

Alaska has failed to implement foster care reforms mandated in 2018 law, audit finds

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Rachel Cassandra / Alaska Public Media

Deko Harbi sits in her room in Anchorage on July 20, 2025. She entered Alaska's foster care system when she was 16 and says it was hard to get the help she needed from the Office of Children's Services.

When Deko Harbi was 16, she was removed from her mother's care and entered state custody. She and her little sister and brother went to live with their older sister, she said, who was 21 at the time. But Harbi said her sister wasn't up for the kind of parenting she and her siblings needed and the household quickly became unlivable.

"It was constantly dirty," Harbi said. "It smelled horrendous. There was always

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tell us what to do."

Case workers from the Office of Children's Services — OCS — are required to do home visits with kids at their placements every month, but Harbi said they never came to check on her and her siblings. She said she got a new caseworker about a month after they were placed, and anytime she needed something from OCS, even for something simple like getting a voucher for winter clothing, it was an uphill battle.

"It was like pulling teeth trying to get in contact with an OCS worker. I would call them. I would go in person to their office," she said. "If I got too frustrated, I would tell them I would call them back, and I would hang up the phone, and I would sit in my room and cry for hours."

Former state Rep. Les Gara, D-Anchorage, was thinking about kids like Harbi in 2017, when he introduced legislation proposing sweeping reforms of OCS.

The law aimed to dramatically increase the number of caseworkers at the department to help reduce caseloads to an average of 13 for experienced caseworkers. It directed OCS to overhire caseworkers, knowing the job has high turnover, and required the office to more than double the amount of time child protection workers spent in training when they began the job, to six weeks. Gara said he drafted the legislation with experts after careful research on successful models in other parts of the country.

"We gave the state the gold standard and said, 'This is how you run a system, so that children suffer as little trauma as possible, have as great a chance to succeed in this world as possible, and so that you can put together as many families as possible,'" Gara said, pointing out that a goal of the foster care system is to reunify families as much as possible.

The legislation became law in 2018 with bipartisan support and required three audits in order to keep tabs on the department's progress. The final audit was released last month and concluded that since the law passed, OCS hasn't implemented most of the law's requirements or improved outcomes for Alaska kids.

The report shows 70% of experienced caseworkers still had more than 13 cases, and in many instances their caseloads were double or even triple that number. The office had

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The report said that's despite the Legislature appropriating \$20.7 million of additional funding and authorizing 110 new caseworker and support positions.

Gara said the audit results are extremely disheartening.

"It's like we handed the state the blueprint of all the gold standard practices to make sure children had a chance in this world," he said. "We handed it to the state, and by 2020 the state had lit it on fire. It's sad."

He said in the first two years of the law, the state saw some progress, but then the office dramatically lowered hiring requirements for caseworkers. Instead of requiring a four-year college degree in social services or a similar field, or equivalent experience, now caseworkers can get hired with just a high school diploma. According to OCS, even a high school diploma or GED isn't required, but in practice most or all employees have one. The state increased training to six weeks, but during the COVID pandemic, Gara said they moved to a virtual format and never went back to in-person training, to save money.

A legislative consultant quoted in the audit noted that employees reported insufficient training and mentoring from "overwhelmed supervisors and co-workers" which led to "woefully insufficient" support for most new hires. The consultant noted that this contributed to high turnover for caseworkers. The audit found that OCS's hiring process was "strongly out of alignment with best practices" and that new caseworkers started with "little to no understanding of what the job actually entailed."

Amanda Metivier, who helped write the legislation and runs the organization Facing Foster Care, said the office should not have reduced hiring requirements.

"This is not entry-level work, holding the authority to remove children from their parents and investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect," Metivier said. "It takes a skill set that requires some foundation in the way of education and understanding trauma, the needs of families, the history of Alaska."

OCS didn't agree to an interview for this story partly because they said no one OCS employee could answer the breadth of questions necessary to respond "off the cuff." But spokesperson Brian Studstill wrote in an email that their hiring practices factor in

the agency can't turn away families, but that OCS takes many steps to keep caseloads manageable.

In the agency's response included as part of the audit report, Commissioner Kim Kovol wrote that a law does not change the available workforce in Alaska and she pointed out that the COVID pandemic made it even harder to hire and retain staff. She wrote that the department disagrees with many of the audit conclusions and recommendations.

Metivier said it's not too late for OCS to make changes for the better.

"Certainly this audit is grueling, but I still think the state has the opportunity to chart a path forward and focus on qualifications of workers coming in the door, recruitment efforts, a plan toward really bolstering the workforce to better serve families," she said.

She also said **the audit** plays an essential role in holding OCS accountable.

"The government has a responsibility to hold parents accountable to keep their children safe," she said. "And whose responsibility is it to hold the government accountable to keep children safe?"

She said all child welfare systems need strong community support to function well. So she said more Alaskans should consider becoming foster parents or mentors for foster youth, which she said people can do through **Big Brothers Big Sisters** of Alaska.

Harbi, who entered foster care in 2021, had to fend for herself. When she was a junior in high school, she said she left the chaos of her placement with her then-23-year-old sister, without telling OCS, to move in with a friend's family.

"Without them intervening and coming in to help me that last year of high school, I don't think I would have graduated," Harbi said.

She called them her "chosen foster parents," and said they were caring and helped her transition to a stable independent adult life. She said that's how the foster system in Alaska could work if it were more functional.