

March 14, 2022

Dear John and Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees,

I am writing you as an advocate for some of Alaska's most vulnerable children and families, those involved in foster care, and those at risk of going into foster care. I became a foster parent by accident at the age of 21 when a 16-year-old neighbor boy who was being abused showed up at my doorstep and asked if he could live with us; he heard from a friend that we were safe people. He moved in that night. This began a journey for me that has become a lifelong passion.

I'm a businessperson like you. I own a couple of companies, go to Rotary, and have an MBA. I even teach business courses at APU. Also, like you, I long to make a significant difference in my community by investing in efforts that I believe make a real difference for those I feel compelled to advocate for. I have a lot of experience starting and running community-led child welfare efforts. I founded Beacon Hill, Safe Families for Children Alaska, and the Heart Gallery of Alaska. I ran them as a volunteer Executive Director for 12 years. Although my time is now invested elsewhere, I am proud of what my investments of time and resources produced.

My passion for child welfare reform has only grown in this new season of my life. I am now focused on helping State leaders, agencies, tribes, advocates, and stakeholders come together to strategically design and implement community-led efforts that strengthen families and reduce the need for child protective services involvement (alaskaimpactalliance.com). This letter provides a brief outline of the ways I believe the Trust could invest in child welfare initiatives that have the potential to positively impact the lives of your beneficiaries.

As I'm sure you are aware, many of your Trust beneficiaries have been involved with child welfare systems at some point in their lives.

- *36% of former foster youth had reported at least one episode of homelessness by age 26 (2014)*
- *25% of foster youth will experience PTSD compared to that of a veteran (2020)*
- *27% of youth in foster care have been referred for substance use treatment (2022)*
- *1 in 3 children enter foster care because of parental drug abuse (2022)*
- *Alcohol abuse is the leading cause of child removal in Alaska (2022)*

Although these statistics are alarming, it is important to note that foster care is a necessary intervention in many circumstances because when the phone rings at the Alaska Office of Children's Services, the crisis has already escalated.

Most people assume that child abuse is physical or sexual, but those types of abuse comprise only 10% of cases. In contrast, child neglect is more than 60% of all reported child maltreatment cases (2022). Child abuse, particularly neglect, is mainly preventable because many causes of harm stem from poverty, lack of social connections, substance use disorders, mental illness, lack of childcare, and other family support shortages. Prevention of child abuse and neglect starts with family support in these areas.

There are three child welfare prevention strategies I would encourage your board to consider investing in 1) The Alaska Family Support Network, 2) Statewide Alternate Response System, and 3) Agency Supports. I will provide a summary of each concept and relevant research for your consideration. If interested, I am happy to provide further ideas and proposals on each strategy.

The Alaska Family Support Network

A group of Alaska Impact Alliance (AIA) members have been working on building a statewide network of Family Resource Centers in Alaska. Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are community resource hubs where families can get access to needed referrals, services, and supports that promote family wellbeing. They can be school-based or community-based.

Alaska just joined the National Family Support Network so they can help us establish standards for training and certification and get support for best practices and funding. We now have four school districts and six agencies as preliminary members of our Alaska Family Support Network. Some of them want to create FRCs within their schools or agencies, and some of them already have similar structures but want to add to their service array and align their practices with best practices across the country.

Knowing where to turn in times of need is a proven crisis prevention strategy. According to Casey Family Programs, FRCs have proven to be a successful secondary prevention strategy. Four years after Alachua County, Florida opened their FRC, and they saw a 45% reduction in cases of child abuse and neglect in the area surrounding their resource center. Allegheny County, Pennsylvania's study found that neighborhoods with FRCs had 30.5 child maltreatments per 1,000 children compared to 41.5 per 1,000 in neighborhoods without the FRCs (2021).

I dream of an Alaska Family Resource Center Fund that school districts, Tribes, and agencies can apply to for grants that help them establish and partially operate their programs for the first two years. In Alaska, I anticipate that it will cost between \$50k-\$100k per year for each FRC. We are designing the services offered with the Medicaid 1115 Family Navigation funding in mind for sustainability. These centers are relatively inexpensive because they are established within organizations that already exist. The Social Return on Investment for FRCs is \$4.93 for every \$1 invested, according to research (2022). An investment of \$1 million would establish a minimum of 10 FRCs in the next two years across Alaska.

There is a large amount of research and information about FRCs across the country at www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org.

Statewide Alternate Response System

When someone is concerned about a child's safety, they call the Office of Children's Services and file a Protective Services Report. OCS historically receives 1,500 of these calls each month. Of those calls, only 40% of cases are forwarded to the Initial Assessment unit for further investigation. This highlights the importance of finding ways to support struggling families that comprise the screened out 60%. These families are not at the point of having their children removed but are at increased vulnerability for such.

Many states with robust prevention efforts have created alternate response systems to divert those screened out calls to community supports so that families can get the help they need. A group of AIA members, Casey Family Programs, call center leaders from, 2-1-1, 9-8-8, Care Line, Peer Supports at AK Behavioral Health, Connect Mat-Su, Help Me Grow Alaska, and OCS Intake are coming together regularly to brainstorm on how we can design a working alternate response system in Alaska. We want to utilize

existing programs, phone numbers, platforms, tribal partners, and regional resource knowledge as much as possible. We are at the phase of gathering data on calls from the intake office at OCS to help us understand the needs of those this alternate response system may serve.

We know there will be future costs associated with this project once we have completed the concept design and are beginning the implementation stages. We also welcome your involvement in the brainstorming and design process. We hope that the Trust will be a partner in this statewide family support line.

By having a network of well-established and supported Family Resource Centers across Alaska in conjunction with an alternate response system that can refer families to those centers, we will make a huge leap in connecting vulnerable families back to their communities. This will increase their strength and resiliency so that they can safely stay together.

You can find a factsheet on Differential Response at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/differential_response.pdf.

So far, I've mentioned two projects directly serving families I feel deserve yours and my investments. The final investment is a structural one and key to the longevity of prevention program and agency success in Alaska.

Agency Supports

There is a much-needed shift occurring within child welfare toward the use of evidence-based practice models and outcome evaluation. The federal government recognized this and enacted the most significant child welfare reform law in over 40 years in the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) (P.L. 115-123). The law was designed to divert funds away from long-term foster care and institutions and toward programs that prevent unnecessary placement and child protective services interventions.

The FFPSA is a strategic change in federal child welfare policy as it requires federal matching funds to be tied to programs that utilize evidence-based practice models. The purpose of linking funding to established and proven prevention methods is to require and uphold practice standards that produce improved outcomes for children and vulnerable families.

In my research, there are four key problems that Alaska and most other states are having in implementing this new law so that they can draw down the 50% federal match. They are:

1. The availability of approved evidence-based practices in the area.
2. The availability of culturally appropriate evidence-based practices.
3. The organizational supports local agencies need to deliver the evidence-based models in their communities (training, technology, certification, etc.).
4. The evaluation and reporting system from OCS to the Children's Bureau.

A group of AIA members are working on a statewide scan of approved evidence-based models that we could use for submission with an Alaska Family First Prevention Services Act Plan, but there is a great need for agency support and program evaluation and reporting to stand the plan up.

I am proposing that like the Alaska Family Resource Center Fund, we have an Alaska Child and Family Agency Support Fund. Agencies could apply for grants related to evidence-based practice implementation. These grants could be used for improving agency technology, training, curriculum, certification, and evaluation.

In my work, I have noticed that agencies are often unaware of similar work other agencies are doing in other parts of the state or community and would have liked to have worked together or shared resources and knowledge had they known about each other's endeavors. The beauty of having a centralized hub for agencies to submit their requests of this sort is that they can be directed to each other for that resource and knowledge sharing and so that investment dollars are leveraged across the state.

As an example, we have several Tribes and organizations interested in implementing the evidence-based Family Spirit Home Visiting Program that is culturally tailored for indigenous communities. It would be a great fit for Alaskan communities and is approved for the federal match under the new FFPSA law. If Alaska agencies and Tribes work together, we could utilize joint training, certification, and national program supports at a reduced cost. A program like Family Spirit would generally cost an agency a minimum of \$25k to get trained and certified, but only a fraction of that if many organizations do it together under one umbrella.

I want to thank you for taking the time to read and consider my investment recommendations. I have purposely left these concepts broad because I am only one voice and effective strategy requires wise counsel from many parties. Will you be that wise counsel for child welfare agencies and stakeholders in Alaska? I hope that this board will see the value of investing in these and other prevention efforts.

I welcome your feedback and questions and sincerely thank you for all you do for Alaska.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ccarmody". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long vertical stroke extending downwards from the end.

Charity Carmody

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