

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

Sponsor Statement

Stability and Opportunity for Foster Youth: HB 33

House Bill 33 aims to make a few modest fixes to the current rules used by the Office of Children's Services (OCS) to provide opportunity for success to our 2,000 foster youth. The Legislature came together to make significant changes in this regard last year. This legislation seeks to fill a few gaps, in a way we believe will cost very little.

Presumption To Keep Siblings Together Instead of Separating Them

Currently there is no statutory preference to keep siblings together when they go into care. This results in the all too frequent break-up of siblings into different foster homes. HB 33 requires a presumption that siblings be placed in the same home when possible and when such a placement is in the siblings' best interests. To make sure social workers comply with this presumption, this bill requires the regional director to sign off when siblings are separated, so we know each such decision receives the attention that's justified before siblings are separated.

Foster Home Licensing Variance

In order for a home to be licensed by the State of Alaska as a foster home, it must comply with numerous building code requirements. Many homes in rural areas do not meet these stringent requirements, so youth are removed from their community even when there are placement options available. HB 33 would allow social workers to grant a variance or waiver from the construction requirement in instances when a home is "otherwise a safe environment", is consistent with construction in the community, and is a preferable placement for the child.

Imagination Library

OCS should take advantage of the opportunities created by community groups that wish to volunteer to improve the lives of foster care youth. Last summer we worked with OCS and Imagination Library to provide free or low cost books to Alaska's young foster youth. While Imagination Library has offered to enroll foster youth, the program has not moved forward substantially. We have added a provision requiring that OCS take advantage of volunteer reading programs like Imagination Library.

Streamlining Application Process for foster parents

This legislation requires that paperwork for foster parents be streamlined. Anecdotally, many of our offices have heard from prospective foster parents that the paperwork to become a foster parent is more cumbersome than necessary.

Continue to Seek a Permanent Home for Foster Youth

The ultimate goal in foster care is to place a child in a good, permanent home, either through adoption, guardianship or reunification with the child's natural parent. OCS can take a child off

this track under the APPLA process (“Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement”). We believe, and the OCS director recently agreed in a newsletter, that this process is overused. Absent compelling reasons, OCS should always look for a permanent placement for children. This is not only a problem in Alaska, but occurs in other states. Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and the federal working group on foster care have proposed federal language to limit the use of APPLA to compelling circumstances, and HB 33 incorporates his proposal.

Housekeeping

The bill includes some housekeeping measures recognizing last year’s legislation to extend foster care to age 21. While OCS and the Legislative legal Department worked on last year’s language, the bill drafter recommends we add a few edits in this legislation to make the statute read more consistently.