

1-26-16

Senate Health & Social Services Committee Members:

This is a letter in support of House Bill 200/Senate Bill 112.

I believe this bill will have important and positive impacts on the outcomes of Alaska Native children and the Alaska Native families who want to adopt them because this bill removes bureaucratic barriers making the process more accessible, understandable, and natural for families.

Alaska Native culture has kept children and families in Alaska safe, happy, and healthy in their communities for thousands of years and all Alaska Native children have the right to be connected to and grow up in their Alaska Native culture and heritage and with their Alaska Native family. I have heard and seen in my nine years of work as an Indian Child Welfare Act department director that over 40% of Alaska Native children adopted annually are adopted by non-Native, non-family members, non-ICWA. ICWA came into being to help prevent this 40% loss of Alaska Native children outside of their families and culture. This bill has the potential to decrease that 40% and increase the number of healthy and happy Alaska Native children who can grow up within their family, culture and traditions.

Passing this bill will help eliminate complicated procedural barriers inherent in probate court proceedings in the adoption process for children in custody-time, access to legal counsel, language, etc. Alaska Native families instead would be considered for adoption through regular Child in Need of Aid (CINA) proceedings, and would have natural opportunities to state their wish to adopt. They would also have the option to make their request through several avenues natural to them, by phone, mail, fax, email, or in person to the Office of Children's Services, and/or through a request made for them by the child's tribe. Providing these options would increase the number of Alaska native families willing and wanting to adopt to be able to be considered for adoption.

Thank you for your work to keep Alaskan's children with their families and in their own home communities and culture.

Sincerely,
Cheryl Offt 
Yup'ik, mother, sister and auntie, lifelong Alaskan, and voter