

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

March 19, 2014

1:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Bert Stedman, Chair
Senator Peter Micciche, Vice Chair
Senator Kevin Meyer

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Pete Kelly
Senator Johnny Ellis

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 263(HSS)

"An Act extending the Alaska senior benefits payment program."

- HEARD & HELD

CS FOR HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 25(MLV)

Urging the United States Congress to restore the presumption of a service connection for Agent Orange exposure to United States Veterans who served in the waters defined by and in the airspace over the combat zone in Vietnam.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 263

SHORT TITLE: EXTEND SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) HAWKER

01/21/14	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/14	(H)	HSS, FIN
02/04/14	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM CAPITOL 106
02/04/14	(H)	Moved CSHB 263(HSS) Out of Committee
02/04/14	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
02/05/14	(H)	HSS RPT CS(HSS) NT 7DP
02/05/14	(H)	DP: SEATON, REINBOLD, PRUITT, KELLER, NAGEAK, TARR, HIGGINS
02/18/14	(H)	FIN AT 1:30 PM HOUSE FINANCE 519
02/18/14	(H)	Moved CSHB 263(HSS) Out of Committee

02/18/14 (H) MINUTE(FIN)
02/19/14 (H) FIN RPT CS(HSS) NT 10DP
02/19/14 (H) DP: HOLMES, MUNOZ, THOMPSON, EDGMON,
T.WILSON, GUTTENBERG, GARA, COSTELLO,
02/19/14 (H) STOLTZE, AUSTERMAN
02/26/14 (H) TRANSMITTED TO (S)
02/26/14 (H) VERSION: CSHB 263(HSS)
02/28/14 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/28/14 (S) HSS, FIN
03/12/14 (S) HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/12/14 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --
03/14/14 (S) HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/14/14 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --
03/19/14 (S) HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205

BILL: HJR 25

SHORT TITLE: VIETNAM VETS: SERVICE-RELATED DISEASES

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) LEDOUX

02/03/14 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/03/14 (H) MLV
02/18/14 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM CAPITOL 120
02/18/14 (H) Moved CSHJR 25(MLV) Out of Committee
02/18/14 (H) MINUTE(MLV)
02/19/14 (H) MLV RPT CS(MLV) 7DP
02/19/14 (H) DP: GRUENBERG, HIGGINS, SADDLER,
REINBOLD, HUGHES, LEDOUX, FOSTER
03/10/14 (H) TRANSMITTED TO (S)
03/10/14 (H) VERSION: CSHJR 25(MLV)
03/12/14 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/12/14 (S) HSS, STA
03/19/14 (S) HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

CECILE ELLIOTT, Staff
Representative Mike Hawker
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced HB 263 on behalf of the sponsor.

RON KREHER, Director
Division of Public Assistance
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions related to HB 263.

MARIE DARLIN, Member
AARP
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 263.

DENISE DANIELLO, Executive Director
Alaska Commission on Aging
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 263.

THOMAS BROWN, Staff
Representative Gabrielle LeDoux
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HJR 25 on behalf of the sponsor.

JOHN ROSSIE, Executive Director
Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association
Littleton, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HJR 25.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:33:07 PM](#)

CHAIR BERT STEDMAN called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Micciche, Meyer, and Chair Stedman.

HB 263-EXTEND SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

[1:33:44 PM](#)

CHAIR STEDMAN announced the consideration of HB 263. [CSHB 263 (HSS) was before the committee.]

CECILE ELLIOTT, Staff, Representative Mike Hawker, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced HB 263 on behalf of the sponsor. She related that HB 263 extends the senior benefits program from June 2015 until June 2021. It is a needs-based program established in 2007, and provides monthly cash assistance to residents age 65 years or older. The beneficiaries receive monthly cash of \$125, \$175, or \$250, depending on their income. Approximately 11,000 of Alaska's lowest income senior citizens will be served by this program in the current fiscal year.

MS. ELLIOTT referred to a document in members' files from the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) that shows the history of senior benefits under various names.

CHAIR STEDMAN requested a synopsis of that document.

MS. ELLIOTT reported that from 1972 to present there have been four significant changes in senior benefits. The Longevity Bonus Program became the Senior Assistance Program, then the Senior Care Program, and currently, the Senior Benefits Program. Changes were made due to costs and prioritizing the most needy to receive a benefit.

CHAIR STEDMAN noted the intent of the committee is to hear from the sponsor, take public testimony, and set HB 263 aside.

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At ease

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CHAIR STEDMAN asked the committee members if they have any questions.

SENATOR MEYER recalled the history of changes in senior benefits programs. He asked how the current program is working out.

MS. ELLIOTT said there are 11,000 seniors with the greatest needs benefiting from this program.

SENATOR MEYER questioned if the money is meeting their basic needs. He asked if the seniors pay taxes on the benefits.

MS. ELLIOTT said they do not.

SENATOR MEYER asked if seniors in a state-subsidized facility receive senior benefits.

MS. ELLIOTT said no.

SENATOR MEYER asked if there are six employees working on the program.

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RON KREHER, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Juneau, Alaska, answered questions related to HB 263. He related that there are six positions attached to the program that have been in the

operating budget since the Senior Benefits Payment Program was established.

MR. KREHER pointed out that the program is successful because it is helping seniors to be able to remain safely in their homes and in their communities, which is a priority of DHSS. About 56 percent of the recipients are on Adult Public Assistance and the program augments that funding. Another 30 percent are on food stamps. He concluded that the seniors who benefit by the program are truly needy.

SENATOR MEYER recalled the tough decision when cutting the Longevity Bonus, which all seniors got. He asked if the seniors have to enroll every year.

MR. KREHER said there is an annual renewal process.

SENATOR MEYER asked if that is why six staff are needed.

MR. KREHER said yes; the staff also monitor other programs.

SENATOR MICCICHE asked why asset levels are not counted for eligibility.

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MR. KREHER related that the program does not have an asset test because so many individuals are receiving benefits from other programs, such as Medicaid, food stamps, and public assistance. He noted that individuals in need are asset poor and often assets are dedicated to end-of-life events.

SENATOR MICCICHE said he can understand why someone in a Pioneer Home or an Alaska Veteran's Home does not receive senior benefits. He asked why individuals in private nursing homes or in mental health institutions do not receive senior benefits.

MR. KREHER said typically individuals that are in a care facility receive a stipend. When the Senior Benefit Program was reauthorized several years ago, an amendment included an increase in stipends for people in institutionalized settings. He stated that for most of the assistance programs, the level of care is being met.

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SENATOR MICCICHE highlighted some of the supporting documents of the bill. He said in his district, the Kenai Peninsula Borough, there are over 1,000 recipients of senior benefits. He thought

that number seemed high for a borough with 54,000 people, but concluded that there are income challenges in some of the communities.

MR. KREHER opined that the ratio is representative of the senior population in each borough. He added that Alaska has an aging population.

CHAIR STEDMAN noted a fiscal note from DHSS for \$23 million in general funds for FY 15, already included in the Governor's budget.

CHAIR STEDMAN opened public testimony.

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MARIE DARLIN, Member, AARP, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of HB 263. She related that she lives in Fireweed Place, housing for seniors of a variety of income levels. She said many seniors are not taking advantage of all the programs and many don't want state services. She maintained that many should be applying because they need help; any assistance for independent seniors helps keep them out of facilities. She said HB 263 is a way to provide much needed help for seniors.

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DENISE DANIELLO, Executive Director, Alaska Commission on Aging, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of HB 263. She referred to a letter from the Commission in members' packets. She said the Commission has supported the Senior Benefits Program from its onset. She stressed that the program really does make a difference. She shared that the average age of the recipient is 75 and the oldest is 107. She related that often with a married couple the husband gets sick, they spend down the family assets, and the wife is left a widow. She reported that about two-thirds of the recipients are women.

SENATOR MICCICHE stated his support for HB 263 and the previous Longevity Bonus. He wanted to encourage seniors to remain in Alaska.

CHAIR STEDMAN thanked Ms. Daniello for her testimony. He closed public testimony.

[1:51:43 PM](#)

MS. ELLIOT thanked the committee for hearing the bill.

CHAIR STEDMAN held HB 263 in committee.

HJR 25-VIETNAM VETS: SERVICE-RELATED DISEASES

[1:52:12 PM](#)

CHAIR STEDMAN announced the consideration of HJR 25. [CSHJR 25(MLV) was before the committee.] He said it is the first hearing on the bill. The intent is to have the sponsor introduce the resolution, take public testimony, and set the resolution aside for further review. He noted a zero fiscal note.

THOMAS BROWN, Staff, Representative Gabrielle LeDoux, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented HJR 25 on behalf of the sponsor. He provided background information on HJR 25. In 1991 Congress passed the Agent Orange Act, which forced the Veterans Administration (VA) to make a presumption of exposure for any Vietnam Veteran who displayed symptoms related to that herbicide and then to provide them with medical or financial benefits.

He said in 2002, the VA redefined what made a veteran eligible for those benefits, choosing to limit them to only those veterans who had served on the ground, dismissing all the off-shore Navy and Marine personnel from coverage. This was done without any scientific, medical, or legal reasons. Over the last six years, the Institute of Medicine, the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences, has issued four separate reports, including one conducted at the request of the VA, all of which concluded that there are no legitimate reasons to exclude members of the Blue Water Navy from receiving benefits related to Agent Orange.

He said there is currently a bill before Congress, HR-543, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2013, which would reverse this arbitrary act of bureaucracy, returning medical benefits and compensation to the veterans who have earned them. There are 174 co-sponsors from both sides of the isle for HR-543, including Don Young.

MR. BROWN concluded that HJR 25 is simply a resolution to urge Congress to honor veterans and pass the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act of 2013. Washington, D.C. has the obligation to provide veterans with medical and financial assistance they deserve. Should HJR 25 pass, copies will be delivered to the President, Vice President, Congress, and the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs. There are potentially hundreds of veterans in need of assistance due to exposure to toxins.

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SENATOR MEYER asked how many veterans this would affect in Alaska.

MR. BROWN said there are 609 Alaska veterans who were members of the Blue Water Navy, but it is unknown how many need this assistance.

CHAIR STEDMAN opened public testimony.

[1:56:30 PM](#)

JOHN ROSSIE, Executive Director, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veteran Association, Littleton, Colorado, testified in support of HJR 25. He described the association as an educational 501(c)(3), whose job it is to put together materials that would educate the general public, as well as legislators, about the issues regarding the change in the VA law.

CHAIR STEDMAN closed public testimony.

MR. BROWN requested that the committee pass the bill.

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CHAIR STEDMAN held HJR 25 in committee.

[1:58:18 PM](#)

There being nothing further to come before the committee, Chair Stedman adjourned the Senate Health and Social Service Standing Committee at 1:58 p.m.