

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

April 4, 2019

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Sara Hannan, Co-Chair
Representative Matt Claman
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins
Representative Steve Thompson
Representative Sharon Jackson
Representative Josh Revak

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 81

"An Act prohibiting disposable plastic shopping bags; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 60

"An Act repealing the senior benefits payment program; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 81

SHORT TITLE: PROHIBIT PLASTIC RETAIL BAGS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) JOSEPHSON

03/06/19	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/06/19	(H)	CRA, L&C
04/04/19	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

BILL: HB 60

SHORT TITLE: REPEALING SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

02/20/19 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/20/19 (H) CRA, HSS, FIN
04/04/19 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE ANDY JOSEPHSON
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, introduced HB 81.

ELISE SORUM-BIRK, Staff
Representative Andy Josephson
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation during the hearing on HB 81, on behalf of Representative Josephson, prime sponsor.

CAROL MONTGOMERY
Mat-Su Zero Waste Coalition Plastic Bag Committee
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on HB 81, offered information regarding the detrimental effects of plastic bags when consumed by ruminants.

EVE DOWNING
Alaska Youth Environmental Action
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 81.

SHAWNDA O-BRIEN, Director
Division of Public Assistance
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the hearing on HB 60.

FAITH MYERS
No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

KEN HELANDER, Advocacy Director
AARP Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

MARY GEDDES

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

LAURA BONNER

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

ROBERTA STEVENS

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

KEREN KELLEY

Homer Senior Citizens, Inc.

Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

JIM HORNADAY

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to the removal of the senior benefit.

DALBERT PUNGOWIYI, President

Native Council of Savoonga

Savoonga, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

DAVID BLACKETER, Immediate Past Chair

Alaska Commission on Aging

Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

DAVID OTNESS

Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

MIKE COONS, President

Association of Mature American Citizens - Greater Alaska Chapter; Public Member

Commission on Aging

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 60.

PATRICK CURTIS, Program Director

Anchorage Senior Activity Center

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

ANNE DOERPINGHAUS
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

JONATHAN STRONG
Senior Citizens of Kodiak
Kodiak, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

KAREN CAMERON
No address provided
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

GORDON GLASER
Anchorage Senior Activities Center
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

GEORGE PIERCE
Kasilof, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

IDA NELSON
Igiugig, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

PAUL SHERRY
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

JO KENNEDY
Kenai, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

NIKKI POLLOCK, Director
Senior Services
Bethel, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

MATT DONAHOE
Sitka, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

JAYME ANDREAN, Volunteer
AARP; Chair
Juneau AARP Community Action Team

Douglas, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 60.

DENICE DAIELLA, Executive Director

Alaskan Commission on Aging

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

ERIN WALKEN TOLLES, Executive Director

Catholic Community Services

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

CAROLINE DEMMERT

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

ANN STEPETIN

Elderly Services

Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

("Tlingit & Haida")

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

BARBARA BOLTON

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

MARY ALICE KNOTTS

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

INDIANNA TURKISHER, Manager

Food Bank of Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

TERESA MCLAIN

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

WILLIAM HARRINGTON

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:02:00 AM

CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Revak, Kreiss-Tomkins, Thompson, Jackson, Hannan, and Drummond were present at the call to order. Representative Claman arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 81-PROHIBIT PLASTIC RETAIL BAGS

8:02:56 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 81, "An Act prohibiting disposable plastic shopping bags; and providing for an effective date."

8:03:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ANDY JOSEPHSON, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 81. He said this legislation originally was filed in January 2018; it was modified and made it through two committees last year. He said the impetus for HB 81 is the scourge of plastic bags. He related there is a plastic bag in a tree across the street from the Capitol Building that has been there for a couple years now. He said some may ask the reason for "picking on this industry and not others," and he opined, "We have to have a starting place." Representative Josephson said that "this is a national movement." He said that when the committee hears public testimony, it would hear from people all over the state that "are willing to be inconvenienced for our environment." He said [plastic refuse] does not only have a [negative] visual impact; it also impacts waterways and wildlife.

8:05:55 AM

ELISE SORUM-BIRK, Staff, Representative Andy Josephson, Alaska State Legislature, gave a PowerPoint presentation related to HB 81 on behalf of Representative Josephson, primer sponsor. She directed attention to slide 2, "Motivations," and she stated that plastics do not belong in nature. She echoed Representative Josephson's remark that plastic is harmful to wildlife and the marine environment. She said there have been multiple news stories in the last month related to whales dying as a result of ingesting massive amounts of plastics. In Alaska, there has been at least one recorded death of a Northern fur seal resulting from entanglement.

MS. SORUM-BIRK shared that she used to be an early childhood educator working in an outdoor summer program. She said she is aware that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has a curriculum completely based around marine debris and plastic issues; it's called, "Lose the Loop." She said, "It's a huge issue for this national agency." She stated that a plastic bag ban is "a small but significant step in addressing the global plastics problem and the issue of single-use plastics in general."

[8:07:33 AM](#)

MS. SORUM-BIRK directed attention to slide 3, "Why Plastic Bags?" She noted that the sponsor of the bill is shown in a photo looking displeased at having found a plastic bag while kayaking. As shown on the slide, she related that plastic bags are "a major plastic offender" because they are lightweight, thus they transport easily in wind and water. She said new habits are necessary and have already been adopted by communities worldwide. Ms. Sorum-Birk turned to slide 4, titled "Plastic Bags in the Environment," which displays a diagram depicting how plastic interacts with the ecosystem. She explained that [persistent] organic pollutants (POPs) accumulate in fatty tissue and [toxins increase in concentration up the food chain]. She said that makes her think of salmon and whales, both of which are depended upon as food resources by subsistence communities.

MS. SORUM-BIRK moved on to slide 5, titled "Why a Ban?" She said in last year's related legislation, a fee for plastic bag use was proposed. She said bans are more common. She related that stores are already subsidizing for the cost of bags by charging more for goods purchased, with an estimated cost of \$25-\$50 per person each year. She pointed out the photo(s) of the aforementioned bag in the tree across the street. Focusing on slide 6, titled "International Policy Trends," she reported that there are more than 40 countries that have a plastic bag ban, and that number continues to rise: Bangladesh was the first in 2002; Kenya has the strictest ban. She said a reporter in The Guardian wrote that this ban has sparked interest in neighboring countries, and "the once ubiquitous issue of plastic bag litter is in decline in Kenya." She said there is less litter and fewer fishermen pulling up plastic bags in their nets on Lake Victoria. She said the bottom of slide 6 shows the many [countries] that will enact plastic bags in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. She noted that the European Union has gone further by

banning many single-use plastic items; that ban will go into effect in 2021.

MS. SORUM-BIRK turned to slide 7, titled "Policy Trends - Lower 49." She said California was the first state to ban plastic bags; this past week New York became the second state to fully ban plastic bags; and all the municipalities in Hawai'i have banned plastic bags although there is no statewide law to that effect. She noted that the slide shows other states that have municipalities within them that have banned bags, and she observed that Alaska should have been included on that list.

[8:11:15 AM](#)

MS. SORUM-BIRK moved on to slide 8, titled "Alaska." She stated that in Alaska 17 communities no longer allow plastic bags; Denali Borough and the City of Homer are considering a plastic bag ban; Homer has "gone back and forth for several years" but will have the issue on its ballot this year. She reported that Anchorage has a [plastic] bag ban in place that will go into effect in September 2019. She noted that those communities on slide 8 that are listed with an asterisk next to the name are communities that "voluntarily stopped using plastic bags out of concern for environmental health."

MS. SORUM-BIRK directed attention to slide 9, titled "The Resource(ful) State." For example, some people have crocheted plastic bags into new, reusable plastic bags. Not on the list is "Boomerang Bags" - a national movement to make, provide, or share reusable bags. Another movement is called, "Take a Bag/Leave a Bag," where people donate their bags, which then get sterilized and put out at stores for use by people who have neglected to bring their own bags. She shared that her alma mater, Valdez High School, has a club that makes bags out of old tee shirts. She said, "So, these creative solutions show that you can reuse materials and get to the root of how a carbon footprint can be reduced"

MS. SORUM-BIRK turned to slide 10, titled "Ruminant Ingestion of Plastic." She stated that this issue was a big motivation for the ban of plastic bags in the Matanuska-Susitna ("Mat-Su") Valley. She said the slide illustrates that the problem [with plastic bags] is not just a coastal problem. She talked about caribou that have had a hole cut in their sides and plastic was found in the digestive tracts of these caribou. She indicated that Carol Montgomery would testify later and talk about this subject.

[8:13:48 AM](#)

MS. SORUM-BIRK proceeded to slide 11, titled "Section 1." She said the proposed legislation would add a new section to AS 46.06. AS 46.06.145(a) would establish a ban on retailers [providing disposable plastic shopping bags to customers]; [subsection](b) would provide exceptions to the bag ban, including bags that hold produce and meat, newspaper bags, and bags for flowers; [subsection](c) would establish fines of \$250 for the first violation, \$500 for the second violation, and \$750 for each additional violation - these would be within a calendar year; [subsection](e) would provide definitions for "disposable [plastic] shopping bag," "retail seller," and "reusable bag." She said it is important to note that a reusable bag can be plastic, as long as it is at least 4 mils in thickness. As shown on slide 12, Ms. Sorum-Birk stated that Section 2 of the proposed legislation would provide an effective date of January [1], 2021, which would give retailers the time to adapt and use up the stock of plastic bags they already have.

[8:15:18 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN questioned why the state should take action when it seems an increasing number of local communities are taking action on their own to ban plastic bags.

MS. SORUM-BIRK answered that many communities in Alaska lack municipal government because they are not incorporated, and HB 81 could benefit those communities. In response to a follow-up question, she reiterated that the effective date proposed under HB 81 should allow retailers to use up their existing stock of plastic bags before the ban takes effect.

[8:16:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMPSON noted that when he was young, paper bag use was frowned upon because the use of paper bags meant trees were being cut down, and the use of plastic bags back then was encouraged. Now things have turned around. He indicated that he was confused as to how, under HB 81, allowed and nonallowed use would be separated. He further indicated that after the ban is in place, people who [reuse] existing plastic bags may be fined.

[8:18:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON speculated that "the difference between the types of bags is so readily apparent that it won't become an issue."

MS. SORUM-BIRK advised that HB 81 clearly outlines [disposable] plastic shopping bags and lists exceptions [to the proposed prohibition]. She said the use of paper [bags] is "in no way environmentally benign," and many municipalities nationwide have imposed fees on the use of paper bags. Nevertheless, she pointed out that paper bags are biodegradable.

8:19:40 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened invited testimony.

8:19:57 AM

CAROL MONTGOMERY, Mat-Su Zero Waste Coalition Plastic Bag Committee, reported that a student visiting the recycling center talked about having seen Dr. Collins, of the Matanuska Experiment Farm, pull plastic bags out of a research moose fitted with a fistula. Ms. Montgomery said she then talked to Dr. Collins, who told her he had lost a couple of caribou before figuring out "what was going on." She said one time Dr. Collins pulled a wedge of plastic bags as big as a football out of a caribou. She said a video was taken showing Dr. Collins removing plastic from the stomach of a moose. She said the coalition found out that the Williams Reindeer Farm and the Agate Inn have lost many reindeer as a result of plastic bag obstruction. She said those were deaths confirmed through necropsy. She pointed out that it is rare for wild animals to necropsied, because it is an expensive procedure. Ms. Montgomery said she called Kimberly Beckman, a [veterinarian] for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G), in Fairbanks, and she confirmed a musk ox calf had asphyxiated on a plastic bag and a turtle from the Alaska SeaLife Center [in Seward] had died from plastic bag consumption.

MS. MONTGOMERY said the coalition started outreach to community groups to spread awareness "about what was going on," and people were receptive to learning about the issue. The coalition approached the Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce, and people donated money, which the coalition used to run some radio spots and buy [reusable] bags to be handed out in grocery stores. She said Mayor Bert Cottle took on the issue in Wasilla, where the public testimony was overwhelmingly in favor: 47 to 1 in written testimony, 2 to 1 in public testimony, and 5 to 1 by

vote of the city council. She reported that Channel 11 News conducted a survey that showed "75 percent were in favor of extending the bag ban to Anchorage." She said [the plastic bag ban] in Wasilla has been in effect almost a year and in Palmer three months, and already the area is cleaner; a windstorm currently in effect has resulted in far fewer plastic bags "stuck" in parking lots of grocery stores. She noted that tourists who rode the Alaska Railroad used to complain about the amount of trash, but that area is "already much better." Ms. Montgomery emphasized the bottom line is that [adjusting to a plastic ban] is "no big deal."

[8:24:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked for definition of fistula, as used in ruminants.

MS. MONTGOMERY answered that it is a device [that can be implanted in the side of ruminates] that allows for a person to reach in to [the rumen] and extract its contents. She indicated that many reindeer on farms have died because "they don't have that option." She said the owners of Agate Inn, in Wasilla, reported one of their reindeer suffered a heart attack after consuming plastic bags; there were so many bags in the reindeer's rumen that they put pressure on his heart. She said reindeer forage for food by pawing the ground, and despite efforts to keep the area clean, the reindeer still consume plastic bags.

[8:25:52 AM](#)

EVE DOWNING, Alaska Youth Environmental Action, stated that the plastic bag ban in Soldotna, Alaska, has positively impacted her community. She said most community members have gotten into the habit of bringing reusable bags to the store when they shop, and many of them have said they just needed "a push" to remember to bring reusable bags. She said there are no longer plastic bags floating through the streets or getting caught in trees. She said she is always surprised to visit communities that still allow plastic bags, because such bags are "a tool of the past." She said her community caters to tourism, and plastic bags are a detriment to the beauty of Soldotna. She said single-use plastic bags are detrimental to the wildlife surrounding her community; many animals have died from consuming plastic bags. She stated that fishing is also an important economy of Soldotna, but when single-use plastic bags float into streams and other waterways, they are consumed by fish and other marine

creatures, which can block the digestive tracks of those animals and cause them to starve to death. She indicated that plastic consumed by salmon, for example, can end up consumed by humans. She opined that banning [plastic] bags is a step toward "being conscious of the impact that we have on the environment around us, as well as a step toward a sustainable future for Alaska." Ms. Downing concluded by expressing support for HB 81. In response to Co-Chair Drummond, she confirmed that the plastic bag ban to which she had referred applies only to Soldotna.

[8:29:07 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that HB 81 was held over.

HB 60-REPEALING SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

[8:29:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 60, "An Act repealing the senior benefits payment program; and providing for an effective date."

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND noted that House Bill 236, [passed during the Thirtieth Alaska State Legislature], with the short title of "Extend Senior Benefits Program," passed both the House and Senate nearly unanimously with bi-partisan support; it had 19 co-sponsors in the House and 16 cross-sponsors in the Senate. She related that the bill extended the Senior Benefits Program until 2024. She continued as follows:

We want to hear directly from the administration on what they are trying to accomplish by taking away these benefits from over 11,000 low-income elders and seniors in our state, who are usually on a fixed income and can't just go out and get a job to make up for the loss of these benefits every month.

[8:30:32 AM](#)

SHAWNDA O-BRIEN, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), referred to handouts [included in the committee packet] that point out "the population being served" and some U.S. Census information regarding where that population is located. She directed attention to a handout, titled "Senior Benefits Program Information & Fact Sheet Updated January 2019." She pointed out that the first couple paragraphs of the first page give an

overview of the different levels of the payment scale, as well as some of the eligibility criteria for those participating in the program. At the bottom of the first page is last year's eligibility information related to income limits; this information gets updated annually on April 1. Page 2 of the handout gives historical information "that breaks out that same detail for the past several years going back to 2016" to show income limits of those who have participated in the program. It also shows where the department has had to lower the benefit payment level for the lowest tier in the program "to accommodate what's been budgeted for the fiscal year." Over the last couple years, the lowest payment amount has had to be reduced. The final page of the handout, she noted, shows census-derived information regarding where program recipients live now, as well as the history of the Senior Benefits Program since its inception.

[8:33:13 AM](#)

MS. O'BRIEN said the other handouts give perspective on the dollars being spent by "the benefit tiers within the program." She said, "We have been paying the lowest tier of the program - \$76 in place of the \$125 that's usually allotted to that payment category. You'll see that we have about 4,731 people that are participating at that lowest tier." She added, "Based on our regulations, we're able to reduce or eliminate that lowest tier to allow for the payments to continue for folks who have a higher need for the funds." She said there are approximately 11,000 participants in the program, 3,000 of whom do not receive benefits from any other DHSS program. The remaining 9,000 or so might be eligible for other programs the department administers, such as [the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] (SNAP) or Adult Public Assistance - or both.

[8:34:26 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS remarked that although the information in the committee packet is "helpful," he does not see any explanation as to the reason for the proposal to eliminate the Senior Benefits Program.

MS. O'BRIEN responded:

The administration is in a tough position for having to find places where we have general fund spending that can be eliminated without a lot of regulation or other things. In this case ... the bill is being

introduced to reduce or eliminate the program entirely. This is an entirely general fund-funded program, and so there aren't a lot of places within ... our budget that have programs that are funded 100 percent with general funds, and so to find areas that can be eliminated - this was one of those areas.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS said he was trying to imagine "who drew the short straw in the administration to present this bill." He added, "I would love to see the commissioner here next time to explain the administration's perspective why the financial benefit of eliminating this program is worth the hardship it'll impose on Alaska seniors." He asked how long Ms. O'Brien has been in her position and what she thinks the impact of eliminating the program would be.

MS. O'BRIEN answered that she was appointed into her position in January [2019] but has worked in DHSS for approximately 13 years. She continued as follows:

I believe that the impact is inevitable As was mentioned previously, these are dollars going to people in the communities who don't, maybe, have other means available to them. To the degree that some folks are participating in other programs - like our SNAP Program and the Adult Public Assistance Program - those benefits can be adjusted for the loss in income for the Senior Benefits Program. And so, to the degree that some of those recipients might see an increase to their food stamps or to their adult public assistance benefits, the division will be reviewing ... those pieces should this bill pass.

[8:37:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMPSON stated that he finds it difficult "to go after our most vulnerable population - the elderly." He observed that in order to get the \$250 per month, the income of the elderly recipient is "super low." With this money, he said these recipients are trying to buy food and medication, and without these funds they [must choose between the two]. He said he is having a hard time "adjusting to" or "agreeing with" [HB 60]. He asked Ms. O'Brien if the administration is hearing from advocacy groups in Alaska on "the effects this will have on seniors."

MS. O'BRIEN answered yes, from some of the advocacy groups. She added that the administration also has received feedback from recipients.

[8:38:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN asked Ms. O'Brien to "overlay" senior benefits with food stamps and elderly public assistance. She explained, "When I look at the chart for senior benefits, I guess I just presume that all of them, with those income levels, would already be eligible to those programs." She clarified that she wants illustrated "the intersect between the financial thresholds for those folks."

MS. O'BRIEN replied that there is another handout she could send to the committee that gives examples of "how some of those impacts would look" and "what the different criteria are." She further offered to send information showing the various income categories. She said some of the programs vary in their eligibility criteria regarding allowed assets that do not count toward the applicant's income. She explained, "That's when you might not be seeing some of those details, where it does appear that the ... income itself is fairly low, but there may be other things that are preventing folks from being eligible for those other programs."

CO-CHAIR HANNAN asked whether the homeowner's tax paid by someone who is mortgage-free is not relevant as far as receiving senior benefits but is relevant in terms of receiving food stamps.

MS. O'BRIEN responded, "Right." She said the first page offers a summary-level overview of the eligibility criteria. She explained that eligibility is based on a person's annual gross income before any other considerations. Assets, such as savings, are not included; a person could own his/her own home. She said there were other details she could provide later.

CO-CHAIR HANNAN offered an example of someone who had written to the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee. She said the person receives senior benefits of \$1,100 a month and receives \$19 in food stamps monthly. She asked, "So, some of our food stamp eligibility is that low?"

MS. O'BRIEN answered yes.

CO-CHAIR HANNAN concluded then that with loss, at \$700 a month, a person would probably be receiving \$175 a month in senior benefits. She asked, "Would their food stamp eligibility increase by up to \$175 a month?"

MS. O'BRIEN answered no, the person would not receive an incrementally adjusted increase to his/her food stamps, but the person's eligibility would change. She clarified, "So, they would receive an increase - just not dollar for dollar."

CO-CHAIR HANNAN said when she read the amount of \$19 regarding food stamps, she thought it must have been a typographical error. She asked if it was possible someone actually could be receiving an even lower amount.

MS. O'BRIEN replied she would follow-up with Co-Chair Hannan and the committee about the varying payments levels within the SNAP program, because she said she is not sure whether there are lower levels. She said she could also provide an overview of how the eligibility scale looks in each of the programs and how they interact.

CO-CHAIR HANNAN stated, "When we hear [the term] 'food stamps,' I guess there's a presumption that it's enough money to buy food. And as this person articulates, that \$19 buys them ramen." From the person's communication, Co-Chair Hannan read, "I'm too old to hunt and fish, so I don't eat meat or fish, and I can buy some ramen, and that's it." She said she cannot imagine how that must feel and "what kind of hopeless that must present." The person cannot hunt or fish or get a job that will provide income. She concluded, "I am horrified at my level of ignorance about how little support we give to people that are living on the margin, and more information would be helpful, but I'm not sure it will be satisfying."

[8:43:15 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN asked if the administration's budget cut would not be able to go through if the legislature chose not to make these statutory changes.

MS. O'BRIEN answered, "It's already been reduced out of the budget, so there would have to be some action to put the funds back into the budget."

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN asked whether, if the legislature put the money back in, the governor would be violating law if he tried to line-item veto the money back out if HB 60 does not pass.

MS. O'BRIEN responded that she is not certain about the legalities in this regard.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN asked, "Is this just another area where the governor's highest priority is that \$3,000 [permanent fund] dividend [(PFD)], and so to make that \$3,000 dividend we have to make these cuts that are reflected in this proposed legislative change?"

MS. O'BRIEN responded that the reduction in the budget was the administration's effort to reduce the budget "to balance with our revenues."

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN suggested that the governor's priority is the \$3,000 dividend over seniors.

MS. O'BRIEN replied, "I believe the way that it ... has been presented is that we are ... reducing our general fund spending to align with our revenue collections - what revenues that we have in the state."

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN aligned with the former comments of Representative Kreiss-Tomkins that he is disappointed the commissioner is not present and that Ms. O'Brien "drew the short straw."

[8:45:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON reviewed that 11,500 is the total in recipients, while 3,000 have no other assistance. She asked if there are other programs available to assist those 3,000.

MS. O'BRIEN replied there is a possibility that those folks may become eligible for other programs for which they are not currently eligible. For example, the loss in public assistance may make a person eligible for SNAP or Adult Public Assistance. She added, "If they're eligible, they would apply for the programs that they're not currently participating in, and we'll review that eligibility at that time."

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON stated, "I'm just saying, ... because the PFD keeps coming up, and it breaks my heart that they didn't receive funds that they could have received in the last two

years." She remarked upon the previously mentioned amount of \$19 in food stamps and how much food and medication it would be possible to buy.

[8:46:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said it sounds like if these proposed cuts go through and the department must assess potential recipients for other sources of benefits, it won't save much in staff time. She asked if consideration had been given to the effort that would be needed to help "potentially past recipients" find other sources of assistance.

MS. O'BRIEN replied that the division is limited in its ability to help folks identify other resources; however, there are other groups in the department more aligned with that kind of outreach. She said the Division of Public Assistance would look at eligibility information and provide information to the recipients as to their eligibility to receive SNAP and Adult Public Assistance.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said she assumed the proposed cuts would also result in a cut to staff that administers the programs.

MS. O'BRIEN said a fiscal note shows that within the division three full-time positions would be eliminated. She said in the past the program was staffed at a higher level, but redesign lowered the number. She said there would be cost reductions in other areas, as well, such as "mailing out warrants and thing of that nature." In response to Co-Chair Drummond, she confirmed that "warrant" means a check.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND echoed a previously stated concern that the commissioner had not been available for many hearings, including this one.

[8:49:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened public testimony on HB 60. She announced that there would be a time limit of two minutes per testifier.

[8:50:22 AM](#)

FAITH MYERS said she is a senior, a volunteer senior advocate, and is testifying in opposition to HB 60. She opined that the state senior benefit program should not be discontinued, because

senior benefits are means-tested. The majority of recipients are listed at or below the poverty level and some have a disability. She said she is a recipient of senior benefits who has a disability and lives at the poverty level. She asserted that here is a connection between being able to pay bills and mental health. Ms. Myers shared that she receives only \$931 a month from Social Security; the Adult Public Assistance and Senior Benefits Program have to supplement that amount, but she does not receive a total that is much higher than the poverty level of income. She said she is dependent upon senior benefits to pay her bills. She stated that as long as the Senior Benefits Program is means-tested, it should be continued. She reemphasized that she does not support the passage of HB 60.

[8:52:19 AM](#)

KEN HELANDER, Advocacy Director, AARP Alaska, testified in opposition to HB 60. He relayed that his comments are a follow-up to an op-ed that was published in the Anchorage Daily News a few weeks ago, which further spells out what the impact would be of the proposed repeal of the Senior Benefits Program. Mr. Helander stated that about four years ago, the legislature reduced the budget for senior benefits, resulting in the loss of approximately \$49 a month for beneficiaries in the higher income tier, from \$125 to \$76 a month, which represents nearly \$600 a year lost to those beneficiaries. He said the AARP Alaska office started receiving phone calls from panicked seniors, who "were fearful of what that loss would mean to their lives." Mr. Helander said he has never forgotten those calls; they motivated him to advocate for senior benefits. He related that two summers ago, as the Senior Benefits Program was up for reauthorization, Representative Spohnholz and then Representative Kawasaki held an informal listening session on behalf of the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee, and in over three hours, more than 50 people called in from around Alaska to describe what the Senior Benefits Program means to them. He said his "takeaway" from listening to those comments was that "this money, as small of an amount as it is, is used by each recipient within their own life situation to help them live independently, with purpose, to help maintain their health, and ultimately to make a difference in the community of people around them."

MR. HELANDER shared that one woman called to say that her \$76 a month allowed her to keep her car running, and she was the only one in her circle of friends who still had a car, and with that car she could meet the transportation needs of herself and her

friends. He said, "In fact, she was the transportation system for her individual community." Mr. Helander said other people shared stories reflecting each person's determination "not just to get a pittance of support from the state, but more importantly to always try to be a help to the people around them." He emphasized the importance of that one woman's car in helping others to access groceries and care. He said, "This isn't about a handout; it's about an investment. It allows older, albeit materially poor Alaskans to prevent being poor in spirit." He indicated that these seniors would become more expensive if they could no longer be on their own. He concluded, "The Senior Benefits Program is an investment with great return that we should carefully protect, because the cost of losing it would be ever so much greater."

[8:56:03 AM](#)

MARY GEDDES stated that she has been an Alaskan for 35 years and is testifying in opposition to HB 60. She stated her belief that the Senior Benefits Program, which provides financial support to eligible elders, is "a crucial, needs-based source of support for many individuals with chronic health problems, mental illness, dementia, and other disabilities." She said the solution to Alaska's budget situation cannot be "to kick 11,000 low-income seniors to the proverbial curb."

[8:56:55 AM](#)

LAURA BONNER told the committee that she is retired and has lived in Alaska since 1972. She said stated opposition to HB 60. She relayed that she has been fortunate to never have been eligible for the program, but [cutting] the Senior Benefits Program would cause those vulnerable seniors to fall further into poverty. She said many of those seniors are women, who worked low-paying jobs without social security, left employment early, or never had the opportunity to make money, perhaps because they were taking care of a loved one. She asked committee members to consider whether they could live on under \$1,000 per month, especially if battling a chronic illness, and what they would choose to pay for: lifesaving medication, food, heat, or transportation to health care. She said malnutrition is common in some senior populations. She stated, "It's unconscionable to eliminate this and other programs that serve the vulnerable and pay tax credits to the wealthy corporations in the world. She said there has been little analysis, and she offered her understanding that the person who had presented the bill the committee had said [the Senior Benefits Program] would

be one of the easiest to cut. She urged the committee to "kill" HB 60 because "it's bad for Alaska."

[8:58:41 AM](#)

ROBERTA STEVENS stated that although she does not receive senior benefits, she is aware of many friends and neighbors that do and are thus being saved from possible homelessness and the inability to pay for medicine. She said it is frightening for people who are unable to work, due to health or age, to have "this small amount of money taken away from them entirely." She said this would take away their independence, and she does not know where these folks would go when they lose their homes. She stated her opposition to HB 60, and she said she hopes the committee will "kill the bill quickly and put it out of its misery."

[8:59:55 AM](#)

KEREN KELLEY, Homer Senior Citizens, Inc., said Homer Senior Citizens, Inc. has 450 members in the Homer area. She said the proposed legislation would affect "the great pioneers and buildings of our state." She opined that not supporting seniors during their vulnerable times is both disrespectful and irresponsible. She said most seniors, without their benefit, would have to reduce their spending on food, housing, heat, and medications. She surmised that it is more likely seniors would reduce their intake of food. She said the lack of proper nutrition directly correlates with higher medical costs. She related that the average senior is 75 years of age, is on a limited income, and often has chronic health conditions. Ms. Kelley reiterated that seniors built the state that others get to enjoy.

[9:01:28 AM](#)

JIM HORNADAY stated that although he serves on the Senior Citizen Board, he was testifying on behalf of himself. He stated opposition to the removal of senior citizen benefits, because "these are the most needy people in Alaska." He said [HB 60] would cause a number of seniors to miss meals, which he advised against. He asked the committee to consider additional revenues, in addition to [the proposed cuts].

[9:02:24 AM](#)

DALBERT PUNGOWIYI, President, Native Council of Savoonga, spoke on behalf of elders in Savoonga and the rest of the state, especially those in remote communities, where the cost of living is astronomical, and elders depend upon their benefits. He said seniors "carried us through our hardest times in the past," and "thanks to them we're all here." He said we must not forget the hard work our elders did, and we must pay our respect to them. He asked the committee, on behalf of those seniors, to [oppose HB 60].

[9:04:25 AM](#)

DAVID BLACKETER, Immediate Past Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging, first testified on his own behalf. He stated he is 83 and his wife is 79, and they live on his social security; at tier 3, they each receive \$76 a month. He said this is helpful, but the reduction from \$125 to \$76 a couple years ago required them to tighten their belts even more than they already had. He said rent is due on the first of the month and social security comes on the third of the month. The budget must also cover car repair so that he and his wife can shop for groceries and get to their medical appointments. Mr. Blacketer said he would now speak as the immediate past chair of the Alaska Commission on Aging. He stated that the commission wants to "kill or put down this bill, HB 60." [This portion of Mr. Blacketer's testimony was indiscernible due to technical difficulties.] Mr. Blacketer surmised that not only he and his wife, but also those receiving senior benefits and those who may need them, would not want HB 60 to be passed out of committee.

[9:07:02 AM](#)

DAVID OTNESS, as a 12-year resident of Cordova and overall 68-year resident of Alaska, third generation, said he has watched the change of society from territorial days to present. He remarked his amazement to find out there are only three people who work to process the 11-12,000 applications. He stated that Alaska has "revenue in abundance," and he mentioned Senate Bill 21 [passed during the Twenty-Eighth Alaska State Legislature] "for a million barrels a day" and "its ongoing oil tax credits." He said, "It's such a huge slap in the face to Alaskans that this governor would choose to reward stockholders, largely hedge fund back east and worldwide, rather than to allow Alaskans to maintain themselves in dignity in their final years." He said Senate Bill 21 brought Alaska "right to this brink" and "now they're coming for more."

MR. OTNESS talked about the disparity of buying power with food stamps in rural communities compared to urban. He recommended people read an editorial in the 4/3/19 Juneau Empire, which "might give a better overview in exactly where we are and what this governor is trying to do to us as a state." He recommended understanding the Constitution of the State of Alaska and "how it works for our benefit and not private corporation."

[9:10:01 AM](#)

MIKE COONS, President, Association of Mature American Citizens (AMAC) - Greater Alaska Chapter; Public Member, Commission on Aging, testifying in both capacities and as a conservative Alaskan, stated that "the Commission on Aging has voted to opposed HB 60," and although he initially abstained, he reluctantly voted in opposition to the bill. He explained that he is a strong supporter of Governor Dunleavy. He said a poll of AMAC members showed strong support for HB 60 and the governor. He stated he is now fully in support of the bill. Mr. Coons opined that the current House Majority Coalition supports "big government." He talked about the budget decisions of the past. He opined, "This opposition to HB 60 is a full-on political assault using all tactics, fears, and lies." He said the truth is that the governor's budget will put Alaska's financial house in order, and seniors will get more per month from the permanent fund dividend than they do currently. He indicated that the governor's budget would bring the state out of a four-year recession he said was created by the legislature and a former governor.

[9:12:30 AM](#)

PATRICK CURTIS, Program Director, Anchorage Senior Activity Center, stated that adjectives such as "vulnerable" and "vital" do not convey the stories people share in person. He indicated that seniors' faces show the physical and emotional stresses of poverty and hardship anticipated by the proposed cut to senior benefits. He said there is a need to address budget issues, but HB 60 would be "one of the wrong choices." He urged the committee to reject the proposed legislation and support those folks who founded Alaska.

[9:13:21 AM](#)

ANNE DOERPINGHAUS shared that she has been a nurse in her community for 26 years, 12 of which she spent in elder care. She now works with vulnerable children and families in times of

crisis. She stated that seniors are major supports for families, because they provide shelter for children and grandchildren when jobs and relationships change, they take in and feed grandchildren in times of trouble. She said many times elders help family members through illnesses - even more so in rural communities. She said she knows elders are fragile and living on low budgets, but "they are the positive engines of our economy." To those who do not like "big government," she said, "The alternative to government is a living wage for families, supports for seniors, so that we can, in fact, be there for each other." She shared her experience has shown that many elders put their families first and never say no to providing food and shelter. She asked the committee to oppose HB 60.

[9:15:06 AM](#)

JONATHAN STRONG, Senior Citizens of Kodiak, shared how he had helped a 65-year-old senior with disabilities apply for senior benefits for the first time. Without those benefits, the person could not afford basic personal needs and had not had a haircut in several years. He said on behalf of this person and Senior Citizens of Kodiak, he opposed HB 60.

[9:16:05 AM](#)

KAREN CAMERON stated that she receives \$76 a month from the Senior Benefits Program. She is a fourth generation Alaskan, who has worked hard all her life. She said she was a regional administrator for 20 years in Los Angeles County, making six figures. She became ill a few years ago, and the expenses involved with her illness lead to the loss of her savings, her investments, and her home. She said she is no longer able to work, and the \$76 [a month in senior benefits] is a lifeline to her. She said she feels gratitude for that money, but even with that benefit, she has not been able to pay for her medication for the past couple of years. She indicated that she is \$25 over the limit for receiving Medicaid. Ms. Cameron said right now she has nothing to eat but top ramen for another week and a half. She said she cannot afford to go to the senior activities center. She gave up her dog, because she could not afford to care for it. She stated that she lives with approximately 400 other seniors, half of whom receive a bonus, and she said it is tragic to see what these seniors go without. Even so, they share as much as they can. She said, "When I started hearing that the governor was going to cut this out -- people just don't come out of their rooms anymore."

[9:18:58 AM](#)

GORDON GLASER, Anchorage Senior Activities Center, stated that although the center has not presently taken an official position, it is circulating "a letter of support opposing repeal of Senate Bill 60 [passed during the Thirtieth Alaska State Legislature] repealing the Senior Benefits Program." Mr. Glaser stated that there are other sources of support for the elderly, but at the center about 70 percent of participants pay on a sliding scale because they are below the federal poverty guidelines. He said, "Those people don't have another source." In terms of planning and direction, he stated, "When you're at the bottom of the hole, the best policy is to stop digging." He opined that before reducing the resources of "those people on the edge," it is important to understand what the consequences of that action will be. He concluded, "Moving blindly is not good public policy."

[9:21:05 AM](#)

GEORGE PIERCE observed that there were sad people testifying. He stated opposition to HB 60, which he called sad and shameful. He said it is the job of the legislature to protect the people of Alaska. He said reducing senior benefit payments will drive seniors onto welfare. He said he has lived [in Alaska] for 30 years and spent all his money here. He said senior benefits help with food and medication. He advised, "Stop funding nonprofits and go after the oil taxes and cut their subsidies." He said the permanent fund dividend that was taken was bad for seniors. He opined, "It's the lowest you can go taking from the poor and needy." He questioned giving billions in oil revenue incentives but not giving a couple million to seniors through benefits. He called this "sad and shameful." He asked, "These people are already in poverty. Why would you hurt them more?" He asked the committee to do the right thing by putting HB 60 in the trash. He indicated that Alaska ranks fourth in the country for millionaires, so that is who should be taxed - not the poor.

[9:23:03 AM](#)

IDA NELSON testified in opposition to HB 60 and taking away the lifeline of seniors. She said she helps elders in her village, and with their benefits they are able to pay for heating oil, food, and living independently. They would lose their independence under HB 60.

[9:24:02 AM](#)

PAUL SHERRY said he is a retired health care administrator, who opposes HB 60. He said he supports the Senior Benefits Program. He said there are demands not met by the state or federal government that other agencies are struggling to address. He said many of the seniors he works with are making \$1,300 a month, perhaps \$16,000 a year, while many of the administrators make ten times that amount. He said it is discouraging that the focus is being put on seniors and students when trying to balance the state budget. He stated that for many seniors, a benefit of \$175 a month is 15 percent of their income and living without would mean figuring out how to cut expenses even further. He expressed support for the Senior Benefits Program. He said, "Another \$1,500 in dividends doesn't offset \$2,100 in senior benefits." He said there is revenue available to cover these benefits. He stated, "You just have to right the ship that the new governor has tipped on its side."

[9:26:35 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS stated that the proposed budget cut angers him, and the proposal itself he finds unconscionable because of the amount of uncertainty and stress it causes Alaska's most vulnerable. He mentioned the proposed price increase on the Pioneer Home cost, and he said he knows there are residents there who have stopped eating due to the amount of stress this has caused. Anecdotes have been heard around the state regarding the stress people are experiencing. He concluded, "Even though it will not pass the legislature - I can state that as a fact - I don't know what the governor's line-item veto pen will do - that's between him and Alaska; but I think even putting this forward is deeply, deeply disappointing."

[9:27:48 AM](#)

JO KENNEDY asked the committee to "look harder at the Adult Public Assistance program," which she said is open to "just about anybody." She said she has witnessed abuse in the program. She emphasized that she is against getting rid of the program, because "a nation or state that forgets its seniors will soon be forgotten itself." She expressed appreciation for living in a country where she has the right to [testify], and she urged the committee not to pass HB 60.

[9:28:59 AM](#)

NIKKI POLLOCK, Director, Senior Services, testified in opposition to HB 60. She said Senior Services in Bethel serves approximately 117 elders Monday through Friday; in the past six months, Senior Services has helped 42 elders "with information, assistance, and referral." She said many elders are referred to [the Adult Public Assistance program] to sign up for senior benefits. She said she knows firsthand the importance of senior benefits to elders in paying for their most basic needs. She said in Bethel, the cost of water is approximately \$9.50 per gallon. She said without the senior benefits, she knows many elders would go hungry, would not have the funds to pay for water, sewer, or electricity, and would have exacerbated health issues. She emphasized that the Senior Benefits Program is of the utmost importance and "we must take care of our elders." She mentioned "what they've done to get to become elders" as being a reason that "we need to be able to support them financially." She said she has spoken in support of the benefits program in the past, and she knows firsthand the positive impact the program has on elders, and she indicated that one of the impacts is in preventing "premature or permanent institutionalization" in long-term care facilities. She opined that doing away with the Senior Benefits Program is not the right thing to do.

[9:31:57 AM](#)

MATT DONAHOE said he has been a resident of Alaska for 46 years and has been a small boat fisherman for 40 years. He mentioned the raw fish tax being taken away from communities, and he said he has never filed for any public assistance until last year, when he applied for senior benefits. He said he had planned on fishing to fund his retirement but indicated that fishing policies made by the state may have affected that plan. He said he knows quite a few fishermen who have applied for the senior benefit. He stated opposition to HB 60, and he related that he has heard some tragic stories.

[9:34:27 AM](#)

JAYME ANDREAN, Volunteer, AARP; Chair, Juneau AARP Community Action Team, stated that the focus is to allow seniors to age with "the highest quality of life" and "lowest level of expense." She explained, "There's a continuum of care that takes place as seniors age, and we can keep people independent, in their own homes, ... [as long as possible], with the highest level of quality of life, the better off everybody is." Doing

so saves money, because it is more expensive to enter assisted living and "nursing care."

[9:35:40 AM](#)

DENICE DAIELLA, Executive Director, Alaskan Commission on Aging, explained that the commission is a governor-appointed board under the Department of Health and Social Services. The commission plans services for seniors, educates Alaskans about senior issues, and makes recommendations to policy makers regarding the needs of seniors. She said, "So, our views represent those of the commission and not necessarily those of the administration." She noted that the commission had submitted written testimony to the committee. She said the commission does not support passage of HB 60. She said a survey conducted by the commission found that concern about financial security was the number two issue of the 3,117 people 55 and older who completed the survey statewide. She said the commission has supported the Senior Benefits Program over the years, as well as its reauthorization. She related that the commission believes the program "is good public policy that helps people to afford ... their basic essentials." She added, "It helps to support their dignity, self-determination, and - in the long run - saves money in terms of health care and long-term care costs." She thanked the committee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of many people that believe senior benefits is a good program.

[9:37:45 AM](#)

ERIN WALKEN TOLLES, Executive Director, Catholic Community Services (CCS), informed the committee that CCS is a faith-based, regional non-profit entity serving Southeast Alaska with health care and social services. She said CCS has 11 senior centers and serves over 3,000 yearly with meals, transportation service, and case management, and a variety of other services. She shared that in her recent travels to senior centers in Sitka, Ketchikan, and Juneau, she has heard from seniors who are "distracted" and "terrified." She said a number of seniors have told her that already they do not have the money to buy meat; the only meat they eat is provided by the senior center. She indicated that without their benefit, those seniors have said they would not be able to afford food at all and are concerned about homelessness. Ms. Tolles said she understands the need to balance the budget, but thinks creativity is needed, as well as discussion about the PFD. She opined:

Not only is it morally wrong to balance the budget on the backs of the most vulnerable in our communities, but also, when you think long term, we're only going to see savings for a short time, as these seniors decline - due to poor ... nutrition, due to homelessness, due to lack of being able to afford medication and heat - and we're going to have those expenses transferred to our health care and our social services within the next couple of years. You're not going to see cost savings; you're not going to accomplish what you want; you're only going to hurt people if this goes forward.

MS. TOLLES emphasized her opposition to HB 60 and encouraged the committee to adopt long-term thinking in terms of the state's vulnerable citizens and social and healthcare systems.

[9:39:55 AM](#)

CAROLINE DEMMERT said she was "speaking for a lot of our people." She said her grandmother and mother collected senior benefits. She returned to Alaska because she thought it would help her to receive her benefits. She said there are many for whom these benefits provide the only hot meal they can get. She said she is a Tlingit, who has lived in Ketchikan, Wrangell, Juneau, Hoonah, and Kake, Alaska, and has observed that many do not get benefits because they do not qualify for them. She indicated that it is just a matter of making one dollar over the limit to be disqualified. She said she worked four jobs in order to raise her four children. She stated that she does not discriminate against anyone in terms of receiving benefits, because "we do have this extra money," which she said she calls "our old lady benefits." She said the benefits are used to buy food, and by the end of the month, many people do not have food. She said too many benefits are being taken away. Many people are still alive because of the benefits; they help everyone take care of each other. She asked, "Once we're given something to live on, why take it away? I would like to see any of you live here on a thousand dollars a month and pay your rent and all your utilities." She said people are tired of trying to live off spare change. She concluded, "We keep our change jars that we might need a loaf of bread."

[9:42:40 AM](#)

ANN STEPETIN, Elderly Services, Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska ("Tlingit & Haida"), pointed to her

elders in the room and said she was blessed to be there with them. Ms. Stepetin tearfully related that Elderly Services serves a lunch on the last Thursday of each month, and an elder told her that by the end of the month he has no money to feed himself and was so appreciative to have found out about the lunch served at Tlingit & Haida. She relayed that in her work, she sees elders who must give up food for a week in order to afford medicine when needed. She said she is there to "hold up" her elders, and sometimes that means paying for things out of her own pockets. She said Tlingit & Haida is looking for alternative ways to help its elders because of "these things that are coming down from the state." Ms. Stepetin stated opposition for HB 60. She indicated that [senior benefits] feed people and keep them from being homeless. She said she serves those in Juneau but related a time when an elder in Washington state went without food for a week because of a holdup in the finance department that made it impossible to get food to the woman.

[9:45:15 AM](#)

BARBARA BOLTON said she is a senior who has lived in Anchorage for 12 years. She said she loves the state and has made friends through the senior programs. She stated her opposition to HB 60. She said, like other seniors her age, she lives at the poverty level. She said \$76 is not a gift; it is the means for food, transportation, and medication for seniors.

[9:46:54 AM](#)

MARY ALICE KNOTTS recalled working hard in the 1970s as part of a committee that fought to get a facility built for seniors. Seniors were leaving Alaska, and the efforts were made "to maintain and improve senior benefits" so that seniors could choose to stay in Alaska. She related that she had to leave Alaska for a while for medical reasons. She stated, "To hear that we are still battling the people with money in their pockets to keep our seniors fed and housed is bad indeed." She questioned what kind of drugs the governor and legislature are "on" and suggested those pills should be shared with seniors so "we don't care what happens to people either." Ms. Knotts emphasized her opposition to HB 60 and said the bill "needs to be cremated immediately."

[9:48:51 AM](#)

INDIANNA TURKISHER, Manager, Food Bank of Alaska, said the food bank helps people apply for benefits, and one of those is senior benefits. She said seniors tell her they use their benefits to pay for food, medication, and transportation to medical appointments. The threat of the benefits being cut means access to those things will be reduced. She said her mother will qualify for the Senior Benefits Program in two years. Ms. Turkisher shared that as a sixth-generation Alaskan, she would like to be able to stay in Alaska for the duration of her life; however, when she sees "how we prioritize seniors right now," it makes her question whether Alaska is a place in which she wants to stay.

[9:50:28 AM](#)

TERESA MCLAIN stated that she lives in a large community of senior and disabled people in Anchorage. She emphasized how upset she was by the proposed cuts to senior benefits and indicated [those cuts] would put her health at "grave risk." She related that she comes from a career military family wherein service to the country is valued. She said she has contributed to her family and community - the latter of which she described as the world she has traveled. She continued as follows:

I'm speaking to you hungry because I didn't have food this morning. Throughout my childhood and adulthood, I have contributed to my community, running the household, taking care of my brothers and my sick mother while my career military U.S. Marine father was an inspector general of the Pacific Rim in Vietnam making sure soldiers' weapons were in working order. Due to my father coming home traumatized, I developed PTSD myself, and that's why I'm on disability. Having seen the suffering of war, I have chosen to live my life in the very modest-means way, to not be one of the greedy people taking resources from others.

MS. MCLAIN spoke of values and apologized when she started to cry. She said she moved to Alaska to be near her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren. She said as an elder she has a lot to offer. She values education and having a wide range of experience to offer to the community. She emphasized her opposition to HB 60, saying she feels it is not a creative or resourceful way "to use one of Alaska's best resources of wise and experienced people who have a lot to offer in guidance for grandchildren and out adult children, as well."

[9:53:41 AM](#)

WILLIAM HARRINGTON stated that he is 70 years old and spends \$80,000 a year helping to support five grandchildren. He said he would not qualify for senior benefits. He stated that he feels strongly that "those in their last years deserve a full stomach and a safe accommodation." He opined it is a travesty for a rich state that "has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars on a pipe dream" to even consider HB 60. He pointed out that he would spend \$800,000 in Alaska over the next ten years, but "you're not making it very easy for me to want to stay and spend that money here." He indicated that he had talked to someone about the uncertainty of the state's future population, suggesting it could be anywhere from 600,000 to 800,000, at which point the person responded that maybe it would be 300,000.

[9:54:51 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND closed public testimony on HB 60.

[9:55:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON indicated that seniors have led the way for "us all to be here today." She said, "I don't believe we're going to have [homeless] seniors or hungry seniors." She recalled that Representative Kreiss-Tomkins had said he was appalled by HB 60. She noted there are eight freshman legislators, three of which sit on the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee. She said, "This didn't just happen in January. What appalls me is we did not have the foresight to prevent us from being where we are today." She thanked those who had testified. She said, "We love you, and everything's going to be okay."

[9:56:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN observed that she and others were emotional about the topic being discussed. She expressed thanks to all those who made sacrifices in order to testify and remind the legislature that those who receive the benefits in question are the most vulnerable of seniors. She talked about the fractional cost to the state [in providing benefits]. She said recipients spend every dollar they are given locally; they are not "snowbirding" or taking vacations; they are "spending their money to survey in Alaska." Representative Hannan said for 31 years, Alaska had a longevity bonus program not based on economic need, and in 1972 the state began providing services to

elders to help them be able to remain in the state. She pointed out that was "before we had large piles of oil money." In the early 2000s, the state did away with that program and made benefits needs-based, and she indicated the benefits now [go to] "people who are at the margins of despair." She noted that she and Representative Jackson had been appointed to serve on the state Suicide Council, and she said people may not realize that there are two groups that are at risk of suicide: young people "struggling to find their way in the world" and "people at the end their lives in their aging years" who end their lives early as a result of isolation and hopelessness. She said she cannot imagine how a senior, who is currently receiving senior benefits and may be planning to move into a Pioneer Home, would feel about [HB 60 and the proposed changes related to the Pioneer Home]. She continued as follows:

And I feel like ... they're being used as a political pawn, because we know this is not a program that has any other funds; it is a program Alaska set out to give to Alaskans. There [are] no federal receipts for it; it is general fund money; because Alaska committed to other Alaskans that we want to be able to keep people here through their lifespans, not just through their economic earning years. And if we don't take care of the most vulnerable at the end of their years, then we have done nothing as a state to deserve our wealth. I hope that we do not allow this political pawn to go any further and that we can assure these seniors we will make sure that the marginal economic benefits we share with them is guaranteed.

[9:59:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMPSON said he hoped he had heard Co-Chair Drummond previously state that when the committee gavels out today, it would "put this bill to rest."

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND answered that Representative Thompson had heard correctly. She emphasized that she did not intend for HB 60 to travel any further. She said it would have been helpful to have heard from the commissioner and the department regarding the estimated cost that would result from removing "these funds from these vulnerable folks." She predicted it would [surpass] "the \$25 million that we're currently spending."

[HB 60 was held over.]

10:00:21 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.