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January 31, 2020

Representative Andy Josephson
Chair, Judiciary Finance Sub-Committee
State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801
rep.andy.josephson@akleg.gov

Dear Representative Josephson and Members of the Judiciary Finance Sub-Committee:

The Mat-Su Health Foundation is in full support of funding for therapeutic courts, including the Palmer Families with Infants and Toddlers (FIT) Court. The Palmer FIT Court is a therapeutic collaborative community court modeled after the Safe Babies Court Team™, which started accepting Child in Need of Aid (CINA) families in February 2018.

The Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF) and the community collaborative R.O.C.K. Mat-Su (Raising Our Children With Kindness) partnered with other funding partners and collaborated with the Alaska Court System to develop and support this demonstration therapeutic court with the intention that it would transition from funding via philanthropy to funding as part of the Alaska Court System's budget. Preliminary evaluation results show that the Palmer FIT Court is changing the CINA system to reduce trauma for all stakeholders, engaging the use of wrap-around services for parents and children, and providing better outcomes for young children in the Mat-Su by achieving permanency sooner.

National Evidence-Based Model. The Palmer FIT Court is modeled after the Zero to Three Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT). This nationally-recognized court model has demonstrated extraordinarily positive impacts on participating infants, toddlers and their families, including a lower maltreatment recurrence, improved access to beneficial developmental, health and well-being services utilized by families, and reduced length of foster care placements. A cost analysis found that up to two-thirds of the program's average cost per child could be directly generated from savings to jurisdictions due to the children's shortened stays in foster care. R.O.C.K. Mat-Su identified the adoption of this therapeutic court model as its highest priority as a means of creating positive system change to support at-risk children and families in Mat-Su.

Palmer FIT Court. The Palmer Families with Infants and Toddler (FIT) Court was launched by the Alaska Court System in February 2018 following two years of planning. The FIT Court goal is to improve how the Court System, child welfare agencies, treatment providers, and attorneys collaborate to share knowledge and expedite quality services for families and their children aged zero to three. Led by a Superior Court Judge that oversees CINA cases in the Mat-Su Borough, this demonstration project focuses on wrap-around recovery services for the child, parents, and custodians, with the goal of reunifying young children with their families when possible and achieving permanency within twelve months of opening the case.

How it works. When a petition for court intervention relating to a child less than three years old is filed, the case is referred to FIT Court. The FIT Project Coordinator attends the initial hearing and meets the parents to determine if the case is appropriate for the FIT Court. If the petition meets the FIT criteria, the Project Coordinator discusses the benefits of the FIT Court with the parents and their attorneys. If the family elects to opt-in to the FIT Court process, all children under three years old are referred for a multidisciplinary screening through a pediatric clinic specializing in high-risk infants. Access to behavioral health services, including screening and treatment of substance abuse disorders and clinical services, is made available through grant funding. Federally Qualified Health Centers, Rural Health Clinics, and Tribal Health Clinics provide additional services.

Preliminary Findings and Evaluation. Since its launch, the Palmer FIT Court has operated at capacity by serving 12 families at a time with one Superior Court Judge. An external evaluator is providing a long-term impact and cost benefit analysis; however, there have not been enough families who have participated in the court and been discharged to provide

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data for an analysis to fully calculate impact and cost savings at this time. Nationally, an evaluation of the Safe Baby Court model found that 92.7 percent of children served by SBCT reached permanency within 12 months (compared to 40.5 percent national standard).

Some of the preliminary findings from the Palmer FIT Court are detailed below:

Indicator	Information
Served since launch of FIT Court	32 children, 35 adults, 19 families
Graduations since launch	9 children successfully reunified with at least one parent and 4 children were adopted; no removals or recurrence of maltreatment has occurred with graduates
Admission to FIT Court after child welfare case opening	Average of 24 days, with 91% of participant enrollment completed in less than 50 days (best practice)
Services provided to children	All but one child has received services and 59% have utilized multiple services. The service array includes developmental screening, child-parent psychotherapy, and early childhood education.
Services provided to adults	Adults average 1.5 months of service, with 89% of services being completed or actively provided. The service array includes Circles of Security parenting program (100% participation), substance abuse treatment, and parent-child psychotherapy.

Source: NPC Research

The Palmer FIT Court is positively changing how CINA cases are currently being worked on by CINA practitioners in the Mat-Su by actively advocating for systemic change that supports families at times where they are particularly vulnerable. As an example, a Trauma Assessment of the Palmer Superior Court was conducted by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in 2019. When compared to other courts, the FIT Court utilized trauma-informed practices more, stakeholders treated each other with respect more often, and more efforts were made to minimize stressful aspects of child protection cases. Systemic changes include a heavy focus on implementing national standards and best practices associated with family contact and foster parent support, trauma-informed and responsive courtroom practices, workforce development of child-parent psychotherapists, and on cross-sector multidisciplinary training.

The Mat-Su Health Foundation helped to pull together a group of funders to catalyze the Palmer FIT Court as an integral part of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su's collective work to end child abuse and neglect and strengthen family resiliency in the Mat-Su. We support the transition of the cost of operating the court to the State of Alaska just as other therapeutic courts have transitioned to long-term sustainability. If you would like any additional information about the FIT Court, please feel free to reach out to the Director of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su, Betsy Smith at bsmith@rockmatsu.org or 907.352.2845.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ripley
Chief Executive Officer