

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Senator Cathy Giessel and Senator Donald Olson

Senate Bill 144 Sponsor Statement

“An Act temporarily reinstating the child and adult immunization program in the Department of Health and Social Services; and providing for an effective date.”

SB 144 is a stop-gap measure to reinstate the Alaska Immunization Program (AIP), which aims to prevent and control vaccine-preventable diseases in Alaska, to its former level of coverage.

Every year, Alaska commemorates a significant healthcare emergency – the serum run to Nome. What we call the Iditarod today was the “Great Race of Mercy” in 1925. Nome and the surrounding communities were in the throes of a diphtheria epidemic, and dog teams relayed the life-saving antitoxin to them. Because of vaccines, diphtheria – a disease of the throat, tonsils, and nose that restricts the airway – has been nearly eliminated from the U.S.

The late Senator Ted Stevens recognized the vulnerability of Alaska – rural communities in particular – to significant, preventable healthcare crises, such as the diphtheria outbreak in Nome. Senator Stevens provided for vaccination availability by making sure that the Alaska Immunization Program was funded to provide preventative vaccines to all Alaskans desiring them. As a result of federal funding for vaccinations, diseases that formerly killed children and adults – whooping cough, lockjaw, haemophilus influenzae, polio – have been controlled.

However, since Senator Steven’s passing, federal funding has been reduced significantly, to a mere \$700,000 for FY2013, down from \$4.3 million in FY2010. As a result of this drastic decrease in funding, affordable vaccinations are no longer readily available to all Alaskans. The reductions in funding have forced the program to further reduce the number of eligible vaccines available to children, and completely discontinue those available to adults. SB 144 temporarily substitutes state funding for the decrease in federal funding to AIP through FY2015.

Prevention is important in ensuring a healthier future for Alaskans. I remember two little boys in my neighborhood, in Fairbanks, who died from the polio virus when I was a child. That doesn't happen anymore...because of a vaccine. Prevention programs like AIP play a vital role in maintaining optimum immunity and helping Alaskans take the best possible care of themselves and their families. SB 144 is a short term measure to ensure availability of vaccines until a more permanent solution can be reached. The health and healthcare of Alaskans is an important issue, and SB 144 provides a temporary solution for the growing problem of unnecessary exposure to and spreading of disease.