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OP-ED

Foster care reforms are improving outcomes for Alaska kids

*By Kim Kovol, Commissioner,
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The Children Deserve a Loving Home Act, [House Bill 151](#), passed in 2018 to reform Alaska's foster care system and give children safer, more stable homes. Its goals were clear: reduce caseworker overload, strengthen family connections and improve outcomes for kids in foster care. The [Office of Children's Services](#) has been moving steadily toward that goal every day, despite enormous challenges.

In a recent opinion piece in the Anchorage Daily News ("[The state needs to follow the law to help Alaska foster children](#)"), Rep. Andrew Gray suggested that OCS has ignored HB 151 due to political pressure. This allegation is false. OCS's mission is guided solely by the safety and well-being of Alaska's children, not partisan politics. Suggesting otherwise misleads the public and undermines confidence in the dedicated staff who carry out this important work.

Since my appointment as commissioner of the [Department of Family and Community Services](#) in 2022, implementing HB 151 has been a top priority. While Alaska faces unique challenges that make comparisons to other states difficult, the reforms are working. New caseworkers now begin with graduated caseloads, easing their transition into one of the most demanding public service roles. Average caseloads have dropped from



19 to 16, with a goal of 13, directly addressing workload concerns raised by staff. Turnover rates, which spiked to 56% during the COVID-19 pandemic, have now fallen to 38%, indicating that we are moving in the right direction. All mentorship positions required by the bill are filled, and OCS has added two additional mentors. Training programs required by HB 151 are fully implemented, combining in-person and field instruction, and continue to be strengthened in response to audit recommendations.

Contrary to claims, OCS training is not fully virtual. New staff complete seven weeks of training, including two weeks in the field with mentors. Ongoing training also reinforces skills and supports professional growth. The Child Welfare Academy, which provides training for OCS, was led by Amanda Metivier from July 2022 to December 2024. During that time, she declined repeated OCS requests for in-field training — context that is often left out of the conversation.

The shift to “core competencies” in hiring broadens the pool of qualified applicants without lowering standards. Official job postings clearly describe Protective Services specialists’ duties: investigating abuse and neglect, developing safety plans, placing children in care, preparing court reports, and collaborating with families, Tribes, and community partners. Applicants are fully informed; this is not “child care” or “security guard” work.

OCS strengthens its workforce through non-tra-

ditional scheduling, centralizing administrative functions, supporting continuing education, and promoting staff wellness. These initiatives improve recruitment, retention, and caseload management, even as turnover remains a nationwide challenge.

According to the Children’s Bureau’s Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data profile from February 2025, Alaska meets and exceeds the national average for reunification rates. When it comes to kinship placements, internal case reviews using the federal instrument showed 100% concerted efforts to identify relatives in the sampled cases, with an average of 50% resulting in successful placement with relatives. These achievements reflect the skill and dedication of our caseworkers and the strength of Tribal and community partnerships.

OCS caseworkers work nights, weekends and holidays, carrying immense responsibility because every child deserves safety and care. Their dedication, perseverance, and professionalism embody a service-first approach. Attacks on OCS should never diminish the heroic work of these frontline staff.

Rigid caseload “caps” cannot come at the expense of child safety. When a child is reported in danger, OCS responds immediately. No statute can erase intergenerational trauma or solve all social challenges, but HB 151 provides a framework, and OCS continues making that framework work every day.

HB 151 set a high standard. OCS continues building



on these successes, reducing caseloads, expanding mentorship, strengthening training, leading in kinship placements, and improving placement stability. The agency remains focused on strengthening Alaska's child welfare system and supporting children and families in every way possible.

Rep. Gray's political claims are false. Alaska's children are safer today, and OCS is delivering results that matter.

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