

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
March 1, 2023  
1:32 p.m.

[1:32:58 PM](#)

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Johnson called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative DeLena Johnson, Co-Chair  
Representative Julie Coulombe  
Representative Mike Cronk  
Representative Alyse Galvin  
Representative Sara Hannan  
Representative Andy Josephson  
Representative Dan Ortiz  
Representative Will Stapp  
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Bryce Edgmon, Co-Chair  
Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair

ALSO PRESENT

Major General Torrence Saxe, Commissioner, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; Bob Ernisse, Administrative Service Director, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; General Simon Brown, Commander of the State, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; Doug Wooliver, Deputy Administrative Director, Alaska Court System.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Rhonda McLeod, Chief Financial Officer, Alaska Court System.

SUMMARY

HB 39        APPROP: OPERATING BUDGET/LOANS/FUND; SUPP

HB 39 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 41 APPROP: MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET

HB 41 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

FY 24 BUDGET OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERAN'S AFFAIRS

FY 24 BUDGET OVERVIEW: ALASKA COURT SYSTEM

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the meeting agenda.

#hb39

#hb41

HOUSE BILL NO. 39

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and loan program expenses of state government and for certain programs; capitalizing funds; amending appropriations; making reappropriations; making supplemental appropriations; making appropriations under art. IX, sec. 17(c), Constitution of the State of Alaska, from the constitutional budget reserve fund; and providing for an effective date."

HOUSE BILL NO. 41

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and capital expenses of the state's integrated comprehensive mental health program; and providing for an effective date."

^FY 24 BUDGET OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERAN'S AFFAIRS

[1:34:13 PM](#)

MAJOR GENERAL TORRENCE SAXE, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, introduced himself.

GENERAL SIMON BROWN, COMMANDER OF THE STATE OF ALASKA DEFENSE FORCE, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, introduced himself.

BOB ERNISSE, ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, introduced himself.

1:34:30 PM

Commissioner Saxe introduced the PowerPoint presentation "FY2024 Operating Budget Overview" dated March 1, 2023 (copy on file). He moved to slide 2 and explained that the mission of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) was to protect the state and the nation.

Commissioner Saxe advanced to slide 3 which depicted a map of Alaska showing the locations of the Alaska Army and National Guard. Each box on the map represented armories that were at capacity with soldiers in 1995. The benefit of having troops across that state was that if there was a natural disaster, there were already troops in all areas of the state ready to respond. Additionally, troops would be on location and ready to respond if there was a federal threat. All areas of the map with a green box were the present focus for recruitment for the department.

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AT-EASE

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RECONVENED

Commissioner Saxe continued on slide 3 and detailed the way in which the military presence in the state had changed over the years. The department was trying to recruit in Western Alaska in particular but was recruiting in many areas across the state. He reiterated that if there were to be a natural disaster in the present day, the department would need to transport troops to the western area of the state; years ago, troops were already present in the area.

Commissioner Saxe continued to slide 4 and indicated that the department's largest response to date off the road system was called the Operation Merbok Response [during the typhoon in September of 2022]. He reiterated that there were not many troops in the Merbok area of the state and it relied upon its large contingent in Nome and in Bethel. Many of the areas in which there were troops years ago were presently void of troops. Accessing roughly 30 unserved communities was a challenge and the department wanted more troops dedicated to the communities.

Commissioner Saxe moved to slide 5, which included a photo of the balloon that was found flying over Alaska and shot down in February of 2023. He shared his concern that there was a foreign object flying over the state's sovereign territory. He also posed the question of why the object would be a balloon rather than a satellite. He noted that the object was also a threat to aviation and could cause a catastrophic situation if it collided with a plane.

Commissioner Saxe advanced to slide 6 which showed the organizational chart of the composition of DMVA. He indicated that most state militaries only had adjutant military, but Alaska had many other state entities within DMVA. He had recently accomplished a long-term goal to include a branch of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) in DMVA. Additionally, DMVA had administrative control over the Alaska Aerospace Corporation.

Commissioner Saxe indicated that Alaska was the only state or territory within the nation that had a larger Air National Guard than an Army National Guard. He relayed that the state's Air National Guard was the most operational in the entire country and made roughly one rescue per week. The official state militia was the Alaska State Defense Force (ASDF). If there were ever to be a situation where the National Guard was federalized, it was possible that the National Guard would relocate to Washington state. He noted that the situation had occurred during World War II. Although it was unlikely to happen again, he wanted to ensure that there were troops stationed in the area to assuage any fears of there being no military presence in parts of the state.

Commissioner Saxe added that the role of the Alaska Naval Militia was primarily to follow state orders, such as to assist during natural disasters. He relayed that the militia had served during natural disasters often over the last few years.

Commissioner Saxe concluded that some of the other entities within the department were Veteran's Affairs, the Alaska Military Youth Academy (AMYA), Administrative Services, and the Homeland Security and Emergency Management System (HSEMS). He emphasized that the homeland division was an especially busy one.

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Representative Josephson understood that CAP was an entity that the legislature had repeatedly funded and the governor had repeatedly vetoed. He asked if the funding was in the current year's budget.

Mr. Ernisse responded that CAP funding was incorporated into the prior year's budget and it had continued into the current year's budget.

Commissioner Saxe added that CAP had to be under the military because it was an official department of the United States Air Force (USAF). He emphasized that it was important that DMVA was utilizing all available assets going forward.

Mr. Ernisse continued the presentation on slide 7, which showed a high level comparison between FY 20 actuals and the governor's request for FY 24. He pointed out that unrestricted general funds (UGF) had stayed relatively consistent over the years with a few notable exceptions. In FY 21, the Alaska Land Mobile Radio (ALMR) communications system was transferred from the Department of Administration (DOA) over to DMVA. In FY 23, ALMR was transferred again to the Department of Public Safety (DPS), which was the reason for the spike in general funds. Also in FY 23, there was an increase in funding to help establish ASDF. There was an additional increase for the defense force in FY 24 that would be apparent in future slides.

Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 8. The department's first request within HSEMS included a decrement of \$700,000 in federal receipt authority. The funding originated from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and was simply being transferred to the capital budget as the department viewed it as a better fit. Secondly, the department was requesting an increase in the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG). The increase in funding was due to an increase in federal funds, which required an increase in matching funds as well. The final request on the slide was for an increase in statutory designated program receipts in relation to the department's Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). He shared that Alaska used to have the ability to offer assistance

when natural disasters occurred in other states, but it unfortunately no longer had the capacity to send employees to help other states. The reason for the change was that there had been a record number of natural disasters within Alaska, which needed to be the focus of the department.

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Representative Hannan asked Mr. Ernisse to elaborate on the deficit incurred by the transfer of NOAA funding to the capital budget. She asked what the original project was and asked for details on the anticipated effect of the \$700,000 receipt authority.

Mr. Ernisse responded that it was a grant for NOAA and was mostly intended for personal services costs for communities. He clarified that DMVA would still execute the grant, but that it was simply being transferred from the operating budget to the capital budget.

Representative Hannan asked what the grant was intended to do.

Mr. Ernisse responded that he did not have the information with him but he would follow up in writing.

Co-Chair Johnson asked what the match requirement was for EMPG.

Mr. Ernisse responded that the match was \$3.6 million.

Co-Chair Johnson asked how much the federal increase was.

Mr. Ernisse responded that the federal increase was also \$3.6 million.

Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 9. The first request on the slide was for \$105,500 for an additional administrative officer under the Army Guard Facilities Maintenance component and would be funded completely using federal dollars. The current administrative workload was unsustainable with the existing staff. The second request was for an additional \$138,000 in the Equipment Maintenance and Lifecycle Refresh component. It would fund a refresh for computers and monitors and would fund annual maintenance for generators statewide to ensure ongoing

functionality. It would also be completely federally funded.

Representative Galvin asked if there were best practices on how often computers should be replaced.

Mr. Ernisse replied that he would follow up with the information.

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Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 10 and detailed the Air Guard Facilities Maintenance component. The first request on the slide was for an increase of \$50,000 in general funds for janitorial services at the Eielson Air Force Base. The department had been unable to establish a janitorial contract with the previously allocated amount of \$99,000 due to inflation and cost of living increases. He added that the National Guard members were currently doing their own janitorial service. The second request was for maintenance and utilities. The National Guard had built a large hanger known as a "nose dock" and the funding request was for the amount required to maintain the facility.

Co-Chair Johnson understood that \$99,000 had been allocated for janitorial services but had not been used.

Mr. Ernisse responded in the affirmative and added that the department had not been able to get a contract despite placing bids multiple times.

Co-Chair Johnson asked if there was anyone who was able to complete a partial contract.

Mr. Ernisse responded in the negative and reiterated that the department had tried to find a contract multiple times.

Co-Chair Johnson asked for confirmation that the total amount would allow the department to get a janitorial contract.

Mr. Ernisse responded that the department believed it would be able to get a contract with the additional funding.

Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 11 which detailed the requests for AMYA. He relayed that the department had discovered that it could charge the federal government more

for personal services costs. As the match in federal authority increased, the general fund match would increase as well; however, the department was still able to identify a \$543,000 cost savings in general funds.

Representative Ortiz asked for a brief overview of the operations at AMYA, such as the number of students currently attending the academy.

Commissioner Saxe responded that there were roughly 85 students currently at the academy and the department's target was to have at least 125 students. The academy lasted around eight weeks and the goal was for its students to either earn a GED, receive a diploma, or return to their high school. He was a supporter of the academy and thought that it was a lifechanging experience. He added that many students would go on to enlist into the military.

Representative Ortiz asked if the students were assigned to the academy due to past legal issues or if the students applied voluntarily.

Commissioner Saxe responded that enrollment in the school was voluntary. The students came from all over the state and a significant portion of the student body came from rural areas.

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Mr. Ernisse advanced to slide 12 and detailed the Office of the Commissioner component of the budget. There was an additional request for the Alaska Distributed Learning Program (ADLP), which was a program that provided classes and additional training to soldiers throughout the state. The program was expanding, and the department was requesting \$75,000 in federal receipts to support the expansion. The next request was for the addition of a Human Resource Consultant 1 position. The position was in response to expected increases in personnel issues as a result of drill statuses and activations within ASDF. The majority of the funding would originate from the National Guard and other divisions.

Representative Stapp asked if there were any plans to use the Northern Warfare Training Center as an active duty training facility.

Commissioner Saxe responded in the affirmative and added that the department wanted to promote all available Arctic training activities. The department was considered the Arctic expert because of its location in Alaska. He wanted to set an example for other state military forces and other entities interested in potential training in the Arctic. He emphasized the importance of protecting the Arctic and of protecting Alaska.

Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 13. The next request was for about \$2.1 million to establish ASDF as a separate division within DMVA. It would fund five additional employees including a position for division director.

Representative Galvin noted that part of the funding would go to the purchasing of fleet vehicles. She understood that the National Guard, ASDF, and other troops would be responsible for responding during emergency situations. She asked if the purchases listed on the slide were a complete list of what ASDF would need to be appropriately responsive in emergency situations.

Commissioner Saxe responded that the National Guard and ASDF would go forward as a team. There were certain areas in which the guard could excel and other areas in which it needed assistance. He relayed that the focus of ASDF would ideally be upon the areas in Alaska without any troops. The goal was to transport the troops and the equipment to rural areas of the state because it would make a disaster response more streamlined.

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Mr. Brown added that all soldiers could ride in National Guard fleet vehicles when the vehicles were available, but if the vehicles were not available, he would have to transport his own troops. He emphasized the importance of having large vehicles readily available to respond quickly to a disaster. He stated that he needed additional survival equipment to ensure that when he sends a soldier to respond to an emergency, the soldier would be properly equipped to remain in the situation for a long period of time.

Representative Galvin asked Mr. Brown if he was including airplanes in the list of equipment he needed to transport troops to remote areas. She asked for more details on the types of equipment of which he was speaking.

Mr. Brown responded that the military would not be purchasing airplanes and would purchase commercial tickets for soldiers if necessary. The requested equipment included off-road vehicles and other wheeled vehicles that would allow troops to remain in an area for long periods of time.

Representative Hannan understood that there were significant barriers preventing ASDF from using the National Guard's equipment and armories. She asked for information on any legal restrictions that would prevent the equipment from being shared. She did not think \$2.1 million would go far in rural Alaska, particularly when establishing a new division or facility. She thought it was difficult to receive permission to use equipment that belonged to the federal government.

Commissioner Saxe responded that it was, "one team, one fight." He relayed that ASDF was presently allowed to use the equipment at the National Guard's armories, particularly in areas of the state where a military presence was lacking. There were some more remote locations in the state where ASDF was the largest force in the area, such as Kodiak, where the force had free use of the federal armories. He did not think sharing equipment was a current issue nor did he think it would be an issue in the future.

Representative Coulombe understood that the request would strictly fund the five new positions. It seemed to be an elevated attempt to respond to emergencies and natural disasters that happened suddenly. She asked what the job duties of the five permanent full-time employees would be when there was not an active emergency situation.

Mr. Brown responded that there were currently 200 people working for ASDF and he wanted to increase the workforce to 500 people. The process of hiring a high number of new employees would involve intensive administrative work such as conducting background checks and preparing training. Volunteer staff were currently conducting the administrative duties once a month for one week and it was not reliable. It was difficult to track progress, applications, and training without a stable staff. It would take a permanent and full-time staff to manage the hiring of 300 additional employees. He reiterated that there needed to be a certain number of staff already on location and ready to respond when a disaster occurred.

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Mr. Ernisse continued on slide 14, which detailed the final budgetary request. The defense force was funded \$400,000 in FY 23 and the change would simply move the funding from the Office of the Commissioner to the ASDF component.

Co-Chair Johnson referred to slide 6. She asked how [the addition of ASDF as an independent division] would change the organizational chart.

Commissioner Saxe responded that the chart would not change.

Co-Chair Johnson asked for clarification that ASDF would remain in the same location on the chart but would simply be considered an independent division.

Commissioner Saxe responded in the affirmative and added that ASDF would continue to report to Mr. Brown who would then report to Commissioner Saxe himself.

Representative Cronk noted that Fort Greely, which was in his district, was the only military base in the state that was not accessible via the railroad. He often saw reports of convoys running off the road. He asked if there was a way to expedite improved access to Fort Greely.

Commissioner Saxe responded that in his opinion, the mission needed to have redundant access. He was looking holistically at the entire state and needed to have the ability to transport forces to every area of the state; therefore, the entire state needed to be accessible by the military. In addition, all of the airfields needed to be at least 8,000 feet in length [for military access] and many of the fields were currently much shorter. He agreed that the military needed to have access to Fort Greely through every means possible. He assured the committee that the department was working on improving accessibility and it was consulting with the congressional delegation to present the request persuasively to both the state and federal governments.

Representative Stapp asked how coordination would work between the National Guard and ASDF. He wondered how ASDF

would be integrated into the complicated military system in Alaska.

Commissioner Saxe responded that all requests would go through a unified command. If there was a disaster, commands would go through the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) and all military assets would be informed. There would not be any entity working separately. He added that the military entities in Alaska had experience collaborating on situations in the past and the forces acted as a unified command. The command would then report to him and he would report to the governor.

Co-Chair Johnson thanked the presenters.

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AT-EASE

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RECONVENED

Co-Chair Johnson indicated that the following presentation would be given by the Alaska Court System (ACS).

^FY 24 BUDGET OVERVIEW: ALASKA COURT SYSTEM

[2:16:07 PM](#)

DOUG WOOLIVER, DEPUTY ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA COURT SYSTEM, introduced the PowerPoint presentation "House Finance Committee; Alaska Court System Overview" dated March 1, 2023 (copy on file).

Mr. Wooliver began on slide 2 and explained that ACS existed for one purpose: to make decisions on legal issues that came before the court. The mission statement as seen on the slide directed ACS to accomplish its purpose as expeditiously as possible during times of budget crises or pandemics. Budget cuts and the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging to accomplish the court's mission expeditiously and allow for accessibility. Courts were sometimes closed in the wake of budget cuts or experienced decreased hours, which made operations more difficult. All decisions made in the management of ACS were with its mission in mind.

Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 3 which showed ACS's operating budget request by funding source. The courts were funded

mostly through the executive branch, but the judicial branch and legislative branch contributed to the budget in smaller but critically important ways.

Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 4 and described the court system's various appropriations. The majority of the funding went to trial courts, which contained the bulk of ACS's employees, judges, and cases. The therapeutic court was a separate appropriation within the budget; however, the entity was still contained within the trial courts. Other components included in the appropriation were appellate courts and administrative costs.

Mr. Wooliver advanced to slide 5 and spoke on the items funded by ACS. He indicated that the courts mostly funded personal services costs, followed by contractual expenses, travel, supplies, and capital outlay. He noted that similar expenses could be found within any court system.

Mr. Wooliver continued to slide 6 and explained that Alaska was unique in that it was a unified court system and did not have separate municipal or county courts. There were only about eight other unified systems in the country. He thought that the unification of the system led to increased efficiencies and made administrative duties more streamlined. There were two municipal prosecuting offices, but ACS also worked directly with the Department of Law (DOL) and the Public Defender Agency (PDA) on issues of prosecution.

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Mr. Wooliver advanced to slide 7 to speak on the factors that impacted workloads at the courts. As the population of an area increased or decreased, caseloads at the courts also increased or decreased. Police and law enforcement resources were also factors that significantly impacted the workloads of the courts. The economy could also impact workloads. It was more difficult to measure economic factors, but employed people generally committed fewer crimes than unemployed people. There were also many statutory changes that impacted workloads, such as a charge being dropped from a felony to a misdemeanor.

Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 8 and spoke on the breakdown of the positions within ACS. He stated that over 660 of the court system's 772 positions were clerical in nature. The

courts also employed five supreme court justices, four court of appeal judges, 45 superior court judges, 20 district court judges, and 38 magistrate judges. He elaborated that magistrate judge positions ranged from full-time lawyer positions in major communities to part-time non-lawyer positions in small and rural communities.

Mr. Wooliver continued to slide 9, which showed a map of court locations and employees throughout the state. The location with the most employees was the southcentral district with a total of 533 workers. There were 40 different court locations around the state. The larger dots on the map represented the superior court locations and the smaller dots represented the locations with magistrate judges.

Mr. Wooliver advanced to slide 10 and detailed the contacts that ACS had with Alaskans in 2022. The jury trial rate had recovered since the pandemic and was almost back to pre-pandemic numbers. Additionally, the court system had 6,268 contacts within the Family Law Self-Help Center (FLSHC). The current director of the center was an expert on self-help centers and gave speeches throughout the country on the subject. There were many resources on the FLSHC website, such as forms that could help citizens with legal issues, informational videos, and links to many other resources for the public. The center focused mainly on family law matters, but also helped with probate cases and guardianship cases. The website remained popular and there were nearly 7 million visits to the website in 2022.

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Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 11. The majority of trial court caseloads had not changed dramatically since the prior year; however, Palmer was the one exception. The superior court in Palmer had seen an increase in caseloads and was currently the busiest court in Alaska. The growth was anticipated because the Mat-Su valley was the fastest growing area of the state. He relayed that the growth in caseloads in Palmer could be almost completely attributed to the increase in involuntary mental commitment, which was a type of probate case. The Mat-Su Regional Hospital recently opened a facility that could accept involuntary mental commitment cases; therefore, individuals that would have previously been transferred to a facility in Anchorage were now being committed in Palmer. Trial court caseloads

had also increased in Anchorage, but cases were rising almost everywhere across the nation. Rising cases were being referred to as the "silver tsunami" due to the aging baby boomer generation. There were other things that could impact cases, as he had mentioned on slide 7, but the increase in involuntary commitments in Palmer stood as an example.

Representative Josephson asked if a probate case could also include a dispute over an individual's will.

Mr. Wooliver responded in the affirmative. He explained that involuntary commitments were a subcategory of probate cases. There was a slight increase in will dispute cases, but the reason for the significant increase in caseloads in Palmer was involuntary commitment cases.

Co-Chair Johnson asked for details on the process of involuntary commitment.

Mr. Wooliver responded that the first step would be a petition for involuntary commitment. He noted that anyone could file a petition, such as a friend, family member, or mental health practitioner. The petition would need to allege mental health issues that brought the situation within the scope of the statute. The court would then appoint an employee to evaluate the situation and determine if there was merit. If the court decided there was merit, it could issue a transport order and the individual could be involuntarily committed. The court would transmit the order directly to law enforcement along with a transport order to empower the police to transport the individual to an appropriate facility.

Co-Chair Johnson asked for confirmation that a commitment order would originate from the court.

Mr. Wooliver responded in the affirmative.

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Representative Hannan noted that probate cases had increased by roughly 500 cases since 2020. She asked if the cases were all unique or if there could be multiple cases involving one individual. She asked if there had been a proportionate [probate case] decrease in the Anchorage courts.

Mr. Wooliver responded that it was possible for multiple petitions to have been filed for one individual. It was also possible for a petition to be granted more than once for one person; however, the total caseload number represented individual cases. The probate cases in Palmer would have gone to Anchorage prior to the building of the new facility and it was likely that the courts in Anchorage experienced a decrease, but the caseload in Anchorage had still increased overall.

Representative Hannan asked if Title 47 holds reported by the Department of Corrections (DOC) were reflected in the increased caseload numbers. She asked if the reopening of the Palmer Correctional Center might have had an impact on the data.

Mr. Wooliver responded that he was not knowledgeable about the particulars. He emphasized that every petition that was filed to commit an individual was included in the data.

Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 13, which included the list of the increment requests for ACS. In order to address the increase in cases in Palmer, the court system was requesting an additional magistrate judge position and an additional clerk position for Palmer's superior court. Each superior court judge in Palmer was already responsible for almost 700 cases each and he predicted that ACS would be requesting additional superior court judges in future years.

Mr. Wooliver continued that in the prior year, the legislature had approved an appropriation for the expansion of the courthouse in Palmer, which was a small step forward as caseloads continued to grow in the area. All of the other increment requests merely reflected increased costs of doing business, such as increased lease costs and security screening costs. He noted that ACS was in a similar situation as DMVA in that it was unable to get a contract for security screenings with the funds that were currently allocated.

Mr. Wooliver added that the court system was responsible for court appointed attorney costs in some cases and it was requesting an increase to \$100 per hour from \$75 per hour for the contract attorneys. Lastly, the increased cost for

juror meals was almost entirely related to increased food costs in Bethel.

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Representative Josephson asked about the security screening costs. He had heard that there were some courthouses in the state with higher security levels than others. He asked if every superior court in the state was satisfactorily secured.

Mr. Wooliver responded that security levels still varied greatly. Courts with only one judge, such as Kotzebue, did not employ the same level of security as courts in Anchorage.

Representative Josephson asked why there was a distinction.

Mr. Wooliver responded that there were a few reasons for the differing levels of security. The difference was partially due to the amount of traffic experienced by the courts in smaller communities. When higher profile cases were brought to courts in smaller communities, there were portable security screeners that could be utilized by the courts. Due to the low traffic and small number of cases, ACS had not prioritized security in the smaller courts.

Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 14, which contained a list of non-UGF budget requests. He relayed that there was a federal program with a formula that determined how much funding a court received depending upon the number of cases related to children in need of aid. According to the formula, Alaska was entitled to about \$450,000 in federal child support interagency receipts. The request would simply allow the state to receive the federal money. There was an additional request for \$304,700 in federal grant receipt authority which would help establish a new veteran's court in Fairbanks. An additional request was for \$304,400 for the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA), which would allow the state the authority to receive the funding. Finally, there was a \$250,000 decrement in non-federal grant authority. He explained that ACS had requested additional funding several years prior intended for a grant related to the Families with Infants and Toddlers Court (FITC), but it did not receive the grant.

Co-Chair Johnson asked if the court system had ever received the grant in the past.

Mr. Wooliver responded that ACS used to receive grant funding for FITC from the Mat-Su Health Foundation. The grant that ACS did not receive was also sourced from the foundation, but it did not come to fruition.

[2:40:30 PM](#)

Representative Coulombe understood that the budget for the therapeutic courts totaled around \$7.8 million. She asked if the \$304,000 in federal grant receipt authority all went to therapeutic courts or if the money had other purposes.

Mr. Wooliver responded that all of the money was intended for the therapeutic courts.

Representative Coulombe asked for a short description of a therapeutic court.

Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 15 to describe therapeutic courts. He relayed that Alaska had been a leader in the development of therapeutic courts. In 1998, Anchorage judge Stephanie Rhoades created one of the first mental health courts in the country. In 1999, another judge in Anchorage, James Wannamaker, created one of the first DWI courts. In 2004, Anchorage judge Jack Smith created Alaska's first veteran's court. He thought the programs were terrific but required a high level of management.

Mr. Wooliver continued that prior to 2011, there were separate therapeutic court appropriations for legal services for DOL, PDA, and the Division of Behavioral Health (DBH). In 2011, Representative Mike Hawker, who was Co-Chair of the House Finance Committee at the time, decided to combine the appropriations under one umbrella in order to better track the ways in which the money was being spent. The entirety of the funding now flowed through ACS's budget and could not be used to fund anything other than therapeutic court expenses. He explained that \$1.8 million of the funding was spent within the court system and the remainder of the roughly \$8 million was appropriated to other entities such as DBH. The divisions would bill the court system and were all paid through the appropriation. He thought it had been helpful to better understand and track the expenses.

Representative Josephson asked what the FY 23 therapeutic court budget would be.

Mr. Wooliver deferred to his colleague.

[2:44:04 PM](#)

RHONDA MCLEOD, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, ALASKA COURT SYSTEM, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), responded that the court system's FY 23 authorized budget was just shy of \$7 million.

Mr. Wooliver concluded his presentation and made himself available for questions.

Representative Stapp asked what the court system's vacancy rate was and how the vacancies were impacting the court's backlog.

Mr. Wooliver responded that the official vacancy rate was intended to be 7 percent. The rate was currently just under 11 percent and there were presently 65 vacant positions throughout the court system, but the situation had been improving. A year prior, there were 39 vacant superior court trial staff positions and there were currently 17 vacant positions. The raise ACS received in the prior year had reduced the length of time it took to recruit new employees from 84 days to 51 days.

Representative Stapp presumed that many court staff had reported several overtime hours to manage the backlog. He asked if overtime payroll expenses were reflected in the budget.

Mr. Wooliver responded that there was almost no overtime incurred in the court system. An employee would need to receive permission from the administrative director in order to work overtime. The overtime costs for the prior year were in the \$20,000 range, which were typically incurred due to judges and clerical staff traveling to another location to cover a trial.

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the agenda for the following day's meeting.

HB 39 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 41 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#  
ADJOURNMENT

[2:48:37 PM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 2:48 p.m.