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Senator Bettye Davis

SPONSOR STATEMENT

SB53 – REESTABLISHMENT OF THE ALASKA COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Senate Bill 53 “An Act reestablishing the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women; and relating to the purpose and powers of the Alaska Human Relations Commission.”

Senate Bill 53 reestablishes the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women – a nine member body devoted to improving the status of women. The Alaska Commission on the Status of Women was originally created in 1978; renewed and renamed to the Alaska Women’s Commission in 1983; then combined with the Alaska Human Relations Commission in 1993. While the Alaska Human Relations Commission continues to exist in statute, it has never been funded and was declared inactive in 1996.

Staggering statistics for women in Alaska show the extreme need to reestablish the Commission to exclusively focus on major issues facing women. Alaska has the highest rates of sexual assault and domestic violence in the nation and historically, women are more likely to be poor than men. Poverty rates for unmarried female householders with children are particularly high and have consistently been two or three times as high as overall male and female poverty rates since 1996. Survey data compiled by the American Community Survey shows that of 26,518 families in Alaska with a female head of household, 22.6 percent live below the poverty level. The gender wage gap persists in Alaska and across a wide spectrum of occupations and industries. In 2009, according to the Alaska Department of Labor, Alaskan women on average earned only 66.6% of what men earned. And, although more women than men in Alaska hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, data shows that men’s median annual earnings are higher in every education level. Alaskan women, in particular women of color, experience health care disparities and women living in rural Alaska have worse-than average disparities on access and utilization of services.

Reestablishing the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women will help Alaskans focus on these critical areas that have negatively impacted women and children for decades. Throughout the Commission’s existence, the Commission conducted many public hearings and trainings, developed manuals on violence against women, education and welfare, conducted research to help women avail themselves of existing resources to meet their needs and implemented recommendations on the opportunities, needs, problems and contributions of women in the areas of education, homemaking, civil and legal rights, and labor and employment. The Commission developed a comprehensive statewide plan that identified the needs of children and youth and made recommendations to enhance the quality of life for women and children, as well as produced annual reports which described in detail the accomplishments of the commission in those years. We need innovative, forward thinking and a commission that exclusively concentrates on ensuring equality for women.

Session: (January – April)

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Interim: (April – December)

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