

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 27, 2009

8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kim Elton, Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Donald Olson
Senator Gary Stevens

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 18

"An Act increasing the number of students pursuing a medical education who are provided postsecondary educational services and programs; and providing for an effective date."

HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 18

SHORT TITLE: POSTSECONDARY MEDICAL EDUC. PROG.

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) WIELECHOWSKI

01/21/09	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/09
01/21/09	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/09	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/27/09	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 211

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHELLE SYDEMAN

Staff to Senator Wielechowski

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on SB 18 for the sponsor.

PAT LUBY, Advocacy Director

AARP Alaska

Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 18.

SUZANNE TRYCK, Director of Regional Programs
University of Washington (UW) side of the Alaska WWAMI
Partnership Program

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 18.

DENNIS VALAENZENO, Director
WWAMI Biomedical program
University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 18.

KAREN PURDUE, Associate Vice President
University of Alaska (UAA)

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 18.

DIANE BARRANS, Executive Director
Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 18.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:01:58 AM](#)

CHAIR KIM ELTON called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Davis, Olson, Stevens and Elton.

SB 18-POSTSECONDARY MEDICAL EDUC. PROG.

[8:02:16 AM](#)

CHAIR ELTON announced the consideration of SB 18.

SENATOR DAVIS moved to adopt the CSSB 18 (), labeled 26-LS0139/S, as the working document. There being no objection, version S was before the committee.

[8:02:49 AM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI, sponsor of SB 18, said this bill follows up on a bill Senator Meyer introduced to increase the number of Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Idaho (WWAMI) student positions. One of the primary recommendations of the 2006 task force suggestions was to increase the number of positions to 30, and the initial bill did that, but the University advised him that anything over 24 students would result in significant additional costs to it in terms of new infrastructure and administration. So he changed the number to 24, which is the

maximum number the University can handle without significant incremental cost increases. The state is about 350 doctors short, and this will begin to address the problem.

[8:05:12 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS questioned whether this bill is necessary, because the original bill says "accommodate at least 20 students."

[8:05:57 AM](#)

MICHELLE SYDEMAN, staff to Senator Wielechowski, explained that the University wanted them to put this in statute although it could have been done through a budget appropriation increasing the amount going to the WWAMI program. Having the fiscal note with the statutory approach is helpful to the University of Washington (UW) and the University of Alaska (UAA) for planning their budgets. It was decided that the words "at least 24" would be acceptable to both universities.

[8:07:04 AM](#)

CHAIR ELTON assumed since the fiscal note addresses the previous version of the bill, it would probably be less with the reduction from 30 to 24 in the CS.

[8:07:39 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS joined the meeting.

MICHELLE SYDEMAN said that is true. An informal revised fiscal note from the UAA indicates that as the program steps up to having the full suite of 24 students, the cost will increase incrementally over the next five years to \$550,000 in 2014.

[8:08:44 AM](#)

CHAIR ELTON asked Ms. Sydeman to discuss the history of the WWAMI program.

[8:08:58 AM](#)

MS. SYDEMAN explained that the program began in 1971 or 1972 and along the way got up to 10 students. It increased to 20 students two years ago.

[8:10:35 AM](#)

PAT LUBY, Advocacy Director, AARP Alaska, said anything that can be done to increase the number of physicians in Alaska would be welcome.

[8:11:23 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked Mr. Luby if he sees any rationale in the requirement for a physician that took advantage of this program to be required to participate in some level of Medicare or Medicaid.

MR. LUBY replied if that were legal, he would support it, and that our congressional delegation is working now to find some way to increase the number of physicians seeing Medicare patients.

SENATOR HUGGINS remarked that we obviously need more physicians, and we don't need to require onerous things of them, but on the other hand, if the state is paying their way, they could think about being more open minded about Medicare and Medicaid for some period of time.

MR. LUBY said he would check on the status of that issue with the WWAMI staff.

CHAIR ELTON said part of that analysis should include whether it would also discourage physicians from coming back the state to practice.

[8:12:57 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON said that the first graduates won't start practicing until 2019, and many people now in need won't even be around then. He asked how he thought the number of physicians could be increased now.

MR. LUBY answered that many of their members are using community health centers throughout Alaska where they will see you if you simply walk in their door. Another idea is to use a nurse practitioner for primary care and refer to a physician as necessary.

[8:15:24 AM](#)

SUZANNE TRYCK, Director of Regional Programs, University of Washington-side of the Alaska-WWAMI Partnership Program, said she doesn't have a definitive answer to that question now but felt it would be a disincentive to physicians to return to the state. She could respond by the beginning of next week.

[8:16:32 AM](#)

MS. TRYCK wanted to speak to the issue of mid-level practitioners and other methods available to expand practitioners in the state. Under the WWAMI umbrella, she said, both universities are expanding their physician's assistants

program and making it more Alaskan by doubling the number. In addition, they are working on graduate medical education residency programs in psychiatry and pediatrics. All of those things will be necessary to resolve this problem.

SENATOR OLSON asked how many members are on the Admissions Committee and where they are from.

8:18:20 AM

DENNIS VALAENZENO, faculty member, UAA, and Director, WWAMI Biomedical program at UAA, said he is also Associate Dean for Medical and Pre-Medical programs. He said the Admissions Committee in Alaska works with the UW Admissions Committee. The committee has four members from the different geographical areas of Juneau, Anchorage, and North Pole. Next year they hope to go to five members. Alaskan applicants interview either in Anchorage or Seattle, and typically two or three students are interviewed for each one admitted.

SENATOR OLSON asked the reasons for adding another member to the committee.

MR. VALAENZENO explained that they started having interviews at UAA at the request of a lot of residents. Anchorage doesn't have a large pool of interviewers like Seattle does, so having only three members limited the number of students that could be interviewed in Anchorage. That is the reason for expanding the committee. They also tend to use an Alaska medical student who is rotating in their third or fourth year in the Anchorage area, and that practice is also followed for interviews in Seattle.

SENATOR OLSON assumed all of the committee members are Alaska residents.

MR. VALAENZENO answered yes.

SENATOR OLSON asked the reason for holding pre-admission interviews in Seattle.

MR. VALAENZENO replied that historically, until they finally got one of the two sessions held in Anchorage, no interviews for any of the WWAMI participants from any state were held outside of Seattle.

SENATOR OLSON asked if he would oppose having one member of the committee appointed by the Legislature.

[8:21:34 AM](#)

MR. VALAENZENO answered that could be an accreditation problem. Medical schools are accredited by a national agency and the members of the committee have to be faculty members at the University.

SENATOR OLSON recalled that other medical schools have at-large admission's members that aren't even in the health care field, let alone part of a faculty.

MR. VALAENZENO replied that they could interview students, but can't vote as to who is admitted.

SENATOR OLSON asked how many members last year came from rural Alaska - cities of less than 10,000.

MR. VALAENZENO said he didn't have that data in front of him; historically they tend to represent the distribution of population pretty well.

SENATOR OLSON said when he looked at last year's admission numbers he did not see a good statewide distribution.

MR. VALAENZENO replied that it varies from year to year. They look over the historical admissions.

SENATOR OLSON asked how many residency graduates are in Alaska.

MR. VALAENZENO replied that the residency program places about 75 percent of its graduates in Alaska.

SENATOR OLSON said he was thinking about last year.

MS. TRYCK answered that the overall numbers went from 78 percent to 81 percent, and she can tell him where they are practicing by location, but she couldn't tell him the difference between years.

SENATOR OLSON asked how many of those went out to rural Alaska.

[8:24:40 AM](#)

MS. TRYCK replied that six are in Bethel, three in Dillingham, one in Kotzebue, one in Haines, one in Kodiak, seven in Seward, one in Sitka, two in Unalaska, one in Wrangell, and three are travelling physicians.

CHAIR ELTON thanked them for their testimony and restated Senator Olson's question about having someone appointed by the Legislature and about how many interviewees were accepted from rural Alaska.

CHAIR ELTON said they interview two or three students for each one accepted and asked if that ratio is because there are not enough slots or is it because of the qualifications of the people they are interviewing.

MR. VALAENZENO replied this is fairly typical of medical school admissions. In order to get the best applicants, you look for people who are not only excellent as far as grades, but other qualities that are often revealed by the interview. It's fairly typical to interview two or three per slot. If they had more slots, more could be admitted.

SENATOR OLSON asked Ms. Purdue if she is familiar with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) program.

[8:27:55 AM](#)

KAREN PURDUE, Associate Vice President, University of Alaska (UAA), answered yes, but Diane Barrans knows more about it.

SENATOR OLSON asked if there is anything going on to reinstitute the WICHE program, which he understands would be less expensive for a resident of Alaska than for the state to put more numbers into the WWAMI program.

MS. PURDUE replied that WICHE is a professional student exchange program, and when the price of oil was down the state stopped paying to be a part of it. It's a good program, but would cost a lot of money to get back in. Their strategy is to expand WWAMI with loan repayment incentives and more residency programs. They've done only one thing so far mentioned in the task force report and that is to double the WWAMI program.

SENATOR OLSON asked how she thinks the extra expense for the WWAMI program would be affected by the lower price of oil since the WICHE program was deleted because of the low price of oil.

[8:31:55 AM](#)

MS. TRYCK replied when the oil prices dropped last time, the idea they had was to start cutting seats, because the contract UW has with each state under WICHE is fairly inelastic. Each

contract pays the same amount per student leaving no room for negotiation except to add or cut seats.

MS. PURDUE added that UW is going through significant downsizing, but one area they are not downsizing is medical school investment. They continue to take a lot of Alaska students, but they also get pressure from every state to do so.

MR. VALAENZENO mentioned that the Physician Supply Task Force did look at the cost effectiveness of the WICHE vs the WWAMI programs. The state participated in WICHE for 40-50 years and ended in about 1995. The issue became that WICHE had only an 18 percent return rate. So while the state paid half as much per student for WICHE, because so few of them came back to practice in the state, the WWAMI program was more effective.

8:34:21 AM

SENATOR OLSON asked how his clinical staff would be able to handle the increased number of clerkships giving them the exposure that they need.

MR. VALAENZENO said that is one of the major challenges in expanding the class. They currently offer about 130 clerkships in Alaska and that still needs to be increased. And while they have adequate capacity now, they are working with hospitals around the state and physicians' associations to expand the opportunities in the future. For instance, they have a new family medicine clerkship in Nome and have started a new rural training experience in Juneau.

SENATOR OLSON said he thinks the medical staff with the WWAMI program has done "an exceptional job" of using the physicians out there and recruiting.

CHAIR ELTON said he would hold this bill since this was its first hearing, but he would reschedule it in the near future when they have an answer to the Medicaid/Medicare question. He sees two big issues: the number of doctors they can get back to practice in the state and physician access surrounding Medicaid/Medicare.

8:38:15 AM

MS. TRYCK commented that on the issue of getting physicians back to the state, WWAMI is always trying to balance how to keep the physician pipeline flowing back into Alaska. UW/WWAMI rarely takes a position on Alaskan policy issues. However, there is a nationwide and worldwide physician shortage, so anything they

can do to get physicians will be beneficial. Currently Alaska WWAMI graduates graduate with \$117,000 - \$138,000 of debt in addition to whatever payback obligations they may have. She has heard anecdotally that is having an effect on the people applying to the program. So, any requirement that makes it less attractive to come back to Alaska makes them concerned.

8:40:15 AM

SENATOR DAVIS followed up saying maybe they should look into giving incentives to those who take Medicare/Medicaid patients rather than penalizing those that might want to come back to the state and not take on those patients. She asked, if we bring these additional slots on, how soon they would be filled.

MS. TRYCK replied that the effective date of SB 18 is July 2010 and the fall of 2010 is probably the soonest new students could be taken.

SENATOR OLSON remarked that the fiscal note says it doesn't start until FY 2012, which would mean July 1, 2011.

DIANE BARRANS, Executive Director, Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), replied the reason it doesn't appear in their fiscal note is because the state doesn't begin to pay the fee to UW School of Medicine until the second year.

SENATOR OLSON asked who paid for the first year.

MS. BARRANS replied that they are embedded in the first year of the UAA programs and are covered within the UAA budget.

SENATOR OLSON asked if she could validate Mr. Valaenzeno's numbers that 18 percent of the WICHE graduates come back to Alaska.

MS. BARRANS confirmed Mr. Valaenzeno's numbers, but she said there was no obligation for them to return. The relatively higher return rate for the WWAMI program is attributed to the fact that it is so embedded in Alaska. It is Alaska's medical school; training was always done in Alaska as part of the four-year program. That has only increased over time. But in addition now they require that individuals who participate to come back or be responsible for a substantial portion of the cost to the state.

SENATOR OLSON speculated that the medical atmosphere has changed from what it was 30 years ago, as well.

MS. BARRANS said she couldn't speak to that.

SENATOR OLSON remarked that from a practical standpoint when Barrow had two doctors, they knew they were going to be on call every other night, and that doesn't look very inviting to a person fresh out of medical school. He asked how many states are involved in the WICHE program.

[8:44:32 AM](#)

MS. BARRANS replied that it is a 14-state compact, and Alaska is one of the states. She added in reference to the incentive Senator Davis suggested for individuals who are in practices with high levels of service to Medicaid/Medicare, one incentive that is available within statute would be to shorten the required period of service similar to the enhanced incentive for rural practice as opposed to practice in urban communities.

SENATOR HUGGINS said he was interested in expanding this conversation to physician assistants and nurse practitioners and other programs that may help solve the medical practice shortage.

CHAIR ELTON said he appreciated the wide discussion, but when the bill is back before the committee the discussion would be narrowed to the issues directly affecting it.

MS. PURDUE clarified that the UA fiscal note on SB 18 is zero and that they could accommodate the four additional students without additional cost.

SENATOR OLSON asked Senator Wielechowski if he's gotten any feedback from physicians' organizations in the state.

[8:47:50 AM](#)

MS. SYDEMAN replied that they have had some response in terms of conversations with Alaska State Medical Association indicating support.

CHAIR ELTON held SB 18 in committee.

[8:48:54 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Elton adjourned the meeting at 8:48 a.m.