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January 14, 2015

Representative Les Gara
State Capital
Juneau, AK 99810

RE: House Bill 27 and House Bill 28 Letter of Support

Dear Representative Gara,

I commend you for your work on improving services for Alaska children and their families, who experience abuse and neglect, in the many years you have served as a State Legislator. These two new pieces of legislation continue your work, and will enhance the reactive system that the State provides when children are at risk. HB 27 focuses upon reducing the trauma experienced by the abused and neglected child by seeking substitute care to be provided by family members or people previously know to the child. It also seeks to insure that children obtain permanency as quickly as possible and that movement among foster parents and schools are minimal. The trauma of children receiving multiple placements and attending numerous schools adds to the abuse and neglect that they already are experiencing. This represents system abuse

HB 28 seeking additional resources for children transitioning out of foster care must occur. Services must continue into the person's 20s. The average age of a majority of youth in the U.S. reaching self-sufficiency has extended into the mid 20s. Many of these youth have not experienced the trauma of the foster child. Some non-profit agencies are working with youth in transition to independence programs, and these need to be extended to all youth who are transitioning from foster care. If insufficient resources are provided to the youth, failure is guaranteed. A college degree or skilled training certification will lead to self-sufficiency. There is an abundance of data that supports this.

The lack of adequate services and resources compound the problem resulting in high caseloads, heavy turnover of staff, and the lack of support from other organizations serving children, including law enforcement. The Office of Children's Services remains isolated from other State, municipal, for profit and non-profit resources that must enter the arena of child protection. All of these players need to participate in the intake and assessment, placement in substitute care, removal of the conditions of abuse and neglect, reunification or adoption, treatment of trauma, and transition to functional adulthood. To rely solely on the Office of Children's Services does not work and has never worked. Recently OCS has entered into contracting with other organizations for some services but needs to do much, much more. The active recruitment of foster and adoptive parents will be more effective if it is outsourced to other organizations with built in incentives for success. More emphasis is needed in recruitment of parents that are the same ethnicity/culture of the child.

As you are aware, our child protective service system is strictly reactive. To eliminate child abuse and neglect in Alaska the following interventions are required. Eliminate all children living in poverty. Eliminate the use of violence as a problem solving method, and replace with more effective interventions to remedy problems. Provide adequate nutrition and health care to all children. Provide mentors to at risk parents and parental effectiveness training, with incentives. Eliminate classism and discrimination toward vulnerable populations regarding housing, education, and employment. Provide universal education from pre-school through PhD. programs.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick M. Cunningham".

Patrick M Cunningham, DSW, MSW
Associate Professor of Social Work