

February 11, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 88

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 88.

Introduction

Our family was a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska from 2018 through September of 2023. During this time, my husband, myself, and our (then) 4 children had the privilege of caring for 5 special little ones for varying lengths of time. Our experiences of working with some of our state's most vulnerable youth have taught us so much of trauma and the impact it can have on a growing body and mind. We've been in the position to witness, first-hand, systemic issues that exist in Alaska's child welfare processes that, rather than harbor and heal, *further* that trauma.

In a desperate effort to effect change, I volunteered as a public member of the Foster Parent Subcommittee on the Parent/Foster Parent Collaborative Council, created as a part of Gov. Dunleavy's People First Initiative.

I currently chair Foster the Future Alaska, a grass-roots organization that advocates for child-centered legislation and policies, promoting the stability and wellness of youth in foster care across the state. We've found ourselves in a position to unify and represent the Alaska resource family voice in a way that was so desperately needed. Through community conversation, it became very clear that many of us were witnessing and experiencing similar problem areas within our state's child welfare system, but we lacked the cohesiveness necessary to communicate that in a meaningful way.

The Foundational Need for Placement Stability

One such area of concern is that of child placement and stability when a child must be removed from their home due to significant safety concerns.

Most readily acknowledge that stability of home and relationship is vital to a child's healthy growth and development. According to one meta-analytic review¹,

"When children live in stable environments, which is a prerequisite for developing secure attachment relationships with caregivers, they are less likely to develop externalizing problems, delinquent behavior, and psychopathology. They are more likely to have healthy brain development and favorable academic achievements. Therefore, stability is important for successful foster care placements and a necessary precondition for positive child development."

Ideally, a child would never need to be removed from their home and parents. That which necessitates the removal, as well as the removal itself, are traumatic and heartbreaking.

The Need for Timely, Comprehensive Relative Searches

If a child *must* be brought into state custody, it is in a child's best interests to be placed within their extended family and community. This allows for the continuity of relationships, environment, and culture, and perhaps lends a stronger sense of stability to a child during a very uncertain time of their lives. Really, it's just common sense. Initial family searches are, by law, required to be run within the first 30 days a child is in state custody.

Yet we find these family searches to be inadequate, at times, leading to situations of relatives not realizing they have familial children in state custody. SB 88 would be one more safety layer in ensuring timely relative notification, by requiring information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts. This would lend a level of intentional oversight desperately needed.

The Need for Early Relative Response

Following immediate/early family notice that a child has been brought into state custody, it is imperative that able relatives respond in a timely manner so that children can benefit from family placement, as well as avoid another later disruption after months or years of rebuilding their lives within a foster family, should returning to their parents not be an option. SB 88 encourages extended family to demonstrate their interest and willingness to be considered for placement of familial children earlier in a case.

Revisiting the Foundational Need for Placement Stability

Lastly, if a child is unable to return to their parents, it is important to acknowledge, validate, honor, and uphold a child's attachments and bonds, wherever they form them, so long as it is safe to do so. If a child has been living in a loving, stable home for years, recognize and respect

¹ Foster care placement instability: A meta-analytic review, Children and Youth Services Review, Volume 96, 2019, Pages 483-499, ISSN 0190-7409, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.12.002>.)

the psychological importance of the relationships they've formed there. Children need a sense of stability and safety to thrive. Studies have repeatedly indicated there are deleterious, compounding consequences to placement instability (when a child is moved repeatedly). While individual risk and protective factors may affect a child's resilience, I believe the bar for justifying even one move from a home a child has found love and safety in should be set much higher than it currently is within our state.

It is important to understand- The child's life is not on hold while they are in foster care. They are growing and developing, learning new skills and creating core memories, building familial relationships within their immediate "stand-in-family" and within the community they engage with every day. And for many of the youngest ones, that home and family is all they've ever known.

Our Family's Story

Our family said "yes" to the placement of a tiny newborn that had spent the first 3.5 weeks of her life withdrawing from in-utero exposure to harmful substances. She was less than 5 pounds when we brought her home to our, then, three children.

In the terrible throes of addiction, neither of her parents chose to engage in case plans for the first 2 years of her life. She didn't even have a visit with them prior to turning 16 months old, when they gave birth to her little brother (also placed with us), and then again there were no more visits until after her 2nd birthday.

Given their placement with us from birth, their young age, and the complete lack of visits with either parent for so long, their reality was that WE were their family. They didn't have the context or understanding to realize otherwise. We were "Mom" and "Dad". They grew up with "siblings". They had a family pet, a church they attended regularly, friends, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and so many cousins. Their developmental milestones, birthdays, holidays and first experiences were with us.

When our (foster) daughter and (foster) son were nearly 3.5 years and 2 years, respectively, they went to live with their parents for the very first time. And we haven't been allowed to see them since. Heartbreaking for us, but reality-shattering for them.

We heard through a mutual acquaintance that the children had told their parents "You're not our parents," after the transition.

SB 88 would not have changed our story, nor am I arguing that it should have. But I do share this to illustrate the very natural effect that living within another family for so long has on a young child. And truly, for their healthy development, we wouldn't want it any other way. Children *should* attach. They *should* be able to internally claim a home and family as theirs.

SB 88 considers a young child's psychological attachments and stability by requiring the courts to consider if they've resided within their current placement for greater than 12 months when

making permanency decisions for children *unable to return to their parents* (in non-ICWA cases). It gives the necessary flexibility for the presiding judge to evaluate all options and act in the child's best physical and psychological interest, elevating and meeting *their* needs.

In closing, it's been estimated that approximately 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health problems compared to those from the general population. It's time we consider what we can do as a state to provide youth with a healing experience, rather than contributing additional trauma on their growing minds, through the infliction of more instability and loss of relationship.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrea R Boeshart". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid.

Andrea Boeshart

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
Dept. of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
1430 Tulane Ave, #8055
New Orleans, Louisiana 70112
(504) 988-5402, Fax (504) 988-4264

Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

February 14, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801
Re: Letter of Support

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to convey my strong and unqualified support for the Alaska Senate Bill 88, which concerns the legal recognition and protection of a young child's psychological attachment to their long-term primary caregiver(s), as well as prioritization of their placement stability (preservation of their created family, home, and community).

I have worked closely with maltreated children as a clinician and researcher for more than 4 decades and consulted nationally on cases involving carelessness about placement disruptions. I was also involved in helping Louisiana's Department of Children and Family Services craft policies and later testified in support of legislation in Louisiana that is quite similar to Senate Bill 88. I can assure you that the proposal is well grounded in developmental science and represents a significant step to assure young children's well-being is protected.

My interest in this area grew from first hand experiences of observing the harm of disrupting established attachment relationships of young children to their foster parents, sometimes to be placed with people they had never met. Though I first became involved with maltreated children because of the well-established links between experiences of maltreatment and later serious problems, I have come to realize that decisions made by child welfare agencies and the courts often have even more powerful effects on children's outcomes, for good or not so good. I am also quite familiar with the growing body of evidence about the harms of disruption. In a study of young children who suffered severe neglect in infancy in Romanian institutions, our research team showed that even one disrupted placement of children in foster care substantially increases that child's risk for a psychiatric disorder in adolescence. There is other evidence that with increasing numbers of disruptions, the risk grows even more.

I am very pleased that the proposed legislation emphasizes that when a child comes into care, a thorough relative search should be prioritized and completed as soon as possible. This makes it clear that the purpose of this legislation is not to oppose kin placements, since the initial task is to identify suitable kin caregivers, but rather to acknowledge that stability is extraordinarily important to the well-being of young children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles H. Zeanah, Jr.".

Charles H. Zeanah, M.D
Mary Peter Sellars Polchow Chair in Psychiatry
Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics

Carson Johnson

[REDACTED]
Anchorage, AK 99508

February 24th, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 88

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing this letter to express my strong support for SB 88.

My wife and I have been licensed resource parents since November 2021. We have had our longest placement, a nearly 6 year old, since December of 2021. In this time, we have cared for children and watched families take the action steps necessary to reunify quickly. We have experienced relative placements express their interest and take placement in a matter of days. But unfortunately, we have also observed no-show family contact visits, relapses, discontinued video calls, and relatives who have firmly denied placement only to change their mind two or more years later.

SB 88 would discourage biological family members from denying placement and changing their decision so much later in the case. This bill puts first the emotional and mental well-being of the child in need of aid. That is what matters. Adults should be held accountable for their responsibilities and the court system should prioritize the child. They are more than a case number. SB 88 does strongly affirm the significance of continuity of the child's community and culture and natural relationships with emphasis on the timeline of family's response to OCS inquiry and searches. Foster parents cannot continue to create strong attachments with youth in care, cultivating healthy bonds and security, for a relative placement to express interest a year or more later. SB 88 ensures the department is held accountable for identifying possible relative placement, clearly communicating the next steps, and finalizing whether they desire to take placement of the children or remain in their lives but not take custody.

Our youth and biological families will have a sense of clarity and answers as communication is clearly shared during the placement search. The children will experience a decrease in trauma and an increase in control and understanding of their steps towards permanency.

Thank you,
Carson Johnson

February 1, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801
Re: Alaska SB 88

Senator Dunbar:

I am writing to you as a resident of Alaska and a foster parent of five years, to express my strong support for Senate Bill 88. This bill represents a beacon of hope for many children and foster parents caught in the protracted processes of the foster care system. Having personally fostered children for years, some from birth, I have witnessed the profound instability and uncertainty these children face, which is only exacerbated by the current system's inefficiencies.

The story of a four-year-old I've cared for since birth, whose case is far from being finalized, is not unique but a common scenario in Alaska's foster care system. These children are left in limbo, with their futures undetermined for years, leading to emotional and psychological distress. The frequent delays in court hearings, often due to administrative oversights, further prolong their wait, leaving them in a perpetual state of uncertainty.

Senate Bill 88 proposes necessary reforms that resonate deeply with my experiences and those of the children I care for. The emphasis on early and aggressive family search and the adherence to federal timelines for achieving permanency are critical steps in ensuring that children do not spend their formative years in a state of temporary care. It is unacceptable for children to remain in foster care for four to five or more years, a time when stability and a sense of belonging are paramount to their development.

The bill's focus on establishing a more efficient, caring, and responsive foster care system aligns with the urgent need to prioritize the well-being and futures of these vulnerable children. It is imperative that we implement reforms that expedite the process towards finding permanent, loving homes for them, whether through reunification with their biological parents, when safe and possible, or through adoption.

As someone who has seen firsthand the impact of the current system's failures on children, I implore you to support and advocate for Senate Bill 181. By doing so, you will be championing the rights and futures of countless children in Alaska, ensuring they receive the care, stability, and permanency they deserve.

Thank you for considering my perspective on this crucial issue. I am hopeful that with your support, Senate Bill 88 will pave the way for significant improvements in the foster care system, benefiting both the children it serves and the families that open their hearts to them.

Danielle Wakefield

Destinee McClung



Anchorage AK 99504

Date: 2/12/2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar

Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee

RE: Alaska SB 88

Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to you in order to express my support for SB 88. My husband and I have been foster parents for the past 5 years, and have had the wonderful experience of parenting nine amazing children through foster care. While we thoroughly enjoyed our experiences parenting the children and working with their families, we were devastated to see the disservice that the state does to protect the children in their charge. The unfortunate and expected standard that is child welfare in our state is abysmal at best.

When I receive a phone call requesting I take a child into our home and family, I ask a series of pointed questions to try and understand the reality that is the case - one of which is have you located any family placement options?" The answer is almost always "Not yet". When a child is removed from their parents and family, it is of the utmost importance that any and all family is swiftly identified, and that children can be placed with any safe family whenever possible. The current guidelines for family search in our state leave much to be desired. SB88 would ensure that family search is done swiftly and well. Childhood is an incredibly short time in one's life. and the attachments, community connections, bonds and relationships established during it set one up for success (or failure). It is well documented that children need stability to thrive. The unfortunate reality is that the state does not adequately identify family placements, leaving children moving between homes and lacking the stability they need to thrive. Whenever possible, it is imperative that family of foster children are located, and choose to swiftly step up and take placement, so these critical connections remain within their biological family.

Secondly, if a child is found unable to return to their biological parents, we would ask that the state move to consider the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing as the primary consideration when considering permanency decisions. After an extended period of time, the child is often well-bonded to the foster family, and has established

connections with an entire community, to include potential foster siblings, extended family, school or neighborhood friends, their religious community, even their pets. Children know these people as their family, their sister, their best friend, and their dog or cat. Our current laws and guidelines do not take into consideration the detriment and trauma that removal from a long-term placement can cause to foster children, who have already endured multiple adverse childhood experiences. These laws do not consider the long-term importance that an established bond with a primary caregiver has to the development and wellbeing of a child. Placement instability (moving children frequently) has many known and well-researched negative consequences.

The primary consideration in every single child welfare case should be the needs of the child or children. We must move to make child welfare laws centered around those who they aim to protect. Children are our future and they are deserving of re-evaluation of our current dated policies, and the enactment of policies and laws that consider their developmental and psychological development as paramount.

Sincerely,

Destinee McClung

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Destinee McClung". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Destinee" is written with a large, looped 'D' and the last name "McClung" follows in a similar cursive script.

Emily Bolander



North Pole, AK 99705

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: Senate Bill 88

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to express my support for Senate Bill 88.

My name is Emily Bolander, and I am a foster parent in Fairbanks, Alaska. Our family has been licensed through the Office of Children's Services for 2.5 years, and in this time, we have had over twenty children reside with us, all but one who were under the age of 6. Some of these children have stayed for only hours, some for a matter of days, and others have resided as long-term placements for a matter of years- nearly for the entirety of our licensure. Currently, we have 6 children in our home between our 3 biological children and 3 placements. We have seen a very wide range of needs in children through our time in foster care. We have navigated Medicaid waiver services, have held children after surgeries, and have dove into the world of caring for disabled children. We have walked alongside biological families and have even had the joy of having dinner in some of their homes. Over the last 2 years, it has been an absolute privilege to serve these children and their families.

If our experience in foster care has taught me anything, it is that children are born inherently deserving of two things: safety and stability.

Safety of course is paramount for Child in Need of Aid cases, but often, stability is an afterthought in these cases. Sometimes this is due only to delays in the court system, or even simply due to lack of staffing and case overloads. While blame is hard to pinpoint, the lack of a solution does not negate the need for stability for the youngest of us in Alaska.

This bill supports family connections whenever possible, and it provides a reassurance that these connections will be sought out quickly. Connections to biological family are proven to increase reunification outcomes, which ultimately, is the goal of foster care. The timely and appropriate search for safe family placements for children in crisis should be a priority of the Office of Children's Services in ALL cases, and family members should absolutely be prioritized when seeking out placement options.

While family should come first, this bill also addresses cases where these family members are unable or unwilling to provide a home to a child in crisis. In these situations, the child is placed

in a licensed foster home, like ours. When these children reside many months in a licensed foster home, safe, healing, and appropriate attachments form. Some of these children stay in these homes from shortly after birth and have no recollection of any other reality.

It is important to remember that non-relative foster placement is not an end to biological family connections. Often, these foster families form safe and healthy relationships with biological family members as well. With one of our long-term placements, we have been able to build beautiful and supportive relationships with the child's paternal family; nearly twenty various family members who chose not to take placement, but love the child in our care. Even my own biological children have gained an additional set of grandparents, as these family members love and support our entire family.

When children who have lived with a licensed foster family for a significant time are pulled from their homes for another permanency option, years into a case, these children experience the trauma of removal all over again. Compounded trauma is exceptionally difficult to unpack and treat and stays for a lifetime. The need for stability in childhood should never be understated. In situations where children have a safe and stable permanent option in their foster family, attachments should at the very least be legally considered in court. Children are **not** resilient in this manner, and relationships cannot just be replaced. The best interest of the **child** should always be considered, above all else.

Children deserve safety, but they also wholeheartedly deserve stability, and that stability should come as soon as safely possible.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Emily Bolander

From: [Jeff Rentzel](#)
To: [Sen. Jesse Bjorkman](#)
Subject: Support for SB88
Date: Friday, February 21, 2025 4:40:21 PM

Dear Senator Jesse Bjorkman


I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 88.

My wife and I have been a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska for the last 7 years. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 55 children. Our experiences of working with some of our state's most vulnerable youth have taught us much about trauma and the impact it can have on a growing body and mind.

Below are listed 2 of the many reasons we support SB 88.

- Affirms the importance of continuity of relationship, community, and culture by emphasizing thorough relative searches so children are placed with safe, extended family in a timely manner. SB 88 also requires information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts for accountability purposes. We recently had a child in our care for over 2 years before OCS they began a search of his relatives. This should have been completed during the initial part of his stay with us. Unfortunately OCS had not completed any of their reports to court, by the time they decided to move forward with them his mother finally began to make some progress in her treatment.
- Requires the courts to consider both the child's physical and psychological well-being when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents.
- Considers a young child's psychological attachments and stability by requiring the courts to consider if they've resided within their current placement for greater than 12 months when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents. We have had several children in our care for over 12 months that we wanted to adopt but in the courts eye we had no say in their decision. At this time resource parents have no law status when it comes to a child's placement.

It's been estimated that approximately 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health problems compared to those from the general population. It's time we consider what we can do as a state to provide youth with a healing experience, rather than contributing additional trauma on their growing minds, through the infliction of more instability and loss of relationships.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey L. Rentzel

Fairbanks, Ak 99708

Kristen Haddox

North Pole, AK 99705

Senator Forrest Dunbar

Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee

State Capitol Room 125

Juneau, AK 99801

Re: Alaska SB 188

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing you today to express my extremely strong support for Senate Bill 188.

My family has been a licensed ICWA foster family, as well as a relative placement, over the course of the last 8 years in Alaska. We have been long term, short term, and an emergency home to 14 amazing foster children. We recently adopted a child after 5 years and 3 months in our home. We are well versed in developmental delays, ADHD, FASD, RAD, ODD, OCD, as well as all the other acronyms this journey presents. Children are not resilient, not matter how agreeable they appear. The brain remembers trauma.

I believe there is a common misperception extended biological families do not want or appreciate OCS involvement. I'm in the unique position, as a relative placement, to inform you many of us are extremely grateful OCS can intervene. They can keep our most vulnerable family members safe in situations where our hands are tied. The most invested family members are often the people the children are hidden from because our advocacy is unwanted. Without the help of strict guidelines and early relative searches, we will be the last to know our family is in state custody.

I am also in the increasingly not unique position of fostering a child for 5 ¼ years before they were able to find permanency. My son arrived at 11 months old and was adopted at 6 years old. His first 11 months of life were horrific and barely survivable. He has at least 10 diagnoseable conditions, and a multitude of health professionals advocated for permanency in our home due to the assured risk of Reactive Attachment Disorder. OCS could not consider us a permanent option, even with advocacy,

because the current “policies and procedures” wouldn’t allow for us to be considered over available family. We have a fantastic relationship with my son’s extended paternal family. Even though they considered us his mom and dad long ago, they requested placement of our son. Among other concerns, they feared his maternal extended family would try to take placement of him over our family. In the end, when it was very clear this part of the family did not want him, and knowing he viewed us as his family, they canceled their request. It should also be noted our son’s biological mother wanted us to adopt him. If the biological mother and other extended family view us as an important part of this child’s life, and can respect the child’s bond, shouldn’t the law allow this same consideration?

We have a responsibility to make foster care a time of healing, not a time our state compounds trauma.

Sincerely,

Kristen Haddox

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kristen Haddox". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Kristen" is written with a large, stylized 'K' and the last name "Haddox" is written with a large, stylized 'H'.

Kristina Johnson
[REDACTED]
Anchorage, AK 99508

February 24th, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 88

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to you today to express my unwavering support for SB 88. Our family has been a licensed resource family in the state of Alaska for the last 4 years. We have cared for 6 children and provided respite care for additional children during this time. I have worked in Special Education and Behavior Analysis for the last 14 years. Many of my students have been or are still in foster care and have needed trauma-informed members in their corner. Additionally, my aunt and uncle were licensed foster parents for 12 years, caring for more than 20 children, and adopting 6 children (and nearly adopting several others). My experiences as a foster mama, Sunday school teacher, in public education, and as a close relative have shaped my heart and helped me to better understand where we can do better for these precious children.

Currently, our nearly 6-year old little one, has been placed with us since December 2021. Just last month, a new extended family member expressed interest in taking long term custody of her. This family member was contacted by OCS in January of 2022 and as of that time, they had no interest in taking care of the toddler. Now, more than 3 years later, they are able to change their minds, and permanency for another little life is held in limbo. SB 88 would interrupt these cycles of “changing minds” by encouraging extended family to not only express, but *demonstrate* their interest in taking placement of familial children. At this stage, more than two years later, SB 88 would also take into consideration the child’s psychological attachments and stability established in their current placement’s home for greater than 12 months. Though we support healthy reunification and came into this journey to bridge the gap for precious little ones until they can be reunited with their biological parent(s), we also care deeply about additional trauma each transition causes in their life, and strongly advocate for transitions to be as few as possible.

It is a heart breaking reality that more children in foster care, or who have been in foster care, experience more mental health challenges than children of the same age who have not experienced being in custody. Anything we can do to minimize the emotional toll and decrease the trauma impressed on the youth in our care will structure healthier relationships for these youth. As a result, it will cultivate healthier communities and citizens of our city as they continue to learn and grow.

Thank you for your time,
Kristina Johnson

Meghan Mason

Anchorage, AK 99502

February 17, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 88

Mr Chairman and members of committee

I am speaking to you today to express my strong support for SB 88.

Our family has been a licensed Foster family since 2017 and during that time we've had the privilege to love and care for 8 children. During this time we've seen first hand the lack of resources that go into making sure children in the system have what they need, which is leading to long term trauma and severe trust issues. As a foster parent our job is to bring these children into our home and ensure they know they're loved and cared for; that they're safe and protected. It's our job, in a sense, to provide a place of "healing" for them. Then the state expects them to uproot again. When do the children become the priority? When they've aged out? When they have seen and experienced more in their in short life than most adults? We need things to change now more than ever.

We had the honor of being the Foster parents of a little girl who we met the day we she was born and took home at 2 weeks old and had in our home till she was just over 4 years old. We had been offered adoption by the state and that was right around the corner when a biological family member across the country whom the child did not know decided to take placement. How do you

explain to a child who knows they can't live with their biological parents and has grown to see you as their safe place, that they aren't allowed to live with you either? You can't. There's no words to make it make sense to a child, it's already sometimes impossible as an adult to understand the why.

By supporting SB 88 will allow children the opportunity to stay with a Foster family they've bonded and growing to love. SB 88 will also hold the State accountable for doing a better job at locating all and potential family/ family friend placements within a reasonable amount of time, not years after a child has bonded and been in our family.

There have been countless studies showing the negative impact that is had on children who have been in Foster care for many years and while keeping kids out of the system is inevitable, we can take steps to make changes to the laws and hold the appropriate people accountable for making sure these children have the opportunity to find placement quicker. Everyone deserves to be loved and feel loved, especially these children who may have never known that feeling.

Thank you for taking time to consider Bill SB 88.

Sincerely,

Meghan Mason

Sabrina Owsley
[REDACTED]
Fairbanks, AK 99709

February 12, 2025

Senator Forrest Dunbar Chair,
Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska Senate Bill 88

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 88.

Our family has been a licensed, ICWA resource foster family for nearly 12 years, fostering 30 children and adopting 2, so far.

We have welcomed newborns to teen, some staying just weeks or months, while others stayed for years before being placed with family.

During this time, I served on the RFAB (Resource Family Advisory Board) for 6 years and represented Foster/Adoptive parents on the Governor's People First Initiative Parent/Foster-Parent Collaborative Council. In addition, I hosted the Northern Region Resource Family Support groups for 8 years and have continued to admin the Northern Region Foster Parent Support Facebook group since 2015. I also worked for, and currently volunteer with, Beacon Hill as a Safe Families for Children host family.

Our family has devoted our lives to the children in OCS' care, as well as to their families, and the resource families who serve and love alongside us, so SB 88 is at the core of our mission for the children who find themselves in OCS' care.

We have witnessed the beauty of families reunited, as well as the devastation of young lives tossed back and forth between biological family and returning into OCS care, while witnessing the lasting, crushing impact those breaks in attachment have on the minds and spirits of these children.

SB 88 affirms the importance of continuity of relationships, community, and culture by emphasizing thorough relative searches, so children are placed with safe, extended family in a timely manner. SB 88 also requires information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts for accountability purposes.

Had this bill been in place in 2018, our former foster daughter, who arrived in our home at age 2 and left at age 5 after already suffering irreparable damage from the abandonment of her birth

mother, would not have spent those 3 years attaching to our family, as OCS had failed to notify the father of her existence for the duration of her case. Instead, as we headed toward our adoption home study with her birth mother's rights terminated, someone at OCS (after nearly 3 years into the case) sent a child support letter to her birth father, which only then alerted him to her existence and notice that she was in foster care. There was no accountability for the failure at contacting her biological father earlier on, and no one at OCS seemed to know why an attempt to make contact had not happened prior. She has spent years in counseling to manage her abandonment issues and today, more than two years after we said goodbye, she still asks to come home and still calls me mom.

SB 88 also considers a young child's psychological attachments and stability by requiring the courts to consider if they've resided within their current placement for greater than 12 months when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents (in non-ICWA cases).

Currently the law requires OCS to remove a child from a bonded foster home and send them to a relative they may have never met, even across the country, before considering the foster home they have settled into over the last year or more. Statistics show that these cases often end in failure, with the child being removed or rejected from the relative home and returning to care with more lasting damage done (often being placed in a new foster home to start over). The bonds formed with the foster family during these crucial months to years, are formative and as real as any relative bond that could have formed, had these relatives stepped forward sooner to care for the child.

This leads to another portion of SB 88, which encourages extended family to demonstrate their interest and willingness to be considered for placement of familial children earlier in a case. Often, relatives are hesitant to step forward in caring for family members in custody, sadly waiting till the '11th hour', as the case moves to termination and adoption, to step up for their young relatives and be willing to take placement. Unfortunately, this often happens long after the child has bonded with the foster family who has carried them through this traumatic experience to a place of healing, showed them stability for the first time, and loved them like family. Long after they have emotionally adopted the family as their own.

The extended waiting periods (which are often years) for relatives to be proactive and willing to care for their family members, are destructive for the children's emotional well-being, and begs the question as to why they let the child linger in the care of another until adoption was on the horizon.

SB 88 will require OCS to encourage relatives to act much sooner in taking placement, rather than allowing the child to linger in care and disrupting a (foster) family bond after years of attachment.

This change will decrease the amount of lifelong attachment disorders our children suffer from such as RAD, help to retain our resource families, and recruit new resource families, while strengthening family bonds and attachments, as the child is able to bond much earlier in the case with the relative placement.

It's been estimated that approximately 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health problems compared to those from the general population. It's time we consider what we can do as a state to provide youth with a healing experience, rather than contributing additional trauma on their growing minds, through the infliction of more instability and loss of relationship.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sabrina Owsley". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Sabrina C. Owsley



Tori Schmidt

[REDACTED]

Wasilla, Alaska 99654

2/12/25

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair

Senate Health and Social Services Committee

State Capitol Room 125

Juneau AK, 99801

RE: **Senate Bill 88**

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to urge your support for **Senate Bill 88**, a crucial piece of legislation that will help improve the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children in need of aid (CINA) in Alaska. As a licensed foster parent and someone deeply concerned about the welfare of vulnerable children, I believe this bill is essential in ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a loving, secure home with the benefit of long-term stability and attachment.

Far too many children in the foster care system face instability, repeated placements and lack of permanent family connections, leading to long-term challenges in mental health, education, and overall well-being. This bill aims to address these issues. Research shows that children who experience stable, loving family environments have better outcomes in adulthood, including higher educational achievement, improved mental health and reduced likelihood of homelessness or incarceration.

I urge you to support this **Senate Bill 88** and to work with your colleagues to prioritize the well-being of our children in need of aid here in Alaska. Thank you for your time and dedication to improving the lives of children who require aid in the form of foster care.

Sincerely,

Tori Schmidt

[REDACTED]

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to support SB 88. I was first licensed as a foster parent in the state of Alaska 11 years ago. I currently have an active foster care license and the placement of a young child in our home, which is my reason for not attaching my name to this letter of support as I do not wish my public support of this bill to have any implications for our current placement and established professional relationships within OCS.

I have many friends and know many members in our community on the Kenai Peninsula who have had placements and decisions that would have been impacted by the necessary changes in this bill. When a young child is placed in a home for over a year and then moved, the foster parents, who often know the child the best, are often at a loss of being able to do anything to impact this decision. It is my hope that with the passage of this bill, OCS will expedite efforts to find family members and suitable placement options earlier in the process. When they do not, it is imperative the child's long-held relationships and psychological health be the primary focus of any placement decisions, recognizing that who a child views as their family will be impacted by who has been in their life and meeting their needs day-in and day-out. In my experience, caseworkers and GALs as well as judges often do not have a full understanding or even a relationship with the child in care, while foster parents often have long established attachment and comprehensive knowledge of the child and their life. We have personally had a child in our home for over 12 months in which OCS did not complete the family search process adequately. We have friends who have a child who was moved this week that they had for over a year and brought home from the hospital because a family member was found at the 16 month mark. If a foster family receives placement of a child at birth or a young age and parents them for over a year, an incredibly significant bond forms. For that child to be moved from the only family they've ever known because OCS did not do their job in a reasonable amount of time hurts everyone. It's preventable. It doesn't need to be that way and it is my hope that this bill provides some accountability to the department and changes in this area.

Thank you.

Steve & Jennifer Van Deventer

Unalaska, AK 99685

2/10/25

Senator Forrest Dunbar
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 125
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Alaska SB 88

Dear Senator Dunbar,

I am writing to you today to express our strong support for SB 88.

Our family has been a licensed resource family for within the State of Alaska for the last 5 years. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 7 children. Our experiences of working with some of our states most vulnerable youth have taught us much about trauma and the impact it can have on a growing body and mind.

SB88:

1. Considers a young child's psychological attachments and stability by requiring the courts to consider if they've resided within their current placement for greater than 12 months when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents (in non-ICWA cases). Often times children are with their resource families for 1 or more years and then ripped from the only family they know. This would help with the young child's psychological attachments to their resource family and create permanency earlier in cases.
2. Requires the courts to consider both the child's physical and psychological well-being when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents. This would help with children not being retraumatized by being removed from resource families that are willing to provide permanency for these children.

Its been estimated that approximately 80 percent of children in Foster Care have significant mental health problems compared to those from the general population. It is time we consider what we can do as a state to provide youth with healing experience, rather than contributing additional trauma on their growing minds, through the infliction of more instability and loss of relationship.

Sincerely,


Steve and Jennifer Van Deventer