

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 16, 2017

4:23 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Ivy Spohnholz, Chair  
Representative Bryce Edgmon, Vice Chair  
Representative Sam Kito  
Representative Geran Tarr  
Representative Jennifer Johnston

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative David Eastman  
Representative Colleen Sullivan-Leonard  
  
Representative Matt Claman (alternate)  
Representative Dan Saddler (alternate)

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: FACING FOSTER CARE IN ALASKA

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 151

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to training and workload standards for employees of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to foster care licensing; relating to placement of a child in need of aid; relating to the rights and responsibilities of foster parents; relating to subsidies for adoption or guardianship of a child in need of aid; requiring the Department of Health and Social Services to provide information to a child or person released from the department's custody; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 103

"An Act relating to the practice of optometry."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 174

"An Act extending the governor's declaration of disaster emergency to address the opioid epidemic; and providing for an effective date."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 151

SHORT TITLE: DHSS; CINA; FOSTER CARE; CHILD PROTECTION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) GARA

03/01/17	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/01/17	(H)	HSS, FIN
03/16/17	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM CAPITOL 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

AMANDA METIVIER, Statewide Coordinator

Facing Foster Care in Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented a discussion on Facing Foster Care in Alaska and answered questions during discussion of HB 151.

REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented HB 151 as the sponsor of the bill.

NAVEAH INGAM

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 151.

RACHAEL BESSLER

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 151.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[4:23:39 PM](#)

**CHAIR IVY SPOHNHOLZ** called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 4:23 p.m. Representatives Spohnholz, Tarr, Johnston, and Edgmon were

present at the call to order. Representative Kito arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**Presentation: Facing Foster Care in Alaska**

[4:24:45 PM](#)

CHAIR SPOHNHOLZ announced that the first order of business would be a presentation from Facing Foster Care in Alaska.

[4:25:04 PM](#)

AMANDA METIVIER, Statewide Coordinator, Facing Foster Care in Alaska, explained that young people with Facing Foster Care from all over Alaska came to the Alaska State Legislature in Juneau each year to learn about government and how the Legislature worked, and to become advocates and have a say in what happens to them. She pointed out that the State of Alaska was the guardian of young people in foster care. She shared the experiences of each of the youth, including their time in foster care, the number of placements, the number of siblings in different foster care placements, and the number of case workers. She stated that Facing Foster Care in Alaska was a non-profit organization of young people in and from the foster care system, and they worked to promote positive changes to child welfare in Alaska. She declared that young people who had experience in the system were the experts. She reported that the numbers of children coming into the system was on the rise, and was now at a record high, as more than 1 percent of the overall child population in the state lived in foster care. She explained that Facing Foster Care taught young people how to be advocates for themselves and about their rights. These young people then train child welfare staff and care givers, and share their experiences in the system with social workers, foster parents, judges, and lawmakers. She added that this was also a peer support organization, as foster care could be very lonely. Groups of foster kids were able to meet to talk about their fears and problems, as well as help each other with basic life skills. She noted that the group also performed a larger scale advocacy role, which included proposals for specific legislative items and meetings with judges and the Director of the Office of Children's Services (OCS).

MS. METIVIER said that she wanted to review the Foster Youth Bill of Rights [included in members' packets]. She shared that federal law ensured that young people, ages 14 and older, were

notified of their rights while in the foster care system. She stated that Facing Foster Care had worked with youth and the department to put together this bill of rights. She pointed out that youth had the right to attend their court hearings, to be part of the process for planning on their own permanency, and for knowing why they were in foster care. Foster youth were instructed about the need to leave the foster care system with their documents, including social security card, birth certificate, and medical records. She shared that OCS was diligently working to ensure that youth had received a copy of the bill of rights, and that youth signed off that they had received it.

MS. METIVIER reported that there had been a long term push for resources for young people transitioning out of the system and into adulthood. These resources were intended to create support systems and teach skills to preclude homelessness, incarceration, and early pregnancy. She stated that youth don't need as many social services and resources when they have a family or a connection to an adult who can help them navigate. She pointed out that you would do better having someone who was pushing you to do things. She declared that the goal was a push for permanency, so that youth were no longer simply aging out of foster care, but instead had a permanent family. She reported that there had been a conversation with the Director of OCS, who would now make the final decision for a youth to age out of the system.

CHAIR SPOHNHOLZ lauded the Facing Foster Care program for its leadership in the move toward advocacy and consideration of youth rights.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR asked how Facing Foster Care got financial support.

MS. METIVIER reported that the organization started in 2003 as a small youth advisory group to OCS, with support from the Casey Family Programs and the independent living program. She said that the group had worked toward becoming its own entity, and worked to become a non-profit. She reported that the majority of funding was from local foundations and private donors, as well as fund raising through Pick, Click, Give. She added that there was also grant funding. She said there was a very small budget, and most of the work was performed by volunteers. She stated that the youth were elected for two years as regional

representatives from each of the five OCS regions. She added that youth had to campaign and the youth members voted for the representatives. The youth board planned with the governance board of directors and helped with fund raising, and this group worked with adults in the community. She said that a lot of time was spent in writing grants and searching for funding.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON asked about the governance in addition to the five regions.

MS. METIVIER explained that in addition to the youth representing the five OCS regions, there was governance by the non-profit board of directors, which included volunteer attorneys, and business and financial people from the community. In response to Representative Johnston, she said that the governance board term limits were staggered for two, three, and four years to allow for smoother transition.

**HB 151-DHSS; CINA; FOSTER CARE; CHILD PROTECTION**

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CHAIR SPOHNHOLZ announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 151, "An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to training and workload standards for employees of the Department of Health and Social Services; relating to foster care licensing; relating to placement of a child in need of aid; relating to the rights and responsibilities of foster parents; relating to subsidies for adoption or guardianship of a child in need of aid; requiring the Department of Health and Social Services to provide information to a child or person released from the department's custody; and providing for an effective date."

[4:42:10 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 151, labeled 30-LS0451\R, Glover, 3/7/17, as the working document.

CHAIR SPOHNHOLZ objected for discussion.

[4:42:30 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA, Alaska State Legislature, paraphrased from the Sponsor Statement [included in members' packets], which read:

Foster youth in Alaska are not getting the chances they deserve. The Children Deserve a Loving Home Act aims to increase the likelihood that foster youth will have the same opportunities in life, and same health and well-being, as their peers. When roughly 40% of our foster youth end up homeless at some point in their lives after leaving care, and roughly 20% end up in jail, it's a call for reform. The nation's leading foster care non-profit, Casey Family Programs, has the correct goal to reduce the number of youth languishing in foster care by 50% by 2020. Alaska should join that effort. We should achieve it not by leaving youth in neglect and abuse to keep our foster care numbers down, but by getting neglected and abused youth out of the foster care system, into a permanent, loving home, much more quickly than we do now. Many Alaskans recognize that our child welfare system has room to improve; this bill seeks to make real positive changes that support youth and families, as well as the caseworkers who serve them. It's been well documented by many sources that when case workers are overworked, outcomes for children and families suffer. The Office of Children's Services (OCS) recommends standards of approximately 12 cases or families per worker - but today, most caseworkers are carrying caseloads that vastly exceed that amount (as high as 43 families in Wasilla, 36 in Homer, and 30 or more in six of the state's main OCS offices). Conditions in rural Alaska, especially the challenges of remote travel, make even a 12 family caseload overwhelming for workers in such regions. Beyond the risk of poorer outcomes, high caseloads contribute to high worker turnover, a costly problem that slows timelines to permanency. This bill seeks to improve both caseload levels and worker retention by implementing significant new training and workforce standards. New workers would receive a minimum of six weeks of training and would carry no more than six cases/families in the first three months, and 12 families in the first 12 months. The bill also provides for the employment of mentors to help caseworkers become more effective and make the transition from training to a full caseload. These standards are recognized to improve outcomes, enable faster timelines to permanency, and allow case workers to perform their duties as intended. In addition, this bill provides for a number of other changes to support

the well-being of youth in care, and to promote quicker timelines for children returning to, or finding new, permanent homes. The bill extends subsidies for adoptions and guardianships to age 21, to incentivize permanency and the closing of cases, and promotes contact with siblings and with previous out of-home caregivers to promote the well-being of children and maintain a network of support for them. Another important tenet of this bill is enacting timelines for waivers and exemptions to licensing requirements for relatives who may want to care for a child, but are not licensed foster parents.

The bill also makes it easier for youth and foster parents to engage in normal day to day activities, such as going on vacation without prior caseworker approval, with fewer requirements. In addition, youth at age 14 are empowered to participate in their case plan with a larger role. This bill also strengthens the requirement to search for relatives before placing a child with foster parents, recognizing that placements with family are often the best and most loving option for youth. Providing support, and a voice, for youth and families who need our help is perhaps one of our most important duties in public service. This bill seeks to give caseworkers the tools they need to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities, and it seeks to support youth and families with provisions that support well-being, make it easier for children to move out of the system and into a permanent home more quickly, and provide the necessary resources for a system that can function well. This bill is intended to create an environment where loving homes are the priority for all youth.

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AMANDA METIVIER, Statewide Coordinator, Facing Foster Care in Alaska, stated that a major provision of the proposed bill was for setting standards to workloads for case workers, as many of the issues would be "wiped away" if case workers had the time to do what was necessary. She reported that, although there was an initial cost, there would be a long term savings of millions of dollars when not having to pay a daily rate for the cost of care for a young person in the foster care system, as well as for attorneys, the court system, and the long term social services. She declared that an earlier move into permanency was much more

cost effective versus staying in the system. She pointed out that so many of the young people leaving the foster care system had not been prepared, and now, these young people had children who were moving into the foster care system. She explained that there were five protective factors that young parents were supposed to have, which included: concrete social support in times of need and someone to call when you are stressed. She shared stories of her interactions with case workers coming to her home, as she was now a foster parent, and she spoke about her earlier dream for becoming a case worker at OCS, until she saw the high numbers of case worker turnover. She opined that this setting allowed for the loss of many good social workers. She declared that improving the caseload levels would make all the other problems solvable. She offered her belief that it was important to engage youth in planning, at 14 years of age. She offered a quote: "it's better to plan for the battle than battle the plan," and opined that having the youth engaged in the process would make it more successful. She reiterated that the most important pieces of the proposed bill were to lower the workload and increase the training for workers.

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NAVEAH INGAM offered her belief that the proposed bill would help both the youth in care, as well as those youth that were going to be in care. She shared her experience when communication was lost with her younger sibling when they were placed separately, and the current feelings of abandonment. She opined that the opportunity for communication among siblings would have positive mental health ramifications.

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RACHAEL BESSLER shared that Amanda Metivier was her foster parent and how positive it was to have permanency. She shared her story of how difficult life had been, and that she was "going down a wrong road." She did not want anybody in her life, and she did not want any connections. She went through 47 foster homes because she felt abandoned and alone. She said that Amanda helped her see a future, and that Amanda's daughter was like her little sister. She relayed that permanency and connection can bring a much easier life, and allowed youth to do something earlier in life. She declared that permanency could change the lives of so many people, and that she was here to advocate for those who still did not have a permanent connection. She said that having a person you can talk to at the end of the day was so important. She emphasized that HB 151

could dramatically change the lives of many children, noting that without a permanent connection, she would either be on the street or incarcerated.

5:12:10 PM

CHAIR SPOHNHOLZ announced that HB 151 would be held over.

[The objection to the proposed CS, Version R, was maintained.]

5:12:58 PM

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 5:12 p.m.