

Alaska State Legislature

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Special Committee on Arctic, Economic Development,
and Tourism, Chair
Resources Committee, Vice Chair
Community and Regional Affairs Committee
Special Committee on Energy

Representative Dean Westlake HB 171 Sponsor Statement

"An Act authorizing the commissioner of corrections to enter into contracts and cooperative agreements for the productive employment of prisoners; authorizing the Department of Corrections to receive money from the productive employment of prisoners; and providing for an effective date."

In Alaska, over 90 percent of those incarcerated will return to our communities. It is important that we allow these individuals to develop the skills necessary to be successful as they reenter into society. As the State Department of Corrections (DOC) works to create a more self-sustaining correctional system, the current language in AS 33.30.191(b) is too narrow. HB 171 will enhance the ability of the Commissioner to accept contracts or cooperative agreements in order to strengthen the current employment of Alaskan prisoners.

This legislation will allow the Commissioner greater latitude to contract with entities to provide the department with expertise on producing various products and services. DOC would then be able to provide products and services to the general public through private-public partnerships in full consultation with industry stakeholders. Alaskans will benefit by an enhanced ability to purchase quality services and Alaskan made products that may not otherwise be available in the area. Further, HB 171 broadens the stakeholders that the Commissioner shall consult with before selling a product/service, thus, providing better outcomes for DOC, industry stakeholders, and the public.

Correctional employment programs are used throughout the country and Alaska's current system pales in comparison. Colorado, Nevada, and Oregon are a few examples of states that are actively employing inmates, providing a better quality of life during incarceration for those employed, and providing better chances for successful reentry into society after incarceration. Inmates in Alaska should also be provided opportunities to gain work experience, be productive with their time, and learn new skills.

Enhancement of prisoner employment will provide more opportunities to find savings within the correctional system. Warehousing inmates is detrimental to the well-being of society and has residual cost burdens. Providing meaningful, productive programs to inmates during incarceration is of tremendous benefit. Safety within the institutions will be enhanced by reducing inmate idleness. Victim restitution, court fees/fines, and other costs associated with confinement will have more opportunities of being paid which enhances opportunities for restorative justice to take place.

HB 171 strengthens the State's efforts in reducing recidivism. The residual effects of improving correctional employment programs could manifest in increased institutional efficiencies, increased skilled workers for Alaska's workforce, reduced recidivism, reduced victimization, and enhanced public safety. The State is currently facing fiscal pressures and must get creative in looking for solutions. HB 171 increases the Department of Corrections' ability to meet their core mission of 'providing secure confinement, reformatory programs, and a process of supervised community reintegration to enhance the safety of our communities.'

For more information please contact Elizabeth Rexford on my staff at 907-465-3473.