

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 7, 2018

1:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator Natasha von Imhof, Vice Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 170

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

- MOVED SB 170 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 170

SHORT TITLE: EXTEND: SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) KELLY

01/31/18	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/31/18	(S)	HSS, FIN
02/07/18	(S)	HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR PETE KELLY
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 170.

HEATHER CARPENTER, Staff
Senator Pete Kelly
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 170 on behalf of the sponsor.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information on SB 170.

GORDON GLASER, Commissioner
Alaska Commission on Aging
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 170.

JEANETTE GRASTO, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 170.

KEN HELANDER, Advocacy Director
AARP Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 170.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:33:42 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON 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 Giessel, von Imhoff, Begich, Micciche, and Chair Wilson.

SB 170-EXTEND: SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

[1:34:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced the consideration of SB 170.

[1:34:22 PM](#)

SENATOR PETE KELLY, Alaska State Legislature, sponsor of SB 170, explained that the senior benefit program is a tiered, cash benefit payment for people 65 and older (11,400 senior citizens receive payments). SB 170 will extend the program, which expires this summer, to 2023. The bill has been through many subcommittees. It has been vetted, it is a good program, and many people support it.

He called the committee's attention to the Senior Benefits Program Information and Fact Sheet in their packets.

SENATOR MICCICHE asked if this will be the same benefit that was paid out in 2018.

1:36:59 PM

HEATHER CARPENTER, Staff, Senator Pete Kelly, Alaska State Legislature, presented SB 170 on behalf of the sponsor. She said it is the same benefit. The bill left the tiers as is in statute. They technically are at a higher tier level [than the current benefit amounts]. That gives the legislature the flexibility to change the tiers by appropriation. The tiers were changed in 2016 because of the budget crisis. The highest income tier, which is the lowest benefit, was lowered from \$125 to \$76 a month.

SENATOR MICCICHE said, to clarify, the payment would remain at \$76.

MS. CARPENTER responded yes.

SENATOR MICCICHE said it is the wrong time to allow senior benefits to lapse. The Senate majority has focused on seniors and those who have developmental challenges. This bill is in the spirit of how the legislature prioritizes support.

SENATOR BEGICH asked about the New Payment Level for Top Income Tier on page 2 of the fiscal note that shows a decrease over time.

1:39:09 PM

MONICA WINDOM, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), provided information on SB 170. She said the top tier level in regulation is \$125 a month. The regulation was changed to handle reductions in allocations. If not enough money is allocated, the top income tier will be reduced, if necessary. If the allocation was low enough to reduce the top tier distribution to zero, the next income tier would be reduced.

SENATOR BEGICH said then the fiscal note does not show a reduction.

MS. WINDOM said the fiscal note shows a reduction in the payment level over time. On average, the number of recipients increases by about two percent a year. If the funding level remains the same, the top tier receives less money as time goes on and more people receive payments.

SENATOR BEGICH said then the top tier will actually go down over time.

MS. WINDOM said correct.

SENATOR BEGICH said he hopes the legislature will find a way to hold that harmless over time, but he did not want to do anything to prevent the bill moving forward.

[1:41:10 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON opened public testimony.

[1:41:24 PM](#)

GORDON GLASER, Commissioner, Alaska Commission on Aging, supported SB 170. He said the program is a way to keep people in the community rather than needing institutionalization. For many people \$76 a month is not a lot of money, but for people right on the margins of paying for prescriptions, rent, or transportation, it is of critical importance. It keeps people independent. The commission and Alaska Geriatric Exchange Network (AgeNet), as well as the Anchorage Senior Activity Center, are unanimous in support of this. It is a program that reaches rural and urban areas. It keeps people independent with a shred of dignity.

[1:43:26 PM](#)

JEANETTE GRASTO, representing self, supported SB 170. She said before she recently retired as the hospital's Lifeline coordinator, she saw first-hand how many seniors live at or below poverty. This program makes such a difference in their lives in helping them to pay for medicine, transportation, food, and medical costs. People at poverty cannot afford these things. This program helps keeps them independent longer.

[1:45:06 PM](#)}

KEN HELANDER, Advocacy Director, AARP Alaska, supported SB 170. He said the Senior Benefits Program is one of the most important in keeping seniors independent. In the 1980s, he spent about 15 years working for senior services for the Anchorage Community Mental Health Center. He made many home visits with people struggling to make it day to day. In those days people were grateful for the Alaska longevity bonus. Now the senior benefits program is means tested based on federal poverty levels. The program and eligibility changes, but people are in the same situation. He related a story about the anxiety of older man who called AARP when an announcement was made that some senior benefits were going to be reduced. The man used his car to take

his struggling neighbors to food banks. From this man's story he heard what it takes to remain independent when older, disabled, or infirm and how determined these older Alaskans are to do that. The Senior Benefits Program serves more than 11,000 for a relative drop in the bucket of the state's budget.

[1:48:42 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON closed public testimony.

SENATOR MICCICHE said he did not mobilize the gray army in his community, but if he had, there would not be enough time for all the public testimony.

[1:49:32 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON said Mat-Su also had a healthy senior advocacy group. This is an important issue for a vulnerable population. The state should do due diligence to help the folks who built Alaska.

[1:50:17 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked for the will of the body.

[1:50:24 PM](#)

SENATOR VON IMHOF moved to report SB 170 from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[1:50:34 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced that without objection, SB 170 is moved from the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee, with the understanding that Legislative Legal is authorized to make any necessary technical and/or conforming adjustments.

[1:50:46 PM](#)

At ease.

[1:52:16 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wilson adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee at 1:52 p.m.