

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Sponsor Statement

HB 126: Success For Foster Youth

HB 126 is designed to fix some of the most glaring problems in our foster care system - problems that serve to deny opportunity and success to at risk foster youth. It is cost effective, and designed to supplement partial efforts that exist today. Given the number of foster youth in Alaska - approximately 2,000 - the cost of this effort will not be substantial, but the economic and human and opportunity cost of not passing it will be.

The legislation is an outgrowth of this past fall's bi-partisan legislative foster care conference, and work by Alaska's foster youth, who have become increasingly active in seeking solutions for the problems they face on a day to day basis.

Today roughly 40% of foster youth end up homeless at some point in their lives after leaving foster care. That's unacceptable, and HB 126 proposes cost effective solutions to that problems. It is estimated that less than 10% of our foster youth graduate from college. Foster youth end up in jail and on state-paid social services, and in social service treatment in greater numbers than their peers. Tolerating this costs Alaskans in terms of money, lost economic activity and human opportunity.

HB 126 does the following:

- It requires OCS to meet federal standards by requiring in person visits with foster children on a monthly basis. Many states impose such a requirement to spur compliance by their state agencies, and the language in HB 126 is taken from Minnesota. The most recent federal review of our system states that in roughly 1/3 of the cases OCS staff meet once every 8 months with foster youth. OCS is working on improving this, and OCS staff are eager to find ways to comply with the monthly visit standards that are so important if we are to protect our foster youth from harm, and learn their needs so they can succeed.
- It provides housing assistance to youth coming out of foster care, for up to a year. Current rules allow OCS to pay for one month of full rent, and then 2 months of rent at 50% of the youth's cost.
- It provides tuition and room and board for in-state job training and college. Currently there are a limited number of tuition-only scholarships available to youth, and some job training assistance. This provision would make that assistance complete. The room and

board component is crucial, as foster youth have no home they can live in after foster care ends.

- It requires that foster youth be allowed to remain in their current school when they suffer a foster family placement change. Bouncing youth between schools causes failure, and federal law provides partial funding to allow students to avoid school transfers.
- It requires that when foster youth are transferred to a new school, they be allowed to attend immediately, and requires that their transcript information be transferred to the new school within 7 days.

Federal funding is available for portions of this effort, and the limited number of foster youth in Alaska would make implementation of this effort relatively inexpensive. If we don't pursue this legislation, Alaska's foster youth will continue facing unfair barriers to their success – and that shouldn't be an acceptable option.

Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions.