



Public Safety Employees Association, Inc.  
"Representing Alaska's Finest"  
A.F.S.C.M.E. Local 803



PSEA Letter of Support for HB 23 and SB 48

Let me start by paraphrasing from former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's book, "Worthy Fights."

*As a state, and as an employer, we have a duty to the men and women we hire to serve and protect our citizens and to enforce our laws. If we, as a state, are asking these public servants to protect all of our citizens from danger, we owe them the full measure of our support – they deserve to be well paid, well equipped, well trained and well led. They need to know that if they are injured, we will nurse them back to health, and that if they are killed, we will comfort and assist their families.*

The Public Safety Employees Association, Local 803, proudly represents approximately 800 law enforcement employees located throughout Alaska. Our members include the Alaska State Troopers, Court Services Officers, Deputy Fire Marshals, Airport Police and Fire Officers, and municipal police employees in Ketchikan, Sitka, Juneau, Fairbanks, Soldotna, Dillingham and Unalaska. The men and women that make up PSEA put their lives on the line every day to protect and serve Alaska citizens.

On March 30, 2013, Alaska State Trooper Tage Toll died in helicopter accident while involved in a search and rescue mission. A year later, on May 1, 2014, Troopers and PSEA members Scott Johnson and Gabe Rich were tragically murdered in Tanana while responding to a call for assistance. Last year, in October of 2017, Sgt. Alan Brandt of the Fairbanks Police Department died after being ambushed responding to a call.

These men all left spouses and surviving children. Within days of these senseless tragedies, the spouses of Tage, Scott, Gabe, and Alan learned their medical insurance coverage would lapse unless the families opted for COBRA coverage. This meant their survivors would lose medical coverage unless they could afford a monthly COBRA expense of almost \$2000.00. For a family that just lost a husband, a dad and the main bread winner to a senseless death, this amounted to an unaffordable expense, but also unneeded stress during a time of unimaginable upheaval and grief.

PSEA supports HB 23 and SB 48 because both bills provide spouses and survivors of Alaska peace officers and firefighters killed in the line of duty continuing medical insurance coverage. However, PSEA believes HB 23 **is the better bill**. HB 23 provides coverage to the spouse until they get other medical coverage or reach Medicare eligibility, and doesn't cut the spouse off after 10 years. As important, HB 23, provides coverage to all eligible spouses and survivors of peace officers or firefighters, whether they are state or municipal employees. Plain and simple, HB 23 carries out a duty the State of Alaska has to comfort and assist families in a time of need, no matter who your employer is and doesn't limit the spouses' comfort to ten years.

These same or similar benefits are provided in 14 other states. Other states have protections for public safety employees because they participate in the social security system. Alaska does not have similar benefits, or provide public safety employees with the social security system.

There are no legal problems with providing medical insurance benefits to police, firefighters and peace officers. As a general rule, public employers have discretion when structuring health benefit plans and are able to make distinctions among employee populations regarding access to and the level of benefits offered. Such distinctions must be based on bona fide employment based classifications (e.g., date of hire or length of service, differing occupations, full-time versus part-time employee status) and not on health factors of other discriminatory bases (i.e., race, color, sex, national origin or religion of the insured). The legislatures in states with the survivor health insurance benefits have recognized that police officers, firefighters and other public safety officers work in hazardous conditions to protect life and property and have determined that the survivors of those who have died in the line of duty deserve special consideration.

Alaska's state and local police officers, firefighters and peace officers work in hazardous conditions. They are required to go into hazardous and dangerous situations to serve and protect the public. For this reason, their families deserve comfort and special consideration in tragic situations. HB 23 and SB 48 lessen the burden on public safety families when a family member is killed in the line of duty.

PSEA Local 803 very much appreciates your consideration of this legislation. As we said above, these bills are good legislation. We simply and respectfully request that the Senate Finance Committee pass a bill that combines the best of SB 48 and HB 23.

Sincerely,

Jake Metcalfe  
Executive Director  
PSEA/AFSCME Local 803