

# STATE OF ALASKA

## DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

### Alaska Commission on Aging

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March 5, 2011

The Honorable Dennis Egan, Chair  
Senate Labor & Commerce Committee  
Alaska State Capitol, Room 510  
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

**Subject: Support for SB 87, Medical Care for Seniors Grant Program**

Dear Chair Egan:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to offer our support of SB 87, a bill sponsored by Senator French, to establish a grant program in the Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development for eligible health care providers who serve older Alaskans insured by Medicare to improve their access to primary care services focusing on areas with a high percentage of medically underserved populations and in communities where seniors have been challenged to find a provider who accepts Medicare insurance.

Alaska continues to lead all states in the rate of growth of people age 65 and older; they number 52,263 according to 2009 estimates from the Alaska Department of Labor. Not only are Alaska seniors growing in number but they are living longer, many with chronic medical conditions and physical disabilities, and require more health care. At the same time, Alaska has a growing shortage of primary care physicians and other health care providers who are preparing for retirement.

In recent years, seniors living in Anchorage, the Mat-Su Borough, and Fairbanks have reported difficulty finding primary care physicians who will accept Medicare patients. Recently, ACoA conducted a statewide survey of seniors as part of our efforts to develop an assessment of senior needs that will be used in developing the new four-year plan for Alaska Senior Services, FY 2012-2015. More than 3,000 Alaskans age 50 years and older responded to the survey of whom 2,395 were age 65 years and older. Thirty-one percent of respondents 65 years and older reported having problems finding a primary care doctor. In examining the Medicare refusal issue by region, we found that access to primary health care is most likely to occur in the Anchorage area where one in four seniors responding to the survey reported this problem. Three other regions also reported this barrier to primary care – Fairbanks and the Interior; Southcentral and the Aleutians – where 16% of the respondents from each region noted trouble finding a primary care doctor in their community to care for them. In addition, survey respondents rated health care and financial security as the two priority concerns for seniors.

The ACoA supports SB 87 to improve access to primary health care for older Alaskan Medicare beneficiaries. Limited access to primary care puts older persons at greater risk of developing serious health conditions that could have been abated with timely medical care. Many older Alaskans are struggling to keep up with the rising costs of health care, which threatens their health and financial security. Thank you for your consideration and support of this legislation. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director, by phone (465-4879) or email ([denise.daniello@alaska.gov](mailto:denise.daniello@alaska.gov)) should you have questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,

  
Sharon Howerton-Clark  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,

  
Denise Daniello  
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Senator Joe Paskvan, Vice Chair  
Senator Linda Menard  
Senator Bettye Davis  
Senator Cathy Giessel

Senator Hollis French, Bill Sponsor