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Support for SB 181

Background

The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) seeks to address challenges in data accessibility for research on Alaska's unique soci-economic issues. Alaska's smaller communities present distinct data challenges, as federal sources like the Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) often produce unreliable results due to small sample sizes. In contrast, data maintained by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (AKDOLWD) is more place-specific, timely, and accurate, thus providing a valuable resource for local insights. By facilitating improved data sharing we can reduce costs, improve research efficiency, and increase the pace of research to serve Alaskans.

Challenges with Current Data Access Arrangements

Sec. 23.20.110(n) provides for AKDOLWD to "produce statistical and other public reports." Consistent with existing statute, past collaborative efforts have involved University organizations like the Institute of Social and Economic Research personnel traveling to Juneau to work directly with AKDOLWD staff to produce statistical reports. This poses logistical challenges and creates expenses for both organizations. These efforts also require bespoke data use agreements (DUAs) and a procurement agreement to compensate AKDOLWD staff for their time. These contracts require approval from both organizations legal departments and procurement offices, creating additional bureaucratic hurdles to the process which impose costs for both AKDOLWD and collaborating University researchers.

Anticipated Benefits of Improved Data Access from SB181

SB 181 would support timely, impactful research to address pressing state policy questions. With enhanced access, the University could leverage AKDOLWD data to explore issues including, but not limited to:

- Understanding the commercial fisheries workforce and the contributions of maritime industries to coastal communities.
- The impact of defined contributions versus defined benefits on workforce stability in Alaska.
- Patterns of rural-to-urban migration within the state.
- Social and demographic impacts of severe weather events, such as the recent storm in Western Alaska, including potential population decline.
- Map trends of workforce skills over time and place

Research centers at the University have the capability to more nibbly change capacity in response to requests, they have access to pools of research talents, and they can receive private, federal and state funding which can be leveraged in public policy research.

Risk Mitigation

ISER researchers would base all data management protocols on University IRB standards, ensuring robust data security and ethical research practices. All personnel granted access to AKDOLWD data would be required to complete IRB training and would be identified within DUA. ISER has extensive experience with managing sensitive and confidential data, including compliance with HIPAA and other federal and state data security standards, ensuring its capability to uphold data security requirements.

Example of the Challenges with Existing Data
A simple example of the challenge with public data: how is the economy of Delta Junction? Or more specifically how many people are employed in Delta Junction?

Today, someone would have two options for trying to answer this question.

1) They could use timely estimates produced by the AKDOLWD. The major limitation of this approach is that the finest resolution available is the Borough/Census Area level of aggregation. While Delta Junction is the largest community in the Southeast Fairbanks Census Area and there are important linkages between communities in the Census Area, the economy of Delta Junction is ultimately different than the economy of Tok or Eagle. One would have to assume that the employment rate is the same for all communities in the CA.

2) They could use data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). While ACS data is produced for 355 of Alaska's communities, there are two major limitations. As a survey, estimates will have associated sampling error. In smaller communities, this sampling error creates a wide margin of error. For example:

   In 2018-2022, the ACS estimates with 90% confidence that there were between 380-602 people employed in Delta Junction per year. This translates to an unemployment rate between 0.7% and 7%; a range wide enough to cover an incredible economic boom to a mild recession. It is difficult for me to overstate the severe limitations of the inference one can draw given this uncertainty.

   The second limitation is the 5-year average that these estimates require even to be as uncertain as just described. To understand the impact of a particular event, be it a military program change, a large resource development, or other capital project requires waiting years after the fact for official data to be collected by the US Census.