



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

## Department of Family and Community Services

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

**Anchorage**  
3601 C Street, Suite 410  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503-5923

**Juneau**  
P.O. Box 110601  
240 Main Street, Suite 600  
Juneau, Alaska 99801

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The Honorable Andy Josephson  
Chair, House Health & Social Services Finance Subcommittee  
Alaska State Capitol, Room 505  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Chair Josephson:

In response to the House Finance Subcommittee hearing on February 27, 2026, the Office of Children's Services (OCS) submits this letter to address the points and concerns raised by Facing Foster Care's Amanda Metivier and former Representative Les Gara concerning the implementation of Chapter 15 SLA 2018 (HB 151): DHSS; CINA; Foster Care; Child Protection, and related child welfare operations in Alaska. For clarity, their concerns are organized by topic outlined below.

### 1. Workforce & Caseloads

**Concern 1:** In Anchorage, caseloads are double the law's standard; statewide caseloads are 50 percent higher than HB 151 mandates.

**OCS Response:** This is an area OCS continues to address, however challenges in recruiting qualified caseworker positions persist. If all positions were filled, OCS would be below the caseload average. OCS is statutorily required to respond to allegations of child abuse and neglect regardless of whether caseload standards can be met.

**Concern 2:** Hiring "any warm body" and reducing qualifications puts children at risk.

**OCS Response:** Recruiting qualified child welfare staff in Alaska presents unique challenges due to the state's relatively small population and its vast geographic dispersion. In June 2020, the Protective Services Specialist (PSS) job class transitioned to competency-based hiring. This approach later became part of a broader statewide shift: in February 2023, the State of Alaska implemented competency-based recruitment as a strategy to address workforce challenges across all departments, not just within the Office of Children's Services (OCS).

While competency-based recruitment can increase the number of applicants, OCS continues to interview carefully to ensure candidates are the right fit for the challenging and specialized work of child welfare.

**Concern 3:** Current pay and benefits are insufficient to attract or retain qualified staff. Prioritize hiring Protective Services Specialists (PSS-3) for complex casework at ~\$80,000/year.

**OCS Response:** All State of Alaska departments, including the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) where OCS is housed, are required to follow statewide personnel, compensation, and recruitment policies and procedures. OCS does not set salaries or determine the minimum qualifications for State of Alaska job classifications. A job classification study for the Protective Services Specialist positions is scheduled to begin in FY2026. This study is intended to ensure that the classification structure and compensation levels accurately reflect the duties performed within OCS and support appropriate consideration of the challenging nature of child welfare work.

**Concern 4:** Retention and appreciation incentives suggested to stabilize workforce.

**OCS Response:** The State provided funding to OCS for retention bonuses in FY2023 and FY2024. Of those who received the incentives, 47 percent are still employed at OCS.

## 2. Training & Onboarding

**Concern 1:** Six weeks of in-person training required by HB 151 has not been implemented; virtual training is inadequate. In-person training is essential for safety, practical skills, and quality service.

**OCS Response:** HB 151 does not require in-person training. OCS uses a blended training model that includes online self-study, virtual classroom instruction, in-person mentoring, transfer-of-learning weeks, and on-the-job training.

**Concern 2:** Frontline staff may lack foundational social work knowledge for complex cases.

**OCS Response:** The State of Alaska's minimum qualifications for Protective Services Specialists do not require a social work degree. Alaska does not have a sufficient supply of degreed social workers interested in child welfare work to meet staffing needs. OCS therefore relies heavily on supervisory support, training, and ongoing professional development. Requiring only social work degrees would likely increase vacancy rates.

## 3. Foster Parent Recruitment & Placement

**Concern 1:** Number of foster families has dropped from 1,350 (2018) to 650 (2025), creating placement shortages.

**OCS Response:** OCS has seen a decrease in licensed foster homes, but not at the rate reported by former Representative Gara. Nationally, the number of licensed homes decreased by 20 percent; this is not an Alaska specific issue.

In Alaska, as of December 31, 2025:

- There are a total of 1,562 homes available for a placement
- 1079 total licensed foster homes
- 634 non-child specific licensed homes (this includes non-relative foster homes)
- 445 child specific licensed homes (this includes relatives and kin who complete the licensure process)
- 483 total unlicensed relative placements. These family members have chosen not to complete the State of Alaska licensing process for a variety of reasons but have been assessed to ensure they are safe placement options

**Concern 2:** Children living in motels, emergency placements, or experiencing multiple moves.

**OCS Response:** At times, Alaska experiences situations where youth present with increasingly complex behavioral and mental health needs, and OCS has been transparent about these challenges. Foster parents retain the right to decline a placement, which can further limit available options, especially when a youth requires a higher level of care. As Alaska continues strengthening its continuum of care, some children with the most intensive needs may spend nights in non-traditional settings or experience multiple placement changes. These circumstances reflect the severity and complexity of the needs of this growing group of youth. While some children who experience multiple placement moves do so because of their complex needs, others move for reasons unrelated to acuity, such as transitioning to relatives or stepping into more appropriate care settings.

**Concern 3:** Family search and relative placement goals not consistently followed; only 50 percent placed with relatives compared to Hawaii's 80 percent.

**OCS Response:** Hawaii's annual report indicates their relative placement is at 46 percent. Alaska has one of the highest relative placement rates in the nation. According to the data found in the packet provided, many relatives are unlicensed - some by choice. Of the children who are currently in foster care, 97 percent have relatives listed in Online Resource for the Children of Alaska (ORCA).

**Concern 4:** OCS is not verifying that caseworkers conduct family searches; the department claims it's too costly (\$2 million) to check a box, but former Representative Gara argues it could be managed simply by indicating it in a folder.

**OCS Response:** The core intent of HB 151 is to ensure timely relative searches are conducted. There are alternate methods to ensure this important work is conducted. OCS has on demand reports which indicate 97 percent of children in foster care have relatives documented. OCS consistently has a high number of children in care who are placed with relatives. The HB 151 Part 3 audit confirms relative searches are occurring. OCS is looking to modernize technology to automate this administrative requirement.

**Concern 5:** OCS is not sufficiently advertising for foster parent recruitment. Urges statewide advertising/outreach to recruit new foster parents.

**OCS Response:** In 2025 through the end of February 2026, OCS has conducted over 90 recruitment and retention events statewide across all regions, including cultural-specific and large community events. OCS coordinates these events in each region for Foster Parent Appreciation month in May and Holiday Celebrations in December. We have engaged in targeted outreach to tribal communities in partnership with local tribes, churches, and organizations. We have engaged in advertising campaigns via rural radio ads, posters in rural villages and schools, coffee sleeve distribution, and social media pushes. OCS works closely with the department's Public Information Team to create campaigns that are utilized via community posters and on social media. Some of our specialized recruitment efforts for kinship care have been utilized through social media, as well as public speaking events across the state. We engage with key partners such as Alaska Center for Resource Families, Beacon Hill, Alaska Impact Alliance, Alaska Autism Resource Center, and Stone Soup Group to assist in recruiting foster families and relative placements.

#### **4. Implementation of HB 151 & Compliance**

**Concern 1:** HB 151 is largely unimplemented after eight years. Lack of adherence due to excessive caseloads, underqualified staff, and inadequate training.

**OCS Response:** OCS disagrees with this assessment. OCS has implemented almost every technical change required by HB 151. The lack of ability to meet caseload averages is solely due to ongoing vacancies. Recruitment and retention continue to be a priority for OCS. The quality of staff and training are addressed in previous questions.

**Concern 2:** Reporting and statistics are inconsistent, making oversight difficult.

**OCS Response:** OCS acknowledges challenges with data reporting and tracking, which are largely due to limitations of the current ORCA system. The department is actively seeking funding opportunities to replace this antiquated system.

#### **5. Budget & Resource Allocation**

**Concern 1:** Training budget has been cut 25 percent since 2018, affecting implementation.

**OCS Response:** OCS reduced its training contract with the Child Welfare Academy after the contractor declined to provide field-based training. OCS has shifted more training responsibilities in-house to meet this need. While the structure of training delivery has changed, OCS has not reduced its commitment to training staff.

**Concern 2:** Suggests reallocating or using current budget for Protective Services Specialist (PSS) 3 hires instead of lower-level positions.

**OCS Response:** Given Alaska's workforce pool, OCS does not have sufficient applicants with the qualifications required to fill all positions at the PSS-3 level.

## 6. Systemic & Policy Critiques

**Concern 1:** Leadership decisions reducing qualifications to keep pay low worsened workforce crisis.

**OCS Response:** Changes to qualifications or compensation are determined at the state level. OCS does not control the salary schedule or minimum qualifications for any State of Alaska job classification.

**Concern 2:** OCS statistics have been inconsistent. Legislature should consider intent language and reporting requirements to hold OCS accountable.

**OCS Response:** OCS acknowledges challenges with data reporting and tracking, which are largely due to limitations of the current ORCA system. OCS also responds to multiple bodies of oversight to include: the Administration for Children and Families, the Alaska Court System, Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, the Alaska Ombudsman, Citizens Review Panel, the Legislature, and the Governor.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide these clarifications and responses. OCS remains committed to the safety, stability, and well-being of Alaska's children and looks forward to continued collaboration with the Legislature to strengthen our child welfare system.

Sincerely,



Tracy A Dompeling  
Acting Commissioner

cc: Kim Guay, Director, DFCS-OCS  
Chrissy Vogeley, Legislative Liaison, DFCS  
Jordan Shilling, Legislative Director, Office of the Governor