



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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March 19, 2018

The Honorable Senator Anna MacKinnon
Senate Finance Committee Co-Chair
Alaska State Capitol, Room 516
Juneau, Alaska 99811-1182

The Honorable Senator Lyman Hoffman
House Finance Committee Co-Chair
Alaska State Capitol, Room 518
Juneau, Alaska 99811-1182

Subject: Support for CSHB 236, Extend Alaska Senior Benefits Program

Dear Senator MacKinnon and Senator Hoffman:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to offer support for CSHB 236 to reauthorize the Alaska Senior Benefits Program with a six-year extension through June 30, 2024. Sixteen senators have signed on as bill co-sponsors including Senators Micciche, Kelly, Giessel, Stevens, Bishop, Costello, Stedman, Hughes, Egan, Wielechowski, Begich, Wilson, Meyer, Olson and both of you. Since 2007, the Alaska Senior Benefits Program has provided an invaluable resource for modest-income older Alaskans who live on small fixed incomes to afford basic life necessities. In the last statewide senior survey conducted by ACoA in 2015, senior participants identified financial security as the #2 most pressing issue confronting seniors behind access to health care services.

The risk of living in poverty increases in later life and varies by race, gender, marital status, and age. The risk of poverty is far greater for seniors who are 75 years and older, as well as for persons living alone, widowed women, and those of minority status. According to the Division of Public Assistance (2017), the average age of recipients is 75 and the maximum age is 104. Typically, seniors who receive Senior Benefits are older and often have little or no financial cushion to meet emergency needs, let alone afford basic life necessities.

The Senior Benefits Program provided critical financial assistance for more than 11,400 low-income Alaska seniors in FY2017 (Senior Benefits Fact Sheet, August 2017). While the monthly payments are not large amounts, they do *make a difference* in whether or not an older person is able to live comfortably and afford food, rent, heating fuel, medication, and other necessities. Senior Benefits also assists the growing number of grandparents raising their grandchildren by helping to make ends meet.

In September 2017, the House Health and Social Services Committee sponsored an interim Listening Session for public members to express their views how Senior Benefits assists low-income seniors. More than 50 public members statewide testified, representing both rural and urban areas of the state. They expressed strong support for the continuation of Senior Benefits because the program is critical to the life and health of vulnerable older people.

Without legislative action this session, the Senior Benefits Program will end on June 30, 2018. The Commission on Aging strongly recommends passage of CSHB 236. Senior Benefits is a critical component of the safety net for Alaska's older people. We believe this legislation is good public policy that provides financial support for older Alaskans who are most at risk to economic stresses allowing them to live with dignity and independence. We thank Representative Kawasaki for sponsoring CSHB 236 as well as the majority of Senate Finance Committee members who have co-sponsored this bill. We greatly appreciate your support of older Alaskans!

Sincerely,



David A. Blacketer
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Senator Click Bishop, Vice Chair
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Natasha von Imhof
Senator Donald Olson
Senator Gary Stevens
Representative Scott Kawasaki