



**MAT-SU HEALTH
FOUNDATION**

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March 15, 2018

Representative Les Gara
Alaska State Legislature
120 4th Street
State Capitol Room 511
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Representative Gara:

Please accept this letter of support for HB151 from the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF). MSHF is the official business name of Valley Hospital Association, which shares ownership in Mat-Su Regional Medical Center (MSRMC). MSHF invests its share of the profits back into the community through grants and scholarships to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in Mat-Su.

In 2013, MSHF, along with community partners, conducted a Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA). Through data analysis, public polling and 24 community forums, community members identified *the number one community health objective: ensure all children are safe and well-cared for*. In response to this goal, MSHF created a focus area dedicated to building family resilience and preventing child maltreatment, which led to staffing and funding a place-based collective impact project called Raising Our Children with Kindness (R.O.C.K.) Mat-Su.

As a means of creating systems improvements, including the Office of Children's Services (OCS), R.O.C.K. Mat-Su collaborated with the Palmer Superior Court to develop and implement a therapeutic court for families with children three and under facing out-of-home placement. R.O.C.K. Mat-Su staff worked closely with Mat-Su OCS and State level OCS administrators to develop the FIT Court model, which includes a dedicated OCS protective services specialist. R.O.C.K. is also working with the Mat-Su OCS office to increase consistent, frequent visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home placement, which strongly influences the likelihood of reunification for families, and hopes to coordinate with Mat-Su OCS in the future to develop a formal response to reports of alleged maltreatment that are currently screened out rather than being investigated.

MSHF has helped to fund much of the above. At the same time, we've watched the number of Maltreatment Reports to the Mat-Su OCS office increase from 2840 in 2014 to 3528 in 2015 as reported by the AK Indicator Based Information System for Public Health. The Palmer Court Child in Need of Aid cases also increased dramatically from 216 cases in 2014 to 242 in 2015 and 271 in 2016 largely due to the opioid epidemic. The Mat-Su OCS had 653 children in out-of-home care over 30 days during 2016, averaging 20.1 months in out-of-home care.

Through all this work, MSHF and R.O.C.K. Mat-Su staff have become quite familiar with the caseload ratios, training deficits and challenging conditions of the Mat-Su OCS office. We've witnessed attorneys, advocates, and nonprofit staff berate and complain about OCS staff, who are overworked and demoralized, along with the families they serve. We witnessed families parading with signs almost every weekend last summer at the corner of Crusey and the Parks Highway over their frustration with the system. We hear lots of complaining but very little constructive assistance to set OCS and their staff up for success.

HB 151 takes a crucial step in that direction. It seeks to improve both caseload levels and worker retention through new training and workforce standards. The bill also provides for mentors to help caseworkers become more effective and make the transition from training to a full caseload. These evidence-based standards will improve outcomes, enable faster timelines to permanency for the children being served, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended.

The MSHF, like many of our nonprofit partners, local delegation members, and Mat-Su residents, recognize that Alaska's child welfare system needs reformed and supported to succeed. This legislation takes steps to make real positive changes that support youth and families, as well as the caseworkers who serve them. We fully support this legislation and will be glad to share our data and experiences through public testimony as well. We're grateful for Rep. Gara bringing this forward and for all his advocacy on behalf of the health of Alaska's children and families.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer