

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

April 18, 2024

3:05 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Mike Prax, Chair
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Vice Chair
Representative CJ McCormick
Representative Zack Fields
Representative Genevieve Mina

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Dan Saddler
Representative Jesse Sumner

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 198

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

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 354

"An Act relating to the use of polystyrene foam and biodegradable or compostable disposable food service ware; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 198

SHORT TITLE: FOOD STAMP PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) GRAY

05/10/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/10/23	(H)	HSS, FIN
04/18/24	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 354

SHORT TITLE: RESTRICT RESTAURANT USE OF POLYSTYRENE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) JOSEPHSON

02/20/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/20/24 (H) HSS, L&C
04/18/24 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE ANDREW GRAY
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 198.

DAVID SONG, Staff
Representative Andrew Gray
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Andrew Gray,
prime sponsor, presented HB 198 to the committee.

RON MEEHAN, Director of Governmental Affairs
Food Bank of Alaska
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198.

GREG MEYER, Executive Director
Kenai Peninsula Food Bank
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198.

DUANE PATTERSON, Director
St. Francis House Food Pantry
Catholic Community Services
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198.

RACHEL LORD, Advocacy and Policy Director
Alaska Food Policy Council
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198.

DEB ETHRIDGE, Director
Division of Public Assistance
Department of Health

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 198.

REPRESENTATIVE ANDY JOSEPHSON

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 354.

LISA KELLER, Staff

Representative Andy Josephson

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation during the hearing on HB 354, on behalf of Representative Josephson, prime sponsor.

CRYSTAL KOENEMAN, Legislative Liaison

Department of Environmental Conservation

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Responded to questions during the hearing on HB 354.

PAMELA MILLER, Executive Director and Senior Scientist

Alaska Community Action on Toxics

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 354.

ASHLYN JOHNSON, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 354.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:05:03 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:05 p.m. Representatives Ruffridge, Fields, Mina, and Prax were present at the call to order. Representative McCormick arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 198-FOOD STAMP PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

[3:06:48 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 198, "An Act relating to the supplemental nutrition assistance program; and providing for an effective date."

[3:06:48 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ANDREW GRAY, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HB 198. He said that in 2022, the Alaska Department of Health (DOH) had an enormous backlog of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applicants, many of whom being children, the primary recipients of SNAP benefits in Alaska. He pointed out that the USDA wrote a letter to Governor Dunleavy on February 8th, 2024 that suggested Alaska comply with the federal maximum timeline for SNAP benefit recertification. He said that Alaska currently requires SNAP recipients to recertify every 6 months, while to current federal requirements outline a recertification every 12 months, 24 months for senior citizens. He emphasized that the recertification process is an administrative burden on the DOH that has potential to delay critical benefits to people in need.

[3:11:00 PM](#)

DAVID SONG, Staff, Representative Andrew Gray, Alaska State Legislature, On behalf of Representative Andrew Gray, prime sponsor, presented HB 198 to the committee. He began by reading the sectional analysis to HB 198 [hardcopy included in committee packet] which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 198
Ver. A
Sectional Analysis

Section 1:

Amends AS 47.25.980(a) to require the Department of Health to certify each eligible household for the longest certification period permitted under federal law.

Section 2:

Establishes an immediate effective date.

[3:15:38 PM](#)

RON MEEHAN, Director of Governmental Affairs, Food Bank of Alaska, gave invited testimony on HB 198. He explained that SNAP benefits supported around 1 in 8 Alaskans in 2022 and said that

a portion of SNAP recipients must complete an interview and paperwork to ensure that they continue to receive their benefits. He emphasized that HB 198 would reduce the chance of any future backlog of SNAP applications forming and highlighted the "enormous consequences" of the previous backlog that formed in 2022.

[3:19:24 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked what pending proposals could immediately help with food insecurity.

MR. MEEHAN replied that the DOH is currently looking at implementing the Elderly & Disabled Application Program (EDAP) to aide people in their SNAP applications and added that the legislature could add SNAP-related amendments in their annual budget to aide the program as a whole.

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CHAIR PRAX opened public testimony on HB 198.

[3:22:21 PM](#)

ERIN WALKER-TOLLES, Executive Director, Catholic Community Services, testified in support of HB 198. She began her testimony by giving her background in community service and spoke to the recent dramatic increase in need for senior meal programs in Alaska. She said that there has been a serious increase in need among folks with a fixed income and said that public assistance has been vital in ensuring that they don't go hungry

[3:25:55 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked what grant funding for senior meals Ms. Walker-Tolles was referring to.

MS. WALKER-TOLLES answered that she was referring to the Division of Senior and Disability Service's Nutrition, Transportation, and Support Services (NTS) grants.

[3:27:08 PM](#)

GREG MEYER, Executive Director, Kenai Peninsula Food Bank, testified in support of HB 198. He said that the recertification process for SNAP benefits is difficult and arduous for someone

experiencing a hunger crisis to go through. He said that any way for someone to be relieved of the burden of paperwork and time is an important thing to achieve.

[3:29:10 PM](#)

DUANE PATTERSON, Director, St. Francis House Food Pantry, Catholic Community Services, testified in support of HB 198. He shared his experience that the food pantry he works at is experiencing increasing demands and said that the increase in demand is due in part to the backlog of SNAP applications.

[3:30:53 PM](#)

RACHEL LORD, Advocacy and Policy Director, Alaska Food Policy Council, testified in support of HB 198. She began her testimony by explaining the role that the Alaska Food Policy Council plays in ensuring food security for Alaskans alike and said that there is an increasing need for SNAP benefits and their smooth implementation.

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CHAIR PRAX, after ascertaining there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 198.

[3:32:15 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked Deb Etheridge how long 6 months has been the timeline for the SNAP benefit recertification process and further questioned how long it would take to alter the month-month eligibility via regulation.

[3:32:44 PM](#)

DEB ETHRIDGE, Director, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health, responded that the 6 month time period for recertification of SNAP benefits has been the status quo since the benefit's inception. She said that the process to change the timeline from 6 to 12 months was not performed through Alaska's regulatory structure, but rather through federal statute.

[3:35:24 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked why the Commissioner of the DOH couldn't just select their own timeline for the SNAP benefit recertification period.

MS. ETHRIDGE said that the DOH extended the recertification period without federal approval and said that the DOH performs what is called an "interim report" to verify the necessity of a recertification of SNAP benefits in the first place.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked if there would still need to be a federal approval for a timeline change even if it is legal under Alaska Statute.

MS. ETHRIDGE replied that if Alaska were to change from the current period of 12 months to 24 months the DOH would have to inquire with the federal government about the change.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY said that the DOH was not doing the federal maximum limit when he filed the bill.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE questioned if the approved 12 months was allowed to be changed by the DOH.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA commented that the Legislature could work collaboratively with the DOH to help set more productive policies like online SNAP benefit applications and the 12 month re-application timeline.

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REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked what the longest possible recertification process was under federal law.

[3:44:00 PM](#)

MS. ETHRIDGE explained that the longest period is 24 months and said that the period could be extended through a waiver called the "Elderly Simplified" waiver that allows a person to wait up to 36 months for recertification of their SNAP benefits.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked if someone could extend their recertification period in any circumstance other than their old age.

MS. ETHRIDGE said that the recertification period is currently 24 months for disabled and elderly individuals and 12 months for non-disabled, non-elderly people.

[3:44:41 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked if Alaska's food stamp program falls under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

MS. ETHRIDGE answered that TANF is a block grant that is separate from SNAP or food stamp benefits.

CHAIR PRAX asked if someone utilizing food stamps is meant to report any new employment to the DOH before their SNAP renewal period. He asked if the DOH has any method of predicting how long someone might utilize SNAP benefits.

MS. ETHRIDGE explained that the food stamp and SNAP programs expect its recipients to work and answered that the DOH does not have a method to predict how long a person will remain on food stamps or SNAP benefits. She emphasized that the DOH has fraud investigation units that take care of any fraud concerns within Alaska's SNAP or food stamp programs.

CHAIR PRAX asked if the DOH's interim report helps to verify data during a recertification period.

MS. ETHRIDGE explained that part of the interim report includes things like residency verification and the usage of one's SNAP benefits.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked what percentage of fraud was legitimate and what was agency error.

MS. ETHRIDGE explained that a very high rate of errors occurring were agency errors.

[3:51:20 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked if there are other things that the State can do to reduce food insecurity in Alaska and further questioned if there was any way that the SNAP application process could be streamlined.

MS. ETHRIDGE answered that the DOH is looking at a multitude of options for the state to utilize in its efforts to reduce food insecurity and said that transitory SNAP benefits are one of the clearest ways to improve food insecurity in Alaska. She answered that the SNAP application could be dynamically leveraged over other SNAP applications with robotic, automated processing of applicants.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY commented that the DOH had remarked in the past that they were rushed and overburdened and said that HB 198 could help reduce such an administrative burden.

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CHAIR PRAX announced that HB 198 was held over.

HB 354-RESTRICT RESTAURANT USE OF POLYSTYRENE

[3:56:16 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 354, "An Act relating to the use of polystyrene foam and biodegradable or compostable disposable food service ware; and providing for an effective date."

[3:56:41 PM](#)

}REPRESENTATIVE ANDY JOSEPHSON* Alaska State Legislature* Juneau, Alaska* As prime sponsor, introduced HB 354 to the committee.{ as prime sponsor, introduced HB 354 to the committee. He began his introduction by explaining the history of the use of polystyrene foam in Alaska and shared information about his own involvement in environmental legislation that had previously come before the legislature. He explained that the impetus of the idea to ban polystyrene foam in Alaska originally came from the Alaska Community Action on Toxins group who had put forward recommendations on environmental legislative action to be taken. He highlighted that Bethel, Cordova, and Seward, Alaska have all already banned the use of polystyrene foam within their boroughs and explained that the term "Styrofoam" is often used in place of the term polystyrene. He said that the United States Plastic Pact has conceded the fact that polystyrene is non-recyclable.

[4:04:44 PM](#)

}LISA KELLER, Staff* Representative Andy Josephson* Alaska State Legislature* Juneau, Alaska* On behalf of Representative Josephson, prime sponsor of HB 354, gave a PowerPoint presentation on HB 354. { On behalf of Representative Josephson, prime sponsor of HB 354, gave a PowerPoint presentation on HB 354. She began the presentation on slide 2, which explained the definition of the polystyrene chemical itself. She continued to slide 3, which gave examples of polystyrene as one might know in its average use. She moved to slide 4, highlighted the main issues that are associated with the use of polystyrene. She moved to slide 5, which displayed a list of other countries and states that have banned the use of polystyrene and other related chemicals. She pointed to Bethel, Cordova, and Seward as communities in Alaska that have banned the use of polystyrene themselves and emphasized that public sentiment is in agreement with the proposed legislation.

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REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS requested data related to the bioaccumulation of polystyrene in marine mammals and asked if there are any studies that confirm the harmful effects of polystyrene.

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON directed his answer to the second question to Pamela Miller and answered that indigenous communities in the arctic are at a higher risk of adverse health effects of polystyrene, like bioaccumulation, due to the nature of ocean currents that congregate the waste along the arctic coast.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked if HB 354 would cover the use of polystyrene in food trucks.

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON said that HB 354 would limit the use of polystyrene in food trucks and said that the trucking companies would be able to propose an alternative with the DOH.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked how the term "undue hardship" would be interpreted by the DOH or the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

[4:15:02 PM](#)

}CRYSTAL KOENEMAN* Legislative Liaison* Department of Environmental Conservation* Juneau, Alaska* Answered committee questions on HB 354.{ answered committee questions on HB 354. She said that the Division on Environmental Health would oversee the implementation of section 17 HB 354.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked for a definition of the term "undue hardship" as mentioned in section 17 of HB 354.

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON explained how the term "undue hardship" would be defined and interpreted by both executive agencies and the judicial branch of the Alaska State Government.

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REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE commented that the banning of plastic bags in Soldotna had no consequence on the use of plastic bags in the borough.

[4:18:06 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK shared his experience that the banning of polystyrene in Bethel has never been enforced and the products have been allowed to be used regardless of the law that was passed to limit their use.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked what alternative options for polystyrene could be utilized.

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REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON said that a specific hard plastic container would be recyclable, while polystyrene is impossible to recycle in any situation.

[4:20:25 PM](#)

}PAMELA MILLER* Executive Director and Senior Scientist* Alaska Community Action on Toxics* Anchorage, Alaska* Gave invited testimony on HB 354.{ gave invited testimony on HB 354. She explained that polystyrene is a hazardous material that should not be used in food contact materials and said that it is impossible to recycle. She highlighted that the styrene in a polystyrene food container often leeches into the food or beverage that of which it is holding and explained to the committee a series of safer alternative options that could be

utilized. She opined that the proposed legislation is "common sense" and urged the committee for their support of HB 354.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked how HB 354 may be enforced when companies might have work-arounds and ways to avoid bans such as the one proposed in HB 354.

MS. MILLER explained that HB 354 aims to ban the use of polystyrene in food containers, not any other sector of use, and shared her belief that banning the use of polystyrene in food containers was a good place to start in the banning of hazardous materials in Alaska.

[4:28:02 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX opened public testimony on HB 354.

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ASHLYN JOHNSON, representing self, testified in support of HB 354. She said that polystyrene foam is a significant environmental pollutant in Alaska that doesn't biodegrade and said that it breaks down into microplastics, which she said pose a unique risk to public, environmental, and wildlife health. She said that the regulation of polystyrene foam would be a step in the right direction and urged the committee's support of HB 354.

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CHAIR PRAX, after ascertaining there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 354.

[4:31:58 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked Ms. Koeneman if the definition of "restaurant" as used in HB 354 would encompass food trucks as well. He asked how an establishment that falls under the "restaurant" definition would determine which is the safest material to use in their food containers.

[4:32:07 PM](#)

MS. KOENEMAN answered that the definition of "restaurant" as used in HB 354 would include food trucks and said that the DEC and DOH would work together to develop guidelines for food

establishments to avoid the use of hazardous materials in their food containers.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK referred to his previous mention that the ban on polystyrene foam in Bethel is unenforced and asked how a law like HB 354 could be enforced.

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REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON replied that HB 354 has a section that would allow a restaurant to seek out alternative and said that his hope of HB 354 is to encourage food establishments to move away from using hazardous food containers.

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REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS commented that polystyrene alternatives are economically viable.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked what a restaurant would do with their current stock of polystyrene food containers if HB 354 were to pass.

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON said that the effective date of HB 354 would give food establishments time to "work through" their current supply of hazardous materials while simultaneously introducing safer options.

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CHAIR PRAX asked how big of a role food establishments play in the use of polystyrene materials and their associated pollution.

REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON gave an example of a restaurant that would not provide plastic utensils unless the customer specifically asked for them and explained that HB 354 would be a good place to start in the reduction of use of hazardous materials in general.

[4:42:28 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS asked if the Alaska State Legislature should add a provision to HB 354 that would direct the DEC to

perform an outreach program to food establishments around the State to ensure that they have a steady access to polystyrene alternatives.

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MS. KOENEMAN replied that the DEC would be happy to look into the prospect of an outreach program and said that she would follow up with the committee later on the DEC's current workload capacity.

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REPRESENTATIVE MINA asked for a breakdown of the use of polystyrene between restaurants, retail, and other sectors.

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REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPHSON replied that HB 354 could've included language for delis in a grocery store and said that it was simpler to target the use of polystyrene in restaurants only.

[4:47:49 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that HB 354 was held over.

[4:48:11 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 4:48 p.m.