

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 24, 2010

1:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Bettye Davis, Chair
Senator Joe Paskvan, Vice Chair
Senator Fred Dyson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Johnny Ellis
Senator Joe Thomas

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: Best Beginnings/Early Childhood

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record.

WITNESS REGISTER

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director
Best Beginnings
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the early care and education organizations' legislative priorities for 2010.

MELISSA PICKLE, Director
RurAL CAP, Parents as Teachers (PAT)
Kodiak, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed Parents as Teachers early childhood home visiting programs.

CANDACE WINKLER, CEO
Thread
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Talked about The Statewide Alaska Child Care Resource and Referral Network and the Quality Referral and Information System (QRIS).

JOY LYON

Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC)
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed workforce development and the early education development registry.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Paskvan, Dyson, and Davis.

Best Beginnings/Early Childhood

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CHAIR DAVIS announced a presentation on investing in Alaska's young children.

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ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director of Best Beginnings, Anchorage, Alaska, said she and her colleagues are here representing five organizations that have come together and developed the legislative priorities for 2010, which they will share with the committee today. These organizations are: Thread, Best Beginnings, Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC), Alaska Head Start Association (AHSA), and Alaska Infant Learning Professional Association (AILPA).

She said, according to the 2000 Census, Alaska has only 49,760 children under the age of five. This is a manageable number, yet 20 percent of the state's young children are living below the federal poverty level.

MS. HENSLEY continued; the list of priorities on slide 4 is geared toward ensuring that every child in Alaska begins school ready to be successful. She stressed that they are talking about a comprehensive early childhood system, not individual programs. They are building a system with a state-level public/private partnership that comprises Best Beginnings and a soon-to-be-established Early Childhood Advisory Council.

With the support of state funding from last session, she said, Best Beginnings has begun development of nine early childhood partnerships with local coalitions, locally-based people from all walks of life who have come together to ensure good outcomes for Alaska's youngest children. This network of organizations

encompasses about 78 percent of Alaska's children from birth to age five and was called for by the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Plan adopted by the state several years ago.

She said the nine partnerships were asked to conduct a needs and assets assessment in their communities to identify their priorities and develop strategic plans; Best Beginnings brought representatives of those partnerships together with people from Imagination Library last week for a training session and to discuss the results of those needs assessments. Much of the conversation centered on early care and education programs and making sure they are high-quality, accessible, and affordable. They also talked about support for families; one of the partnership's stated goals was to make sure that families are "engaged, inspired, and involved in young children's learning, with the needed support and resources." She mentioned that she was somewhat surprised that so many partnerships shared the goal of increasing recreation opportunities for young children.

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MS. HENSLEY said their request to the governor and the legislature for this year is for \$1 million to support the partnerships' activities, to support the network of partnerships, and to perform an evaluation of the work they do.

She expanded briefly on the data represented on slides 8 through 13. Slide 8 shows the growth in the number of partnerships during the year since Best Beginnings became involved. She commented that a public/private partnership is a wise use of resources; as shown on slide 9, the state's investment of \$50,000 together with \$59,000 in corporate funding and local contributions, totaled \$133,000 in 2009.

MS. HENSLEY indicated the graph on slide 10, which reflects the difference in the Alaska Kindergarten Developmental Profile results in language development and early literacy from 2003 to 2009; it reveals a steady decline. This demonstrates why they are concerned and why Best Beginnings has taken on statewide sponsorship of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Alaska. The Imagination Library is available for children from birth to age five and mails a free, age-appropriate book to each enrolled child every month. The cost of the program is \$30 per child, per year. Slides 11 through 13 detail the benefits to children and communities in the state and the sources of program funding through 2009. Ms. Hensley pointed out that this is not just a book-distribution program; each of the communities with which they have a relationship has an obligation to do some kind of

parent engagement activities as well. A recent evaluation shows that parents of children who were enrolled in the program for at least a year read to their children more often; the children were more enthusiastic about books and reading, and there were more books in their homes. All of these things help to ensure that children are ready to learn how to read when they begin school. They are requesting \$400,000 to expand the program.

Finally, Ms. Hensley said the Kuskokwim Education Foundation, which provides scholarships for postsecondary education and training, has been unable to get qualified students for those scholarships. In order to ensure a good pool of students in the future, they are now investing in the infrastructure for Imagination Library in their ten villages and are paying for the books.

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MELISSA PICKLE, Director, Rural CAP, Parents as Teachers (PAT), Kodiak, Alaska, spoke to the committee about early childhood home visiting programs, also known as personal visiting programs. Home visiting programs are based on the philosophy that parents are their children's most influential and powerful teachers. PAT's role is to support parents and provide them with activities that will help their children develop optimally during the crucial first years of life. Slide 14 lists some demonstrated outcomes specific to the Parents as Teachers program. Parents enrolled in these programs have increased knowledge of early childhood; they are more involved and have more early literacy experiences in their homes; they have improved parenting practices and fewer documented cases of child abuse and neglect. Children also benefit by earlier detection of developmental delays, allowing them to be connected with early intervention services. They have higher readiness scores in kindergarten, and many of these gains are maintained at third grade.

MS. PICKLE said parents who enroll in Parents as Teachers do so voluntarily. When parents enroll, they fill out a survey about their parenting styles and knowledge of early childhood, which helps PAT to individualize the services for those families. On surveys completed this year by families all over Alaska, 22 indicated that they didn't realize a child who has ear infections will have trouble learning to talk; 46 families thought that as long as a child's vision problem is addressed by age five, it will be OK. That is not true. If a child has cataracts that aren't addressed by the time the child is nine months of age, that child's vision will never be normal. Some

families also indicated that they didn't know babies are interested in books before the age of one.

She said research shows that early childhood home visitation programs really work. One of the reasons for that, particularly with Parents as Teachers, is that these programs start at birth. Slide 15 shows that the neural connections for vision, hearing, language, and cognitive functions begin forming four months before a child is born. Neural connections for vision and hearing peak between four and five months of age; for language it occurs between nine and ten months, and for higher cognitive functioning it is right at two years. This means that all of the foundational connections are being formed before a child is even two years of age.

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MS. PICKLE stepped through a summary of Parents as Teachers in Alaska between 2008 and 2009. Last year they had 11 programs funded through federal grants; this year they are down to 8 programs because of reduced funding from the federal government. Parents as Teachers receives no funding from the state of Alaska.

Head Start and Early Head Start are two programs that also incorporate personal visits, she said. Head Start serves families with children three to five, while Early Head Start focuses on children prenatal to three years of age. Eligibility is based on income level, but Alaska also designates some communities as meeting the "poverty of access" provision.

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MS. PICKLE said the 16 Head Start grantees across the state provided services in over 100 communities last year, serving over 3500 children. They also employed more than 950 staff. Many of those jobs are in small communities where jobs are scarce.

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Slide 20 provides a 2008-2009 summary report of services by Head Start and Early Head Start. During that time, 276 children were identified as needing medical treatment and were connected with the services they needed; another 515 children needed dental treatment, 77 needed mental health services, and 379 were identified as having special needs. Seven hundred and eighty-one parents were referred for emergency crisis intervention services, and over 1100 parents requested information about parenting. She identified the last bullet as the average salary

for a bachelor-degreed Head Start teacher in Alaska; that amount is only \$27,744 annually.

MS. PICKLE indicated the Alaska Head Start Association Critical Issues document included in the committee members' packets. She stated that Head Start currently has 711 children on its waiting list, and this does not take into account the numbers of families that don't even sign up because the list is so long. There is a need for increased funding to serve more children. There is also a need to upgrade facilities; many of their buildings are 35 years old and desperately in need of repair. Head Start teachers are going to be required to have bachelor degrees by 2014, so they will definitely need funds to obtain those degrees. Another very high priority is to get more children qualified for Denali Kid Care by raising the eligibility limit up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

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CANDACE WINKLER, CEO, Thread, the Statewide Alaska Child Care Resource and Referral Network, Anchorage, Alaska, said the organization has been around for about 24 years, but adopted a new name and brand in August. Thread works with 7600 families each year, helping them find quality child care, early care, and education programs that meet their needs. Operating in collaboration with the University, they are the largest provider in Alaska of professional development for people working in the field and are active throughout the state helping programs to improve their practice and quality.

MS. WINKLER disclosed that Alaska has about 60,000 children under the age of six; 40,000 of those children live in households where all of the parents are working. There are fewer than 24,000 slots available in licensed or approved child care, Head Start, and preschool. That figure includes some school-age slots and some slots that are only part-day, so it may be slightly inflated. That leaves quite a gap.

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She said many families struggle to afford the cost of child care. In Alaska, 36 percent of households with children under age six have reported having some work restrictions due to child care issues; with rates often as high as \$1000 per month for infant and toddler care, it is a challenge for many families. At the same time, programs are spending from 70 to 80 percent of their budgets on personnel expenses, even though those employees earn about \$9 per hour.

The graph on slide 25 compares the rate of brain development with the cumulative public investment in children between birth and age two. The inverse trajectories make it clear that the state is not taking advantage of the opportunities to start its youngest citizens out with the highest possible chance for success.

MS. WINKLER stated that access to quality child care is often attained for those lowest-income families through child-care assistance. She thanked the legislature for raising rates to the fiftieth percentile a couple of years ago; she added that the new infant and toddler reimbursement rates released by the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) within the past two weeks show an increase to the seventy-fifth percentile. The rest of the rates remain in the fiftieth percentile however, placing a burden on those lowest-income families. The second part of child care assistance that really needs to be addressed is the family eligibility income level, which has not changed since 2002. That level could be as high as eighty-five percent of the state median income, and that where Thread would like to see it set.

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MS. WINKLER said that, in her mind, a Quality rating and improvement program (QRIS) is an effective, comprehensive way to address all aspects of child care, and early care and education: the affordability, accessibility, and quality. It gives parents the tools and information to make them drivers of child care quality and gives providers a guide for program improvement. It also helps policy-makers evaluate the value of the resources the state puts into early care and education programs.

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She walked through what is needed in a Quality rating and improvement program, as shown on Slide 28.

- Quality standards, tied to research, have to be agreed upon for all programs.
- There has to be an assessment process in place to rate the programs.
- Families must have access to the higher-quality programs, which is where childcare assistance, Head Start, public funding of preschools, and other funding programs come in.
- Once the system has identified areas in which programs can improve, it has to be able to offer resources in the form of incentive payments and technical assistance to help with that improvement.

- Professional development is another critical component.
- Finally, there has to be a rating system, a common-sense way for the public and policy-makers to gauge how programs are doing.

She ended by saying that the QRIS is a really comprehensive way to tie quality to access and affordability. It has been recognized at the federal level as a linchpin issue for states as they develop their systems.

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JOY LYON, Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC), Juneau, Alaska, said the Southeast office provides the Thread services throughout Southeast Alaska and is the lead agency for the Best Beginnings partnerships and the Imagination Library. Referring to the QRIS system, she noted that incentives are vital; just measuring quality without providing incentives for change will not result in improved quality. Another factor that research has shown is vital to improved quality is professional development. AYEC needs to find a way to decrease the financial barriers and increase recruitment and retention for early care and education teachers. Thread currently offers \$500 per year as a tuition scholarship for licensed child care providers, which will pay for only three or four credits. For someone coming in at entry level, which most of the people entering early care and education are, it could take ten years to get an Associate Degree that way. They would like to increase the amount, so providers who are interested can really move forward and increase their education. Currently, less than 10 percent of the child care workforce has a college degree. The national accreditation standards and the Head Start standards are moving toward having a bachelor-degreed teacher in every classroom, so there is a long way to go. They have a good start however, in that they now have a seed registry, the System for Early Education Development, and are able to track all of the licensed programs' teacher qualifications. They can now see that there are just over 470 teachers in the field who have either a Child Development Associate credential or a degree. With the proper incentives in place, they hope to increase teacher education levels and lower the turnover rate. The 45 percent turnover rate in Alaska is devastating to children, who are so reliant on a relationship with their teachers.

MS. LYON said AYEC has a plan in place for a program they call "Retaining Our Outstanding Teachers" or the ROOTS Award. They offered a low-level award to draw people into the seed registry so they could estimate what the cost would be to add a real

incentive to help fill the gap between what a teacher with a BA can make working with children four years old, and what they can make working with five-year-olds. At this point they can make twice as much working with children five years old and older, so it is very hard to retain those degreed teachers.

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ABBE HENSLEY summarized Alaska Early Care and Education's legislative priorities for 2010, which are listed on slide 31:

- Raise the qualifying income level for Denali Kid Care to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, thus restoring eligibility to some 1300 children and 225 pregnant women.
- Increase Head Start funding consistent with the two-year plan Head Start developed in conjunction with the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED).
- Funding for home visitation programs.
- \$1 million in order to enable early childhood partnerships to begin doing the work they have identified in their communities, and to bring on new partnerships.
- \$400,000 to continue expansion of the Imagination Library program.
- Increase the child care reimbursement rate for all children to the seventy-fifth percentile to ensure access to quality child care.
- The Quality Rating and Improvement System. The Department of Health and Social Services is working with early childhood advocates to continue this work.
- \$1.5 million for professional development and retention of early educators.

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CHAIR DAVIS asked Ms. Hensley to clarify if what they are asking for in the governor's budget is \$1.2 million for Best Beginnings.

MS. HENSLEY said they have asked for \$1 million for early childhood partnerships and \$400,000 for Imagination Library. The amount added to the governor's budget was \$200,000, allocated to Best Beginnings, the Imagination Library, and early childhood partnerships.

CHAIR DAVIS asked if anything has been said about the amount that was NOT included in the governor's budget.

MS. HENSLEY said, as she understands it, the Department of Education and Early Development budget is limited, and if money is added to any one component, it has to come out of another.

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CHAIR DAVIS asked if there has been any progress on the quality rating system.

MS. WINKLER answered that they developed a plan three years ago, which needs to be revisited; that is what they are working on with the Department of Education and Early Development. What they really need now is financial support to implement the first phase of the plan. At the federal level, there have been conversations about Early Learning Challenge Fund grants that will be made available to states, and one of the components the federal government is looking for is a quality rating system. Hopefully, the opportunity represented by this federal grant will help to move the QRIS forward in the state.

She repeated that the QRIS is a comprehensive way to tie quality to access and affordability. The reality is that, while all of those components are important, it does no good to have accessible, affordable care that is not very good. The trajectory for success that they have been talking about occurs when kids are in high-quality programs; when kids are in poor-quality programs, they can actually do worse than they would in no program at all.

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CHAIR DAVIS asked what the time-line is for requiring Head Start teachers to have an associate's degree.

MELISSA PICKLE answered that they will require teachers to have a bachelor's degree by 2014, but she isn't sure of the deadline for an associate's degree.

JOY LYON interjected that they are requiring 100 percent of Head Start teachers to have an associate's degree in early childhood education by September 30, 2011. By 2013, 50 percent nationwide must have a bachelor's degree.

CHAIR DAVIS asked where they are in meeting that time-line.

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MELISSA PICKLE said she is not sure, but will get the committee that information.

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CHAIR DAVIS commented that each of the presenter's organizations has a board, and asked if their boards are active in fund-raising and helping to market information to the public.

JOY LYON said the board members for Alaska AEYC and their Southeast office just traveled to Washington DC to meet with Alaska's Congressional Delegates. All of their boards are made up of volunteers who have full-time jobs, but they are all active in reaching out at the community level.

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CHAIR DAVIS said she serves on the Labor and Commerce Finance Sub-Committee, and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) got at least \$28 million of stimulus money for workforce development. She asked if the organizations for early child care and education have applied for or received any stimulus grants yet, or if any of that money has been ear-marked for early childhood education.

CANDACE WINKLER responded; some of the stimulus money was an expansion of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) that comes to the state of Alaska to support resource and referral agencies like Thread, as well as child care assistance, and child care licensing. The funding to move the rate for infant and toddler care up to the seventy-fifth percentile was part of that. They have not started to spend the CCDBG dollars that are earmarked for quality, but there will be an amount in the area of \$300,000 available for that. Over the years, the people in the early care and education field have made attempts to collaborate and coordinate with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED). It seems to be a perfect alignment, since the field is made up primarily of small businesses that employ people, and it has the added benefit of enabling parents to go to work and contribute to the economy. Unfortunately, they have had no real success in leveraging resources for their work force. She said she would appreciate the committee's help and suggestions to open the doors for meaningful dialogue with those departments.

MS. WINKLER asked committee members to imagine what would happen tomorrow if the child care workforce across the state went on strike, and ventured that the state would be brought to its knees.

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CHAIR DAVIS said the committee would like additional information about how it can help in areas other than funding.

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MS. WINKLER said she will be happy to provide that information. She mentioned that the McDowell Group conducted a study for them in 2006 that identified the workforce as about 6500 people in the state of Alaska.

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SENATOR DYSON said they have heard from constituents that it takes a while for providers to receive child care assistance payments, so parents sometimes have to pay up front. He asked how big a problem this is for parents and providers.

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MS. WINKLER said it is a significant problem. It creates a challenge, not only for the families, but for providers, most of which are working on very small margins. She reiterated that 70 to 80 percent of providers' resources go into their workforce, and they are paying only \$9 per hour; they don't have the capacity or the cash flow to float a lot of the parents they are trying to serve.

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MS. LYON added that self-pay parents generally pay for child care at the beginning of the month. Programs turn in the paperwork for Child Care Assistance payments at end of month, and it is another couple of weeks before they receive payment; that means that if everything goes smoothly, there is about a six-week lag before they get paid. Alaska AEYC conducted a survey in Juneau of all of the licensed family child care providers that closed over a one-year period, and almost every one stated that the difficulty of getting paid was the main reason they stopped doing business. They simply couldn't count on the income.

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SENATOR DYSON asked what Ms. Lyon would do to solve this problem.

MS LYON responded that the state did a pilot program about ten years ago, in which the it paid parents up front, allowing them to pay for care at the first of the month and providing them some flexibility in deciding where their children would go. She admitted that it cost a little more to administer the program at that time; more checks had to be issued. With the current

availability of electronic payment systems however, it might be an effective solution to the problem.

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SENATOR DYSON suggested that the committee write to the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) suggesting that the current system is creating a hardship for the people it is intended to serve and that there are better ways to handle it.

SENATOR DAVIS concurred, but said she would also be willing to bring the administration before them to talk about it.

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MS. LYON commented that it's like paying rent; if a landlord couldn't get rent for six weeks, and the rent could be reduced for days the renter wasn't home, he couldn't afford to operate.

CHAIR DAVIS said they are very busy during the 90-day session, but will continue to work on this during the interim.

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SENATOR DYSON advised the presenters that the Health and Social Services Committee can't help them much; they need a champion for their funding on the Finance Committees of both houses. He assured them that he and Chair Davis care deeply about this issue, but pointed out that they have little influence over the budget.

CHAIR DAVIS said she is sorry there is no more money in the present budget. She suggested they continue to follow the process. The budget bill is in the House, and she thinks that the House is doing close-out at the end of the week. Anything they can get into the budget over there will help when it comes to the Senate because at least the line item will be in there. She encouraged them not to give up if they don't make sub-committee cut off; the full Finance Committee will look at it and take public testimony. She stressed that it is important for them to get parents and others affected by this issue to testify or send in written testimony, and reminded them that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

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ABBE HENSLEY said that advocacy is one of the topics that was covered at the training session they conducted last week for people from the early childhood partnerships and the Imagination Library.

CHAIR DAVIS asked if Alaska is gaining or losing early child care providers.

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ABBE HENSLEY said she has heard that the numbers are declining, but deferred to Ms. Lyon and Ms. Winkler for definite answers to that question.

JOY LYON said there has been a steep drop off in family child care programs. At one time, there were 90 Southeast Alaska providers in the Child Care Food Program, and that number has dropped to 45. Centers are fairly stable, but it is very difficult for new centers to start up.

MS. WINKLER added that the family child care homes are the ones that most often provide infant and toddler care; many of the centers are deciding it is not cost-effective to do so.

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MS. WINKLER said preschools have seen some growth because it is the most cost-effective care to provide.

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KAREN ROBINSON stated that the people involved in early care and education have really have tried to get into the budget process, but they do not have the opportunity to present their needs until the full Finance Committee opens public testimony, by which time most of the decisions have been made. That's too late. They have met individually with subcommittee chairs and some subcommittee members, but need to be able to present their information before the budgets are completed.

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CHAIR DAVIS agreed that it is not ideal, but said it is due in part to the time constraints imposed by a 90 day session. She pointed out that if they can't gain access to the legislators they need to speak to, they can speak to the staff.

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MS. ROBINSON said finding a champion in the right position is really proving to be difficult. No one seems to be willing to take up their case.

CHAIR DAVIS commented that Denali Kid Care is on their list of priorities and said there is a Senate bill, SB 13, in the House Health and Social Services Committee this session, but it will need to be monitored closely. She said she believes increasing

the qualifying income level has sufficient support among legislators and the governor that something should be able to make it out this year, and the Senate bill is in the best position to make it.

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ABBE HENSLEY closed by thanking Senator Davis and Senator Dyson for all of their help and concern for children and families.

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SENATOR DYSON said the committee appreciates the important work they do every day and is sorry the system does not provide them with more support. In his view, he said, the process is clumsy, awkward, and irritating, but better than anything else in the world. He exhorted them not to give up.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Davis adjourned the meeting at 2:41 p.m.