

Presbyterian Hospitality House

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Members of the Alaska State Legislature:

Thank you for the opportunity to support an act designed to increase the quality of life for children in Alaska. At Presbyterian Hospitality House in both Fairbanks and Wasilla, we often see young people who are ready to go home but have no family resource to welcome them back. This lack of a home may be because of a natural parent who feels they cannot have a older child mix with their younger children, a situation where the parent is incarcerated or drug addicted, or all too often, a failed adoption. Many of these young people still need parenting and support so we seek foster parents who are eminently qualified to help meet our mission of intentionally creating a brighter, safer environment for Alaskan children. Sometimes a bond occurs between the foster parents and the child in their care. With careful thought and counseling by one of our 9 therapists the child and foster family may reach a decision to seek adoption. What a tragedy for all involved when a well meaning OCS worker, usually new to the "Case" decides that another placement might be better. It is even more of a trauma for children ladled "reactive attachment disorder" who have finally worked through this, now, significant relationship.

All too often children who are in out-of-home care under AS 47.14 find themselves alone with only a tenuous bond to an OCS worker for protection. If that worker is transferred or leaves the job, the child can languish in the system with no permanent plan for their future. Under Alaska law a youth who faces the unfortunate circumstance of being placed in foster care is entitled to a placement that is in his or her "best interests". Federal law and rules internal to the Office of Children's Services (OCS) note that a search of family members and friends who are akin to family members should be completed in a timely manner, usually considered being within 30 days.

HB 54 puts into statute an additional protection, which is not currently addressed by OCS statutes or policy. This ACT is warranted due to the continuous high turnover rate for OCS workers. Additionally some OCS workers (over 30% a year) are very new, and many don't make it as social workers beyond one year or two years. Requiring that a more experienced OCS supervisor document that a family search has been thoroughly conducted will ensure that Alaskan children are protected, and when possible residing with a family member or kin.

Furthermore, this Act (HB 54) stipulates that an OCS supervisor will be required to verify that a diligent search for family members has occurred. If it has not, the OCS line worker will be directed to complete that search, to the supervisor's satisfaction

It is generally accepted in the field of foster care services that, if a good family placement is available, keeping a child in their family is often the placement that is the best interest of the child as well as the community. This provision is expected to be cost-neutral.

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A Member of the United Way of the Tanana Valley



HB 54 supporting document letter Presbyterian Hospitality House 2-20-13