



Alaska State Legislature  
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## ***Signed & Sealed: Foster Care Reform Legislation Signed by Governor***

(JUNEAU) –Legislation to improve the chances for foster youth to succeed as adults was signed by Governor Parnell yesterday, June 15. In combination with major reform efforts the Legislature passed in the operating budget, also signed by the Governor, Alaska’s 2,000 foster youth have received a significant boost.

“We should do everything we can to help our youth succeed,” Representative [Les Gara](#) (D-Anchorage), prime sponsor of [House Bill 126](#), said. “There is a national effort to help our foster youth succeed, and the legislature’s doing a lot to adopt the best nationwide practices we know of.”

In crafting HB 126, Rep. Gara, who grew up in foster care, joined a national effort to allow youth to get on their feet before leaving foster care. The bill enjoyed the support of a strong bi-partisan list of 33 co-sponsors. HB 126 allows foster care to extend to age 21, and reverses the ban on re-entry into foster care for youth who leave early, and find themselves homeless, or otherwise in trouble. National studies show foster youth who are allowed to remain in care [achieve greater success](#) than those required to leave early.

Amanda Metivier, former foster youth and founder of Facing Foster Care in Alaska, praised Rep. Gara’s bill. “Foster youth need support as they become young adults,” Metivier said, “and HB 126 allows for youth in care to safely make this transition.” Presently, 30 states allow foster youth to stay in care until 21. National children’s advocates have made it a priority to establish similar provisions in all states.

On a related front, a package of major foster care reforms was approved in the Operating budget, which was approved by Governor Parnell on June 3. The reforms are aimed to ensure Alaska’s foster youth achieve educational and job success in a state where 37% of our foster youth end up homeless and over 30% end up incarcerated.

The reforms contained in the Operating budget include:

**Protecting Youth from Mid-term School Transfers.** Today, too many foster youth bounce between schools during a school term, as they move between family placements. The budget includes \$80,000 to help the state transport youth so they can remain in the same school for the remainder of a school term when they change foster homes.

**Mentoring Success.** Every child needs an adult to look up to and to lean on. But when foster youth leave care, they often have no responsible adults in their lives, to help them get job skills, continue with school, or find a way to put food in their stomachs. The budget includes \$200,000 to provide volunteer mentors to youth aging out of care. The funds will be used for competitive grants to groups that will run mentoring efforts and find matches for youth aging out of foster care. Providing agency help to recruit and train volunteers and coordinate with the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) would leverage thousands of hours of needed help.

**College and Vocational Aid.** Whether youth go to college or get job training, financial aid shouldn’t depend on where individuals stand in line. The budget includes job training funds, and will increase the number of college scholarships Alaska awards for foster youth from 10 to 20.

**Help so More Youth Coming Out of Care Succeed.** The Independent Living Program (ILP) is OCS’ effort to assist youth after they leave care with work, school, job training and life skills. The ILP cannot possibly work with only four statewide staff. When our 2,000 youth come out of care, and need guidance on finding work, maintaining housing, continuing education, and leveraging available benefits, there are only four people to help. They say they are completely overwhelmed, and unable to help adequately in individual cases. That leads to failure. Two additional staff will effectively extend educational, work, and life skill guidance to youth coming out of care.

**Housing Assistance to Avoid Homelessness.** OCS presently offers youth partial rental assistance for about three months. Roughly 100 youth come out of care every year. The budget includes \$100,000 for youth facing the prospect of homelessness. These funds allow up to six months of transitional housing help where needed.

**Foster Parent Recruitment; Discount Clothing Help.** Last year, the Alaska Legislature spent \$30,000 to create and broadcast a public service announcement aimed at recruiting Native Alaskan foster parents. This new budget will allow the state to continue this promotion, and allow OCS to continue their efforts to alleviate the severe shortage of foster parents in Alaska, especially Native Alaskan foster parents. The budget also includes \$5,000 for mailings to keep families informed of Foster Wear, the discount clothing program launched last year. The mailings will let foster families know as new stores join the effort, and of the discounts provided at the stores. Presently, notice is provided only by e-mail.

Senator Bettye Davis (D-Anchorage), a major proponent of foster care reform efforts, filed similar legislation during the twenty-sixth legislature and worked with Rep. Gara on these efforts. The budget work received bi-partisan support, and would not have passed without the help of many on both sides of the aisle in the Senate and House. Rep. Nancy Dahlstrom (R-Eagle River), provided notable help in moving HB 126 through the legislative process.

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