

February 19, 2015

Tamara Dietrich
7857 Moose Run Circle
Anchorage, Alaska 99507

Representative Les Gara
State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Mr. Gara:

You have my full support of House Bill 27: Child Protection and Opportunity Act.

In writing this letter, it has become apparent how all aspects of HB 27 overlap in a myriad of ways. I have done my best to address each aspect in a logical progression. Where one aspect may seem lacking, may I suggest you consider the contents of this letter in whole, versus analyzing a standalone section please?

Please let me express my gratitude and thank you for all of your efforts to improve the lives of foster youth in our great state. My 16 year old niece entered foster care when she was three (3) years old. I will refer to her as my daughter from here on out.

Relative Placement – Our family met a lot of resistance from the Office of Children's Services (OCS) when it was determined that my brother was not her biological father. The judge wanted to honor the inherent relationship; as my brother and sister-in-law were still married at the time, but OCS approached the bench. I do not know what was said, or why my family was not considered. We would have jumped through any hoop to prove ourselves. As it was, it took over eight months to become a foster parent and still OCS would not consider us a viable placement. When our daughter's biological father was found, she was sent to the village. In both placements, she missed us dearly; to the point that her biological dad placed her in our care at the age of five (5).

Ensuring Foster Youth are Prepared to Leave Foster Care – In my heart, I felt that my daughter was not ready to enter middle school in the sixth grade. So we purchased a house in a school district where the elementary school still encompassed sixth grade. We wanted to give her the ability to be "Top Dog" and to experience the confidence boost which comes with that. She is in the 10th grade and on par with other kids her age now. However, she is terrified of "aging" out of our home. She feels like she has no safety net. Nothing we say or do can prove to her that she will *always* be our little baby.

Reducing the Amount of Time Foster Youth Wait for a Permanent Home – Due to the fact that her mother's parental rights were not terminated while in OCS custody (two years), we have not been able to adopt her or become her *forever family*. Her father asked us to adopt her, but our lawyer encouraged him not to give up his rights because

then the biological mother would inherit all rights to the child. As long as he willingly placed his child in our home, we were able to become her legal guardians. Aside from adoption, legal guardianship is the best thing we could hope for in our case. Guardianship does NOT feel permanent to our daughter though.

Providing Foster Youth with Quality Educations - We have to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Success is not automatic. Even though I *thought* I was prepared to leave my parents house at the age of 18, I moved back in twice before I could fully support myself. It is imperative that we help foster youth in overcoming obstacles such as a lack of housing and low-wage jobs. Let us build in success by providing a stable home with a support system so that they can focus their energies on higher learning. Education is a major building block to success; education equalizes the playing field. We must work to eliminate the disparities between our foster youth and their peers. It is not enough to want our children to survive; we must help them to thrive.

Improving Collaboration with Alaska Native Communities – Where do I begin regarding this aspect of HB 27? I cannot stress enough how vital it is to encourage communication between Alaska Native entities and OCS. Our daughter had never been enrolled in a tribe prior to entering OCS custody; so no one else was fighting for her. Thankfully, after obtaining legal guardianship, we were able to enroll our daughter into her paternal tribe. This was fortunate because after her biological dad died, the maternal family tried to dissolve the guardianship. That is when her paternal tribe intervened on her behalf and stood behind their tribal member because he is the one who entrusted the care of his daughter to us. All children need someone looking out for their best interests. This is especially true for Alaska Native and American Indian children because their tribe not only provides a link to their past, but an important link to their future as well.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Tamara Dietrich
Legal Guardian, Fost-Adopt Parent, Child Advocate