

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

Alaska Public Media | By **Rachel Cassandra**

Published July 29, 2025 at 10:41 AM AKDT



LISTEN • 5:50



## Lawmakers probe OCS management following audit finding agency is failing to implement reforms

Corinne Smith, Alaska Beacon

Feb 17, 2026



## Improving Children's Lives: Comprehensive 2018 Foster Care Reforms

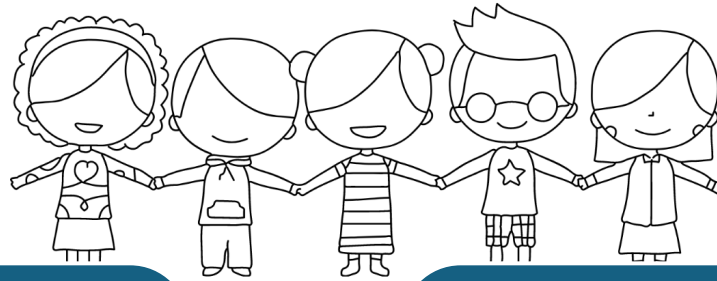
Presenters:

Les Gara, House Member 2003- 2018

Amanda Metivier, Executive Director Facing Foster Care in Alaska

# HB 151, the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

*Comprehensive, Bi-partisan, Evidence-Based*



**Cross-Sponsored by every member** on the Senate Floor in a 15-5 Republican-led Senate.

Presentation Highlights a **Few Important HB 151 Provisions to address current crisis:**

# Stable Workforce = Healthier Children & Families

Reduced turnover and manageable caseloads lead to

Timely investigations

Support for resource families

children reunifying or moving to permanent homes  
timely



**Proper, Manageable  
Caseloads: Serve  
Children, Families  
Effectively, With  
Dignity.**



- *“Excessive workloads impair the ability of frontline caseworkers to **provide quality services to children and families....**”* Audit p. 7.
- *HB 151 requires evidence-based average of **13 Cases per worker.*** AS 47.14.112.
  - ***OCS exceeds legal caseload limit by 50% statewide; by 100% in largest Regional Office.*** OCS House HSS Feb., 2026 presentation; Audit pp. 15-16.
- *‘Policymakers . . . should recognize that ... OCS’s annual recruitment and retention **report understates OCS’s workload.**’* 2025 Audit pp. i-ii, p. 17.

# A Bad Recipe: No Relevant Work Experience or Degree, Reduced Job Qualifications & Excessive Caseloads



**45+% OF CASEWORKERS LEAVE  
OCS ANNUALLY** BECAUSE OF  
BURNOUT OR FOR BETTER JOBS.



AUDIT P. 11 NOTES 47% OCS-  
REPORTED TURNOVER.



OCS FEB. 2026 HOUSE HSS  
PRESENTATION NOTES 45%  
TURNOVER.

**“OCS process to hire ...  
frontline caseworkers  
was *strongly out of  
alignment with best  
practices.*”** Audit p. 35.

Audit finds current hiring and training practices to be  
**“*woefully insufficient*”** for the protection of children.  
Audit p. 14.

“During 2020 OCS began hiring workers with what OCS  
calls ‘core competencies’ **rather than hiring workers  
with specific qualifications such as a college degree or  
prior work experience....**” Audit pp. 34, 36.

OCS hiring caseworkers **“without any child protection  
experience or training.... [M]any new hires do not  
meaningfully understand the job .... [S]ome... **thought  
that the position was for childcare** or security.”** Audit  
Appendix A, p. 51.

# Caseworkers are essential to success

---

*“A well-trained, highly skilled, well-resourced and appropriately deployed workforce is foundational to a child welfare agency’s ability to achieve best outcomes for the vulnerable children, youth and families it serves.”*

Casey Family Programs

# Stronger Training To Develop Strong Caseworkers



In-Person Training increased from 2 weeks to **legal “minimum of 6 weeks of training”** AS 47.1.112. Training was in-person until 2020.



“Beginning in 2020, the method of training new staff switched from in person to virtual.” Audit p. 13.



Hiring caseworkers **without degrees or work experience**, combined with **switch to virtual training instead of in person training**, is:



“”***woefully insufficient*** for the majority of new hires, which is a **major contributor to turnover** among recently hired frontline workers.” Audit p. 14. Also Audit p. 9.

# Foster Care Is “Complex” Social Work:

A Range 19 PSS 3 Position is for “Complex” social work

## *Who Do We want Deciding:*

- Whether to separate a child from their parents
- How to Reunite Children With Parents
- How to effectively and quickly find and **recruit Loving Relatives** To become foster parents.
- How to address significant **trauma, emotional, education, social problem**
- How To quickly Return A child To A **Permanent Loving Home.**
- **Cease recruitment of Protective Service Specialist 1’s.** “Trainees” with no social work experience, education or knowledge.
- Range 15, \$58,000/yr.

## *Majority of hiring should be for Protective Service Specialist 3’s..*

- PSS 3’s **must be able to work “Complex” Cases.** Workplace Alaska. **Range 19, \$76,500 - \$81,200 yr.**
- **PSS 3’s are most stable position (PSS 3s:10% vacancy rate; PSS 2’s 32%; PSS 1’s 22%)**
- **Minority of hiring when need to - PSS 2’s.**
- PSS 2’s must perform “**the full range of duties common in the delivery of professional social work...**” Workplace Alaska
- **Range 17, \$66,000 – \$71.5k/yr.**

**For Committee  
Consideration;  
Presenters will skip  
for time)  
Budget Language Is  
Appropriate So  
Legislature Can  
Track OCS Progress**

- The Legislature can add intent language that OCS:
- Must Aggressively seek the most qualified **Protective Service Specialist 3** workers for a majority of their hires in Alaska, and if needed, also recruit in key localities where Social Workers are underpaid Outside.
- Hire PSS 2's to fill a minority of future positions, PSS 1's if **Necessary**.
- Report Progress to Legislature on all important points By November 15, 2026 (date annual Workforce and Recruitment Report is due)

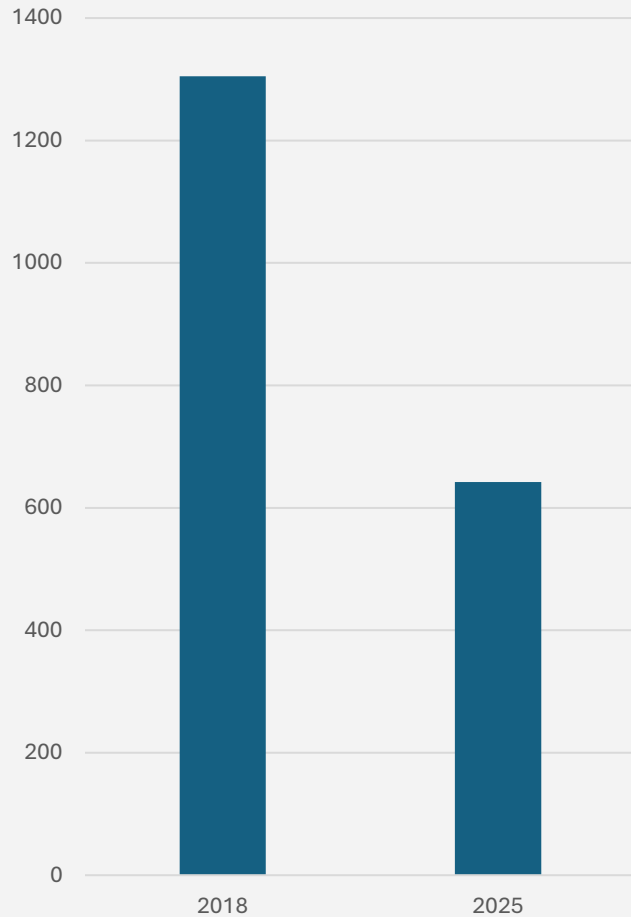
***OCS Likely Has  
Budget Funds for  
Competitive Pay –  
Reducing 50%  
Caseload Excess by  
½ in 2026 Would be  
Good Progress***

- The Legislature has properly budgeted for the number of caseworkers OCS needs to meet caseload standards.
- Many Positions Not Filled – Over 20% Vacancy Rate because of Turnover, etc.
- “High Vacancies and turnover led to **excess budgetary authority, which was used, in part, for other purposes.**” 2025 Audit p. 9. \$4.1 “permanently transferred” out of Allocation from FY ‘16 – ‘23. Audit p. 12.
- OCS has annually both transferred funds into and out of the Frontline Caseworker Allocation.
- \$1.0 - \$2.2 million annually since FY 2019 to “pay overtime” because of excessive caseloads, turnover and vacancies. Audit p. 11.

**Workforce Stability  
Bridge Solution:  
Annual Retention  
Bonuses:**

- ***Temporary solution Committee might Consider: Retention Bonuses***
- **NOT a substitution** for hiring Highly Qualified PSS 3 Workers
- \$2,000/\$2,500 Annual Bonus” to show Overworked Workers Respect, add incentive for carrying legally excessive caseloads
- Not a Million Dollar item: Cost would be in this hundreds of thousands for Leg Finance to calculate.

Foster Home Data  
(Non-Child Specific)



## Children Deserve Loving Homes, Not Bunk Beds In Offices

- OCS has **lost over half** of its traditional foster families (OCS statistics call these “licensed non-child specific” homes). Source: OCS published statistics.
- **Children Living in OCS Offices & Motels** Without families;
- “Temporary Emergency” 30-day foster homes are damaging, require extra placement moves, and are over-used.
- **Alaska Law Requires the state to “Actively” recruit foster and adoptive families in times of “shortage”**. HB 27, passed 2016.
- **Proposed Action: paid social and/or traditional media campaign. Legislature did this prior to 2018 when needed.**
- Placeholder Appropriation Amount: \$\_\_\_\_\_ with OCS to request a Supplemental if funds are not adequate.

# Evidence-based Love: Increase Foster Care Placements With Loving Family & Friends

- HB 151 Goal: Increase placements with **loving extended family members**.
- Supervisor must “*certify in writing*” that OCS “**searched for an appropriate placement with an adult family member of family friend.**” If not, supervisor must “**ensure the department completes the search** in the shortest time feasible”. AS 47.10.080 (s), .100, .115(b), AS 47.32.032(c).
- Audit: OCS must “*ensure supervisors certify in writing* whether OCS staff has searched for an appropriate placement with a relative or family friend as required by law.” Audit p. 31.
- Tribal entities do strong work on family placements in cases where contracted.
- **Proposed Action:** OCS should be asked in budget language to follow the law, inform Legislature if it needs help complying in future.

# Thank You!

## Please Let Us Know If we can help!



[Les Gara lesgara@gmail.com](mailto:lesgara@gmail.com)



[Amanda Metivier Amanda@ffcalaska.org](mailto:Amanda@ffcalaska.org)