



Sponsor Statement

HB 262

The Alaska Supreme Court is seeking a change to AS 22.10.120 to add one new superior court judge to serve in Palmer. The judge will handle a mix of civil and criminal cases to better serve the justice needs of Alaskans in the busiest court in the state.

An additional judge is needed because the Palmer superior court judges have the highest caseloads in the state. The four current Palmer judges are handling a workload that is unsustainable: they are assigned an average **of 683 cases per judge, compared to the statewide average of 458 cases per superior court judge**. Adding a fifth judge to the Palmer Superior Court will mean that those judges would have 546 cases each. This would *still* exceed the statewide average number of cases per judge, and Palmer judges would *still* have the highest caseload per judge of any court in the state, but it would be a welcome and needed improvement.

The last time the legislature changed the law to add a new superior court judge in Palmer was 20 years ago. **The population of the Mat-Su Borough increased by approximately 40% since 2006 when the last judge was added**. With such a marked increase in population comes, of course, a marked increase in all the government services that those citizens require, including from the courts and judges.

The number of **cases filed in the Palmer superior court has increased by 55% since FY 07, when the fourth (newest) judge took his seat**. The filings in Palmer (from 1,746 cases in FY 07 to 2,732 cases in FY 25) have been handled by the same four superior court judge positions. For many years, this growing burden was mitigated with the increased use of technology and other efficiencies, but continuing with the same number of judges we have had in Palmer for 20 years while the population increased 40% and case filings increased by 55% has become untenable.

The Chief Justice and the Administrative Director carefully study caseload trends, filing patterns, and judicial coverage in the entire state. Along with the entire Supreme Court, they determine the needs of the Judiciary and how best to provide justice to Alaskans, and they carefully consider when and where judicial positions should be changed. After much discussion, the Court has concluded that adding this superior court judge in Palmer is necessary, and House Bill 262 is the most effective and fiscally responsible way to continue to provide equal justice to all Alaskans.

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