

February 9, 2021

The Honorable Mia Costello, Chair  
Members of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Senator Costello,

This letter is in support of SB 56, which extends the COVID-19 Public Health Disaster Emergency Declaration until September 30, 2021.

APEI is a Joint Insurance Arrangement, formed under AS 21.76, which allows public entities to pool together to share costs and procure insurance on a group basis. We are the non-profit administrator of a pool of about 71 school districts, municipalities, and related organizations located around Alaska. Most of our members and their employees would be affected in some way by this extension.

Retaining the disaster declaration has a number of provisions to enable our municipal and school district members to meet the needs of their students and citizens:

- The flexibility in licensing and expansion of telehealth included in the current and proposed disaster declaration has been very helpful for people in our largely rural communities who need health care, and has enabled them to get at least some of the care they need without the expense and risk to their health inherent in travelling. APEI manages the workers' compensation claims for a large number of injured workers who depend on this type of care for their treatment.
- The existence of the Public Health Emergency (PHE) declaration has allowed the state and communities more flexibility in distributing and administering vaccines. Making it possible for as many people as possible to be vaccinated is key to allowing life to return to normal and children to school; ending the PHE will impede those efforts.
- Alaska's school districts received a significant amount of CARES funding from the Federal Government, not all of which has been spent. With these unspent funds, a number of districts face the possibility of having their fund balance exceed statutory limitations. Without an extension of the PHE, the department of Education will not be able to waive that limitation, forcing school districts to either forego the funding, or spend it quickly before the deadline, without time for careful consideration of needs and expenses.
- The flexibility in procurement for COVID-19 related expenditures has been a significant benefit to our members, and allowed them purchase supplies and contract for services quickly, without the delays inherent in the typical procurement process. This has been invaluable to our members and allowed them to respond to needs in their communities.

This disaster declaration is permissive rather than directive, and can provide the foundation that municipalities and school districts need to best respond to the changing needs of their community members. I urge you to support this bill to enable our state to continue to protect Alaskans.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Barbara Thurston  
Executive Director  
Alaska Public Entity Insurance  
(907) 523-9440 Direct phone