

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

February 2, 2010

11:31 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Nancy Dahlstrom, Co-Chair
Senator Bill Wielechowski, Co-Chair
Representative Charisse Millett
Representative Jay Ramras
Representative Pete Petersen
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Lesil McGuire
Senator Joe Paskvan
Senator Fred Dyson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative John Harris

PUBLIC MEMBER

General Tom Case - via teleconference

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Briefing: Alaska Marines
Updates: VA Health Care; Education Benefits, Alaska Territorial
Guard and Veterans Summit; PTA Report; and Fisher House

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to report.

WITNESS REGISTER

MAJOR WILLAM B. ALLEN IV, Site Commander Company D
U.S. Marine Corps

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a briefing on Alaska Marines.

MARCIA HOFFMAN-DEVOE, Public Affairs Administrator
Alaska VA Healthcare System
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation on VA healthcare.

VERDIE BOWEN, Veterans Affairs Administrator
Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered updates on education benefits for veterans, Alaska Territorial Guard, and Veterans Summit.

GENERAL TOM CASE, public member

POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on the UA credit transfer process for veterans

PAULA PAWLOWSKI, Director
Parent Engagement Program
Alaska PTA

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered an update on Alaska PTA.

SENATOR CHARLIE HUGGINS
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered an update on Fisher House services for active and retired military members.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[11:31:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR BILL WIELECHOWSKI called the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting to order at 11:31 a.m. Present at the call to order were Representatives Millet, Peterson and Dahlstrom and Senators Paskvan, and Wielechowski. Public member General Tom Case, retired, attended via teleconference. Co-Chair Wielechowski highlighted the long and dedicated service of Colonel Dean Owens who is stepping down.

Briefing: Alaska Marines

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced the first order of business would be to hear an Alaska Marines briefing.

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SENATOR HUGGINS and SENATOR DYSON joined the committee.

MAJOR WILLIAM B. ALLEN IV, Site Commander Company D, U.S. Marine Corps in Alaska, said he would provide an overview of what the Marine Corps is doing worldwide before focusing on what it is doing in Alaska. He highlighted that recruiters are encouraging young men and women to join the Marine Corps by offering them a "title, a set of dress blues, and an opportunity to be

ambassadors across the globe for our nation." It's been an honor to serve as company commander with this generation of young men and women in Iraq, he said. They are showing both moral and physical courage on the battlefield.

MAJOR ALLEN directed attention to the historical "Marlboro Marine" photo taken during the battle of Fallujah and informed the committee that this represents the face of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He said he's trying to bring awareness that service members coming home need resources in the community to help with their wounds, some of which aren't visible. The program has been quite successful and a lot can be credited to the attention that Alaskans give service men and women. He noted that 25-50 Marines are now serving as mentors to the Iraqi Marine Corps, down from a high of 25,000.

He explained that about 11,000 Marines are currently in theatre in Afghanistan and most of their work is in the Helmand Province. Aside from dealing with the Taliban and Al-Qaida forces, they spend a great deal of time helping communities find a means of making an income that doesn't include opium. He noted that more than 90 percent of the world's opium supply comes from Afghanistan. The reported \$400 million worth of illegal drug sales comes back in the form of more powerful weapons in the hands of those we don't necessarily want to engage, he said.

MAJOR ALLEN informed the committee that 2,200 Marines in the 22nd Expeditionary Unit are currently engaged in Haiti providing community assistance. This unit has the capacity to do air and sea lifts and is providing much needed security at various relief sites.

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MAJOR ALLEN related that he works directly under the Marine Corps Forces Reserve in New Orleans, but Alaska Marines wouldn't be as successful as they have been if it weren't for the help and partnership with the National Guard in Alaska.

He displayed the mission statement of the Anti-Terrorism Battalion, which is to provide a supported commander with purpose-trained infantry units to protect and defend against terrorist operations, actions, and attacks worldwide. He explained that the Alaska Marine headquarters at Elmendorf oversees the rest of the unit that is located in Billings Montana. Alaska Marines maintain proficiency in mountain and cold climate training and have been able to provide expertise to

other units coming to Alaska to train. They also travel out to partner with other active and reserve units. He displayed a site map of the Marine Reserve Center headquarters located midway between Elmendorf AFB and Fort Richardson. With just 8 active duty Marines in Alaska and an equivalent staff in Billings, they are able to serve the needs of the 150 Marines in the company, he said.

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MAJOR ALLEN said that Senator Stevens reminded him this morning that the Marine presence in Alaska started in Kodiak. His particular unit was stood up in 1985 as a reconnaissance unit and since then it has twice deployed as a company to Iraq. Multiple smaller units of Alaska Marines have volunteered in support of the War on Terrorism and three Marines have been killed in action.

He highlighted the following tasks that the active duty staff does day-to-day:

- Marines are trained, equipped and readied for mobilization. This last year they were activated for 400 days and spent about 7 months in Iraq.
- Maintain administrative and logistical readiness assuring that pay and equipment are up to date. Families are cared for while the service member is serving overseas.
- Paying final tribute to fallen Marines. It was our honor to participate and bid farewell to former Senator Kelly, he said. We maintain close ties to the family.
- Notifying family members when a Marine passes away while mobilized or on active duty.
- The Toys for Tots program is unique; it's genuinely Alaskans taking care of Alaskans. We are honored to be part of distributing cheer and the opportunity to mentor young men and women statewide to help them make positive life choices. Operation Semper Fidelis is a branch of the Toys for Tots program that involves flying C-130 aircraft to remote Interior villages to distribute toys and Christmas cheer.
- Maintaining community relations involves things like this presentation, providing the Color Guard for the Governor's prayer breakfast, and volunteering at places like the Eagle River Nature Center and the Armed Services YMCA.

MAJOR ALLEN displayed several pictures of Marine Corps Innovative Readiness Training projects and told the committee

that this is a Department of Defense operation that provides all reserve units the opportunity to serve and give back to the nation. The relocation of Newtok started last year and the new program this year will be to survey for a road south from Kotzebue where a new deep water port will be located. This will make year round barge service possible. Finally, there will be a Marine contingent to survey and catalog airfields statewide. This would be of use in the event of a natural disaster.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAMRAS joined the meeting

MAJOR ALLEN highlighted the following future events:

- Annual training exercise. 250-500 Marines from various units in the Anti-Terrorism Battalion will train in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and some of the Toys for Tots locations. This is to show that signing up to be a member of the armed services is more than deploying overseas.
- The 235th Marine Corps birthday ball celebration in November.
- The Toys for Tots campaign is ongoing. All the toys or monetary donations remain in Alaska to help care for its future leaders.
- The change of command ceremony. Major Sullivan is returning to Alaska to become company commander.

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CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI thanked Major Allen and remarked that this is the first time a Marine has testified before the Joint Armed Services Committee.

SENATOR MCGUIRE joined the committee.

SENATOR DYSON asked if the stress issues for servicemembers coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan parallel those from the Vietnam War.

MAJOR ALLEN replied the difference this time is that men and women are returning home to welcoming families and communities and many more services.

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SENATOR DYSON commented that he suspects that in past conflicts there was more PTSD than was recognized.

MAJOR ALLEN replied there is a heightened awareness today, but it's a signature wound of all wars.

SENATOR HUGGINS complemented Major Allen on his accomplishments and then recognized Josh Temple, staff to the committee, and his aide Sharon Long, the mother of three Marines.

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI, speaking on behalf of the committee, urged Major Allen to speak up if there is anything that the committee could do to help military members and veterans.

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SENATOR MCGUIRE offered to introduce Major Allen to the Brain Injury Network, which is trying to increase outreach to returning veterans.

MAJOR ALLEN said he'd welcome that; TBI is the signature injury of this war and a significant challenge for the service member, their family, and caregivers.

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI, speaking on behalf of the committee, thanked veterans for their service.

Representatives Buch and Johansen joined the meeting.

Update: VA Health Care

[11:57:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced the next order of business would be an update on VA healthcare.

MARCIA HOFFMAN-DEVOE, Public Affairs Officer, Alaska VA Healthcare System, delivered an overview of the Alaska VA healthcare system including eligibility, demographics of veterans in Alaska, available programs for veterans, and available care sites.

The Department of Veteran Affairs has three administrations represented in Alaska.

- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is based in Anchorage and the current director is Alex Spector.
- The Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) has a regional office and service center in Anchorage that is managed by Patrick Kelley. Director Mark Bilosz is located in Salt

Lake City. VBA administers the non-healthcare benefits such as compensation, pension, disability, burial, rehabilitation, and reemployment.

- The National Cemetery Administration has locations at Fort Richardson and Sitka. Local director, Virginia Walker, reports to a director in California.

The veteran centers in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, and Wasilla report to a regional director who is headquartered in Denver. Ms. Hoffman-Devoe explained that veteran centers were established in the late '70s in response to the needs of returning Vietnam veterans. It was during that war that PTSD became an official diagnosis.

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Basic eligibility for VA medical care differs between veterans. There are 8 separate priority groups with group 1 being the highest priority. Benefit level depends on income level and whether or not the veteran's condition is service related. Federal statute provides guidelines. There are required co-payments for medications, outpatient care, and inpatient care. Third-party insurance is billed for care not related to service-connected disabilities. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) returning veterans are eligible for free care for 5 years following discharge. This provides the servicemember time to complete the application process for treatment of service-connected disabilities or conditions. Eligibility continues after 5 years but co-payments may apply dependant on which priority group the service member is enrolled.

The VHA has learned some valuable lessons one of which is to send an OEF/OIF team when Guard members are mobilized and demobilized. Servicemembers also participate in post-deployment screenings and are actively involved in the Warrior Transition Unit and Battalion to coordinate services. A quarterly networking meeting is held with the various services, guard members, and agencies to ensure that efforts are coordinated.

The standard VHA benefits package for eligible veterans has full and comprehensive medical, surgical, mental health, and substance abuse care. It includes the following:

- Preventive care services.
- Outpatient diagnostic and treatment services.
- Hospital diagnostic and treatment services.

- Prescription drugs.

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Some VHA benefits are very limited and may depend on the veteran's priority grouping. This includes beneficiary travel and dental care unless the disability is dental related. Servicemembers being discharged do receive follow-up dental care for 180 days post service.

Travel eligible veterans are those:

- Rated 30 percent or more service connected for travel relating to any condition.
- Rated less than 30 percent for travel relating to their service connected condition.
- Receiving VA pension benefits for all conditions.
- With annual income below the maximum applicable annual rate of pension for all conditions (\$11,830 for a single veteran).
- Traveling in relation to a compensation and pension (C&P) examination.

The VHA purchases and pays for plane tickets and lodging when necessary. Last year the budget for beneficiary travel was \$4 million half of which was air travel. Veterans on the road system who are eligible for travel receive 41.5 cents per mile. That rate has increased from 11 cents per mile two years ago.

VHA demographics reflect the following:

- 2000 Census - 17 percent of the Alaska population or 71,552 were veterans. This is the highest per capita of any state in the nation.
- FY 09 Alaska veteran population was 76,443.
- 2015 Alaska veteran population is projected to be 76,995.
- In FY 2009:
 - 26,708 veterans enrolled for VA healthcare.
 - 15,152 visited a VA site for care.
 - 142,246 VA outpatient clinic visits.
 - 48,627 VA purchased community visits.

A chart of the Alaska veteran population shows that over 50 percent live in Anchorage/Mat-Su and 17 percent in Fairbanks.

Enrollee and user demand charts for VA healthcare in Alaska reflect continued growth since FY 02 while other VA locations

have seen decreases in veteran populations. In Alaska the user demand shows a sharp increase since FY 08.

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The Alaska VA site of care parent facility is an outpatient clinic in Anchorage. The space is leased from the Alaska Regional Hospital. The designated VA hospital for Alaska is a VA/DOD joint venture located at Elmendorf Air Force Base. This is the preferred emergency room for the Anchorage area. In addition, the VA runs and staffs a 10-bed intensive care unit.

The VA domiciliary care for homeless veterans is located in midtown Anchorage. It's a 50-bed residential facility that serves veterans statewide. An outreach social worker does community work in camps and shelters and also does transition work with the Alaska Department of Corrections should a veteran need medical care after leaving that system. The average stay in the residential program is 6 months. The veterans' work through a three-phase program into a veterans' vocational and employment program. The veteran can then graduate into transitional housing that provides supportive staff and case management. The veteran can continue working in a compensated work-therapy program or attend school. The VA also has agreements with businesses in the community for supported employment. Case management is provided for that as well.

Another homeless veteran service program is with housing and urban development. Through that program the VA has been issued 65 Section 8 vouchers for the Anchorage area. This past December, 35 vouchers were extended to the Fairbanks community. A social worker is currently working to build that program. The final homeless program allows an agency in the community to apply to the VA at the federal level to have a per diem payment for veterans in the program. Currently the VA has agreements with the Salvation Army adult rehab center in Anchorage and with the Fairbanks Rescue Mission. Veterans can work in different settings and still get VA support and case management services.

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Additional VA sites of care have been built following the veteran population statewide.

- Last April a community-based outpatient clinic opened in Wasilla.

- The community outpatient clinic embedded in the Bassett Army Community Hospital on Fort Wainwright was activated in 1997.
- The Kenai Outpatient Clinic was activated in 2001.
- Kenai extended outpatient services to Homer in 2009.
- Services at the Juneau VA outreach clinic were first available in 2008. A provider from the Anchorage VA sees patients one day per month. A more full-service clinic should be completed in mid June. That facility will be located on the first floor of the Juneau federal building.

Once all these sites of care are activated, over 87 percent of veterans living in Alaska will have access to a VA clinic in the borough in which they live.

The medical campus that is located just outside the Muldoon gate to Elmendorf Air Force Base will offer services for active duty military as well as veterans. It will include:

- The new U.S. VA outpatient clinic and regional office building is a full-service clinic that will offer specialty services in addition to primary care.
- Fischer House.
- Warrior Transition Unit (WTU).

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The scope of clinical services at the Alaska VA healthcare system includes:

- Outreach clinics open with primary care teams and mental health services so veterans going to any of those locations can get the basic benefits package.
- Lab/radiology/pharmacy/dental.
- Social and behavioral health service. These services have tripled in the last few years in preparation for outreach for OEF/OIF and to accommodate Vietnam era veterans. VA clinics see veterans that range in age from 19 to 99 years.
- Homeless veterans' service.
- Limited specialty car.
- Ambulatory surgery.
- The coordinated care home telehealth program is based in Anchorage, but the service is available statewide. Currently 223 units are in veteran's homes and hooked up to their phones to monitor things like blood pressure, weight, and glucose levels.

The Alaska VA healthcare system delivery of care includes the following:

- Direct delivery of care through one of the Alaska VA outpatient facilities in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai/Homer, Mat-Su and Juneau.
- Referral to federal facilities within Alaska at either the joint venture hospital at Elmendorf Air Force Base or Bassett Army community Hospital.
- Referral to the closest federal facility outside Alaska. This may be the VA clinic in Seattle or another VA medical center.
- Currently about 38 percent of care is purchased from local facilities in Alaska. Veterans living outside of Anchorage go to their community hospital for emergency and inpatient care. If the veteran is enrolled in the system the local hospital notifies the VA for payment authorization. Also, inpatient care is available at Providence Hospital under a preferred provider contract. If outpatient care can't be accommodated at a VA or federal facility, federal statute allows flexibility to purchase the care in the community. This recognizes Alaska's geographic size and transportation challenges.

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Current OEF/OIF outreach efforts include:

- Memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to work with the National Guard and with family programs.
- Close coordination with the Warrior Transition Units.
- Post deployment health reassessments and briefings.
- Participation in the National Guard "Yellow Ribbon" outreach. This team has the goal of visiting all 237 villages statewide. VA staff has done outreach in some of those areas.
- Marketing and education to rural OEF/OIF veterans is done through a partnership with Native tribal health consortiums. There have been educational series on post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, suicide awareness and prevention. This has been an opportunity for Native healthcare providers and counselors to get additional education. Some video teleconferencing has also been done.

To accommodate the 13 percent of veterans that live off the road system and do not have access to a VA clinic, there is a pilot

program to hire a rural veteran liaison (RVL) in Bethel, Kotzebue, and Nome. The Bethel RVL has been in position since June, 2009 and the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation has provided office space and support. Having a central point of contact has been a great benefit to veterans in the area.

This past year a nurse practitioner was hired for tele-mental health services. Interventions are being done with the Kenai VA community-based outpatient clinic. The PTSD specialist/psychologist has started using videoconferencing within Anchorage and has plans to expand to outpatient clinics. Peer-to-peer professional staff consultation has been done with the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation and Maniilaq Corporation. Consultations will continue to be available on an as needed basis and when that assistance is requested.

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In August there is a pilot project to provide primary care and mental health care to rural veterans using the purchase care option mentioned earlier. This allows VHA to authorize up to three primary care and two mental health visits within a six-month period. The designated pilot areas are the Bristol Bay Borough, the Northwest Arctic Borough, the City of Cordova, and the Bethel, Dillingham, Nome, and Hampton census areas. 548 enrolled veterans were invited to participate. About 20 percent have expressed interest in opting in and a smaller number requested authorization for care. Veterans and providers will provide feedback for consideration at the national level.

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MS. HOFFMAN-DEVOE provided her email address if additional information was needed and noted that the www.va.gov website answers many FAQs about non-healthcare benefits and the national cemetery administration.

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH noted that the slide on VHA demographics indicates that by 2015 an additional 500 veterans will live in Alaska. He asked the source of that data.

MS. HOFFMAN-DEVOE replied it came from the demographic section of the VA national website. The projections are based on the 2006 population of veterans. Responding to a further question she explained that the projections for building the new clinic were based on an increasing veteran population through 2022.

While veteran populations are increasing, the total number in military service isn't as high as it was during the Vietnam War.

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SENATOR DYSON related that in the past 10 years his office has been receiving fewer complaints from veterans; he asked her sense.

MS. HOFFMAN-DEVOE said patient and employee satisfaction scores have increased in the last few years. VHA director Alex Spector and chief of staff Dr. Joe have provided stable leadership for about 10 years; both have backgrounds in healthcare. More and better services continue to be provided.

SENATOR DYSON asked about situations where the preferred treatment isn't covered and the veteran doesn't have the option of paying the difference.

MS. HOFFMAN-DEVOE explained that a variety of primary care and specialty services are available at the clinical care sites in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai/Homer, Wasilla and Juneau. If the needed service is part of the veteran's VA healthcare benefit it could be provided at a partner federal facility or a VA facility in the Lower-48. Because the VA directs where that care goes some veterans may choose to use other insurance. If the veteran chooses something other than what the VA provides, there would be no ability for cost-sharing or co-payments.

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SENATOR PASKVAN asked if population trend studies indicate that Alaska will need additional veteran facilities.

MS. HOFFMAN-DEVOE said not that she isn't aware of, but the VA does use models for projecting how to plan for new facilities. Those models were used to plan the community outpatient clinics.

Update: Education Benefits, Alaska Territorial Guard, Veterans Summit

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CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced the next order of business is to hear from Verdie Bowen.

VERDIE BOWEN, Veterans Affairs Administrator, Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, highlighted the following things that were done in the state to help veterans last year:

- Outreach to over 700 veterans in the Fairbanks and Anchorage areas.
- The Legislature helped educate TRIWEST members about Alaska's unique geography and size when veterans had problems with TRICARE.
- The state provided over 1,000 blue star banners to families that have members serving their country.
- DMVA teamed with the VA to do outreach pilot programs in rural areas.
- More veteran service officers were added to help with outreach in Fairbanks and Chugiak. These officers represent veterans directly to the VA without charge.

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MR. BOWEN said that the majority of calls to his office relate to the GI Bill, the Territorial Guard, and the Veteran Summit. Today he will focus on these topics.

Post 9/11 GI Bill - Mr. Bowen reported that this is the most comprehensive GI Bill offered to veterans leaving the military since World War II. In the state of Alaska a veteran will receive \$1,000 for books, \$13,429 for fees, free tuition to \$159, and \$1,836 per month for a housing allowance while attending school. This is available to veterans up to 15 year after leaving the military. Additional staff has been added to accommodate the influx of new claims.

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Alaska Territorial Guard - Mr. Bowen informed the committee that last year he flew to 20 villages with General Katkus to present discharges and medals to Alaska Territorial Guard members. The intent has been to get discharges for all older members so they are able to access VA benefits. If a Territorial Guardsman didn't do 20 years in federal service, they are eligible for a pension through the VA. The amount of the pension changes dependent on the condition of the veteran or spouse.

Under federal legislation passed last year, the 22 members in the Territorial Guard who are still living and receiving retirement benefits were able to add 5 years to their retirement time. That means that today they are all receiving a full

federal retirement and the state is no longer filling the stopgap.

DMVA also searched available records and found the following:

- 4 members who had served up to 15 years in the National Guard and were eligible to retire. 3 will receive benefits starting next month and the fourth is pending.
- 32 spouses who were eligible to receive survivor benefits.
- 6 Alaska Territorial Guard Members who were eligible for state retirement through the militia system retirement benefit program. The surviving family members will receive those benefits because the member and spouse are deceased.

MR. BOWEN relayed that the Alaska National Guard Military Funeral Honors Team performs an honor ceremony for any ATG member who has passed away and did not received a National Guard honor burial at the time he or she passed. This last year the team performed 158 honor details and expects to do more than 200 this year.

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Veterans Summit - Mr. Bowen relayed that the Alaska Veterans Advisory Council brought information garnered from town hall meetings to the most recent Veterans Summit, which was put on by the legislative Veterans' Caucus. He directed attention to the reports from the Military Separation Committee, the Federal Committee, the Judicial Committee, and the Executive State Committee each of which developed specific action items. In total 11 action items came out of this summit. Each committee included what had been accomplished and what accomplishments were expected in the future.

A second summit is planned for June and town hall meetings will begin immediately. In this venue veterans are able to articulate their issues so that they can be vetted properly through the system. He cited as an example a bridge sign that was intended to honor a deceased Congressional Medal of Honor member, but the wording was confusing to some and meaningless to others. The sign was reworded and the issue was resolved

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SENATOR MCGUIRE asked how the VA is addressing the issues of spouses of military members, particularly after a death, and where she might find more information about that.

MR. BOWEN explained that each branch of the service has a casualty reporting officer who briefs families on the benefits that they will receive. He noted that the next speaker, Ms. Pawlowski, will address this more fully.

SENATOR MCGUIRE asked if the surviving spouse and children of a deceased military member receive health benefits for life.

MR. BOWEN replied the surviving spouse receives TRICARE benefits until he or she remarries and the children receive TRICARE benefits until age 18 or through college if they go on to school.

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SENATOR DYSON noted that several veterans in his district have expressed frustration that UAA doesn't give credit for courses they took while they were in the military, and asked if there is a solution.

MS. BOWEN said it is a problem but UAA isn't any different than other universities; credits don't always transfer between schools. The same thing happens when attempting to transfer credits from a military school. Responding to further questioning, he deferred to General Case.

GENERAL TOM CASE, public member, said his experience at UAA is that every effort is made to transfer credits for veterans.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAMRAS suggested the co-chairs of this committee and General Case send a letter challenging the UA Board of Regents to do a self audit on the subject of credit transfers. Veterans in his district have expressed great frustration that their credits haven't transferred.

GENERAL CASE said he would support that action item. Because veteran friendliness seemed to be somewhat personality dependent, it would be a positive move to institutionalize it, he added.

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that this is a counterpart to the issue that was addressed last year that related to military children receiving full credit when they transfer between schools. "This is equally within our control; we just have to ask the question to get the right answer," he said.

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI said he would ask his staff to draft a letter.

Alaska PTA and the Military

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CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced the next order of business is to hear a report from Paula Pawlowski.

PAULA PAWLOWSKI, Director, Parent Engagement Program, Alaska PTA, said she has served for 10 years as the state representative to the National Military Family Association and 9 years on the Armed Services Board. She also serves on the Commission on Aging, which allows her to keep an eye on veterans in the Pioneer Homes.

She explained that Alaska PTA, which was chartered in 1957, is the largest and oldest advocacy organization in the state. Former Senator Nick Begich was a school liaison between the Alaska PTA and base schools. Liaisons continued until base schools completely switched over to the public school system.

In 1997, with a \$4,000 initiative from the National PTA, the Alaska PTA sought input from military families in Fairbanks, Kodiak, and Anchorage on what it was like to participate in the education system. That report is available on their website.

In 2001 after the high school qualifying exit exam became law, the Alaska PTA participated in an education summit to address the issue of students passing an exit exam in one state only to be required to retake the exam when they enrolled in an Alaska school. Military leaders were concerned that this would prevent families from requesting Alaska as an assignment. The summit was well attended and presentations by the students were "awesome."

The primary question in 2009 asked about Alaska's capacity to support its military members and families in the areas of health care, family support services, and veteran benefits and accessibility. The reality is that this is a different war with deployments, redeployments, and re-redeployments of both mothers and fathers, she said. Also, for the first time guardmembers are being deployed. How this would affect a child's life in the future wasn't clear and so she was tasked by a legislator to gather information on the subject in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Kodiak.

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MS. PAWLOWSKI said that working with a broad coalition of support they gathered information on what services are available. She directed attention to the reports on the 3 summits and highlighted that the key issue was communication. There are communication gaps between families who need services and the provider of services and there are communication gaps between service providers that don't know that they are duplicating efforts. For example, the Coast Guard doesn't belong to Military One Source because it's under the U.S. Department of Transportation not the U.S. Department of Defense. What the Coast Guard uses to identify available resources isn't as complete as Military One Source and perhaps that should be addressed.

MS. PAWLOWSKI said that the family support systems on Fort Richardson and Elmendorf have been jointly meeting every month to address questions about how to handle the combination of family services. This is an attempt to make the transition smoother for families. The truth is that families are also serving. They serve in different ways, but it's a lifetime of service. She again stressed the need to connect the dots between the quality services that are provided and the families.

Most recently the Alaska PTA was asked to hold a workshop oriented summit to facilitate a general discussion among resource-based presenters and families. She said she has selected November 5-6, 2010 and she will be seeking outside funding as well as support from the Legislature. What happened this year probably wouldn't have happened without help from the Legislature. The 2009 summit was most rewarding; participants were dedicated to making things better while generally recognizing that there is a gap in communication that can be tightened. It's a combination of being proactive before you need it and knowing that the resources are there when you depend on them.

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SENATOR MCGUIRE asked if she has concrete recommendations about how a young mother who is busy at home raising young children can get information about support resources.

MS. PAWLOWSKI replied each service communicates distinctly so there isn't one answer, but she believes that the providers have

begun to recognize the need to do things differently. The way things are now they aren't reaching the people they want to reach.

SENATOR MCGUIRE commented that it's interesting that as a society we don't connect dots. We salute the men and women in uniform but we don't take care of their families when they're gone. She offered her help and suggested developing a central website that lists all available services.

Fisher House

[1:22:02 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced the last order of business is to hear from Senator Huggins about Fisher House.

SENATOR CHARLIE HUGGINS reported that in May, 2010 legislators will be invited to a Fisher House groundbreaking and in 2012 they will be invited to the grand opening. He asked the committee to make their constituents aware of the service that Fisher House offers.

SENATOR HUGGINS directed attention to the Fisher House Mission:

- A "home away from home" for service members, veterans and their family members.
- Warm, compassionate environment for families to heal, support each other.
- Relieve the financial and emotional strain of being away from home.

The quote, "You gave us a home when we had none in our time of need," says it all, he said.

SENATOR HUGGINS displayed a slide showing facts about Fisher House including that there are 43 homes nationwide and that 17 new homes are under development, one of which is here in Alaska. He noted that 9,500 families were served in 2008 and that the American Institute of Philanthropy gave Fisher House an A+ rating.

Fisher House of Alaska will be located on Elmendorf Air Force Base and the base will pick up a significant portion of the operational costs. The facility will have 26 suites to offer at no cost to families. This will be a 501(c)(3) organization that generates money through fundraising, not the Legislature. The nonprofit package has been submitted to the IRS. The goal is to

raise \$500,000 by the grand opening; the estimated annual budget is \$365,000.

SENATOR HUGGINS displayed a slide showing Fisher House of Alaska board members and noted that they will try for more regional diversity moving forward. He said he and Josh Tempel are proud to be part of the group representing the Legislature.

He displayed a short video about Fisher House and the ways it supports the troops and their families.

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI commented that this sounds like a worthwhile program.

[1:28:47 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Wielechowski adjourned the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting at 1:28 p.m.