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Sponsor Statement

HB 319- Study Health Effects of Airport Screening

HB 319 requires the Department of Health and Social Services to conduct a study to determine the health consequences of the federal Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) procedures in Alaska's four major airports' security screening areas. The study will indicate the physical, mental health and emotional impacts on Alaskans who are traveling through locations that require TSA security procedures.

Many Alaskans who have traveled outside Alaska since October 2010 have experienced full-body scanners and invasive physical exams given by TSA in larger airports throughout the United States. Starting in December 2011, body scanners were installed at the international airports in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau and Ketchikan.

New software installed in Alaska makes the image less personal than those of older machines, but the scanner's millimeter wavelength technology has drawn health concern from some passengers, and there is not sufficient independent scientific verification to be assured of their safety.

If a scanner detects anything irregular in the person's body, or if a passenger refuses to be scanned, TSA procedure calls for a physical hands-on exam by a TSA employee. Passengers who have body abnormalities, prostheses, non-visible medical equipment, insertions, or scarring will be required to undergo the invasive exam experience. People who have previously been subjected to traumatic events (from work, environmental, medical treatments, and/or physical assault-related) or those with objections based on moral or religious beliefs can be impacted by TSA examinations with retraumatization. Many people with personal backgrounds free of trauma will not suffer reactions to invasive searches.

Alaska was the last state to have the body scanners installed. Prior to their installation scans were done by metal detectors which triggered fewer physical exams. Unfortunately, trauma is pervasive in Alaska. Increases in physically invasive touch on a population leading the nation in trauma of many kinds, requires study to assess the mental health impacts on Alaska's population. The cost of those impacts also needs to be examined.

In addition to emotional reactions, there is concern for protecting the public health. Among these concerns is the need for advanced health training of TSA workers who touch private and possibly surgically or otherwise injured body parts that may also have communicable diseases. Employees use gloves, but between exams, they are observed touching many objects and inappropriately using cleaning processes, or sanitary equipment. Visibly, public protections are not adequate.

These issues are critical to travel in Alaska. Alaskans not only travel eight times more than the national average, but those who live off the road system must utilize air flight for advanced or non-standard medical treatment.

Since December 2011 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has expanded TSA screening areas and installed body scanners in Alaska's four gateway airports. During the intervening months, constituents have continued communicating to legislators about non-sanitary touching and treatment by TSA screeners. A study on the possible impacts of TSA screening procedures is important to the mental, emotional and physical health of Alaskans.