



STATE OF ALASKA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
JUNEAU

June 8, 1983

The Honorable Jalmar Kerttula
President of the Senate
Alaska State Legislature
Pouch V
Juneau, Alaska 99811

Dear Mr. President:

Under the authority of art. III, sec. 18, of the Alaska Constitution, I am transmitting a bill to create an office of public advocacy within the Department of Administration. The bill transfers responsibility for the public guardian program (AS 13.26.360 -- 13.26.410) and for administration of statutorily required advocacy services from the court system to the executive branch.

PUBLIC GUARDIANSHIP

The public guardian office, established by the legislature in 1981 (AS 13.26.370), provides guardianship and conservatorship services to incapacitated persons and minors when no one else is willing or qualified to perform in this capacity. Many of the wards are severely handicapped due to mental retardation, developmental disabilities, or mental illness. The public guardian's responsibilities for individual wards include placement; securing medical, dental, vocational, or rehabilitation services; financial management; benefits application; and personal visits.

The public guardian is also required to assist private guardians throughout the state to ensure that guardians and conservators secure the necessary services for the persons they protect. This task involves maintaining contact with community resource programs and government agencies, and producing informational and educational aids.

The court system is not qualified or equipped to handle such a social services program. By law, coroners/public administrators must serve as the public guardians, yet none of the coroner/public administrators is a social worker.

PUBLIC REPRESENTATION

The court system, by statute (AS 18.85.130(a)), appoints and compensates attorneys who represent indigent persons when the public defender agency cannot provide an attorney because of a conflict of interests. The court is also authorized by current law to appoint and pay for guardians ad litem to represent the best interests of a minor in proceedings which affect the minor's welfare (AS 09.65.130). Representation and guardian ad litem services presently are provided by contract with private law firms and by direct court appointment at hourly rates that are below customary rates charged by attorneys.


OFFICE OF PUBLIC ADVOCACY

The bill creates an office of public advocacy under the commissioner of administration, who also oversees the public defender agency. The office will be empowered to provide public guardian and guardian ad litem services as well as legal representation to indigent persons, when authorized by existing statutes. Services will be provided both by staff employed by the office and by independent contractors, subject to centralized management under the commissioner of administration.

In creating such an office, it is anticipated that it will have locations in major population areas around the state. This will permit efficient sharing of resources, including space, personnel, clerical support, and other administrative costs, with other state offices. In developing the staffing requirements and other costs, it has been determined that in many instances it will be less costly for the state to establish full-time offices with full-time employees rather than contract for these services.

The judicial branch supports transfer of the public guardian program and the management of advocacy services to the office of public advocacy. Principles of sound management and fiscal responsibility point to the desirability of this approach, and I urge passage of the bill.

Sincerely,



Bill Sheffield
Governor