



April 11, 2018

Senators Hoffman, MacKinnon, Bishop, von Ihmhof, Micciche and Olson
Senate Finance Committee
Alaska State Legislature
State Capitol Room 511
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Senators,

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 Alaska 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.

Often we hear concerns about OCS, but there seems to be very little constructive assistance to set OCS staff up for success. HB 151 takes a crucial and positive step in that direction. It seeks to improve caseload levels and worker retention through new training and workforce standards, and it provides for mentors to help caseworkers become more effective and make the transition from training to a full caseload. In addition, HB 151 addresses prevention of child maltreatment. Under the bill, when OCS completes an investigation of a report of harm to a child and determines that services to protect the child are not required, parents may opt into referrals to community organizations that can actively reach out to the family to provide needed support services. These evidence-based standards will improve outcomes, support families, enable faster timelines to permanency for the children being served, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended.

The Mat-Su Health Foundation recognize that Alaska's child welfare system needs to be reformed and supported to succeed. This legislation takes steps to make real positive changes that support youth and families and the caseworkers who serve them. We respectfully ask you to consider moving this legislation forward.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer