

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
February 29, 2024  
1:45 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Johnson called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:45 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

None

ALSO PRESENT

Treg Taylor, Attorney General, Department of Law; John Skidmore, Deputy Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Law; Cori Mills, Deputy Attorney General, Civil Division, Department of Law; Doug Wooliver, Deputy Administrative Director, Alaska Court System.

SUMMARY

HB 268      APPROP: OPERATING BUDGET; CAP; SUPP; AM

HB 268 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 270      APPROP: MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET

HB 268 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF LAW FY 25 BUDGET

OVERVIEW: ALASKA COURT SYSTEM FY 25 BUDGET

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the meeting agenda.

#hb268

#hb270

HOUSE BILL NO. 268

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and loan program expenses of state government and for certain programs; capitalizing funds; amending appropriations; making capital appropriations; making supplemental appropriations; making reappropriations; 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. 270

"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."

^OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF LAW FY 25 BUDGET

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TREG TAYLOR, ATTORNEY GENERAL, DEPARTMENT OF LAW, introduced himself and his staff. He began the PowerPoint presentation "Department of Law FY 2025 Budget Overview" dated February 29, 2024 (copy on file). He began on slide 2 titled "Mission:"

The Department of Law upholds the rule of law, protects public safety, and provides high quality legal representation to executive branch agencies for the benefit of all Alaskans.

Attorney General Taylor read the mission of the Department of Law. He continued to slide 3 which contained photographs and titles of the Department of Law's (DOL) management team and spoke of the team's continuity over the prior 3 years.

Attorney General Taylor moved to slide 4 titled "Department of Law FY 2023 - FY 2025 Operating Budget Comparison." He explained that the chart and graph provided an overview of the operating budget over the years shown. He noted the slight increase in the FY 2025 governor's request, which represented multi-year statehood defense funds from FY 2023. Mr. Taylor addressed slide 5 titled "We See Things Others Don't," which included a link to a video that featured actual employees at the department talking about the work done within the department. He related that the purpose of the film was to explain the work of DOL. He characterized the department as a resource to the public, specifically the consumer protection division. He also wanted the film to inspire others to work for the department.

Co-Chair Johnson asked how long the video was.

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JOHN SKIDMORE, DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL, CRIMINAL DIVISION, DEPARTMENT OF LAW, relayed that the video was 15 minutes but was cut down to 6 minutes for the purpose of the presentation. [The film was not watched.]

Attorney General Taylor continued on slide 6 titled "Department's Request: Paid Interns:"

State Position Description: Graduate Intern 2  
Range 16: \$4,570/month in Anchorage  
Airfare: \$750  
Housing Stipend: \$3,000

Partner with University of Alaska for rooms:  
University gets stipend

District Attorney Offices (DAO) in Anchorage,  
Fairbanks, Palmer, Juneau (southeast), Kenai, Bethel,  
Nome, Kotzebue, Utqiagvik

Total 58 interns / 3 months: \$1,072,800

Attorney General Taylor indicated that a large request for the department was for paid interns. The era of unpaid interns had ended, and the interns work was valuable for DOL. However, the main purpose of hiring interns was to attract future employees to the department. He noted that half of the department's current leadership began as interns as well as many others still working in the department. He deferred to Mr. Skidmore to further expand on the program.

Mr. Skidmore explained that the criminal division received 166 applications for interns, but 93 percent of the applications had negative outcomes with only 11 accepting positions out of 57 offers. A significant portion declined; 23 candidates cited lack of pay, while others noted the lack of housing, or stated other reasons. He calculated that 40 percent of people that the department extended offers to declined due to lack of pay. He discovered that other states and cities were paying interns between \$2.2 thousand to \$4.2 thousand monthly. He shared that Ms. Mills, Deputy Attorney General, Civil Division began her career with the department as an intern and was now in leadership. The number of law school graduates had decreased dramatically over the last decade by roughly 10 thousand fewer each year. He believed that the department needed to pay interns to remain competitive. He reiterated that the department's ranks were full of prior interns and felt that it was a necessary recruitment tool. He deferred to Cori Mills to discuss the situation in the Civil Division.

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CORI MILLS, DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL, CIVIL DIVISION, DEPARTMENT OF LAW, echoed Mr. Skidmore's sentiments. She relayed that the civil division had a 40 percent declination rate citing pay or housing, which reduced the intern pool to 1L or first year law students. She detailed that 2L or second year students could appear in court. In addition, 2L students were more likely to return as full time employees. She elucidated that ivy league schools' students received stipends and were more likely to view the internship as an experience or vacation. The department wanted to attract interns from state universities that had law programs that were more applicable to Alaska's needs. She observed that a paid internship broadened the pool of interns.

Mr. Taylor agreed with Ms. Mills and added that the prior year's interns were mostly from ivy league schools, which was positive except many were 1L. The department was trying to attract 2L students that were seriously considering starting a career and moving to Alaska.

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Representative Ortiz thought it made a lot of sense. He asked what the minimum qualifications were to apply. Mr. Taylor responded that the programs were summer programs designed for interning between school years and the minimum requirement was students had to complete the first year of law school.

Co-Chair Johnson asked how the number of 58 interns was derived. Mr. Skidmore responded that 23 of the positions were for the criminal division derived from how many positions each of the district attorney offices had around the state. He addressed Representative Ortiz's question and elaborated that the criminal division only wanted 2L students in the paid program because the interns were authorized to appear in court. The range was associated with PCN's for 2L's that was already established in statute. He deferred to Ms. Mills to discuss the civil division's request.

Ms. Mills added that she had examined prior internship programs and DOL's current capacity to supervise interns. She expounded that the civil division program included externships. The division had approximately 25 openings in the summer and 10 spots available for semester externships for 2L candidates. Both Mr. Skidmore and Ms. Mills emphasized that 1L students were welcome, but they would not be paid and were only awarded a small stipend.

Representative Galvin stressed that it was the best recruitment plan she had seen in the House Finance Committee among the departments that were experiencing staff shortages. She commended the testifiers and thought that it was a great model for others. She had heard many different ideas from other departments on how to address shortfalls. She mentioned teaching and nursing staff recruitment in the state, with a cost of over \$20 million on recruitment that had not changed anything. She calculated that the cost for each intern was roughly \$25 thousand each summer. She asked whether she was correct.

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Ms. Mills responded that the housing stipend was for the entire summer. The airfare and the housing stipend were both one-time expenses.

Representative Galvin wondered what the total per intern was. Mr. Skidmore responded that the way it works was that the airfare and housing were one-time items, and the range was displayed. He preferred to provide the committee with a spreadsheet that broke down the costs for a complete answer.

Representative Tomaszewski noted that his question had just been answered and he commended the testifiers on the intern program.

Representative Coulombe asked how many intern positions already existed and how many were new positions. Mr. Skidmore responded that in the prior year he was looking for a total of 23 but had only been successful in recruiting 11. He indicated he was not adding more, but because the interns were not paid previously the department lacked PCN's (position control numbers). Representative Coulombe understood that the goal was for 58 PCN's. Mr. Skidmore answered in the affirmative. He did not believe the number would be reached immediately, but it was the future goal.

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Representative Hannan asked if the interns were divided by about 60 percent for the civil division and 40 percent for the criminal division. Ms. Mills responded that split was roughly 50/50 but the criminal division offered 10 externships over a semester.

Attorney General Taylor interjected that many interns were trained for civil work and could work immediately. However, the prosecutorial side was a very different experience, and it took training and a hands on approach due to the interns' lack of experience.

Mr. Skidmore advanced to slide 8 titled "Criminal Division Mission:"

To seek justice, promote public safety, and further public respect for government through prompt, effective, and compassionate prosecution of cases.

Mr. Skidmore examined slide 9 titled "Criminal Division FY 2025 Operating Budget Changes:"

Change In Sexual Assault Consent Laws: \$2,328.6  
Unrestricted General Funds (UGF), 12 Permanent Full-Time Positions (PFT)  
Training: \$100.0 UGF  
Increased Drug Prosecutions: \$397.5 UGF, 2 PFT  
Six Investigators: \$1,142.9 UGF, 6 PFT  
Investigative Grand Jury Needs: \$502.4 UGF, 3 PFT

Mr. Skidmore continued to slide 10 titled "Change in Sexual Assault Consent Laws:"

Staffing  
Six Attorney 5  
Nome DAO, Anchorage DAO, Fairbanks DAO, Special Prosecutions: Juneau, Bethel, Anchorage  
Two Paralegal 3  
Anchorage DAO and Special Prosecutions  
Two Law Office Assistant 2  
Kenai and Special Prosecutions  
Two Administrative Assistants  
Juneau/ Anchorage

Previous bill passed without fiscal notes

Defense agencies received funding last year:

(\$3,128.9 UGF received by Office of Public Advocacy and Public Defender Agency)

Mr. Skidmore explained that HB 325 (Domestic Violence/Sexual Offenses/Consent - Chapter 44 SLA 22 - 07/28/2022) expanded some of the conduct that qualified as sexual assault. He was requesting a total of \$2.5 million as broken down on the slide.

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Mr. Skidmore advanced to slide 11 titled "Training:"

Two types of Academies:

Prosecutor:  
Two weeks substantive law/trial advocacy  
Held twice a year  
20 attendees  
Three-five trainers

Paralegal:  
40 hours recorded modules  
40 hours in person  
Held once a year  
13-15 attendees  
Two trainers

Mr. Skidmore emphasized the importance of training. He stressed that about 60 percent of the division's prosecutors had two or less years of experience.

Representative Ortiz asked if there was a significant increase in inexperience over the past five years. Mr. Skidmore responded in the affirmative and expounded that the percentage of inexperience was greater than in the past due to turnover, therefore, training was critically important. He delineated that the academies had been funded via unexpended money due to high vacancy rates, but since recruitment had been better additional funding was needed.

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Representative Stapp cited slide 6 and thought there was a mathematical error of \$60 thousand. Mr. Skidmore replied that he wanted to provide the spreadsheet that broke down all costs that included administration costs.

Co-Chair Johnson noted that Representative Cronk was the chair of the DOL subcommittee.

Mr. Skidmore turned to slide 12 titled "Increased Drug Prosecutions:"

Increased Need for Prosecution  
Amount seized increased  
Deaths increased  
Number of cases increased

Drug Trafficking = Public Safety Danger

Two PFT:

Prosecutor  
Paralegal

Mr. Skidmore asserted that there was a 300 percent increase in seized fentanyl in the prior year in the state amounting to 87 kilograms. The number of fentanyl overdose deaths had increased by 135 percent since 2018. He reviewed slide 13 titled "increased Drug Prosecutions:"

65% increase in cases charged since 2018

+250 active cases

125 awaiting screening

Two prosecutors currently =

125 active per attorney

75 screening per attorney

Mr. Skidmore indicated that the national average suggested that 90 to 100 cases per attorney was the norm.

Representative Tomaszewski asked what happened to the fentanyl that was seized. Mr. Skidmore responded that the drugs were ultimately destroyed.

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Representative Hannan pointed to the chart on slide 13 of charged, indicted, and convicted prosecutions from 2018 to 2023. She presumed that a charge from 2018 was not also indicted and convicted in the same year. She asked for an estimate of how long it would take between initial charge and conviction. Mr. Skidmore responded that it was rare for someone to be charged and convicted in the same year. He interpreted the charts by calculating the difference between the cases charged and solved in a given year. He conveyed that there should be an equilibrium of cases between the number of new cases and the number of resolved cases each year or the system becomes problematic.

Representative Tomaszewski asked if a plea agreement was represented as convicted. Mr. Skidmore responded in the affirmative.

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Mr. Skidmore continued on slide 14 titled "Investigators:"

Most prosecutor's offices in lower 48 have investigators

Follow up needed for domestic violence/sexual assault  
Serve witnesses

Six PFT Throughout the State:

Special Prosecutions

Fairbanks

Palmer

Kenai

Southeast

Bethel

Mr. Skidmore continued on slide 15 titled "Investigative Grand Jury:"

Alaska Constitution Article 1 § 8

Recent increased demand

Not criminal cases

Law

Constitution

Statutes

Regulations

Court Rules

Practice and Policy

Facts/evidence

How to obtain evidence

Harm, if any

Three PFT:

Prosecutor

Paralegal

Law Office Assistant

Mr. Skidmore elaborated that the recent increased demand for investigative grand juries created problems for the criminal division that was focused primarily on prosecution and investigative grand juries was not limited to prosecution. Therefore, a prosecutor had to learn about the area of the law and associated information as listed on the slide, which all took significant time away and prevented the criminal division from its primary focus of prosecution. The division was requesting a prosecutor position solely for Investigative Grand Jury requests. He

relayed that discussions were underway regarding the proper placement within the department for the prosecutor position.

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Representative Ortiz asked for a brief definition of what an investigative grand jury was, how was the demand generated, and why was the increased demand happening currently versus in prior years. Mr. Skidmore replied that per the Alaska Constitution Article 1, Section 8 stated that if someone was charged with a felony it had to be presented to a Grand Jury first. However, the section also references an investigative grand jury, which was primarily envisioned for correctional facilities to determine whether or not the jails were operating appropriately and effectively. He relayed an incident concerning Governor Sheffield where an investigative grand jury could result in indictments. However, his concern was focused on the requests that were completely investigative in nature like looking into the Office of Children's Services (OCS). He delineated that grand juries were part of the constitution crafted in 1959 but once the ombudsman office was created in 1964, state government operational complaints could be heard through the ombudsman versus the investigative grand jury resulting in a decrease in grand jury requests. However, in the previous several years there was a marked increase in citizens requests. He reiterated that the situation had become problematic for the division, and it pulled staff from prosecutorial work.

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Representative Ortiz asked about the number of requests for investigative grand juries that occurred in the prior year. Mr. Skidmore answered that there were seven requests.

Co-Chair Edgmon was temporarily passed the gavel to chair the meeting.

Representative Galvin recalled from a prior meeting that the Office of the Ombudsman was requesting more support for a significant case load. She wanted to evaluate where the work needed to happen. She wondered if there was a general theme in the investigative cases and whether the ombudsman could adjudicate the same cases. Mr. Skidmore responded that some of the complaints were directed towards the

Ombudsman's Office. A citizen's had the right to request that another body investigate the issue. He shared that the division's process was to determine whether the complaint qualified as affecting public welfare or safety and if so, it was appropriate for a Grand Jury investigation. The ombudsman focused on individual cases but if the issue impacted the public at large, it could be appropriate for both the ombudsman and an investigative grand jury.

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Representative Hannan shared that she had served once on a criminal grand jury that met once a week for a period of months. She understood that an investigative grand jury was comprised of a panel of citizens and that the state was still struggling to impanel juries that had the time commitment and skills to sit on an investigative grand jury. Mr. Skidmore replied that grand juries were focused on conduct in their jurisdiction and did not travel within the state according to judicial rules. He agreed that there was a concern about how much the investigative requests would affect impaneling criminal grand juries, which was why the evaluation process was so important. Representative Hannan asked if the purpose could be served by "beefing up" the ombudsman and sanctioning more investigative authority and employees. Mr. Skidmore responded that the ombudsman could be empowered to do more but citizens were still entitled to an investigative grand jury and should not be denied the opportunity even with another avenue.

Representative Josephson wondered how long the cycle of increased requests would last. Mr. Skidmore was not able to determine if the increased requests was a trend or a phase.

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Representative Coulombe asked if the positions were in the requested three positions that were in the base budget. Mr. Skidmore responded in the affirmative.

Ms. Mills continued the presentation on slide 16 titled "Civil Division Mission:"

To provide high-quality legal services that protect the human, financial, and natural resources of the state.

Ms. Mills advanced to slide 17 titled "Civil division FY 2025 Operating Budget Changes:"

Civil Division Restructuring: \$45.0 UGF  
Personnel for Child Protection Section Fairbanks:  
\$176.2 UGF, \$176.2 Interagency Receipts (I/A), 2 PFT  
Expand Consumer Protection Unit: \$598.7 Statutory  
Designated Program Receipts (SDPR), 3 PFT  
Replace Unavailable Interagency Receipt Authority for  
Regulation Reviews: (fund source change) +\$448.0 UGF,  
-\$448.0 I/A  
Increase for Statehood Defense (FY25-FY27): \$2,018.0  
UGF IncT

Ms. Mills explained that the civil division budget was about half funded by interagency receipts and the other half came from the General Fund (GF). The division's budget had 15 components, which created many administrative burdens and budgeting inflexibility. The division proposed to decrease the number of components to 5. Ms. Mills continued to slide 18 titled "Civil Division Post-Restructure:"

Protective Legal Services & Support

Human Services

Child Protection

Commercial, Fair Business, and Child Support

Regulatory Affairs and Public Advocacy

Agency Advice & Representation

Torts, Workers' Compensation, and Corrections

Labor and State Affairs

Public Corporations and Governmental Services

Resource development & infrastructure

Environmental

Transportation

Oil and Gas

Natural Resources

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Opinions, Appeals, and Ethics

Information and Project Support

Professional Development and Public Service

Special Litigation

Legislation, Regulations, and Legislative  
Research

Legal Support Services

Paralegal: Protective Legal Services  
Paralegal: Government Services, Resource  
Development and Infrastructure, Agency Advice and  
Representation  
Law Office Assistants

Ms. Mills identified the Legal Support Services component and elaborated that the by including all the paralegal support and law office assistant support it realigned resources to allow all law office support to help out on a breadth of sections within the division versus dedicating the support staff to a specific section. The support services supported all sections, and an added benefit was it created more backup support if someone left the division.

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Representative Galvin deemed that some components in the new structure appeared to be taking on much more work. She wondered if the division was reducing staff or was it a new way to reorganize the division's support structure. Ms. Mills responded that there was no reduction in staff, but it was simply a reorganization to reduce administrative burdens, streamline systems, and create efficiencies. The number of sections remained the same.

Representative Hannan asked whether all the statehood defense would be included in resource development.

Co-Chair Johnson noted that there was an upcoming section on statehood defense later on in the presentation and delayed the answer.

Ms. Mills continued on slide 19 titled "expand child protection:"

TWO FULL-TIME FAIRBANKS PERSONNEL

Attorney 4, range 24  
Paralegal 1, range 14

ADDRESSING CASELOADS

Reduce burden on Fairbanks attorneys by distributing significant workload  
Improve retention and attorney scheduling balance

Improved coordination with Office of Children's Services

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Positive impact on children, foster families, and parents

Ms. Mills expounded that child protection was the largest section. The caseloads in child protection should be around 60 to 70 while the Alaska's was 90 to 100 on average. Caseload work varied depending on what parts of the state the cases were located in. She stressed that attorney burnout was high due to districts where the caseloads were demanding. Ms. Mills discussed slide 20 titled "Expand Consumer Protection Unit (CPU):"

VALUABLE SERVICES TO THE STATE

Over \$25 million in Civil penalties in five years  
\$1.3 million in restitution to consumers  
Nearly \$100 million for opioid abatement

History of CPU

Expansion in 2018 resulted in significant increase in number of consumer cases filed  
Currently, 17 investigations unable to be worked on due to lack of staff

THREE FULL-TIME ANCHORAGE PERSONNEL

Attorney 5, range 25  
Investigator 2, range 16  
Paralegal 2, range 16

Ms. Mills reported that the request was not for GF but requested increased authority to spend Statutory Designated Program Receipts (SDPR), from an existing account that was filled with funds from consumer protection settlements. Some of the settlements required the settlement award to be expended on consumer protections efforts that amounted to 5 percent of the fund while the remaining 95 percent went to GF.

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Ms. Mills moved to slide 21 titled "Regulation Review Fund Source Change:"

+\$448.0 UGF/- \$448.0 I/A

Removes the outdated chargeback system

Allows the Department of Law to meet the current cost for regulation reviews.

Ms. Mills offered that the regulation review fund source change made sense philosophically because DOL was statutorily mandated to ensure that all agency regulations did not conflict with statutes or the constitution and acted independently of agencies.

Co-Chair Johnson asked if DOL was charging back to the departments in the prior system. Ms. Mills responded in the affirmative, but it was based on a formula average over time rather than the actual number of hours spent on a specific department. Representative Josephson deduced that the regulation review was exclusively a state expense. Ms. Mills answered in the affirmative.

Representative Josephson asked for confirmation that the review examined the smallest most benign regulation. Ms. Mills responded in the affirmative and also ensured that the procedural steps were followed in the formation of the regulation.

Ms. Mills highlighted slide 22 titled "Statehood Defense Increase:"

Asserting the state's ownership and management rights relating to land and natural resources, protect the responsible development of the state's resources, and defend Alaska's sovereignty.

Issues relating to federal rulemaking challenges relating to resource management.

Support for navigability and other matters of access across the state.

Ms. Mills reminded the committee that the funding was a multi-year request. She advanced to slide 23 titled "Statehood Defense Current Multi-Year Appropriations." She pointed to the chart that depicted the appropriations from FY 2021 through FY 2024. She expounded that the current proposal was for \$2 million each year as a "temporary increment" and the money would not be included in the base budget.

Representative Stapp asked what the state's record was on the statehood defense. Ms. Mills noted that a list of cases was included in the backup (titled "Multi-Year Statehood Defense/State's Rights Funding." dated January 17, 2024) (copy on file) She replied that only one or two cases had concluded. However, she listed some successes and indicated that most were pending or on appeal.

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Ms. Mills cited Representative Hannan's earlier question regarding the source of the funding. She reported that the initial appropriation was outside of the regular budget structure.

Mr. Taylor interjected that statehood defense did spill over from litigation to appeals.

Co-Chair Edgmon pondered whether there was a need to have statehood defense defined in law. He did not find a definition in regulations or statute. He saw a valid need for it, but the issues were always open-ended, ill defined, and a work in progress. He suggested that a definition was necessary. Mr. Taylor agreed with Co-Chair Edgmon's comments. He reported that the department attempted to act transparently and cautiously in its approach avoiding controversy and focused the funding responsibly on statehood defense. Co-Chair Edgmon asked if the discretion DOL applied to statehood defense was not spilling into a current subsistence case. Mr. Taylor responded that there was no spill over.

Ms. Mills interjected that she had to personally approve what cases were included and determined that they fit within the parameters set forth by the legislature. Co-Chair Edgmon believed that the funding was merely an appropriation line item and lacked parameters. Ms. Mills responded that the current funding was a temporary increment but in prior years parameters was included. She offered that the intent would still apply for the defense funding.

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Representative Josephson cited Mr. Taylor's remarks regarding avoiding controversial issues. He inquired whether all of the defense work was considered

controversial. Mr. Taylor acknowledged that the issues were contentious, but the department attempted to stay within the parameters, and it would not be overly controversial and maintain transparency.

Representative Ortiz asked whether the resources used by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for R.S. 2477 [Rights-of-Way] to move litigation forward came from DOL.

Ms. Mills replied that DNR had gotten funds for their expertise to help with litigation. The DOL funds were used specifically for the legal services associated with the litigation and expert advice. Representative Ortiz requested a brief summary of the issue. Ms. Mills answered that an old mining statute allowed for development of public access through use and the state could assert ownership as a public right-of-way. The law was repealed therefore, historical evidence of use of the area was needed and many were old mining trails like the Iditarod Trail and the Dalton Highway both originated as an RS 2477.

Mr. Taylor made closing remarks.

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AT EASE

[3:09:13 PM](#)

RECONVENED

^OVERVIEW: ALASKA COURT SYSTEM FY 25 BUDGET

[3:09:54 PM](#)

DOUG WOOLIVER, DEPUTY ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA COURT SYSTEM, introduced the PowerPoint presentation "House Finance Committee Alaska Court System Overview" dated February 29, 2024 (copy on file). He briefly reviewed slides 2 through 4

Slide 2 titled " Mission Statement:"

The mission of the Alaska Court System is to provide an accessible and impartial forum for the just resolution of all cases that come before it, and to decide such cases in accordance with the law, expeditiously and with integrity.

Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 3 titled "FY 25 State of Alaska Operating Budget Request - All Funding Sources." He noted that the Judicial Branch made up 1.5 percent of overall state spending. He proceeded to slide 5 titled "Alaska Court System FY 24 Operating Budget Appropriation" that showed the majority of the budget was expended on Trial Courts. Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 5 titled "FY 24 Authorized Budget Overview - All Budget Units" and reported that most of the budget spend was on personnel, facilities, and contractual obligations that comprised 98 percent of the budget.

Co-Chair Johnson asked Mr. Wooliver to explain why the Judicial Branch budget was part of the governor's budget request. Mr. Wooliver responded that traditionally, the Judicial, Executive, and Legislative Branches of government were all in the same operating budget. The Judicial Branch budget was submitted via the Office of Management and Budget. The Judicial Branches budget request was directed to the Legislature as the appropriating body.

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Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 6 titled "Distinguishing Characteristics of the Alaska Court System:"

State Funded - No County or Municipal Courts

Unified Judiciary

Mr. Wooliver noted that Alaska's entire justice system was the most unified justice system in the country, which was very efficient.

Mr. Wooliver advanced to slide 7 titled "Factors Impacting Workloads:"

Population  
Police  
Economy  
Statutory Changes  
Recovery from Pandemic Era  
Staff Vacancies

Mr. Wooliver acknowledged that the state's demographics were changing via losing population and aging, which changed things in the state. An aging population

experienced fewer crimes committed and a shift in the types of cases that came before the courts. While other departments in the justice system were experiencing retention issues it also impacted how cases moved throughout the courts. He turned to slide 8 titled "Vacancy Rates - FY 2021 to FY 2023:"

FY25 Personal Services Underfunding = 7.3%

Temporary and non-permanent positions (including most grant-funded positions) are not included in vacancy calculations

Judges are not included as hiring is not within the control of the Alaska Court System

Mr. Wooliver relayed that the Judiciary had a high vacancy rate of 13.3 percent but had dropped to 10.6 percent and was budgeted for a 7.3 percent vacancy rate. He credited the decrease to recruiting efforts. Mr. Wooliver continued to slide 9 titled "Recruitment Efforts:"

Participated in six job fairs held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau during 2023

Social Media Outreach

Spotlight "Jobs of the Week" on Alaska Court System Facebook page

Direct outreach with Facebook groups such as the Military Spouses' page

HR Department is exercising flexibility with not requiring use of on-line application platforms and accepting applications and resumés via email

Employee Referral Program - Successful referrals yield three paid days of leave

Mr. Wooliver commented that the deputy director of the Judiciary's Human Resources Division was a military spouse and her efforts advertising on Facebook to military spouses helped find 7 more new hires.

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Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 10 titled "Improved Recruitment Responses:"

In 2022, the average number of applications received for each open position totaled 5.3

In 2023, the average number of applications received for each open position totaled 6.2

Mr. Wooliver addressed to slide 12 titled "Employees in Transition:"

With aging workforce future retirements may continue to increase (as of January 2024 payroll, 37% of the court's non-judge workforce is age 50+)

Separations are declining and the number of exit survey responses citing pay as a reason for separation have declined

Internal Transfers impact the vacancy rate (current employee accepts a new position, then the vacated position must be recruited)

Mr. Wooliver listed the 3 reasons for employment changes: retirements, separations, and internal transfers. He emphasized that although incremental, the Judicial Branch was successful in recruitment efforts. He reviewed slide 12 titled "FY 24 Court System Employees - 776 Authorized Positions:"

Primarily Clerical Employees  
Five Supreme Court Justices  
Four Court of Appeal Judges  
45 Superior Court Judges  
20 District Court Judges  
39 Magistrate Judges

Mr. Wooliver indicated that 113 employees were judicial officers, and the rest were primarily clerical workers since the system was clerical based with exception of the employees that worked in administration.

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Mr. Wooliver moved to slide 13 titled "FY24 Court Locations & Authorized Positions by District." He offered that the

employees were spread out over 38 different communities, but most employees were in the third judicial district. The entire second judicial district only had 34 employees [north and west areas of the state].

Representative Galvin noted that there were two districts with one and zero Appellate Court Judges. Mr. Wooliver replied that appeals was a statewide court. There was only one Appellate Court.

Mr. Wooliver continued on slide 14 titled "Contacts with Alaskans in 2023:"

92,454 new cases filed (trial and appellate courts)  
5,532 contacts thru the Family Law Self-Help Center  
3,447 Alaskans served on juries  
7,741,111 visits to the court's website  
2,399,429 CourtView searches  
22,410 online payments made  
393 therapeutic court participants  
Tens of thousands of on-line court forms accessed or downloaded

Mr. Wooliver highlighted slide 15 titled "Trial Court Caseloads - FY22 vs. FY23:"

FY23 Trial Court Case Filings Totaled 91,953  
Down 13.8 % from FY22 Total Trial Court Filings

FY23 Superior Court Cases Totaled 21,365  
Down 3.8% from FY22 Superior Court Case Totals

FY23 District Court Cases Totaled 70,588  
Down 16.4% from FY22 District Court Case Totals  
Minor Offenses for FY23 totaled 12,892 fewer than in FY22

Mr. Wooliver pointed to the decrease in the caseloads in the current year but nothing in a budget was impacted by the decrease comprised of relatively minor changes. He noted that the decrease in minor offenses was comprised of Fish and Game tickets and traffic violations.

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Mr. Wooliver continued to slide 16 titled "FY 25 Continuation Budget Request (UGF):"

\$957,100	Software Maintenance & Licensing
\$473,900	Mediators, Interpreters, Visitors
\$448,000	Facility Maintenance & Operations
\$444,500	Therapeutic Courts Treatment, Counseling, Urinalyses, Juneau Mental Health Court*, Competency Calendar
\$252,600	Security Screening Costs
\$38,200	Appellate Court Travel
\$2,614,300	Total Increased FY25 UGF Requested

Mr. Wooliver related that the budget request increment was attributed to increased costs of operating the system, which were listed on the slide.

Mr. Wooliver advanced to slide 17 titled "FY 25 Guardianship Monitoring Initiative - New:"

Alaska is facing a guardianship crisis due to OPA refusing to accept new cases based on their high caseloads.

Newly hired professional guardians or family guardians will benefit from the monitoring program to ensure they are fulfilling the protective services role for which they are appointed.

The Alaska Court System is requesting \$417,000 to hire three positions to assist guardians and monitor their compliance with statutorily required reports.

Mr. Wooliver commented that the request for the three positions did not solve the crisis but benefitted the Office of Public Advocacy (OPA) by allowing more people to serve in the guardianship role.

Mr. Wooliver continued to slide 18 titled "FY 25 Operating Budget Requests (Non-UGF):"

\$525,000	Federal Grant Receipt Authority
\$178,300	Mental Health Trust Authority
\$125,000	Interagency Grant Receipts
\$828,300	Total FY25 Non-UGF Increase

Mr. Wooliver concluded the presentation.

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Representative Coulombe cited slide 17 and asked if the staff would be monitoring guardians or helping friends and family become guardians. Mr. Wooliver replied that it would be both. He added that every guardian had to submit an annual report to the court. The monitors reviewed every report and ensured the guardians were doing what was required on behalf of the ward. In addition, they assist individual guardians with their questions and paperwork. Representative Coulombe asked how many were currently employed in the position. Mr. Wooliver answered that there were currently 2 positions federally funded via an expiring grant that covered Anchorage, Homer, Kenai, and Bethel. The third position would allow coverage in all courts in the state.

Representative Josephson asked about the Palmer Courthouse. Mr. Wooliver noted that the Palmer Courthouse was the priority Capital Budget request totaling \$35.7 million. The only place where increased population was an issue was in the Mat-Su. The area needed new judges, but the courthouse was completely full. The Judiciary wanted to add more superior court judges in the Mat-Su and the only way to accomplish it was through a new courthouse.

Representative Ortiz asked if the item was included in the governor's capital budget. Mr. Wooliver answered in the negative but added that it was included and submitted in Judiciary's capital budget request.

[3:34:34 PM](#)

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

HB 268 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 270 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#  
ADJOURNMENT

[3:34:53 PM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 3:34 p.m.