



Area of Focus: Protecting Vulnerable Alaskans

Protecting Vulnerable Alaskans

Alaskans are free from abuse, neglect, self-neglect, and exploitation.

Objective 6.1: Prevent maltreatment of all vulnerable Alaskans and their families across the lifespan.

Objective 6.2: Promote early intervention for individuals at risk of maltreatment.

Objective 6.3: Ensure individuals who suspect potential abuse understand the role of protective agencies and how to report potential abuse and neglect.

Objective 6.4: Increase timely access to protective services statewide.

Objective 6.5: Ensure vulnerable Alaskans understand their rights and responsibilities.

VULNERABLE ADULT:

A person who, because of physical or mental impairment, is unable to meet their own needs or to seek help without assistance.

Alaska State Legislature — 47.24.900 Definitions¹

Vulnerable Alaskans of all ages should be provided with supportive and protective services. State and local public awareness campaigns, training programs, and multi-disciplinary teams are essential when providing these supportive services. In addition to improving the systems for responding to children and adults experiencing or at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect, it is vital that we focus on preventing Alaskans from ever entering the system by supporting healthy, resilient families, and healing intergenerational trauma. The overarching approach encompasses multifaceted

initiatives spanning prevention, early intervention, public education, and the facilitation of timely access to protective services.

Concerns for the safety of Alaska’s children and vulnerable adults are reported by neighbors, teachers, nurses, treatment providers, and others to the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) and Adult Protective Services (APS). During the COVID-19 pandemic, OCS saw a decrease in the number of reports of harm received; however, since the pandemic has ended, the reports of harm received have increased back to

pre-pandemic levels. Over the past five years, these reports have stabilized going from 20,692 in fiscal year 2020 (FY20) to 21,200 in fiscal year 2024 (FY24)². APS has seen an increase of reports of harm (particularly self-neglect and financial exploitation) to adults with mental illness, cognitive impairments, and chronic substance misuse.

Depending on the family circumstances, severity of safety concern, and family support systems, OCS is responsible for determining if a removal from the home is required to maintain child safety. In FY20 the number of children in out-of-home placement in Alaska was 4,396. That number was dramatically larger than in years past but has decreased to 3,554 in FY24³. As previously stated, since the COVID-19 pandemic has ended, the uptick in reports of harm received means that now OCS must address the challenge of balancing staff turnover while working to keep caseloads within the statutory maximum for caseworks around the state. Additionally,

OCS also must contend with the difficulty in finding permanency or kinship care for children that are in OCS care. Likewise, the increase in adult reports of harm has continued to push APS investigator caseloads past the national average. Additional resources are in the process of being added to support the APS office in recognition of the increase in caseload.

The following objectives and strategies provide a protective system that reacts to crises and works towards building resilient families. Alaskans should be equipped with knowledge on social-emotional

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA:

A traumatic event that began years prior to the current generation and has impacted the ways in which individuals within a family understand, cope with, and heal from trauma.

The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health⁴

CULTURAL COMPETENCE:

The ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one’s own.

American Psychological Association — In Search of Cultural Competence⁵

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skills, healthy relationships, and the indicators of potential maltreatment. The plan recognizes the power of informed communities in preventing and addressing abuse and emphasizes the adoption of trauma-informed, culturally sensitive practices across all programs. Early intervention measures include fully leveraging 1115 Behavioral Health Reform Medicaid Waiver services, increasing access to family peer groups, and collaborating with the Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact. These initiatives collectively strive to create a supportive environment that curtails the escalation of potential harm.

Objective 6.1: Prevent maltreatment of all vulnerable Alaskans and their families across the lifespan.

- a. **Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive and coordinated statewide framework to prevent maltreatment of all Alaskans.
- b. **Strategy:** Promote public education on social-emotional skills and regulation, healthy relationships, healthy and equitable communities, trauma, and cultural connectedness.
- c. **Strategy:** Promote public education on positive caregiving to vulnerable Alaskans.
- d. **Strategy:** Promote early screening, detection, and access to resources for families with or without an understood issue or diagnosis.
- e. **Strategy:** Increase effective public awareness of risk factors and indicators of maltreatment and how to report suspected maltreatment.
- f. **Strategy:** Promote awareness and utilization of trauma-engaged, culturally responsive practices across all State of Alaska departments.
- g. **Strategy:** Support resiliency through focused services to both families and communities at risk for maltreatment.
- h. **Strategy:** Coordinate with other state departments to consider policies and trends to support prevention on a societal level (legal, economic, medical, etc.).
- i. **Strategy:** Encourage practice-informed strategies to build or maintain caregiver-child bond in the face of a caregiver's extended absence.

Objective 6.2: Promote early intervention for individuals at risk of maltreatment.

- a. **Strategy:** Continue implementation of the 1115 Behavioral Health Reform Medicaid Waiver services, including intensive in-home services, to prevent out-of-home placement of children whenever possible.
- b. **Strategy:** Support family peer support groups and programs that support families in crisis and help families to transform negative practices into positive caregiving behaviors and attitudes.
- c. **Strategy:** Support the Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact through continued funding for prevention services and other scopes of work.
- d. **Strategy:** Support the Alaska Family Justice Center which brings together advocacy programs, law enforcement, court systems, human services, and health care agencies together.
- e. **Strategy:** Create interagency coordination to ensure that vulnerable young adults have a reduced risk of victimization.

Objective 6.3: Ensure individuals who suspect potential abuse understand the role of protective agencies and how to report potential abuse and neglect.

- a. **Strategy:** Increase awareness of OCS, child abuse reporting procedures, and mandatory reporter obligations.
- b. **Strategy:** Increase awareness of APS, abuse reporting procedures, and mandatory reporter obligations.
- c. **Strategy:** Increase awareness of services and supports available to Alaska Native/American Indian families per the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).
- d. **Strategy:** Establish interagency data-sharing agreements to ensure reports of harm are transmitted timely and accurately.

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Objective 6.4: Increase timely access to protective services statewide.

- a. **Strategy:** Support communities building sustainable, systemic approaches to protective services for both children and adults.
- b. **Strategy:** Apply a person-centered model to the delivery of protective services.
- c. **Strategy:** Prioritize and enhance existing strategies to increase recruitment and retention efforts for protective services workers in OCS and APS.
- d. **Strategy:** Necessary services are provided to vulnerable adults who have a court ordered public guardian and/or conservator through the Office of Public Advocacy.
- e. **Strategy:** Support access to certified and/or trained volunteers such as long-term care ombudsman volunteers and legal advocates.
- f. **Strategy:** Strengthen communication and response between advocacy and guardianship bodies and protective service agencies.
- g. **Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive and coordinated state response to APS through resources and funding.

Objective 6.5: Ensure vulnerable Alaskans understand their rights and responsibilities.

- a. **Strategy:** Improve access to advocacy supports and quality civil and criminal legal assistance for all vulnerable adults and children, including access to the offices of public advocacy, long-term ombudsman, ombudsman, and other processes for grievances.
- b. **Strategy:** Establish pathways and support systems for vulnerable adults and children who are in institutional levels of care, such as the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API), Department of Corrections (DOC), Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), residential psychiatric treatment centers (RPTC), or nursing homes to access protective services.

- c. **Strategy:** Support the court system in creating statewide consistency across judicial districts for all court procedures relating to protection services for children and adults.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alaska State Legislature — 47.24.900 Definitions. <https://www.akleg.gov/basis/statutes.asp#47.24.900>
- 2 20,692 in fiscal year 2020 (FY20) to 21,200 in fiscal year 2024 (FY24). <https://dfcs.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/statistics/default.aspx>
- 3 Number of children in out-of-home placement in Alaska decreased to 3,554 in FY24. <https://dfcs.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/statistics/default.aspx>
- 4 The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health. <https://www.acamh.org/blog/intergenerational-trauma/>
- 5 American Psychological Association — In Search of Cultural Competence. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/03/cultural-competence>