

Keeping in Touch: Effective Communication with Your Caseworker

By: Aileen McInnis, Director, Alaska Center for Resource Families

To be an effective advocate, you need to effectively communicate. That means knowing how to reach your caseworker, leaving an effective message and knowing what to do if you need help. A group of OCS caseworkers and resource parents in Anchorage put these ideas together to help resource families improve the communication flow.

First, Know Who To Call

- *Know the correct name and phone number of the OCS caseworker for each child in your care. Better yet, get the caseworkers business card and keep names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses in an easy to find place. You can also call the OCS main number in your community and ask to be connected or check the State Employee directory at www.state.ak.us for phone numbers and email addresses.*
- *Most caseworkers belong to some kind of OCS unit led by a supervisor and at the least, every caseworker has a supervisor. Know the worker's supervisor in case of emergency. In larger communities, the Social Services Associate (SSA) in the unit can also be helpful. In some offices, a Unit Coordinator is on call to handle emergencies.*
- *Know the name and phone number of your licensing worker. Often she can help when you can't reach someone.*

If You Are Calling On the Phone

- *Call early (between 7:30 to 9 a.m.) before social workers are caught up in court and visits.*
- *If a caseworker is not available, you will reach voice mail. Listen carefully to the message. It may tell you the caseworker is on vacation or in training.*
- *Leave a good voice mail message and be specific. Say why you are calling and how urgent the message is. Indicate if you need to be called back and what time is a good time to call and indicate any deadline to receive the information needed. The more specific you are the better.*
- *Caseworkers may not be able to call back the same day. Be patient! Caseworkers often have dozens of phone calls to return upon returning to the office. Do not leave multiple messages on the same day.*
- *Once you get your caseworker on the phone, you may not have time to chat over a long period of time. Be direct and precise in what you need so problems and concerns can be solved quickly.*
- *Give the caseworker a reasonable amount of time to return calls. Utilize the Unit Coordinator if it is an emergency and the caseworker has not returned your call in a reasonable amount of time.*
- *Voice mail is your friend! Leave an update on the child just for information sharing so the caseworker knows more about day-to-day issues. State your questions clearly so a caseworker can call back if necessary. Speak clearly and leave your phone number so the caseworker doesn't have to look it up.*

If You Use E-mail

- *E-mail is another option for contacting social workers with information. Caseworkers can often answer an email faster than return a phone call. If you have access to email, use it whenever possible.*
- *All social workers have an e-mail address. But talk to your workers about what they prefer. Some social workers don't use email as much as others. All OCS employees have the email address of `firstname.lastname@alaska.gov`.*
- *Just as in a phone call, be precise and clear about what you are asking for. Be brief. Don't bury your request toward the bottom of the email. The caseworker may never see it! Put it near the top and specify you need a response. Long involved emails may be skimmed and a question or request can be lost.*
- *Emails can be printed and included in the child's file. So use it as a way to update the caseworker on a child's progress. Indicate in your message that you are keeping the caseworker up-to-date and that you don't need a reply. But remember to always be professional. More people than your caseworker, including the birth parent or the tribe may see your communication so choose your words with care.*
- *When working with the team, consider copying the email to the caseworker and the guardian ad litem and the therapist so everyone has the same information.*
- *If a home visit is coming up, develop a list of things you need to discuss with the caseworker and send it in an email several days before the visit. This way, the caseworker can come prepared.*

Climbing the Ladder of Communication

1. *Contact the caseworker first. Leave a clear message and a way to contact you. Allow a reasonable amount of time before calling again. The instruction of OCS to their workers is to try to return phone calls from foster parents within 48 hours.*
2. *If you don't get a return call after leaving several messages, or if it is an emergency and you cannot wait for an answer, call the main number and ask for the Unit Coordinator for your social worker's unit.*
3. *If you still can't get what you need, contact the Unit Supervisor. (In some areas, the Unit Coordinator is the caseworker on call for that day.)*
4. *If you still can't get what you need, contact the Staff Manager or call the reception desk and ask to talk to someone in person. ■*

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1.0 Hour Self-Study Questionnaire

If you read the above entitled article and want foster parent training credit applied to your training requirement, fill out the following questionnaire and FAX it to 1-907-479-9666, mail to ACRF, 815 Second AVE STE 202, Fairbanks, AK 99701 or email to acrf@nwresource.org.

Name: _____ Email: _____
Only one person per questionnaire

Address: _____ Provider#: _____

1. All OCS employees have the email address of _____
_____.@alaska.gov. (Fill in the blanks)

2. More people than your caseworker, including the birth parent or the tribe, may see your e-mail communication.

_____ True

_____ False

3. Describe what makes a good voicemail message.

4. If you are calling, call _____ before the caseworker gets caught up in appointment such as court and visits. (Fill in the blank)

5. The instruction of OCS to their workers is to try to return phone calls from foster parents within _____ hours. (Fill in the blank)

6. Name one other person you can call if you can't get reach your caseworker.

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