

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

February 1, 2024

12:35 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Stanley Wright, Chair
Representative Laddie Shaw
Representative Ben Carpenter
Representative George Rauscher
Representative Dan Saddler
Representative Cliff Groh
Representative Andrew Gray

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 229

"An Act establishing Alaska Veterans' Poppy Day; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED HB 229 OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 249

"An Act creating the military and veteran family help desk in the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 229

SHORT TITLE: ALASKA VETERANS' POPPY DAY

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STAPP

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	MLV
01/25/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
01/25/24	(H)	Heard & Held
01/25/24	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
02/01/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HB 249

SHORT TITLE: MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY HELP DESK

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) GROH

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	MLV, FIN
02/01/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

CAMERON EBERSOLD, Staff
Representative Cliff Groh
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Read the summary of changes on behalf of Representative Groh, prime sponsor.

ANGELA LAFLAMME, Special Assistant/Legislative Liaison
Office of the Commissioner/Adjutant General
Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 249.

TAMMIE PERREAULT, Northwest Regional Liaison
Defense State Liaison Office
U.S. Department of Defense
(No address provided)

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered a question during the hearing on HB 249.

LISA SLABA, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 249.

ROBERT DOEHL, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 249.

MARYBETH GOODMAN, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 249.

KAYLA LAFOND, Military Spouse Liaison
State of Virginia

Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 249.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:00:44 PM](#)

CHAIR STANLEY WRIGHT called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. Representatives Shaw, Groh, Gray, Saddler, Rauscher, and Wright were present at the call to order. Representative Carpenter arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 229-ALASKA VETERANS' POPPY DAY

[1:01:22 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 229, "An Act establishing Alaska Veterans' Poppy Day; and providing for an effective date."

[1:02:05 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to report HB 229 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 229 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

[1:02:35 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:02 p.m. to 1:05 p.m.

HB 249-MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY HELP DESK

[1:05:06 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 249, "An Act creating the military and veteran family help desk in the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; and providing for an effective date."

[1:05:34 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GROH, as prime sponsor, paraphrased the sponsor statement for HB 249 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

This legislation would create a service within the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs (DMVA) for a Military and Veterans' Family Help Desk. This help desk would be a dedicated point of contact for military families to learn more about services offered by the State of Alaska. It is intended to directly meet State Policy priorities outlined by the Department of Defense to assist military families and open an avenue to address other priorities in the future. This legislation is similar to bills that have recently passed in Virginia and Washington.

In Alaska there are approximately 23,065 total members in the Department of Defense--although our total military community in Alaska is much larger. If you consider the families, the size of this community grows to 51,297--or about 7% of our total population. The impact of military members in Alaska cannot be overstated, and they come with unique needs. By creating a clear link between the State of Alaska and our military communities, we can connect service members and their families to services the State of Alaska currently provides and open a clear channel of communication to find out what services are still needed.

This service will help recent military in-migrants integrate to Alaska. Each state offers different services, has different laws, and may require different professional certifications. Military families are highly transient. For military members who have just recently relocated to Alaska, this help desk can be their first point of contact to learn about what their state government can do for them.

A key feature of this legislation is prioritizing military spouse employment. Dual incomes are critical to military families. Yet, a disconnect between experience and obtaining profession certifications in a new state has contributed to high rates of unemployment among military spouses, a concern that has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This legislation also takes the concept further by expanding to include military families and their children. For example, this help desk could assist children of military families in applying to the

University of Alaska, or help those children learn about a trade or obtain a job in the state. The bill is intended to be inclusive of other family structures, such as military members who may have dependent siblings or parents in their care.

Passing this legislation will help the State of Alaska better serve those in our community who have served.

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The committee took a brief at-ease from 1:07 p.m. to 1:08 p.m.

[1:08:00 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 249, Version 33-LS1204\U, C. Radford, 1/30/24, as a working document.

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER objected for the purpose of discussion.

[1:08:37 PM](#)

CAMERON EBERSOLD, Staff, Representative Cliff Groh, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Groh, prime sponsor, read the summary of changes [included in committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

1. In Section 1 (AS 44.35.025 (b)), page 1 lines 9-10 deletes "conduct outreach to and advocate on behalf of military members, veterans, and their families" and adds "provide a central point of contact for military members, veterans, and their families seeking information, resources and state services" This change better expresses the goal of a 'one-stop-shop' for service members.

2. Page 1, lines 11-12 deletes "provide direct assistance and information about state services to military members, veterans, and their families."

3. Page 1, lines 13-14 are moved to lines 11-12 and adds "and court decisions" to the list of information the service shall provide. The intent of the help desk is to provide relevant information about Alaska state law, of which court decisions are an essential component.

4. Page 2, lines 1-2 are moved to Page 1, lines 13-14 and adds "cooperate with the University of Alaska to" and removes "and create informational materials relating to those issues." This change places the burden of research onto the University so the help desk can focus their efforts on quality service delivery.

5. Page 2, lines 1-5 adds "in coordination with local veteran service organizations, agencies, and nonprofit organizations, identify and address the needs of military members, veterans, and their families, facilitate coordination and communication to enhance the range and quality of services, streamline the delivery of services and share data and information for improving services for military members." This change makes more explicit the need to coordinate with the non-profit sector to efficiently deliver services.

6. Page 2, lines 3-7 are moved to lines 5-11 and replaces "The United States Department of Defense" with "federal departments that operate branches of the military." The change includes service members and veterans of branches of the military that exist outside of the DoD, such as the U.S. Coast Guard.

7. Page 2, lines 8-9 are deleted.

8. Page 2, lines 10-13 are moved to lines 12-15 and deletes "develop a standard form" and adds "Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, and other professional licensing entities, reduce barriers to employment for spouses of military members." This is based on feedback from the Military Spouse Liaison of the State of Virginia.

9. Page 2, lines 14-15 are moved to 16-18 and replaces "encourage a municipality" with "upon request, assist a municipality." This change makes the goal more actionable for the department.

10. In Section 1, (AS 44.35.025 (c)), page 2, lines 17-19 is moved to 20-25 and adds paragraph (2) to define "military" to mean "the armed forces of the United States, the United States Coast Guard, or the

Alaska National Guard" for the sake of applying the service.

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REPRESENTATIVE GROH added that Alaska would be the third state to provide this service.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER removed his objection. There being no further objection, Version U was before the committee.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER said that the legal definition of the word "military" does not include the U.S. Public Health Service or the Commission Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association.

MR. EBERSOLD responded that the intention of the bill is to be as inclusive as possible; if there is language that does not reflect inclusiveness, the sponsor would like it changed to be as inclusive as possible.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER offered his understanding that veteran organizations provide services, as well as the Veterans' Administration (VA). He asked how the bill would replace, complement, or add new services.

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REPRESENTATIVE GROH deferred the question to Ms. Laflamme.

[1:15:25 PM](#)

ANGELA LAFLAMME, Special Assistant/Legislative Liaison, Office of the Commissioner/Adjutant General, Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs, confirmed that the department's Office of Veteran's Affairs does offer partnerships with veteran organizations within the state to help get resources to the veteran population. She said HB 249 expands this scope to other partnerships to provide one resource where all the information would be. In response to a follow-up question by Representative Saddler, she said the proposed help desk is envisioned as a facilitator.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked if there is any obligation by the federal government to assist with the help desk.

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REPRESENTATIVE GROH responded that the VA wants to help. He said HB 249 would provide a repository of Alaska-specific information to veterans. He asked Ms. Perrault to confirm that the bill aligns with the goals of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked Ms. Perreault about there being other VA supports, and how the proposed help desk would interact with that.

1:19:26 PM

TAMMIE PERREAULT, Northwest Regional Liaison, Defense State Liaison Office, Department of Defense, answered that the word "complement" best describes the proposed help desk and how it would interact with other services. She said that, though there are many services available through the VA system, the opportunity to bring services provided by the state and its partners into one spot where people can go for information would be beneficial.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY offered his understanding that different statuses and branches may have different services. He asked if it is possible to get staff that are knowledgeable in the different branches and services.

MS. LAFLAMME answered that, initially, it would be best that the staff know who the experts are, rather than being the experts themselves.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER pointed out that the bill requires coordination with local veteran organizations, military installations, federal departments, and municipalities to provide recommendations regarding improving assistance to military members. He asked whether that work is already being done and how an administrative assistant would fill those roles.

MS. LAFLAMME responded that much of the office's work is indeed what he has listed. She explained that, with the expanded scope, it wouldn't just be handled by an administrative assistant III; it would be handled by a shared office. She said if there are issues, they could be addressed by the director, adjutant general, or commissioner.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER inquired about duties already being performed by the Alaska Office of Veteran's Affairs. He asked Ms. Laflamme to delineate how much staff time is being put towards current duties, and what is not being performed.

MS. LAFLAMME answered that the office staff already handle veteran resources; the office has five staff who distribute out the resources, answer questions, and help veterans. She shared that it had created a veterans' resource book that centralized all of the service information available in the state.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER read page 2, lines 16-18 of the proposed CS, which read as follows:

(7) upon request, assist a municipality with close economic or community ties to a military installation in creating military and veteran family liaison

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked whether creating liaisons at municipalities by municipalities is a state initiative.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH responded that HB 249 arose from conversations with the military community in Fairbanks, as well as with Ms. Perrault.

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MR. EBERSOLD added that municipalities would need to push to have such a liaison for their own community as they know best what their needs are.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER sought confirmation that the bill is not a directive for municipalities to create a new position.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH answered, "That's correct."

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked who would need to request a liaison.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH explained that in August of last year, he and Mr. Ebersold went to Fairbanks and attended a defense forum; through the forum, they had met a person that told them about the close relationship between the military and the community. He said the intent of the bill is to help military members, namely those who are newly assigned to the state.

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CHAIR WRIGHT opened public testimony on HB 249.

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LISA SLABA, representing self, shared that she is a military spouse stationed at Eielson Air Force Base and is also the military project manager at the Fairbanks Economic Development Corporation. She said military spouses are always transitioning and that, upon receiving orders, they are researching all the information needed about the community they are about to be stationed at. She commented that the proposed helpdesk could provide help to military families and the resources they may need. She expounded that, if there is a liaison at both the municipal and state level, that would give families multiple levels of help. She added that the helpdesk could act as a conduit that provides military spouses a voice.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked what direct interaction Ms. Slaba has had with the Alaska Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs.

MS. SLABA answered that she has had a professional relationship with the department. She said the helpdesk could add a level of inclusivity and would allow the spouse to call to ask questions about resources available.

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ROBERT DOEHL, representing self, shared that he is a retiree from the military and the state. He said that service members

ask three questions: "Where will our family live?," "Where will our kids go to school?," and "Where's the spouse going to work?" He stated that the bill could leverage the expedited licensing requirements the Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED) provides for military dependents. He explained that a service member not wanting to come to Alaska because their spouse doesn't want to do so places Alaska bases at risk; it also deprives the state of skilled workforces. He stated that DMVA is the right place for the helpdesk, as it has the mandate to work with uniformed services. He stressed that the helpdesk should not be DoD-centric and should include the Coast Guard, Uniformed Public Health Services, and other such services.

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MARYBETH GOODMAN, representing self, stated she is in support of HB 249. She said there is a need to guide military families toward credible and valid resources. She shared that she has seen such families in Alaska directed to organizations that have not been vetted; the helpdesk would be able to direct the families to a reputable resource. She stressed the importance of the provision that the helpdesk works with Defense Service Offices (DSOs), resources, healthcare agencies, and other non-profits alongside DoD, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and local-based leadership. She said the commitment to share the information resources with local communities is a commendable move toward improvement. She urged members to pass HB 249.

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KAYLA LAFOND, Military Spouse Liaison, State of Virginia, said Virginia is the second state in the nation to have a designated program that is focused on advocating for military spouses, something similar to what is being proposed in HB 249. She said Virginia's legislation contained a similar line item regarding the creation of a common form to highlight military spouse skills, education, and training. She explained that, over the last two years since Virginia adopted the bill, it has been found that such a form is a good idea but has been hard to execute without the help of workforce agencies. She suggested that removing the standard form verbiage from the bill would allow the Alaska DMVA the flexibility to determine the needs in the different Alaska regions. She commented that when a military spouse is employed, the employer is supporting the veteran and their family.

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CHAIR WRIGHT, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 249.

[1:48:01 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked which duties in the bill are not already being done.

MS. LAFLAMME offered that she will work with DMVA to provide a list of what is currently being addressed and what isn't.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER inquired what the proposed repository of information would look like.

MS. LAFLAMME answered that it could be a central portal that provides information to families upon orders to Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked how many active-duty families contact DMVA on a weekly or monthly basis.

MS. LAFLAMME responded that she does not know the number but can provide that information later. She said DoD has good partnerships with active military families through DMVA.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER pointed to language on page 2, line 4, regarding data sharing, and asked who the helpdesk would be sharing data with.

MS. LAFLAMME said that is something DMVA would look at as the resources are developed. In response to a follow-up question regarding whether the information would be public data with a user-friendly interface, she confirmed that the information would be presented in that way.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER, on page 2, line 19, read that an annual report be provided to the adjutant general. He asked what that report would contain.

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REPRESENTATIVE GROH responded that it would include the information collected throughout the year.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that he is concerned about the broad scope of duties that are expected of an administrative assistant. He asked whether they would be overtasked.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH answered that the tasks are important, and having the information centralized and distributable would help people. He said he'll rely on the good stewardship of DMVA to ensure that happens.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY relayed that his experience is from his time in the Alaska Army National Guard; there is a family services office in the Fort Richardson Armory with full-time staff. He offered that the helpdesk would provide the number for a service like this, and he asked whether the helpdesk would be a central location to find that number.

MS. LAFLAMME offered her understanding that that is how the legislation would be put into practice; the helpdesk would not replace already existing benefits, rather, it would be just a repository to connect people to resources.

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY asked whether the helpdesk would be a physical helpdesk and where would it be located.

MS. LAFLAMME answered that the helpdesk will have a physical person at a desk and would be located within the Office of Veterans' Affairs under DMVA.

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CHAIR WRIGHT interjected that the Office of Veterans' Affairs is located off base.

[1:56:45 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked about the repository and whether it could be described as just papers with phone numbers, addresses, e-mails, and people to seek out.

MS. LAFLAMME responded that it could consist of that. She pointed out that Alaska has many resources, meaning the information sheet would be long. She explained that there will be other formats as well that'll be used to get information out. In response to a follow up as to whether there is a person at

DMVA to take calls and answer questions, she said the department does get calls regularly. She explained that the intent of HB 249 is to have a phone number that is designated as a repository of information that is easily accessible.

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REPRESENTATIVE GROH reminded members of the invited testifiers.

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MS. PERREAULT explained how the program worked in Washington state, which has had a military spouse liaison for several years; this person has become a single point of contact for military spouses as they move in and out of the state. She said that while the family may get some information on resources from the federal side, there is nothing like a person who works in state government that directs people to state resources.

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CHAIR WRIGHT announced that HB 249 was held over.

[2:01:25 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 2:01 p.m.