

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

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March 15, 2018

Senator Wilson  
State Capitol Room 115  
Juneau, AK 99801  
[Senator.David.Wilson@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.David.Wilson@akleg.gov)

RE: HB 151 – Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Senator Wilson:

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority fully supports HB 151.

The Trust recognizes the capacity issues inherent in Alaska's child welfare system in its current form and supports the training and workforce standards presented in HB 151. To achieve better outcomes for children and families involved with the Office of Children's services (OCS), there must be reasonable caseload requirements. Reasonable caseloads are critical given the complexity of needs for both the child and their family involved with OCS. House Bill 151 would take Alaska in a positive step in that direction. Furthermore, ensuring new case workers have sufficient training and support as they begin their practice will better support children and families towards the ultimate goal of permanence.

This enhanced and expedited level of support for children and families would have the cumulative effect of reducing stress and mental health burden experienced by all parties involved, including case workers. Ultimately, the Trust advocates for policies and strategies that reduce the number of children requiring out-of-home placement, but in the interim HB 151 improves the existing system and better supports beneficiaries and their families.

Respectfully,



Steve Williams  
Chief Operating Officer

Cc: Senator Micciche  
Senator von Imhof  
Senator Giessel  
Senator Begich  
Representative Gara

# Alaska Regional Coalition

*Representing 100 Communities*

SENT VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

March 13, 2018

RE: Support for HB 151, the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Legislators:

The Alaska Regional Coalition respectfully submits its support for House Bill 151, the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. The Alaska Regional Coalition is a consortium of four regional Alaska Native tribal nonprofit organizations and one regional tribe, together serving 75,000 Alaskans from Kotzebue to Ketchikan. Children are our most treasured resource, and we share a sacred obligation to ensure that they are provided every opportunity to reach their full potential and to be contributing members of our society. All children have the right to grow up in a safe, loving environment.

Each year, thousands of children and families go through the Alaska child welfare system managed by the Office of Children's Services ("OCS"). Alaska Native children are disproportionately represented in the system. While Alaska Native children make up only 18.9 percent of Alaskan children, 55% of children in out of home care are Alaska Native.<sup>1</sup> Alaska Native children remain in foster care for longer periods of time than non-Native children and their reunification rates are lower.

OCS worker vacancy and turnover is 35%, with most new workers staying on the job for just 18 months.<sup>2</sup> With the high turnover rate, caseloads are double the national guidelines.<sup>3</sup> With high caseloads due to high turnover, workers are unable to perform their jobs. They are severely limited in their ability to hold monthly caseworker visits, do case planning, and complete the work needed to achieve permanency through unification.<sup>4</sup> In these circumstances, it is our children that suffer most, and in that our future as a state.

OCS is working toward getting on a path that meets the needs of our children and families, for which we are grateful. Passage of HB 151 will provide much-needed tools for OCS to provide adequate services to

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, Child and Family Services Review: 2017 Statewide Assessment (2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 3.



Tanana  
Chiefs  
Conference



MANILAQ  
ASSOCIATION



KAWERAK, INC.



Tlingit and Haida  
Tribes of Alaska



Chugachmiut

# Alaska Regional Coalition

*Representing 100 Communities*

Alaska's children. More broadly, passage of this bill will help our state government perform its constitutional duty to promote the public welfare.

Sincerely,



Central Council of the Tlingit Haida  
Indian Tribes of Alaska



Kawerak, Inc.



Chugachmiut



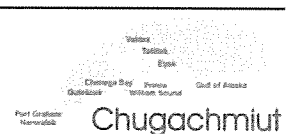
Tanana Chiefs Conference



Maniilaq Association



Tanana  
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**MAT-SU HEALTH  
FOUNDATION**

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[www.matsuhealthfoundation.org](http://www.matsuhealthfoundation.org)

March 15, 2018

Representative Les Gara  
Alaska State Legislature  
120 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
State Capitol Room 511  
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Representative Gara:

Please accept this letter of support for HB151 from the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF). MSHF is the official business name of Valley Hospital Association, which shares ownership in Mat-Su Regional Medical Center (MSRMC). MSHF invests its share of the profits back into the community through grants and scholarships to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in Mat-Su.

In 2013, MSHF, along with community partners, conducted a Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA). Through data analysis, public polling and 24 community forums, community members identified *the number one community health objective: ensure all children are safe and well-cared for*. In response to this goal, MSHF created a focus area dedicated to building family resilience and preventing child maltreatment, which led to staffing and funding a place-based collective impact project called Raising Our Children with Kindness (R.O.C.K.) Mat-Su.

As a means of creating systems improvements, including the Office of Children's Services (OCS), R.O.C.K. Mat-Su collaborated with the Palmer Superior Court to develop and implement a therapeutic court for families with children three and under facing out-of-home placement. R.O.C.K. Mat-Su staff worked closely with Mat-Su OCS and State level OCS administrators to develop the FIT Court model, which includes a dedicated OCS protective services specialist. R.O.C.K. is also working with the Mat-Su OCS office to increase consistent, frequent visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home placement, which strongly influences the likelihood of reunification for families, and hopes to coordinate with Mat-Su OCS in the future to develop a formal response to reports of alleged maltreatment that are currently screened out rather than being investigated.

MSHF has helped to fund much of the above. At the same time, we've watched the number of Maltreatment Reports to the Mat-Su OCS office increase from 2840 in 2014 to 3528 in 2015 as reported by the AK Indicator Based Information System for Public Health. The Palmer Court Child in Need of Aid cases also increased dramatically from 216 cases in 2014 to 242 in 2015 and 271 in 2016 largely due to the opioid epidemic. The Mat-Su OCS had 653 children in out-of-home care over 30 days during 2016, averaging 20.1 months in out-of-home care.

Through all this work, MSHF and R.O.C.K. Mat-Su staff have become quite familiar with the caseload ratios, training deficits and challenging conditions of the Mat-Su OCS office. We've witnessed attorneys, advocates, and nonprofit staff berate and complain about OCS staff, who are overworked and demoralized, along with the families they serve. We witnessed families parading with signs almost every weekend last summer at the corner of Crusey and the Parks Highway over their frustration with the system. We hear lots of complaining but very little constructive assistance to set OCS and their staff up for success.

HB 151 takes a crucial step in that direction. It seeks to improve both caseload levels and worker retention through new training and workforce standards. The bill also provides for mentors to help caseworkers become more effective and make the transition from training to a full caseload. These evidence-based standards will improve outcomes, enable faster timelines to permanency for the children being served, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended.

The MSHF, like many of our nonprofit partners, local delegation members, and Mat-Su residents, recognize that Alaska's child welfare system needs reformed and supported to succeed. This legislation takes steps to make real positive changes that support youth and families, as well as the caseworkers who serve them. We fully support this legislation and will be glad to share our data and experiences through public testimony as well. We're grateful for Rep. Gara bringing this forward and for all his advocacy on behalf of the health of Alaska's children and families.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer





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alaskachildrenstrust.org

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14 March 2017

Rep. Les Gara  
Alaska State Legislature  
Capital Building, Rm 515  
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: HB 151 – Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Representative Les Gara,

Alaska Children's Trust (ACT) extends its support for HB 151, Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. ACT is the statewide lead organization focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

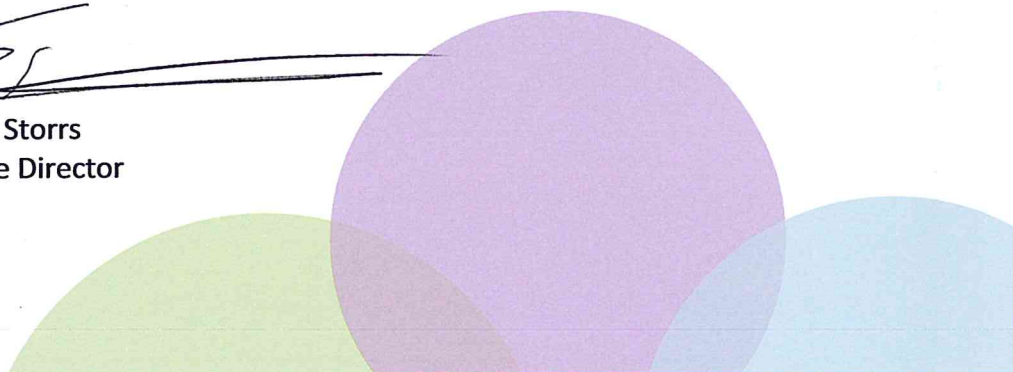
Each year, we have thousands of children and families go through the Alaska child welfare system (OCS). Nearly 50% of the children are under the age of 5 years. Abuse and neglect is occurring during the most critical time of a child's life. Research shows that abuse and neglect affect children throughout their lives. In addition to immediate injuries, abuse and neglect can disrupt brain development, weaken children's bodies, and cause long-term health problems. Children often adopt high-risk behaviors to cope with the pain of abuse and neglect, and those also can lead to chronic illness, disease, homelessness and other social ills.

It is important to ensure the safety net that is designed to protect children from the adversity of child abuse and neglect does not cause further trauma. When OCS case workers have high caseloads, it is difficult for them to provide the support and attention a child and the family needs to gain the resilience to overcome this experience. With high turnover of staff, children are unable to establish an important bond, which is one of the most important protective factors in building resilience.

HB 151 addresses these core challenges faced by OCS. By reducing high caseloads and high worker turnover, workers will be able to ensure the purpose of the safety net is achieved. When these challenges are addressed, it will help strengthen components across the entire system. Together we can prevent child abuse and neglect.

Sincerely,

Trevor J. Storrs  
Executive Director



Thursday, March 15, 2018

Rep. Les Gara  
Alaska State Legislature  
Capital Building, Rm 515  
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: HB 151— Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Representative Gara:

R.O.C.K. Mat-Su (Raising Our Children With Kindness) is a place-based collective consisting of individuals and organizations that joined together to promote family resilience and reduce child maltreatment in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The partners of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su strongly support HB 151 as increasing the training OCS caseworkers receive and reducing the caseloads they carry will better support OCS staff and make them more able to care for Alaska's most vulnerable children.

In the Mat-Su Borough, just as in all of Alaska, the State's Office of Children's Services (OCS) is struggling with an increase in child abuse and neglect cases. In the past five years, the number of OCS cases statewide has increased by 50 percent. The cumulative incidence of a report of maltreatment among children aged 0-7 in the State of Alaska is 31% (longitudinal study, ALCANLink). The Palmer Court has seen the number of Child in Need of Aid (CINA) cases, where children have been removed from their parents, increase dramatically from 216 cases in 2014 to 242 cases in 2015 and 271 cases in 2016.

R.O.C.K. Mat-Su works closely with staff from our local OCS office, and together we have been able to achieve great things for families engaged in the child welfare system in Mat-Su, such as launching the first therapeutic court in Alaska for families with young children in the child welfare system. During our work together we have also seen firsthand how committed to providing meaningful services to families in need OCS staff are. The partners of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su see our support of HB151 as a way to give back to OCS staff who give so much to their work. By reducing caseloads and increasing training for OCS staff we are helping them to achieve the positive outcomes, such as increased contact with family members and decreased length of time in care, that Alaska's children deserve.

Thank you,



Desiré Shepler, MPH  
Director  
R.O.C.K. Mat-Su

**Working collectively towards large-scale systems change, in our lifetime, we will:**

Strengthen families so all children are safe, healthy, and thriving



and child abuse and neglect, and reduce Adverse Childhood Experiences.



February 16, 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of Access Alaska I am writing in support of HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. This Act provides an opportunity for children and families to heal from trauma, abuse and neglect. Children are being removed from their home at an alarming rate. The downturn in the economy, untreated mental health conditions and substance abuse has all contributed to the very high removal of children.

High caseloads for the Office of Children's Service's (OCS) caseworkers do not allow for appropriate intervention and support for children and families. Removing a child from the home is another trauma on a long string of traumatic events. Once a child is removed it is critical that the system move quickly to support the family in their ability to care for their children and have them returned as soon as possible. When this is not possible children need to find an alternate (foster) loving home in which to live, heal and develop a sense of well-being.

In the current OCS system this is not possible. Caseloads are far too high for case workers to be effective in making qualified decisions for child removal, supporting families to build their capacity to have children returned or to seek permanent alternative placements for children. Reducing caseloads and providing additional training for caseworkers as outlined in HB 151 is a step in the right direction.

As a Center for Independent Living working with people with disabilities, we understand that many of the people we serve are at risk of having children removed unnecessarily. People with disabilities across the spectrum have been unfairly assessed for being unable to care for their children. Access Alaska has intervened in several of these cases in Alaska and has been successful in ensuring that these families stay intact. The need for support, disability, poverty, etc. should not be grounds for child removal. It is an overtaxed system with inadequately trained caseworkers that contribute to this occurrence.

Alternately, children with disabilities are at greater risk of child abuse and neglect. They are also more vulnerable to lasting harm. In these cases, it is critical that the system is swift, deliberate and effective in finding permanent loving homes and families.

Please support the passing of HB 151 and protect Alaska's children and families. Let me know if you should have any questions regarding our position on this matter.

Sincerely,

Douglas White, LCSW  
Executive Director

♦  
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♦  
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# Alaska CASA Program

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March 20, 2017

The Honorable Les Gara  
Room 511, State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99501

RE: HB 151

Dear Representative Gara and Representative Spohnholz,

My name is LeeAnn Reicks and I am the State Director for the Alaska Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. CASAs are court appointed volunteers who advocate for children who are in the custody of the Department of Health and Social Services due to abuse and neglect.

We would all like to believe that all children in the child protection system are treated like any other child in Alaska but this is far from the truth. When the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) files a petition on a child in court, the result in most the cases, is DHHS is given legal custody of the child. Once a child is committed to the legal custody of the Department, this relationship imposes certain duties and responsibilities to the child which are carried out by its Child Protection Specialists. Child Protection Specialists in Alaska carry caseloads of up to 30 or more cases when the Child Welfare League of America's nationally recognized standards are between 12 and 17 cases. With the current level of cases, Child Protection Specialists work long hours attempting to take care of both the children and families they serve.

I have witnessed many very capable, experienced and dedicated Child Protection Specialists who have given their all to provide for the basic needs of all the children on their caseload. This is exceedingly challenging considering the size of their caseloads. Workers spend much of their time just making sure children are housed and safe without any extra time to provide guidance and support for each unique child. In addition, despite working hard to make sure that children are reunified as quickly as possible or placed with relatives, the workers often have no choice but to place children in foster homes. Even with giving as much attention as possible to each individual child,

the sheer number of cases make it impossible to give the attention each worker would like to give and the child is viewed by the community as a “foster kid”.

After a few months of working themselves to the point of exhaustion and experiencing supreme discouragement, often, a worker concludes that no matter how hard they work and how many hours they put in they will never be able to meet the many needs of the youth and his family. They leave the agency and another enthusiastic worker is hired who basically must start all over developing relationships with the children, families, and other parties to the case, which can result in delaying permanency for the child.

Because of high worker caseloads, new workers are often thrown into the fray immediately and are repeatedly called to make important decisions regarding children when they have little history on the family or facts of the case. I have listened to CASA volunteers vent their frustrations about workers they worked closely with and have created a plan to support the child only to have the worker leave after a few months.

With the high caseloads workers have right now, this ugly cycle will continue and our children and families will continue to suffer. When they have lower caseloads, they will be able to afford the time and attention all children need and deserve. Children in custody frequently come into the system traumatized and with special needs. They need workers who have the time to get to know them, evaluate them, and meet their unique needs. In the current system, children get the opposite, an overworked and overburdened worker who sees the youth monthly but is not able to give them the time and attention the worker would like to give to the child and her family.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "LeeAnn Reicks", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

LeeAnn Reicks  
Alaska CASA Director



April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016

**RE: House Bill 151 Children Deserve a Loving Home Act**

Representative Les Gara,

On behalf of Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA) we would like to extend our support for House Bill 151, the "Children Deserve a Loving Home Act." As current and former foster youth, we know all too well the challenges faced by children and families engaged with Alaska's child welfare system. With record numbers of children and youth in foster care, Alaska is in dire need of the improvements outlined in HB 151.

This bill offers solutions to insure relative search/placement, sibling contact, normalcy and the prudent parent standard, and training and workload standards for child welfare staff, to help reduce caseloads, ultimately leading to the safe reduction of children in the foster care system.

**Placement with Relatives & Friends**

Identifying relatives promotes kinship placements for children and can help to maintain connections to family and avoid stranger foster care. HB 151 adds that an OCS supervisor must certify that a search for relatives of children placed in foster care has been conducted. This bill also requires that potential relative placements receive an answer when applying for a foster care license within 45 days.

**Sibling Contact**

Our youth often report that sibling connections are some of the most important relationships in their lives. Youth separated from their siblings can experience even more severe impacts of trauma and lose connections critical to their livelihood. HB 151 allows children separated from their siblings by the foster care system to maintain contact. It promotes that caregivers help to support sibling relationships, and requires OCS provide contact information for brothers and sisters to maintain connections.

**Normalcy**

Youth engaged in their communities have more connections to caring adults (teachers, coaches, mentors, the parent of a friend), strong connections to their peers, and opportunities grow and develop through age appropriate activities. HB 151 promotes the, "Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard," allowing foster parents to make decisions about participation in extracurricular activities, travel, field trips, overnight activities, and cultural, and social activities.

**Case Planning & Older Youth**

"It's better to plan for the battle, than battle the plan," ~Abraham Lincoln. Youth engaged in their case plan are more likely to have positive relationships with their case workers, team members, and actively participate in permanency planning. HB 151 allows youth ages 14 and older, to participate in meetings to develop a case plan and decide on a permanency goal. It adds that youth are allowed to identify two adults (other than foster parents) to attend meetings, and act as advocates.

**Documents**

Everyone needs proof of who they and where they come from as adults to get a job, go to the doctor, file for their PFD, and get a driver's license. and HB 151 requires OCS provide or get help obtaining birth certificate, social security card, health insurance information, medical records, driver's license or ID card, and Certificate of Degree of Indian/Alaska Native Blood for youth released from foster care at ages 16 or later.

**Training & Workload Standards**

Fully trained caseworkers who have the time and support to do their jobs allows for meaningful engagement with families to make better decisions about the removal, placement, and long term permanency of children. HB 151 requires OCS to provide a "Gold Standard," training and lower caseloads for newer workers. It also requires that OCS submit a written report to the legislature if the department is having trouble hiring and retaining front line staff.

All of the provisions outlined in this bill offer drastic improvements to the lives of more than 3,000 children in foster care in Alaska. As Alaska's only statewide organization of current and former foster youth, we are in full support of House Bill 151.

Regards,

*Amanda Motivier*

Amanda Motivier  
Facing Foster Care in Alaska



## Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force

Richard Bloomquist,  
Coordinator

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Kim Guay Vice Chair

Cathy Baldwin-Johnson MD  
Randi Breager  
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BJ Coopes MD  
Scott Dattan  
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Ellen Sovalik

Visit our website at:  
<http://hss.state.ak.us/ocs/ChildrensJustice/>

Contact us at:  
Phone: 907-465-3207  
Fax: 907-465-3656  
Richard.Bloomquist@alaska.gov

April 12, 2017

Representative Les Gara  
State Capitol Room 511  
Juneau, Alaska, 99801

RE: House Bill 151

Dear Representative Gara,

The Alaska Children's Justice Act (CJA) Task Force was established in 1999. The current mission of the task force is to identify areas where improvement is needed in the statewide response to child maltreatment, to make recommendations, and to take actions to improve the system. The Alaska Children's Justice Act Task Force works to improve safety and healing for Alaskan children by evaluating and promoting early and effective interventions for abused children and their families and integrating agencies and systems involved to reduce the risk for further trauma to children.

One way this is done is through identifying and supporting legislation that is consistent with the Alaska CJA's mission. The Alaska CJA supports the position of HB 151 on sibling contact as set forth on Page 11, line 13 of the Bill:

*The department shall provide each sibling with contact information for the other sibling and require the children's caregivers to encourage and provide opportunities for contact between the siblings if it is in the best interests of the children to maintain contact.*

The CJA is not commenting on portions of the bill which may have fiscal implications, and certain members were required to abstain from voting in support of any legislation due to their roles in State Government. However, the CJA supports the intent and spirit of encouraging the maintenance of relationships between siblings, and recognizes that the cessation of parents' rights does not, for this purpose, end the sibling relationship. Studies have shown that maintaining healthy family connections is extremely valuable for youth and improves their resilience. The CJA supports Representative Les Gara's commitment to normalizing and solidifying contact with siblings who have been involved in the foster system.

Sincerely,

  
Marsha Tandeske, Chair

Children's Justice Act Task Force



March 21, 2018

Dear Representative Gara,

I am writing in support of HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act.

The mission of the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership is to improve the health and wellness of all of Alaska's children by promoting best practices and identifying barriers to our children reaching their optimal health and potential for success in life. We consider the OCS caseworker's high case loads and resulting inability to adequately serve families as a significant barrier to children's optimal health and we strongly support this bill and the activities it includes.

Nearly 3000 Alaskan children are in out-of-home placements, and in some areas of our state, caseworkers are managing more than 30 caseloads, which is more than double according to national recommendations. About 10 percent of these children entering the foster care system are under the age of 6.

We know that the first 3 to 4 years of life is when the brain structures that govern personality traits, learning processes, and self-regulation skills to deal with stress and emotions are established, strengthened, and made permanent. The nerve connections and neurotransmitter networks formed during these critical first years are influenced by negative environmental conditions such as child abuse and neglect, violence within the family, exacerbated by multiple placements.

Most children entering the foster care system, especially those entering so early on, have not experienced a nurturing, stable environment prior to entering the system. The positive experiences created by permanency and a solid relationship with a supportive adult caregiver, are critical in the short- and long-term development of children's brains and their ability to subsequently participate fully in society. Additionally, the premature return of a child to the biological parents and the inability to provide families with the attention they need to remain stable, compliant, and safe, often results in return to foster care or ongoing emotional trauma to the child.

No less important, we must consider that working in such stressful environments and dealing with the difficult situations that are part of a caseworker's day, creates toxic stress for the caseworkers themselves and results in high-turnover rates and further negative outcomes for our children. Reduced case loads and additional training for staff will result in a healthier and more supported workforce leading to more permanency and better outcomes for the children.

Sincerely,

Tamar Ben-Yosef  
Executive Director





ALASKA MENTAL HEALTH BOARD  
ADVISORY BOARD ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE  
431 North Franklin Street  
Juneau, Alaska 99801  
907-465-8920

March 15, 2018

The Honorable Representative Les Gara  
State Capitol Room 511  
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: HB 151 Foster Care; Child Protection

Dear Representative Gara,

The Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (ABADA) and Alaska Mental Health Board (AMHB) are the state agencies charged with planning, coordinating, and advising on behavioral health services funded by the State of Alaska. The joint mission of ABADA/AMHB is to advocate for programs and services that serve people with behavioral health disorders, their families, care providers, and communities.

The Boards offer their full support for House Bill 151, a bill that will address caseload levels and worker retention. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) reports a high vacancy rate of 49% in FY 17, resulting in caseloads that are significantly higher than the national average of 12 cases per case-carrying worker. For example, Anchorage caseworkers carry 28 cases and King Salmon staff carry 27 cases. Families and foster parents who struggle to maintain stability and safety for children involved with the state system are dependent on timely and professional attention from state OCS workers. This bill meets a critical need for Alaskan families.

Thank you for your ongoing advocacy for improving the lives of foster children in Alaska. We appreciate your support in continuing to improve systems that support Alaska's children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison L. Kulas', written over a horizontal line.

Alison L. Kulas MSPH  
Executive Director

# Mary Rikken

3306 Park Place, Juneau, AK 99801 • Phone: (907) 209-0807  
E-Mail: mary.rikken@gmail.com

March 11, 2017

Representative Les Gara  
State Capitol Room 511  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Gara:

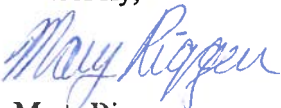
I am writing in support of HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. I have been a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer in Alaska for the past 6 years, working with children and youth in the foster care system to try to help ensure their needs are being addressed. From the insight I have gained as a CASA, and a Fostering Futures mentor, I appreciate and support the changes proposed in this bill: to help Alaska increase its effort to get neglected and abused youth out the foster care system, into a permanent, loving home, much more quickly than we do now.

Alaska's Office of Children's Services (OCS) caseworkers have impossibly high caseloads, which do not allow them to perform the necessary responsibilities to address the needs of the children under their care. I believe the provisions of HB 151 will help to improve this situation. Also greatly needed are the provisions to support the well being of youth in care, empower older youth and foster families, and support relatives who may want to care for a child.

I would love to provide examples of how these provisions would benefit the cases I have or am currently working on, but do not want to risk potentially violating confidentiality.

I commend you for your work and commitment to children and youth in Alaska's foster care system.

Sincerely,

  
Mary Rikken

**From:** [Michelle Sydeman](#)  
**To:** [Tristan Walsh](#)  
**Subject:** Support for HB 151  
**Date:** Friday, April 6, 2018 2:32:22 PM

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**From:** Jessica Ullrich <[jessica\\_ruck@hotmail.com](mailto:jessica_ruck@hotmail.com)>

**Subject:** Support for HB 151

**Date:** April 6, 2018 at 9:23:41 AM AKDT

**To:** [Senator.Anna.MacKinnon@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Anna.MacKinnon@akleg.gov), [Senator.Lyman.Hoffman@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Lyman.Hoffman@akleg.gov),  
[Senator.Peter.Micciche@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Peter.Micciche@akleg.gov), [Senator.Gary.Stevens@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Gary.Stevens@akleg.gov),  
[Senator.Click.Bishop@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Click.Bishop@akleg.gov), [Senator.Donny.Olson@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Donny.Olson@akleg.gov),  
[Senator.Natasha.Vonimhof@akleg.gov](mailto:Senator.Natasha.Vonimhof@akleg.gov)

Dear Senate Finance Committee,

I'm forwarding a letter to you that I wrote for the HSS Committee last week. Knowing that this committee is responsible for overseeing the costs involved, I want to express my belief that passing HB 151 would save money for the State of Alaska because high caseloads at the Office of Children's Services costs the state extra money in the following ways:

- 1) High frontline staff turnover is linked to the high cost of training new workers.
- 2) Cases take longer to close because workers don't have time to close them, which means delayed reunifications and adoptions for children and families.
- 3) High caseloads have a ripple effect on the courts because workers don't have time to fulfill the court requirements which means rescheduled court hearings that adds stress to an already overloaded court system.
- 4) High caseloads make it hard to recruit and retain foster parents because their needs aren't being responded to in a timely manner.
- 5) Children and families don't get the services they need, which contributes to increased burdens on other systems like the department of juvenile justice.

I know that you are having to make very tough budgetary decisions. I believe passing HB 151 would be a good financial decision for the State of Alaska.

Here's the letter I sent to the HSS committee:

I am a constituent in District N, I vote in every election, and I pay close attention to what my state representatives are doing in Juneau. I am writing you today regarding HB 151. I am very concerned about the caseloads that Office of Children's Services (OCS) frontline workers are enduring. I worked as a full-time family services worker, in-home services worker, ICWA Specialist and then supervisor for 8.5 years at OCS. I can tell you from experience, that caseloads above 20 is bad, but now with it being above 30- you are going to have unsafe children. This is not okay and it's up to our legislature to do something about it.

A caseload of 20 or more makes it **impossible** to keep up with the requirements of the job. Imagine communicating with 400+ people per month: children/youth, parents, parent attorneys, GALs, CASAs, family members, foster parents, daycare providers, school personnel, service providers, visitation supervisors, judges, etc. and also being responsible for safety assessment homevisits, developing case plans, finding least restrictive placements, making request for funds, writing court

reports, attending court hearings, keeping up on ORCA documentation, making referrals, returning phone calls and responding to emergencies. The amount of work is too much. The number of children removed has more than doubled since I worked at OCS. Adherence to the Indian Child Welfare Act must be incredibly difficult with caseloads higher than 30 right now.

High caseloads are directly linked to worker turnover. Children and families suffer from high turnover rates the most. Every time a family gets a new caseworker, it puts the child at risk because it's hard for workers to catch up on the full history of the case when they are receiving multiple cases at one time. It's not fair to children and families to have to start all over again with a new worker. I will never forget working with 3 teen siblings that had been in custody for years, was split apart from each other and had a younger sibling commit suicide while in a separate foster home. These youths had over 10 different OCS workers and had zero trust in anyone. What are we doing to our children in this overloaded system?

New workers are naïve. I remember making dumb mistakes when I was new. I put myself in a very dangerous situation at a homevisit with two parents that were in a violent relationship with each other (the child was in a foster home). One of the parents was shot a couple days later. I didn't have any idea that I should have screened for access to guns in the home. I felt responsible for the victim being shot and I was shaken because I felt like I could have easily been shot at the homevisit when the father started to escalate. New workers should gradually increase caseloads because the learning curve is incredibly steep and legal parties have no tolerance for mistakes (for good reason). Right now, new workers are set up to fail.

Unless you have worked within this system, it is hard for people to fathom the amount of stress and trauma that is experienced in order to keep children safe. I don't know one single OCS frontline worker that has worked 37.5 hours per week and stayed on top of all the things they needed to do. So many workers and supervisors donate their time to OCS in the name of child safety. This also leads to burn out and it was the reason I decided to leave the agency almost 5 years ago. I was taking time off for the first time in 2 years and I still couldn't get away from work. I was called, emailed, and essentially worked from home while I was on leave. I was done.

I am begging you to please do what you can to get HB 151 passed through the legislature. A caseload cap that is actually followed through on is long overdue. As much as I believe we need to do more in terms of prevention, I also know that we need to do everything we can to support the children that are caught in the child protection system at this time. People's lives are literally at stake. HB 151 would drastically improve services to children and families and also improve the working environment at OCS. I support HB 151 and I'm requesting you to do the same.

Thank you very much for reading this long letter,

Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, MSW  
Social Welfare Doctoral Candidate  
University of Washington  
Phone: 907-301-2779  
[Email: jessica\\_ruck@hotmail.com](mailto:jessica_ruck@hotmail.com)

Ann Turner Olson, LCSW, Counseling Services  
9000 Glacier Hwy, Suite 304  
Juneau, AK, 99801  
907.790.1090  
907.723.5219

To: House HSS

From: Ann Turner Olson

Re: **Letter of support for HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act**

I am a 42-year resident of Alaska with 40+ years of working in mental health with children and families. I am writing to add my voice and support to HB 151 to make sorely needed changes in the State foster care system. The Alaska foster care system, though well-intentioned, has been failing far too many children in placement for far too many years. With the extremely high number of cases each OCS worker carries, the attention a caseworker can give to a child placed in foster care is inadequate. Our State has an obligation to not just protect children but to help them thrive and have the same opportunities for success in life as those children fortunate to be living with their own parents in stable homes.

The changes proposed in HB 151 will make it easier for children to move out of the foster care system and into permanent homes more quickly as well as provide needed resources so the foster care system can function optimally. An environment where loving homes are the priority for all youth is the cornerstone of this bill. Thank you for your vote to support this important goal.

I appreciate the movement of resources into providing for more front line social workers to allow for smaller caseloads and better attention to children in foster care. Please vote to add the additional funds for Office of Children's Services for the improvement of Alaska's foster care system.

Respectfully submitted,

Ann Turner Olson

Box 240081

Douglas, AK, 99824

10225 Main Tree Drive  
Anchorage, AK 99507

March 14, 2017

Letter of Support - HB 151

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in wholehearted support of HB 151, the "Children Deserve a Loving Home Act." This bill contains much needed reforms to the child protection system, and it builds on some of the gains made with the passage of last session's HB 27. I have highlighted several provisions of HB 151 that I believe will be particularly beneficial to children and youth involved in the system.

Just so you know where I'm coming from... I spent 25 years as a guardian ad litem, advocating on behalf of abused and neglected children in Alaska. After my "retirement" seven years ago, I have continued as a volunteer guardian litem through the Alaska Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program. In addition, I serve on the executive board of directors of the non-profit corporation Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA), whose mission it is to improve the foster care system. I am also nearing completion of a comprehensive training curriculum for all the judges, lawyers, children's advocates, tribal representatives, and OCS staff who handle Child in Need of Aid cases. I feel that my experience has given me a good sense of the strengths and weaknesses of Alaska's child protection system, as well as a recognition of how the law can benefit the children and families who come before the courts.

One important theme throughout HB 151 is the focus on maintaining family connections:

- Two provisions address what is often the most important relationship for children and youth in state custody - their connection to their sisters and brothers. While the law already requires OCS to place siblings together when possible, HB 151 addresses the devastating situation of siblings being separated. All too often, on-going contact between separated siblings is not a priority of caseworkers and caregivers, and it is the children who suffer. Under HB 151, OCS will have the authority and responsibility to give siblings contact information for each other, even if a sibling has been adopted by an unrelated person, and to encourage caregivers to provide opportunities for sibling contact.
- Several provisions of HB 151 focus on making relative placements a reality for those children and youth who cannot remain in the home with their parents. While existing law requires OCS to search for relatives at all stages of a case, from the initial removal to placement changes to permanent placement, HB 151 requires that an OCS supervisor certify that a relative search was in fact conducted at each stage; and, if the search was not conducted, that the supervisor ensure it occurs quickly. In addition, OCS is required to assist



relatives who wish to be licensed as foster care providers to fill out an application - a daunting task for most people - so they can receive the financial support they need to care for the children. Also, OCS is directed to make a timely decision on the foster care license application (within 45 days, if feasible), so the children do not have to remain in limbo indefinitely. These provisions will help ensure that children and youth are placed in a timely manner with their relatives.

Other important provisions of HB 151 relate to older foster youth:

- One section of HB 151 requires OCS caseworkers to engage youth 14 and over in the development of their case plans and their permanent plans. Youth are permitted to choose up to two adults to support and advocate for them at planning meetings so their voice can be heard. This provision is important to ensure the youth's wishes are articulated, which in turn will result in greater buy-in and cooperation for achieving a successful permanent plan.
- Another section of HB 151 requires OCS to provide youth 16 and over who are being released from state custody with important documents (or with assistance in obtaining the documents), such as birth certificates, social security cards, medical records and drivers licenses/ID cards, to assist them in making the transition to adulthood. Too often, youth exit state custody without the most basic documents required to obtain housing, employment, and medical care.

The provisions I've highlighted are just some of the provisions contained in HB 151 that will benefit children and their families as they navigate the child protection system. I hope the Alaska legislature will continue its efforts to make life better for Alaska's children by passing this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Barbara L. Malchick  
[barbmalch@gmail.com](mailto:barbmalch@gmail.com)  
907-229-9496

March 23, 2017

Cindy Mills

POB 178

Klawock, Alaska 99925

Representative Les Gara

[Rep.les.gara@akleg.gov](mailto:Rep.les.gara@akleg.gov)

Dear Representative Gara,

This is a follow up to my recent letter to Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tompkins. It described the day of a case worker that chooses to come to Prince of Wales to work for Offices of Children's Services. It brought light to the possible reasons a worker doesn't last long here.

I am sadly letting you know the State will be advertising for another worker in this position on Prince of Wales. This means there will be Itinerant workers as well as Ketchikan workers coming in to meet with families. If there's an investigation to be done, they will fly someone in. The Supervisors involved have done their very best to provide support. There has been an Administrative Assistant hired, and there have been more of the itinerant and Ketchikan workers coming in.

Each of the five permanent workers on POW I have worked with are working with families because they care. I have yet to meet a person employed with OCS that was in it for the paycheck. This includes meeting the many workers at workshops, ICWA conferences and other workers in the State.

We have families that are struggling. Some are actively working their case plans. There are some that love their children but are fighting to get through the day and stay clean. Each case has it's similarities but also unique. It is a balance that depends on trust. Trust is lost each time a worker leaves and they have to start all over with the new worker. All our families need someone they can trust and can then work with. When an OCS Worker leaves it impacts all of us.

I fully support HB 151. I especially see positive outcomes with longer training and mentor support for new workers. I appreciate having a maximum caseload of six families for the first three months and adding more with the maximum of twelve for the first twelve months benefitting not only the worker, but most importantly, the families and children.

While I am at it, please include having the GAL's actually meeting the children they are representing. I have at least two GAL's speaking on behalf of my children in ICWA cases that have never laid eyes on the children they speak for. We are told this is due to lack of money for travel.

Thank you for fighting for our children, I appreciate it!

Sincerely,

*Cindy Mills*

Cindy Mills

Being in foster care had both its advantages and disadvantages, many in which shaped me into the woman I am today.

Even the worst experiences I faced while in care, no matter how bad could not compare to the vial home situation I came from. I was now in a much safer place and no longer living with my parents who abused, mistreated, and neglected me. For the first time in 10 years, I was no longer a witness to domestic violence influenced by constant drug and alcohol abuse.

While in care, you attend numerous court hearings and meetings, change school's numerous times, become recipients to bullying, and sometimes really struggle with your mental and emotional health due to the continuous instability.

I changed schools four times in one semester while in state custody and it proved very difficult to transition into so many he new classes. Former friends and even my cheer team began to ostracize me, spreading rumors, while other peers called you the new kid that was poor, unwanted, an orphan and would even go as far as to ask me what I did to land myself in care, feeling as if they were placing fault and blame on me.

Moving was very problematic, as you change beds, rooms, families, and your only known lifestyle. It wore on my anxiety as my belongings were strewed through different homes, lost, and unorganized. Court did become tedious, as well as meetings with GAL's, IL specialists, attorneys and numerous caseworkers, being the turnover rate is so high. However, this also allowed me first hand exposure to our justice system.

Loneliness was by far the worst part of care. The yearning to feel loved, cared about, wanted, needed, and crave for physical touch led to many sleepless nights in a new bed while crying silently until I fell asleep. Though my parents were the farthest people I wanted to see and

reunification was out of my care plan, I would have done anything just to of been held in my mom's arms. It takes a toll on your emotional wellbeing.

Although through all the bad times, there finally showed some light at the end of the tunnel. Foster care gave me hope, and removed me from horrific and unsafe living conditions with both of my parents. My time in care connected me with IL resources aiding me into permanency while living as an independent young adult after my guardianship became another unstable, unsafe, and unhealthy home.

Prior to being in state custody, I had very little knowledge of where I would go or how I would end up. There were nights I slept in the car with my mother as she abused drugs right beside me, or she would leave me with my grandparents and disappear for weeks on end, with no contact. My old soul has witnessed many things that no person, much less a child should have to see, but it allowed me this chance at a new life.

Today, because of foster care, I am living in my own apartment, for almost 3 years now, working part time as a CCA with Midnight Sun Home Care, and attending University of Alaska, Anchorage, as a full-time sophomore, making the dean's list. Although I have been blessed with the job I have and receive college funding, there are still months that prove tight while solely supporting myself. However, I am very responsible and tight with my money.

I am thankful beyond words for the opportunity to attend college in hopes for graduating with my BSW, then onto my Masters of Social Work degree, becoming a LCSW. The financial support and mentored help of Amanda Metivier, of The Child Welfare Academy has continue to lead me to success. This would have never been possible without entering foster care.

I stand proud to of spent time in state custody being the upmost gracious for my experience in the system. It has changed and shaped every aspect of my life; from the better woman I have become to the way in which it provided and then coursed the route of my college education and now one day my career.

Finally, another great aspect of being in care are the brothers, sisters, opportunities and family I will have for life. The youth in care I have met through Facing Foster Care in Alaska have led impactful change and influence in my life. We are blessed with opportunities that involve community outreach such as traveling to the state capital and advocating policy change on the house floor. We are also a support system for each other, and as an only child, I now have brothers and sisters I can depend on for life.

Foster care never defined me, but it helped make me, and I will always be proud to stand up for any foster youth, legislation, and for the statistic that I beat.



FRANK KELTY  
PO BOX162  
UNALASKA, ALASKA 99685  
Phone 907-268-8718  
E-Mail fvkelty@gmail.com

April 9, 2018

To: House Finance Committee Members

Subject: Letter of Support for HB 151: Children Deserve a Loving Home Act

Dear Co-Chair Rep. Seaton and Co-Chair Rep. Foster

I am writing to you today in support of HB 151: I'm a 47 year resident of Unalaska, Alaska and currently serve as the Mayor of the City Unalaska. During my time in Unalaska, I served the community as an elected official for 22 years served as Mayor, a City Council Member, and Unalaska School Board member. My work history has always been connected to the fisheries; I have managed two seafood plants for 30 years and also worked for the City of Unalaska as their fishery resource person for 15 years. I'm now retired except for my elected official duties.

I have known for a few years Rep. Gara, interest foster care situation in Alaska, my interest in this legislation; is based on my own personal history which I will relay some of it today in this letter. I grew up in the Seattle area in the 1950s and 1960's. I was the oldest of three children, both of my parents were alcoholics and my father was very abusive to my mother, he eventually deserted his family in the early 1960's. My mother was a Boeing Company secretary that was now trying to raise 3 children with limited income, a mortgage, food, child care and other costs that involved with raising a family and no support from her husband. The pressure of the situation broke her, and she turned to alcohol and prescription drug abuse.

The State of Washington eventually became aware of the situation probably because of me, as the oldest feeling the pressure, became a runaway and a truant at school. The State of Washington took the children away from my mother as she became more ill, and unable to care for the family. My younger brother and I were sent to various foster homes for a while some good, and some bad, but for whatever reason it didn't work out with these families. My sister the youngest was taken in with a foster family from a local church in our area which was the best situation for her as she was

with this loving family 12 years until she went to college and has had a great life. The situation for myself and my younger brother since we were older we became wards of the juvenile court, and were sent to group homes in the Seattle area which had a mixture kids from trouble homes, some kids had been abused or teenagers that were already into criminal activity. The situation for me worked out well in the end for me. The Griffin Home had a counselor on staff they allow us to participate in athletic activities, but they demanded that you we had to stay in school and get decent grades and participate in various group work projects and outings during the four years I spent at the home; during high school brought a sense of direction and discipline to my life that I never had and has lead me to the successful career I've had. My younger brother had a different situation he dropped out of high school and joined the Army and had a tough go of it his entire life.

I think this bill is very important it will reduce caseload levels and training for caseworkers. Most importantly this bill will make changes that will improve the care and wellbeing of the youth in Alaska. This legislation if passed will assist the youths and foster parents to move forward with a more normal life. It also will give the caseworkers with a reduced workload more time to search out for relatives that may want to be a part of the youth's life. We having a saying at the school board meetings: It's for the kids! If this bill it passed, the saying would be: It's for the wellbeing of Alaska's kid's. I give my full support for HB151 from a longtime Mayor, a seafood plant manager, a leader in his community, which went to college, and was a two sport letterman. But in the early years of his life, he carried the tag of being incorrigible, and ungovernable; from circumstances in life that weren't really his fault.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Frank V. Kelty", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Frank V Kelty