

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
March 13, 2024
5:03 p.m.

5:03:02 PM

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Johnson called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 5:03 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

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Elizabeth Ripley, President and CEO, Mat-Su Health Foundation, Wasilla; Zallman Liston, Self, Wasilla; Trevor Storrs, President and CEO, Alaska Children's Trust, Anchorage; Suzi Pearson, Executive Director, Abused Women's Aid In Crisis, Anchorage; Beki Toussaint, Program Director, Alaska Resource Education, Anchorage; Tonda Lundin, Self, Big Lake; Lisbeth Jackson, Self, Palmer; Kelly Lessens, Member, Anchorage School Board, Anchorage; Linda Combs, Board of Directors Member, Palmer Senior Center, Palmer; Rebecca Logan, CEO, The Alliance, Anchorage; Evi McNamee, Service Employees International Union 775, Wasilla; Aleshia Lockhart, Self, Anchorage; Sasha Johnson, Self, Anchorage; Karen Matthias, Self, Anchorage; Cheryl Kerkove, Self, Wasilla; Randall Wilson, Self, Anchorage; Marianela Ramirez, Self, Anchorage; Sarah Krug, Member, Service

Employees International Union 775, Anchorage; Dr. Gene Quinn, Self, Anchorage; Kendra Sticka, Self, Anchorage; Tommy Hiratsuka, Hope Community Resources, Anchorage; Rebecca Reiss, Self, Wasilla; Queen Mary Tialavea, Self, Anchorage; Ethel Tuck, Self, Palmer; Brenda Shelben, Executive Director, Mat-Su Council on Aging, Mat-Su; Betty Redd-Mendez, Self, Wasilla; Pam Ventgen, Executive Director, Alaska State Medical Association, Anchorage; Jeanne Gerhard-Cyrus, Self, Kiana; Vanessa Liston-Cunningham, Self, Wasilla; Deantha Skibinski, Executive Director, Alaska Miner's Association (AMA), Anchorage; Veronica Holloway, Self, Anchorage; Laura Bonner, Self, Anchorage; Marlene Munsell, CEO, Wasilla Area Seniors Inc., Wasilla; Laura Norton-Cruz, Self, Anchorage; Jeremiah Lewis, Member, Caregiver's Union, Anchorage; Thomas Azzarella, Executive Director, Alaska After School Network, Anchorage; Stephanie Berglund, CEO, Thread, Anchorage; Ricarda Ledman, Self, Anchorage; Brenda Moore, Self, Anchorage; William Ingram, President, Board of Directors, Palmer Senior Center and Mat-Su Senior Services, Palmer; Jessica Simonsen, Self, Anchorage; Yolanda Thomas, Self, Anchorage; Melanie Hooper, President and CEO, Campfire Alaska, Anchorage; Sam Garcia, Self, Anchorage; Lisa Paesani, Board Member, Head Start, Anchorage; Jennifer Brown, Staff Member, Standing Together Against Rape, Anchorage.

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 270 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

PUBLIC TESTIMONY: ANCHORAGE, MAT-SU

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the meeting agenda. The committee would be hearing public testimony on the operating and mental health budgets.

#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."

[5:05:00 PM](#)

^PUBLIC TESTIMONY: ANCHORAGE, MAT-SU

Co-Chair Johnson reminded callers that SB 140 was not part of the operating budget. She did not intend to hear testimony related to vetoes on any bill. She reviewed the testimony protocol.

[5:06:19 PM](#)

ELIZABETH RIPLEY, PRESIDENT AND CEO, MAT-SU HEALTH FOUNDATION, WASILLA (via teleconference), relayed that the Mat-Su Health Foundation shared ownership in the Mat-Su Regional Medical Center and invested its share of the profits back into the community through grants, scholarships, and systems change work with the goal to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in Mat-Su. The foundation had conducted community health needs assessments every three years since 2013 and residents had communicated the top health concerns were related to mental health and substance use and things related to behavioral health. She requested the restoration of \$1 million for Crisis Now services, \$2.8 million for the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) homeless assistance program and \$1.75 million for special needs housing grants. She relayed that Mat-Su had been experiencing growing acute behavioral health crises. She discussed work with law enforcement

partners on the Crisis Now system and its benefits. She relayed that Medicaid and the 1115 waiver did not cover the cost of around the clock services. She stressed it was essential to have the funding restored.

[5:10:46 PM](#)

ZALLMAN LISTON, SELF, WASILLA (via teleconference), requested increased funding for homecare workers. He shared that he had been a caregiver for his uncle for the past 14 years and was 28 years old. He relayed that he had to find other sources of income because working as a caregiver was not sustainable financially.

[5:11:48 PM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, PRESIDENT AND CEO, ALASKA CHILDREN'S TRUST, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that the Alaska Children's Trust advocated for policies that increase economic security for families and provide early education supports for children. The organization supported \$1.5 million for bulk food purchase grants under the Department of Health (DOH), \$300,000 for DOH human services grants, \$400,000 for DOH community initiative grants, and \$5 million for Head Start via the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). He thanked the committee for the \$6.1 million fiscal note for HB 89. He requested funding for AHFC homeless assistance funding and childcare. The organization recognized that childcare is a key aspect for families and the economy as a whole.

[5:13:50 PM](#)

SUZI PEARSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ABUSED WOMEN'S AID IN CRISIS (AWAIC), ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), relayed that AWAIC was the only emergency domestic violence shelter in Anchorage. She spoke about services provided by the agency. She relayed that the loss of \$4 million in Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA) funding would cause a 20 percent cut to AWAIC's emergency shelter budget. The cut would make vacant positions redundant, possibly eliminate the legal advocacy program, potentially reduce the shelter beds, and would create a waitlist for individuals seeking nonresidential services. She listed the number of individuals the agency had served in 2023. The number of individuals being served would be reduced if the cut went through. She shared that the services had been

essentially flat funded for almost eight years. She explained that federal funds from American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding had helped pay for utilities and foods. The increments would stop with the loss of the federal funding. She requested a reinstatement of the \$4 million to maintain flat funding. Additionally, she requested an increase to overall CDVSA funding.

[5:16:12 PM](#)

BEKI TOUSSAINT, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, ALASKA RESOURCE EDUCATION, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), encouraged the committee to support Alaska Resource Education's (ARE) work by reinstating the original appropriation in the budget. She provided information about the organization that prepared Alaska's students for gainful employment in the state's natural resource industries. She shared the benefits of the program teaching facts and science. The organization helped students who wanted to live and work in Alaska in a wide range of career opportunities. She provided additional work done by the organization. The organization taught over 12,000 students across the state associated with issues related to Alaska's natural resources.

[5:18:44 PM](#)

Representative Coulombe asked about the \$1 million in the original appropriation. She stated her understanding the funds were granted to school districts for programs.

Ms. Toussaint replied that the funding would go to the ARE to help sustain programs for various school districts.

Representative Coulombe wondered if the funding was going to ARE and ARE was teaching in school districts or the grants were going to school districts to pay ARE to do the classes.

Ms. Toussaint responded that it was her understanding the funding would go directly to ARE for its programs done in partnership with school districts.

[5:20:03 PM](#)

TONDA LUNDIN, SELF, BIG LAKE (via teleconference), had worked in the healthcare field for 22 years. She requested additional funds for homecare and home healthcare workers. She shared that she had recently been out sick for a full week and because she was living paycheck-to-paycheck she had been unable to go to the doctor because she could not afford the cost. She relayed that three out of her four clients had not received care in the week she was out. The crisis was urgent.

[5:21:23 PM](#)

LISBETH JACKSON, SELF, PALMER (via teleconference), shared that she is a senior citizen. She requested the restoration of \$2.7 million to senior community grants in order for senior centers to maintain their current level of services. She stated that services had been cut in the past and Palmer was still not able to offer its members congregate meals and any further cuts would impact all of the other services including delivered meals, transportation, and other things that helped seniors live at home as long as possible. Living at home was the most cost effective way to age. She believed in the importance of taking care of the state's senior citizens.

[5:23:24 PM](#)

KELLY LESSENS, MEMBER, ANCHORAGE SCHOOL BOARD, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of an operating budget that would help accomplish an increase in the BSA by no less than \$680, allocate \$500 per K-3 student identified to have a reading deficiency, and increase student transportation funding by \$50 per Anchorage School District (ASD) student. She stated that an operating budget that provided funds for the aforementioned investments would benefit ASD students, families, educators, the municipality, and the state. The funds would allow ASD to provide critical resources directly to the classrooms. She estimated that the ASD had approximately 6,800 K-3 students who may be in need of reading support. The funds would also enable class sizes to remain the same, would have a positive impact on educators' working conditions, and would enable the ASD to maintain valuable school-based programs and charter school options.

[5:25:12 PM](#)

LINDA COMBS, BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEMBER, PALMER SENIOR CENTER, PALMER (via teleconference), echoed comments by Ms. Jackson. She had been on the senior center board for seven years. She had served on the Governor's Commission on Aging. She believed the state's seniors were owed some security when they were responsible for building Alaska. She stated that the \$2.7 million cut to the senior and disability community grants program would be detrimental to seniors. She stressed that the cut would result in reduced services including cuts to meals and transportation, increased waitlists, and a loss of services. She asked the committee to consider the issue. She thanked the committee.

[5:28:01 PM](#)

REBECCA LOGAN, CEO, THE ALLIANCE, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), asked for a restoration of \$1 million for ARE. She stated that all of The Alliance's members were facing a serious workforce shortage. She highlighted the importance of the state's young people in growing the state's workforce. The school districts and schools were the starting place of educating students about careers and career paths in Alaska. She had worked with the Anchorage School District on the Anchorage Academy's project and had learned there were gaps in what school districts could provide. She stated that ARE was an excellent program that was filling the gaps in school districts statewide. She stressed it was significant impact on education across the state. She emphasized it was not the time to reduce programs that were complimentary to what was happening in school districts.

[5:29:53 PM](#)

EVI MCNAMEE, SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION 775, WASILLA (via teleconference), shared that she had been a caregiver since she was 11 years old when she started as a candy stripper at a hospital. She had become a nurse and was now a caregiver for her husband and one client. She emphasized the crisis currently taking place. She highlighted the aging population and stated that without caregiver services no one would be able to stay in their homes or in the [Mat-Su] valley. She emphasized the money needed to be put in caregivers' hands. She shared that she was working 58 hours per week because no one wanted to do the job that lacked benefits, backup, and healthcare. She appreciated the committee's time.

5:31:43 PM

ALESHIA LOCKHART, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that she is a direct service provider. She relayed there was a problem keeping caregivers because they were underpaid, and people were quitting to find other better paid jobs. She loved the field and stressed people needed to be paid enough to continue in the profession to help those in need. She asked the committee to help caregivers make more money in order to provide more care.

5:33:21 PM

SASHA JOHNSON, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of funding for caregivers and home healthcare providers. She had been a caregiver for 20 years. She wanted to see better funding for home healthcare providers and transparency as to where the funding was going. She stated caregivers needed better hours for clients and access to health insurance. She wanted to be able to continue to care for her aunt and mom who lived with her. She shared it was a struggle to pay her bills and groceries with most of her paycheck going to her mortgage. She relayed that she had to save her next paycheck for bills that were past due. She stated it was no way to live.

5:35:06 PM

KAREN MATTHIAS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for Alaska Resource Education (ARE). She volunteered with the Powerful Opportunities for Women in Resources Program for several years and was impressed with the curriculum, enthusiasm and knowledge of the ARE staff, and the positive impact on young women who wanted to explore careers in industries that were traditionally male dominated. She shared that ARE staff had helped in her son's elementary school class and had used fun hands on approaches to introduce kids to robotics and electronic circuitries. She noted her son was just one of 40,000 students across the state who had received additional STEM education from ARE. She stressed it was crucial for new teachers to be introduced to Alaska specific curricula. She provided further benefits of the program.

5:37:08 PM

CHERYL KERKOVE, SELF, WASILLA (via teleconference), called in support of direct funding for caregivers and homecare. She stressed that inflation had gone up and everything cost more. She stated that many young caregivers were struggling to afford their basic needs. She wanted it to be a profession that retained young workers. She emphasized the importance for increased pay and treating caregiving as a career. She cared for her son around the clock and struggled to find dependable caregivers. She shared it was important for her son to know and trust his caregivers. She stressed that better pay would attract better caregivers and would benefit the clients.

[5:38:34 PM](#)

RANDALL WILSON, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of funding for caregivers and homecare providers. He shared that he had been a caregiver for 18 years. He stressed it was the most underappreciated profession in the healthcare industry. He referenced the high turnover rate and non-livable wages. He mentioned the consumer assessment tool that graded what a person could or could not do for themselves and stated there was no way to accurately judge someone's level of care by a visit or electronic visit. He emphasized that a wage of less than \$20 an hour was not sufficient for caregivers taking care of the mental, physical, and emotional needs of others.

[5:41:11 PM](#)

MARIANELA RAMIREZ, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), requested more money in the budget for homecare. She had worked as a caregiver for more than five years. She stressed the need for increased funding going directly to caregivers. The work of a caregiver required significant responsibility and was very important to clients. She stated it was not fair that caregivers had to work multiple jobs or work extra hours and barely survive. She stressed that the work was essential and she requested funding for increased pay. She thanked the committee.

[5:43:07 PM](#)

SARAH KRUG, MEMBER, SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION 775, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), requested increased funding for care providers. She shared information about

her work as a caregiver. She stressed that care provider jobs required a lot of hard physical, mental, and emotional work and had low wages and high turnover rates. She shared information about her son's disability that required full-time care. She stated it was important that her son have the ability to have a sense of independence and autonomy in addition to help when needed. She listed things that her son was doing for himself. He only received 20 hours of home care and she had been out of work for two months because there was no one else to provide care. She stressed that being a caregiver should provide a livable wage.

5:47:10 PM

DR. GENE QUINN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that he is a practicing cardiologist and worked with the Health Information Exchange (HIE). He supported an increase of \$935,000 for HIE. He thanked Representative Stapp and the department for their work on the subcommittee. He stressed that HIE was one of the building blocks of the healthcare system in Alaska. He remarked that the state was statutorily required to have a health information exchange. The exchange was a nonprofit but was the state's designated health information exchange. There were federal matching funds. He spoke about his work taking care of Alaskans across the state. He underscored that it was essential to see individuals' records in order to treat them. He stated that without sufficient information patients had to fly to Anchorage at the expense of the healthcare system, Medicaid, etcetera. He was grateful for the increase of \$935,000 in the budget.

5:50:05 PM

KENDRA STICKA, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of the \$935,000 in funding for the Alaska Health Information Exchange. She thanked the subcommittee for recognizing the importance of the HIE and providing funding for continued operations. She noted the federal fund source had ended. The HIE served as critical healthcare infrastructure across the state. Healthcare ended up being more expensive and less efficient without the service. Ultimately Alaskans paid for inefficiency through higher healthcare costs. The core function of the HIE was to facilitate data sharing to improve the cost, efficiency, and effectiveness of healthcare for Alaskans. She thought most individuals had experienced frustration in getting

healthcare records from one place to another, which should not happen. She appreciated the legislature's support.

[5:52:20 PM](#)

TOMMY HIRATSUKA, HOPE COMMUNITY RESOURCES, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), supported continuing to eradicate the waitlist for adults and children with disabilities waiting for services. He stated that in 2023 Senior and Disability Services recommended the implementation of a resource allocation tool. The legislature added funding for the tool in FY 24. He asked the state to continue to monitor progress to implement the plan and eliminate the waitlist. He asked the legislature to support services including human services transportation in order for individuals to get to work or other locations (in the governor's original budget). He requested an additional \$1 million for transit match funding. He supported \$13 million for community behavioral health services to close the gap from a delayed rate increase and enact a 1 percent increase in Medicaid spending to bolster current community behavioral health until a new long-term rate methodology was created.

[5:54:43 PM](#)

REBECCA REISS, SELF, WASILLA (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for caregivers. She shared that despite working full-time she and her daughter had found themselves homeless twice in the past year. She asked the legislature to put more money in the budget for homecare so that money went directly to caregivers.

[5:56:00 PM](#)

QUEEN MARY TIALAVEA, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of funding for caregivers and homecare funding. She had been working for 30 years in the field, she had to work two jobs and did not have time to be home with her kids because she was working to make ends meet. She requested funding in the budget to go directly to caregivers.

[5:57:10 PM](#)

ETHEL TUCK, SELF, PALMER (via teleconference), requested the restoration of \$2.7 million for the senior and disability grant program. Maintaining the funding would

mean services could be continued at their current level. She had worked with senior centers in Palmer and Wasilla. She shared details about the benefits at the centers. She thanked the committee.

[5:58:47 PM](#)

BRENDA SHELLEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MAT-SU COUNCIL ON AGING, MAT-SU (via teleconference), requested the restoration of \$2.7 million in the seniors and disability community grants. She stated that the funds sustain the home and community based services for seniors. She stated that when a senior lived at home, grants helped pay for services at an average of \$691 per client per year. She stressed that care in a skilled nursing facility was over \$148,000 per year per client. She stated that the funds would enable nonprofits to continue services. She shared information about various services provided in the past year that would not be possible without the grant.

[6:01:04 PM](#)

BETTY REDD-MENDEZ, SELF, WASILLA (via teleconference), spoke in support of increased funding for caregivers. She had been doing the work for 25 years. She stressed the expense of living in Alaska. She took care of her father and son, which she loved but she needed to work a second job. She shared that it was hard to balance the two. She highlighted that one day everyone on the committee would need a caregiver. She stated that a happy caregiver was the best. She thanked the committee.

[6:02:22 PM](#)

PAM VENTGEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), thanked the committee and subcommittee for funding \$935,000 for the Health Information Exchange. The exchange was mandated and improving daily. She stated it helped maintain the continuity of patient care, reduce duplicative testing, and prevent delayed treatment. She thanked the committee.

[6:03:35 PM](#)

JEANNE GERHARD-CYRUS, SELF, KIANA (via teleconference), urged maintaining funding for human and community services. She requested a restoration of \$2.85 million for

homelessness and \$1.75 million for special needs housing grants. She stated the funds were needed to enable people to stay in their homes. She requested \$50,000 for the autism resource center recommended by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA) but not included in the governor's budget. She supported funding for the comprehensive planning coordinator and funds to support individuals with disabilities. She spoke in support of funding for the Crisis Now initiative grants. She stressed there were huge human costs when someone was in crisis, particularly in rural communities. She underscored that arresting individuals did not represent treatment. She asked for \$250,000 for the DOH crisis services grants.

[6:06:56 PM](#)

VANESSA LISTON-CUNNINGHAM, SELF, WASILLA (via teleconference), spoke in support of funding for caregivers. She shared that her youngest son was in a catastrophic accident 25 years ago. She had been caring for her son since that time and he required care around the clock. She relayed that caregivers did not receive health insurance, retirement, or vacation time. She was 71 years old and had no retirement. She would like to hire a caregiver but had nothing to offer. She spoke about all of the numerous things that caregivers needed to know how to do. She thanked the committee for listening to the public testimony.

[6:10:56 PM](#)

DEANTHA SKIBINSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA MINER'S ASSOCIATION (AMA), ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of Alaska Resource Education (ARE) funding. She highlighted worker shortages and workforce challenges. She stated the issue was prominent in the mining and other resource industries. She stated that young people were not being informed of the employment opportunities in the state's resource sectors and did not necessarily receive resource education and understanding. She supported ARE funding and highlighted details about the curriculum. The program educated students on what made the state's economy work and what people could expect when working in the resource industry. She thanked the committee.

[6:12:34 PM](#)

VERONICA HOLLOWAY, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for caregivers and home healthcare. She requested more money in the budget for homecare workers. She asked members to consider what it would be like to be a person who needed care. She stressed that unexpected things happened to everyone. She underscored that caregivers should be paid a living wage and wanted clients to feel loved and taken care of. She echoed statements made by others earlier in support of the funding. She underscored the difficulty of the job. She wanted to be able to make a difference in people's lives.

Co-Chair Edgmon thanked her for the testimony.

[6:14:53 PM](#)

LAURA BONNER, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), supported a reasonable PFD of around \$1,000 or so. She supported appropriations to receive federal matching funds in workforce development, Department of Health, and the Department of Family and Community Services. She stated that Anchorage and other communities needed help with homelessness, food security, and mental health. She supported funding for vocational career training services such as Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC), more healthcare employees, more engineers, more teachers. She stated the Office of Public Advocacy had a problem regarding guardianship, possibly due to a shortage of public employees. She wanted a fix to the problem of recruiting and retaining public employees. She stated that one-time bonuses were not the answer. She thanked the committee.

[6:17:14 PM](#)

MARLENE MUNSELL, CEO, WASILLA AREA SENIORS INC., WASILLA (via teleconference), requested the restoration of \$2.7 million for the senior community grants program. She shared that Wasilla Area Seniors currently served over 1,400 seniors in the Mat-Su. The organization had delivered over 140,000 meals to seniors in their homes the past year. The organization also provided congregate meals and transportation to seniors. Without the funds there would be reduced services for individuals who needed the services the most.

[6:19:20 PM](#)

LAURA NORTON-CRUZ, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of funding for early childhood funding including \$5 million for Head Start and \$6.1 million in HB 89 to expand access to childcare assistance. She highlighted that workers needed childcare for their children in order to go to work. She highlighted that the first five years of life were the most sensitive for brain development and had an intergenerational impact. She requested direct support for childcare providers in order for childcare businesses to keep their doors open. She requested \$30.5 million in the childcare benefits line item including \$15 million in one-time funding for direct operating grants to childcare businesses. She encouraged committee members to watch the documentary At Home/In Home: Rural Alaska Childcare in Crisis. She thanked the committee members for their support.

[6:22:20 PM](#)

JEREMIAH LEWIS, MEMBER, CAREGIVER'S UNION, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that he had been a caregiver for 18 years. He supported more direct funding for caregivers. He shared that he had been living off of his credit card since 2018 when the woman he cared for went to the hospital. He shared information about his personal work situation. He stated that increased funding from the previous year helped but he was still going from paycheck to paycheck. Caregivers needed more money in order to focus on their clients. He thanked the committee.

[6:24:20 PM](#)

THOMAS AZZARELLA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA AFTER SCHOOL NETWORK, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), asked for funding for the early childhood sector and childcare assistance. He supported the \$5 million increment for Head Start funding and \$6.1 million to expand access to childcare assistance through HB 89. The organization was concerned about the ongoing childcare crisis in Alaska. He encouraged the committee to consider one-time funding to provide direct grants to childcare providers to support and maintain operations in childcare programs at high risk of closure. The end of federal funding meant programs were at an increased risk of closure. He thanked the committee.

[6:26:19 PM](#)

Co-Chair Edgmon noted there was a 6:30 p.m. cutoff for calling in.

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, CEO, THREAD, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), thanked the committee for its vote for childcare through HB 89. She asked the committee to add \$30.5 million in the operating budget in the childcare benefits line item to ensure families had access to affordable and quality childcare. She stated that one-time investments in childcare had provided necessary relief and stability to the sector. The federal funding ended in June and the childcare sector had not recovered from the pandemic. The absence of funding would mean the closure of childcare businesses. Additionally, businesses would see increased problems recruiting and retaining employees. The organization supported the \$5 million increase to Head Start.

[6:28:40 PM](#)

RICARDA LEDMAN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), called in support of senior community grants. She noted the importance of healthcare workers. She supported adequate services and stabilizing nonprofits and workers in order for them to accomplish their goals.

[6:30:02 PM](#)

BRENDA MOORE, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of maintaining funding for human service matching grants and community initiative matching grants. The grants provided essential services for the state's vulnerable population. The services were meant to be focused on the needs of the municipality and communities. She stated that an absence of the services would pose significant mental and physical health issues for those in need. She thanked the committee for its work.

Co-Chair Edgmon noted there were approximately eight more testifiers.

[6:32:09 PM](#)

WILLIAM INGRAM, PRESIDENT, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, PALMER SENIOR CENTER AND MAT-SU SENIOR SERVICES, PALMER (via teleconference), requested the \$2.7 million in the budget

for senior services. He shared that the organization provided Meals on Wheels and due to a funding shortfall the previous year it had cut congregate meals. He stated that funding above \$2.7 million was needed and the organization needed as much help as possible. Without the funding seniors at a critical level of care would not receive the services or would be faced with looking for more expensive care. He underscored the importance of the funding.

Co-Chair Johnson thanked Mr. Ingram for calling in.

[6:35:11 PM](#)

JESSICA SIMONSEN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for early childhood funding including \$5 million for Head Start and \$6.1 million to expand childcare assistance via HB 89. She emphasized the critical nature of the funding. She shared that she is a foster mother of two children from Utqiagvik. She detailed that many of the children were moved from their homes due to a lack of childcare. She requested \$30 million in childcare funding including \$15 million in one-time funding for direct care to childcare businesses. She stated that her kids' childcare facility faced a 25 percent tuition increase the previous year. The increase had occurred, but there had still been a budget shortfall. She stated that without continued COVID-19 relief funds, businesses were facing more shortages and childcare business closures. Families were leaving Alaska because they could not find childcare. She urged the committee to make the one-time investment.

[6:37:29 PM](#)

YOLANDA THOMAS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for caregivers. She had 35 years of experience working with caregivers and several families. She also had to work elsewhere to be able to make it with four children of her own. She stressed there were no funds to pay caregivers as if they were human beings. She highlighted a cut in funding. She stressed that parents needed help with disabled children. She requested direct funding to caregivers to enable them to earn a living wage. She treated the children she cared for like her children. She stressed there were not enough caregivers because they could not afford it.

6:40:37 PM

MELANIE HOOPER, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CAMPFIRE ALASKA, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), thanked the committee for its work to support childcare and expanded family access to childcare in HB 89. She supported direct support to childcare providers and \$30.5 million in childcare benefits including \$15 million in one-time funding for direct operating grants to childcare providers in the childcare grant program. She highlighted that federal funding to stabilize childcare would be ending in 2024. The funds had been critical for providers to continue operations. She shared that that Campfire had served over 1,100 children daily, but the number had collapsed to 90 children at the start of the pandemic in 2020. The organization had been steadily rebuilding its workforce and it currently operated 18 programs and served almost 600 youth daily, but it was only about 55 percent recovered. She stressed the critical nature of federal funding in covering operating costs. Families could not bear the true cost of care. She thanked the committee for its time.

Representative Galvin thanked Ms. Hooper for her work. She asked about the number of children the organization was serving.

Ms. Hooper replied that in March of 2020 Campfire had been serving 1,100 children daily. The number dropped to 90 for the next 10 months once the pandemic began in April 2020.

Representative Galvin asked if Campfire had been able to retain or bring back its workforce.

Ms. Hooper responded that workforce was the organization's number one issue. She detailed that Campfire had increased its staff wages by 35 percent with federal stimulus funding, but it was still not a livable wage in Alaska. The organization was slowly growing, but many providers were not. The organization had a six figure operational gap at each of its sites.

6:45:15 PM

SAM GARCIA, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), advocated for programs for mobile crisis and crisis stabilization. He shared that he was in long-term recovery from a substance use disorder. He now worked to help others who were

struggling. Alaska was number one in the nation for substance use and number two for alcohol use. He saw the issue on a daily basis working in shelters. He stressed that people needed help. He stated that things were slowly moving in the right direction with crisis mobile teams starting to form, but more help was needed. He discussed the benefits of crisis mobile teams. He stressed that individuals did not need to be thrown in jail. More help was needed to get people out of the system and receiving necessary support.

[6:47:27 PM](#)

LISA PAESANI, BOARD MEMBER, HEAD START, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funds for Head Start. She thanked the committee for its time. She asked for increased funding recommended by the education subcommittee. Full funding would enable the program to receive the full federal matching funds. Head Start helped families get on the right track. The program responded to community needs. There was currently a crisis in childcare. She relayed it was competitive to keep staff and Head Start gave as many benefits as it could. She stated that staff would be leaving the state if they did not have enough money to raise their families. She requested the \$5 million increase in the budget.

[6:50:24 PM](#)

JENNIFER BROWN, STAFF MEMBER, STANDING TOGETHER AGAINST RAPE, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), requested increased funding for CDVSA in the Department of Public Safety budget. She asked for the funding on behalf of all programs facing the large cut across the state. She stressed that nonprofits were already doing more with less. She stressed it was time for Alaska to listen to survivors. Alaska had the worst record of domestic violence and sexual assault in the nation. She asked how much longer the state would be okay with that distinction. She stated that \$4 million would flat fund the current level of services. She stated that the STAR's education team was trying to end sexual assault through primary prevention. She advocated for all CDVSA programs statewide.

[6:53:19 PM](#)

AT EASE

6:53:27 PM

RECONVENED

Co-Chair Johnson CLOSED public testimony for the evening. She thanked callers for their testimony.

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

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

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the schedule for the following meeting.

#

ADJOURNMENT

6:54:12 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 6:54 p.m.