



March 21, 2018

Dear Representative Gara,

I am writing in support of HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act.

The mission of the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership is to improve the health and wellness of all of Alaska's children by promoting best practices and identifying barriers to our children reaching their optimal health and potential for success in life. We consider the OCS caseworker's high case loads and resulting inability to adequately serve families as a significant barrier to children's optimal health and we strongly support this bill and the activities it includes.

Nearly 3000 Alaskan children are in out-of-home placements, and in some areas of our state, caseworkers are managing more than 30 caseloads, which is more than double according to national recommendations. About 10 percent of these children entering the foster care system are under the age of 6.

We know that the first 3 to 4 years of life is when the brain structures that govern personality traits, learning processes, and self-regulation skills to deal with stress and emotions are established, strengthened, and made permanent. The nerve connections and neurotransmitter networks formed during these critical first years are influenced by negative environmental conditions such as child abuse and neglect, violence within the family, exacerbated by multiple placements.

Most children entering the foster care system, especially those entering so early on, have not experienced a nurturing, stable environment prior to entering the system. The positive experiences created by permanency and a solid relationship with a supportive adult caregiver, are critical in the short- and long-term development of children's brains and their ability to subsequently participate fully in society. Additionally, the premature return of a child to the biological parents and the inability to provide families with the attention they need to remain stable, compliant, and safe, often results in return to foster care or ongoing emotional trauma to the child.

No less important, we must consider that working in such stressful environments and dealing with the difficult situations that are part of a caseworker's day, creates toxic stress for the caseworkers themselves and results in high-turnover rates and further negative outcomes for our children. Reduced case loads and additional training for staff will result in a healthier and more supported workforce leading to more permanency and better outcomes for the children.

Sincerely,

Tamar Ben-Yosef  
Executive Director