

January 26, 2016

The Honorable Bert Stedman, Chair  
Senate Health and Social Services Committee  
Alaska State Senate  
State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Chairman Stedman:

Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) writes in strong support of Senate Bill 112 because of the significant positive impact it will have on reducing the long term negative effects of placing Native children outside of their own communities and families. As the Senate Health and Social Services Committee is well aware, Native children make up over 60% of the children in out of home care, and Native adoptive families are often difficult to identify and place. CITC offers a wide spectrum of services that assist families both before and after their involvement with the Office of Children's Services. From supervised visitation to intensive in-home services, CITC has a tremendous impact on the families with whom we work. Last year CITC realized the following results in our Child and Family services division:

- 86 percent of program participants referred in the family preservation program maintained their children in their own care
- an average of 90 percent of families maintained care for their own children through the Intensive Family Preservation program
- 638 individuals participated in family support/preservation programs, of whom 100 percent avoided Office of Children's Services (OCS) involvement or placement

In addition, CITC's holistic, wrap-around services, including TANF, Recovery Services and education programs, support families to overcome their barriers and remain intact. Because of the nature of our work, CITC has an inside view of the opportunities to improve outcomes for Native families, and how important it is to make it as efficient as possible for family adoption to occur through the Child in Need of Aid (CINA) process.

SB 112 removes barriers for Alaska Native families who want to adopt those connected to them by family or tribal membership by making the process more realistic and understandable and by removing obstacles that have resulted in children unnecessarily being disconnected from their families.

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Unfortunately, currently well over 40% of Alaska Native children who are adopted annually are adopted by non-Native, non-family members. This bill will increase the number of Alaska Native children to reach permanency with their family, culture and traditions, and will reduce litigation based on lack of compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which Congress enacted in 1978 due to the alarming numbers of Indian children being removed from their homes by state and private welfare agencies and placed in non-Indian foster and adoptive homes never to be returned to their families, culture, or communities. Sadly, after almost forty years, Alaska Native families still experience disproportionate rates of children placed out of their homes and culture.

Alaska Native families who live in rural Alaska may not speak English fluently or they may have difficulties obtaining legal counsel. This bill seeks to eliminate complicated procedural barriers in the adoption process for children in custody so that Alaska Native families can be considered for adoption through the CINA proceedings instead of through an entirely different proceeding held in Probate Court. Families will be able to assert their desire to adopt a child through the Child In Need of Aid proceeding and would be considered for adoption after the permanency goal changes to adoption. As a result, children in out-of-home placement would reach permanency more quickly, lessening the burden on Alaska's Office of Children's Services.

Thank you for supporting keeping Alaska's children with their families and in their own home communities.

Sincerely,

 for G. O'Neill

Gloria O'Neill  
President/CEO