



Crisis Center • Community Services Center • Transitional Living

March 3, 2011

Representative Les Gara  
State Capital Room 500  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Gara,

Thank you for introducing HB 33, a bill focused on improving Alaska's foster care program and protecting children to the best of our ability. Covenant House Alaska (CHA) serves Alaska's homeless and at-risk youth through our Crisis Center, Transitional Living Programs, Healthcare and Educational/Employment Support. CHA appreciates your commitment to keeping Alaska's youth as safe and healthy as possible.

HB 33 enacts the following changes to protect foster care youth:

- (1) HB 33 requires the department to seek permanency for all youth and, if positive permanency plans are unsuccessful, imposes substantive and procedural protections around planning for youth to be placed in another planned permanent living arrangement ;
- (2) HB 33 allows a court to extend supervision over a youth until his or her 21st birthday;
- (3) HB 33 simplifies the application process to become a foster home and allows the department to waive strict compliance with building code requirements for foster and relative placements if the placement is in the child's best interest and is otherwise preferable and safe; and
- (4) HB 33 requires the department to make all reasonable efforts to place siblings together.

All of the changes listed above evince strong policy underpinnings. Specific to CHA's population of homeless and runaway youth, the provisions regarding extending foster care supervision up to the age of 21, waiving strict building code compliance for relative homes, and placing siblings together are particularly noteworthy.

Extending court supervision (and, presumably, department services) will better prepare youth for the transition to independence. Additionally, waiving strict building requirements to facilitate relative placements and placing siblings together will also tend to reduce the number of kids who run away from foster care. Research indicates that kids in foster care who are placed with siblings in the home of a relative or family friend, usually in a community the child lives in or is familiar with, tend to run away less frequently.

These statutory changes may be viewed as measures targeted to prevent youth homelessness. And, just as important, if a youth comes to Covenant House from the foster care system who qualifies for extended court supervision, it appears that this legislation would allow CHA to work with the department to continue to provide services for the youth.

Thank you for your efforts at protecting Alaska's vulnerable children. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can answer any questions or provide further feedback on HB 33.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Deirdre A. Cronin".

Deirdre A. Cronin  
Executive Director