

Parent Advisory Committee
Office of Children's Services
4501 Business Park Boulevard
Suite 24
Anchorage, AK 99503

February 19th, 2024

Senate Health and Social Services Committee

Dear Senator Wilson and Members of the Senate Health and Social Services Committee,

The Office of Children's Services is currently in the process of creating a Parent Advisory Committee in order to represent the parent voice and provide input into agency policy development. We are the first two Parent Leaders who volunteered for this role, striving to reshape OCS to better serve and empower families and helping to build strong families within our communities. Both of us have had personal experiences with OCS, having been separated and later reunified with our children. Danielle also has experience on the other side of this process as a foster parent. We are passionate about improving the child welfare system, and helping OCS to better meet the needs of children and families.

As birth families who have been through the OCS process, we respect the significant role that foster parents have played in our children's lives. We agree with many things we heard in the testimony, to include:

- The child welfare system should not delay the process of finding relatives, which results in unnecessary trauma and can cause lifelong harm to children. Relative searches must be conducted thoroughly and promptly.
- Placement changes - even when reunifying with parents - should occur thoughtfully and calmly. A transition plan should be identified, frequently discussed, and well planned.
- Children shouldn't lose their connection to *any* of the people they love. Important connections should be maintained, including to family or to foster parents.

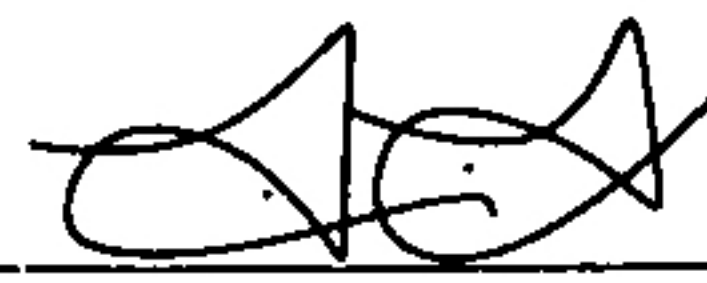
Despite finding these commonalities, we cannot support Senate Bill 181 due to the elevation of foster parents to the same placement preference as a relative placement. Children do best long term with family. A one-year attachment to a foster parent cannot replace the history, culture, and love that connection to family brings.

We heard the argument that this change does not elevate foster parents *above* relatives, but that does not take into account that foster parents and relatives are not starting on equal footing. Foster parents receive training on child welfare, have greater knowledge of the system, have homes ready to accept children, have already been assessed by a slow-moving system,

and often have access to more resources. Magnifying the advantages foster parents hold over relatives does not benefit children.

Relatives are the top placement preference because children do best with family, and this should not be changed. Senate Bill 181 protects foster parents' interests over children's interests. We urge the Committee to not pass Senate Bill 181 and to consider other solutions such as increased focus on maintaining a positive co-parenting relationship between birth and long-time foster parents, focused on maintaining *all* attachments. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Danielle Zundel (Feb 19, 2024 05:57 AKST) Tellisha Frankhouser (Feb 19, 2024 07:51 AKST)

Danielle Zundel, Parent Leader (Southcentral Region)

Tellisha Frankhouser, Parent Leader (Southeast Region)

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