

State of Alaska FY2025 Governor's Operating Budget

Department of Family and Community Services Children's Services Results Delivery Unit Budget Summary

Children's Services Results Delivery Unit

Contribution to Department's Mission

Ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children by strengthening families, engaging communities, and partnering with tribes.

Core Services

- Safety
- Permanency
- Well-being

Major RDU Accomplishments in 2023

- The Office of Children's Services (OCS) continued to work in partnership with Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal organizations to implement the Tribal Child Welfare Compact and a total of five service agreements related to initial and ongoing relative searches, safety walk-through of potential foster homes, assisting potential foster parents in the foster care licensing process, facilitation of family visits, and prevention. This year marked an agreement to use Encounter Rates for billing services provided by the Tribe. Work continues toward agreed upon outcome measures.
- After over two years of negotiation, Alaska's federally mandated Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), resulting from a 2017 federal review, was approved in June 2019. The PIP is in place for two years and requires extensive efforts from all levels of the agency with quarterly progress updates to the Federal Children's Bureau to demonstrate practice improvement activities. Due to COVID-19, the PIP was extended for an additional year. Despite the challenges of implementation of activities due to COVID-19, OCS met four goal items in 2021: efforts to prevent removal from the home, timely establishment of permanency goals, timely achievement of permanency, and caseworker visits with parents. In FY2022, Alaska implemented each strategy contained in the PIP and successfully met two additional goals, stability in foster care placement and child and family involvement in case planning. Though strategies from the PIP have been implemented, goal measurement will continue into December of 2023.
- OCS has created a centralized statewide Special Needs Hotline for resource families, tribes, and staff to access commodity needs for children in care. The hotline is currently staffed with a Program Coordinator, a Project Assistant, and a Social Services Associate. These staff connect resource families with commodity needs for children placed in their home. The unit has expanded to now include child care, vacation travel for children in care, foster parent damage and loss, funeral arrangements, and Individualized Service Agreement funds.
- The Independent Living Program (ILP) continues to serve all Alaskan foster youth ages 16 years and older who were in care on or after their 16th birthday and up to age 21. In FY2023, additional funding was provided for ILP youth. The program issued grants to youth to assist with education, employment, cultural events, food, housing, transportation, medical, and other basic living needs. A Career Conference for youth was held with additional funding provided from the Governor's Budget. Youth were able to apply for a stipend to attend the conference as well as receive an iPad Pro. Additional funding was also used to provide stipends for high school graduations.
- OCS hired a Wellness and Resiliency Officer to manage the safety and wellness programming designed to address secondary traumatic stress for the agency. Accomplishments for this past fiscal year include implementing a crisis debriefing program instruction and selection of a crisis debriefing model to address secondary traumatic stress in the workforce, regional assessments of support and wellness of staff and developing regional plans to improve staff well-being, and implementation of Supervisor Facilitated Attuned Interactions (FAN), a reflective practice in leadership meant to improve supervisor-staff relationships and retention. To support our workforce, OCS sends interested staff through an Interdisciplinary Occupational Endorsement Certificate in Child Welfare at UAA. This is a two-year commitment, and we are seeing retention of employees going through this educational opportunity. Fiscal year 2023 saw our first of 6 graduates with certificates.

- The Medical Mental Health Unit (MMHU) has been documenting characteristics of complex youth and detailing gaps in the current continuum of care. This work is contributing to a larger statewide effort to meet the needs of youth with severe mental health, behavioral health, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and complex medical needs. While much more is needed to address this statewide issue, OCS is contributing to the solutions.
- OCS completed a year-long process to evaluate options to update its aging State Automated Child Welfare Information System) (SACWIS) to a new system that meets federal requirements.

Key RDU Challenges

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) provides a range of services that are heavily focused on responding to reports of maltreatment that have already occurred, with a smaller portion of services geared toward preventing maltreatment.

These services and supports include prevention and early intervention services, child protective services, safety assessments, foster care, family support and preservation services, adoption and guardianship, and permanency planning to ensure permanency is achieved and that children do not languish in the foster care system.

Siloed prevention efforts are a hindrance. Lack of social determinants of welfare (housing, employment, etc.), lack of community-based services such as behavioral health and substance abuse treatment facilities are major barriers.

Every child welfare agency has challenges due to multiple factors: 1) The number of available foster homes has significantly decreased; 2) It is difficult to maintain adequate staffing levels; 3) The complex needs of families along with children's complex mental and behavioral needs; and 4) The shortage of available family support services.

OCS adheres to a philosophy that prioritizes keeping children in their homes whenever it is safe to do so. If it is necessary to remove a child from their home, OCS strives to reunite that child with their family as soon as possible. When permanency through adoption or guardianship is the only option, it should be timely and adoptive parents or guardians should receive the appropriate support from the State to ensure long term stability and reduce the chance of reentry into the foster care system.

Although meaningful and important, child welfare work is complex and often emotionally taxing. OCS struggles to:

- Attract and retain qualified staff in both urban and rural office locations that can meet the challenging demands of the work including high caseloads.
- Adequately refer or assist families to access the services they need to address the behaviors or conditions that result in children being unsafe.
- Provide culturally relevant services statewide that meet families where they are within their own communities.
- Direct available funds to invest in prevention and in-home services to keep families intact and prevent them from entering the system.
- Adequately equip staff to work effectively, collaboratively, and sensitively with the 229 Alaska Native Tribes whose culture and values are not always well understood by staff.

Workforce recruitment and retention continues to be an ongoing challenge for OCS. Many exiting staff indicate the top reasons for leaving is workload, personal safety, the difficult nature of the work, and the lack of competitive salaries.

Employee safety continues to be a top concern for OCS. Staff are threatened with bodily harm and are sometimes physically assaulted by clients. Efforts have been made to improve the physical safety of each field office. The addition of a new safety team, including a Safety Officer and a Program Coordinator 2, will identify and address primary safety issues with infrastructure improvements, training, and gear. Along with continual safety training, the OCS Safety Team has updated emergency action plans for the 22 statewide offices and continued working toward a satellite-based radio device to improve communications for staff traveling in rural and remote locations.

OCS's workforce also continues to be challenged with the lack of appropriate technology resources to do the job effectively and efficiently. Alaska's current child welfare system is at its end of life and options for a new system were explored this past fiscal year.

Significant Changes in Results to be Delivered in FY2025

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) anticipates improved service delivery related to safety assessment, service planning, and permanency because of the efforts underway to comply with the Performance Improvement Plan.

OCS leadership will focus on identifying processes within the agency where efficiencies can be gained to improve Alaska's child welfare services.

Contact Information
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**Children's Services
RDU Financial Summary by Component**

All dollars shown in thousands

	FY2023 Actuals				FY2024 Management Plan				FY2025 Governor			
	UGF+DGF Funds	Other Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds	UGF+DGF Funds	Other Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds	UGF+DGF Funds	Other Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds
Formula Expenditures												
Foster Care Base Rate	14,799.2	0.0	4,185.4	18,984.6	18,289.3	0.0	4,736.6	23,025.9	21,896.5	0.0	6,129.4	28,025.9
Foster Care Augmented Rate	1,867.6	0.0	402.1	2,269.7	3,252.6	0.0	850.0	4,102.6	3,252.6	0.0	850.0	4,102.6
Foster Care Special Need Subsidized	9,902.0	0.0	326.4	10,228.4	8,798.9	3,799.2	632.1	13,230.2	8,798.9	3,799.2	632.1	13,230.2
Adoptions/Guardians	20,380.8	0.0	23,295.0	43,675.8	20,976.2	0.0	23,506.5	44,482.7	20,976.2	0.0	23,264.3	44,240.5
Non-Formula Expenditures												
Children's Services Management	5,777.6	202.0	3,472.5	9,452.1	6,613.3	560.5	3,864.5	11,038.3	7,784.5	668.0	3,976.6	12,429.1
Children's Services Training	1,340.5	0.0	582.1	1,922.6	911.1	0.0	709.6	1,620.7	911.1	0.0	709.6	1,620.7
Front Line Social Workers	43,320.9	70.6	30,640.0	74,031.5	45,676.5	104.3	29,835.0	75,615.8	47,234.0	109.3	30,830.2	78,173.5
Family Preservation	2,103.1	3,438.6	9,120.8	14,662.5	3,177.6	3,995.9	11,164.5	18,338.0	3,177.6	3,995.9	10,084.6	17,258.1
Tribal Child Welfare Compact	4,848.5	0.0	0.0	4,848.5	5,000.0	0.0	0.0	5,000.0	5,000.0	0.0	0.0	5,000.0
Totals	104,340.2	3,711.2	72,024.3	180,075.7	112,695.5	8,459.9	75,298.8	196,454.2	119,031.4	8,572.4	76,476.8	204,080.6

Children's Services
Summary of RDU Budget Changes by Component
From FY2024 Management Plan to FY2025 Governor

All dollars shown in thousands

	<u>Unrestricted Gen (UGF)</u>	<u>Designated Gen (DGF)</u>	<u>Other Funds</u>	<u>Federal Funds</u>	<u>Total Funds</u>
FY2024 Management Plan	107,095.5	5,600.0	8,459.9	75,298.8	196,454.2
One-time items:					
-Children's Services Management	-150.0	0.0	-235.0	0.0	-385.0
-Family Preservation	0.0	0.0	0.0	-1,079.9	-1,079.9
-Subsidized Adoptions/Guardians	0.0	0.0	0.0	-242.2	-242.2
Adjustments which continue current level of service:					
-Children's Services Management	321.2	0.0	342.5	112.1	775.8
-Front Line Social Workers	1,557.5	0.0	5.0	995.2	2,557.7
Proposed budget increases:					
-Children's Services Management	1,000.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1,000.0
-Foster Care Base Rate	3,607.2	0.0	0.0	1,392.8	5,000.0
FY2025 Governor	113,431.4	5,600.0	8,572.4	76,476.8	204,080.6