ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

March 31, 2016

Honorable Kevin Meyer
Senate President, Alaska Senate
Juneau, Alaska

Honorable Mike Chenault
Speaker, Alaska House of Representatives
Juneau, Alaska

Re: Support for HB 205 and Criminal Justice Reform in Alaska

Dear Senate President Meyer and House Speaker Chenault:

The Alaska Federation of Natives submits this letter in support of HB 205, an act relating to criminal law and procedure and geared towards criminal justice reform.

AFN is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Our membership includes 185 federally recognized Alaska Native tribes, 153 village corporations, 12 regional corporations, and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that compact and contract to run federal and state programs. Formed fifty years ago, AFN continues to be the principle forum and voice of Alaska Natives in dealing with critical issues of public policy and government.

In 2014, the Alaska Legislature established the bi-partisan, interbranch Alaska Criminal Justice Commission ("Commission") and it was tasked with "develop[ing] recommendations aimed at safely controlling prison and jail growth and recalibrating our correctional investments to ensure that we are achieving the best possible public safety return on our state dollars." In addition, you and other legislative leaders requested that, because the state's difficult budget situation rendered reinvestment in evidence-based programs and treatment possible only with significant net savings, the Commission forward policy options that would not only avert future prison growth, but would also reduce the prison population between 15 and 25 percent below current levels.

The Commission developed a comprehensive package of policy recommendations that would protect public safety, hold offenders accountable, and reduce the state's average daily prison population by 21%, saving the state an estimated $424 million over the next decade.

The Commission found that a disproportionate number of Alaska Natives are being confined. While Alaska Natives represent about 15 percent of the state resident population, they represent 36 percent of the state's pretrial inmates, 34 percent of the state's sentenced prisoners, and 42 percent of the probation and parole violators in prison. Measures recommended in the Criminal Justice Commission report aimed at safely reducing pretrial incarceration, diverting low-level offenders from prison, adjusting criminal penalties to get better outcomes, and making penalties for probation and parole

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violations more proportional will have a disproportionately positive effect on Alaska Natives, who are overrepresented in the state's incarcerated population.

Alaska Natives are also overrepresented among crime victims. Effective practices that reduce reoffending and result in fewer victims, as well as reinvestments into victims' services, will directly improve the lives of Alaska Natives.

HB 205 is a great start towards criminal justice reform in Alaska. I testified in the House Judiciary Committee hearing on March 22, and we listened in on the continuation of the hearing on March 23. We were happy to hear that the bill's sponsors intend to add a reinvestment component to help offenders with re-entry back into society. There is a severe lack of alcohol and drug rehabilitation beds in this state, and a lack of programs that would help get offenders into jobs upon release or help victims get back on their feet. We strongly believe that rather than simply locking people away, the system should focus on targeting the causes of the behavior and helping to make offenders productive members of society.

We urge legislators to amend HB 205 to match the Commission's sentencing recommendations for Class A and B misdemeanors. The bill language, as currently written, has carved out exceptions that significantly reduce the savings associated with the reform package, making reinvestment more difficult. It has also departed from the evidence base, which shows that shorter jail sentences and alternatives to jail can effectively manage the risks low-level offenders pose to the community, while avoiding the harmful effects of mixing those low-level offenders in prison with more serious, violent offenders. We believe these changes will produce more savings for the state, reduce recidivism, and help build and support healthy communities in Alaska.

If you have any questions or require further clarification about the content of this letter, please contact me directly at (907) 274-3611 or mblair@nativefederation.org.

Sincerely,

Maude Blair
Vice President

cc: AFN Board of Directors
Governor Bill Walker
Lt. Governor Byron Mallott
Rep. Bryce Edgmon, Bush Caucus