

January 31, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181.

Introduction

Our family was a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska from 2018 through September of this last year. During this time, my husband, myself, and our 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 181 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 181 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, aunties 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 181 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 181 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,



Andrea Boeshart

February 1, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Letter of Support

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to convey my strong and unqualified support for the Alaska Senate Bill 181, 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 181. 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 psychopathology, 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 black ink, reading "Charles H. Zeanah, Jr." in a cursive script.

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

David Abel, DO
[REDACTED]
Soldotna, AK 99669

Date: 2/1/2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, senate Health and Social Services Committee

RE: Alaska SB 181

Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you in order to express my support for SB 181.

As a family physician and foster parent who has had numerous placements in my home, I have a unique view into the world of foster care and childcare in our state.

We already know that the early years of development have massive impact in long term mental and physical health. This bill places an emphasis on making decisions for long term placement early in the process in order to minimize upheaval in a child's life.

It is an embarrassment for our system and state that we leave children in foster care for 3-4 years before deciding on a final placement when this could have been avoided by appropriate due diligence early in the process.

This bill requires child services to perform appropriate steps to facilitate placement with family as able. I have seen first hand the department's failure to follow this through which has resulted in unnecessary trauma for the child and as a result find it very appropriate to name this as a requirement by law.

In short, I think this bill takes a small step in a very long journey that is needed toward improving the care of foster children in our state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely

David Abel, DO



CENTER FOR THE RIGHTS
OF ABUSED CHILDREN

Support Senate Bill 181

Modifies provisions relating to the due diligent search for and placement of a child with a relative.

Written Testimony

Kendall Seal, Vice President of Policy
Center for the Rights of Abused Children

Senate Health and Social Services Committee

Chair Wilson and Committee Members:

Good morning, I am Kendall Seal, Vice President of Policy for the Center for the Rights of Abused Children. Our mission is to ensure that every abused and neglected child has a safe and loving home.

To ensure children are protected and have the best chance for stability and a family connection, children should be quickly settled into a relative or foster home on the path to permanency.¹ Children who live with family right away fare particularly well.² That's why we support efforts to find relatives as soon as the child enters care and

¹ David Rubin et al., "The Impact of Placement Stability on Behavioral Well-Being for Children in Foster Care," National Library of Medicine, 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2693406/>; Austen McGuire et al., "The Relation Between Dimensions of Maltreatment, Placement Instability, and Mental Health among Youth in Foster Care," Child Abuse and Neglect, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327868743_The_relation_between_dimensions_of_maltreatment_placement_instability_and_mental_health_among_youth_in_foster_care; Thomas Keller et al., "Approaching the Transition to Adulthood," National Library of Medicine, 2007, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2802332/>.

² "Benefits of Kinship Placement," American Bar Association, January 2022, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/litigation_committees/childrights/kinship-placement/memo-re-benefits-of-kinship-placement-adoption.pdf; Christian Connell et al., "Changes in Placement Among Children in Foster Care," National Library of Medicine, 2006, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4204626/>.

ensure the child's best interests are always at the center of placement and permanency decisions.

The Problem

Currently, Alaska law requires the department to search for adult family members or family friends and prioritizes placement with a relative.³ However, the parameters of a, "due diligence search" are not adequately defined. State law does not detail what a notification shall entail, require timely responses, detail what must be reported to the court, or provide sufficient accountability for executing diligent searches. Together, these structural issues can result in avoidable disruptions when a child's relatives are not found upon a child's removal from their home but appear months or even years down the line – diminishing children's stability and safety.

Consider the following:

- 20% of Alaska youth have three or more placements.⁴
 - Compared to 16% nationally.
- The median number of months a child spends in care is 22.⁵
 - Compared to 18, nationally.

³ AS 47.14.100(e).

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, *Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data*, Permanency and Well-Being, Outcome 6: Placement Stability, <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/sixOneLessThan12/index>.

⁵ *Id.* at Foster Care Data, Exited Foster Care During FY, <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/exitedCare/index>.

- 5.4 percent will reenter care within a year, and 13 percent will reenter care after a year of a prior incident.⁶
 - Compared to national averages of 7.5 (higher than Alaska) and 11.5 (lower than Alaska), respectively.

Such instability fuels negative outcomes, such as going missing and the subsequent risk of exploitation and human trafficking.

Through the work of a pro bono legal clinic at the Center for the Rights of Abused Children, we know firsthand the harms children suffer when agencies and courts shuffle them from home to home in simple obedience to preferential lists – as opposed to the child's best interests always guiding decisions. Too often, agencies are not incentivized to find the best relative placement at the start of the case and opt to remove children from the only loving foster family they have ever known and send them to relatives they have never met.

The solution

Senate Bill 181 promotes safety and stability of children in care by:

- Establishing clear guidelines for conducting timely, thorough relative searches.
- Helping relatives make informed, timely decisions by providing information about the options for participating in the child's care, the process for becoming licensed, and all available resources.

⁶ *Id.* at Permanency and Well-Being, Outcome 4.2: Reentries into Foster Care, <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/fourTwo/index>.

- Increasing accountability through judicial oversight of diligent searches.
- Improve stability by treating long-term foster families of young children akin to relatives. When considering whether a child should be moved, the law would now recognize the importance of bonding with foster parents and minimizing instability by considering a long-term foster placement as preferentially equal to relatives.

Conclusion

A child's needs must always be paramount. This means finding relatives quickly, and if this cannot be accomplished, it means prioritizing stability and limiting trauma to the child through lasting and loving foster homes. A developing body of research shows that placement stability and immediate placement with relatives are pivotal for child safety and well-being.

By passing this reform, children entering the foster care system will have a stronger pathway to being placed with relatives quickly and avoiding the trauma of constantly moving homes.

These are the simple and needed policies that serve the most vulnerable children in Alaska. Thank you for your time and attention, and I can answer any questions you may have.

###

Kenna Willis
Anchorage, AK 99501
February 3rd, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

This letter is to encourage the consideration of SB 181.

My husband and I have been Therapeutic Foster Parents in Alaska for over 7 years, specifically trained in caring for children who experience additional adversities, including medical needs, cognitive impairment, developmental delays, severe behaviors and other varying special needs. Beginning in the Matanuska Valley and now residing in Anchorage, we've cared for more than 12 children full time, including several sibling groups and additionally have provided respite to more than 20 children.

I'm also a first grade teacher in the Anchorage School District, working at a title 1 school, where many of my students' families are affected by social and economic factors that some of us can only imagine. I'm familiar with the myriad of ways in which families, biological and foster, are affected by the deep impacts of foster care.

We've worked closely with biological families and support reunification between children and their parents whenever safe and possible and we've gone above and beyond to facilitate family contact and support meaningful connections with extended family members of children in our care, recognizing the importance of honoring as many safe and positive relationships for our children as possible.

SB 181 holds the Office of Children's Services and other organizations and agencies responsible for the placement of vulnerable children, accountable for seeking out safe and appropriate relatives of a foster child, locating them and informing them officially of the child's CINA status and addressing the possibility of that family member providing placement for the child, barring any barriers outside of the departments control. Most notably, this should be happening *as quickly as possible*, as children build new routines in their foster homes, build new relationships with daycare/school friends and foster siblings, and settle into their new realities. Making the transition to a safe and positive adult family member *as quickly as possible* means that children can settle into this "new"ness with more


familiarity and comfort. It could mean that biological families are more motivated to reunify with their children, sooner, as their children are with known members of their own family (and therefore perhaps the parents contact and visitation with their child is in a more natural and meaningful setting, like "grandma's house for a birthday party" instead of a drab visiting room at OCS). It also very well could mean that children in our foster care system would experience disrupted placements at a much lower frequency, because presumably once placed with a safe and healthy family member, there'd be no need to continue moving the child around. This would also lessen the frequency and severity of children experiencing unnecessary losses and developing Reactive Attachment Disorder at a lower rate. In our experience, children with behavioral problems are the most at-risk of multiple disruptions, as foster family after foster family struggle to understand the child, their background, their unique needs and cultural factors or other factors that influence the child and their behavior, something perhaps a close family member of the child would have a deeper understanding of and more empathy for working through.

We currently care for a sibling set of 4 children, who've lived with us for approximately 5 years. The youngest (4) was born into our home and has had zero contact or visitation with any relatives, including either biological parent. Despite visitation attempts from OCS and attempts from our family to involve some of the children's family members in their lives, no one has shown a desire to be involved or to take placement of the children and to my knowledge, all family members are aware of the children being in custody at this point. *Still*, the department has communicated their desire to locate family members interested in taking placement, *FIVE* years into the case. At this point, the 4 year old who wholeheartedly thinks of us as "mom" and "dad" would be devastated to leave our home. This bill would ensure that these family placement attempts happened at a much sooner period in time and that these attempts are documented in a concrete manner, so that caseworkers are held accountable for their efforts, or lack of efforts in finding safe and appropriate family placements for these children.

Every child deserves to grow up in a home where they feel loved, cared for, cherished and where their ideas and personalities are honored and respected. Where they experience compassion and have trust in their caregiver. While the child welfare system is in need of repair in more ways than one, our system is only as good as the people within it and if we can collectively work to make minor but monumental changes like this one, we can at the very least, change the life of a child or two.

Sincerely,

Kenna Willis


February 8th 2024

Kate Sutton

Soldotna, AK 99669

January 31, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181.

Our family has been a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska for the last 6 years. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 4 foster children. We have had the joy of adopting 2 of them, and making our home their forever home. Our experiences of working with some of our state's most vulnerable youth have taught us so much about trauma and the impact it can have on them.

The point of SB 181 I want to emphasize the most...

- It 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). Our young foster son was with our family for 3 years but was reunited with his family a year ago. The trauma he and our family have experienced through this reunification has been difficult. We disappeared from his life and he from ours. He was placed with us at 4 months old, and we were the only family he has ever known. I believe if the child's psychological attachment and stability was considered after 12 months it would change these sweet children's lives and the percentage of foster families in our state would go up.

Because of the additional trauma that is placed on their growing minds 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. As a state it's time we provide a healing experience with more stability for our children and our foster families.

"Every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story."

Sincerely,

Kate Sutton



Dear Senator Wilson,

Hey there, I'm Valley Wakefield, 16 years young, and the oldest kid born into a pretty awesome family that's been sharing our home, snacks, and probably too many embarrassing moments with foster kids for the past five years. I'm reaching out to talk about something super important to me (and a bunch of other kids too) - Senate Bill 181.

So, here's the deal: Senate Bill 181 is like this beacon of hope for kids caught in the foster system. It's all about finding family members fast, making sure kids can stay with relatives who are safe and loving, and keeping us in the loop with the people we've started calling family. My family's kind of a pro at this. We don't just open our home; we dive deep, getting to know the kid's bio families too. Like this one time, we had a sibling group, and thanks to the folks at OCS doing their magic, they found a safe family member pretty fast. Even when they moved to California, we stayed connected, turning into one big extended family. That's the dream, right?

But, let's get real for a sec. That dream? It's more like a once-in-a-blue-moon kind of deal. In fact, none of our other cases have gone that way. Right now, we have this adorable four-year-old with us. She's been part of the fam since she was just a tiny baby. To her, my mom is mom, and this is her home. Our cats are her cats and my cousins are her cousins. But it feels like the system doesn't see that over the last 1,366 days she's woven herself into the tapestry of our family. She has a sense of belonging. Instead, it seems like there's this obsession with ticking boxes for adults, without thinking about how it's going to tear her world apart. The federal timeline is 2 years in care. Tell me why this little girl is going on four years with no end in sight? Tell me why the state keeps ignoring constant safety concerns or why they beg people who do not want kids and have clearly stated they have no interest in raising them to take them when their perfectly happy and content where they are.

This bill, Senate Bill 181, it's a game-changer. It gets that kids need to be with people who love them from the get-go, and not shuffled around until someone finally decides they're ready to step up. I've seen enough to tell you, the system's got it backward a lot of the time, putting adult feelings before what kids need and want. Bowing to adults throwing tantrums instead of seeing the devastation they bring upon the child. Is it Office of CHILDRENS services or Office of PARENT services. Maybe OCS should change their name.

I'm just a sophomore in high school, but trust me, I've seen enough drama to last a lifetime. And not the fun kind you see on TV. We're talking real-life, heartbreak stuff that sticks with you. I've even talked to

my parents about stopping our foster license because, honestly, it's just too much sometimes. We don't want these kids to think we didn't want them after years of living in our home. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Supporting Senate Bill 181 means you're not just hearing us; you're taking a stand for what's right for the kids who don't have a voice in all this. It's about making sure they get to go to and stay with people who love them right from the start, without all the unnecessary drama.

Thanks for listening (or reading, I guess). I hope you can see why this bill means a lot to me and so many others. Let's do something awesome together for these kids.

Best,

Valley Wakefield

Valley Wakefield

From: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Alaska SB 181
Date: Wednesday, January 31, 2024 9:11:20 PM

Erin Allen

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] 99501
January 31, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am reaching out to convey my firm endorsement of SB 181.

For over 7 years my days have been spent with children in care and their parents, facilitating family contact. I've seen the parents motivated to reunify, do the hard work with the reward of having their families together again. Those are the best days. I've been to adoptions; those are the best days. Those are both equally the best days because the children have found their permanent home. As a child time is suspended and feels endless but looking back childhood is achingly short and lingering in care without a permanent family is a disservice to Alaska's children. A prompt discovery of family to offer a stable environment for children in care, preserving their community, culture and relationships and urging families to express their interest and readiness for placement consideration at an earlier stage in the case would reduce the timelines for permanency. Children need stability and attachment and requiring the courts to consider if they have resided with their current placement for longer than 12 months when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents (in non-ICWA cases). 12 months is a very long time for a child and for some it is all they have ever know or remember.

These decisions and laws create a ripple effect, fast forward 10 - 20 years and the impact on Alaska's children will be huge and it is up to us whether the impact will be positive or not.

Sincerely,

Erin Allen

Kristen Haddox

██████████
North Pole, AK 99705

Senator David Wilson

Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee

State Capitol Room 121

Juneau, AK 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing you today to express my extremely strong support for Senate Bill 181.

My family has been a licensed ICWA foster family, as well as a relative placement, over the course of the last 7 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 a long horizontal stroke that extends to the right. The last name "Haddox" is written with a large, stylized 'H' and a long horizontal stroke that extends to the right.

Mallory Haines

North Pole, Alaska
99705

February 2, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee State Capitol
Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181.

My name is Mallory Haines and our family has been a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska for the last 4 years. Additionally, we served our community by being a licensed resource family in the Commonwealth of Virginia prior to moving to Alaska. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for many 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.

I am in support of SB 181 for many reasons including, but not limited to:

- 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 181 also requires information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts for accountability purposes.

- Encourages extended family to demonstrate their interest and willingness to be considered for placement of familial children earlier in a case.
- 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 (in non-ICWA cases). This point is especially important to me as I've witnessed the attachment issues and fall-out that comes from abruptly removing children from the bonded supports they've attained throughout their lives while in care.

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,

Mallory Haines

Date: 2/1/2024
Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
RE: Alaska SB 181

Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you in order to express my support for SB 181.

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. SB181 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 blue ink, appearing to read "D McClung". The signature is stylized, with a large, looped initial "D" and the last name "McClung" written in a cursive-like script.

Simone Montayne
[REDACTED]
Fairbanks, AK 99708
2/2/24

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801
Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181. Our family has been a licensed resource family within the state of Alaska on and off since 2010. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 6 children. Our experiences of working with some of our state's most vulnerable youth have taught us much about trauma, children's mental health and prenatal drug and alcohol exposure and the impact it can have on a growing body and mind. In half of my cases, the child's physical safety and mental health were not considered in long-term placement decisions.

I support SB 181 because it:

- 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 181 also requires information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts for accountability purposes.
- Encourages extended family to demonstrate their interest and willingness to be considered for placement of familial children earlier in a case.
- 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.

It's been estimated that approximately 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health problems and developmental disabilities 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,
Simone Montayne

Simone Montayne

Bobbi Dyan Outten, MA, LPC-S

[REDACTED]
Anchorage, AK 99516

February 1, 2024

Alaska Senate Health and Social Services

Re: Letter of Support in re. Senate Bill No. 181

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter is in support of Senate Bill No. 181 relating to the placement of a child in need of aid and/or adoption. As a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Director of a program that addresses domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and child neglect for over twenty-four years, I have observed patterns of coercive behaviors, victimization and neglect that all too often involve the system of care put in place to protect. With dual master's degrees and a specialized degree with a focus on at-risk children, I am a subject matter expert in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and advocate strongly for laws that ensure standards, checks and balances and trauma-informed best practices for our most vulnerable. Decision making of the well-being of a child should never be allowed to fall to the interpretation or at the pleasure of a department or person.

SB181 removes the current ambiguity as to standards the Office of Children's Services must adhere to. I urge the Senate to review historical data, to listen to community advocates and to do their own research. Removals and even reunifications are too frequently spontaneous knee-jerk decisions, without any adherence to best practices, attachment research, age-appropriate conversations or transition intentionality. Careless decisions directly impact the number of families willing to continue offering foster care, in turn creating the current foster care crisis. We must understand what is happening within the very system designed to protect...a system that is now creating trauma, not only to the child in custody, but to entire family systems. The data and research alone require more than your time, it requires your action. Without action, Alaska's children will be more vulnerable than ever before in our history. I humbly urge you to listen, to read this letter and to take action.

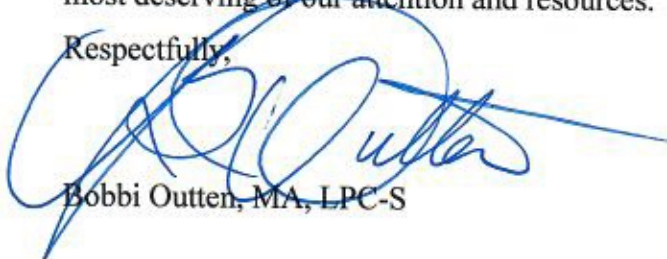
Legal parameters need to be solidly in place, requiring the entire system to conduct thorough family searches immediately for children in custody. SB 181 offers protection of a young child's placement stability and psychological attachment to their long-term primary caregiver(s) by REQUIRING a thorough, diligent and detailed search for ANY family members, rather than the ambiguity of the current language stating the department "attempts to...". The timing of when a thorough family search is done is critical to the well-being of a child, we should never be "just discovering" family a year or years later. I urge the Senate to require family searches for all children to be defined and required within no more than three months after a child is in custody. Moving children to family sooner ensures opportunity to create bonds and attachments to their family. If a child cannot be moved to family due to interstate requirements or for any reason, the identified family for future placement should legally be required to visit the child and build connections within guidelines established based on attachment research. If we allow children to form primary attachments to foster families, further trauma will occur, at the hands of

the state, when severing these bonds and requiring a child to try to reattach. It must be acknowledged that broken bonds make it increasingly difficult for a child to attach to a new caretaker and children who develop attachment disorders are at risk for future mental health disorders, and thus the cycle continues. If the Office of Children's Services has used due diligence in family searches by an appropriate established timeline, and family has not taken steps to build attachment, then a home in which a child has stability in placement, having formed attachment and bonds, should by all rights become the primary consideration for permanency. When a child has found stability in placement for a year or more, permanency decisions must now be based on best practices on what is safest, most nurturing and least disruptive to the child.

As an indigenous woman, I see children as our most important resource. I stand on the importance of culture, tradition, and the importance of a child being connected to their roots. While perhaps not relevant to a SB 181, I will nonetheless emphasize that in regard to children known or suspected to be under the jurisdiction of the Indian Child Welfare Act, it is imperative for increased efforts for any and all tribal affiliation to include contacting the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

I appreciate the opportunity to voice my support for Senate Bill No. 181. Alaska's children deserve strong, decisive action on their behalf and, as our state's very future, they are the best investment and most deserving of our attention and resources.

Respectfully,



Bobbi Outten, MA, LPC-S

Sabrina Owsley
[REDACTED]
Fairbanks, AK 99709

January 31, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181.

Our family was a licensed, ICWA resource family for over 10 years, closing our license last September after caring for 25 children and adopting 2.

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 local 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 Supervisor and host family, as well as the Northern Region resource family support coordinator, here in the Fairbanks region.

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 181 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 181 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 181 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 181 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 181, 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, is 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 181 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 that reads "Sabrina Owsley".

Sabrina C. Owsley



Patrick McClung

Anchorage AK 99504

Date: 2/2/2024

Senator David Wilson

Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee

RE: Senate Bill 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

When your mom tells you to clean your room you probably pick up the toys and games but you don't make your bed or clean the windows or vacuum the floor just like how OCS doesn't do a good job finding family for kids , they do the bare minimum. They need someone to tell them how to actually do good work.

My foster sister was in our family for 10 months before they even found someone from her family. At that point she was already comfortable and felt like a part of our family and it was really sad for her to leave us. Then she left that family and came back to us. Then she ended up leaving us again to go to a different family and she was still only three. It would have been better for her to stay with us or them the whole time because moving that much is way too hard for a kid.

I think the state should and very easily could make OCS do a better job because when they move kids to family they think it makes them look like they are doing a good job. But moving kids lots of times isn't doing a good job. Getting kids to family right away is doing a good job, or letting them stay in one foster family is good too.

I want the laws to think about the kids over adults because OCS is doing a bad job and that's who they're supposed to protect, the kids over adults. It makes me sad to see my foster brothers and sisters who just have to do whatever OCS decides and nobody gets to say that it doesn't seem okay or right. Somebody needs to help the kids and help make sure that things are right for the kids as the most important.

I am only eleven but a year to two years is a long time when you're a kid even if it doesn't seem like it to an adult. You only get to be a kid for a little bit.
please think about what I'm saying and pass the Senate Bill 181.

Patrick McClung, age 11

Patrick McClung

February 2, 2024

Malaika Tesson

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801
Re: Alaska SB 181

[REDACTED]
Anchorage, AK 99504

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express my strong support for SB 181.

I am a born and raised Alaskan with years of experience with the resource family network both as a child and as an adult as my mother was also a Resource Parent and I have friends and family who are also resource parents or had their license within the last 5 years. My family has been a licensed resource family within the State of Alaska for the last 3.5 years. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 5 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.

SB 181 is needed for so many reasons but some of the main reasons are that it 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 181 also requires information regarding search and notice efforts to be filed regularly with the courts for accountability purposes. It also encourages extended family to demonstrate their interest and willingness to be considered for placement of familial children earlier in the case instead of waiting until the case plan goals have changed.

For my family in particular the goals of requiring the courts to consider both the children's physical and psychological well-being when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents, and considering a young child's psychological attachments and stability by requiring the courts to consider if they've resided with their current placement for more than 12 months when making permanency decisions for children unable to return to their parents in non ICWA cases is especially important.

My family is not unique in this desire, but this year has experienced monumental loss that can never be put into words all due to the fact that the current regulations and Statutory requirements don't take into consideration the psychological toll moving children from their long-term placements places in children under 3. Psychologists have testified in my cases how this affects children under the age of 3 are impacted from being removed from the family that they have ever known, should that be the resource family or other placement.

One child in particular has caused our family extreme distress and harm. Very briefly the recount is as follows: I took this child home from the hospital when she was 2 weeks old and being discharged from the hospital after having to be monitored for withdrawal due to drug use. Fast forward 2 years, hundreds of hours of therapy and doctor appointments later and due to a case worker error, which still has not been held accountable for, and the worker did not sign the parent voluntary relinquishment as required

and ordered by the judge. This resulted in our pre-adoptive child being yanked from my home after 3.5 years in our home, and reunified with a biological parent who is unable to care for the child. Fast forward 7 months later and we still have her sleeping at our home 4 days a week, taking her to all her therapeutic appointments, doctor appointments all, with no support from the Office of Children's Services and no avenue to ensure her safety. This is just one example of the reason change is needed. We have 2 other children who have had their case extended for over 3 years as family members keep coming out of the woodwork to attempt to get placement when they have known from day one that the kids have been in care just to be deemed unable to receive placement of the children. With our home study done but no hope that the case will be finalized before the child who came to my home at 6 weeks old turns 4 years old.

It has been estimated that 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 they have known for the majority of their lives.

Thank you for reading my letter, I genuinely hope that this bill passes as the number of children it can help would be monumental.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Malaika Tesson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Malaika Tesson

Steve & Jennifer Van Deventer
[REDACTED]
Unalaska, AK 99685

1/30/24

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Alaska SB 181

Dear Senator Wilson,

I am writing to you today to express our strong support for SB 181.

Our family has been a licensed resource family for within the State of Alaska for the last 3 years. During this time, we've had the privilege of caring for 5 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.

SB181:

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

February 1, 2024

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol Room 121
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: Alaska SB 181

Senator Wilson:

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 181. 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 181 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 181 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.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Danielle Wakefield". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "D".

Danielle Wakefield