

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 18, 2014

8:08 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Gabrielle LeDoux, Co-Chair  
Representative Benjamin Nageak, Co-Chair  
Representative Neal Foster  
Representative Bob Herron  
Representative Sam Kito III

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Kurt Olson  
Representative Lora Reinbold

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 216

"An Act adding the Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Unangax, Dena'ina, Deg Xinag, Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich'in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Hän, Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian languages as official languages of the state."

- MOVED HB 216 OUT OF COMMITTEE

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 216

SHORT TITLE: OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF THE STATE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) KREISS-TOMKINS, MILLETT, EDGMON, NAGEAK, HERRON

01/21/14	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/14
01/21/14	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/14	(H)	CRA, STA
02/18/14	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE JONATHON KREISS-TOMKINS  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Spoke as one of the joint prime sponsors of HB 216.

FREDDIE OLIN, Staff  
Representative Jonathon Kreiss-Tomkins  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During hearing of HB 216, answered questions.

GLENN WAGHIYI  
Savoogna, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Spoke in his Alaska Native language of Siberian Yupik.

SELINA EVERSON  
Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS)  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Related support for HB 216 from ANS.

LANCE TWITCHELL, Assistant Professor  
Alaska Native Languages  
University of Alaska Southeast  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

LAWRENCE KAPLAN, Director  
Alaska Native Language Center  
University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF)  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Related the Alaska Native Language Center's support for HB 216.

ANNETTE EVANS-SMITH, President/CEO  
Alaska Native Heritage Center;  
Chair, Alaska Native Language Preservation & Advisory Council  
(ANLPAC)  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

ELIZABETH MEDICINE CROW  
First Alaskans Institute  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

BEVERLY TOOLIE  
Savoonga, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Spoke in her Alaska Native language of Siberian Yupik.

CHELSEA MIKLANOOK  
Savoonga, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Spoke in her Alaska Native language of Siberian Yupik.

TERESA HAMILTON, Teacher  
Savoonga, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During hearing of HB 216, answered questions.

MIGUEL ROHRBACHER  
Douglas, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as to the importance of HB 216.

RICHARD ANDERSON  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

JOHN HANLON  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

ESTHER GREEN  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During hearing of HB 216, expressed that all [Alaska Native] languages are important.

DIANE MCEACHERN  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

KONRAD FRANK  
Angoon, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

BYRON CHARLES  
Ketchikan, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided testimony on HB 216.

DELLA CHENEY  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

TONI WEBER (PH)

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified that HB 216 would bring dignity and a sense of belonging to Alaska Natives.

CHARLENE CLEARY

Tok, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

DEWEY HOFFMAN

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During the hearing of HB 216, expressed the need for Alaska Native languages to be healthy and thrive.

DAVID KATZEEK

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During hearing of HB 216, expressed the need to acknowledge and preserve Alaska Native languages.

MARY NUNUWAK [NOONGWOOK?]

[Savoonga, Alaska]

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 216.

MAGARET ACTIVE

Kongiganak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** During hearing of HB 216, expressed the importance of a person's language.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:08:22 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR GABRIELLE LEDOUX** called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:08 a.m. Representatives Drummond, Foster, Herron, Nageak, and LeDoux were present at the call to order.

#### **HB 216-OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF THE STATE**

[8:09:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR LEDOUX announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 216, "An Act adding the Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Unangax, Dena'ina, Deg Xinag, Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich'in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Hän, Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian languages as official languages of the state."

[8:09:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JONATHON KREISS-TOMKINS, Alaska State Legislature, speaking as one of the joint prime sponsors of HB 216, explained that the legislation makes all Alaska Native languages official languages of the State of Alaska, which is a hugely important symbolic step. The legislation is the result of the work of many people statewide who have been working to preserve and revitalize Alaska Native languages statewide. The grass roots effort, he pointed out, is evident [by those present today]. He noted that HB 216 doesn't carry the force of law that the 1998 voter initiative that created English as the official language. Although the legislation before the committee today won't require printing of documents in 22 different languages, he opined that it will be the harbinger of much more substantive efforts. In fact, many of those involved in Alaska Native languages are considering legislation that would make it easier for bilingual teachers to teach in K-12 schools.

[8:11:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FOSTER related his full support for HB 216 and noted that he is a co-sponsor of the legislation. He then asked whether there has been any opposition from any Alaska Native groups.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS replied no, adding that HB 216 was developed through a grassroots effort that included representatives from the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN), First Alaskans, and Alaska Language Center within the University of Alaska. Therefore, he characterized the legislation as the result of a very inclusive process that was a collective effort. In fact, he said he has yet to hear any opposition from anyone.

[8:12:26 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR LEDOUX asked if HB 216 includes all Alaska Native languages in the state.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS replied yes, noting that the sponsors worked with the Alaska Native Language Center as well as the staff at Legislative Legal Services in order to ensure the correct and proper diacritics and proper character marks.

CO-CHAIR LEDOUX recalled attending a reception at Sealaska during which a gentleman from Kodiak was honored and introduced as Sugpiaq. She related that she had never heard of the Sugpiaq Alaska Native group, which she assumed spoke the Sugpiaq language that is not included in HB 216.

[8:14:01 AM](#)

FREDDIE OLIN, Staff, Representative Jonathon Kreiss-Tomkins, Alaska State Legislature, clarified that Alutiiq is the informal reference to Sugpiaq, which is the technical name for the Alutiiq language. He related that the Russians referred to the Sugpiaq as Alutiiq, which was a plural term for Aleut. Therefore, there was confusion with regard to Sugpiaq and Aleut. He further clarified that Alutiiq and Sugpiaq are the same.

[8:15:12 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR LEDOUX opened public testimony, with the caveat that witnesses would be limited to three minutes.

[8:16:09 AM](#)

GLENN WAGHIYI, spoke in his Native tongue of Siberian Yupik.

[8:19:18 AM](#)

SELINA EVERSON, Alaska Native Sisterhood, began by bidding the committee good morning in Tlingit, "Yak'eyi Ts'ùtât". Ms. Everson stressed that her language, once forbidden to be spoken, is very important. She related support for HB 216 from ANS. She then emphasized that passage of HB 216 will sustain Alaska Native people as well as their way of life and culture in Alaska.

[8:20:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND began by speaking in Greek. She then informed the committee that she is a Greek American who was born in New York City and didn't speak English until she entered kindergarten. Language, she opined, is such a core value of every ethnicity, and therefore she is pleased that HB 216 is before the committee. She also announced that she supports HB 216.

[8:21:23 AM](#)

LANCE TWITCHELL, Assistant Professor, Alaska Native Languages, University of Alaska Southeast, provided the committee with handouts, including his written testimony, maps of estimated number of speakers remaining for individual Alaska Native languages, and [a map] of the estimated number of speakers in Tlingit communities. Mr. Twitchell then provided the following testimony in Tlingit with the English translation [original punctuation provided]:

sh yaa awoodinéix'i. gunalchéesh áwé ldakát yeewháan.  
self-respecting people. thank you, yes, all of you.

ax twoowú yak'éi haa yoo x'atánkx'i daat woosh  
x'awtula. átgi.  
i feel good that we are talking about our languages.

haa daséigu áyá. haa daséigu áyá.  
this is our life-breath. this is our life-breath.

haa dachxánx'i yán yís áyá x' akkwatáan.  
for our grandchildren, i am going to speak.

yadál áyá. yee gu.aa yáx x' wán. yadál áyá.  
it is a heavy thing. have strength and courage. it is  
a heavy thing.

ax séek' x' akkwatée yeedát, Shgaté:  
i am going to imitate my clan-daughter, Shgaté (Jessie  
Johnnie):

tlax wáa sá x'alitseen yá Lingít yoo x'atángi,  
how incredibly valuable our language is,

hél dáanaa a yáx koogéi wudu.óowu.  
no money, not any amount, can buy it.

yéi áyá. yéi áyá.  
this is how it is. this is how it is.

haa dachxánx'i sáani yís woosh yéi jigaxtooneí.  
for our little grandchildren, we are going to work  
together.

hél yagaxtoosax'aakw.  
we are not going to die off.

hél yagaxtoosax'aakw.

we are not going to die off.

gunalchéesh.

thank you.

MR. TWITCHELL then paraphrased from the following written testimony [original punctuation provided]:

We are not an English-only state, and we should never tolerate the embarrassment of deciding to be one. For over ten thousand years there have been other languages here, and they are still here today. We are right here wondering why some languages, and therefore cultures, feel the need to state a sense of superiority. This is not a fight with each other, or against the perceived erosion of the English language. This is a fight against death, and it is a death that we can avoid if we so choose.

I am here to testify in support of House Bill 216: Official Languages of the State of Alaska. I am not exaggerating when I say this: we have an absolute crisis on our hands. Michael Krauss, an expert on world languages, Alaska Native languages in particular, predicts that half of the world's 6-7,000 languages will be gone in the next century. In order for that to happen, a language will have to die every two weeks. I urge you to keep this in mind as you do all that is in your power to reverse language shift, to counter genocidal policies and tendencies.

Alaska Native languages are not going to die anymore.

In the past ten years we have seen the last fluent speakers of two Alaska Native languages pass away. Marie Smith once said, of being the last fluent Eyak speaker, "I talk to the walls, I talk to the TV, I talk to God, but no one talks back."

We are going to talk back. We are going to work collectively and see how simple it is to begin undoing generations of racist policies, how simple and worthwhile it is to revitalize an entire state.

You are exactly the ones to do this. You have to realize that there is no tomorrow or next week, but there is right now. The average Alaska Native language

has fewer than 1,000 speakers, and the vast majority of them are over seventy years old. Now is the perfect time for equality.

This is the today we have been waiting for. If we look back at the troubled history of contact in Alaska, and if we can do so without seeing it as a glorious conquest of untamed lands, then we will see that we have been set up to do exactly this kind of work. We are destined to fix the problems that plague our state.

The most important thing to know about Alaska Native languages is that people did not choose to stop speaking them. Our grandparents were beaten as children for speaking them. Our parents were humiliated for knowing them, and then for not knowing them. We have weathered incredible waves of genocide from the most powerful nation ever conceived, and we are still here, ten thousand years standing.

But these languages are dying right now. I see dying languages and escalating suicide rates and think: how can those things not be connected? I see the end result of cultural genocide and think: how can we just decide to accept this?

There is no magic solution for language loss. But there is the promise of unity, and recognizing that solutions exist: an official language act, immersion schools, language nests, communities that embrace Alaska Native languages.

I sit here as your peer. I sit here as your equal. We may speak different languages, but mine is just as valuable, just as necessary, and just as useful as yours. I urge you to push this bill forward and make us the only other state in America to officially recognize the value, the beauty and necessity, of indigenous languages.

In the name of unity and equality I thank you for your time, and wish you strength of spirit.

Gunalchéesh.

[8:26:53 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FOSTER highlighted the use of the terms "crisis" and "suicides," which he said underscored the need for HB 216. He then recalled the committee's February 13, 2014, hearing regarding suicide prevention and the Qungasvik project in which language is used to provide Alaska Natives a shared and common purpose and bond. Therefore, he opined that having a language that the Alaska Native community can be proud of and the entire state supports has far-reaching consequences.

[8:27:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked if any other state recognizes indigenous languages.

MR. TWITCHELL replied Hawaii.

[8:28:23 AM](#)

LAWRENCE KAPLAN, Director, Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), informed the committee that he is a Greek American whose field of study is Alaska Native languages. In fact, he noted that he has worked with the Inupiaq language for about 40 years. Mr. Kaplan then expressed the Alaska Native Language Center's support for HB 216. He told the committee that 11 of Alaska's Native languages are in the Athabascan or Dene family and 2 more are in the larger Na-Dene group, and 4 other languages are in the Eskimo group that are closely related to the Aleut language. The Haida and Tsimshian languages are found in Southeast Alaska. Anchorage and Fairbanks are Athabascan areas with the Dena'ina language originally in Anchorage and Tanana language originally in Fairbanks. Mr. Kaplan clarified that these are all different languages, not merely dialects, such that even related languages are usually very distinct. For instance, although Inupiaq and Yup'ik are certainly related languages, their relationship is comparable in distance to that of English and German and thus they are clearly separate languages.

MR. KAPLAN opined that the difficult history of Alaska's Native languages has led to a decline in their usage and resulted in their current state of endangerment. Some languages such as Deg Hit'an, which is found in the villages of Anvik and Shageluk, have only a handful of elderly speakers remaining. The largest and most vital language, Central Alaskan Yup'ik, in Southwest Alaska has about 10,000 speakers. Although 10,000 speakers sound like a lot, it's only half of the Yup'ik population. The Eyak language of Cordova received national and international

recognition when it lost its last speaker a few years ago. Dena'ina, the original language of the Cook Inlet Anchorage area, may have a couple of dozen speakers remaining while the Tanana language of the Interior Fairbanks area has even less than that. Many Alaskans, he emphasized, are concerned about the precipitous decline in Alaska Native language use and would encourage the languages to be supported, valued, and taught so that they last and continue in the future. The cultural, historical, and scientific knowledge that is closely tied to the Alaska Native languages is valued by many who want to learn from those who inhabited Alaska for generations prior to statehood. Granting official status to Alaska Native languages would send a positive message to Alaska's population that these languages are valuable, deserve support and equal respect and status with the predominant language of the state, English. Although symbolic, official status would be very meaningful to a large portion of Alaska's population. He pointed out that in Hawaii the Hawaiian Native language is co-official with English as is French in Louisiana. Passage of HB 216 would place Alaska out front of most states in terms of support for indigenous languages. The Alaska Native Language Center, he informed the committee, was founded by state legislation in 1972 and continues to provide support for Alaska Native languages through research, teaching, and service. The publications, writing systems, and archival documentation developed at the Alaska Native Language Center provide a strong foundation for official language status. Mr. Kaplan related that the Alaska Native Language Center urges members to work toward passage of this important language.

[8:33:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND spoke in Greek to Mr. Kaplan about his Greek mother who is from New York, where there are a plethora of languages and immigrants. Representative Drummond related that she has a great deal of respect for indigenous languages and is pleased to support HB 216.

[8:34:46 AM](#)

ANNETTE EVANS-SMITH, President/CEO, Alaska Native Heritage Center; Chair, Alaska Native Language Preservation & Advisory Council (ANLPAC), introduced herself in the Alaska Native languages, ..., of her parents who are from South Nanek and Bristol Bay and Rampart in the Yukon as follows: .... She related that the Alaska Native Language Preservation & Advisory Council voted unanimously to support HB 216. In fact, ANLPAC spent the last year-and-a-half obtaining public testimony from

across Alaska. She highlighted that many people have expressed a strong desire to learn their Alaska Native languages. Furthermore, Alaska's Native languages are critical to the state's history and heritage; "they hold the DNA of our cultures." Although this is a symbolic measure, it's an important gesture for the state government to acknowledge the importance of Alaska Native languages. As mentioned, 19 of the state's 20 languages that represent the state are listed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as critical or severely endangered. Although over the last 25 years there has been a tremendous amount of loss, she related her belief that language loss is not inevitable or irreversible. Evidence illustrates that when youth are connected to their culture and languages, they perform better in school and make better life choices. Therefore, there is tremendous success between language programs and promoting health and wellness for indigenous people. The aforementioned is observed on a daily basis by the Alaska Native Heritage Center. For example, the Alaska Native Heritage Center operates a national award-winning high school program that has an approximately 80 percent graduation rate as compared to a 54 percent graduation rate for Alaska Native youth in the Anchorage School District not served by the aforementioned program. Furthermore, when asked by the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Alaska Native youth have said the top two things they desire are time with elders and to learn their language. Therefore, the Alaska Native Heritage Center has begun to weave language into its program. Additionally, the Alaska Native Heritage Center runs an after school middle school program for at-risk students that has been successful in retaining at-risk middle school students so that they move and advance to the next grade level. This legislation, she opined, would demonstrate to the states and Alaskans that Alaska greatly values its diversity. In fact, the passage of Senate Bill 130 [in the 27th Alaska State Legislature] that created the language council illustrates the state respects Alaska Native languages. In closing, Ms. Evans-Smith related that both the Alaska Native Heritage Center and ANLPAC support HB 216.

[8:38:49 AM](#)

ELIZABETH MEDICINE CROW, First Alaskans Institute, began by informing the committee of her Haida and Tlingit lineage in both the Haida and Tlingit languages. She then related that when Mona Jackson, her Haida grandmother, was sent to boarding school and later to university, she retained her language by speaking Haida to her mother in her mind, which kept her strong, focused,

and healthy. Her language and faith were her pillars of strength, connection, and resilience. She returned home and taught in Kake city schools for over 30 years. Ms. Crow characterized her grandmother as a tough and loving lady whose language was the cornerstone of her ability to do so much. All Alaska Native peoples and others should have the right and the ability to understand and treasure the Alaska Native languages. Ms. Crow then informed the committee that the First Alaskans Institute, a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing Alaska Native people, strongly supports HB 216. Moreover, the First Alaskans Institute is excited to observe the bipartisan support HB 216 has received. She then thanked the joint prime sponsors and co-sponsors of HB 216 for their vision and understanding of the necessity of this legislation, which is a simple and reasonable approach to this crisis for which time is of the essence. Unlike other world languages spoken in Alaska, Alaska Native languages aren't spoken anywhere else. In closing, Ms. Crow urged support for HB 216 from all Alaska legislators and pointed out that passage of HB 216 will send a strong message that Alaskans are united in ensuring that Alaska's Native languages don't die.

[8:45:09 AM](#)

BEVERLY TOOLIE, speaking in her Alaska Native language of Siberian Yupik, related her Yupik name, that she is from Savoonga, and proud to be from St. Lawrence Island.

[8:46:12 AM](#)

CHELSEA MIKLANOOK, speaking in her Native language of Siberian Yupik, told the committee her Yupik name, that she is from Savoonga, is happy to be here, and is proud to be a Siberian Yupik and speak Siberian Yupik.

[8:46:59 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FOSTER asked if Alaska Native languages are taught in the Savoonga school.

MS. TOOLIE reported that the language classes stopped within the last couple of years. In further response to Representative Foster, Ms. Toolie said she would want to take the language classes if they were re-introduced in the schools.

MS. MIKLANOOK interjected that their grandparents speak to them in their Alaska Native language at home. In further response to

Representative Foster, Ms. Miklanook said she would want to take the language classes if they were re-introduced in the schools. In response to Co-Chair LeDoux, Ms. Miklanook said they spoke their Alaska Native language before they spoke English.

[8:47:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked why the Alaska Native language is no longer taught in the Savoonga school.

TERESA HAMILTON, Teacher, answered that there is no Alaska Native language class in the school because there is no one there to teach it since the Native speaker choose not to teach it any longer. Efforts are being made to reinstate the class. In further response to Representative Drummond, Ms. Hamilton confirmed that there is funding to pay for the position.

[8:48:50 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR NAGEAK related his experience during an exchange regarding the establishment of a science program that took him and two others to St. Lawrence Island. He recalled that the Yupik residents, even the children, spoke Siberian Yupik well. He further recalled that it was an exciting time. He encouraged the youth to continue to speak their language because no one tells them they can't speak their language.

[8:51:17 AM](#)

MS. HAMILTON clarified that although the Siberian Yupik language is no longer taught at the high school in Savoonga, there are Siberian Yupik paraprofessionals that teach elementary and middle school classes that reinforce language on a regular basis within the curriculum. There is also specific time to teach Siberian Yupik in the middle and lower grades, only the high school class is not functioning at this time.

[8:52:23 AM](#)

MIGUEL ROHRBACHER began by noting that he is not an Alaska Native. He then emphasized that HB 216 is important for all Alaskans, not just Alaska Natives. In fact, he informed the committee that this past year he has been a student in a Tlingit language class at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). The Tlingit language class has been important to his life and he has observed how integral the language is to understanding the Tlingit culture as well as the Alaska Native culture. The

language embodies the values and priorities of the culture. Therefore, he encouraged the legislature to recognize the aforementioned by making this small gesture with HB 216 to elevate/recognize Alaska Native languages as having the same status as English.

[8:54:54 AM](#)

RICHARD ANDERSON, speaking as a returning student to UAS who is taking the Tlingit language class, stressed that HB 216 is really important. As a Baby Boomer, he recalled the racial strife in the 1960s in the Lower 48. After being in Alaska for about five years, Mr. Anderson said he has grown to love many in Alaska, particularly many of the [Alaska] Native people in the area. He characterized his experience as almost life-altering. Learning the language of other cultures, he opined, breaks down barriers. By learning the Alaska Native language of the area, he opined that he has become a richer and more respectful person who is aware of others' situations. Language defines culture, and therefore he characterized support for HB 216 as the right and moral thing to do. He mentioned that there is an enormous amount of support for HB 216 and that learning the language and being culturally aware could help with some of the negative aspects [Alaska Natives] are experiencing as it would enhance their sense of self in terms of their past, present, and future.

[9:00:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FOSTER remarked that he was glad to see the room is filled with Alaska Natives and non-Alaska Natives and to hear from both why this legislation is important, which he surmised to mean the state should support HB 216.

[9:02:23 AM](#)

JOHN HANLON told the committee his Tlingit name. He then informed the committee that he didn't have the opportunity to speak Tlingit when he was growing up and is a beginning language student who is amazed how much he has learned in the past year. He said that HB 216 is encouraging as it encourages him to continue on the path that he has decided to follow. Furthermore, he now knows from where he came and who he is, including clan house specific information. He opined that it doesn't matter whether one learns from voice recordings or written text because the underlying message is to treat one another with respect. He opined that had he grown up that way,

his life would've been better for it. In closing, he related his support for HB 216.

9:05:57 AM

ESTHER GREEN began by stating her Yup'ik name. She informed the committee that she was originally from Nunapitchuk, but during the tuberculosis epidemic she was forced to move to Bethel. Ms. Green emphasized that all [Alaska Native] languages are important and should stay and be taught. She further informed the committee that for many years she was a bilingual teacher in the Lower Kuskokwim School District. Teaching language really highlights that language and culture go together and can't be separated, she stressed. She expressed the belief that it's helpful to teach language with culture, a way of life.

9:10:35 AM

DIANE MCEACHERN echoed some of the statements made by other non-Alaska Natives. As an Alaskan citizen, she said it's not acceptable to her that her fellow humans are not supported as fully as she enjoys in terms of their language, culture, and spirituality. She then related her wholehearted support of HB 216.

9:11:53 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HERRON related that when he was elected to the House of Representatives in 2008 he was in the Lower Kuskokwim District, which is 89 percent Alaska Native. He further related that although he has lived in Bethel for 41 years, his wife's family has lived in the area for [much longer]. He noted that both of his wife's grandmothers were Alaska Natives who married non-Alaska Native traders. Although his wife's parents could speak the language, the family lived during the time when they were discouraged from using their Native tongue and the children were not taught their Alaska Native language. Furthermore, since the family was half Alaska Native, the Alaska Native community of Bethel treated them as white while the white community considered them Alaska Native, which resulted in them living in a sort of nether world. Since Representative Herron's wife didn't learn Yup'ik, she couldn't teach their children the language. However, their youngest daughter learned her Alaska Native language herself. As Ms. Green indicated, many teach the Yup'ik language for the future. In fact, there is the Yup'ik Immersion School in Bethel for grades 1st-6th. He recalled that a non-Alaska Native friend of his daughter attended the Yup'ik

Immersion School and he ultimately became the valedictorian of his high school in Bethel and gave his entire speech in Yup'ik. Representative Herron opined that he lives in a rich part of Alaska in terms of language, which is why he felt it's important for HB 216 to become law.

[9:16:36 AM](#)

KONRAD FRANK, speaking in his Alaska Native language of Tlingit, said: "yak'ei tsootáat Ch'a déi xhát nei.oo Lingít shtoo xháltoow Lingit xh'eina'xh yoo xha't duwasaakw. Cha'ak naxha't site. Kaagwaantaan aya xha't. xho'otsnoowoo da'xh aya" Mr. Frank then asked if members understood what he said. He opined that was what it was like for his grandmother in school where she was only allowed to speak and be spoken to in English. He clarified that he wasn't trying to point fingers or blame guilt but rather make a point as to the importance of HB 216. He translated his Tlingit greeting, as follows: "Good morning. It is good to see each and every one of you here today. Please forgive me if I have said anything offensive or wrong for I am still learning my language." He then informed the committee of his Tlingit name, Shak'sha'ani E'esh, and that he comes from Kootznahoo, Angoon. Mr. Frank then expressed his desire to help committee members further understand what Alaska Native languages mean to Alaska Natives. He highlighted the following phrases that people often say: "Take care."; "I love you so much my grandchildren."; "Your mother says I spoil you.". He then said this is how Alaska Natives feel when they are able to say those words in their Alaska Native tongue: "Jink'wat sheeltín. Kunáxh ixhsixhán axh dachxhanz'Iya'n. I tláa yaawakua, kúdáx i eex kei xat tula.aanch. énk'wx i guxsatee" Although it doesn't mean [saying] it in English means that Alaska Natives love their children any less or any more than others but rather saying I love you [in the Alaska Native language] holds a thousand years of history, his history. Furthermore, the language is essential to who Alaska Natives are as a culture. Therefore, for the state to recognize Alaska Native languages, the state is recognizing an important part of Alaska Native people. Mr. Frank said:

Diversity is a beautiful thing. Every language has something to offer. Ideas and perspectives that may not be as clear in English. Not to say English is not a beautiful language or has nothing to offer, because it does. What I am trying to get at, is that being bilingual or learning another language can create more available perspectives. This bill, if passed, would

recognize that diversity, as well as our ancestors who have spoken these languages before us. This is why I support this bill and hope it moves forward.

Gunalcheesh axh'eit yisa axh'ee, Thank you for listening to me.

[9:21:38 AM](#)

BYRON CHARLES began by thanking the committee in Tlingit, Gunalcheesh, and then related his Tlingit name and noted that he belongs to the Douglas (indisc.) killer whale clan and eagle clan on his mother's side. He said he is proud to hear the support for HB 216, which is long overdue. He emphasized that it's good to see progress in learning and maintaining Alaska Native languages to keep them alive. He encouraged the witness from the university to keep up the good work and applauded the committee members for listening. He informed the committee of a recent national survey that found only 36 percent of the population surveyed in 2013 knew their First Amendment rights. He then discussed the importance of interpretation. He said that HB 216 would serve as a positive tool in much of Alaska, particularly in the largest growing industry, the tourism industry, in Alaska.

[9:27:49 AM](#)

DELLA CHENEY spoke in support of HB 216. She then introduced herself in her Alaska Native language of Haida. She reviewed her lineage, specifying that she is an eagle who belongs to the hummingbird people. As a Haida woman born in 1947, she attended elementary and high school in Kake where she learned to speak a little Spanish as it was a requirement. She then attended and graduated from the University of Hawaii Hilo and was a fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ms. Cheney related that she participated in programs that researched and learned about stories of families and communities and the importance of the aforementioned, including the language, to the children. She told the committee that her mother and grandmother were Haida and spoke Haida and her father was Tlingit. Although she didn't learn either Haida or Tlingit, she listened to them and can understand the majority of what someone says in either language. In 1969/1970 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she started to learn the language from Ms. Soboleff. She then moved to Southeast Alaska where there were no teachers of the language. Although her mother spoke the language, she didn't speak it to her children as her mother attended boarding school

and was told not to speak her Alaska Native language. Furthermore, she said her parents wanted her to learn English in order to live in the new world. She said she was thankful for that because now her youngest daughter is an attorney and her oldest daughter is a doctor of leadership and change. Ms. Cheney related that she is a survivor of cancer who had to learn the language of cancer and taking care of oneself and is now hoping to return to learning Haida. With regard to learning Haida, Ms. Cheney highlighted that it's not just the words, but the connections and relations to others and her community that is the most important part of understanding who one is.

[9:33:55 AM](#)

TONI WEBER (PH) began by stating her Haida name. She informed the committee that she has been working in the field of substance abuse in Juneau since 2009. She noted that she offers and implements cultural activities in her groups at the SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC). The cultural connection, she opined, helps people heal. Ms. Weber attributed the high rate of suicide amongst Alaska Natives to the difficulty in finding a sense of belonging and identity in the Western world. She opined that passage of HB 216 would return dignity and a sense of belonging to Alaska Natives.

[9:35:35 AM](#)

CHARLENE CLEARY related that her family is from Tanacross, which is located in the Tok area. She urged support for HB 216 as it's important. She told the committee that although she speaks her Alaska Native language, some in her family and community didn't learn their Alaska Native language because they weren't allowed. She expressed the desire to pass on her Alaska Native language to her grandkids. She also expressed the need for her Alaska Native language to be taught in school. In closing, Ms. Cleary urged the committee's support for HB 216.

[9:37:52 AM](#)

DEWEY HOFFMAN began by relating his name in his Alaska Native language of Denaakke. Continuing to speak in Denaakke, he told the committee that he is originally from Ruby, but now lives in Anchorage. In Denaakke he identified his parents. He then informed the committee that he originally began learning Denaakke, Koyukon Athabascan, in 2007. He said he noticed the impact of learning Denaakke with himself and his own family. Although he said learning Denaakke was the most challenging

language of the many he has learned, it has been the most meaningful. In fact, he has begun to find little ways in which to integrate Denaakke into his everyday life. Mr. Hoffman related that he is currently a Masters student in the College of Education at the University of Alaska Anchorage and is reviewing ways, through policy change, in which to facilitate language learning in formal settings as well as at home. Mr. Hoffman characterized HB 216 as part of the aforementioned, and therefore he said he fully supported any effort to advance policy that facilitates learning [Alaska Native languages]. He echoed earlier testimony that languages are a powerful tool that individuals and communities can use to become healthy, functional, and value-driven. When healthy communities are promoted, increases in funding or policies for incarceration or other punishments aren't necessary as the [communities and their people] will be stronger than ever. Mr. Hoffman opined that the aforementioned can be achieved. He added that learning a language is just like CPR training, obtaining a Ph.D., or driver's training in that anyone can learn and anyone can teach. For example, there was training for Eyak for which the main instructor was from France. In conclusion, Mr. Hoffman expressed his desire for Alaska Native languages to be healthy and thrive.

[9:42:53 AM](#)

DAVID KATZEEK began his testimony with a brief introduction in Tlingit that began as follows: "Most noble, very precious children of the earth ...." He said that the language he just spoke is an Ancient language that has a lot of knowledge and wisdom. For example, his people spoke with one another by referring to each other as "Precious Children of the Earth." He echoed earlier comments that any spoken language develops community, which can be observed in sports and education, activities. Some challenges arise when a language hasn't been used and acknowledged because it's as if the community of people aren't being recognized, acknowledged, or appreciated. Millions of dollars, he pointed out, have been spent by the U.S. to estimate what past indigenous speakers spoke about. Mr. Katzeek said he was certain members hear the voice of oil, trees, fish, and resources. However, he emphasized that now members are hearing the voice of the people [and their request] for help. This is a great opportunity to maintain [languages] that are over 10,000 years old. Therefore, he encouraged the committee to hear the voice/cry because a lot of education and wisdom in the ancient languages. "Why not preserve it? Why not keep it? Why not be known for hearing the voice of a people of long

ago?," he questioned. He noted that the words he spoke in Tlingit were ancient words regarding who he is that were passed down through the generations. Every human being, he opined, needs to know who they are and who they represent.

[9:48:51 AM](#)

MARY NUNUWAK [NOONGWOOK?] began with a brief introduction in her Alaska Native language. She explained that when she first went to school, she didn't know any English besides the words yes and no. She said that she is a firm believer that all students should learn other languages at a very early age as it broadens one's world view, takes away prejudices, and provides a broader perspective. She then said the earlier apologies by the non-Alaska Native witnesses for being non-Alaska Native wasn't necessary as no one should apologize for who they are; everyone has something to offer and it only requires meeting in the middle, which she opined will result in more getting done. Drawing from her mother's experience, she opined that one doesn't always have to learn from formal schooling as everyone has the capability to learn things on their own. She then related her belief that reading is the best way to learn. She noted that she is very good in western sciences and traditional knowledge, which is a form of science that never fails as it has been passed down for generations. In closing, she related support for HB 216 and expressed the need to teach one another and use education as it is the best tool to solve problems.

[9:56:36 AM](#)

MAGARET ACTIVE related her name in her Alaska Native language of Yungtun, which is also known as Yup'ik. She then thanked all who support HB 216. She told the committee that her grandmother only spoke Yungtun in her house, even to those who didn't speak Yungtun, which she believes was her grandmother's way of teaching that everyone needs to be treated with respect and dignity and that language is an important part of a person. In the Kongiganak area the bible is written in Yup'ik, for which she thanked the missionaries. She noted that there is literature printed in Yup'ik in Germany, which she felt embarrassed about because it wasn't printed in her home country. She also recalled that her grandfather had literature written in Yungtun using the Russian alphabet.

[9:58:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HERRON, recalling Representative Kreiss-Tomkins' remarks that HB 216 is a symbolic gesture/effort, expressed hope that the legislation is not just symbolic but rather an acknowledgement and recognition of the existence, validity, legality, and acceptance [of Alaska Native languages].

[9:59:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FOSTER pointed out that HB 216 is an effort at the state level, and therefore questioned how local communities, tribes, and Native corporations could be encouraged to support the recognition of Alaska Native languages. He noted that the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) has passed a resolution that would support Alaska Native languages. He further questioned how local support could be developed to place Alaska Native languages in schools and spoken by more people. He clarified that the aforementioned were questions for the public to ponder in terms of its part in this state level effort. Representative Foster recalled Representative Kreiss-Tomkins' comments that previous efforts to pass legislation similar to HB 216 failed, but the difference is that HB 216 wouldn't have the force of law. He requested that Representative Kreiss-Tomkins expand on the aforementioned.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS clarified that there hasn't been language offered similar to that in HB 216. However, there was a 1998 voter initiative that set the precedent for language law in Alaska. This legislation would add to the official languages of the state without the logistical details of printing materials in 22 different languages. In regard to Representative Herron's comments, Representative Kreiss-Tomkins characterized HB 216 as profound and symbolic in its importance and in terms of change. He then said that he hasn't felt any more of a Representative and a sense of humility than today because this legislation belongs to everyone.

[10:02:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR NAGEAK provided the following comments in his Alaska Native language. He highlighted that he is the only one in the legislature who is fluent in his/her Alaska Native language, Inupiaq. He said that he speaks Inupiaq on a daily basis when he is with his peers who speak the language. In fact, he noted that he spoke Inupiaq exclusively until he went to school at the age of six. Although those who spoke their Alaska Native language were punished, the cold climate and the fact that the Lower 48 transplanted teachers didn't go outside during recess

afforded them the opportunity to speak Inupiaq outside during recess. His generation, he charged, was the last to speak their Alaska Native language fluently and is complicit in not keeping the language alive for future generations. Therefore, they must change the course and speak to their youth in their Alaska Native languages until all are fluent in their Alaska Native language. He stressed that one shouldn't make fun of youth who make mistakes when learning their Alaska Native language. He noted his support of HB 216 and encouraged all his colleagues to support the legislation as well.

[10:07:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR LEDOUX closed public testimony.

[10:07:51 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR NAGEAK moved to report HB 216 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal note. There being no objection, HB 216 was reported from the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[10:08:36 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:08 a.m.