



# Alaska CASA Program

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March 20, 2017

The Honorable Les Gara  
Room 511, State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99501

RE: HB 151

Dear Representative Gara and Representative Spohnholz,

My name is LeeAnn Reicks and I am the State Director for the Alaska Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. CASAs are court appointed volunteers who advocate for children who are in the custody of the Department of Health and Social Services due to abuse and neglect.

We would all like to believe that all children in the child protection system are treated like any other child in Alaska but this is far from the truth. When the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) files a petition on a child in court, the result in most the cases, is DHHS is given legal custody of the child. Once a child is committed to the legal custody of the Department, this relationship imposes certain duties and responsibilities to the child which are carried out by its Child Protection Specialists. Child Protection Specialists in Alaska carry caseloads of up to 30 or more cases when the Child Welfare League of America's nationally recognized standards are between 12 and 17 cases. With the current level of cases, Child Protection Specialists work long hours attempting to take care of both the children and families they serve.

I have witnessed many very capable, experienced and dedicated Child Protection Specialists who have given their all to provide for the basic needs of all the children on their caseload. This is exceedingly challenging considering the size of their caseloads. Workers spend much of their time just making sure children are housed and safe without any extra time to provide guidance and support for each unique child. In addition, despite working hard to make sure that children are reunified as quickly as possible or placed with relatives, the workers often have no choice but to place children in foster homes. Even with giving as much attention as possible to each individual child,

the sheer number of cases make it impossible to give the attention each worker would like to give and the child is viewed by the community as a “foster kid”.

After a few months of working themselves to the point of exhaustion and experiencing supreme discouragement, often, a worker concludes that no matter how hard they work and how many hours they put in they will never be able to meet the many needs of the youth and his family. They leave the agency and another enthusiastic worker is hired who basically must start all over developing relationships with the children, families, and other parties to the case, which can result in delaying permanency for the child.

Because of high worker caseloads, new workers are often thrown into the fray immediately and are repeatedly called to make important decisions regarding children when they have little history on the family or facts of the case. I have listened to CASA volunteers vent their frustrations about workers they worked closely with and have created a plan to support the child only to have the worker leave after a few months.

With the high caseloads workers have right now, this ugly cycle will continue and our children and families will continue to suffer. When they have lower caseloads, they will be able to afford the time and attention all children need and deserve. Children in custody frequently come into the system traumatized and with special needs. They need workers who have the time to get to know them, evaluate them, and meet their unique needs. In the current system, children get the opposite, an overworked and overburdened worker who sees the youth monthly but is not able to give them the time and attention the worker would like to give to the child and her family.

Sincerely,



LeeAnn Reicks  
Alaska CASA Director

10225 Main Tree Drive  
Anchorage, AK 99507

March 14, 2017

Letter of Support - HB 151

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in wholehearted support of HB 151, the “Children Deserve a Loving Home Act.” This bill contains much needed reforms to the child protection system, and it builds on some of the gains made with the passage of last session’s HB 27. I have highlighted several provisions of HB 151 that I believe will be particularly beneficial to children and youth involved in the system.

Just so you know where I’m coming from... I spent 25 years as a guardian ad litem, advocating on behalf of abused and neglected children in Alaska. After my “retirement” seven years ago, I have continued as a volunteer guardian litem through the Alaska Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program. In addition, I serve on the executive board of directors of the non-profit corporation Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA), whose mission it is to improve the foster care system. I am also nearing completion of a comprehensive training curriculum for all the judges, lawyers, children’s advocates, tribal representatives, and OCS staff who handle Child in Need of Aid cases. I feel that my experience has given me a good sense of the strengths and weaknesses of Alaska’s child protection system, as well as a recognition of how the law can benefit the children and families who come before the courts.

One important theme throughout HB 151 is the focus on maintaining family connections:

- Two provisions address what is often the most important relationship for children and youth in state custody - their connection to their sisters and brothers. While the law already requires OCS to place siblings together when possible, HB 151 addresses the devastating situation of siblings being separated. All too often, on-going contact between separated siblings is not a priority of caseworkers and caregivers, and it is the children who suffer. Under HB 151, OCS will have the authority and responsibility to give siblings contact information for each other, even if a sibling has been adopted by an unrelated person, and to encourage caregivers to provide opportunities for sibling contact.
- Several provisions of HB 151 focus on making relative placements a reality for those children and youth who cannot remain in the home with their parents. While existing law requires OCS to search for relatives at all stages of a case, from the initial removal to placement changes to permanent placement, HB 151 requires that an OCS supervisor certify that a relative search was in fact conducted at each stage; and, if the search was not conducted, that the supervisor ensure it occurs quickly. In addition, OCS is required to assist

relatives who wish to be licensed as foster care providers to fill out an application - a daunting task for most people - so they can receive the financial support they need to care for the children. Also, OCS is directed to make a timely decision on the foster care license application (within 45 days, if feasible), so the children do not have to remain in limbo indefinitely. These provisions will help ensure that children and youth are placed in a timely manner with their relatives.

Other important provisions of HB 151 relate to older foster youth:

- One section of HB 151 requires OCS caseworkers to engage youth 14 and over in the development of their case plans and their permanent plans. Youth are permitted to choose up to two adults to support and advocate for them at planning meetings so their voice can be heard. This provision is important to ensure the youth's wishes are articulated, which in turn will result in greater buy-in and cooperation for achieving a successful permanent plan.
- Another section of HB 151 requires OCS to provide youth 16 and over who are being released from state custody with important documents (or with assistance in obtaining the documents), such as birth certificates, social security cards, medical records and drivers licenses/ID cards, to assist them in making the transition to adulthood. Too often, youth exit state custody without the most basic documents required to obtain housing, employment, and medical care.

The provisions I've highlighted are just some of the provisions contained in HB 151 that will benefit children and their families as they navigate the child protection system. I hope the Alaska legislature will continue its efforts to make life better for Alaska's children by passing this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Barbara L. Malchick  
[barbmalch@gmail.com](mailto:barbmalch@gmail.com)  
907-229-9496



alaska childrens trust

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14 March 2017

Rep. Les Gara  
Alaska State Legislature  
Capital Building, Rm 515  
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: HB 151 – Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Representative Les Gara,

Alaska Children’s Trust (ACT) extends its support for HB 151, Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. ACT is the statewide lead organization focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

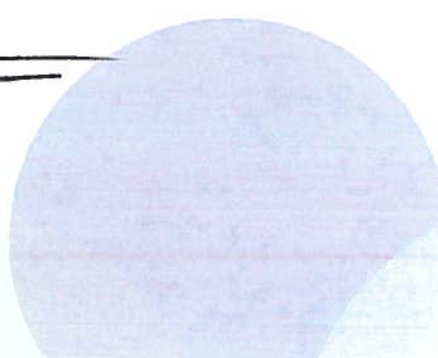
Each year, we have thousands of children and families go through the Alaska child welfare system (OCS). Nearly 50% of the children are under the age of 5 years. Abuse and neglect is occurring during the most critical time of a child’s life. Research shows that abuse and neglect affect children throughout their lives. In addition to immediate injuries, abuse and neglect can disrupt brain development, weaken children’s bodies, and cause long-term health problems. Children often adopt high-risk behaviors to cope with the pain of abuse and neglect, and those also can lead to chronic illness, disease, homelessness and other social ills.

It is important to ensure the safety net that is designed to protect children from the adversity of child abuse and neglect does not cause further trauma. When OCS case workers have high caseloads, it is difficult for them to provide the support and attention a child and the family needs to gain the resilience to overcome this experience. With high turnover of staff, children are unable to establish an important bond, which is one of the most important protective factors in building resilience.

HB 151 addresses these core challenges faced by OCS. By reducing high caseloads and high worker turnover, workers will be able to ensure the purpose of the safety net is achieved. When these challenges are addressed, it will help strengthen components across the entire system. Together we can prevent child abuse and neglect.

Sincerely,

Trevor J. Storrs  
Executive Director



**Laura Chartier**

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**From:** Ruth Rosewarne Kimerer [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 21, 2017 2:20 PM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Subject:** Letter in support of HB 151

To whom it may concern,

Please accept this email as a letter of support for the proposed changes to HB 151, as presented by the Honorable Les Gara. As a participant in the Big Brothers Big Sister Sync Program, I have been a 'Big' to a young adult. In the very short time she has been in my life (since June of 2016) I have witnessed the following.

She was placed in a foster home with anywhere from 3 - 6 children in foster care. Her foster parent, at one point, decided to expel all the foster kids in her care from her home, sending these children's OCS case workers in a flurry of chaos as they scrambled to find new homes for the kids. This left my 'Little' in despair, feeling immensely unloved and insecure as she didn't understand why she was being punished. The new foster placement was a bad fit and she was subsequently put back into 'emergency' placement with the former foster parent - again with 4 - 6 other children in "emergency" placement. This environment started to spoil pretty quickly which led my Little to runaway. She was then forced to undergo a psychiatric evaluation at Prov by her former foster parent (tore from her bed at Covenant House at 1 am and then left at Providence Hospital with no communication until 5 pm the following day!). This former foster confiscated all her belongings and has since left my Little with none of her personal belonging. This has been ongoing for over 2.5 weeks. And lastly, her OCS case worker quit right as this was happening and she has had NO contact from anyone at OCS since. She is 16.

The foster system in Alaska is in dire need of more support - more people and more resources. My main motivation for writing today is because these children are just that - CHILDREN. They are forced into a situation that is not of their making and not their fault. They are placed in situations of high stress, uncertainty, and instability. The result of which is children who become permanently scarred and often times, unable to learn the right skills and achieve the right mental stability to prosper as adults. We owe them every opportunity.

I urge the Legislature to support the changes to HB 151, to support our most at-risk population and give these kids a fighting chance.

Respectfully,

Ruth Rosewarne Kimerer  
907.350.6301  
4500 Southpark Bluff Dr.  
Anchorage, AK 99516

**From:** Alves, Anita L (DOA) [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Friday, March 17, 2017 12:18 PM  
**To:** Rep. Les Gara  
**Subject:** Child in Need of Aid Cases

Dear Representative Gara,

I am responding to your request for input on the type of cases filed in court by OCS in which they are petitioning for legal custody or supervision of the children involved. If OCS removes the children from the home prior to court they will file an emergency petition. If there is no removal, OCS will file a non-emergency petition with the court and request legal custody or supervision at the court hearing. They may or may not request removal at that time.

In order to give you an idea of the facts involved in the petitions OCS files, I reviewed petitions that came into our Anchorage office from January 1, 2017 through March 10, 2017. I supervise the Anchorage Child Advocacy Office which covers all of Anchorage, Dillingham, Naknek, King Salmon, Valdez, and Cordova. I try and review all petitions filed so that I have an idea of the cases assigned to staff guardians ad litem (GAL) and can see any patterns that emerge. There are cases in which we have a conflict that are assigned to contractors. Our office does receive the majority of the cases. From the cases I review and from feedback from my staff, nearly 100% of the cases involve issues that affect child safety, through either imminent harm or a high risk of harm to the child, and set forth valid reasons for OCS to file with the court.

Here is a snapshot of the petitions filed by OCS from January 1, 2017 through March 10, 2017. The information I gathered is based on my review of the petitions and looking at the facts as stated in the petitions. It does not address whether a child has been removed or whether the court has found reasonable/active efforts on the part of OCS. The snapshot does reflect the serious issues facing Alaskan families and their needs for assistance.

During this time period our office was assigned as the GAL in 71 cases. These cases involved 116 children. Of the petitions, 33 were non-emergency petitions and 36 were emergency petitions. The following is a list of the issues (more than one is often seen in a single petition) set forth:

- 27 alleged domestic violence and mental injury
- 18 alleged alcohol issues
- 36 alleged methamphetamine/heroin/cocaine abuse
- 10 alleged physical abuse
- 11 alleged sexual abuse
- 33 alleged neglect
- 6 alleged abandonment by the parents
- 3 alleged medical neglect

In all the petitions, the court found probable cause for the state's involvement. This results in continued involvement of OCS and continued court oversight.

In reviewing the petitions, I noted 9 newborns that tested positive for numerous substances at birth, including meth and heroin. It has also become a standard practice of OCS to request hair follicle testing of children who have lived in their parents' home in which the parents used meth or heroin. Many of the hair follicle tests done on children come back positive for exposure to drugs, meth in particular since it can be absorbed through the skin.

While it is rare for a petition filed by OCS to be seen as frivolous, it does not mean that there is not argument and litigation over other issues such as placement, family contact, active/reasonable efforts. If those issues cannot be worked out, the parties will go before the judge in a contested hearing. There are checks and balances to the system. However, large caseloads of all participants, OCS, parents' attorneys, GALs, ICWA workers as well as lack of resources take a toll on the families that we want to serve and effect reunification. That said, in my 27 years as a GAL in the Child Advocacy Section of OPA, it is clear that the professionals in this field do their jobs because of their beliefs that children are better off with their parents or extended family members, that people can change, and that good outcomes for families and their children are possible.

Sincerely,

Anita L. Alves  
Supervising Attorney/guardian ad litem



**Laura Chartier**

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**From:** Lesa Hollen [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 21, 2017 12:39 PM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Subject:** House Bill 151

Please support this house bill for our children. We have the highest violence against Alaska women & children in the United States. An ounce of prevention (foster care) is worth a pound of cure (private prisons). Why keep putting the health of our children into greedy prison institutions? We use to protect our youth and weak. While I was working at the Boys & Girls Home (4th level lockdown facility), I observed only the smart ones survived this long and reached a place of safety & caring. The things done to them by their own parents is unfathomable and truly disgusting. They need help before they are truly lost in fear, abuse, violence, and terror that is beyond anything we could comprehend. We need to stop burying our heads in the sand and act to help our abused and lost children, before they are the ones holding you at gun point. They need education on how to handle stress & life positively. "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance". It's our fault for giving them a bad 21st century education. It's our responsibility to help them. Love to you all.

--

Sincerely,

Lesla Hollen, (Alaskan White Dragon)

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, while imagination encompasses the world" Albert Einstein

Neuroscience Visualization M.S.  
Dept of Biochemistry & Chemistry  
University of Alaska Fairbanks  
(907) 978-8784

**Laura Chartier**

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**From:** Alyse Galvin [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 21, 2017 1:39 PM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Cc:** Rep. Les Gara; Rep. Andy Josephson  
**Subject:** HB 151

Dear legislators,

I am asking for your support of HB 151. The chances of foster children ending up in prison is very high- 40%! Let's improve that- not only for the betterment of these lives but also for our community! Prison is expensive. This is so alarming and screams of a need for change.

This bill sets out to ensure better placement, inclusion of children 14 and up to help with decision making and brings the numbers of children per case manager to a reasonable amount. I support it! And I support our state front ending these costs which will result in a likelihood of foster children becoming self sustaining, loved adults!

If you cannot support all of the pieces in this bill, please make amendments so that as MUCH of these important elements as possible pass.

We must do better by all of Alaska's children!

I appreciate your very long hours of hard work for the Alaskans in our state!!

Many thanks,  
Alyse Galvin

Please retain this letter for public record.  
3117 Cottonwood Street  
Anchorage, Alaska 99508  
907-884-2299

Sent from my iPhone

## Laura Chartier

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**From:** Sharon Waisanen [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 22, 2017 7:55 AM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Subject:** Support HB 151

I support Rep. Les Gara's bill, HB 151 concerning foster children. At a time when there are many children in foster care, an emphasis on stable, loving families is critical to their success in later life. Whatever money can be allocated to support foster children to grow up in loving, caring homes will only pay off into the future. We must be realistic in helping social workers as they place foster children rather than overwhelming them with unrealistic caseloads in their efforts to make sure these children are successful.

When we look at resources in Alaska, our children truly are our greatest resource. It is up to us to care enough.

Sharon Waisanen  
44932 Eddy Hill Dr.  
Soldotna, AK  
262-6298

**Laura Chartier**

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**From:** Sarah Ferrency [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 21, 2017 3:31 PM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Subject:** Support foster care reform bill

As a formerly licensed foster parent and career educator, I support HB 151 which adds supports for foster youth and OCS. Thank you!

Sarah Ferrency  
Sitka

**Laura Chartier**

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**From:** Dael Devenport [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 21, 2017 12:22 PM  
**To:** Laura Chartier  
**Subject:** Support HB 151

Hi Laura,

Please support HB 151 Children Deserve a Loving Home. This bill will improve success for foster youth and get them into permanent, healthy loving homes.

Thank you!

Dael

With compassion for all beings