

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

May 2, 2022

9:04 a.m.

[9:04:54 AM](#)

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Bishop called the Senate Finance Committee meeting to order at 9:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Click Bishop, Co-Chair
Senator Bert Stedman, Co-Chair
Senator Lyman Hoffman
Senator Donny Olson
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator David Wilson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Natasha von Imhof

ALSO PRESENT

Representative Geran Tarr, Sponsor; David Song, Staff to Representative Tarr; Kris Curtis, Legislative Auditor, Alaska Division of Legislative Audit; Diane Casto, Executive Director, Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Department of Public Safety.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Vikki Jo Kennedy, Self, Juneau; Jayne Andreen, Alaska Public Health Association, Douglas; Brenda Stanfill, Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Fairbanks.

SUMMARY

CSHB 291(STA)

EXTENDING COUNCIL ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

CSHB 291(STA) was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#hb291

CS FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 291 (STA)

"An Act relating to the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault; extending the termination date of the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault; and providing for an effective date."

9:05:25 AM

Co-Chair Bishop relayed that it was the first hearing of HB 291. It was the committee's intention to hear a bill introduction, hear a sectional analysis, take invited and public testimony, and set the bill aside.

9:05:52 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR, SPONSOR, was appreciative of the opportunity to present HB 291 to the committee. She reminded that there were sunset audits that reviewed the work of different councils. There had been a sunset audit for the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA), and absent the legislation the council would sunset in June. She thought the legislative auditor could give a fuller report to the committee, and she was present to do so. She explained that the audit concluded that the council was working in the public's interest, and importantly also concluded that the council was not doing duplicative work. There had been three recommendations, and the council director was present to speak on the matter.

Representative Tarr continued to address the CDVSA audit and explained that she considered the recommendations minor in terms of audit findings. She listed working on document retention, improvement of the Battering Intervention Program database, and timeliness of the annual report submission and regulation changes. She noted that a couple of the recommendations were related to Covid-19 and commented on the difficulty of keeping staff and filling vacant positions during the pandemic. She discussed improving the functionality of the database. She detailed that the audit recommendation was to extend the council until June 20, 2028, which was included in the legislation.

Representative Tarr continued her bill introduction. She discussed recommendations for council membership. She noted that currently there was a designated seat for someone for

rural Alaska, but not a designation for a seat from an Alaska Native organization. She thought the inclusion of rural representation helped with understanding service delivery in places off the road system. She asserted that the addition of a member from an Alaska Native organization would ensure the inclusion of an important voice that would reflect the understanding and interest in addressing the disproportionality of domestic violence and sexual assault in Alaska Native communities. She detailed that the bill more specifically defined a role for recommendations for members from the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center.

[9:09:17 AM](#)

Representative Tarr continued to address the bill. She noted that the bill proposed to add the chief executive officer of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA) (or the designee), which would add important voices and depth of knowledge. She referenced an email from the Chief Executive Officer of AMHTA, dated March 11, 2022 which indicated the trust supported being added as a member of the council (copy on file).

Senator Hoffman asked about attendance records of the board members for the previous two years.

Representative Tarr agreed to provide the information.

Co-Chair Bishop asked Representative Tarr to direct the information to his office.

Representative Tarr agreed.

[9:11:25 AM](#)

DAVID SONG, STAFF TO REPRESENTATIVE TARR, discussed an Explanation of Changes document (copy on file):

CS for HB 291 Ver: 32-LS1425\G

Following feedback from our partners, we have included several changes to HB 291:

- Section 1: This section amends AS 18.66.020 to expand the public membership of the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA) to include a representative from an Alaska Native Organization. This section also allows for the

governor to consult specifically with the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center during the appointment process. The Alaska Native Women's Resource Center (AKNWRC) and the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA) also will submit a list of recommended appointees to the governor.

o This section also creates a new subsection (7) under AS 18.66.020(a) to include another new member to the CDVSA, the CEO of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (or their designee). This ensures that there is a balance between the governmental and public members of this council.

- Section 2: This section amends AS 18.66.020(d) in order to add a definition for "Alaska Native organization," which is based on federal statute (43 USC 1601 et seq and 25 USC 5304). There are also numbering changes to reflect the newly-added definition.
- Section 3: This section extends the length of the CDVSA to June 30, 2028.
- Section 4: This section states that this Act takes effect immediately.

[9:13:46 AM](#)

KRIS CURTIS, LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR, ALASKA DIVISION OF LEGISLATIVE AUDIT, referenced the document "A Sunset Review of the Department of Public Safety, Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA)" dated July 30, 2021 (copy on file). She highlighted that overall, it was found that the council was operating in the public's interest by funding and monitoring Alaska domestic violence and sexual assault programs and prevention activities. She shared that the council had served as a central coordinator for related services throughout the state, conducted meetings in accordance with council by-laws, and effectively met most of its statutory duties. The audit also concluded that the council should improve document retention, should improve access to the Batterers Intervention Program database, and should improve the timeliness of its annual report submission and regulatory changes. The audit recommended a six-year extension.

Ms. Curtis highlighted page 9 of the audit, which showed the schedule of expenditures and funding sources. Also included on page 25 was Appendix B, which was a listing of grant payments for the audit period FY 18 through February 2021. The listing of grant payments was organized by grant program and listed all the grantees and amounts, including the location. The audit made four recommendations, listed on page 14 and summarized on the first page of the audit:

1. The executive director should allocate resources to ensure the annual report is submitted in accordance with council by laws.
2. The executive director should improve training to help ensure document retention procedures are followed.
3. The executive director should work with the Department of Law to expedite regulatory updates.
4. The executive director should continue to work with the Department of Public Safety and the Office of Information Technology to improve access to the Battering Intervention Program database.

Ms. Curtis detailed that at the time of the audit, the annual report was approximately five months late. She noted that the audit had tested 11 grant files, 3 of which were missing documentation. She noted that at the time of the audit, the CDVSA regulations had not been updated since FY 06. There were two regulatory projects in progress. She discussed the delay of regulatory changes due to a change in administration and the coronavirus epidemic. She discussed requirements for the database in the fourth recommendation, which included a full background check that made the addition of new users time-consuming. She noted that the management's response to the audit began on page 29 and the commissioner and CDVSA agreed with the recommendations and supported a six-year extension.

[9:17:18 AM](#)

DIANE CASTO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNCIL ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY, introduced herself and noted that the previous day had been the five-year anniversary of her role at CDVSA. She expressed appreciation of the audit and considered it an

opportunity for improvement and change. She summarized that over the five years she had been at the council, it had made significant changes in order to be in alignment with the federal government and the process of handing out money. She mentioned an extensive review in 2017, which had resulted in a number of recommendations.

Ms. Casto addressed the recommendation related to retention of materials. She asserted that the council was doing an excellent job at retaining materials. She noted that during the time of the audit, the council had been in the process of transitioning from paper to electronic records and had been changing processes. She asserted that the council was fully compliant with paperwork retention and had changed almost completely to an electronic process. In addition, the council had changed its grant management system and had contracted with a new Microsoft system that was cloud-based and allowed grantees to submit information online. She estimated that council had completed 90 percent of the training necessary to transition to the new system. She remarked on how the new system would increase efficiency and effectiveness in grant management.

[9:20:52 AM](#)

Ms. Casto addressed the third recommendation regarding expedition of regulatory updates. She acknowledged that the aforementioned regulatory delays had indeed happened. She noted that the council had been appointed a specific person to work within the Department of Law and were waiting for the go-ahead.

Ms. Casto addressed the fourth recommendation pertaining to the Batterers Intervention Program database. She detailed that the matter had been a significant concern since she had arrived. She thought the council had lapsed in its ability to manage and monitor programs due to budget cuts. The council had ten approved programs and six current programs. She emphasized the importance of data collection. She had reached out to the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and the council was making great progress. She noted that council was in the middle of doing an assessment of needs for the database and would be transitioning to a cloud-based program for easier access to upload grantee data. She reminded of the high turnover rate at non-profit organizations. She relayed that the council was confident that there would be a new system in place within FY 23.

9:24:01 AM

Ms. Casto noted that the council was undergoing changes to its programming to make sure it was more data informed. A work group had started the previous April, which was reviewing national data and making recommendations. She mentioned evidence-based programming with new opportunities for people to apply to programs. She hoped to offer more programs throughout the state and mentioned interest from rural areas.

Ms. Casto addressed the first recommendation pertaining to the council's annual report. She acknowledged that the council was behind on the report, and detailed that the 2020 report had been due during the pandemic at a time when maintaining programming was stressful. She used the term "regulatory discretion" to describe delaying a requirement when other duties were prioritized out of necessity. She discussed staff shortages and the lack of a research analyst and administrative officer, who would have contributed information towards the report. She affirmed that currently, a combined 2020-2021 annual report was in the final draft and would hopefully publish in the following week. She acknowledged the importance of the annual report and emphasized the council's transparency with information that was posted on the internet.

9:28:24 AM

Senator Hoffman thought it was quite disappointing that Alaska Natives had such high rates of domestic violence as referenced by Representative Tarr. He referenced additional programming mentioned by Ms. Casto and asked if there was a bigger plan to move the state forward in improving the rates of domestic violence and sexual assault. He did not think there had been much change to the domestic violence and sexual assault statistics in the decades since he had been in the legislature. He emphasized the severity of the problem. He did not see a plan for substantial changes. He thought the council was asking for a long extension, and the legislature would not get additional analysis on the subject. He thought the board needed to take stronger action and have a better plan to move forward. He was concerned about reports and board extensions taking place with no change to the problem.

[9:31:35 AM](#)

Ms. Casto agreed with Senator Hoffman's comments and called domestic violence in Alaska "an insidious problem." She commented that it was very difficult to make significant progress. She emphasized that it was important to ensure there was a balanced approach. She thought the system and continuum of current services was unbalanced. She highlighted that 90 percent of the council's funds went to victim's services, which left only 8 percent for prevention. She noted that the council had received \$2 million as a result of SB 91 [criminal justice reform legislation passed in 2016], which she thought was from marijuana funds. She detailed that the council had \$2 million for prevention across the state, with 13 programs but not enough resources to hire even one full-time staff. She emphasized that there needed to be more focus on prevention.

Ms. Casto continued to address Senator Hoffman's comments. She cited that only 2 percent of the council's funding went toward working with abusers. She stressed the importance of dealing with the root cause of the problem. She reiterated her agreement with Senator Hoffman. She reiterated the need to balance the services that were provided. She mentioned the board's participation in a strategic planning process, in which the two top priorities were rebuilding and strengthening of battering and prevention programs.

[9:34:32 AM](#)

Senator Hoffman asked why the council did not come forward to request more funds for potential demonstration projects. He used the example of picking a region of the state and funding prevention for two to three years. He emphasized that leadership was needed from the board and Ms. Casto to start on a solution. He suggested working in the part of the state with the highest rate of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Co-Chair Bishop wanted to follow up on Senator Hoffman's comments. He stated that Ms. Casto had done a great job with her invited testimony and had addressed all his questions in her testimony. He echoed Senator Hoffman's remarks and commented that 8 percent of funding being directed towards prevention would never "bend the curve." He mentioned the council's strategic planning and suggested

the council identify geographical areas of the state with greater incidence of domestic violence and sexual assault. He mentioned seven grants going towards shelters in different parts of the state, and suggested the council come back with a plan. He thought a ten to twenty-year funding increment was necessary if the state was committed to bending the curve.

[9:37:23 AM](#)

Senator Wilson noted that he had worked with shelter and batterers programs. He thought the affordability of programs was a challenge. He estimated that outside programs were \$10,000 to \$30,000 for only 10 to 20 participants. He wondered if the council had started developing its own training curriculum for prevention programs. He thought outside programs with emerging practices were expensive.

Ms. Casto agreed that "canned" programs were expensive. She relayed that the 13 communities that were funded by CDVSA were funded as a community coalition. Communities were asked to do a readiness assessment and identify needs, and used a number of national programs. She mentioned programs such as Girls On the Run, Let Boys Run, and Coaching Boys Into Men. She noted that the programs were well-studied, and that the council provided training. She mentioned there were a number of prevention evaluation documents on the council's website. She emphasized the long-term nature of prevention efforts.

Ms. Casto continued her remarks in response to Senator Wilson's question. She had worked in prevention since 1978 and had not seen the progress she would have liked. She emphasized that prevention indicated generational change, and the ongoing efforts were time intensive. She agreed with everything that had been said, but asserted it was difficult to find the perfect balance between requesting too much funding over time and finding the best programs considering all the differences in the state. She thought the council had a strong prevention program that was not well funded.

[9:42:08 AM](#)

Senator Wilson discussed the programs mentioned by Ms. Casto. He wondered if the council was doing something

different and less expensive because the programs were making money as a result of the state's problem. He thought even the batterers program was expensive. He wondered if the council was looking at creating something and considering best practices to have a less expensive option to address prevention.

Ms. Casto knew there were many expensive programs and held that the council was not spending a great deal on its current prevention efforts after getting statewide licenses. She noted that the council only had \$2 million, and approximately \$1.6 million would be going to sub-grantees. She thought Senator Wilson was right to bring up considering what programs were right for Alaska. She said the council had created some programs for Alaska, that did not cost a lot. She cited that the challenge of the time needed to evaluate the success of a program's impact, as compared to using programs that had been previously tested and researched.

[9:45:20 AM](#)

Senator Wilson asked if the University of Alaska Anchorage was still doing a victimization survey.

Ms. Casto answered "yes," and noted the council had its third Alaska Victimization Survey (AVS). The survey had been done in 2010, 2015, and 2020. She agreed to send Senator Wilson the link to the report. The report showed some increase but largely an overall steadiness. She described that AVS was a phone survey for women that asked detailed questions about occurrences over a lifetime and in the last 12 months. She cited data points from the 2020 survey that indicated 48 percent of those interviewed had experienced intimate partner violence, 41 percent had experienced sexual violence, and 58 percent had experienced one or both over their lifetime. She emphasized that the numbers were unacceptable.

Ms. Casto added that the council was going to be continuing doing some additional data analysis on the information that had been collected. The survey had also collected information on Adverse Childhood Experiences as well as whether individuals were beneficiaries of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA). There was a significant number of individuals that fell into the category of AMHTA, which she cited as a reason for adding the additional

position to the board. She offered to send the additional information to the committee. She mentioned a grant the council funded through the UAA Center for Human Development, which worked on abusive response for people with disabilities. She expressed appreciation for the support of the legislature.

Senator Wielechowski asked if domestic violence and sexual assault cases in Alaska were trending up, down, or flat in the previous ten years.

Ms. Casto stated that the cases were "pretty much flat."

Senator Wielechowski observed that the fiscal note proposed \$3 million for "Services" in FY 23 and \$2.59 million in FY 24. He asked what Services in the budget was.

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RECONVENED

Ms. Casto noted that the Services line listed on the fiscal note pertained to contracts the council had. She listed the Disability Abuse Response Teams (DART) program, contracts for prevention outcome measures and other services. She explained that the reason the amount went up in FY 23 was that there was \$500,000 in the budget for a family justice center as a pilot project.

Senator Wielechowski asked what percentage of domestic violence and sexual assault in the state was attributable to substance abuse.

Ms. Casto answered, "very high." She cited that there was a great deal of alcohol use both by victims and perpetrators. She noted that the victimization survey had indicated that alcohol use was not a big issue but based on reports and cases in facilities it was apparent that alcohol use was very high. She emphasized that the consumption of alcohol did not cause abuse, but rather it made a person more impulsive and more violent. For victims that used alcohol, it was often a way of self-medication. She mentioned battery intervention programs and the goal of better screening for substance abuse in order to provide the needed treatment.

[9:54:28 AM](#)

Senator Wielechowski stated that in all the time he had been in the legislature, domestic violence and sexual assault had been a top priority yet did not seem to be improving. He thought Ms. Casto had cited that domestic violence rates were up to 58 percent, which he thought was a four percent increase from the previous survey. He thought the problem seemed to be getting worse. He thought the council appeared to be doing "more of the same," and wondered if things should be done differently. He asked how Ms. Casto would tackle the problem if she was in charge. He questioned what the legislature needed to do.

Ms. Casto wished she had "a magic answer." She recounted that she had come to Alaska in 1984, and domestic violence and sexual assault had been a problem since that time as well as where she previously lived in Washington. She emphasized the difficulty of change and the underreported nature of domestic violence and sexual assault. She explained that family dynamics were involved and cited that the current interventions and support were progress. She acknowledged the lack of progress in helping victims move beyond victimization to being survivors

Ms. Casto pointed out that many victims stayed in abusive relationships. She questioned how to start helping move individuals into better lives. She mentioned lack of housing as a barrier, which she considered a huge issue in a victim's ability to leave an abusive situation. She noted that a few of the council's programs had transitional housing components. She cited the need for transitional services to help victims rebuild their lives. She noted that many victims were economically tied to partners. She commented on the expense of housing. She acknowledged the need for a longer-term, bigger plan to solve the problem.

[9:59:19 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop thought it was obvious that the committee had a great interest in the topic. He asked if the council had done any research on the monthly rates of domestic violence and sexual assaults.

Ms. Casto pointed out that there was national data and explained that the council had not done an analysis but had

considered internal data. She noted that there were some peaks, such as in the spring. She thought the holidays were considered to a peak time but that incidents were perhaps not reported.

Co-Chair Bishop asked about the percentage of male and female incidence of being victims.

Ms. Casto estimated that 8 percent to 10 percent of the council's clients were male.

Senator Wilson asked if Ms. Casto would recommend that the committee work with the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) to raise the amount of funds given to domestic violence housing vouchers.

Ms. Casto thought Senator Wilson's suggestion was a good start. She knew that housing vouchers had presented some barriers. She noted that the council also worked closely with the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA), who were the membership programs that worked with shelters. She thought ANDVSA had been working on the issue. She thought a full analysis needed to be done.

[10:02:14 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop OPENED public testimony.

VIKKI JO KENNEDY, SELF, JUNEAU (via teleconference), was concerned that Ms. Casto had not been prepared for the meeting with information. She did not think much was getting done. She spoke in support of the Boys to Men Program, which had been started by President Barack Obama. She thought villages needed to be more responsible for the problem. She questioned why corporations could not start addressing the problem. She thought the AHFC voucher program was a good program but thought there was not enough housing that would accept the vouchers.

Ms. Kennedy mentioned a half-way house in Juneau. She thought the problem was ongoing. She mentioned United States Attorney General William Barr, who had visited rural Alaska and indicated he would work to address problems. She mentioned United States Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. She thought there needed to be more action taken. She mentioned a missing persons case in Juneau.

[10:05:15 AM](#)

JAYNE ANDREEN, ALASKA PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION, DOUGLAS (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the bill. She appreciated that the legislation expanded the membership of the council. She discussed Alaska Native representation. She referenced member's questions and informed that she had worked in domestic violence and sexual assault since the 1970s in Minnesota. She highlighted that she had not only worked in victim's services response, but also had worked in a health promotion, primary prevention, evidence-based way. She thought Alaska should continue to focus on trauma-informed care and looking at historical/generational trauma effects on families. She stressed the importance of working together across disciplines. She cited the need for more resources for Adverse Childhood Experiences to make long-term societal changes.

[10:07:11 AM](#)

BRENDA STANFILL, ALASKA NETWORK ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT, FAIRBANKS (via teleconference), testified in support of HB 291. She asserted that the council was an integral piece of the work being done in the state and making a dent in the numbers. She strongly supported the addition of two members to the council from AMHTA and the Alaska Native community. She referenced a movie called "The Silence," which had shown interviews of victims. She appreciated the member's questions and noted that she would provide information to each member. She agreed with the need for a strong plan to be put in place to address the problem.

Co-Chair Bishop CLOSED public testimony.

CSHB 291(STA) was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Bishop discussed the agenda for the afternoon.

#

ADJOURNMENT

[10:10:04 AM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 10:10 a.m.

