

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

February 24, 2024

3:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Mike Prax, Chair
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Vice Chair
Representative CJ McCormick
Representative Dan Saddler
Representative Jesse Sumner
Representative Genevieve Mina

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Zack Fields

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 275

"An Act relating to sexual assault examination kits; establishing the sexual assault examination kit tracking system; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 264

"An Act requiring the Department of Family and Community Services to adopt a uniform screening tool; requiring shelters for runaway minors to screen minors for victimization relating to sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation; requiring the Department of Family and Community Services to screen children in need of aid for victimization relating to sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation; and relating to the duty of the Department of Family and Community Services to investigate the experiences of missing children in need of aid who have been located."

- MOVED CSHB 264 (HSS) OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 196

"An Act relating to the supplemental nutrition assistance program; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 275

SHORT TITLE: SEXUAL ASSAULT EXAMINATION KITS/TRACKING

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

01/18/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/18/24	(H)	HSS, FIN
01/30/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
01/30/24	(H)	Heard & Held
01/30/24	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
02/22/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
02/22/24	(H)	-- Public Testimony --
02/24/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 264

SHORT TITLE: CHILD TRAFFICKING SCREENING

SPONSOR(s): VANCE

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/12/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	HSS, FIN
01/30/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
01/30/24	(H)	Heard & Held
01/30/24	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
02/08/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
02/08/24	(H)	Heard & Held
02/08/24	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
02/22/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
02/22/24	(H)	-- Public Testimony <Time Limit May Be Set> --
02/24/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 196

SHORT TITLE: FOOD STAMP PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

SPONSOR(s): MINA

05/08/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/08/23	(H)	HSS, FIN
02/22/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106
02/22/24	(H)	Bills Previously Heard/Scheduled
02/24/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

LISA PURINTON, Director
Division of Statewide Services

Legislative Liaison
Department of Public Safety
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 275.

KATY BOTZ, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 275.

LAUREE MORTON, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 275.

MOLLIE MONTAGUE, Director
State Legislative Affairs
Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN)
New York, New York

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 275.

TARA HENRY, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Expressed concern with the seven-day deadline.

MAXINE DOOGAN, President
Community United for Safety & Protection
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 275.

BURCU SAGIROGLU, Policy and Advocacy Associate
Joyful Heart Foundation
New York, New York

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 275.

REPRESENTATIVE SARAH VANCE
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 264.

DELAYNA WEST, representing self
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 264.

KAT MCELROY
No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Had her testimony read by Terra Burns.

TERRA BURNS, Advocate
Community United for Safety & Protection
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 264.

TATIANA ROTHCHILD, Volunteer
Community United for Safety & Protection
Providence, Rhode Island
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of Amendment 5 to HB 264.

AMBER NICKERSON, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of Amendment 5 to HB 264.

BRENDA EDENS, representing self
Homer, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 264.

MAXINE DOOGAN, President
Community United for Safety & Protection
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of Amendment 5 to HB 264.

BOB BALLINGER, Staff
Representative Sarah Vance
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Explained an amendment to HB 264 on behalf of Representative Vance, prime sponsor.

SHANNON DILLEY, Director
Division of Juvenile Justice
Department of Family and Community Services
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of Amendment 1 to HB 264.

KIM GUAY, Director
Office of Children's Services
Department of Family and Community Services
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of Amendment 1 to HB 264.

REPRESENTATIVE GENEVIEVE MINA
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 196.

KATY GIORGIO, Staff
Representative Genevieve Mina
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis of HB 196 on behalf of Representative Mina, prime sponsor.

RON MEEHAN, Director of Government Affairs
Food Bank of Alaska;
Manager
Food Bank Coalition
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 196.

ERIN WALKER-TOLLES, Executive Director
Catholic Community Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 196.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions from the committee regarding HB 196.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:02:37 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [3:02 p.m.]. Representatives McCormick, Saddler, Mina, Prax, Ruffridge (via teleconference), and Sumner (via teleconference) were present at the call to order.

HB 275-SEXUAL ASSAULT EXAMINATION KITS/TRACKING

[3:04:24 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 275, "An Act relating to sexual assault

examination kits; establishing the sexual assault examination kit tracking system; and providing for an effective date."

[3:05:21 PM](#)

LISA PURINTON, Director, Division of Statewide Services, Legislative Liaison, Department of Public Safety, spoke in support of HB 275. She explained the bill would codify existing processes and streamline the requirements for processing the sexual assault examination kit. It would require the Department of Public Safety to develop and maintain a system where the sexual assault kits are tracked from the manufacturer through completion of the testing at the state crime lab. The department has sought federal funding and has purchased and implemented this tracking kit system. It is in place, and the department has worked with medical services and providers, law enforcement agencies, and prosecutors to implement and employ the system statewide. The benefit of the system is that it allows accountability and also allows victims of sexual assault to identify the location and the completion of the test. It sets timelines for lab processing; timelines for law enforcement to collect the kits; and timelines for the medical providers to complete the kits and notify law enforcement.

[3:08:17 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX opened public testimony on HB 275.

[3:08:39 PM](#)

KATY BOTZ, representing self, testified in support of HB 275. She described it as a good clean bill and victim oriented. She discussed the trauma of sexual assault and shared her personal experience.

[3:10:54 PM](#)

LAUREE MORTON, representing self, testified in support of HB 275. She explained that originally, she had planned to speak in her role as deputy director of the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA), which also supports the bill; however, she decided to testify for herself. She shared a personal experience and described how difficult it is to speak and how control is taken away. Being able to track the kit would be using technology to bring comfort and a semblance of autonomy. She appreciates the bill giving a victim rights and

allowing them to have agency over what happens to them and about them.

MS. MORTON also spoke in an official capacity briefly describing the work of the Network.

[3:15:29 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked whether the tracking kits are also a benefit for victims of domestic violence.

MS. MORTON explained that under victims' rights, domestic violence victims have opportunities to keep informed through the prosecutor's office. The system is supposed to be responsive to victims of domestic violence. The Department of Public Safety is working to improve access to those rights through victim navigator services.

[3:17:33 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that there had been a system for gathering sexual assault evidence. The genesis of this bill is the realization that processing those kits is not happening in a timely fashion. He questioned whether the system for domestic violence is working.

MS. MORTON replied that things can always be better. She expanded by explaining that parts are better and pointed out opportunities for improvement.

[3:18:40 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK asked about the deficiencies in access to services for individuals living in rural and Bush communities.

MS. MORTON touched upon some of her early work in Bethel. There is an awareness of law enforcement deficiencies, response times are difficult, and weather plays a part. She described the network's advocacy programs are the emergency departments in the system. They need to be available and fully equipped, fully staffed 24/7, 365 days a year. They catch people as they are falling. She explained that not enough is done to fund and support victim services and said, "We are still doing bake sales." In the broader context, the criminal justice response is necessary, but the vision of what is possible needs to be

expanded to reach the Alaska women who are victims of sexual assault and/or domestic violence.

[3:23:16 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK expressed his appreciation of the work done to assist Alaska women in crises.

[3:23:35 PM](#)

MOLLIE MONTAGUE, Director, State Legislative Affairs, Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), spoke in support of HB 275. She discussed the history of RAINN and its work with victims and survivors. She provided examples relating to the importance of transparency and timely processing of rape kits, and mentioned other states that are employing similar ideas.

[3:26:12 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER expressed his appreciation for the national perspective and asked whether other states have a similar tracking system to the one proposed by this bill.

MS. MONTAGUE replied that she would look at her organization's research and get back to the committee.

[3:27:01 PM](#)

TARA HENRY, representing self, explained that the concept of HB 275 is good but would have unintended negative consequences. She described the difficulty of meeting the seven-day deadline and the difficulties for nursing and medical staff. She described the steps medical staff must follow in order to complete the kits and stated it was unreasonable to legislate a time limit without discussion with Alaska's healthcare providers.

[3:31:32 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked what the average turnaround time would be for a forensic nurse to process a sexual assault examination kit.

MS. HENRY discussed a number of factors that would affect the time to process a kit and gave examples of issues. She speculated that the busier programs might take approximately 10

days, but there was not enough information for an informed opinion.

[3:33:59 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked whether Ms. Henry was aware of any other states that have similar tracking requirements and what time frames they have. The committee would like to stay current with best practices and would like to know how other states approach these timelines.

MS. HENRY replied that some other states have timelines. Best practices are as soon as possible, ideally within three business days. But there are not many statutes in other states that mandate time frames. Most of the time frames range from 24 hours to a couple weeks to release that information to law enforcement. Things to take into consideration are what the processes are in specific communities, what documentation is required, and the volume of caseloads. Because Alaska just started the tracking system, there is not a lot of data at this time.

[3:37:15 PM](#)

MAXINE DOOGAN, President, Community United for Safety & Protection, spoke in opposition to HB 275. She explained that her organization's members are Alaska current and former sex workers, sex trafficking victims, and their allies. She expressed concern regarding privacy and that law enforcement might be able to keep the DNA of rape victims for other purposes.

[3:39:02 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 3:29 to 3:40 p.m.

[3:40:37 PM](#)

BURCU SAGIROGLU, Policy and Advocacy Associate, Joyful Heart Foundation, spoke in favor of HB 275. He explained the organization he works with has a top priority of processing the backlog of untested rape kits. He discussed how law enforcement, hospitals, and medical facilities have dealt with rape kits. He provided information regarding deadlines for various states. He also discussed the importance of transparency and being able to track the progress of the kits as they are being processed.

[3:43:23 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX, after ascertaining there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 275.

[3:43:58 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced HB 275 was held over.

[3:44:26 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 3:44 to 3:46 p.m.

HB 264-CHILD TRAFFICKING SCREENING

[3:46:00 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 264, "An Act requiring the Department of Family and Community Services to adopt a uniform screening tool; requiring shelters for runaway minors to screen minors for victimization relating to sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation; requiring the Department of Family and Community Services to screen children in need of aid for victimization relating to sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation; and relating to the duty of the Department of Family and Community Services to investigate the experiences of missing children in need of aid who have been located."

[3:46:52 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SARAH VANCE, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, described HB 264 as an act that would require the Department of Family and Community Services to adopt a screening tool for the purposes of screening children for sexual exploitation.

[3:47:38 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX reopened public testimony on HB 264 [previously closed on 2/8/24].

DELAYNA WEST, representing self, testified in support of HB 264.

[3:49:05 PM](#)

KAT MCELROY had her testimony read by Terra Burns. Ms. Burns read that Ms. McElroy has served on the Nenana City Assembly since 2008, has greatgrandchildren, and is a registered voter in Alaska. Ms. McElroy worked for 3 decades as an addictions counselor for vulnerable populations and learned that asking the wrong questions can illicit "bad information." Ms. McElroy wrote that HB 264 "would do exactly that" and requested the committee vote no on HB 264, as written, and support Amendment 5.

[3:50:09 PM](#)

TERRA BURNS, representing self, explained that HB 264, as written, would result in false and misleading definitions leading to false statistics. She encouraged the committee to [adopt] Amendment 5.

[3:51:38 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 3:51 to 3:52 p.m.

[3:52:03 PM](#)

TATIANA ROTHCHILD, Volunteer, Community United for Safety & Protection, explained that she was a PhD candidate in Political Science at Northeastern University and a volunteer researcher with Community United for Safety & Protection. She has worked in the anti-trafficking movement for over a decade and her research explores how different institutional structures engage in anti-human-trafficking work. She specifically examined how different definitions have been used by different organizations. She shared that her support of Amendment 5 comes from seeing negative results of misleading definitions which criminalize minors who are victims.

[3:55:15 PM](#)

AMBER NICKERSON, representing self, Community United for Safety & Protection, spoke in support of Amendment 5 to HB 264. She described her personal experience and reviewed the result of poor definitions in previous bills, resulting in victims being treated as criminals. In its current form, she warned, HB 264 is part of a "foster care to prison pipeline," but Amendment 5 would add the criminal definition of sex trafficking and prostitution of minors.

[3:58:16 PM](#)

BRENDA EDENS, representing self, spoke in support of HB 264.

[3:59:18 PM](#)

MAXINE DOOGAN, President, Community United for Safety & Protection, testified in opposition to [HB 264] in its current form because the definitions would lead to bad public policy. The organization she represents supports the definitions proposed in Amendment 5.

[4:01:17 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX, after ascertaining no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 264.

[4:01:24 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 4:01 to 4:06 p.m.

[4:06:36 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER moved to adopt Amendment 1 to HB 264, labeled 33-LS1126\S.4, Bergerud, 2/15/24, which read as follows:

Page 1, lines 1 - 2:

Delete "**adopt a uniform screening tool**"

Insert "**develop a shared screening methodology**"

Page 2, lines 5 - 6:

Delete "uniform screening tool adopted under"

Insert "screening methods developed in"

Page 2, lines 17 - 23:

Delete all material and insert:

"(u) The department shall work with agency partners and advocacy organizations to develop a shared screening methodology to appropriately identify whether a child is a victim of sexual abuse, sex trafficking, or commercial sexual exploitation. The methods shall support the trafficking information-gathering efforts in the state. The department shall screen a child committed to the department upon the child's initial commitment to the department and when the department receives information indicating that

the child may be a victim of sexual abuse, sex trafficking, or commercial sexual exploitation."

Page 2, following line 31:

Insert a new bill section to read:

"* **Sec. 5.** The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read:
TRANSITION. The Department of Family and Community Services shall develop and begin using the shared screening methodology required by sec. 4 of this Act not later than one year after the date this Act takes effect."

CHAIR PRAX objected for the purpose of discussion.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER clarified that the amendment eases the requirement and asks to develop as opposed to adopting a uniform screening tool. He said the Department of Family and Community Services and the Division of Juvenile Justice hope that this will improve things.

[4:07:43 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE explained that this amendment was brought forward by the department in order to work with what it believes is achievable and create the best method to partner with organizations in the state to develop a screening methodology.

[4:08:14 PM](#)

BOB BALLINGER, Staff, Representative Sarah Vance, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Vance, stated that the Amendment 1 does not change the original intent of HB 264 much; it adds an implementation deadline and changes the language to provide more flexibility. There would be some uniformity in the information, but there would be slight variations in the screening tool.

[4:09:12 PM](#)

SHANNON DILLEY, Director, Division of Juvenile Justice, Department of Family and Community Services, explained that the division supports Amendment 1 to HB 264. The division has been conducting screening tools about trafficking since 2018. The tools are effective in collecting data, and this amendment supports the continuation of those tools.

[4:09:49 PM](#)

KIM GUAY, Director, Office of Children's Services (OCS), Department of Family and Community Services, spoke in support of Amendment 1 to HB 264. She explained that OCS also has its own screening tool that it uses. While all tools could be updated, different organizations use tools that best fit the groups they work with, so while there needs to be a methodology about what data is collected, the tool does not necessarily need to be uniform.

[4:10:45 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX removed his objection to the motion to adopt Amendment 1. There being no further objection, Amendment 1 was adopted.

[4:11:08 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA, in response to Chair Prax, said that she would not be moving Amendment 2 [in committee packet].

[4:11:19 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER moved to adopt Amendment 3 to HB 264, labeled 33LS1126\S.1, Bergerud, 2/5/24, which read as follows:

Page 1, line 1, following "**Act**":

Insert "**extending the termination date of the board of massage therapists;**"

Page 1, following line 9:

Insert a new bill section to read:

"* **Section 1.** AS 08.03.010(c)(12) is amended to read:

(12) Board of Massage Therapists
(AS 08.61.010) - June 30, 2030 [2024];"

Page 1, line 10:

Delete "**Section 1**"

Insert "**Sec. 2**"

Renumber the following bill sections accordingly.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX objected for the purpose of discussion.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that the legislative process allows for adding anything to a bill; this would change the title. He did not support turning this bill into a "two headed creature." The bill is thorough and addresses sex trafficking and would create a good screening tool.

[4:12:11 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX maintained his objection.

A roll call vote was taken. No representatives voted in favor of Amendment 3. Representatives McCormick, Ruffridge, Saddler, Sumner, Mina, and Prax voted against it. Representative Fields was absent. Therefore, Amendment 3 to HB 264 failed by a vote of 0-6.

[4:13:13 PM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease at 4:13 p.m.

[4:13:48 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX called on Representative Mina to present Amendment 5. [Amendment 4, in the committee packet, was not offered.]

REPRESENTATIVE MINA moved to adopt Amendment 5 to HB 264, labeled 33-LS1126|S.6, Bergerud, 2/20/24, which read as follows:

Page 1, lines 3 - 4:

Delete "**commercial sexual exploitation**"

Insert "**prostitution**"

Page 1, line 6:

Delete "**commercial sexual exploitation**"

Insert "**prostitution**"

Page 2, lines 1 - 3:

Delete all material and insert:

"(2) "prostitution" means engaging in sexual conduct in return for a fee;

"(3) "sex trafficking" means engaging in sexual conduct for the financial benefit of another;

"(4) "sexual conduct" has the meaning given in AS 11.66.150."

Page 2, line 7:

Delete ", or at risk of becoming a victim,"

Page 2, line 8:

Delete "commercial sexual exploitation"
Insert "prostitution"

Page 2, line 11:

Delete "commercial sexual exploitation"
Insert "prostitution"

Page 2, line 12:

Delete "a new paragraph"
Insert "new paragraphs"

Page 2, lines 13 - 15:

Delete all material and insert:
 "(4) "prostitution" means engaging in
sexual conduct in return for a fee;
 (5) "sex trafficking" means engaging in
sexual conduct for the financial benefit of another;
 (6) "sexual conduct" has the meaning given
in AS 11.66.150."

Page 2, lines 18 - 19:

Delete ", or at risk of becoming a victim,"

Page 2, line 19:

Delete "commercial sexual exploitation."
Insert "prostitution. The tool must screen for
sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and prostitution as
distinct categories, and the department must maintain
the distinct categories when aggregating or reporting
data gathered using the tool."

Page 2, line 23:

Delete "commercial sexual exploitation"
Insert "prostitution"

Page 2, line 31:

Delete "commercial sexual exploitation"
Insert "prostitution"

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER objected.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA explained that Amendment 5 changes the bill in terms of the type of data and definitions the uniform screening tool would use. She expressed appreciation that the stakeholders are coming together to work on the screening tool

and standardize the system for foster children and runaway children. She expressed concern about the language regarding commercial sexual exploitation. This amendment focuses the uniform screening tool on prostitution, sex trafficking, and sexual conduct. Representative Mina posited that there is merit to understanding data when screening youth that are in vulnerable positions and emphasized the worth in having discussions on definitions. She clarified that Amendment 5 refers to definitions that are currently in state statute, but the term "commercial sexual exploitation" is a new definition.

[4:15:58 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE responded that extensive work had been done on these definitions. The legislature is currently updating the criminal definitions around sex trafficking, sex conduct, and commercial sexual exploitation. Amendment 5 would undermine the purpose of having a screening of children for sexual exploitation. The purpose is to catch children before in that place of vulnerability before it turns into further exploitation where children are prostituting themselves as spoken of by the testifiers. The hope is that children who come into contact with the state can be caught at the earliest moment of sexual violence or exploitation. The current statutory definition of commercial exploitation, which aligns with other legislation being updated in partnership with the Department of Law, is sex abuse or sexual exploitation for the financial benefit of any person or in exchange for anything of value given or received by any person. Representative Vance emphasized the latter part of the definition. She further emphasized that the sooner the state is able to find out if a child is being exploited or using "survival sex" in exchange for food and shelter, the sooner it can help that child. Amendment 5 would change that to "prostitution." Children cannot consent to prostitution, and that needs to be highlighted in this conversation. Prostitution is an illegal adult activity. Children cannot consent, and anything that says otherwise is dangerous. She stated that definitions and language matter greatly, and she expressed her hope that the definitions of commercial sexual exploitation and sexual activity would be updated in law.

[4:19:21 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX reiterated the concern of some public testimony regarding a federal definition and questioned whether the term "prostitution" is what is used in the federal definition.

MR. BALLINGER explained that in the state they are, but that is part of the problem. The bill was initially set up to screen children who are victims, but if you are screening them to see whether they were engaged in prostitution, that is a crime which creates a problem in that these are children and you are interviewing children, minors, whether or not they were engaged in criminal activity. So, I guess you would have to give Miranda, contact their parents, etc. It thwarts the purpose. The purpose is not to find out if they are criminals engaged in this activity or whether they may be victims. That is part of the problem of using a criminal definition. The definitions that are used here, this new definition, only apply to these code sections. That definition would not be used in criminal law. It is only used to identify the child victims in this case.

CHAIR PRAX reiterated that the definition only applied to children because they were underage and unable to consent.

MR. BALLINGER agreed.

[4:21:41 PM](#)

MS. GUAY explained that the department opposes the language in Amendment 5. Children should be looked at as victims in these situations. Prostitution is an illegal act. Children should be looked at as victims in these situations. There is shame and blame that comes with the language of prostitution, sex trafficking, and sexual conduct. The language of sexual exploitation incorporates pornography and video pornography where children are controlled and do not have the right to say no because of survival.

CHAIR PRAX brought up the concern raised by one of the testifiers that collecting DNA could be used against them in the future.

MS. GUAY explained that this refers to collection of data and they would not be collecting DNA.

[4:24:36 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK referred to one testifier's comment that, as currently written, the bill creates foster care to prison pipeline and asked for a response to that concern.

MS. DILLEY responded that the bill does not do that in her opinion but rather connects victimized children to services that will help them.

[4:25:59 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA explained her reasoning regarding creating more specificity in the definitions, specifically regarding commercial sexual exploitation.

[4:27:07 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK asked Representative Vance to respond to the foster care to pipeline concern.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE responded that nationwide sixty percent of trafficking victims have gone through the foster care system. It is believed that in Alaska up to eighty percent of trafficking victims have been through foster care. The earlier the screening, the sooner the intervention. This bill and further screening will help prevent a pipeline of exploitation of kids in our foster care system. For example, the Covenant House screening tool identified 27 more victims that would have otherwise been missed, allowing the youth to get the support they would need to avoid future exploitation and harm. In addition to helping children who have been victims, it is also important to be proactive in preventing the exploitation of youth.

[4:30:31 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked whether Representative Saddler maintains his objection.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER replied in the affirmative.

[4:30:34 PM](#)

A roll call vote was taken. Representatives Mina and McCormick voted in favor of Amendment 5 of HB 264. Representatives Ruffridge, Saddler, Sumner, and Chair Prax voted against it. Representative Fields was absent. Therefore, Amendment 5 failed by a vote of 2 - 4.

[4:31:55 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 4:31 to 4:32 p.m.

[4:32:06 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER moved to report HB 264, as amended, out of committee, with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSHB 264(HSS) was reported out of the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee.

[4:33:25 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 4:33 p.m. to 4:36 p.m.

HB 196-FOOD STAMP PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

[4:36:19 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 196, "An Act relating to the supplemental nutrition assistance program; and providing for an effective date."

[4:37:05 PM](#)

GENEVIEVE MINA, Alaska State Representative, Alaska State Legislature, introduced HB 196 to the committee. She explained she would discuss the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] and eligibility for the program.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA showed a PowerPoint presentation regarding HB 196, entitled, "Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility." She explained that SNAP is Alaska's strongest food security program, and it is a hundred percent funded by federal dollars. The program encourages its recipients to work, and the majority of SNAP participants do work. Alaska follows federal guidelines, but the program allows some flexibility regarding how it is administered including how eligibility is defined.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA presented slide 3 which described the history of the SNAP program in Alaska. She showed slide 4 and talked about what is referred to as the "benefit cliff" and introduced the flexibility options available to Alaska under Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE). The BBCE would eliminate the asset test and would allow the Department of health to increase the income limit from 130% to 200% of Alaska's poverty level. She moved to slide 5 which showed the

step-down approach to transitioning individuals and families off SNAP.

[4:44:44 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked for clarification regarding the step-down approach for transitioning from SNAP.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA moved to slides 5 and 6 which illustrated the food insecurity issues in Alaska. She described these issues and discussed how HB 196 would address some of these problems. The final slide illustrated how SNAP positively affects local economies, providing economic stimulus to local businesses and rural grocers.

[4:48:41 PM](#)

KATY GIORGIO, Staff, Representative Mina, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Mina, prime sponsor, presented the sectional analysis for HB 196, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

HB 196 Sectional Analysis

"An Act relating to the supplemental nutrition assistance program; and providing for an effective date."

Section 1. Amends AS. 47.25.980(a)(3):

This section updates the reference to the chapter of United States code governing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This section also increases the household income limits for the SNAP program from 130% to 200% of the Alaska poverty standard and eliminates the household asset test.

Section 2. Amends uncodified law by adding a new section:

This section provides the authority for the Department of Health to adopt the necessary regulations to implement this Act.

Section 3. Provides for an effective date for Section 2:

Section 2 has an immediate effective date.

Section 4. Provides for an effective date.

Except as provided in sec. 3, the effective date of this Act is July 1, 2025

[4:49:44 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced the committee would hear invited testimony.

[4:50:04 PM](#)

RON MEEHAN, Director of Government Affairs, Food Bank of Alaska, Manager, Food Bank Coalition, spoke in support of HB 196. The bill will increase government efficiency, reduce the time necessary to process SNAP applications; and provide economic security for hard working Alaskans. The SNAP program helps 92,000 Alaskans and stimulates the economy. He reiterated several of the points made by Representative Mina regarding the benefit cliff and gave examples of disincentivizing people from taking jobs with more money. One example of how the current SNAP asset requirements are particularly inappropriate in Alaska is that people who use a boat or snowmobile for subsistence fishing and hunting are disqualified from SNAP because they exceed the asset restrictions. This legislation will make SNAP work better and help people get out of poverty. The BBCE will provide targeted assistance to low-income families and seniors while saving the state money and increasing government efficiency.

[4:56:27 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked how the foodbank interfaces with the SNAP program.

MR. MEEHAN responded that when people do not receive SNAP benefits, they show up at the foodbanks at much higher levels.

[4:57:16 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked what the niche that foodbanks fill in food security issue and whether foodbanks have eligibility requirements.

MR. MEEHAN answered that the foodbank system was not designed to be an alternative to food benefit programs. The foodbank coalition does administer several programs with paperwork requirements, but foodbanks are designed as an additional food resources and do not have eligibility requirements.

[5:00:33 PM](#)

ERIN WALKER-TOLLES, Executive Director, Catholic Community Services, spoke in support of HB 196. She described her support for the BBCE but specifically directed her testimony to issues facing Alaskan seniors. She explained that seniors comprise 20% of Alaska's population. Catholic Community Services has 10 senior centers, and last year served 130,000 hot meals. Since the pandemic, there has been a dramatic increase in the need for senior services. She gave examples of the difficult choices some seniors must make and pointed out that poor nutrition creates avoidable health issues. The most effective intervention is access to nutritious food.

[5:05:07 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX questioned whether the Catholic Community Center senior meal program is a supplement to the SNAP program and whether she would expect the demands on the community center to decrease with the projected changes in SNAP.

MS. WALKER-TOLLES explained that the senior meal program provides approximately one-third of daily nutritional requirements, and the SNAP program is necessary to meet many seniors' needs. She explained that the demands on the program would fluctuate, but there is an increasing percentage of seniors in Alaska's population.

[5:06:41 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked the Division of Public Assistance to provide its perspective.

DEB ETHERIDGE, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health, described the issues seniors have encountered with the SNAP program. Changing the eligibility requirements to the BBCE system allows seniors to access benefits more easily.

[5:08:14 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX inquired about estimated long-term results and asked about how it helps families get back on their feet.

MS. ETHERIDGE pointed out that the implementation of the bill does not remove need for families to work. Furthermore, it enables families to begin saving in order to move forward.

CHAIR PRAX gave an extreme scenario which he described as unlikely, but which would be an example of abuse of the program and asked about the potential for abuse of the SNAP program.

MS. ETHERIDGE replied that abuse was theoretically possible but rare.

[5:11:44 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK thanked Representative Mina for bringing this forward and explained that it was very important to many people in his district. He ended his comments with what he indicated was an intentional pun, "Oh SNAP! Who said urban and bush Alaska cannot work together."

[5:13:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that he felt the bill was a combination of bureaucratic efficiency, humanity, compassion, helping Alaskans stay independent, healthy in their homes, and contributing. He commended the sponsor for bringing the bill forward.

[5:13:31 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that HB 196 was held over.

[5:14:31 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 5:15 p.m.