

# **Sponsor Statement**

## **HB 133**

The Alaska Supreme Court is asking for two new superior court judges in Anchorage. The judges will be assigned to civil cases.

Additional judges are needed because Anchorage superior court judges have the highest caseloads in the state and a combination of devoting more time to Child in Need of Aid (CINA) cases and an ever-increasing number of domestic relations cases where the parties choose to litigate their case without the assistance of attorneys has created a workload that is unsustainable.

Although some of the additional work comes from an increase in case filings, much is the result of improved practices that better meet the needs of those who come to court. This is particularly true with CINA cases.

One change that has impacted workload involves how CINA cases are assigned to judges. Prior practice was to have standing masters (specialists who hear cases and make recommendations to judges) preside over all phases of a case with the exception of contested hearings. If a hearing was contested it would be assigned to an available superior court judge who would resolve the contested issue and then return the case to the standing master. Although that practice saved superior court time, it led to other problems as the family was shuffled back and forth between judges.

The new practice begins the same as the old; a CINA case starts with a master until there is a contested issue. However, once that occurs the case is permanently assigned to a superior court judge; it does not return to the master. This eliminates the judge-shuffling and allows the judge and the family to get to know each other. All parties agree that familiarity improves both the process and the outcome for the families. However, this model results in superior court judges spending more of their time on these cases.

In addition to CINA cases, another prime driver behind the current workload is the prevalence of unrepresented litigants in domestic relations cases. Although we do not have historical statistics that track these cases, Alaska judges, like judges from across the country, have seen a significant increase over the past several years.

Judges cite a list of time-consuming challenges that arise when counsel is absent from one side or both sides. Frequent motion practice, arguments unrelated to the relevant legal issues, delays stemming from the failure to submit needed information and judicial time spent calculating child support awards are some of those challenges. However, even though these litigants take more time, their cases are as important as those where the parties have lawyers and the judiciary is committed to ensuring that they too can meaningfully access the court.

Adding two new judges will not significantly reduce the workload of the Anchorage superior court (Anchorage superior court judges will still be the busiest superior court judges in the state), but it will provide some relief as the court works to develop alternative ways to manage that workload. Thank you for considering this request.