



February 28, 2014

Dear Senator Coghill, Chair, and Members of the Senate Judiciary,

The Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force respectfully submits this letter of support for the passage of CSSB 171, regarding Multidisciplinary Child Protection Teams (MDTs).

The genesis of the Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force (CJA) is the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (42 U.S.C. 5101) and the Victims of Crime Act (42 U.S.C. 10601). The CJA was founded in 2002 and is federally mandated and funded. The 21 members of the task force are from across the State of Alaska and include representatives from the fields of medicine, law, child protection, juvenile justice, mental health and education. Our mission is to: *Identify areas where improvement is needed in the statewide response to child maltreatment, particularly child sexual abuse, make recommendations, and take actions to improve the system.*

The CJA believes that MDTs greatly improve the statewide response to child maltreatment because they provide a coordinated response to child abuse investigations, which in turn creates better criminal and civil investigations and prosecutions of child abuse, reduces trauma and provides better services to the affected child and family. However, AS 47.14.300, the statute addressing the formation and operation of MDTs that was enacted in 1998, needs some changes to improve MDT functioning. We believe that the passage of CSSB 171 would bring about this result in several ways.

First, some MDT members are interpreting AS 47.14.300 to mean that if a representative from the Office of Children's Services (OCS) is not present at an MDT investigation or meeting, it is not an MDT under this statute and thus not subject to the protections provided in AS 47.14.300. Usually both law enforcement and OCS are part of an investigation; however, there are some investigations that are only criminal matters, not child protection matters. For example, if a child is abused outside the home and there is a protective parent in the home, OCS may not be involved. CSSB 171 would clarify that although OCS still maintains a role in the initial creation of MDTs, OCS does not need to be present at every MDT investigation in order for an investigation to be considered an MDT under this statute. In addition, this bill would clarify that OCS is not the only MDT member that can refer child protection cases to the MDT for review. (See sections 1, 3 and 6.)



Second, AS 47.14.300 currently lists who may be on an MDT, and CSSB 171 would highlight who the core MDT members are and expand the list of other potential members who may be invited to serve on an MDT by the core members. Input from these other persons can, depending on the circumstances, provide valuable assistance to the investigation or case review. (See section 2.)

Third, AS 47.17.010 and AS 47.17.033(c), statutes relating to child abuse investigations, currently state that an investigation should avoid subjecting a child to “multiple interviews” or “more than one interview”; however, sometimes it is necessary (and best practice) to have more than one interview of a child because, for example, the child is not able to describe the extent of the abuse in one interview, or because there is need for a follow-up interview due to information the subsequent investigation revealed. CSSB 171 uses the term “duplicative interviews” to clarify that repeated interviews that merely go over the same material covered in previous interviews should be avoided. (See sections 1, 5, and 6.)

Finally, CSSB 171 would require that a team meet at least once a month. Many MDTs meet on a twice-monthly basis, but the CJA recognizes that smaller communities may not be able to meet that frequently. The CJA believes that setting a monthly minimum highlights the importance of having an active, ongoing team to review ongoing investigations and cases.

Thank you very much for your consideration. If we can be of assistance or a resource for you please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force

Jan Rutherford, Chair