

February 22, 2011

The Honorable Les Gara
Alaska State House of Representatives
State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Representative Gara:

Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) writes this letter in support of House Bill 33, promoting the Stability and Opportunity for Foster Youth. As the largest Alaska Native non-profit tribal organization providing social services in the Anchorage area, CITC is in a unique position to witness the issues that face our state's foster children, from the time they are infants and toddlers to the long-term consequences experienced in adults. CITC's four core program areas confront the realities of the effects of our foster care system in Child and Family Services, where intensive home based services are provided; to the Education program, where our students are often in the system; to Recovery Services and Employment and Job Training, where adults experience the fall-out from not graduating from high school and not having a support system.

The modest changes that HB 33 makes to the current rules used by the Office of Children's Services (OCS) will make a significant difference to the children going through the child welfare system. One of the most traumatic components of being removed from parents is the separation of siblings. Shifting the orientation so that the presumption of keeping siblings together is in the best interests of the children gives the department and the courts another tool to reduce that trauma.

A second challenge occurs in homes in rural areas, which are otherwise safe but do not meet the stringent building code requirements possible in the cities. It is important for children to remain in their communities wherever possible, and this section will permit more discretion in licensing foster homes to make this a reality.

The child welfare system cannot work without caring, appropriate resource families to provide foster care. However, many families are discouraged by the extensive paper work required to meet department requests. Streamlining the application process will make more foster homes available.

The most important change in the proposed legislation relates to the importance of creating a permanent plan for children in the foster care system. Although the law expects that children taken from their parents will ultimately find a good and permanent home, in fact many children do not end up in permanent placement. "Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement" or APPLA,


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allows OCS to stop looking for a parent, relative or adoptive placement. Even the OCS director agreed that this process has been overused. This section of HB 33 anticipates possible federal legislation to limit the use of APPLA to compelling circumstances, a necessary standard in order to change the current overuse of APPLA.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council wholeheartedly supports this legislation to make small changes in the foster care system that can create positive outcomes for Alaskan children.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Gloria O'Neill
President/CEO