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To: Senate Health & Social Services Committee

From: Scott A. Limstrom, MD, President of Alaska Society of Eye Physicians & Surgeons  
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Re: SB 55

## **Geographic Outreach of Ophthalmologists in Alaska**

Response to Request from Senator Stoltze, Senate Health and Social Services Committee

Alaskans have access to the highest quality of medical and surgical eye care through a highly trained cadre of dedicated ophthalmologists – medical and surgical eye physicians. There is approximately one ophthalmologist per 27,000 Alaskans, which is comparable to Washington State’s ophthalmologists/citizens ratio of one ophthalmologist per 20,000 citizens.

Most recent data (through 2014) shows that 41% of the state’s population lives in Anchorage. The Fairbanks North Star Borough and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough combined comprise an additional 27% of Alaska’s total population (roughly 13% in each borough). So, nearly 70% of the state’s population lives in those three areas, which have excellent access to highly trained ophthalmologists. With ophthalmology practices based in Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks, Kenai, Soldotna, and Wasilla, and through the Alaska Native Medical Center’s field clinics (held two-to-four times a year) in Sitka, Juneau, Bethel, Ketchikan, Barrow, Kotzebue, Nome, Kodiak, and Dillingham, ophthalmologists efficiently serve the entire population of Alaska.

Ophthalmology practices are not limited to brick and mortar in Alaska. The Alaska Native Health System provides much rural eye care in the state. Three ophthalmologists based in Anchorage travel throughout the state with several optometrists providing needed eye care services. Many eye surgeries are performed in Anchorage. If a patient encounters an eye emergency, trauma or detached retina in a community like Kodiak, an emergency room doctor (or whoever is currently treating the patient) will immediately contact an ophthalmologist. The ophthalmologist uses skills and experience to assess the immediate treatment needed, whether the patient requires further medical eye treatment, and if so, how quickly the patient needs to be seen. As with other specialty surgeries such as cardiovascular surgery or neurosurgery, a patient requiring complex eye surgery is flown to Anchorage because these surgeries require sophisticated instrumentation only available in Anchorage.

Finally, telemedicine is also enhancing the delivery of eye care by ophthalmologists in Alaska. Telemedicine delivers eye care through digital medical equipment and telecommunications technology, providing patients in remote areas access to highly trained eye physicians and surgeons—ophthalmologists. These patients receive ophthalmic disease screening, diagnosis and monitoring. New and innovative diagnostic technologies have recently proliferated, based on wide availability of the Internet, smartphones, tablets, and other devices. Telemedicine technology allows ophthalmologists to take images of the patient’s eyes, without requiring expensive equipment, and often times without the patient leaving home. This technological transformation has enhanced patient understanding and management of conditions, made diagnostic tools available in more remote settings, permitted remote diagnosis and interpretation by ophthalmologists, and has helped lower healthcare costs by reducing patient visits.