

An Open Message to the Members of the Senate Finance Committee

As the state budget is being reviewed legislatively, I appreciate this opportunity to provide my opinion now to the members of the Senate Finance Committee. I understand the difficult experience you are faced with and ask that you consider the unique and already “bare bones” grant situations in rural Alaska.

As you may know, the remote regions in the state have always worked with less when compared to the financial situations created and supported by the sheer number of the population in our larger sister urban areas. Please consider the following concerns:

- State funded programs support the only services available to the vulnerable people (those in poverty, in addiction, in the criminal justice system, in volatile home situations, in substandard housing, our veterans, our Elders, our children, the people with mental health treatment need, etc.) and for rural Alaskans in general.
- The jobs funded by the state grants support the economy of rural Alaska and, with no funding and subsequently no jobs, a “domino effect” begins to unravel the support of the rural communities.
- The “wait period” for substance use treatment beds in the state is 4 to 6 months and rural residents die while they are waiting for treatment. If treatment funding is diminished across the state, these waiting periods will lengthen incrementally.
- The expected funding increase from Expanded Medicaid has been slow in coming and is not yet realized sufficiently to support the grant-funded services in rural Alaska.
- Historically, the state has spent millions and millions of dollars sending the people and children of rural Alaska to services in the urban areas of Alaska and out-of-state, to Texas, Utah, etc., for treatment. Realizing the clinical and financial error in this planning, the state spent additional funds to bring the children home and recommended treatment services for the child within the family, rather than only the child.
- The need for the state’s most costly state services, the correctional centers, continues to grow and will increase annually if services are diminished.
- The services needed to address the “triad” of untreated mental health services, untreated substance use treatment services, and recidivism in the correctional system are in their infancy in this area of rural Alaska.
- Local treatment services for the families, adults, and children, can interrupt the cycle of addiction and recidivism and promote the community changes needed to support the fledging families in recovery.

I encourage you to plan creatively and bravely to postpone the dramatic cuts to the state’s budget. Utilize the available funds in the Permanent Fund to allow Medicaid Expansion to become strong in the state and support our services.

I ask that you retain the state grant funding without the dramatic budget cuts to allow services to continue as Medicaid grows. A plan to address lowering the grants incrementally over the next fiscal years would allow the Medicaid system itself to meet the need of processing the increased load of applications and payment and allow the rural areas of Alaska to continue to enroll beneficiaries in Medicaid to support services.

I ask that you maintain Nome’s Youth Facility to allow youths and their families this service, rather than beginning the incarceration pattern of the past (youths are incarcerated in DJJ and then, as adults, begin their cycle of incarceration which never ends).

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions. Thank you.

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