

Jeff Testimony March 14 - SB 36

My name is Jeff Gonnason, OD. I was born and raised in Ketchikan & Craig and I was the first Alaska Native optometrist. I have served on the State Optometry Board under two different governors, and as Past President of the Alaska Optometric Association. I have volunteered at the ANMC and SCF. I practice in Anchorage and performed Bush clinics in my younger days.

A brief history for those new to this issue:

Optometry's doctor's degree was brought up to the same level of education as medicine and dentistry over 45 years ago - 4 years of undergraduate Bachelors degree followed by a 4 year graduate professional doctoral program, plus often 1-2 year residencies for advanced education.

This exactly follows the dental school model. Looking at 8-10 years of university education.

By the way, currently 2/3 of optometry students are women.

The 4 learned professions of medicine, dentistry, optometry, and advanced practice nurses - are all independent, all have their own regulatory boards, and are all currently authorized by Alaska law to prescribe drugs including controlled narcotics with DEA numbers. Alaska optometrists have prescribed drugs for the past 25 years with no issues of harm or abuse.

Optometrists are defined as PHYSICIANS by the federal Center for Medicare, and are held to the same standard of care as other medical professions as we treat Medicare &

Medicaid patients, and are on preferred provider insurance panels.

The optometry malpractice insurance fee is extremely low - about \$485 per year for \$4M in coverage.

Approximately 150 optometrists practice all over the state and provide the vast majority of eye care in Alaska, servicing over 80 remote locations. Local optometrists are called upon at rural hospitals and clinics for their expertise. We are the primary care physicians for eyecare in Alaska.

Treatment and travel costs from rural areas greatly increases when routine eye care is instead provided by urban specialists.

Alaska needs the best new doctors of optometry, and antiquated state statutes are a barrier to attracting the best and brightest to our state.

To be absolutely clear, **SB 36** does NOT authorize any optometrist to do ANYTHING. It only updates antiquated statutes and gives the State Optometry Board authority to regulate the profession with their sworn duty to protect the public, the same as Alaska medical physicians, dentists and advanced practice nurses - so that optometry does not have to return for legislation for every new advance in education or technology.

The legislature creates professional boards to regulate the specific details of practice, that allows for flexibility with advances in health care delivery. Licensing includes

professional judgment of when to refer patients for specialty care.

This bill has nothing to do with comparing the advanced sub-specialty ophthalmology training with optometry. The clinical education of an optometrist does not have to parallel that of an ophthalmologist any more than the education of a family physician needs to parallel a heart surgeon or a neurosurgeon.

The family doctor has no restrictions, but does not perform heart or brain surgery, as they refer to those specialties. Optometry does the same. The state optometry board would NEVER authorize any optometrist to perform any treatment they were not educated and qualified to do. Risk of harm to the public has NEVER been an issue, and all these claims of harm are patently untrue.

Of the 4 main prescribing professions, only optometry still contains outdated statutes. The Alaska Optometry Board deserves the same level of respect as these other professions.

I respectfully ask for your support of **SB 36** to allow the optometry board to better regulate for the future, to benefit Alaska citizens by providing better access to eye care and lower costs.

Jeff Gonnason, OD

Legislative Chair, Alaska Optometric Association
Past President, Alaska Optometric Association
Past Chair, Alaska State Board of Examiners in Optometry