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SPONSOR STATEMENT

HOUSE BILL 35 – VERSION G

“An Act relating to the use and possession of electronic devices by prisoners”

House Bill 35 recognizes the functionality of 21st century technology and the role it can play in reforming Alaska’s correctional system. Current Alaska statute does not include guidelines on prisoner use of electronic devices, making it difficult for the Department of Corrections (DOC) to provide devices to prisoners. HB 35 specifies the access a prisoner is allowed under DOC supervision in an effort to improve rehabilitation and assist with reentry.

Tablets and computers are not a luxury. Instead, they are tools that are extremely helpful with the rehabilitation process. They allow prisoners to access educational materials, gain experience with workplace technology, and improve connectivity to telehealth. Electronic devices also offer supplemental online visitation as a solution to Alaska’s geographic vastness. Perhaps most importantly, HB 35 will introduce prisoners to common electronic devices and programs that are now ubiquitous within our society.

Alaska is one of the last states in the nation to introduce devices into prisons. Many other states have implemented similar legislation in an effort to enhance prison conditions and reduce contraband brought into correctional facilities. These programs have resulted in improvements in prisoner behavior and initiative and have successfully decreased the disparity between prison and reentry exposure to everyday technology.

Device access has the capability of reducing recidivism. Ninety-five percent of Alaska’s current incarcerated population will eventually be released. Incarcerated individuals who are released without any support or plan in place are all-too-often hit with the harsh conditions that they were living in when they were initially arrested, and it is common for those individuals to relapse back into substance abuse or reoffend. Unfortunately, the support programs that are currently in place to assist with reentry (such as those facilitated through DOC, the Department of Health (DOH), and non-profit organizations) do not have the capacity to reach every single inmate before they are released, and electronic devices can supplement in-person “inreach” to prisoners while they plan for reentry.

Allowing prisoners to use specific programs and have limited access to information and services on electronic devices will enhance public safety and help ensure that Alaska’s incarcerated population is better prepared for reentry.