



15 April 2026

Joint Health & Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol
120 4th St.
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Citizens' Review Panel Presentation March 2026

Dear Members,

Alaska Children's Trust (ACT) is grateful for the committee's thorough and candid examination of Alaska's child welfare system during the March 26, 2026, joint hearing. The questions raised about (1) how children are faring statewide, (2) mandatory reporting, and (3) what happens to the families whose reports to OCS are screened-out, go directly to the heart of ACT's mission - preventing child abuse and neglect before it occurs.

The committee's questions and conversation reflected a shared understanding that Alaska's child welfare challenges cannot be solved by OCS alone. OCS is not the child welfare system – they are the Child Protective Services (CPS) – a component of the overall child welfare system. The child welfare system is the broad, overarching framework designed to promote children's safety and well-being, while CPS is the specific "front-end" investigative agency responsible for responding to reports of abuse or neglect.

I write to offer ACT's perspective on the issues raised during that hearing, share relevant data, and express our strong interest in working alongside the legislature, OCS, and community partners to address the gaps in Alaska's system that were identified. ACT is committed to being a useful partner in building the prevention infrastructure and policy framework that Alaska's children and families deserve.

Enclosed are documents providing information on each of the three topics addressed above. These topics, however, represent only a small piece of the broader reframing and reform needed within the child welfare system. To reduce the number of children in foster care, lower OCS caseloads, and decrease the incidence of abuse and neglect, we must build a prevention ecosystem — one grounded in the recognition that children thrive when families are supported, communities reinforce healthy expectations, and systems are aligned to promote well-being rather than simply respond to harm. At the close of this letter, I have included ACT's framework, which guides our work toward building that prevention ecosystem.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with committee members, provide additional data, or assist with the development of legislation in any of the areas identified above. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at tstorrs@alaskachildrenstrust.org or 907-248-7370.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Storrs', written over a horizontal line.

Trevor J. Storrs
President & CEO

THE STATE OF ALASKA'S CHILDREN

ACT is the state partner for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS Count project. Each year, KIDS Count releases a comprehensive 50-state measure of child well-being.

The question your committee asked was "How are Alaska's children doing?" In reviewing the data, they are not well enough, and in several areas, things are getting worse. Alaska ranks **40th out of 50 states** for overall child well-being in 2025, placing us in the bottom fifth of the nation. For nearly the past two decades, Alaska has been ranked in the bottom half if not the bottom third.

KIDS Count looks at four key domain areas: (1) Education, (2) Economic Well-Being, (3) Health, and (4) Family & Community. Below is a summary of each to provide you a snapshot of how Alaska children are doing.

Education (49th)

Nowhere is the urgency more acute than in our classrooms. Alaska ranks **49th in Education** — second to last in the entire country. Nearly four out of every five Alaska fourth graders are not reading at grade level. The same is true for eighth grade math.

The pandemic set students back across the country, but Alaska has struggled to recover in ways that peer states have not. Preschool enrollment — one of the strongest predictors of long-term academic success — remains low, with **61% of Alaska's three- and four-year-olds not enrolled in any school program**. High school graduation has also worsened, with **22% of students not graduating on time** — nearly ten points above the national average of 13%. These are children who will enter adulthood without the foundation they need.

Behind these numbers is a funding crisis with direct consequences for the issues your committee heard about. School districts across the state are cutting programs, closing schools, increasing class sizes, and struggling to recruit and retain teachers. According to the Alaska Children's Budget, the state has **reduced its investment in children and families by 15%** compared to average funding levels from FY2014–2017. In May 2025, Alaska's only crisis recovery center for youth closed its doors — in a state that already has one of the **highest youth suicide rates in the nation**. When we reduce the safety net, children fall through it.

Economic Well-Being (42nd)

Alaska ranks **42nd in Economic Well-Being**. Approximately 21,000 Alaska children — 12% — live in poverty. While that rate has improved modestly since 2019, the broader economic picture for families has not. Thirty percent of Alaska children live in households where no parent has stable, full-time employment — a rate that has actually worsened since 2019, even as the national trend improved. Nearly 47,000 Alaska children live in households spending more than 30% of their income on housing, leaving little room for food, child care, health care, or the other essentials children need to thrive.

This matters directly to the topics your committee discussed. The research is unambiguous: economic instability and housing insecurity are among the most powerful drivers of child abuse and neglect. Families under financial stress are more likely to come to the attention of OCS and more likely to have their reports screened-out when the underlying issue is poverty, not maltreatment. When we fail to invest in economic stability for families, we push more of them toward crisis and then ask OCS to manage the fallout with insufficient resources.

Health (34th)

Alaska ranks **34th in Health** — a relative area of strength, though still with serious gaps. Progress has been made: child and teen death rates have declined significantly since 2019, and the share of uninsured children

has dropped from 9% to 7%. Although, we know nearly 10,000 children just lost their access to Denali Kidcare (Medicaid) in the past year, mostly due to paperwork.

But other health trends are moving in the wrong direction. The rate of low birth-weight babies has increased, although Alaska has one of the best rates in the nation. Youth obesity and overweight rates have worsened, rising to 33% of Alaska children ages 10 to 17. And the closure of the state's only youth crisis recovery center is a stark reminder that mental health infrastructure in Alaska remains deeply fragile. A child in crisis today has fewer places to turn than they did five years ago.

Suicide rates among young people have risen more than 60 percent since 2007, and nearly 60 percent of teenage girls reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness as of 2021. Alaska consistently faces some of the nation's highest rates of youth suicide and mental health challenges and the evidence is clear that social media has made this crisis worse.

Family & Community (21st)

Here, there is genuinely good news. Alaska ranks **21st in Family and Community** — our strongest domain, and one that reflects meaningful progress over time. Teen birth rates have declined. Fewer children are living in high-poverty neighborhoods. More households are headed by someone with at least a high school diploma. These are not accidents; they are the result of sustained investment and community effort. They show us that when Alaska commits to its children, things improve.

This letter offers only a snapshot of how Alaska's children and families are doing — it is not a comprehensive summary of all available data. It is important to note that Alaska is making meaningful progress in some areas, and those gains deserve recognition. But overall, we continue to lag behind most other states, and in too many categories, Alaska ranks among the worst in the nation.

Are you looking for a specific data point – ask our Kids Count Chatbot: <https://chat.alaskachildrenstrust.org/>. Click on this link – all legislator emails are access to the Chatbot. If you have any issues connect, please contact our Director of Policy & Advocacy, Teresa Wrobel (twrobel@alaskachildrenstrust.org)

Enclosed is a copy of the KIDS Count profile for Alaska.

SCREENED-OUT REPORTS

The committee's exchange with OCS Director Guay and Citizens' Review Panel Chair Dr. Bettisworth surfaced a challenge that ACT and other partners have long been focused on: Screened-out Reports. Families in need who are screened-out currently receive no systematic connection to supports and services. For many of these families, without any connection to supports and services, they will most likely reach a point where they are screened into the OCS system.

Director Guay was candid about the regulatory barrier at the heart of this problem. Under 7 AAC 54.080, OCS cannot share information about a family with a third-party service provider without the family's explicit consent. This means that every year, thousands of Alaska families who come to OCS's attention fall through a gap between the child protective services and the broader network of community-based prevention services. The families least likely to receive any preventative support are those most likely to benefit from early, voluntary, community-based services.

The data cited by Representative Gray during the hearing, showing Alaska's 34.3% screen-in rate against a national average of 49.5%, is data that ACT tracks closely. We share the committee's concern that a high screen-out rate without any connection to community services may mean that children and families in need are not getting help.

Enclosed is a report from Legislative Research Services conducted in 2017 that provides more detailed information. Within this report, it also outlines that allowing OCS to share contact information on screened-out cases with other social service entities or tribes would be a benefit to families. And, in the Mandatory Reporting Survey, 67% of mandatory reporters indicated they made a report to connect a family to needed supports and services.

We applaud OCS for their partnership with tribes and creating a pathway to ensure tribes obtain screened-out reports. For non-tribal families, there are two potential pathways in providing supports and services:

1. Change Statutory Language - Representative Gray and Director Guay both expressed interest in developing language that would allow OCS to connect screened-out families to community services without violating privacy protections. ACT is ready to support the drafting of legislation or regulatory guidance that would make a meaningful difference for families at this stage.
2. OCS be the Backbone Organization – another concrete idea worth considering is positioning OCS as a backbone organization that actively connects screened-out families to community support. As Director Guay noted, only OCS staff have the legal authority to view information from screened-out reports, but that authority need not be an endpoint. OCS could establish a formal partnership with a statewide lead organization such as Alaska 2-1-1 or Help Me Grow Alaska, embedding an OCS employee within that partner's team. That employee would retain the legal access required to work with screened-out report data while simultaneously having the tools, relationships, and resources to connect families to meaningful support. Critically, they would not need to identify themselves as an OCS representative — they could engage families simply as a community partner, reducing the stigma and fear that too often prevent families from accepting help. This model would ensure that a screened-out report is not the end of the road for a family in need, but the beginning of a connection to the right services.

States that provide voluntary services specifically for Screened-Out families include North Carolina, Wisconsin (Marathon County), and Minnesota.

MANDATORY REPORTING

Thank you for your attention to the challenges and opportunities related to Alaska's mandatory reporting (MR) system. Alongside the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) and other partners, ACT has been closely following the national conversation on mandatory reporting while also learning from the lived experience of mandated reporters and communities across Alaska.

ACT has engaged in this work through multiple avenues, including leading a statewide mandated reporter survey of more than 800 respondents, hosting a recent statewide MR convening, and training focused on decision-support and guidance for reporters. Our work and our research tells us what you heard in committee testimony: Alaska's MR system is deeply important, but it is also complex and in need of thoughtful improvement.

We want to express ACT's strong alignment with CRP's recommendations - particularly the call for **standardized, high-quality mandatory reporter training** and **meaningful support for linking reporters to community resources** as appropriate. Our study and others have shown that mandated reporters consistently express a desire to do the right thing for children and families, yet they often lack clear, practical guidance and support.

During your committee discussion, a crucial question was raised: *Would strengthening mandatory reporting lead to improved outcomes for Alaska's kids?* ACT believes the answer is *Yes*, if reforms prioritize clarity, support, and prevention. A stronger MR system can help ensure concerns are identified earlier, families are routed to appropriate supports, and reports are more accurate and actionable. This, in turn, can reduce unnecessary system involvement while increasing protection for the children who need it most.

We would also encourage continued exploration of promising innovations and practices from other states, such as [Evident Change's Community Response Guide](#) and [Arizona's Lean on Me](#). These models demonstrate that carefully structured reporting and response approaches can improve outcomes without overburdening child protection systems.

Finally, we share the committee's recognition that OCS cannot be all things to all people. Improving mandatory reporting must go hand in hand with broader collaboration across prevention, early intervention, and family support systems. Dedicated prevention efforts, and the funding to sustain them, are essential if Alaska is to move upstream and reduce harm before it occurs.

Thank you for your leadership and willingness to engage in this complex work. ACT stands ready to support these efforts and looks forward to continuing to partner with you, the Citizen Review Panel, Children's Justice Task Force, OCS and others to strengthen Alaska's mandatory reporting system in service of safer, healthier outcomes for Alaska's children and families.

We have enclosed the key findings from Mandated Reporter Survey for your information. A full version of the results is available on our website www.alaskachildrenstrust.org

PREVENTION ECOSYSTEM

ACT's Primary Prevention Framework focuses on six interconnected areas that research and practice show are essential to family stability and child well-being. These areas work together as a prevention ecosystem, recognizing that children are safest and strongest when families are supported, communities reinforce healthy expectations, and systems are aligned to promote well-being rather than respond to harm. The framework is based on the CDC's "Adverse Childhood Experience Prevention: Resource for Action".

1. Strengthen Economic Stability - research shows that financial hardship increases parental stress, depression, and family conflict, which can compromise parenting and raise the risk of child abuse and neglect. Policies and systems that strengthen household economic security (i.e., stable housing, food security, health insurance, affordable child care) reduce stress, stabilizing family income, and enabling parents to meet children's basic needs. Strengthening economic supports is a multi-generational prevention strategy that improves outcomes for both parents and children and promotes lifelong health and well-being.
2. Social Norms - shape how individuals and communities view parenting, discipline, help-seeking, and shared responsibility for child well-being. Promoting norms that promote positive parenting and encourage community shared responsibility for children and families helps prevent child abuse and neglect by shifting expectations from single responsibility and isolation toward community, connection, and primary prevention.
3. Early Childhood - the first few years of a child's life is a critical period because more than 90% of brain development occurs before age five, shaping the architecture for learning, health, and behavior across a lifetime. High-quality early childhood experiences strengthen cognitive, social, and emotional skills, while reducing the likelihood of later challenges such as academic failure, poor health, and involvement with child welfare or justice systems. From an economic perspective, investments in early childhood generate some of the highest returns of any public investment - often cited at \$7-\$13 for every dollar spent. These early investments also support parents' ability to work, stabilize families, and strengthen communities. Simply put, early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong well-being and a stronger economy.
4. Connecting Youth to Caring Adults & Activities - raising children is a community activity – not just a parent one. Relationships with other caring adults, in a community such as teachers, coaches, family members, and community volunteers, can prevent or buffer the impacts of adversities and significantly improve long-term outcomes for children and youth. These connections help them build protective factors, stay engaged in their community, and build positive social networks, especially when facing challenges. Programs that help children and youth build appropriate relationships with caring adults outside of their primary caregivers, helps to foster personal growth, skill development, academic success, and future education and employment opportunities across all ages.
5. Skill Development - children and youth are our future parents, teaching them how to manage stress, emotions, and conflict reduces the development of behaviors, and substance misuse, and other negative health outcomes that increase the risk of abuse and neglect when they become parents. Strengthening parenting skills and fostering nurturing, supportive family environments builds a protective foundation that promotes healthy development into adulthood. Programs like healthy relationships, human development, parenting programs, help reinforce these skills at home and in relationships, supporting safer, more resilient families and communities.
6. Reframe Child Welfare - although our focus is on primary prevention—preventing harm before it occurs—we also recognize the responsibility to respond swiftly and compassionately when harm does happen. Those responses must promote safety and healing without causing additional trauma. Shifting child welfare from a

policing approach to a universal public health model creates a more effective pathway to healing. This approach addresses root causes, supports families, and reduces the risk of further harm while strengthening long-term well-being.



Navigating Pathways for Families to Primary Prevention

Alaska's children, youth, and families have access to the knowledge, skills, supports, and resources to thrive.



Strengthen Economic Supports to Families

- Strengthening household financial security
- Family-friendly work policies



Ensure a Strong Start for Children

- Early childhood home visitation
- High-quality child care
- Preschool enrichment with family engagement



Teach Skills

- Social-emotional learning
- Safe dating and healthy relationship skill programs
- Parenting skills and family relationship approaches



Connect Youth to Caring Adults & Activities

- Mentoring programs
- After-school programs



Promote Social Norms that Protect Against Violence and Adversity

- Public education campaigns
- Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment
- Bystander approaches
- Men and boys as allies in prevention

