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SENATOR Löki Gale Tobin

Education Committee Chair

SB 176 Board of Parole Membership Sponsor Statement

Senate Bill 176 expands the number of seats on the Alaska Board of Parole from five to seven, establishes criteria for membership on the board, and applies ten-year term limits to board members. This expansion will help address the substantial workload of the board which presides over hundreds of hearings a year on discretionary parole, parole revocation, geriatric and medical parole and preliminary hearings.

SB 176 adds criteria for membership to create a board that more closely reflects the incarcerated population in Alaska. Alaska Natives make up 40 percent of the people incarcerated in Alaska, yet are 15 percent of the state's population. SB 176 requires one board member to be a member of a federally recognized tribe. In Alaska, the total number of Alaska Native people in prison is almost equal to the number of Caucasian people in prison. In the 2021 count, of the 4,600 people incarcerated in Alaska prisons 1,895 were white, and 1,855 were Alaska Natives. Alaska Native/Native American people made up 31 percent of parole applicants in 2022, reflecting a years-long trend and, like the prison population, is higher than the general population proportion.

80 percent of all individuals in the state's correctional system report a substance use disorder. SB 176 requires that one member of the Parole Board have drug and alcohol rehabilitation support experience.

Parole can be granted when the board determines through the hearing process that a petitioner has undergone appropriate rehabilitation during incarceration and is no longer a threat to society. In numerous cases the board has denied parole to individuals who have demonstrated rehabilitation – relying on a condition in the discretionary parole statute that “release of the prisoner on parole would not diminish the seriousness of the crime.”

This provision is vague and can be at odds with the intent of parole and rehabilitation. In deleting this language, SB 176 helps clarify the focus of the parole system on rehabilitation. The courts at sentencing weigh the seriousness of the crime. Deleting “diminish the seriousness of the crime” language will allow the board to more clearly and accountably provide their rationale for authorizing or denying parole.