



April 24, 2024

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senate Health & Social Services
Senate.Health.And.Social.Services@akleg.gov

Ben Jones, J.D., Director of Legal and Policy Initiatives, Lives in the Balance

Re: Support of SB 231, Protecting Alaska's Children

Dear Sen. Wilson, Chair, and Senate Health & Social Services Committee members:

My name is Ben Jones and I am the Director of Legal and Policy Initiatives at Lives in the Balance, a national non-profit organization that advocates for our most vulnerable kids, and helps caregivers intervene in evidence-based ways that are collaborative, proactive, non-punitive, non-exclusionary, and effective.

We write in support of SB 231 to shine a light onto residential psychiatric treatment centers, holding them accountable to both the state and to families. We have worked with staff in schools and treatment facilities across the country and see firsthand the importance of reporting dangerous practices, so that we can measure the effectiveness of safe alternatives. The use of these practices, including restraint and seclusion, is a red flag that something is not working.

SB 231 adds protections for child-patients and provides additional oversight of locked facilities. One, it ensures a weekly opportunity for confidential video communication between children and parent/guardian. Two, it requires unannounced inspections of facilities by licensing authorities, with inspectors interviewing at least 50% of child-patients. Three, facilities would be required to report uses of restraint and seclusion to the state and to parent/guardian within one day of use.

Families and the state deserve to know what is happening to children when they are confined to a treatment center. This issue has heightened importance for its civil rights implications and disproportionate impacts - around 17% of the state are Alaska Native, but a third of the children who received state funding for residential psychiatric treatment were Alaska Native.

We urge you to vote in favor of SB 231. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Ben Jones", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ben Jones, J.D.