

RE: Support for House Bill 118

March 17, 2021

Chair Rep. Kreiss-Tomkins and Members of the House State Affairs Committee,

My name is Jonathan Pistotnik and I am the Coordinator for the Anchorage Reentry Coalition. I engage in community organizing centered around prisoner reentry with a primary focus on Anchorage.

The first piece of HB 118, providing identification to certain people concurrent with their release, addresses a very important issue and is likely to mitigate some of the hardship obtaining identification that many face immediately after being released from incarceration. I am strongly in support of those amendments.

HB 118 also proposes to make changes to Alaska statute known as the “No Frills” bill, which severely limits what a computer can lawfully be used for by incarcerated people in Alaska. If it was not already apparent before the COVID-19 pandemic it surely must be now: computers are no longer a frill, a contrivance of the fanciful elite. Rather they are an essential tool for navigating and engaging with the world. We use them to communicate, to access information, and to participate and engage in our communities. They are ubiquitous in today’s world, yet inside Alaska’s correctional facilities access and use is much more limited.

Advocating for change on this subject is difficult. Stories and anecdotes vary between staff spread out across the state in various offices and staff positions throughout the chain of command as to what is available inside the correctional institutions and what the policies are. Personal stories from individuals released from incarceration regarding access to programs and rehabilitative services, and pre-release reentry support can be highly variable. Even stakeholders engaged and supportive of reentry services continually debate what the heart of the matter issues are surrounding access to computers, tablets, the internet, and even conceptually about what actually constitutes “use of a computer.” We do know that the inability to pivot to digital service delivery and community engagement during the pandemic has left people isolated and without structured programming for a full year.

The bottom line is there are people releasing from incarceration in Alaska who are unprepared to use computers and modern technology, and to utilize these everyday tools to integrate into the community. Without changes within our systems to make technology more readily available to both inmates and staff, and with a forecast in the number of incarcerated people in Alaska set to increase, the digital divide will continue to widen, opportunities will be missed, and successful reentry will be even more difficult to achieve.

As an advocate for those that are and have been incarcerated, and for programs and services directed towards reentrants, I support HB 118 to the extent that it attempts to remove some of the constraints put into law that restrict the Department of Corrections from seeking out and implementing new and creative ways for delivering habilitative, rehabilitative, educational, and pro-social opportunities to those who are incarcerated in Alaska correctional facilities through the use of computers and digital technologies.

I believe that the Legislature could go further than what is proposed in HB 118 by removing from state statute all definitions as to what is an approved use of a computer. I strongly advocate that our leaders refine the law so that computers and digital technology will no longer be viewed as a frill in our state, but rather as tools that when used and managed properly can supplement existing efforts to deliver education and job skills training inside our correctional institutions, support sobriety and recovery, deliver faith-based services, connect loved ones, and ultimately contribute to safer correctional institutions and a safer Alaska.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JP Pistotnik", written in a cursive, fluid style.

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