

March 6, 2021



Madam Chair and members of the House Health and Social Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide invited testimony.

My name is Amanda Metivier, I am a former foster youth, foster parent and longtime advocate for foster care reform. I am testifying on behalf of [Facing Foster Care in Alaska](#) (FFCA). FFCA is a statewide non-profit of current and former foster youth leading efforts in advocacy, training, and peer support.

I want to share solutions specific to how we improve child welfare in Alaska—for children, youth & families, and those who work on the front lines every day.

It has been suggested that the proposal to split Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) will promote improvements at the Office of Children’s Services (OCS). Evidence as to how an additional Commissioners office and high level staff will improve outcomes for children and families has not been offered. The proposed split would go into effect July 1st, but children and families cannot wait.

House Bill 151

Foster youth, caregivers, child welfare experts and key stakeholders came before the legislature with mounds of evidence for two years to support the passage of House Bill 151. This legislation passed with incredible bipartisan support in 2018. Many of you supported this effort. It is a lofty bill with a 5 year implementation timeline. The bill was based on an effort in New Jersey (the result of class action lawsuit), that reduced the number of children coming in to foster care, and increased the number of children exiting foster. **New Jersey safely reduced the number of children in foster care by 45% over the course of 5 years.**

The intent of the legislation was to over hire, stack the frontline with staff to combat turnover, and increase training to begin to reduce the workload and promote better decision making. That leads to safely reducing the number of children in foster care and a cost savings long term.

The goal is safe reduction. To prevent removal of children from their families and increase the number of children leaving foster care to return home or move in to other permanent plans such as guardianship or adoption.

HB151 Promotes Lower Caseloads

- HB151 Increased training for frontline child protection staff and limits caseloads during the training period.
- HB151 added additional positions with the intent of “over hiring,” to get in front of turnover and vacancy issues.

- HB151 promotes lower caseloads to allow frontline caseworkers to make better decisions during investigations of child abuse and neglect and work through case plans with those families who have had their child removed.

COVID19

Covid19 has harmed foster care as it's harmed everything else. That harms caseworkers who want to improve the lives of children and moves us away from the effort to promote safe reduction of children involved in child welfare.

- Recruitment and retention of frontline caseworkers are impacted by the pandemic. The most recent HB151 Annual Report to the Legislature cites that it takes 198 days to hire a frontline caseworker from the time someone resigns. The vacancy and turnover rates are identical at 47.6%.
- Cases are stagnant. All court, meetings, visits, and hearings are mostly virtual.
- There has been a reduction in the number of foster homes. 171 foster homes have closed since December 2019 and that doesn't include foster homes that have put their license on hold due to the pandemic. More foster youth are in shelters or temporary crisis settings.

COVID19 is a child protection nightmare no bill or re-organization can fix.

Frontline caseworkers and families need a commitment to an effort. Every new administration comes in with some big idea on how to improve things, they need time to get acquainted, and then the next round of leaders comes in.

An effort to combat turnover and implement HB151 was made early on by a strong recruitment effort to fill frontline child protection staff positions, but that has fizzled out with the pandemic and multiple leadership changes.

The most recent HB151 Annual Report to the Legislature recommends efforts be made on the OCS recruitment and retention plan to hire frontline staff. The report also recommends competitive wages and meaningful incentives to retain staff.

HB151 can't work if there's zero effort being made to implement it. DHSS is requesting several million dollars along with 13 staff positions to create a new Commissioners Office.

I worry that the efforts focused on re-organization of DHSS take away from the foundation that has been laid to fully implement HB151. The research has been done, the model for HB151 is proven, and DHSS needs to make concerted efforts to implement it for the success of children and families.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

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