

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Sponsor Statement **HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act**

Foster youth in Alaska are not getting the chances they deserve. The *Children Deserve a Loving Home Act* aims to increase the likelihood that foster youth will have the same opportunities in life, and same health and well-being, as their peers. When roughly 40% of our foster youth end up homeless at some point in their lives after leaving care, and roughly 20% end up in jail, it's a call for reform. The nation's leading foster care non-profit, Casey Family Programs, has the correct goal to reduce the number of youth languishing in foster care by 50% by 2020. Alaska should join that effort. We should achieve it not by leaving youth in neglect and abuse to keep our foster care numbers down, but by getting neglected and abused youth out of the foster care system, into a permanent, loving home, much more quickly than we do now.

Many Alaskans recognize that our child welfare system has room to improve; this bill seeks to make real positive changes that support youth and families, as well as the caseworkers who serve them. It's been well documented by many sources that when case workers are overworked, outcomes for children and families suffer. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) recommends standards of approximately 12 cases or families per worker – but today, most caseworkers are carrying caseloads that vastly exceed that amount (as high as 43 families in Wasilla, 36 in Homer, and 30 or more in six of the state's main OCS offices). Conditions in rural Alaska, especially the challenges of remote travel, make even a 12 family caseload overwhelming for workers in such regions. Beyond the risk of poorer outcomes, high caseloads contribute to high worker turnover, a costly problem that slows timelines to permanency.

This bill seeks to improve both caseload levels and worker retention by implementing significant new training and workforce standards. New workers would receive a minimum of six weeks of training and would carry no more than six cases/families in the first three months, and 12 families in the first six months. These standards are recognized to improve outcomes, enable faster timelines to permanency, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended.

In addition, this bill provides for a number of other changes to support the well-being of youth in care, and to promote quicker timelines for children returning to, or finding new, permanent homes. The bill implements adoption and guardianship stipends for youth age 18 and older, to incentivize permanency and the closing of cases, and promotes contact with siblings and with previous out-of-home caregivers to promote the well-being of children and maintain a network of support for them. Another important tenet of this bill is enacting timelines for decisions on foster care home license applications, and for variances (for family members who may not be licensed foster parents).

The bill also makes it easier for youth and foster parents to engage in normal day to day activities, such as going on vacation without prior caseworker approval, with fewer

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requirements. In addition, youth at age 14 are empowered to participate in their case plan. This bill also strengthens the requirement to search for relatives before placing a child with foster parents, recognizing that placements with family are often the best and most loving option for youth.

Providing support, and a voice, for youth and families who need our help is perhaps one of our most important duties in public service. This bill seeks to give caseworkers the tools they need to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities, and it seeks to support youth and families with provisions that support well-being, make it easier for children to move out of the system and into a permanent home more quickly, and provide the necessary resources for a system that can function well. This bill is intended to create an environment where loving homes are the priority for all youth.