

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
April 12, 2024
1:35 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Foster called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:35 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

Representative Dan Saddler, Sponsor; David Kirstien, Administrative Operations Manager, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Labor and Workforce Development; Griffen Sukkaew, Staff, Senator Scott Kawasaki; Joe Hayes, Staff, Senator Scott Kawasaki; Deb Ethridge, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Jamie Kokoszka, Program Coordinator, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, Wasilla; Mystie Rail, Executive Director, Assistive Technology of Alaska, Anchorage; Melodie Wilterdink, Staff, Representative Dan

Saddler; Marge Stoneking, Advocacy Director, AARP Alaska, Anchorage.

SUMMARY

HB 219 REPEAL ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY LOAN PROGRAM

HB 219 was REPORTED out of committee with nine "do pass" recommendations and one "no recommendation" recommendation and with one previously published zero note: FN1 (LWF).

SB 170 EXTND SR BENEFITS; REPEAL LONGEVITY BONUS

SB 170 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Foster reviewed the meeting agenda.

#hb219

HOUSE BILL NO. 219

"An Act repealing the assistive technology loan guarantee and interest subsidy program; and providing for an effective date."

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Co-Chair Foster asked the bill sponsor to review the legislation.

REPRESENTATIVE DAN SADDLER, SPONSOR, thanked the committee for hearing the bill that would repeal the Assistive Technology Loan Fund. He explained that the legislation would eliminate a well-intentioned loan program that was instituted many years ago but had not had its intended use. The bill would end the loan fund and appropriate the funding to a nonprofit that could make the grants and use the funds as originally intended to assist Alaskans with disabilities with obtaining assistive technology allowing them to live, work, and go to school in Alaska.

Representative Saddler explained that a two-step process was needed to implement the intent of the bill. The first was to appropriate the approximately \$446,000 remaining in the Assistive Technology Loan Fund to the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DLWD) Vocational

Rehabilitation Special Projects Section, which would occur in the final passage of the operating budget. He detailed that the action was contingent on the passage of HB 218 [219], which would repeal the fund.

Co-Chair Foster noted that the committee had heard the bill once before.

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Representative Hannan remarked that the bill number before the committee specified HB 219. She noted that Representative Saddler had referred to HB 218. She asked for verification that she was looking at the correct bill.

Representative Saddler confirmed it was HB 219.

Co-Chair Foster OPENED public testimony.

JAMIE KOKOSZKA, PROGRAM COORDINATOR, GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION, WASILLA (via teleconference), thanked the committee for hearing the bill. She spoke in support of the legislation. She detailed that the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE) along with the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) presented a position paper in support of the recommendations from the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and the Assistive Technology of Alaska (ATLA). She relayed that GCDSE believed assistive technology (AT) was critical for Alaskans with disabilities to live a productive, healthy, independent, and dignified life. She detailed that assistive technology allowed individuals to participate in education and the labor market. She reported that the need for assistive technology had only increased as the internet and other technologies had become indispensable to accessing services and participating in work and community.

Ms. Kokoszka stated that GCDSE believed ATLA was the best organization to take over the remaining funds of the restricted Title 1 funding. She detailed that it aligned with ATLA's current AT Act services, which could include developing new programs that adhered to AT Act requirements. Additionally, ATLA had a proven track record of responsibly managing the funding for this purpose and getting AT into the hands of Alaskans that needed it. She noted that the council's position paper (copy on file)

included additional information about why individuals needed the technology. She highlighted that the individual in the photo shown on the council's position paper was one of the council's staff members and he was using a one-handed keyboard. She thanked the committee for its time and consideration.

MYSTIE RAIL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY OF ALASKA, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), relayed that she was available for questions.

Co-Chair Foster CLOSED public testimony.

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Representative Coulombe referenced a memorandum provided by Representative Saddler in response to House Finance Committee member questions (copy on file). She noted that one of the answers specified that the funds avoided being swept because they consisted of federal funds. She highlighted a sentence in the document specifying that earnings on the fund were restricted. She asked if there were any issues with moving the money because it contained federal funds. She asked if the interest was allowed to be used for the purpose identified in the bill.

Representative Saddler answered that because the origins of the fund were kind of "lost in the mists of time" he could not give a clear answer or cite a federal chapter; however, he believed the fact that the fund had not been swept in its lifetime of 20 or more years was tertiary evidence that the fund was not sweepable. He stated that the best answer he could provide was that the funds were restricted and not sweepable.

Representative Coulombe asked if there was an issue with doing what the sponsor wanted due to the federal funds.

Representative Saddler deferred the question to the Mr. Mayes with department.

Co-Chair Foster noted that the individual was not online.

Representative Saddler deferred the question to his staff.

MELODIE WILTERDINK, STAFF, REPRESENTATIVE DAN SADDLER (via teleconference), replied that DVR reached out to the

appropriate federal department and had received approval for the funds to be moved to the nonprofit ATLA in order to achieve the original purpose of the funds.

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DAVID KIRSTIEN, ADMINISTRATIVE OPERATIONS MANAGER, DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION, DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, confirmed that the federal government had given authorization to transfer the Assistive Technology Grant Fund balance to ATLA.

Co-Chair Foster asked for a review of the fiscal note.

Mr. Kirstien reviewed the DLWD fiscal note. He relayed that the fund was established in 1997 with federal receipts from the assistive technology federal grants. The program allowed for loans from a commercial bank to be made to qualified individuals for assistive technology equipment. The fund had not been utilized since 2014 and was no longer used by the department. The bill would make the funds available to the non-state entity ATLA to provide assistive technology equipment to Alaskans with disabilities. He added that the fiscal note was zero. The bill did not modify the loan fund and it did not impact any regulations.

Representative Galvin asked if any past loans made from the fund had already been cleared. She wondered if there was any money owed that may come in and what would happen to it.

Mr. Kirstien answered that there were no remaining loans outstanding. The last loan was in 2014 and had been paid off in 2018 or 2019.

Representative Galvin wanted to ensure there would be no further payments on any loans coming in because they had all been cleared.

Mr. Kirstien replied affirmatively. He relayed that the fund had been used to guarantee loans through the commercial bank; therefore, there had not been any funds going in for the loan.

Co-Chair Foster noted that no amendments had been received on the bill.

Co-Chair Edgmon MOVED to REPORT HB 219 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal note.

There being NO OBJECTION, it was so ordered.

HB 219 was REPORTED out of committee with nine "do pass" recommendations and one "no recommendation" recommendation and with one previously published zero note: FN1 (LWF).

Representative Saddler thanked the committee.

#sb170

CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 170 (FIN)

"An Act relating to the Alaska longevity bonus program and the Alaska senior benefits payment program; and providing for an effective date."

[1:50:29 PM](#)

Co-Chair Foster asked the sponsor's staff to provide a review of the bill.

GRIFFEN SUKKAEW, STAFF, SENATOR SCOTT KAWASAKI, relayed that the Senate floor was still meeting, and the senator could not be present. He reviewed the sponsor statement (copy on file):

Senate Bill 170 would extend the Senior Benefits Program indefinitely, ensuring continued support for low-income seniors across Alaska. The successor to the Longevity Bonus created in 1972, the Senior Benefits Program would end in June 2024 without legislative action.

The Senior Benefits Program protects low-income seniors by providing them with modest monthly cash assistance to pay for expenses like food, heating, electricity, transportation and prescription medication. The program was established in 2007 and currently aids over 10,000 Alaskans aged 65 and older with incomes at 75, 100 and 175 percent of federal poverty level. Subject to appropriation from the Alaska State Legislature, assistance can range from \$76 to \$250 a month for eligible seniors.

In September 2017, the House Health and Social Services Committee held a statewide listening session for Senior Benefit recipients and their advocates. Hundreds of Alaskans spoke of the need to preserve this program to enhance their way of life. This program protects seniors who have spent a lifetime building our great state. It lends a hand to low-income seniors who need assistance to help make ends meet.

Terminating this program would put thousands of seniors at risk of losing their means for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. I respectfully request your support to continue this vital program.

Mr. Sukkaew reviewed the sectional analysis (copy on file):

Section 1: Repeals the still existing statutes that established the Longevity Bonus Program.

Section 5: Removes the sunset provision for the Senior Benefits Program. This makes the program permanent and no longer needing periodic legislative reauthorization.

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JOE HAYES, STAFF, SENATOR SCOTT KAWASAKI, introduced himself and was available for questions.

Representative Galvin appreciated the legislation. She stated she had many elders in the state. She referenced the Senior Benefits Program fact sheet (copy on file), which specified that payments were not available to seniors living in specific institutions including prison or jail, Alaska Pioneers Home, Alaska Veterans Home, nursing home, and public or private institution for mental illness. She understood the first several institutions because seniors were being fed, had supports, housing, and access to healthcare. She was concerned about the language pertaining to a public or private institution for mental illness. She wondered if an elder was in a home for other reasons such as a disability. She asked for clarity.

Mr. Sukkaew deferred the question to the department.

DEB ETHRIDGE, DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, answered that the terminology was a bit antiquated, but it generally referred to a state institution such as the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) or a facility that may be specifically for individuals with developmental disability. She explained that the language pertained to an institution versus a home. She would need to clarify.

Representative Galvin what Ms. Etheridge meant by her statement that she needed to clarify.

Ms. Ethridge replied that she had misspoken. She wanted to make sure the committee understood the language did not mean an individual in a home; it applied to someone in an institution. She did not believe there was any need to clarify additionally in the bill.

Representative Galvin asked if an institution meant someone without the faculties to be able to use the money. She thought about some elders living in an assisted living home and suffering from depression, which some may say was a mental disease. She asked if it would keep a person from enjoying the Senior Benefits Program.

Ms. Ethridge responded that a home and community based setting was not considered institutional. She explained that an institution could be a nursing facility or nursing home.

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Representative Galvin considered seniors living in the Pioneer Home with some type of a mental health issue. She asked if it meant the individuals would not receive benefits.

Ms. Ethridge answered that individuals residing in the Alaska Pioneer Home did not receive senior benefits. She noted that the individuals had all of their needs provided for in the Pioneer Home, which was similar to a nursing home.

Representative Coulombe remarked that the sponsor statement in her bill packet specified that the bill would extend the program for eight years. She remarked that Mr. Sukkaew had

stated the bill would extend the program indefinitely. She asked for clarification.

Mr. Sukkaew apologized and stated that he may have sent the wrong version [of the sponsor statement]. The bill was amended in the Senate Finance Committee to make the program indefinite as opposed to an eight-year extension under the original bill.

Representative Coulombe asked for verification that the bill did not make any changes to how allocations were given out. She asked for confirmation that the only changes included the removal of the sunset date and the removal of the longevity bonus wording.

Mr. Sukkaew confirmed that Representative Coulombe was correct.

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Representative Stapp asked who distributed the cash payments to seniors. He asked about income brackets.

Ms. Ethridge answered that a senior or individual would apply for the benefit similarly to other public assistance programs. Individuals could mail an application or come into the office. She hoped that individuals would be able to apply online one day soon. She elaborated that the application was processed by Department of Health (DOH) eligibility technicians. She relayed that most if not all of the department's eligibility technicians processed all programs for the Division of Public Assistance (DPA). Technicians determined whether an applicant was eligible and added the income level in which a person was eligible. Technicians processed the applications within the department's legacy system EIS [Eligibility Information System]. Payments to eligible individuals were made through the EIS system.

Representative Stapp understood that EIS was the department's Cobalt system. He asked if the department was integrating the program onto its new cloud-based system.

Ms. Ethridge responded that the intention was to move all programs off of the Cobalt legacy mainframe system starting with Medicaid categories and working its way through SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and other

programs. She explained that it would be a cloud-based module.

Representative Stapp asked who distributed the money after an individual was approved for benefit payments. He asked if the funds were distributed by DOH or the Department of Revenue (DOR).

Ms. Ethridge answered that DOH authorized the benefits through EIS.

Representative Stapp asked who distributed the funds.

Ms. Ethridge responded that individuals could chose to have their benefits directly deposited. She detailed that some cash benefits were issued through an EBT [Electronic Benefits Transfer] card and some benefits could be distributed via a check.

Representative Stapp asked if DOR issued 1099s to individuals receiving cash payments.

Ms. Ethridge answered that she did not know and would follow up on the question.

Co-Chair Foster noted that an individual with AARP was online and would be providing invited testimony later in the meeting.

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Representative Hannan asked how often a participant had to requalify [for benefits].

Ms. Ethridge answered that there was an annual reauthorization/application renewal.

Representative Hannan asked if there was anything that would prevent a longer authorization period. She remarked that typically seniors on fixed income did not start making more income or go off of an assistance program as they aged. She asked if statute or regulation limited it to one-year qualification and eligibility. She understood there were federal guidelines for many of the benefit programs.

Ms. Ethridge answered that it was a regulation the division had the authority to manage.

Representative Hannan asked how long it had been since the monthly benefit payments had been increased.

Ms. Ethridge answered that the benefit level had not been changed since 2017. She noted that in April 2024 the poverty level changed, changing those eligible for the program.

Representative Hannan asked if the rate was determined via regulation or statute. For example, she wondered if the department had the ability to increase the payment from \$250 to \$500 in response to a high rate of inflation.

Ms. Ethridge answered that the rate was in regulation.

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Representative Josephson asked if the governor's FY 25 operating budget included the \$23 million. He noted that the law was set to expire at the end of the coming fiscal year.

Mr. Hayes replied that the increment was not included in the budget. The Senate Finance Committee had taken steps to look at items with attached fiscal notes to address the issue.

Representative Josephson noted that the AARP letter specified that the program expired next summer. He asked for verification that the program would expire in the coming summer.

Mr. Hayes responded affirmatively.

Representative Tomaszewski looked at the DOH fiscal note and observed that the department anticipated an increase of about \$500,000 annually going forward. He asked if the increase was a result of an expectation of an increasing number of eligible recipients. Alternatively, he wondered if the increase was anticipating an inflationary increase in payments.

Ms. Ethridge responded that the increase reflected anticipated growth in program participation.

Co-Chair Foster moved to invited testimony.

MARGE STONEKING, ADVOCACY DIRECTOR, AARP ALASKA, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), relayed that AARP was a nonpartisan, nonprofit member organization serving the 50-plus population. The agency's purpose was to empower people to be able to choose how they live as they age. She relayed that AARP had a strong commitment to protecting financial resilience for older adults. While most older Alaskans were self-supporting, some needed financial assistance to remain independent. She elaborated that senior safety net programs like the Senior Benefits Program provide foundational support to help low income elders remain in their homes and out of more costly levels of care. For example, individuals qualifying for the largest senior benefit amount of \$250 per month could have income of no more than \$1,139 per month. In Alaska, the average social security retired worker benefit was \$1,485 per month. Older Alaskans eligible for the Senior Benefits Program fell below that average, which meant their lifetime earnings were less than average.

Ms. Stoneking elaborated that older Alaskans most likely to benefit from an extension of the Senior Benefits Program based on historical participation were women. Historically, Senior Benefits Program beneficiaries had been mostly women. She stated it was no secret that women earned less over the course of their working lives and made up the vast majority of unpaid family caregivers and often outlived their husbands. Many lower wage workers, Alaskans who did not make as much during their time working, had more than one job, but with Alaska's higher cost of living were unable to accumulate much; therefore, they were more likely to be receiving minimal social security benefits. Rural Alaskans, especially those living subsistence lifestyles, were less likely to have made cash income and if they received social security at all, their benefits were often very low. The loss of the Senior Benefits Program would hurt many Alaskans living in remote villages.

Ms. Stoneking highlighted that the oldest Alaskans were the ones most likely to spend increasing amounts of their retirement budgets on healthcare costs, which may result in financial instability and make it difficult to afford other basic living expenses including housing, food, and heat. Loss of income to the specific population increased risk of losing independence and hastened moves to much more costly

levels of care. She relayed that AARP supported the bill to extend the Alaska Senior Benefits Program.

Co-Chair Foster thanked Ms. Stoneking for her testimony.

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Representative Stapp directed a question to the department. He asked for the number of applications per year for the program, the number of people who applied annually compared to the number of people approved, and the average processing time of each application. He directed his second question to Mr. Hayes. He looked at the history of the program and stated the appropriation was shorted based off of the total. He thought that the money paid out to eligible individuals appeared to have been prorated in certain fiscal years. He wondered if it was the standard procedure if the budget did not reflect the fiscal note.

Mr. Hayes answered affirmatively. He stated that the funding was up to legislative appropriation annually.

Representative Coulombe remarked that assets did not count towards income eligibility and most seniors did not have a regular job. She thought it sounded like social security was counted. She asked what determined eligibility. She asked if investment income counted. She was interested in a definition between assets and income.

Ms. Ethridge answered that in order to be eligible for the program a person had to be 65 or older, fall within the income level, be an Alaskan resident and U.S. citizen or qualified alien, have a social security number or proof that one had been applied for, and have countable income that did not exceed the income limits. She noted she could provide the income level brackets.

Representative Coulombe was trying to determine what counted as income if assets were not included.

Ms. Ethridge answered it was more a definition of asset, which could be a home, car, or savings account. She noted that those things would not be considered income.

Representative Coulombe asked if social security benefits counted as income.

Ms. Ethridge responded affirmatively.

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Co-Chair Edgmon relayed that there was a bill in committee dealing with SNAP benefits. He did not know whether there was any interplay between the SNAP legislation and the Public Assistance Program and eligibility criteria in terms of assets. He asked if Ms. Etheridge was familiar with the other legislation and knew enough to speak to any connection between the two.

Ms. Ethridge answered not necessarily. She stated that senior benefits were counted when looking at a SNAP benefit level, but there was no other direct relationship.

Co-Chair Edgmon asked about how the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) tied into the program. He considered eligibility criteria and exemptions under income. He asked if PFDs and Alaska Native regional dividends were counted as income under the federal poverty guidelines.

Ms. Ethridge answered that she would follow up with the information.

Co-Chair Edgmon noted there was a hold harmless provision. He asked Mr. Hayes to comment.

Mr. Hayes replied that there was a hold harmless provision for the PFD for individuals receiving TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] and other benefits. The provision was in place to ensure individuals did not lose their benefits as a result of the PFD payment. He believed the hold harmless provision would have the same effect for senior benefits.

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Co-Chair Edgmon surmised there were likely no snowbirds taking advantage of the Senior Benefits Program. He believed in theory program beneficiaries were year-round Alaskan residents.

Mr. Hayes responded that under the previous longevity bonus program there were seniors who were snowbirds and were eligible for the funding. However, the new Senior Benefits Program applied to less fortunate Alaskan seniors. He

asserted that the individuals did not make enough money to be snowbirds.

Co-Chair Edgmon looked at page 3 of the Senior Benefits Program document (copy on file). He observed that in 2023 there were only 1,917 seniors who were eligible to receive the maximum benefit of \$250. He was interested in seeing the demographics involved in the payment tiers. He believed many of the recipients receiving the higher payment level would be located in rural Alaska. He remarked that the senior population was the fastest growing segment of the state's population. He was in strong support of the legislation. He hoped the state would give every bit of help possible, particularly in rural Alaska where costs were rising exponentially.

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Co-Chair Foster noted that Co-Chair Johnson had joined the meeting.

Representative Tomaszewski considered that one reason there were more women receiving benefits from the program was due to their longer lifespan. He referenced snowbirds and asked how many days out of the state would disqualify an individual from receiving the benefit. He asked if it was similar to the PFD where an individual could only be out of state for a certain period of time.

Mr. Hayes deferred to his colleague.

Mr. Sukkaew replied that AS 47.45.030 applied to the longevity bonus and he believed it also applied to the Senior Benefits Program. He read from the statute:

After qualification, a recipient shall notify the commissioner of health and social services when a recipient expects to be absent from the state if the absence is for a continuous period that exceeds 60 days. After that notification, the recipient may no longer receive bonuses from the Department of Health and Social Services after the last regularly approved monthly application. Upon returning to the state, the recipient may again make application for a bonus. Failure to notify the commissioner of an expected absence may be grounds for disqualification.

Representative Tomaszewski looked at the cost of \$23,542,000 for FY 25. He if the money was currently in the FY 25 budget. He asked where the money would come from.

Mr. Hayes responded that the Senate Finance Committee had looked at the policy bills with large fiscal note bills and he believed the committee had put aside money to address the Senior Benefits Program for FY 25.

Representative Tomaszewski asked Mr. Hayes to repeat his response.

Mr. Hayes complied.

Co-Chair Edgmon noted that the \$23 million attached to the fiscal note was part of a spending agreement between the House and Senate. He stated that presumably the bill had to pass [for the funding to be appropriated]. He highlighted that the PFD program allowed individuals to be out of state for 180 days. He noted that the 60-day window was more restrictive. He added there was an exemption for medical care in the event a person had to be out of state for more than 60 days due to a terminal illness or other medical reason. He noted that there were around 20 exemptions for PFD eligibility including military considerations whereas the Senior Benefits Program eligibility requirements were far more restrictive. He stated there were many ups and downs over the course of the program's life beginning in 1972. He highlighted there were years the program had not been funded. He referenced debate over the PFD and following the law and pointed out that the Senior Benefits Program had not been funded in some years as well. He hoped the program could be resurrected indefinitely and that it would become a regular feature of keeping the fastest growing segment of the population in Alaska.

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Representative Stapp asked if trust and investment income was applicable to the poverty line testing.

Ms. Ethridge replied that she would follow up on the question.

Representative Stapp stated that the co-chair's reference to broad-base category eligibility prompted his question. He noted that those items [trust and investment income]

were not included in the definition. He asked how money was loaded on the EBT card. He asked if it was a payment in lieu of benefit. He thought there was a big difference in being able to provide the payment on a card versus cutting a check for recipients.

Ms. Ethridge responded that the agency FIS managed the department's electronic benefit transactions. The department authorized the transaction and FIS issued the benefit based on the department's authorization.

Representative Stapp referenced testimony from Marge Stoneking with AARP about housing, food, heat, and medical care. He noted that all of those things were separate federal programs including Medicaid and Medicare, which the recipients would qualify for based on their income level. He stated that the EBT card was for SNAP benefits. He asked how the department would load payments that seniors could in theory spend on other things onto a card intended for SNAP.

Ms. Ethridge replied that the transaction type could be identified when using the card.

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Representative Josephson stated his understanding that the bill would repeal the 60-day rule and the longevity bonus part of the law and retain AS 47.45.304, which seemed to restrict absences to medical treatment, the accompanying of a family member to medical treatment, and for a vacation, business trip, or other absence of less than 30 consecutive days unless the individual applied for and received a time extension. He thought it seemed to deal with the snowbird issue as well. He asked Mr. Hayes if that sounded plausible.

Mr. Hayes replied, "I do believe so, yes."

SB 170 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Foster relayed that the committee would focus on energy bills the following week.

ADJOURNMENT

2:31:03 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 2:31 p.m.