

# STATE OF ALASKA

## DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

*Alaska Commission on Aging*

**SARAH PALIN, GOVERNOR**

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March 30, 2009

Representative Nancy Dahlstrom  
Alaska State Capitol, Room 411  
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

**Subject: Support for HB 204**

Dear Representative Dahlstrom:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) supports HB 204, a bill to expand Alaska's participation in the WWAMI Medical School program to increase the supply of doctors needed to meet the growing health care needs of all Alaskans. WWAMI is a unique five-state collaborative program that presently allows 20 Alaskan medical students to enroll. HB 204 would increase the number of slots from 20 to 24 students on July 1, 2010. This bill is authored by you and co-sponsored by Representative Kerttula.

Alaska, as with the rest of the nation, is experiencing a shortage of health care workers, particularly doctors and nurses. For many doctors in our state, retirement is just around the corner and replacing those experienced medical providers with newly trained doctors is a priority for all Alaskans, and a critical need for people 65 years and older who have multiple medical conditions.

The Alaska Physician Supply Task Force Report states that Alaska will need nearly twice as many physicians in the next twenty years as it currently has if the state is to meet the expected demands from a growing population of seniors. Similarly, the demand for registered nurses is increasing during a period when many health care professionals are retiring. The pool of qualified medical providers continues to shrink as the demand for services increases.

Alaska now has the highest rate of growth of persons 65 and older in the nation, according to the 2007 report by the U.S. Administration on Aging. This increased growth rate is due to the fact that Alaska's seniors and high proportion of Baby Boomers are now choosing to remain in state following retirement, close to their families and friends, which is made possible by improved health care and home and community based services. As a result, Alaska's economy benefits through seniors' contribution of approximately \$1.6 billion of revenue to the state each year from their retirement pensions, other income, as well as medical payments in addition to their volunteering, caregiving, and mentoring to younger generations. If older Alaskans are unable to find a physician willing to serve them, they may be forced to leave the state in search of access to health care professionals, which will result in a significant financial and social loss for Alaska.

The Alaska Commission on Aging supported Senator Meyer's bill in 2007 to increase the number of WWAMI slots from ten to twenty. HB 204 offers another meaningful opportunity to increase the number of slots for medical students and for our state to prepare for the health care demands of Alaska's growing senior population. The University of Washington, which is ranked first in primary care medical schools nationwide and seventh in geriatrics, not only allows WWAMI medical students to pay in-state tuition, but the program also provides an incentive for those completing medical school to return to Alaska to practice medicine.

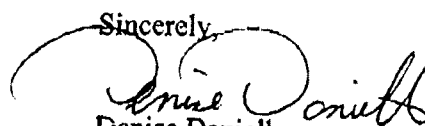
ACoA supports HB 204 to improve primary health care access for all Alaskans, including Alaska seniors. We thank you for sponsoring this important legislation. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director (465-4879), should you have any questions regarding our position.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello  
ACoA Executive Director

CC: Representative Beth Kerttula