

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

February 29, 2024

1:02 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. 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."

- MOVED CSHB 249 (MLV) OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 312

"An Act relating to the appointment of an assistant adjutant general; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 228

"An Act establishing the Alaska mental health and psychedelic medicine task force; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

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
02/01/24 (H) Heard & Held
02/01/24 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
02/29/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HB 312

SHORT TITLE: ASSISTANT ADJUTANT GENERAL APPOINTMENT

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

02/09/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/09/24 (H) MLV
02/22/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/22/24 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --
02/29/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HB 228

SHORT TITLE: MENTAL HEALTH/PSYCHEDELIC MED. TASK FORCE

SPONSOR(s): ARMSTRONG

01/16/24 (H) PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24 (H) HSS, STA, FIN
02/02/24 (H) MLV REPLACES HSS REFERRAL
02/02/24 (H) BILL REPRINTED
02/13/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/13/24 (H) Heard & Held
02/13/24 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
02/29/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

BRIGADIER GENERAL CRAIG CHRISTENSEN, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 312 on behalf of the sponsor,
House Rules by request of the governor.

ANGELA LAFLAMME, Legislative Liaison
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave the sectional analysis for HB 312 on
behalf of the sponsor, House Rules by request of the governor.

REPRESENTATIVE JENNY ARMSTRONG

Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, answered questions during the hearing on HB 228.

MICAELA FOWLER, Deputy Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 228 on behalf of the sponsor, House Rules by request of the governor.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:02:27 PM](#)

CHAIR STANLEY WRIGHT called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. Representatives Shaw, Groh, Saddler, Rauscher, Wright were present at the call to order. Representatives Gray and Carpenter arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 249-MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY HELP DESK

[1:02:57 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the first 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." [Before the committee, adopted as a working document on 2/1/24, was the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 249, Version 33-LS1204\U, C. Radford, 1/30/24 ("Version U").]

[1:03:22 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW commended Representative Groh's work in supporting veterans.

[1:03:47 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to report CSHB 249, Version 33-LS1204\U, C. Radford, 1/30/24, out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSHB 249(MLV) was reported out of committee.

[1:04:05 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:04 p.m. to 1:06 p.m.

HB 312-ASSISTANT ADJUTANT GENERAL APPOINTMENT

[1:06:12 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 312, "An Act relating to the appointment of an assistant adjutant general; and providing for an effective date."

[1:06:45 PM](#)

CRIAG CHRISTENSON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs, presented HB 312 on behalf of the sponsor, House Rules by request of the governor. He explained that the bill seeks to change the assistant adjutant general (ATAG) position from a five-year service requirement to a preference. He said there are two ATAG positions within the Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs that serve a federal and state role: the commander of the Air National Guard and the commander of the Army National Guard. He stated that both positions are considered as state employees at a director level position. He said HB 312 would expand the pool of possible applicants to include active-duty servicemembers leaving active service, who have the required qualifications and want to stay in Alaska. He pointed out that the five-year preference would remain in statute.

[1:08:38 PM](#)

ANGELA LAFLAMME, Legislative Liaison, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs, on behalf of the sponsor, House Rules by request of the governor, read the sectional analysis for HB 312 [included in committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1 amends AS 26.05.180(a) relating to headquarters staff of the Alaska National Guard regarding appointment and qualification of an assistant adjutant general by removing the requirement for at least five years of service in the Alaska Army National Guard or Alaska Air National Guard and replacing it with language providing the Adjutant General flexibility when appointing an assistant

adjutant general to provide a preference to a candidate with at least five years of service.

Section 2 establishes the effective date of this legislation.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked about the definition of "preference."

MR. CHRISTENSON explained that preference would be subjective as there would be no scoring mechanism.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER requested more information as to how big the qualified candidate pool is and how the bill would expand the pool.

MR. CHRISTENSON answered that as an example, the Army position is not filled since there is no qualified candidate to fill the spot. He said there are 12 O6 positions within the Army National Guard, some of which are not suited to be ATAG. He shared that typically, a pool to pull from are those in active guard and reserve (AGR), as they are members of the guard who work fulltime. He said there are reasons someone might not take the job, one being that it is a significant pay cut in becoming a state employee, which has been a disincentive for members to "move up." He said the goal is someone who has five years of service, but the department would like to open the pool to include guards from out of state.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked how the bill would give allowance to count service in another state.

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MS. LAFLAMME answered that the preference would be given to someone in the Alaska National Guard or someone who has five-years of experience in the guard; taking away the experience requirement would allow the department to consider candidates outside of the Alaska National Guard.

[1:15:23 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW inquired whether, if there's a promotable O5 to an O6, the pool could be expanded to O5 applicants.

MS. LAFLAMME offered her understanding that to be promoted from an O5 to O6, there is a controlled position that they need to move into. She added that there are other federal stipulations, including being able to be promoted to brigadier general.

[1:17:04 PM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON added that the department would not go to the O5 level because this person needs to have a certain level of experience. He added that even if this were something that could be done, it is not something that would be done.

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW relayed that in the 1980s, the Nebraska adjutant general was promoted from O5 to O7 adjutant general. He said he is sharing this because the scenario has happened before in the country.

[1:18:21 PM](#)

MS. LAFLAMME stated that the adjutant general in Alaska is appointed by the governor, and the appointment does not need to fulfill the five-year service requirement. For the ATAG, they're appointed by the adjutant general with concurrence by the governor.

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CHAIR WRIGHT opened public testimony on HB 312. After ascertaining that there was no one who wished to testify, he closed public testimony.

[1:19:29 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT shared a personal anecdote about his work at the Department of Military & Veteran's Affairs. He shared his appreciation of the bill.

[1:19:58 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented that he appreciates the flexibility proposed under HB 312.

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CHAIR WRIGHT announced that HB 312 was held over.

HB 228-MENTAL HEALTH/PSYCHEDELIC MED. TASK FORCE

[1:20:53 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 228, "An Act establishing the Alaska mental health and psychedelic medicine task force; and providing for an effective date." [Before the committee, adopted on 2/13/24, was the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 228, Version 33-LS0976\Y, Bergerud, 2/9/24 ("Version Y").]

[1:21:13 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GROH moved to adopt Amendment 1 to HB 228, Version Y, labeled 33-LS0976\Y.1, Bergerud, 2/14/24, which read as follows:

Page 2, following line 24:

Insert a new paragraph to read:

"(9) one member representing psychiatric nurse practitioners, selected by the board of directors of the Alaska Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Alliance;"

Renumber the following paragraphs accordingly.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER objected for the purpose of discussion.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH explained that Amendment 1 would provide for a change in the membership.

[1:22:09 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked how many advance practice nurses there are.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH deferred the question to Representative Armstrong.

[1:22:49 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:22 p.m. to 1:23 p.m.

[1:23:52 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JENNY ARMSTRONG, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor of HB 228, told Representative Saddler that she does not know the number of such nurses in the state but can

follow up. She noted that nurse practitioners support the proposed bill.

[1:24:51 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked whether all psychiatric nurse practitioners are covered under or are members of the Alaska Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Alliance.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG responded that she does not know the answer; the alliance is the primary membership organization that oversees such nurses, and its goal is to represent all nurse practitioners, regardless of whether the nurse is a member. In response to a follow-up question, she stated that HB 228 proposes 12 people on the task force, with three more selected by the task force after it is assembled.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER referred to language in [subsection (b), paragraph (5)], on page 2, line 16 of HB 228, Version Y, and noted the total number was 16.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER offered that many of the state's boards and commissions have membership requirements. He said that it appears that much of the membership would be selected by trade organizations, the university, and the Alaska Native Health Board. He asked what the reason was to have membership selected by these groups rather than having the governor select them.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG answered that Amendment 2 would cover that since, if it is the will of the committee, the task force would not be an executive task force but rather a legislative one. She said the boards mentioned were chosen because she wanted to defer to their expertise, as they would be best positioned to choose members of the task force.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER advised that there are many boards that establish requirements and allow just the executive branch to make selections.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER removed his objection. There being no further objection, Amendment 1 was adopted.

[1:29:21 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GROH moved to adopt Amendment 2 to HB 228, Version Y, labeled 33-LS0976\Y.2, Bergerud, 2/15/24, which read as follows:

Page 1, line 8:

Delete "Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development"

Insert "legislature"

CHAIR WRIGHT objected for the purpose of discussion.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH explained that with the bill proposing to have the task force under the legislature rather than the executive branch, the amendment would remove the fiscal note and fix the separation of powers issue.

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REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG relayed that she found that the separation of powers issue could be solved by making the task force a legislative one instead of executive.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER inquired whether, if the task force were under the legislature and the bill had no fiscal note, there would be no per diem or travel costs associated.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG answered that travel was removed from the bill, and that the ability to accept grants was added if the board wanted to meet in person; otherwise, it would meet virtually.

[1:31:10 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER asked whether there is an overriding fiscal note.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG stated that there is a fiscal note from the Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs for \$60,000, but there were issues with the fiscal note. One was a drafting error that said the task force would exist for a few years, when actually it would exist for less than a year. Further, since the task force was situated under the department, staffing funds were needed.

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER requested the committee hear from the department.

[1:32:22 PM](#)

MICAELA FOWLER, Deputy Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, explained that the costs within the first fiscal note were the result of the legislation putting the task force within the department's structure. With the amendments moving the task force to the legislature, she said, the department would change the fiscal note to a zero fiscal note.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER sought confirmation about the fiscal note from the commissioner's office totaling \$325,000.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG confirmed there is just the one fiscal note and that Representative Saddler may have referenced the annual cost.

[1:33:35 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY asked whether the members of the board are already selected.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG answered no, there is just a passionate community in the state that would be willing to support the task force.

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY inquired as to how many medical doctors (MDs) are proposed to be on board.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG cited line 16 "with two members representing the healthcare needs of Alaska Native communities" and said it would be to the discretion of the Alaska Native Health Board as to whether it wants the members to be MDs. She further cited line 6, "member representing the health care needs of survivors of domestic violence". She stated that there could be several different appointments to the task force that could be MDs, but the aim is to leave the appointments to the groups that would best represent that population.

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY asked whether it is possible for the task force to have zero MDs.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG responded that it is possible.

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY relayed that he met with physician groups, and their concern was that there would be no MD required to be on the task force and they believe there should be one.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG answered that because it would not be a public health task force and focuses on licenses and regulation, and because MDs are less likely to facilitate psychedelic-assisted therapy sessions, she just wanted to keep the task force open. She said she is amendable to adding language requiring an MD.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked whether, if Amendment 2 were passed and the task force were put under the legislature, there would be a conflict with the commissioners of the Department of Health, the Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs, and the Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development being on the board. He sought clarification as to whether the bill directs the commissioners to be members of a legislative board.

MS. FOWLER answered that there are other task forces within the legislature on which commissioners, or their designees, serve.

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REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER noted that if this is going to be a legislative task force, it would be more appropriate that the legislators be co-chairs.

REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG said she would support a conceptual amendment.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER moved to adopt Conceptual Amendment 1 to Amendment 2, to delete language on page 3, line 2, and insert "the co-chairs of the task force shall be the members representing the House of Representatives and the Senate".

[1:38:31 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:38 p.m. to 1:39 p.m.

[1:40:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that, there being no objection, Conceptual Amendment 1 to Amendment 2 was adopted.

[1:40:22 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER removed his objection to Amendment 2, [as amended]. There being no further objection, Amendment 2, as amended, was adopted.

[1:40:39 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that HB 228, Version Y, as amended was held over.

[1:40:48 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at [1:41] p.m.