

Jody Simpson

From: Jessica Ullrich <jessica_ruck@hotmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 29, 2018 12:03 PM
To: Sen. David Wilson; Sen. Natasha Von Imhof; Senator.Cathy.Giessel@alaska.gov; Senator.Peter.Micciche@alaska.gov; Senator.Tom.Begich@alaska.gov
Subject: HB 151

Dear Senator Giessel and Health and Social Services Committee,

I am a constituent in District N, I vote in every election, and I pay close attention to what my state representatives are doing in Juneau. I am writing you today regarding HB 151. I am very concerned about the caseloads that Office of Children's Services (OCS) frontline workers are enduring. I worked as a full-time family services worker, in-home services worker, ICWA Specialist and then supervisor for 8.5 years at OCS. I can tell you from experience, that caseloads above 20 is bad, but now with it being above 30- you are going to have unsafe children. This is not okay and it's up to our legislature to do something about it.

A caseload of 20 or more makes it impossible to keep up with the requirements of the job. Imagine communicating with 400+ people per month: children/youth, parents, parent attorneys, GALs, CASAs, family members, foster parents, daycare providers, school personnel, service providers, visitation supervisors, judges, etc. and also being responsible for safety assessment homevisits, developing case plans, finding least restrictive placements, making request for funds, writing court reports, attending court hearings, keeping up on ORCA documentation, making referrals, returning phone calls and responding to emergencies. The amount of work is too much. It's unbelievable to me to see that the number of children removed has more than doubled since I worked at OCS. Adherence to the Indian Child Welfare Act must be incredibly difficult with caseloads higher than 30 right now.

High caseloads are directly linked to worker turnover. Children and families suffer from high turnover rates the most. Every time a family gets a new caseworker, it puts the child at risk because it's hard for workers to catch up on the full history of the case when they are receiving multiple cases at one time. It's not fair to children and families to have to start all over again with a new worker. I will never forget working with 3 teen siblings that had been in custody for years, was split apart from each other and had a younger sibling commit suicide while in a separate foster home. These youths had over 10 different OCS workers and had zero trust in anyone. What are we doing to our children in this overloaded system?

New workers are naïve. I remember making dumb mistakes when I was new. I put myself in a very dangerous situation at a homevisit with two parents that were in a violent relationship with each other (the child was in a foster home). One of the parents was shot a couple days later. I didn't have any idea that I should have screened for access to guns in the home. I felt responsible for the victim being shot and I was shaken because I felt like I could have easily been shot at the homevisit when the father started to escalate. New workers should gradually increase caseloads because the learning curve is incredibly steep and legal parties have no tolerance for mistakes (for good reason). Right now, new workers are set up to fail.

Unless you have worked within this system, it is hard for people to fathom the amount of stress and trauma that is experienced in order to keep children safe. I don't know one single OCS frontline worker that has worked 37.5 hours per week and stayed on top of all the things they needed to do. So many workers and supervisors donate their time to OCS in the name of child safety. This also leads to burn out and it was the reason I decided to leave the agency almost 5 years ago. I was taking time off for the first time in 2 years and I still couldn't get away from work. I was called, emailed, and essentially worked from home while I was on leave. I was done.

I am begging you to please do what you can to get HB 151 passed through the legislature. A caseload cap that is actually followed through on is long overdue. As much as I believe we need to do more in terms of prevention, I also know that we need to do everything we can to support the children that are caught in the child protection system at this time. People's lives are literally at stake. HB 151 would drastically improve services to children and families and also improve the working environment at OCS. I support HB 151 and I'm requesting you to do the same.

Thank you very much for reading this long letter,

Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, MSW

Social Welfare Doctoral Candidate

University of Washington

Phone: 907-301-2779

Email: jessica_ruck@hotmail.com