



The Honorable Les Gara  
Alaska House of Representatives  
Alaska State Capitol, Room 400  
Juneau, Alaska 99801

February 3, 2015

Dear Representative Gara,

On behalf of the First Focus Campaign for Children (FFCC), a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, I would like to share our support for House Bills No. 27 and No. 28 introduced on January 21, 2015. At FFCC, we believe that promoting the safety, permanency and well-being of children and youth whose lives are impacted by child welfare should be a top priority for all States. These two bills have the potential to significantly improve outcomes for Alaska's most vulnerable children in each of these areas.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that children and youth do best and are most able to cope with and overcome trauma when they have permanent connections to caring and supportive adults. For most children, their parents, supported by extended family and communities, provide this stable care and support. Sadly, for children and youth in foster care, these critical family and community connections have often been disrupted. While these disruptions have devastating and lasting effects on a child or youth's cognitive, social, emotional and identity development, such effects can often be mitigated through effective child welfare programs and services that connect children and youth to families and support them in forging a successful transition to adulthood.

Research has also shed light on the dismal outcomes facing youth who age out of foster care, often disconnected and unprepared for adult life - outcomes that have been shown to have much higher long-range costs than earlier investments that can be made to prevent them. Alaska's child welfare programs and services can be greatly strengthened by the provisions in House Bills No. 27 and No. 28 and ensure that those in or leaving foster care are connected to family, to a community, and that they are being prepared to not only survive but to thrive in adulthood as healthy, productive Alaskan citizens.

First Focus stands prepared to work with you to ensure swift passage of both House Bills No. 27 and No. 28, which take critical steps to improve the lives of children and youth in the care of the State of Alaska. If you have any questions or comments, need additional information, or would like us to provide testimony please contact Dianna Walters at [DiannaW@FirstFocus.net](mailto:DiannaW@FirstFocus.net).

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley  
President

**Facing Foster Care in Alaska**  
**PO Box 92644**  
**Anchorage, AK 99509**



**Representative Les Gara**  
**Alaska State Capitol, Room 400**  
**Juneau, Alaska 99801**

**February 1, 2015**

**Representative Les Gara:**

As current and former foster youth of Alaska's child welfare system, we would like to express our support for House Bill 27. This bill offers improvements to the child welfare system for the more than 2,400 children and youth in foster care in Alaska. We believe all aspects of this bill could significantly improve the lives of vulnerable children in Alaska.

**Relative and Community Placements**

The requirement that the Office of Children's Services (OCS) find a relative placement or a community placement when feasible, for emergency placements can help avoid placing children with strangers in foster care or even outside of their home communities. We believe that every child deserves to remain with family to avoid being re-traumatized and bounced between homes in a broken system. Relative placements provide for a child's need for safety, well-being and permanency, and can play a pivotal role in achieving reunification.

**Timely Permanency**

We know all too well, the repercussions of long term foster care. This bill requires that if a child has not been placed in a permanent home after 1 year, OCS must show to a Court that it is taking all feasible steps to secure permanency. After 2 years without permanency, there will be court hearings every 6 months to establish that all feasible steps are being taken. When reunification is not an option, we want to ensure OCS is working to find a forever family for all children lingering in the system.

**Aging out of Foster Care**

Many of our members have been released from foster care without stable housing, a high school diploma, and minimal skills to be self-sufficient. This bill requires OCS to establish in court that a release from custody before a youth turns 21 is in their best interests.

**Education and Training**

Many foster youth have a desire to complete their education and start a career. This bill requires AS 47.18.320(a)(2) to go from providing "basic" education and training to "education and training, including education and training that are consistent with the

individual's work and educational potential." This section also requires OCS to make a report to the legislature if it does not have adequate resources to meet this requirement.

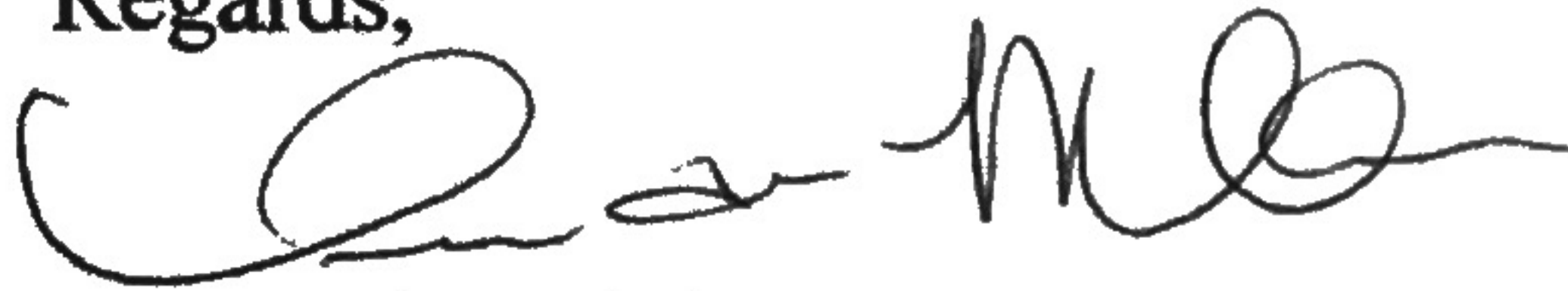
### **Foster/Adoptive Parent Recruitment**

There are more than 2,400 children in foster care. That's more than 1% of our overall child population. HB 27 requires the Department of Health and Social Services to work with the Governor's Office to recruit foster/adoptive parents when needed. It also requires adequate staffing to ensure caseworker have the time and resources to meet the needs of thousands of Alaskan families.

### **Information Sharing Between OCS and Tribes**

OCS often receives multiple reports of abuse and neglect before they need to take action and intervene with a family. Tribes have a variety of resources to offer families, to prevent further intervention from the state. Allowing the release of cases that OCS does not pick up to tribal leaders, as a sort of early-warning system could prevent the removal of and placement of children in foster care. It's important that we catch families early and work to build healthier communities.

Regards,



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