From: Barbara Haney
To: Senate Health and Social Services
Cc: Sen. Robert Myers; thecaulder@hotmail.com
Subject: SB123 supporting testimony
Date: Monday, April 6, 2026 6:52:02 PM

April 7, 2026

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel, Vice Chair
and Members of the Senate Health & Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: Strong Support for SB 123 – Reestablishing Citizens' Review Panels for Permanency Planning (Hearing Today, April 7, 2026)

Dear Chair Dunbar, Vice Chair Giessel, and Committee Members:

I am writing as a concerned Alaska resident parent/grandparent to urge your strong support for Senate Bill 123. This critical legislation reestablishes independent Citizens' Review Panels for Permanency Planning, restoring vital citizen oversight of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) cases involving children in state custody.

Alaska's child welfare system is under immense strain. Thousands of children—disproportionately Alaska Native—spend time in out-of-home care each year. Recent legislative audits have exposed chronic problems: caseworker turnover remains alarmingly high, caseloads far exceed safe limits for most workers (70% of experienced caseworkers exceed the statutory average cap of 13 families, with many carrying 20–48 cases), and key reforms from 2018 have not been fully implemented. These failures delay permanency, prolong uncertainty for children, and undermine family reunification or safe adoptive placements.

Critically, OCS case plans too often fail to match actual outcomes. The 2024 Division of Legislative Audit found that Alaska achieves permanency for children in foster care at rates statistically lower than national averages within the first two years in care. OCS's own data shows that while about 82% of children have current case plans, this drops to just 61% for parents (with some rural regions as low as 30%). Key permanency goals—reunification, guardianship, adoption, or other permanent arrangements—are achieved as a "strength" in only about 44% of reviewed cases. These gaps demonstrate that internal processes alone are insufficient; children deserve external accountability to ensure plans translate into timely, safe permanency.

While Alaska currently maintains a statewide Citizen Review Panel, its recent efforts have focused primarily on the management of state employees — particularly OCS staff recruitment, retention, and workplace wellness — rather than conducting regular, independent evaluations of individual children's case plans and progress toward permanency. The existing panel only examines selected issues "as directed" by the state and does not provide the consistent, case-by-case oversight our children actually need.

SB 123 directly addresses these gaps by creating a state-level Citizens' **Review Panel and local panels in each judicial district**. These volunteer citizen panels would:
• Review OCS case plans for appropriateness of placements and services;
• Monitor progress toward timely permanency goals (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other permanent arrangements);
• Evaluate case plans in light of regional customs, cultural values, and community-specific needs—especially critical in Alaska's diverse districts where local panels must be representative of the district's social, economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (as required by the bill).

This is not new bureaucracy—it restores a proven, cost-effective mechanism that previously strengthened accountability while respecting confidentiality and coordinating with OCS, courts, and families. Independent citizen review aligns with federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) principles and brings community voices into a system that too often operates without sufficient external checks. Children deserve better than prolonged state custody due to systemic delays. Families deserve transparent, accountable processes that honor local culture and traditions. Taxpayers deserve assurance that OCS resources are used effectively.

With the hearing scheduled for today, I respectfully urge the Committee to advance SB 123 without delay. Passing this bill will send a clear message that Alaska prioritizes child safety, family stability, cultural respect, and real reform in our child welfare system.

Thank you for your service and for considering this important legislation. I am happy to provide any additional information or answer questions. Please feel free to contact me at (907) 347-5109 or barbarahaney100@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Barbara Haney, PhD