

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Alaska Commission on Aging

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February 27, 2012

The Honorable Wes Keller, Chair
The Honorable Alan Dick, Chair
House Health & Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Rooms 432 & 104
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Subject: Support for HB 310, Temporary Reinstatement of the Child and Adult Immunization Program

Dear Chair Keller and Chair Dick:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) supports passage of HB 310, a bill to re-establish and fund the child and adult immunization program as it existed in 2009 targeting children and adults who are uninsured and underinsured. This legislation is authored by Representative Herron and co-sponsored by Representatives Wilson, Costello, Gruenberg, Edgmon, and Holmes.

Preventive services, such as immunizations, are important tools for maintaining the health of all Alaskans at every stage of life. Immune systems weaken with age, which place older people at greater risk for severe illness from influenza and pneumonia. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (2011) recommends influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations for persons age 65 and older. The Alaska Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS 2011) reports underutilization of these vaccines by seniors with more than 36 percent reporting not receiving a flu shot within the past year and 33.5 percent having never received a pneumonia vaccination. Older adults who receive immunizations from providers who do not accept Medicare reimbursement and seniors who have not contributed to Medicare would not be eligible for free immunizations, which may explain some of the underutilization by the senior population of these vaccines. In addition, seniors ages 60 to 64 who are not eligible for Medicare and are low-income, uninsured or unemployed may find the cost of obtaining flu and pneumonia vaccines prohibitive. For these reasons, HB 310 will help increase senior access to immunizations.

A growing number of Alaska seniors are grandparents raising their grandchildren on a fixed income with limited insurance coverage. They desire healthy grandchildren who have access to the recommended immunizations recognized by public health standards. Medicare does not cover the cost of childhood immunizations. Rather than seeing their grandchildren go without immunizations, which are required for admission to public schools, many grandparents will make personal and financial sacrifices to insure their grandchildren receive the recommended immunizations.

Although not on the list of select immunizations, the ACoA recommends consideration of the shingles vaccine as a qualified immunization targeting low-income uninsured/underinsured older adults. Shingles most often strikes older people, particularly those with weakened immune systems. Shingles, caused by the varicella zoster (or the "chicken pox" virus on first infection), is a debilitating and painful rash that can be accompanied by irritation and nerve inflammation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the vaccine for all people over the age of 60. The shingles vaccine has been shown effective in reducing the number of outbreaks by 55 percent in a recent study of 300,000 elderly patients however it is used by only 11 percent of the older adult population. While Medicare and most insurance plans cover the cost of the vaccination, some seniors may need to pay deductibles, co-pay expenses, or the full cost of the vaccine if their provider does not accept Medicare

reimbursement. These additional costs are believed to be contributing to the underutilization of the shingles vaccine by seniors.

The ACoA supports HB 310 as a temporary measure to ensure that select vaccines are made available to underinsured and uninsured Alaskans of all ages. We appreciate your consideration and support of this legislation. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director, by phone (465-4879) or email (denise.daniello@alaska.gov) should you have questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Representative Herron
Representative Seaton
Representative Kerttula
Representative Miller
Representative Millett

Representative Peggy Wilson
Representative Costello
Representative Gruenberg
Representative Edgmon
Representative Holmes