

Alaska State Legislature

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Senator Bettye Davis

Senate Bill 51, 27-LS0079 -"An Act relating to the operation of vending facilities on public property."

Sponsor Statement

SB 51 restores to blind persons first priority for a contract to operate a vending facility on state and other public property. This bill amends the Alaska Chance Act of 1976 to require that the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Business Enterprise Program provide the same first priority to the blind on state and other public property as it does on federal property enforced under the Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936. The Alaska Chance Act for the first time added disabled persons in addition to the blind in preference for vending licenses on public facilities. This loss of first priority and expansion of beneficiaries has thwarted the spirit and letter of the Randolph-Sheppard Act. The resulting decrease in vending opportunities for blind merchants in Alaska exacerbated their already extraordinarily high unemployment rates among all types and severities of the disabled and the population in general.

SB 51 recognizes that the blind are dissimilarly situated compared to other disabled persons who do not suffer the same degree of impairment and unemployment as an economic matter. Although the State has combined management and training opportunities for both the blind and other persons with disabilities under one Business Enterprise Program of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, this bill requires that it must give first priority to the blind for vending contracts on state, federal or other public property.

SB 51 comports with original legislative intent and gives first priority to the blind imposed under AS 23.15.100 prior to changes in 1974 and 2006 which added persons with disabilities and severe disabilities who currently compete with the blind for licenses on vending facilities on public property. It requires that the Division attempt to find and notify blind persons of vending opportunities as they arise on public property. These public properties may include among others court houses, military bases, state and federal office buildings, and other public properties.

Typically, blind individuals who receive Randolph-Sheppard contracts act as managers of large vending or cafeteria facilities, subcontracting with food service organizations to provide meals and/or vending services on a day to day basis. They also may independently operate lobby concession stands, or vending machine banks. In October, 2009 Alaska's Business Enterprise Program had only six sites operating in federal facilities under Randolph-Sheppard, and six sites operating in state facilities under the Chance Act. This bill should greatly expand opportunities for employment and vending locations for the blind.