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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. The Alaska Legislature established the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women in 1978 (ch 120 SLA 1978). The Commission was tasked with implementing the recommendations contained in the preliminary study on the status of women. The Commission aimed to improve the status of women in the state by conducting research, serving as a referral service for information and education on existing resources for women, and making and implementing recommendations on the opportunities, needs, problems, and contributions of women in Alaska. The Commission was dedicated to the achievement of equal legal, economic, social and political status specifically for women in Alaska and was a statewide network for study and action on a variety of issues. In 1983, the Commission was renewed and renamed the Alaska Women's Commission (ch 52 SLA 1983).

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 on the status of women and children in Alaska. The Alaska Women's Commission merged with the Alaska Human Relations Commission in 1993. The Alaska Human Relations Commission continues to exist in State Statute, but has never been funded and was declared inactive in 1996.

Over the past several decades, the participation and roles of women in the workforce has changed dramatically. Women are employed in more varied occupations and are more likely to work year-round than they have in the past. In addition, women have attained higher levels of education, and receive the majority of bachelor degrees granted. More mothers are part of the workforce, and thus, a women's contribution to family incomes have increased and is often critical for families' economic well-being. In 2008, working wives contributed 29 percent of their families' incomes, up from 24 percent in 1988. Nonetheless, even though more women are in the workforce than ever before, the difference in wages men and women receive for their work remains substantial. The gender wage gap persists in Alaska, and across a wide spectrum of occupations and industries. According to *Invest in Women, Invest in America*, women working full-time, year-round earn only 77 cents for

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every dollar earned by men. In Alaska, men continue to earn significantly more on average than women in 2009. According to data obtained from the Alaska Department of Labor and workforce Development, the wage difference between men and women has not changed much since 2000. On average, women earned 66.6 percent of what men earned in 2009, which was the same as in 2006. Women and children continue to be the most common victims of domestic abuse. Women in Alaska lead the nation as victims of sexual assaults. Alaska has a struggling foster child system and Alaska's high school students, both male and female, drop out at alarming rates. Alaska has one of the lowest percentages of students entering and completing higher education programs and Alaska has a significant economic divide between our urban and rural communities, which negatively impacts all of us. These are a few areas of concerns facing women and children in our state and simply put, Alaska can no longer afford to ignore these statistics.

Alaska with its unique culture, history and challenges, combined with its large size and small population, calls for innovative forward thinking to deal with many of the difficult issues facing women and children throughout Alaska. Reestablishing the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women will allow Alaskans to focus attention on these critical issues that have negatively impacted women and children for decades.

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