

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 1, 2024

3:04 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Mike Prax, Chair  
Representative CJ McCormick  
Representative Dan Saddler  
Representative Jesse Sumner  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Genevieve Mina

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Justin Ruffridge, Vice Chair

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 242

"An Act extending the Alaska senior benefits payment program;  
and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 260

"An Act repealing programs for catastrophic illness assistance  
and medical assistance for chronic and acute medical  
conditions."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 242

SHORT TITLE: EXTEND SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) VANCE

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	HSS, FIN
02/01/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 260

SHORT TITLE: CATASTROPHIC ILLNESS/MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STAPP

01/16/24 (H) PREFILE RELEASED 1/12/24  
01/16/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
01/16/24 (H) HSS, FIN  
02/01/24 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

#### **WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE SARAH VANCE  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, introduced HB 242.

ROBERT BALLINGER, Staff  
Representative Sarah Vance  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** On behalf of Representative Sarah Vance, prime sponsor, answered questions about HB 242.

REPRESENTATIVE WILL STAPP  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, introduced HB 260.

HONOUR MILLER-AUSTIN, Staff  
Representative Will Stapp  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** On behalf of the prime sponsor, Representative Will Stapp, provided background and the sectional analysis for HB 260.

DEB ETHERIDGE, Director  
Division of Public Assistance  
Department of Health  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions about HB 260.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:03:34 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:04 p.m. Representatives Prax, Saddler, Sumner, Fields, and Mina were present at the call to

order. Representative McCormick arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**HB 242-EXTEND SENIOR BENEFITS PAYMENT PROGRAM**

3:05:03 PM

CHAIR PRAX announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 242, "An Act extending the Alaska senior benefits payment program; and providing for an effective date."

3:05:25 PM

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HB 242. She explained that HB 242 would extend the sunset date on the Senior Benefits Payment Program by 10 years until June 2034. Alaska has a long-standing commitment to its senior population, and this bill is especially crucial as the cost of living rises. The support of seniors dates back to 1915. In 1950 Alaska paid bonuses of 12 dollars a year for those who had lived in the state for a decade, acknowledging the pioneers who had contributed to the building of the state. With the oil boom in the 1970s, the longevity bonus program was introduced. In 2003 the program changed to a needs-based program with additional changes in 2004 and in 2007. The income-based eligibility is tied to the federal poverty guidelines, and the program addresses the rising costs to seniors on fixed incomes. This program reaffirms the state's dedication to assisting those who have contributed to Alaska's rich history.

3:08:40 PM

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked whether payment amounts would be adjusted with inflation if the date is extended by 10 years.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE explained that adjusting for inflation is already part of the program.

3:09:19 PM

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER inquired about the net result for the state of Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE explained that as a fiscal conservative, she believes every dollar counts. However, with the rising cost of food and medical services, this specifically would go to low-

income elders, who need an extra hand. She referred the committee to the packet which shows the level of payment depending on income which provides extra assistance for the purchase of food or medicine. She explained that in her district a third of her constituents are seniors, a majority of whom rely on social security. Legislators consistently agree on this program.

[3:11:20 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that this program is one of several and that most of the recipients are likely to qualify for Medicaid and additional low-income benefits. This is not the only support for Alaska seniors.

[3:11:40 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked whether there are other states that have state-funded senior benefit programs similar to Alaska's.

ROBERT BALLINGER, Staff, Representative Sarah Vance, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Vance, prime sponsor of HB 242, explained that there are no other states with a program exactly like Alaska's although three other states have similar programs.

[3:12:14 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE, in response to questions from the committee, explained that 10 years was chosen as a surety to the seniors that the program would not go away. The Senate bill has an eight-year extension, she noted.

[3:13:39 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that HB 242 was held over.

#### **HB 260-CATASTROPHIC ILLNESS/MEDICAL ASSISTANCE**

[3:13:43 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 260, "An Act repealing programs for catastrophic illness assistance and medical assistance for chronic and acute medical conditions."

[3:14:36 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILL STAPP, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HB 260, explaining that he believes in results-based budgeting and efficient operations. This would be a straight repeal of a program called "Catastrophic and Acute Medical Assistance" (CAMA), which has a long history in Alaska. However, since the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was adopted and Alaska expanded Medicaid, there have been no recipients of this assistance in the two previous years, and prior to that, there were only two people in the program. Approximately \$150,000 is appropriated for the program, but that doesn't represent the entire cost of administering the program. He consulted with management and eligibility technicians at the Division of Public Assistance (DPA) to see what the legislature could do to help streamline the application process, and this bill addresses that issue.

[3:18:43 PM](#)

HONOUR MILLER-AUSTIN, Staff, Representative Will Stapp, Alaska State Legislature, discussed the history of the CAMA program and its original recipients. She presented the sectional analysis for HB 260 to the committee [included in the committee packet], which reads as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- 1 AS 36.30.850(b)(11) Deletes reference to Catastrophic Illness Assistance from service providers
- 2 AS 47.05.085 Deletes reference to Catastrophic Illness Assistance from evidence in connection with investigation under the administration
- 3 AS 47.05.200(d) Deletes Catastrophic Illness Assistance from obtaining payment from providers
- 4 AS 47.05.210(a) Deletes reference to Catastrophic Illness Assistance from medical assistance fraud
- 5 AS 47.05.240 Deletes reference to Catastrophic Illness Assistance commissioner excluding applicant from medical assistance program
- 6 AS 47.05.290(9) Deletes Catastrophic Illness Assistance from the definition of "medical assistance program"

7 AS 47.05.290(10) Deletes Catastrophic Illness Assistance from the definition of "medical assistance provider"

8 AS 47.05.290(17) Deletes Catastrophic Illness Assistance from the definition of "medical assistance services"

9 AS 47.05.330(a) Amend Modifies reference to Catastrophic Illness Assistance as "former"

10 (a) AS 47.08.010 - 47.08.140 Repeals all references to Catastrophic Illness Assistance within statute

10 (b) AS 47.08.150 Repeal reference to Medical Assistance for Chronic or Acute Medical Conditions within statute

11 Uncodified Law Add new section Allows the Department of Health to create an initial case if fraud is found within previous program of Assistance for Catastrophic Illness and Chronic or Acute Medical Conditions

12 Uncodified Law Add new section Allows the Department of Health to issue subpoenas and further investigate with necessary records or evidence

[3:20:59 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked Representative Stapp whether he had considered changing the program to be state referral only in the event the federal government radically changes health coverage.

REPRESENTATIVE STAPP explained he did not believe there would be any major changes in Medicaid expansion. The department is doing Medicaid re-determinations, and when recipients aren't eligible for Medicaid, they are referred to the health care marketplace. That type of procedure is already a part of the process.

[3:22:18 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked about two individuals who were legal immigrants and who had received CAMA. She questioned why they had not been referred to the ACA. She suggested that people who

received CAMA might be waiting for the five-year eligibility period for people who are legal immigrants.

REPRESENTATIVE STAPP responded that people who are legal residents in the U.S. are eligible for ACA coverage and can enroll on healthcare.gov. He did not know whether they were referred by Public Assistance.

[3:23:42 PM](#)

DEB ETHERIDGE, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health, addressed Representative Mina's question about the two CAMA recipients. She explained that it is the practice to refer people to the federal marketplace, but there may have been a gap during that time.

[3:24:11 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA followed up with a question about the definition of a catastrophic illness and whether it is a chronic illness or an emergency situation.

MS. ETHERIDGE responded that there are specific categories and listed those categories.

[3:25:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STAPP referred the committee to the coverages provided under minimum essential coverages under Medicaid and pointed out that Medicaid covers far more than the state statute covered under CAMA.

[3:25:36 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked for clarity regarding Sections 11 and 12, on page 5, lines 6 through 24 of HB 260.

[3:26:04 PM](#)

MS. MILLER-AUSTIN explained that those sections would allow the Department of Health to continue investigating and prosecuting cases within the CAMA application process for fraud.

[3:26:57 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA questioned how instances of fraud would occur in a program that has been repealed.

REPRESENTATIVE STAPP replied that he did not think the Joint Legislative Budget and Audit Committee would audit a program no one is on, but the provision is in the bill to continue with the standard and customary practices. He commented that HB 260 would help modernize the processes of the Division of Public Assistance to ensure that every Alaskan can get their needs met in the most efficient way possible.

[3:28:33 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that HB 260 was held over.

[3:29:07 PM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 3:29.