

April 6, 2009

Members of the Senate Education Committee:

The Alaska Dental Society urges members of the Senate Education Committee to pass SB174 out of committee.

SB174 will reestablish funding and program guidelines for the Alaska's participation in the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE). The WICHE program will provide a partial tuition incentive for Alaskan residents to attend health care programs not offered in Alaska: dentistry, pharmacy, optometry and physical therapy. The program would provide support in the form of a low interest loan that would be partially forgiven if the graduate returns to Alaska and an additional amount would be forgiven if the graduate practices in an underserved area or provides a percentage of care under the Medicaid system.

Alaska has long faced a shortage of health care providers in rural areas. A rapidly graying workforce and lack of providers to replace retiring practitioners is rapidly leading to a shortage in non-rural areas. The cost to attend professional school has rapidly escalated resulting in heavy loan repayment burdens for graduating professionals. 44 states have one or more incentive programs for health professionals – Alaska is one of 6 states without a program.

Encouraging Alaskan residents to seek careers in health care fields will pay several dividends. Returning Alaskan residents are more likely to remain in Alaska for their practicing careers providing a stable source of health care providers. In a troubled economy health care fields provide stable, well paying jobs and health care providers will employ additional people providing an economic boost for communities.

Sincerely,

Mark Prator, DDS
President, Alaska Dental Society