

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Sponsor Statement

HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act Version Y

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 in life, 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 correct goal to reduce the number of youth languishing in foster care. Alaska should join that national effort, particularly in the face of rising foster youth numbers nationwide, at crisis proportions in many states. HB 151 does that. It will get neglected and abused youth out of the foster care system into permanent, loving homes more quickly, with less damage to youth, than we do now.

Many Alaskans recognize that our child welfare system has room to improve. This bill seeks to make real positive changes that support youth and families, as well as the caseworkers who serve them. It's been well documented by many sources that when case workers are overworked, outcomes for children and families suffer, and that excessive caseloads lead to excessive turnover, wasted money on recruiting and training staff that leave shortly after they've been trained, adding to the caseloads of remaining workers.

The results are youth who linger in foster care where they are often damaged as they bounce between unfamiliar homes; the failure of over-stressed frontline workers to find loving relative homes for youth put into foster care; the failure to reunify families with the work that's needed to achieve that result; and the payment of foster care daily reimbursement charges for youth who should be out of the system where they can be cared for and loved, at less cost to the state.

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) recommends standards of approximately 12 cases or families per worker – but today, most caseworkers are carrying caseloads that vastly exceed that amount. Conditions in rural Alaska, especially the challenges of remote travel, make even a 12-family caseload overwhelming for workers in such regions.

This bill seeks to improve child and family health, 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 would carry no more than six cases/families in the first three months, and 12 families in the first six months. 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.

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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 homes. The bill promotes contact with siblings and with previous out-of-home caregivers to promote the well-being of children and maintain a network of support for them. Another important tenet of this bill is enacting 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, with fewer requirements. In addition, youth at age 14 are empowered to participate in their case plan. This bill also 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, and a voice, for youth and families who need our help is perhaps one of our most important duties in public service. Amendments in the Senate HSS Committee have strengthened the bill to enable more intervention to help families so their children do not end up in expensive foster care. HB 151 is intended to create an environment where loving homes are the priority for all youth.