

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE LABOR AND COMMERCE STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 7, 2022

3:20 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Zack Fields, Co-Chair
Representative Ivy Spohnholz, Co-Chair
Representative Liz Snyder
Representative David Nelson
Representative James Kaufman
Representative Ken McCarty

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Calvin Schrage

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL ALASKA

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MIKE ANDREWS, Former Director
Alaska Works Partnership
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave information about the history of Alaska Works Partnership.

GARRETT BOYLE, Federal Co-Chair
Denali Commission
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented about workforce development in rural Alaska.

AARON PLIKAT, Business Manager
Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 367
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave information about workforce development within the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union.

RYAN ANDREW, Assistant Business Manager
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1547
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Alaska Workforce Development and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act."

MIKE HOFFMAN, Executive Director
Yuut Elitnaurvat
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed workforce development in rural Alaska.

KARLA HEAD, Director
Alaska Technical Center
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Read from prepared testimony about apprenticeship and workforce development in rural Alaska.

JOHN NICHOLS, Manager
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed Water and Sewer Projects in rural Alaska.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CO-CHAIR ZACK FIELDS called the House Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:20 p.m. Representatives Snyder, Nelson, Spohnholz, Kaufman, and Fields were present at the call to order. Representative McCarty arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION: Workforce Development in Rural Alaska

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CO-CHAIR FIELDS announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on workforce development in rural Alaska.

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MIKE ANDREWS, former director, Alaska Works Partnership, explained that Alaska Works Partnership is a nonprofit created

by Alaska's construction trade unions in 1996. The mission of Alaska Works Partnership is to increase Alaska's infrastructure occupations statewide through apprenticeship-training programs including Helmets to Hardhats, Alaska Construction Academies, and Women in the Trades. He stated that Alaska Works Partnership teamed up with the Denali Commission in 2000 as a designated grantee to develop training for rural Alaskans. Some programs included rural apprenticeship outreach and rural job training. In 2016, due to the price of oil, construction had a downturn and the Denali Commission no longer had funding for job training. He described gaps in the system because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recession; however, many partnerships are still in place to meet the challenges of the Infrastructure and Jobs Act.

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GARRETT BOYLE, Federal Co-Chair, Denali Commission, explained that one of the statutory purposes of the commission is to provide job training and other economic development services in rural communities. Through its partnership with Alaska Works Partnership, the commission served 2,600 people throughout 190 communities across the state. Training was held in 45 communities. As funding declined, partly when U.S. Senator Stevens left office, the commission had to focus its work on programs through the Alaska Energy Authority and Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC). He advised that the state is about to receive billions of dollars through the recently passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). He concluded that the state needs to empower people in rural communities to get involved with construction, long-term operations, and maintenance work.

MR. BOYLE encouraged the committee to explore supporting training centers, promoting distance learning, and creating remote positions wherever possible. Many villages now have solar, wind, and batteries as part of the grid. He advised that as technology advances and becomes more complex, the training programs need to keep pace as well. The Denali Commission is uniquely qualified to help with infrastructure advances in Alaska. There are many opportunities for significant advances in the next few years.

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AARON PLIKAT, Business Manager, Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 367, gave some history of workforce development within the

union. He stated that there are over 800 members today in the union. The union members take a deduction from their wages and put this into a training fund, and for example, hundreds of plumbers, steam fitters, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning members have been trained through this program. He pointed out that the University of Alaska apprenticeship program is one of the longest apprenticeship programs in the trades. He said that it has become increasingly difficult over the last several years to recruit new apprentices due to a lack of available work on large-scale construction projects. He stated that requiring applicants to go all the way to Anchorage to complete their apprenticeship is an ineffective way to fill the workforce gap, particularly when discussing the rural workforce. With IIJA dollars, he said, there could be more consistent work for construction employees throughout the state, and this could lead to more successful apprenticeship programs. He expressed the hope that this could make it possible for workers to complete an apprenticeship program within their own region. As projects start to roll out across the state, an hourly requirement allotted for apprentices to participate in the work would help teach new professionals and benefit Alaska in the future.

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RYAN ANDREW, Assistant Business Manager, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1547, went through a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Alaska Workforce Development and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He stated that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) local 1547 represents over 4,000 workers in Alaska. The three most common disciplines in the electrical industry are journeyman electrician, journeyman lineman, and journeyman telecommunications. Each of these three disciplines require 8,000 hours of on-the-job training experience and 1,000 hours of classroom instruction. Apprenticeship completion and journeyman status is achieved on average within four to five years. New apprentices are taken from an applicant pool eligibility list, as needed by industry demand. He stated that the program is scalable based on demand and is limited by the positions available to apprentices. There is a challenge with employers who are not willing to train the future workforce. He advised that one solution to alleviate the bottleneck is apprenticeship-utilization requirements. He pointed out that increasing the funding for the State Training and Employment Program (STEP) with grants through the Department of Labor and Workforce

Development will help bolster the local workforce as federal projects are funded throughout the state.

Mr. Andrew said that STEP currently funds apprentice CDL training and supports the costs for apprentices who travel from rural Alaska. He suggested increasing funding for pre-apprenticeship programs. He stated that the Alaska Works Partnership provides free training for potential applicants who can then learn about different positions before committing to a trade or apprenticeship program. Regional opportunities also exist for applicants in rural Alaska.

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MIKE HOFFMAN, Executive Director, Yuut Elitnaurvat, explained that Yuut Elitnaurvat offers training programs for people near the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. He emphasized the difficulty for students to thrive in training programs outside of the region. He stated that Yuut Elitnaurvat offers the only federal apprenticeship program exclusively operated in rural Alaska; however, there are struggles with the lack of flexibility in the federal model. He stated that workforce development and apprenticeships are valuable but have lower success rates for rural Alaskans. He advised that success comes from training rural Alaskans, as opposed to bringing in workers from the Lower 48. He argued that the current apprenticeship programs are too regimented and need to be more flexible to increase success for rural Alaskans.

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KARLA HEAD, Director, Alaska Technical Center, spoke about expanding apprenticeship programs in Alaska. She paraphrased from a prepared statement [copy included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about the importance of establishing and expanding apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship training opportunities throughout Alaska. In our region alone, the lack of sufficient, available trained, experienced, skilled electricians, mechanics, plumbers, water and sewer experts, and HVAC technicians continues to perpetuate an ever-expanding problem for businesses, schools, homeowners, and communities.

Please indulge me for a moment while I tell you about a situation that the community of Selawik experienced a little over one year ago. Selawik is home to approximately 900 residents who all receive electricity supplied by 3 generators. Around 5 pm on February 14, 2021, with temperatures colder than -35 degrees, the generators stopped working. While this may seem like a minor inconvenience, it quickly became a disaster with consequences that residents endured for almost a year. The power outage lasted for over 18 hours. Unfortunately, many homes in Selawik do not have a secondary heat source. I was the principal at Davis-Ramoth Memorial School last year in Selawik when this happened. Fortunately, our school has a backup generator so we opened the doors for residents to stay in the gym during the power outage so they could be warm. In my apartment, the temperature dropped to 42 degrees during the power outage, so I had to send my 7-year-old to a teacher's apartment that had heat since it was connected to the school's back-up generator. The aftermath of the power outage is where things became dire. Due to the extended power outage, the village's pumps that provide water to the treatment plant froze and broke. The treatment plant itself froze and was inoperable for a time and, when it was repaired and was back online, the water was not suitable to drink without boiling it for 5 minutes prior to ingesting it. The complex aboveground sewer system froze throughout 2/3 of the village. There were homes that were without running drinking water for several months, but most homes were without functioning sinks and toilets for up to 9 months after the power outage.

I tell you all of this to emphasize the profound need to develop and maintain pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities in rural communities, to train residents to be able to not only mitigate catastrophes such as the one I shared, but to be able to preemptively work to prevent such situations from happening in the first place. In hindsight, had there been trained heavy diesel mechanics within the community that could conduct routine, preventative maintenance on the generators on a consistent basis, would the village have been without power at all? Probably not. If the power did go out, had they had trained professionals readily available to dispatch

within the village or even within the region much sooner to address the problem, would the outage cause such long-lasting problems? Again, probably not. Had there been enough trained plumbers, mechanics, and electricians within the village or region that were available to assist immediately, the consequences from the outage would not have stretched out for months and months. Many families had to leave the village as maintaining a household for an indefinite amount of time without running water and sewer was prohibitive.

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Within our region and across Alaska, there are countless people that are ready and willing to be trained. However, for a multitude of valid reasons, these individuals want to live, learn, and train in their home communities, to help elders and families in their villages to have the same quality of life that urban areas experience. These potential trainees want to engage in valuable opportunities through apprenticeships to develop the skills and technical knowledge they need to address the needs of their villages. There are many regional training centers like Alaska Technical Center in Kotzebue that could work and want to work in partnership with other entities, to build successful pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities, but we need your support to fund these potential programs. At Alaska Technical Center, we can offer training that is facilitated in-person, virtually, and via a hybrid model. We welcome the prospect of developing these opportunities, to benefit Alaskans!

In our region and surrounding area, we have a multitude of large infrastructure projects coming up like the Noorvik Airport Rehabilitation (DOT), Deering Airport Rehabilitation (DOT), Selawik 3 Homes Project (NIHA) • Shungnak Bulk Fuel Upgrade Project (AVEC), Selawik Barge Landing / Boardwalk Upgrade (DOT, Shishmaref Seawall Project (DOT), Kotzebue Cape Blossom Road Project (DOT)

These projects could employ more Alaskans, especially local and regional residents. Not only are these ventures prime opportunities for apprenticeships, but they are also a chance for apprentices to become an

integral part of Alaska's workforce. These newly trained individuals would also be a part of the long-term solution towards not having the need to outsource jobs to non-Alaskans. The impact that a fully operational apprenticeship program could have in developing skilled plumbers, electricians, mechanics, water and sewer plant techs, construction workers, and other essential employees is far reaching and long-lasting. Thank you for listening today as I advocate for expanding pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs across the state in regional training centers. If you have any questions for me, I invite you to ask or to contact me at your earliest convenience. Thank you.

[3:55:22 PM](#)

JOHN NICHOLS, Manager, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, expressed excitement concerning the funding from IIJA, and its potential to provide water and sewer systems to the 32 unserved "honeybucket" communities throughout Alaska. Functioning water and sewer systems are a preventative health care measure, and he emphasized the necessity to hire and train local professionals who know the area well and are available within the region. He gave an example that, if a pump goes down for more than two hours, it will freeze the entire system. It is critical to provide services which keep rural Alaskans healthy and out of the hospital. He expressed the expectation that funding for rural Alaska water and sewer systems would triple over the next five years, and the workload will more than double over the next decade. The biggest increase in production will be through construction contracts; therefore, there will be incentives to hire local contractors.

MR. NICHOLS expressed his approval of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. There are many challenges involved with serving "honey bucket" communities. Expanded preliminary engineering reports will involve communicating with communities about different options with respect to cost and maintenance. He pointed out that some systems are not feasible for isolated communities with extremely cold conditions, and these communities would need a Portable Alternative Sanitation System (PASS). This is a sanitation system which does not require traditional piping and uses a seepage system, depending on soil conditions. He suggested that IIJA funding could be used to implement more PASS systems.

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MR. PLIKAT, in response to a question from the committee, expressed the need for more regional skill-building and training facilities in places like Bethel and Unalaska, because they have smaller villages nearby and could serve as a hub for apprenticeship-training programs. This could help keep up with the need for qualified pipefitters, plumbers, and more. He stated that IIJA funding could be used to extend projects over a long period of time and involve people in rural regions. He expressed the opinion that training in rural Alaska would be different than the types of training offered in Anchorage, and training should be curbed to deal with regional needs.

MR. PLIKAT expressed the importance of understanding subsistence lifestyles. For example, he stated that recruiting more apprentices would allow apprentices to have a rotation, allowing for subsistence in their off time. He stated that the goal of the apprenticeship program is for registered apprentices to obtain the journeyman skillset. He described that every 2,000 hours apprentices would receive a wage increase, with 240 hours per year spent in the classroom where safety skills are gradually built. He reiterated that water and wastewater training with certifications is important for rural Alaska, and it is never too early for young people, including highschoolers, to get training and be exposed to fields within the workforce; however, a minimum age requirement of 18 years is a factor for apprenticeship programs. He informed the committee about the introductory courses from the National Center for Construction Education and Research.

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MS. HEAD, in response to a question from the committee, expressed the opinion that it is critical for students entering high school to finish the required core courses. She mentioned the importance of exposing students to different career paths. Students in her program have been exposed to culinary arts, business programs, driving simulators, and more. To show students all the different career options, she stressed that funding at the secondary level. This would build pre-apprenticeship programs which create relationships with different organizations within the region. She stated that because of budgetary constraints, career and technical education (CTE) programs have been cut in all rural schools. She pointed out that Kotzebue High School is the only rural school with a woodshop class.

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MR. HOFFMAN, in response to a question from the committee, stated that in the Kuskokwim region many CTE programs are still funded; however, there is a struggle to find trained instructors.

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MR. NICHOLS remarked that construction forecasts can be shared to encourage community training in advance of regional construction work.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 4:49 p.m