

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Sponsor Statement

HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Foster youth in Alaska are not getting the chances they deserve. The *Children Deserve a Loving Home Act* aims to increase the likelihood that foster youth will have the same opportunities to succeed, and same health and well-being, as their peers. When roughly 40% of our foster youth end up homeless at some point in their lives after leaving care, and roughly 20% end up in jail, it's a call for reform. The nation's leading foster care non-profit, Casey Family Programs, has the laudable goal of reducing the number of youth languishing in foster care by 50% by 2020. Alaska should join that effort. We should achieve it not by leaving youth in neglect and abuse to keep our foster care numbers down, but by getting neglected and abused youth out of the system, into permanent, loving homes, including back with their families when safe, much more quickly than we do now.

It's been well documented by many sources that when case workers have more cases than they can handle, outcomes for children and families suffer. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) recommends a maximum caseload of no more than approximately 12 cases or families per worker – but most workers carry caseloads that significantly exceed that amount. Conditions in rural Alaska, especially with the challenges of remote travel, make even a 12-family caseload overwhelming. Beyond risking poorer outcomes, high caseloads contribute to worker turnover, a costly problem that slows timelines to permanency, harming youth and families.

Last year, the Legislature added positions to OCS to move Alaska closer to the standards in this bill. This has given us an unprecedented opportunity to attain the best practice standards called for in HB 151, to vastly improve the lives of children and families, and move more children out of foster care into a loving home more quickly.

This bill seeks to improve both caseload levels and worker retention by implementing significant new training and workforce standards. New workers would receive a minimum of six weeks of training and carry no more than six cases/families in the first three months, and 12 families in the first six months. That would meet federal standards and result in a 75% federal matching during the training period. For other workers, this bill establishes a statewide average caseload of no more than 13 families per worker. This caseload level contains costs while staying as close as possible to a nationally recognized standard of 12. Lower caseloads are recognized to improve outcomes, enable faster timelines to permanency, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended.

In addition, this bill provides for a number of other changes to support the well-being of youth in care, and to promote quicker timelines for children returning to, or finding new, permanent

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homes. The bill promotes contact with siblings and previous out-of-home caregivers to maintain a network of support for them. It also sets timelines for decisions on foster care home license applications, and for variances (for family members who may not be licensed foster parents).

The bill also makes it easier for youth and foster parents to engage in normal day-to-day activities, such as going on vacation without prior caseworker approval. In addition, youth at age 14 are empowered to participate in their case plan. In addition, the bill strengthens the requirement to search for relatives before placing a child with foster parents, recognizing that placements with family are often the best and most loving option for youth.

Providing support to, and a voice for, youth and families who need our help is perhaps one of our most important duties in public service. This bill seeks to give caseworkers the tools they need to carry out their duties and help children to move out of the system and into permanent homes more quickly and safely. It creates an environment where loving homes are the priority for all youth.