

Alaska lawmakers seek inexpensive crime solutions

By AUSTIN BAIRD

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Lawmakers, prosecutors and law enforcement officers from around the state gathered Tuesday for a two-day summit that aims to identify cost-effective ways to fight crime and improve public safety across Alaska.

The Senate Judiciary Committee opened the summit with a presentation from Annie Pennucci, a researcher for the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. The institute is nonpartisan and established by the Washington Legislature to study the economic impacts of issues important to the state.

Pennucci told the bipartisan committee that a summary of 66 studies of 3- and 4-year-old low-income children she helped conduct for the Washington Legislature show a direct correlation between preschool for low-income children and lower crime rates.

Everything from high school graduation rates to out-of-home placement rates are also correlated, she said.

"It bends the curve significantly," said the committee's chairman, Sen. Hollis French, D-Anchorage, who has sponsored legislation that would expand education opportunities to pre-elementary aged children. French said early childhood education is not a cure-all but a part of an overall solution.

Other topics of discussion at the summit included how communities of varying sizes, from Anchorage to Palmer to rural villages, have fared as budget cuts have chiseled away resources available to departments.

Anchorage Police Chief Mark Mew asked the state for renewed support of community policing, for which a grant recently expired, and for other programs that he said have been effective at curtailing crime in Anchorage.

Another focus was on so-called "bath salts," which are synthetic drugs legally sold over-the-counter that mimic the highs from cocaine, ecstasy and other illicit substances. Bath salts have become a focus for lawmakers and will be the subject of a hearing before the committee Friday.

The legislature banned synthetic marijuana last year, and that was helpful, Mew said. "We have a misdemeanor ordinance (in Anchorage) for bath salts, but it really needs to be a felony," he said.

It's not clear whether any special initiatives or new legislation will result from the summit, but French has said it's important to bring together criminal justice experts to get a better sense of what is happening in the system as a way of considering catalysts for change.

The summit is scheduled to continue Wednesday, with speakers slated to include Walt Monegan, CEO of the Alaska Native Justice Center, and Nancy Haag of Stand Together Against Rape.