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April 6, 2009

Sen. Donald Olson
Senate Education Committee
State Capitol Rm. 514
Juneau, AK 99801 + 1182

Dear Sen. Olson,

The Alaska Dental Society urges members of the Senate Education Committee to pass SB174 out of committee.

SB174 will reestablish funding and program guidelines for Alaska's participation in the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) in healthcare professions for which in-state programs are not available:

Dentistry
Optometry
Pharmacy; and
Physical therapy.

SB174 will establish a low interest loan that will be partially forgiven if the graduate returns to Alaska. An additional amount can be forgiven if the graduate practices in an underserved area in Alaska or provides a percentage of care under the state's Medicaid system.

Alaska has long faced a shortage of healthcare providers in rural areas. An increasingly aging workforce combined with a lack of new providers to replace retiring practitioners is rapidly leading to a shortage in Alaska's urban areas. The cost to attend professional school has rapidly escalated in recent years resulting in heavy loan repayment burdens for graduating professionals. Forty-four states have at least one or more incentive programs to entice health professionals to establish a practice in those states -- Alaska is one of 6 states without a program.

Encouraging Alaskan residents to seek careers in healthcare fields will pay several dividends. Returning Alaskan residents are more likely to remain in Alaska for their practicing careers providing a stable source of healthcare providers. In a troubled economy healthcare fields provide stable, well paying jobs and healthcare providers will employ additional people providing an economic boost for communities.

Sincerely,

Mark Prator, DDS
President, Alaska Dental Society