

March 15, 2018

Senator Wilson
State Capitol Room 115
Juneau, AK 99801
Senator.David.Wilson@akleg.gov

RE: HB 151 – Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

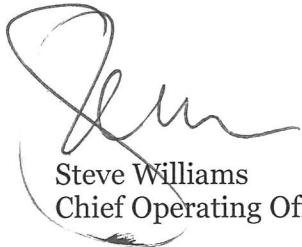
Dear Senator Wilson:

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority fully supports HB 151.

The Trust recognizes the capacity issues inherent in Alaska's child welfare system in its current form and supports the training and workforce standards presented in HB 151. To achieve better outcomes for children and families involved with the Office of Children's services (OCS), there must be reasonable caseload requirements. Reasonable caseloads are critical given the complexity of needs for both the child and their family involved with OCS. House Bill 151 would take Alaska in a positive step in that direction. Furthermore, ensuring new case workers have sufficient training and support as they begin their practice will better support children and families towards the ultimate goal of permanence.

This enhanced and expedited level of support for children and families would have the cumulative effect of reducing stress and mental health burden experienced by all parties involved, including case workers. Ultimately, the Trust advocates for policies and strategies that reduce the number of children requiring out-of-home placement, but in the interim HB 151 improves the existing system and better supports beneficiaries and their families.

Respectfully,



Steve Williams
Chief Operating Officer

Cc: Senator Micciche
Senator von Imhof
Senator Giessel
Senator Begich
Representative Gara



ALASKA MENTAL HEALTH BOARD
ADVISORY BOARD ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE
431 North Franklin Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801
907-465-8920

March 15, 2018

The Honorable Representative Les Gara
State Capitol Room 511
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: HB 151 Foster Care; Child Protection

Dear Representative Gara,

The Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (ABADA) and Alaska Mental Health Board (AMHB) are the state agencies charged with planning, coordinating, and advising on behavioral health services funded by the State of Alaska. The joint mission of ABADA/AMHB is to advocate for programs and services that serve people with behavioral health disorders, their families, care providers, and communities.

The Boards offer their full support for House Bill 151, a bill that will address caseload levels and worker retention. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) reports a high vacancy rate of 49% in FY 17, resulting in caseloads that are significantly higher than the national average of 12 cases per case-carrying worker. For example, Anchorage caseworkers carry 28 cases and King Salmon staff carry 27 cases. Families and foster parents who struggle to maintain stability and safety for children involved with the state system are dependent on timely and professional attention from state OCS workers. This bill meets a critical need for Alaskan families.

Thank you for your ongoing advocacy for improving the lives of foster children in Alaska. We appreciate your support in continuing to improve systems that support Alaska's children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison L. Kulas'.

Alison L. Kulas MSPH
Executive Director

Alaska Regional Coalition

Representing 100 Communities

SENT VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

March 13, 2018

RE: Support for HB 151, the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Legislators:

The Alaska Regional Coalition respectfully submits its support for House Bill 151, the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. The Alaska Regional Coalition is a consortium of four regional Alaska Native tribal nonprofit organizations and one regional tribe, together serving 75,000 Alaskans from Kotzebue to Ketchikan. Children are our most treasured resource, and we share a sacred obligation to ensure that they are provided every opportunity to reach their full potential and to be contributing members of our society. All children have the right to grow up in safe, loving environment.

Each year, thousands of children and families go through the Alaska child welfare system managed by the Office of Children's Services ("OCS"). Alaska Native children are disproportionately represented in the system. While Alaska Native children make up only 18.9 percent of Alaskan children, 55% of children in out of home care are Alaska Native.¹ Alaska Native children remain in foster care for longer periods of time than non-Native children and their reunification rates are lower.

OCS worker vacancy and turnover is 35%, with most new workers staying on the job for just 18 months.² With the high turnover rate, caseloads are double the national guidelines.³ With high caseloads due to high turnover, workers are unable to perform their jobs. They are severely limited in their ability to hold monthly caseworker visits, do case planning, and complete the work needed to achieve permanency through unification.⁴ In these circumstances, it is our children that suffer most, and in that our future as a state,

OCS is working toward getting on a path that meets the needs of our children and families, for which we are grateful. Passage of HB 151 will provide much-needed tools for OCS to provide adequate services to

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, Child and Family Services Review: 2017 Statewide Assessment (2017).

² *Id.* at 2.

3 Id.

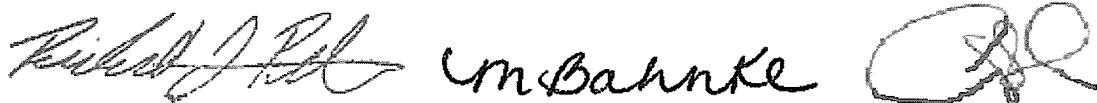
⁴ *Id.* at 3.

Alaska Regional Coalition

Representing 100 Communities

Alaska's children. More broadly, passage of this bill will help our state government perform its constitutional duty to promote the public welfare.

Sincerely,



Central Council of the Tlingit Haida
Indian Tribes of Alaska

Kawerak, Inc.

Chugachmiut

Tanana Chiefs Conference



Maniilaq Association



Tanana
Chiefs
Conference





February 16, 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of Access Alaska I am writing in support of HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. This Act provides an opportunity for children and families to heal from trauma, abuse and neglect. Children are being removed from their home at an alarming rate. The downturn in the economy, untreated mental health conditions and substance abuse has all contributed to the very high removal of children.

◆
Anchorage
1217 E. 10th Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99501
Phone: 907.248.4777
Fax: 907.248.0639
Toll Free: 800.770.4488
TTY: 907.248.8799
VP: 888.808.1496

◆
Fairbanks
526 Gaffney Road
Suite 100
Fairbanks, AK 99701-4914
Phone: 907.479.7940
Fax: 907.474.4052
Toll Free: 800.770.7940
TTY: 907.474.8619
VP: 866.971.2832

◆
Wasilla
1075 Check Street
Suite 109
Wasilla, AK 99654-6937
Phone: 907.357.2588
Fax: 907.357.5585
Toll Free: 800.770.0228

◆
Kenai
Physical:
33880 Community College Dr.
Soldotna, AK 99669-9234
Mailing:
PO Box 484
Kenai, AK 99611-0484
Phone: 907.262.4955
Fax: 907.262.4936
Toll Free 888.260.9336

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www.accessalaska.org
Info@accessalaska.org
facebook.com/access_alaska

High caseloads for the Office of Children's Service's (OCS) caseworkers do not allow for appropriate intervention and support for children and families. Removing a child from the home is another trauma on a long string of traumatic events. Once a child is removed it is critical that the system move quickly to support the family in their ability to care for their children and have them returned as soon as possible. When this is not possible children need to find an alternate (foster) loving home in which to live, heal and develop a sense of well-being.

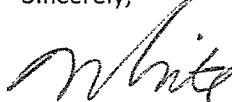
In the current OCS system this is not possible. Caseloads are far too high for case workers to be effective in making qualified decisions for child removal, supporting families to build their capacity to have children returned or to seek permanent alternative placements for children. Reducing caseloads and providing additional training for caseworkers as outlined in HB 151 is a step in the right direction.

As a Center for Independent Living working with people with disabilities, we understand that many of the people we serve are at risk of having children removed unnecessarily. People with disabilities across the spectrum have been unfairly assessed for being unable to care for their children. Access Alaska has intervened in several of these cases in Alaska and has been successful in ensuring that these families stay intact. The need for support, disability, poverty, etc. should not be grounds for child removal. It is an overtaxed system with inadequately trained caseworkers that contribute to this occurrence.

Alternately, children with disabilities are at greater risk of child abuse and neglect. They are also more vulnerable to lasting harm. In these cases, it is critical that the system is swift, deliberate and effective in finding permanent loving homes and families.

Please support the passing of HB 151 and protect Alaska's children and families. Let me know if you should have any questions regarding our position on this matter.

Sincerely,


Douglas White, LCSW
Executive Director



April 11th, 2016

RE: House Bill 151 Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Representative Les Gara,

On behalf of Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA) we would like to extend our support for House Bill 151, the “Children Deserve a Loving Home Act.” As current and former foster youth, we know all too well the challenges faced by children and families engaged with Alaska’s child welfare system. With record numbers of children and youth in foster care, Alaska is in dire need of the improvements outlined in HB 151.

This bill offers solutions to insure relative search/placement, sibling contact, normalcy and the prudent parent standard, and training and workload standards for child welfare staff, to help reduce caseloads, ultimately leading to the safe reduction of children in the foster care system.

Placement with Relatives & Friends

Identifying relatives promotes kinship placements for children and can help to maintain connections to family and avoid stranger foster care. HB 151 adds that an OCS supervisor must certify that a search for relatives of children placed in foster care has been conducted. This bill also requires that potential relative placements receive an answer when applying for a foster care license within 45 days.

Sibling Contact

Our youth often report that sibling connections are some of the most important relationships in their lives. Youth separated from their siblings can experience even more severe impacts of trauma and lose connections critical to their livelihood. HB 151 allows children separated from their siblings by the foster care system to maintain contact. It promotes that caregivers help to support sibling relationships, and requires OCS provide contact information for brothers and sisters to maintain connections.

Normalcy

Youth engaged in their communities have more connections to caring adults (teachers, coaches, mentors, the parent of a friend), strong connections to their peers, and opportunities grow and develop through age appropriate activities. HB 151 promotes the, “Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard,” allowing foster parents to make decisions about participation in extracurricular activities, travel, field trips, overnight activities, and cultural, and social activities.

Case Planning & Older Youth

“It’s better to plan for the battle, than battle the plan,” ~Abraham Lincoln. Youth engaged in their case plan are more likely to have positive relationships with their case workers, team members, and actively participate in permanency planning. HB 151 allows youth ages 14 and older, to participate in meetings to develop a case plan and decide on a permanency goal. It adds that youth are allowed to identify two adults (other than foster parents) to attend meetings, and act as advocates.



Documents

Everyone needs proof of who they and where they come from as adults to get a job, go to the doctor, file for their PFD, and get a driver's license. HB 151 requires OCS provide or get help obtaining birth certificate, social security card, health insurance information, medical records, driver's license or ID card, and Certificate of Degree of Indian/Alaska Native Blood for youth released from foster care at ages 16 or later.

Training & Workload Standards

Fully trained caseworkers who have the time and support to do their jobs allows for meaningful engagement with families to make better decisions about the removal, placement, and long term permanency of children. HB 151 requires OCS to provide a "Gold Standard," training and lower caseloads for newer workers. It also requires that OCS submit a written report to the legislature if the department is having trouble hiring and retaining front line staff.

All of the provisions outlined in this bill offer drastic improvements to the lives of more than 3,000 children in foster care in Alaska. As Alaska's only statewide organization of current and former foster youth, we are in full support of House Bill 151.

Regards,

Amanda Metivier

Amanda Metivier
Facing Foster Care in Alaska