

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

House Bill 27

Sponsor Statement

HB 27: Child Protection and Opportunity Act

House Bill 27 aims to improve multiple aspects of the lives of foster youth in an effective, but cost-efficient manner. These provisions are expected to be cost-neutral.

Reducing the Amount of Time Children Wait for a Permanent Home

This bill aims to speed up the process for placing a foster child in a permanent home to meet national standards. At existing proceedings, the court shall determine all reasonable steps are being taken to secure permanency. Bouncing children between foster homes is harmful, and the national standard is that a permanent home be found within 12-24 months.

Ensuring Children Are Prepared to Leave Foster Care

This bill requires the Office of Children's Services to demonstrate in court that releasing a foster child from custody prior to age 21 is in the best interests of the child. This provision reflects the fact that many foster youth are not ready to leave care at age 18 or 19, and that roughly 20% of youth end up homeless after leaving care.

Providing Foster Children with Quality Educations

This bill revises the requirement under AS 47.18.320(a)(2) requiring the state to provide "basic" education and training. Instead, the statute will require the state to provide "assistance in obtaining educational and vocational training."

Increasing the Number of Foster Parents

This bill also works to increase the number of foster/adoptive parents by requiring Health and Social Services to work with the Governor's Office to recruit foster/adoptive parents. Currently there is a great shortage of foster parents while 850 youth are awaiting adoptive homes.

Improving Collaboration with Alaska Native Communities

This bill encourages communication between Alaska Native entities and the Office of Children's Services so that Native groups are aware of significant challenges a child may be facing. This section will be implemented by Office of Children's Services regulation so that the department may determine the most appropriate language for determining this goal.

Ensuring that Relative Placements are Prioritized

This bill also requires Office of Children's Services to continue to seek relative placements after the initial 30-day search period where appropriate. Often a relative placement is the healthiest placement for a child.

Increasing Stability in Schools

This provision works to reduce the number of times a foster child moves from one school to another. Under federal law, homeless youth are allowed to finish their school term in the same school when a family moves, and this is important to help youth avoid delay in their academic progress.