

Reunification: OCS Policies, Practices, and Laws

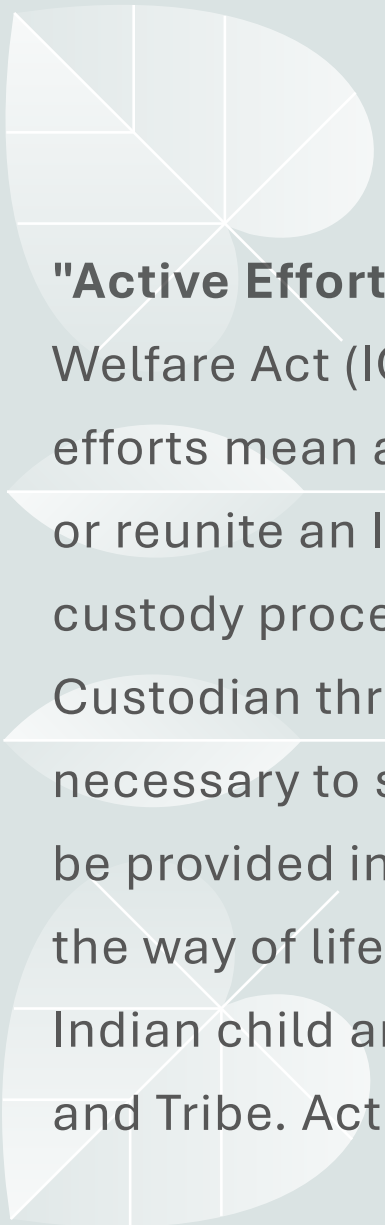


An exploration of OCS
policies and procedures
surrounding reunification
and Foster Families roles
in a child's path to
permanency





Definitions



Active Efforts

"Active Efforts": Active Efforts toward reunification, as required by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), require a higher level of services than “reasonable efforts”. Active efforts mean affirmative active, thorough and timely efforts intended primarily to maintain or reunite an Indian child with his or her family. Where an agency is involved in the child-custody proceedings, active efforts must involve assisting the parent or parents or Indian Custodian through the steps of a case plan with accessing or developing the resources necessary to satisfy the case plan. To the maximum extent possible, active efforts should be provided in a manner consistent with the prevailing social and cultural conditions and the way of life of the Indian child’s Tribe and should be conducted in partnership with the Indian child and the Indian child’s parents, extended family members, Indian custodians, and Tribe. Active efforts are to be tailored to the facts and circumstances of the case.

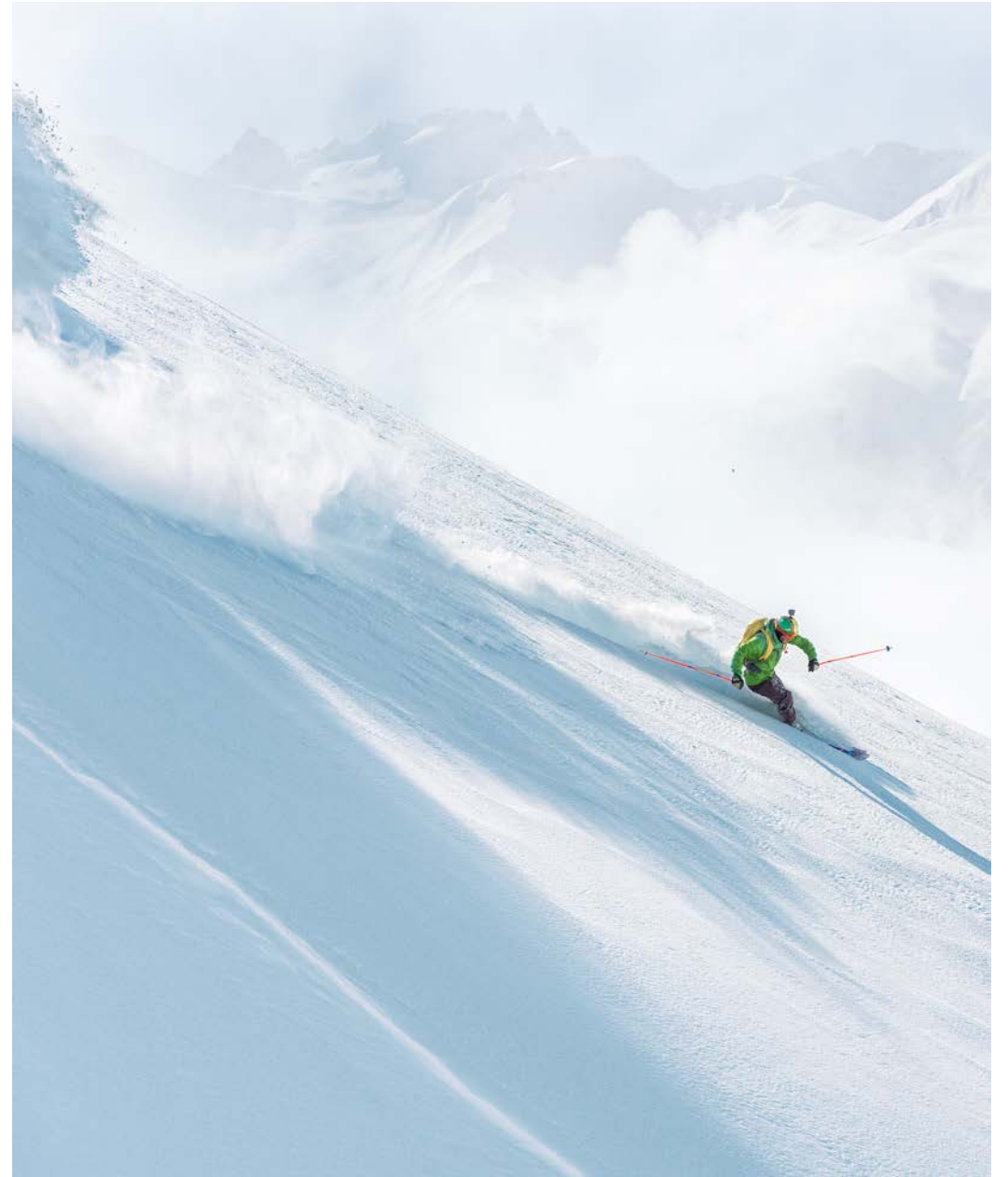
Reasonable Efforts:

Federal and state law require that the department makes reasonable efforts to prevent the unnecessary removal of a child from the child's home, to promote reunification with the P/G/C, and to finalize the permanency plan for the child.

- To prevent removal: Reasonable efforts to prevent a child's removal from the home, mean identifying and actively offering family support services aimed at addressing the safety concerns in the home that place the child at risk of harm. The department must refer the P/G/C to community-based services whenever such services are desired by the P/G/C and available in the P/G/C's community. Reasonable efforts also require that the department document its actions in providing services to the family. Various factors may affect the level of services necessary to constitute reasonable efforts, such as the parent or guardian's willingness to participate in services being offered, the parent or guardian's level of cooperation with the department and other service providers, or whether the parent or guardian is incarcerated or unavailable. The court looks at the entirety of the department's efforts from the time of its involvement with the family. Reasonable efforts to prevent removal are not required when it is necessary to remove the child from home immediately due to emergency circumstances.
- To promote reunification: Reasonable efforts toward reunification,, mean identifying and actively offering family support services that will assist the child's P/G/C in remedying the conduct or conditions in the home that cause the child to be in need of aid...
- Reasonable time: Reasonable Time is defined as a period of time that serves the best interests of the child, taking into account the child's age, emotional and developmental needs, and ability to form and maintain lasting attachments.



Permanency
planning starts from
the minute a child
enters custody



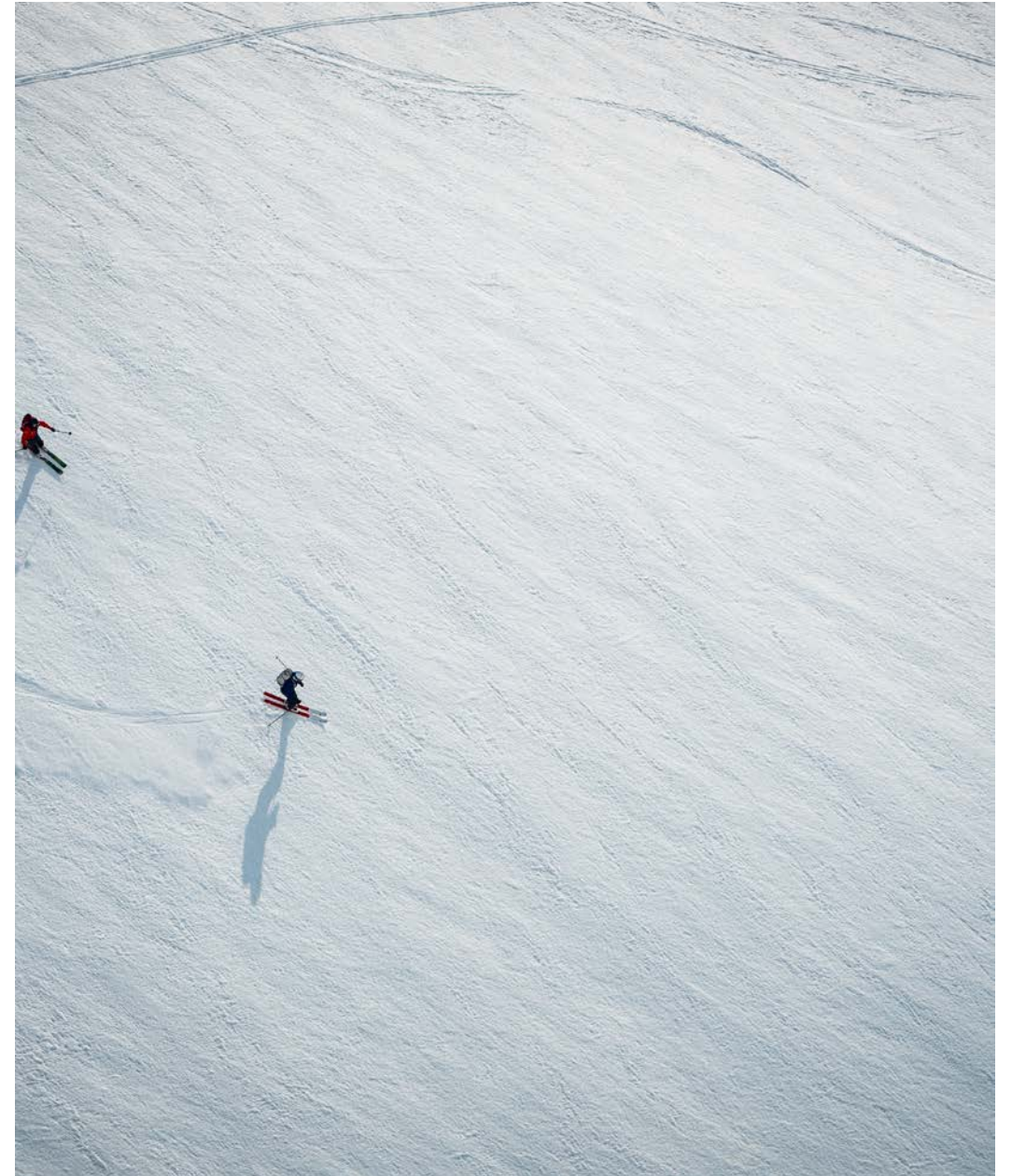
Permanency Timelines

1. *Reunification: The child should be back in the home within 12 months of coming into care;*
2. *Adoption: A child should be in a finalized adoption within 24 months of coming into care;*
3. *Guardianship: A child should be in a finalized guardianship within 18 months of coming into care;*
4. *Permanent Placement with a Fit and willing relative: Only appropriate for youth 16 and older when it is expected that the youth would be in care beyond their 18th birthday. This goal is preferable over APPLA; or*
5. *Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA): Only applies to youth 16 and older who have OCS Director approval. See CPS manual section [3.13.3](#) for further information on APPLA.*
6. *OCS has established Regional Permanency Specialists (RPS) for each region to function as experts regarding permanency for children in care. The RPS provides consultation and guidance on permanency for children and youth. Disagreements on the permanency goal should be escalated through the chain of command and reviewed by management. If alignment is not found, then the Division Operations Manager should be consulted.*



Reunification:

THIS GOAL SHOULD BE THE PRIMARY GOAL WHENEVER A CHILD IS REMOVED FROM A PARENT'S CARE, EXCEPT IN THE EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES. THE GOAL CAN APPLY TO REUNIFYING THE CHILD WITH BOTH OF THEIR PARENTS, THE PARENT FROM THE REMOVAL HOME, OR THE PARENT FROM THE NON-REMOVAL HOME. WHEN THE PERMANENCY GOAL IS REUNIFICATION, A CHILD SHOULD BE BACK IN THE HOME WITHIN 12 MONTHS OF COMING INTO CARE.



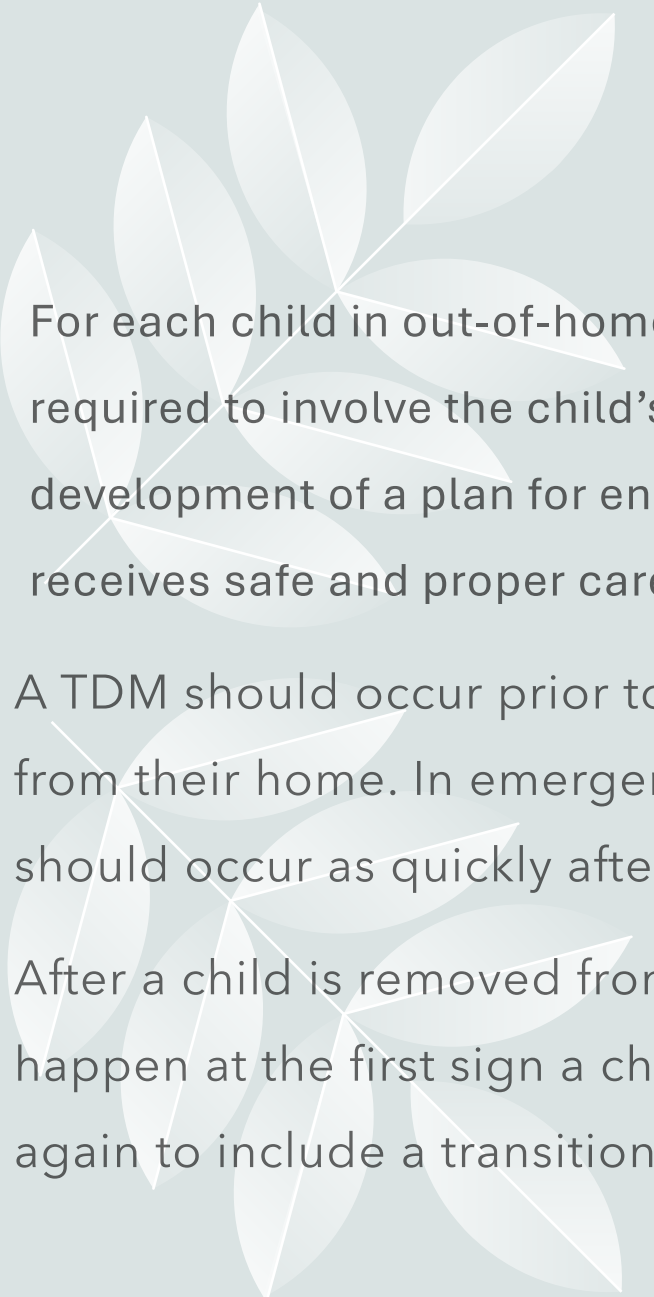
The background features a light gray color with decorative elements in the corners. In the top-left and top-right corners, there are clusters of stylized, light gray leaves with white outlines. In the bottom-left and bottom-right corners, there are stylized heart shapes, also in light gray with white outlines. A thin horizontal line is positioned below the main title.

Goal Setting

Primary Goals and Concurrent Planning

During the Family Services Assessment process, the PSS will discuss with each parent about the establishment of a permanency goal for the child and, if appropriate, the need for an alternate permanency goal. The initial goal in almost all cases will be for the child to remain in their home, or Reunification if placing the child out of the home.

Alternative permanency goals should be developed with parents and explained as a backup plan should the primary goal not work out. OCS will focus on the primary goal, but efforts will simultaneously be made toward the alternative goal such as relative/extended family search for potential permanent placement.

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Team Decision Making

- For each child in out-of-home placement, the state is required to involve the child's parent or guardian in the development of a plan for ensuring that the child receives safe and proper care, in the least restrictive manner possible.
- A TDM should occur prior to a child being removed from their home. In emergency situations the TDM should occur as quickly after the removal as possible.
- After a child is removed from the home a TDM should happen at the first sign a child may need to move again to include a transition for a Trial Home Visit.
- For Trial Home Visits, a TDM should be held considering unsupervised family contact and prior to any overnight contact.
- A Safety Plan will be created if there are active safety threats to ensure safety during the Trial Home Visit.

Case Planning

- Case planning is a vital role towards reunification
- A case plan must be developed within 60 days of when a child is removed from a home
 - The case plan must be jointly developed with the parent
 - A Tribal representative will be included when applicable
- Each case plan will be written using language that the P/G/C can understand and include services they request to meet their identified needs.
- The case plan evaluation process will occur every six months after development of the case plan or when a significant change occurs with the family that would require a case plan evaluation

Family Contact

- When a child has been removed from the parental home, the department should encourage frequent, regular, and reasonable contact between the child and the child's parent or guardian and family members.
- For a child who is placed in foster care, when the department finds that it is in the best interest of a child and that the foster family will not be placed in undue risk of harm, the department shall require foster parents to provide regular opportunities for contact with the child by the parents of the child and encourage foster parents to serve as mentors for facilitating family Reunification.
- When determining what constitutes reasonable contact with a family member, the department shall consider the nature and quality of the relationship that existed between the child and the family member before the child was committed to the custody of the department. The court may require the department to file a Family Contact Plan (visitation plan).
- The department may deny contact to the parents, guardian, or family members if there is Clear and Convincing Evidence that contact is not in the child's best interests. If the department denies contact to a parent or family member of a child, the department shall inform the parent or family member of a reason for the denial and of the parent's or Adult Family Member's right to request a review hearing as an interested person. A parent, adult family member, or guardian who is denied contact may request a review hearing. A non-party adult family member requesting a review hearing under this subsection is not eligible for publicly appointed legal counsel.

Family Contact Continued

- Children/youth, parents, siblings, guardians, Indian custodians and extended family members have a mutual right to family contact with one another, and they also have a mutual right to refuse family contact with each other.
- Frequent family contact facilitates permanency and contributes to the well-being of children/youth placed out-of-home.
- OCS will encourage regular and frequent contact between family members by supporting families' attending such activities as a child's/youth's school functions, a child's/youth's extra-curricular activities, medical or other appointments, family gatherings, community events, etc.
- The family contact must be supervised in the most familiar environment possible (preferably in parents' home), considering the safety of the child/youth. This will allow for the Initiation of the comprehensive assessment and will provide more accurate details regarding family functioning.
- Resource families and other out-of-home care providers will be advised of their role in family contact and that they are expected to:
 - have regular on-going contact with parent
 - permit parents to have contact with children/youth placed in their home;
 - support the positive intent of family contact;
 - provide transportation for the child/youth, if pre-arranged by PSS;
 - have the child/youth ready to participate in family contact at the agreed-upon time;
 - help the child/youth accept separation from parent;
 - record observations, problems, etc., that affect the child/youth before, during, or after the family contact and provide this information to the PS Specialist; and
 - support the child/youth following family contact.

Returning Home



THV: Trial Home Visit

- While OCS has custody of a child, a placement in the child's own home following an out-of-home placement is considered a trial home visit for the first six months, or for a different time period if ordered by the court.
 - Prior to placing a child at home for a trial home visit an evaluation will be completed to determine whether the household is a safe environment.
 - The Protective Services Specialist should take the following steps to prepare the child, the parents/guardian/Indian Custodian, and the provider at least two weeks prior to any trial home visit/return home.
- A Trial Home Visit should be considered when the safety threats that led to the need for out-of-home care have been mitigated by a change in parent's behavior or a sustainable safety plan already exists or can be put in place to mitigate the threat of harm.
 - Reunification of families when a child has been in an out-of-home placement can be exceptionally stressful time for the child and the parents, guardian, or Indian custodian.
 - After a Trial Home Visit has begun the department/PSS will:
 - Continue follow up until the parents, guardian, or Indian custodian have demonstrated an ability to continue to care for the child.
 - Maintain telephone contact and face-to-face contact with the child and the parents, guardian, or Indian custodian at least on a monthly basis, and more frequently if needed.
 - Contact the safety plan participants to verify that the plan still is working, and revise the plan if needed.
 - Continue to provide supports and referrals to the family as needed
 - Continue communication with providers and supports working with the family.
 - Release of custody of the children must be granted by the courts. If all legal parties are not in agreement with custody being released a contested hearing may be called by any legal party to the case.

- It is always the department's number one goal to support a child's to return to their home.
- Reunification can be stressful and overwhelming for all parties involved. For some foster families it can be difficult for a child bonded to your family to transition home.
- The department encourages biological families and foster care providers to cultivate relationships to better support the child and build long lasting connections whenever possible.
- Foster parents are encouraged to collaborate with primary case workers, licensing staff, Alaska Center for Resource Families, or any other community supports to develop their knowledge, skills, and understanding of childhood trauma and how we can all support reunification.





Thank you

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Licensing and Team Decision Making

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