



KEVIN A. CAMPBELL

Founder, Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness
Permanency and Family Finding Expert, Seneca Center
6925 Chabot Road, Oakland, CA 94618
Email: familyfinding@senecacenter.org
Phone: (510)654-4004 | Fax: (510) 317-1451

Date: January 30, 2015

RE: Legislation to Improve Foster Care in Alaska

To Whom It May Concern,

We are writing to ask for your support for two needed, cost effective foster care reform bills. An email to both me and my aide, Molly (molly.carver@akleg.gov)- as short or long as you'd like, would be very helpful!

Our office believes that a roughly 20% homelessness rate for foster youth who leave care, and a 25% incarceration rate are signs foster care reforms are still needed badly in Alaska.

We are concerned that children are not being placed in permanent homes in a timely manner under established guidelines, that too many are released from foster care before age 21, that the current enabling statute only requires we give youth a "basic" education, that information Alaska Native entities could use to help their members is not shared due to confidentiality rules, and that youth bounce between schools mid-term as they bounce between too many placements.

More details on the bill, and the bill itself, are included in this packet. The bill seeks to fix these and related problems.

I hope you can write a letter of support, and help support the bill when we need help, perhaps in testimony, and possibly with letters to the editor in the larger state newspapers, and your local papers as well.

Additionally we are filing a cost effective separate bill to help transition youth to successful adulthood. Currently Alaska has only six Independent Living Specialists for the hundreds of youth they are assigned between ages 16-23, who are charged with helping transition to successful adulthood. We hope you can support that bill, HB 28, too. Thank you!

HB 27:

Section 1: Requires OCS to find a relative placement or a community placement when feasible, for emergency placements. The purpose of this is to make sure that OCS is doing its best to place children in need of aid with a family member.

Section 2: If a child has not been placed in a permanent home after one year, OCS must show the court that it is taking all "feasible" steps to secure permanency. After two years without permanency, there will be court hearings every six months to establish that all feasible steps are being taken.

Section 3: We are requiring OCS to establish in court that a pre-21 release from custody is in the child's best interests before sending a child out of custody. Many youth are not ready to leave care at age 18 or 19. We passed legislation following evidence-based guidelines to allow youth to stay in care until age 21, but too many are being released early.

Section 4: We are strengthening the requirement in AS 47.18.320(a)(2) to go from providing "basic" education and training to "education and training, including education and training that are consistent with the individual's work and educational potential." This section also requires OCS to make a report to the legislature if it does not

have adequate resources to meet this requirement. All youth deserve a good education that fits their circumstances, not just a basic one.

Section 5: Health and Social Services has to work with the Governor's Office to recruit foster/adoptive parents when there is a shortage. There is currently a massive shortage in both areas.

Section 6: Alaska Native entity information sharing allows the release of information to tribal leaders regarding cases OCS does not pick up. This provides an early-warning to a tribe or Alaskan Native entity that a youth is in need of assistance.

Section 7: Allow a child who is living in a dorm to receive foster care money related to food and rent - less than the daily Foster care rate but enough to help the youth succeed in school and job training and not end up homeless. The Department has been trying to figure out a solution to this problem.

Section 8 -9: Allow at a permanency hearing for a child to be placed with a relative who is capable of taking care of the child adequately, and require proof that relative placements have been sought where there is no permanent placement. The duty of OCS to look for a relative placement where it is a child's best interests current ends 30 days after a child is removed from their home.

Sometimes adoption is impossible, and foster care with a non-relative is undesirable, but there may be a permanent, healthy placement with a relative. We want to make sure relative placements are not overlooked when there is no adoptive family, and reunification with a natural parent is not in the child's best interest.

Section 10: Studies show that children who are moved between schools during a school term fall behind academically. This is exacerbated when children face multiple placements. This is a problem the state should correct. Currently, only a portion of the foster youth are protected by federal law. If a foster youth fits into the narrow definition of being homeless (a vast minority of foster youth), then federal law requires that they remain in the same school for the remainder of the term if the new placement is within reasonable proximity to the current school.

Separate bill, HB 28: \$500K grant program to cost-effectively assist inadequate Independent Living Program staff.

Currently there are only six state staff assigned to help hundreds of youth aged 16-23 transition from foster care to success. Rather than hiring more staff at a high cost, we propose a more cost-effective solution to improve foster care employment and education outcomes. We propose supplementing the state's Independent Living Program with a program run through private programs that will help foster youth become successful adults. This will be a competitive grant aimed at using the private sector, at a more efficient cost, to help the six Independent Living Program staff to help foster youth achieve success.



Kevin Campbell
Kevin A. Campbell
Founder, Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness
Permanency and Family Finding Senior Consultant, Seneca Center



The Honorable Les Gara
Alaska House of Representatives
Alaska State Capitol, Room 400
Juneau, Alaska 99801

February 3, 2015

Dear Representative Gara,

On behalf of the First Focus Campaign for Children (FFCC), a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, I would like to share our support for House Bills No. 27 and No. 28 introduced on January 21, 2015. At FFCC, we believe that promoting the safety, permanency and well-being of children and youth whose lives are impacted by child welfare should be a top priority for all States. These two bills have the potential to significantly improve outcomes for Alaska's most vulnerable children in each of these areas.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that children and youth do best and are most able to cope with and overcome trauma when they have permanent connections to caring and supportive adults. For most children, their parents, supported by extended family and communities, provide this stable care and support. Sadly, for children and youth in foster care, these critical family and community connections have often been disrupted. While these disruptions have devastating and lasting effects on a child or youth's cognitive, social, emotional and identity development, such effects can often be mitigated through effective child welfare programs and services that connect children and youth to families and support them in forging a successful transition to adulthood.

Research has also shed light on the dismal outcomes facing youth who age out of foster care, often disconnected and unprepared for adult life - outcomes that have been shown to have much higher long-range costs than earlier investments that can be made to prevent them. Alaska's child welfare programs and services can be greatly strengthened by the provisions in House Bills No. 27 and No. 28 and ensure that those in or leaving foster care are connected to family, to a community, and that they are being prepared to not only survive but to thrive in adulthood as healthy, productive Alaskan citizens.

First Focus stands prepared to work with you to ensure swift passage of both House Bills No. 27 and No. 28, which take critical steps to improve the lives of children and youth in the care of the State of Alaska. If you have any questions or comments, need additional information, or would like us to provide testimony please contact Dianna Walters at DiannaW@FirstFocus.net.

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley
President

Facing Foster Care in Alaska
PO Box 92644
Anchorage, AK 99509



Representative Les Gara
Alaska State Capitol, Room 400
Juneau, Alaska 99801

February 1, 2015

Representative Les Gara:

As current and former foster youth of Alaska's child welfare system, we would like to express our support for House Bill 27. This bill offers improvements to the child welfare system for the more than 2,400 children and youth in foster care in Alaska. We believe all aspects of this bill could significantly improve the lives of vulnerable children in Alaska.

Relative and Community Placements

The requirement that the Office of Children's Services (OCS) find a relative placement or a community placement when feasible, for emergency placements can help avoid placing children with strangers in foster care or even outside of their home communities. We believe that every child deserves to remain with family to avoid being re-traumatized and bounced between homes in a broken system. Relative placements provide for a child's need for safety, well-being and permanency, and can play a pivotal role in achieving reunification.

Timely Permanency

We know all too well, the repercussions of long term foster care. This bill requires that if a child has not been placed in a permanent home after 1 year, OCS must show to a Court that it is taking all feasible steps to secure permanency. After 2 years without permanency, there will be court hearings every 6 months to establish that all feasible steps are being taken. When reunification is not an option, we want to ensure OCS is working to find a forever family for all children lingering in the system.

Aging out of Foster Care

Many of our members have been released from foster care without stable housing, a high school diploma, and minimal skills to be self-sufficient. This bill requires OCS to establish in court that a release from custody before a youth turns 21 is in their best interests.

Education and Training

Many foster youth have a desire to complete their education and start a career. This bill requires AS 47.18.320(a)(2) to go from providing "basic" education and training to "education and training, including education and training that are consistent with the

individual's work and educational potential." This section also requires OCS to make a report to the legislature if it does not have adequate resources to meet this requirement.

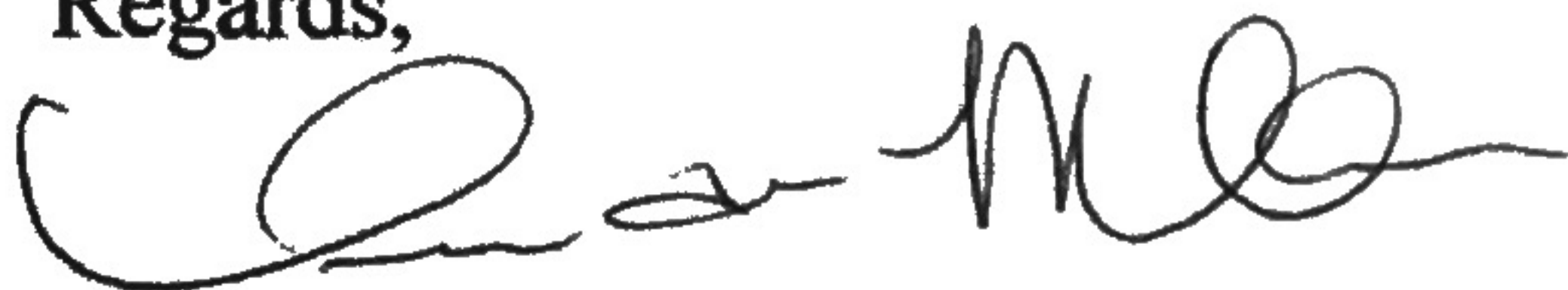
Foster/Adoptive Parent Recruitment

There are more than 2,400 children in foster care. That's more than 1% of our overall child population. HB 27 requires the Department of Health and Social Services to work with the Governor's Office to recruit foster/adoptive parents when needed. It also requires adequate staffing to ensure caseworker have the time and resources to meet the needs of thousands of Alaskan families.

Information Sharing Between OCS and Tribes

OCS often receives multiple reports of abuse and neglect before they need to take action and intervene with a family. Tribes have a variety of resources to offer families, to prevent further intervention from the state. Allowing the release of cases that OCS does not pick up to tribal leaders, as a sort of early-warning system could prevent the removal of and placement of children in foster care. It's important that we catch families early and work to build healthier communities.

Regards,



Amanda Metivier

Executive Director

Facing Foster Care in Alaska

Facing_fostercare@yahoo.com

(907) 230-8237