

Alaska State Legislature

Legislative Affairs Agency

Information & Teleconference

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Jessica Geary, Executive Director

FROM: Tim Powers, Manager *TP*
Information and Teleconference

DATE: January 31, 2023

SUBJECT: FY24 Information and Teleconference Budget Increment Request

Information and Teleconference requests a full-time year-round position in the Matanuska-Susitna Legislative Information Office (Mat-Su LIO) located in Wasilla to support current workload demands. The workload at this LIO has increased significantly in the last 20 years due to a substantial rise in population and a corresponding reduction of State offices and/or inadequate staffing in the Mat-Su area. When combined with an abrupt transition to electronic processes, Mat-Su residents have relied heavily on the LIO staff. As a result, staff are overwhelmed and have had difficulty using mandatory leave as well as exceeding reserve hours by almost 70% to date, with five months left in the fiscal year.

In 2000, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough population was 59,322; today, its nearly doubled to 111,752. Over the same period, state services in the Mat-Su have been reduced. Consequently, many constituents come to the Mat-Su LIO seeking help, primarily in the areas of public assistance, SNAP benefits, energy assistance/weatherization, senior benefits, and business and professional licensing. Many Alaskans needing support are elderly, experience homelessness and/or disabilities, live off-grid, or have language barriers, and many need immediate assistance; they do not understand or have reliable access to current technology and are unable or ill-equipped to secure state services that are only available online, so they to come to the LIO for help.

Another area that requires significant staff resources is assisting constituents with filing for a permanent fund dividend (PFD). *MyAlaska* (a State of Alaska authentication and electronic signature system) and the Permanent Fund Dividend Division (PFDD) recently implemented multi-factor-authentication as a requirement for verified online filing. This means constituents without a cell phone cannot submit a verified application from the LIO and are left with an unverified or paper application that treats them as a first-time applicant. Application assistance can now take over an hour per applicant, and the LIO is unable to provide any follow-up assistance due to the constituent not being "verified." The Mat-Su LIO has helped an average of 1,500-2,000 applicants file for their PFD annually, and is the busiest LIO in the state, according to PFDD. *MyAlaska* is also required for accessing unemployment insurance benefits, professional license applications and renewals, Alaska jobs, State of Alaska Retirement and Benefits services, and the child support payment portal.

I recognize that many of the services the Mat-Su LIO staff provide as outlined above are rightly classified as Executive Branch functions, including PFD filing assistance that LIO's across the state have been providing for several years; however, as you are aware, legislative staff take great pride in serving their communities and it could be argued that helping these constituents navigate a quickly changing government technology landscape qualifies as a legislative function. Regardless, I want to assure you that traditional legislative duties continue to be the priority for Mat-Su LIO staff. Adding this position will allow staff to assist individuals who are otherwise unable to access necessary state services and, in doing so, provides an opportunity to tell them about what the LIO does, distribute informative legislative publications and, at times, educate constituents about the legislative process, a valuable community service and a primary legislative duty.

Without an additional position, staff will continue to experience burnout and have difficulty taking accrued compensatory time and mandatory leave; they often work through their lunch hour and stay late to help. Current staffing levels are insufficient to process the quantity of requests and staff will have to triage requests, leading to delays in assistance, or turn people away altogether.

1.0 FTE Information Assistant (R13) is \$86.9.

Thank you for your consideration.