

March 28, 2024

Senator Matt Claman and Representative Maxime Dibert
120 4th Street
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Senator Claman and Representative Dibert,

The Tanana Chiefs Conference urges you to pass Senate Bill 231 and House Bill 366, which would increase transparency and parental oversight for Alaskan children who are institutionalized due to behavioral health challenges.

Tanana Chiefs Conference is a non-profit corporation dedicated to meeting the health and service needs of Tribal members and beneficiaries throughout interior Alaska. Our tribal consortium is made up of 42 members – including 39 villages and 37 federally recognized tribes. As a behavioral health services provider, our staff works directly with young people who struggle with their mental health. Occasionally, we have no choice but to refer these patients to intensive treatment centers far from their home community.

We've seen the toll that this separation can have on families, as they often worry that their children will be subject to abuse or simply slip through the cracks. This legislation would ensure that Alaska Native children who receive treatment at in-state psychiatric hospitals are better able to maintain connections with their family and tribal community.

In 2022, the United States Department of Justice released a report finding that many Alaskan children with behavioral health challenges were institutionalized far from home due to the lack of community-based intensive behavioral healthcare services. This institutionalization can last weeks, months, or even years. Such long-term placement is devastating for all families and is especially traumatic for Alaska Native families who make up one-third of institutionalized Alaska children and also experienced the harm of family separation when their loved ones were forcibly removed to boarding schools.¹ These children are placed not only outside of their home community, they are placed outside the Tanana Chiefs Conference region because we do not have a local hospital to treat children. The placement in a psychiatric hospital alone is a scary situation, and for the youth coming from our rural communities it is a culture shock as well.

¹ U.S. DEP'T JUST., C.R. DIV., INVESTIGATION OF THE STATE OF ALASKA'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM FOR CHILDREN 17 (2022)



Local and national reporting has raised alarms about the extensive use of seclusion and restraints on children inside such facilities, including forced injection of sedatives.² Parents of institutionalized children also “worried that their children may be vulnerable to abuse in facilities too distant to visit more than once a year, if at all.”³ And while the medical community agrees that these tactics should be used only as a last resort, the Disability Law Center of Alaska has uncovered an alarmingly high rate of seclusion and restraint, raising concerns that they are being used inappropriately.⁴

Senate Bill 231 would improve the transparency and quality of institutional care for Alaskan children. It would do so by: (1) ensuring that children can maintain communication with their parents or legal guardians while institutionalized; (2) requiring unannounced and thorough inspections by state public health officials twice annually; and (3) ensuring that facilities are transparent about the use of seclusion and restraint. Similar bipartisan legislation was recently enacted in Utah, Montana, Missouri, and Oregon.

Alaskan children, parents, and taxpayers deserve to know that the facilities treating young people are safe and effective. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to enact S.B. 231 and H.B. 366.

Sincerely,

Tanana Chiefs Conference

Sincerely,

TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Brian Ridley'.

Brian Ridley
Chief

² Michelle Theriault Boots, *Federal Inspectors fault Assaults, Escapes, Improper Use of Locked Seclusion at North Star Youth Psychiatric Hospital*, ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS (Sep. 30, 2022); Julia Lurie, *Inside the Psychiatric Hospitals Where Foster Kids Are a “Gold Mine,”* MOTHER JONES (Sept./Oct. 2023).

³ *Id.*

⁴ Disability Law Center of Alaska, *Summary of Findings Regarding North Star Behavioral Health System* at 5 (Oct. 4, 2004).