 2002.

The following comments from Roundtable participants regarding this issue were cited in the Statewide Assessment

- When standards are developed by DFYS, they undergo extensive review by supervisors, providers, external agencies, and the public.

- High caseloads create difficulty for workers in meeting practice requirements.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that the State has new licensing standards and an extensive policy and procedures manual outlining timeframes, contact requirements, and other actions to be taken to ensure safety and to protect children.

Item 31. The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 31 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because the State does not have a Statewide quality assurance process and has no formal process for clients or stakeholders to evaluate agency performance.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS' primary quality assurance activity is the case conferencing system that takes place for every child in custody. The conference focuses on issues pertaining to safety, permanency, and well-being for all children in foster care and are facilitated by Regional supervisors or administrative reviewers.

The Statewide Assessment also noted that DFYS has a Balloon Project oversight committee that provides guidance regarding quality improvements to expedite the process of establishing permanence for children in out-of-home care. In addition, a recently created Citizen Review Board (CRB) will review and make recommendations regarding the provision of child abuse prevention services and protection services to families and children in their own homes. Alaska also has a Child Fatality Review Team (CFRT), which is an interdisciplinary team that reviews every child death in Alaska.

Many stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that the DFYS quality assurance process needs to be improved. These stakeholders noted that there is no State-level quality assurance process and local level efforts vary widely. In addition, there is no formal or periodic process for clients or stakeholders to evaluate agency performance. Some stakeholders reported that the agency is in the process of implementing quarterly supervisory reviews and that the evaluation unit reviews will incorporate features of the Federal CFSR process beginning in July 2002. Stakeholders indicated that they expect these efforts to result in improvements in both quality assurance and practice. However, Stakeholders voiced the opinion that for the reviews to be effective, it is critical that DFYS develop formal procedures for sharing the results of evaluation reviews with program staff and the training academy.

VII. TRAINING

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3X	4

STATUS OF TRAINING

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Training. Findings with regard to specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 32. The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 32 was rated a Strength because the agency has an initial training program and workers complete training before being assigned a caseload. Additional training is available on a range of issues and it is available in a variety of ways to accommodate both local and distance learning.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DFYS has a contract with the University of Alaska School of Social Work to provide a training academy for all agency workers. The University provides training for all current agency workers and ensures that all training meets the competencies established by the Child Welfare League of America. The University also tracks attendance and provides feedback to management and staff regarding attendance. Attendance is excellent for the first six months of employment and new workers complete basic training prior to being assigned a caseload.

The basic training program, called Training and Orientation of New Employees (TONE), provides ten days of training for all new social workers that must be completed before workers are assigned a caseload. In addition to the 10 initial days of training, workers are required to attend 5 days in the first 6 months on the job and 11.5 more days in the second 6 months.

According to a chart in the Statewide Assessment, 100 percent of new workers attend the first ten days of TONE training. Almost 90 percent of the workers attend the 2 additional TONE training sessions (5 additional days) that are required in the first 6 months of employment. According to the Statewide Assessment, only 55 percent of workers complete the specialized ICWA training provided during the second 6 months, and only 48 percent of workers completed the required specialized foster care and adoption training, also required in the second 6 months. Subsequent information from the State of Alaska indicates that attendance at these sessions has increased substantially in the last 12 months.

The Statewide Assessment provided the following comments from Roundtable and survey participants regarding the training program for new workers:

- TONE is generally seen as improving the skills of new staff and providing consistency in job-related training.
- Training is offered in major training sites and by distance delivery through computer classes.
- Other staff are overloaded while new social workers attend training.
- More Tribal involvement in training is needed to address local issues.
- Tribal staff needs training.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue were generally positive about TONE. They noted that all workers do receive training before being assigned a caseload and that agency management has demonstrated a commitment to establishing training requirements. Stakeholders also noted that TONE is available to Tribal staff and contract staff (i.e. dual track workers), but they usually have to pay their own travel expenses.

Item 33. The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 33 was rated a Strength because the State provides for ongoing training for staff.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DFYS offers ongoing training to staff who have completed the first year of training. In addition, supervisors are offered an array of courses to enhance skills in supervision and management. The Statewide Assessment provides the following comments from Roundtable participants and survey respondents regarding ongoing training.

- Despite a 5-year emphasis on ICWA training, there continue to be comments that training generally lacks sufficient Tribal involvement.
- Travel limitations create barriers to accessing training.
- Social workers and collaborative partners are positive about the quality of the academy's training.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue reported that the Training Academy provides an array of in-service training to DFYS staff. They noted the training was of high quality and that efforts were made to reach all workers by sending trainers to rural sites, and using distance learning technologies. Specialized training has been developed in areas such as Structured Decision Making, forensic interviewing, and adult psychopathology. Stakeholders noted, however, that there is insufficient training on adolescent issues, legal issues, and cultural issues, and there is no formal process to determine workers' training needs.

Although 23 hours of in-service training each year are mandated, stakeholders noted that workers do not routinely attend ongoing training. Several stakeholders noted that high caseloads make attending training difficult for many workers.

Stakeholders also commented on the high staff turnover among caseworkers. As one stakeholder noted, even with quality training it takes 2 to 3 years for a worker to become really proficient. Because workers rarely stay that long, most are not fully experienced.

Stakeholders noted that in addition to the in-service programs, the State has full and part-time MSW and BSW stipend programs. One stakeholder noted that a MSW and BSW practicum coordinator is placed at the agency in Anchorage and Fairbanks and supervises a student unit. These students share management of a caseload with the practicum coordinator as a part of their field work.

Item 34. The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 34 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because foster parents are not consistently receiving initial core training or completing ongoing training, and they routinely provide care for children prior to receiving training.

The Statewide Assessment notes that DFYS contracts with the Alaska Foster Parent Training Center (AFPTC) to provide training to foster parents. AFPTC provides orientation for foster parents in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau; regularly scheduled training for new foster parents (6 week/15 hour program) in Anchorage and Fairbanks; and individual training for foster parents in other areas as resources allow. There are specific requirements for both foster parents and adoptive parents related to training courses that they must attend. Course offerings are widely publicized.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, Roundtable participants and survey respondents made the following comments regarding foster parent and adoptive parent training:

- Training is needed regarding special needs children.
- Foster parent training should be required prior to licensing.
- There is a lack of training for rural caregivers and an under utilization of training by foster parents.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue reported that there is no requirement that foster parents receive training before a child can be placed in their homes and some foster parents care for children for a period of time before receiving any training. Stakeholders noted that core training is provided several times a year in Anchorage and in other areas core training is available through a self-study packet. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that the initial training for foster parents focuses on the mechanics and technical aspects of becoming a foster parent rather than preparing them for dealing with children who have experienced maltreatment and may have serious behavioral and emotional problems.

Stakeholders reported that the State requires foster parents to complete 10-15 hours of ongoing training each year and offers a variety of ongoing training activities available through books and videos as well as onsite training. Some stakeholders noted that foster parents perceive training and technical assistance from the AFPTC and information provided in the biennial foster care conference as helpful to them. However, stakeholders noted that many foster parents do not complete the ongoing training requirements.

Stakeholders expressed the following concerns about foster parent training:

- Self-study training is not the most appropriate or effective way to train Native Alaska foster homes.
- Some foster parents do not receive information on how to access training by mail.
- There is insufficient emphasis by DFYS on the training requirement and insufficient DFYS monitoring of foster parent completion of initial and ongoing training.
- Some foster parents do not perceive the self-study training as effective.
- Lack of child-care is a barrier to participation by some foster parents.
- About 29 percent of foster homes have no documented training.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that there is a need for more cultural competency training for foster parents. It was noted that at present, this training is not offered on a Statewide basis.

Stakeholders commenting on training provided to residential care providers suggested that it is "strong and relevant."

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1X	2	3	4

STATUS OF SERVICE ARRAY

Alaska did not achieve substantial conformity with the factor of service array. Findings with regard to specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 35. The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 35 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because services are not available in sufficient quantity in either rural or urban communities. Shortages of services have a negative impact on prevention, reunification, permanency planning and the agency's efforts to provide for the wellbeing of both children and families.

According to the Statewide Assessment, there is a wide array of services available to families in the State. The Statewide Assessment notes that services to families to prevent removal include family preservation services, family support services, and day care. These services are offered through programs such as the Community-Based Family Resource Grants, the Alaska Children's Trust, and the Dual Track/Alternative Response program. Services to families to facilitate reunification are offered primarily through 12 community-based agencies that provide family preservation services and time-limited family reunification services. Other services are provided through the Division of Mental Health and Development Disabilities and the Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

The Statewide Assessment also reported that DFYS has made concerted efforts to develop and provide services designed to achieve permanency for children. To promote permanency for children who have been in foster care for long periods of time, DFYS developed the Balloon Project. This project involved hiring over a dozen new staff and increasing the number of attorneys available to process cases. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, several other projects grew out of the Balloon Project, including the Home Study Project, designed to expedite home studies; Project Succeed, which implements procedures to search for adoptive families for specific children; and a new process called Simple New Adoption Process (SNAP) that is designed to expedite the adoption process.

Additional services that the State has recently developed include new programs for youth aging out of foster care, a new visitation site in Anchorage, and a dual track program in Mat-Su.

The Statewide Assessment provided the following comments from Roundtable participants and survey respondents regarding the service array:

- The lack of available services for families is a major barrier to achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for children in both rural and urban areas of Alaska.
- The greatest need is for in-home services, substance abuse treatment services, and services victims of sexual abuse.
- Tribes need to be involved earlier in the service provision process.
- There is great need, across the State, for partnering with other agencies to provide services.
- Visitation resources are inadequate.
- Transportation is a barrier to accessing services.
- Follow-up support is needed for families that are reunified.
- Post-adoption services are needed.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that there are service gaps in the following areas:

- Foster homes, particularly therapeutic foster homes.

- Substance abuse assessment and treatment services.
- Mental health assessment and treatment services. Treatment services for children and adults who have been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Exposure (FAE).
- Residential care facilities resulting in children being sent out of State or bouncing from program to program.
- Respite care and day care services.
- Culturally appropriate services in all service areas.
- Home-based services.

Stakeholders suggested that despite the fact that there is an insufficient quantity of service, Alaska has some quality service providers and some quality programs. Some of these programs include:

- Child Advocacy Centers, which provide integrated services to children and families in sexual abuse cases.
- Inpatient substance abuse program for mothers and children.
- Programs through which the Tribes offer an extensive array of services available to Native children and families
- An extensive subsidized guardianship program.
- Independent Living programs funded by the Federal Chaffee Foster Care Youth Independence Program.
- Family Resource Centers.
- The Alaska Youth Initiative.
- Program for children with developmental disabilities.

Item 36. The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State’s CFSP.

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 36 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because services are not readily available in all communities in the State.

According to the Statewide Assessment, there is an array of services available throughout the State, but families cannot always easily access them. The State Assessment noted that services are limited in rural communities and that remote areas need more immediately accessible services. Parents and children are required to travel to larger communities to obtain specific services. Stakeholders noted that such travel can be difficult because of long distances and inclement weather. Stakeholders also noted the additional challenges experienced by clients who receive services away from their home community and have to transition back to the community.

Stakeholders noted staff and service provider travel to remote areas is costly and time-consuming and requires additional resources. Stakeholders also noted the need for more case-specific coordination between the State, Tribal worker, and village worker to ensure follow-through on rural cases and the need for additional expertise in villages when assessing safety and providing emergency response.

Stakeholders noted as strengths efforts the state makes to provide services including flying families out to services, flying specialized service providers to HUB communities, and sending providers (such as behavioral health services specialists) to villages. It also noted as a strength the arrangements for an extensive network of village-based Tribal workers to provide some services.

While obtaining services is challenging in rural Alaska, stakeholders expressed the opinion that many services lacking in rural communities tend to also be lacking in other communities in the State and that the issue of scarcity of services and resulting long waiting lists is a Statewide problem, and not limited to a particular jurisdiction. Stakeholders noted that independent living services were reported to be strong in two of the sites but not in the third site.

Item 37. The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 37 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because service provision is influenced by availability rather than underlying needs of the children and families.

According to the Statewide Assessment, case plans can be tailored to fit the child's and family's needs. However, stakeholders noted that the scarcity of services often results in service provision being based on what is available and addressing general concerns rather than specific problems. Stakeholders noted a lack of family-centered services and a lack of focus on the underlying needs of children and families. Stakeholders also noted that there is a lack of unique or individualized services, particularly for in-home cases. Stakeholders in one site also noted a need for more coordination of services between the agency and the Tribal Organization to ensure that underlying needs are addressed and for services to be more culturally appropriate.

Despite these concerns, stakeholders in the sites included in the review process reported that DFYS local agencies have access to flexible funds to pay for specialized services that may be needed by children or parents or to address individual needs. The local agencies also were able to provide wraparound services, particularly through the Alaska Youth Initiative. Finally, stakeholders also noted examples of Tribes using funds to address service gaps.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3X	4

STATUS OF AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Alaska is in substantial conformity with the factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community. Findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor are discussed below.

Item 38. In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with Tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 38 was rated a Strength because the State has an active Tribal-State collaboration group, some positive local collaboration efforts, and managers at all levels of the agency who are seen as easily accessible to community stakeholders when questions or issues arise.

According to the Statewide Assessment, due to the small population in Alaska, many community service providers have direct contact with agency management and staff regarding policies and practices. The Statewide Assessment also notes that Tribal relationships are

significantly enhanced through the Tribal-State Collaboration Group, which meets regularly to review State policies, issues, and concerns. Other groups with whom the division meets regularly include:

- Alaska Association of Homes for Children - residential care providers.
- Family Support and Child Abuse Network - service provider grantees.
- Balloon Project Steering Committee - permanency planning issues.
- Children's Justice Act Task Force - Agencies involved in child protection issues.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue suggested that the agency was generally responsive to the community and engaged in consultation with a wide range of community and Tribal stakeholders and partners. Local offices collaborate at regularly scheduled meetings and stakeholders report primarily positive relationships. Multi-disciplinary teams (MDT) are one of the primary venues for collaboration. There is some inconsistency in the extent to which they address systemic issues as well as case specific issues. In one site, the MDT efforts led to the establishment of a Child Advocacy Center and a project with the schools. Stakeholders noted the Tribal-State Collaboration Group has improved Tribal-State communication and has resulted in increased joint efforts, including Title IV-E Agreements and efforts to develop Tribal licensing standards. One stakeholder noted that the agency also participates in a provider group that addresses service delivery issues at a systems level. Despite these efforts, stakeholders expressed the opinion that the agency is not proactive and seems to respond more to requests for information rather than reaching out to the community to form partnerships.

Item 39. The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 39 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because involvement in the Child and Family Services Planning Process is limited to review and comment instead of active involvement in setting goals and priorities.

The State Assessment notes that the DFYS has actively involved many agencies in its planning process and that community agencies are involved in planning for projects and services that are incorporated into the State Plan. The State Assessment indicates DFYS sends draft copies of the State Plan to all Alaska Tribes and issues public notice regarding commenting on the State Plan.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue, however, expressed the opinion that the agency is not proactive in getting the community involved in policy development and planning, although the agency is receptive to suggestions from community members. Stakeholders noted involvement in the CFSP was primarily by review and comment. Tribal stakeholders in one site noted that instead of being involved in the plan, they had to ask the agency for a copy of the final plan.

Item 40. The State’s services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 40 was rated a Strength because the State has collaborative efforts among Federal and federally assisted programs.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS engages in significant coordination efforts with other State Agencies as is evidenced by the following list of activities and projects that are in place to respond to the issues of child abuse and neglect in Alaska:

- Interdepartmental Agreement on Child Abuse.
- The ASPIN interagency agreement between the division and law enforcement.
- Multi-Disciplinary Teams.
- Child Advocacy Centers - now in six locations.
- Interagency Sex Offender Working Group.
- Alaska Youth Initiative.
- Coordination with School Districts.
- DFYS now has five Tribal IV-E agreements in place.
- Regional Placement Committees.

The Statewide Assessment notes that greater coordination efforts are needed with the Department of Education and Early Development. The Statewide Assessment also addresses the efforts of DFYS to build Tribal relationships to better respond to the cultural needs of the Native children and families served. Early and frequent reviews of children's cases involving Tribal representatives as well as family members and others are designed to bring the cases into compliance with ICWA and work actively toward resolution. Extensive data is collected on these children and efforts are made to place them in ICWA preference placements quickly. Current efforts are underway to recognize Tribal court adoptions, recognize Tribally licensed foster homes, and to develop strategies to serve more Native children through the Independent Living Program.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that there are effective coordination efforts, particularly at the case level, in many areas. Examples cited by stakeholders include the Child Advocacy Centers and the Multidisciplinary Teams. One stakeholder noted that the Federal Court Improvement Program in Alaska is providing training to judges on child welfare issues. In addition to Tribal-State collaboration and title IV-E agreements, stakeholders also noted collaboration efforts through the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet, with Indian Health Services, with the Department of Mental Health & Developmental Disabilities and with law enforcement and domestic violence programs. One site noted one of these relationships had resulted in child welfare clients being given priority for service.

Problem areas noted by stakeholders concerned (1) the lack of sufficient contact between ICWA workers and agency workers in one of the sites included in the onsite review, (2) difficulties in coordinating services and interventions with local school systems, and (3) inconsistent coordination with the TANF agency to ensure that conflicting demands are not placed on shared clients.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2X	3	4

Alaska is not in substantial conformity with the factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention. Findings with respect to the items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 41. The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and child-care institutions which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.

X Strength ___ Area Needing Improvement

This item was rated a Strength because the State has issued and implemented comprehensive new licensing standards as of December 2001.

The Statewide Assessment reports that DFYS has established standards for approving foster family homes and child care institutions. According to the Statewide Assessment, foster and adoptive homes are assessed differently. Adoptive homes are required to have a comprehensive home study, while foster homes are subject to a "standard by standard" process for studying whether the home meets the requirements. Both processes address safety issues. Relatives who are licensed meet the same standard as all licensed foster parents.

The Statewide Assessment provided the following comments from Roundtable participants:

- The establishment of new licensing standards is a positive step.
- The licensing process is too lengthy and intimidating (particularly for Alaska Native families), and results in discouraging potential foster parenting.
- DFYS should recognize Tribally-licensed homes.
- Licensing standards do not take into account the culture and child rearing standards of some communities.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that the State has licensing standards and is working with the Tribes to recognize Tribal standards and licensure.

Item 42. The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or child care institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 42 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because application of variances results in full licensing standards not being applied to all foster homes.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS requires that all licensed foster homes in Alaska comply with the same set of standards. Relatives who are licensed meet the same standards as other licensed providers. Variances can be approved for specific standards. The Statewide Assessment notes that DFYS does use an "emergency" approval status, which allows the immediate placement of children with relatives or others known to them. Stakeholders reported that homes with emergency approval status do not receive funds from title IV-E for children in their care while in "emergency approval" status.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that the same licensing standards are applied to all homes including relative foster homes. However, stakeholders noted that some variances are being used to waive standards instead of to meet the standards in an

alternate way in both relative and non-relative homes. Stakeholders noted that while the State has a training requirement in their licensing standards, this requirement is not consistently enforced.

Stakeholders also reported that Tribal standards for foster homes are not the same as agency standards. Some stakeholders suggest that the DFYS should work more closely with the Tribes to ensure that high standards are met. Other stakeholders, however, suggested that ICWA homes are available but Federal and State restrictions exclude very good homes due to licensing and criminal history requirements that cannot be met.

Item 43. The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 43 was rated a Strength because criminal records checks are completed on all homes.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State is required to complete criminal background checks both at the State and Federal level for all foster and adoptive homes. The Statewide Assessment reported the following activities relevant to this issue:

- Alaska utilizes the APSIN (Alaska Public Safety Information System) to complete a background check on all potential providers of out-of-home care.
- National fingerprint background checks are done on all applicants for foster care licenses.
- The APSIN Flag Project assures criminal background checks occur on an ongoing basis by sharing with law enforcement the names of all residents in licensed foster homes. When there is any contact with these individuals due to potential criminal behavior, DFYS is notified immediately.
- Residential care facilities must provide finger print cards or clearance forms for all employees and volunteers who come in contact with children.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that criminal background checks are completed on all homes.

Item 44. The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

____ Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 44 was rated an Area Needing Improvement because the State does not have an effective recruitment plan and needs more recruitment strategies.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DFYS has a statewide recruitment and retention campaign, entitled "Foster a Future," which promotes foster parenting through ads on TV and radio. Locally, efforts are underway to work closely with many Tribes to recruit and license Native foster homes. The State also has implemented Project Succeed in two sites, is in the planning stages of developing a post-adoption program and a collaborative recruitment campaign, and is beginning to establish procedures for recognizing foster homes licensed by the Tribes. The Statewide Assessment noted that there is a need for Native foster parents and for non-native minority foster homes.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted a critical need for more homes and a need to be more pro-active in recruiting and retaining homes. Stakeholders in one site reviewed noted that insufficient staff time was available for recruitment causing them to rely primarily on statewide recruitment efforts. Stakeholders noted the following challenges:

- The State has a number of recruiting mechanisms in place but they do not yield results.
- There are many Native children in out-of-preference ICWA placements due to lack of Native Alaskan foster homes.
- Stringent regulations are hard for some Native homes in rural areas to meet the standards.
- Lack of day care in some communities prevents successful recruitment of working adults.
- The children that are coming into care have multiple problems and not all families are suitable.
- Living expenses are high and foster care payments are inadequate to cover costs.
- Foster parents incur expenses and then must wait to receive payment through the mail.
- The State is having trouble retaining foster homes, either by losing homes through adoption or not providing enough support such as respite or day care.
- Criminal background checks eliminate some potential families.
- Some potential families do not follow through because of frustration with the paperwork requirements.
- Respite care is needed.

Stakeholders identified some recruitment efforts through Youth for Christ (a recruiting effort through churches and faith-based organizations), the Foster a Future advertising campaign, foster parent appreciation events, and word of mouth as the primary recruitment strategies. Some Tribal child welfare staff are used to recruit in villages and help with completion of licensing paperwork.

Item 45. The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 45 was assigned a rating of Strength because the State utilizes the Alaska Exchange and the Northwest Adoption Exchange to seek placements for children.

The Statewide Assessment notes that children who are legally free and in need of a permanent home are referred to the Alaska Adoption Exchange, and after 3 months, are referred to the Northwest Adoption Exchange for promoting and recruitment of a home specifically for them. Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that the State does register children with the Northwest Adoption Exchange. However, stakeholders also noted that some workers do not support sending children out-of-State for adoption.

XI. DETERMINATION OF SUBSTANTIAL CONFORMITY

For each outcome and systemic factor listed below, mark “Y” where the State is determined to be in substantial conformity and “N” where the State is determined not to be in substantial conformity. For each outcome or systemic factor marked “N,” place a check beside the performance indicator, listed by item number in this form, that has been determined to be an area needing improvement.

Outcomes
I. Safety

 N **Outcome S1**
 x Item 1
 x Item 2

 N **Outcome S2**
 x Item 3
 x Item 4

II. Permanency

 N **Outcome P1**
 Item 5
 x Item 6
 x Item 7
 x Item 8
 x Item 9
 x Item 10
 N **Outcome P2**
 Item 11
 Item 12
 x Item 13
 x Item 14
 x Item 15
 x Item 16

III. Child and Family Well-Being

 N **Outcome WB1**
 x Item 17
 x Item 18
 x Item 19
 x Item 20

 N **Outcome WB2**
 x Item 21

 N **Outcome WB3**
 x Item 22
 x Item 23

Systemic Factors

IV. Y Statewide Information System
 Item 24

V. N Case Review System
 x Item 25
 Item 26
 x Item 27
 Item 28
 x Item 29

VI. N Quality Assurance System

 Item 30
 x Item 31

VII. Y Training

 Item 32
 Item 33
 x Item 34

VIII. N Service Array

 x Item 35
 x Item 36
 x Item 37

IX. Y Agency Responsiveness to the Community

 Item 38
 x Item 39
 Item 40

X. N Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention

 Item 41
 x Item 42
 Item 43
 x Item 44
 Item 45