

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 29, 2024

3:04 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Laddie Shaw, Chair  
Representative Stanley Wright, Vice Chair  
Representative Ben Carpenter  
Representative Jamie Allard  
Representative Ashley Carrick  
Representative Andi Story

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Craig Johnson

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 245

"An Act relating to depositing permanent fund dividends into investment accounts; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 103

"An Act relating to peer support counseling programs for law enforcement agencies, emergency service providers, and the Department of Corrections."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 245

SHORT TITLE: DIR DEPOSIT PFD IN INVESTMENT ACCT

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) SADDLER

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	STA, FIN
02/22/24	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/22/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/29/24	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: SB 103

SHORT TITLE: PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING PROGRAM  
SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DUNBAR

03/15/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/15/23	(S)	CRA
03/28/23	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/28/23	(S)	Heard & Held
03/28/23	(S)	MINUTE(CRA)
04/04/23	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
04/04/23	(S)	Moved SB 103 Out of Committee
04/04/23	(S)	MINUTE(CRA)
04/05/23	(S)	CRA RPT 3DP
04/05/23	(S)	DP: DUNBAR, GRAY-JACKSON, GIESSEL
04/24/23	(S)	TRANSMITTED TO (H)
04/24/23	(S)	VERSION: SB 103
04/26/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/26/23	(H)	STA
02/22/24	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/22/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/29/24	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

#### **WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE DAN SADDLER  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented HB 245, as prime sponsor.

MELODIE WILTERDINK, Staff  
Representative Dan Saddler  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a sectional analysis and answered questions about HB 245 on behalf of Representative Saddler, prime sponsor.

SENATOR FOREST DUNBAR  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a statement regarding SB 103, as prime sponsor.

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner  
Department of Public Safety  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided testimony about SB 103.

SERGEANT KELLY HUSTON, Peer Support Team Coordinator  
Anchorage Police Department  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on SB 103.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:03:53 PM](#)

**CHAIR LADDIE SHAW** called the House State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:04 p.m. Representatives Allard, Carrick, Story, Wright, and Shaw were present at the call to order. Representative Carpenter arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**HB 245-DIR DEPOSIT PFD IN INVESTMENT ACCT**

[3:05:13 PM](#)

CHAIR SHAW announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 245, "An Act relating to depositing permanent fund dividends into investment accounts; and providing for an effective date."

[3:05:30 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DAN SADDLER, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, paraphrased his sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 245 would give Alaskans the option to simply and easily direct all or part of their annual Permanent Fund dividends into investment accounts, and make it easier for them to build their personal financial security. Much as the popular "Pick. Click. Give." program lets Alaskans check a box on their dividend application to direct money to their own favorite charities, "Pick. Click. Save." would let Alaskans direct money to their own investment accounts, such as Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) or 401(k) accounts. Making it easier for Alaskans to put money aside today to grow through compound interest and capital appreciation for the future can make them more financially independent, and less dependent on potentially unreliable government

benefits. Currently, a person filling out a PFD application has the option to direct all or part of their dividend to a checking account, savings account, 529 education savings account, education raffle ticket or, through "Pick. Click. Give.," any of several charities. HB 245 would expand those options to include direct deposit into an existing investment account, eliminating the necessity of waiting to receive the dividend, then having to take the additional step of contributing it to an investment account. It's important to note that HB 245 does not seek to address any high-level policy questions about the Permanent Fund, such as how dividend amounts are calculated, how the Fund is invested, whether its principal and reserve accounts should be combined, or anything else. It simply would make it easier for Alaskans to invest the dividends they do receive in a way that will benefit their personal, long-term financial health. Pick. Click. Save. is a modest but important way we can help Alaskans along the journey to economic independence.

[3:08:37 PM](#)

MELODIE WILTERDINK, Staff, Representative Dan Saddler, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Saddler, prime sponsor, provided a sectional analysis of HB 245 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1, Page 1, Lines 4-14 & Page 2, Line 1 Section 1 of HB 245 amends AS 43.23 by adding a new section, AS 43.23.058, which has three subsections.

Subsection (a) states that a recipient of a permanent fund dividend may direct the Permanent Fund Division to deposit all or part of that dividend into an investment account.

Subsection (b) directs the Department of Revenue to design the permanent fund dividend application to allow direct deposits into investment accounts and to request any information from dividend applicants needed to make those deposits.

Subsection (c) stipulates that the Department of Revenue may not use money from the dividend fund to cover the administrative costs of implementing this Act.

Section 2, Page 2, Line 2  
Section 2 provides for an effective date of January 1,  
2025.

[3:10:02 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked about the administrative costs.

[3:10:42 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER explained that while the "Pick.Click.Give." collects an administrative fee, "Pick.Click.Save." would have no fee. He referenced the zero fiscal note.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked for an explanation for the lack of fees.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER explained that setting up one extra box on the online application would create little administrative impact.

[3:12:03 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK asked for more specificity concerning the types of accounts that can be utilized.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER answered that while HB 245 was envisioned to encourage Alaskans to contribute to retirement accounts, it is not limited to retirement accounts and can be put into any long-term investing account including money-marketing accounts or crypto currencies.

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK asked if the investment accounts would need to be established by the permanent fund dividend (PFD) recipient.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER affirmed that the investment accounts would be set up by the constituent separately. He noted that in an earlier iteration of the bill that there would have been a requirement to enroll in a state sponsored investment account. The current version of HB 245 imposes no obligation on the state to set up accounts.

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK asked if there is wisdom in narrowing the language to "retirement accounts" to deter Alaskans from utilizing predatory accounts.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER explained that autonomy should be granted for citizens to determine their own investment decisions. He made note of his personal views on long-term retirement accounts.

CHAIR SHAW made a comment about using the PFD as an investment opportunity.

[3:16:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked if the extra box is necessary.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER said HB 245 creates an additional option for direct deposit of the PFD into a personal investment account. He recollected opportunities in the past for Alaskans to buy shares of the permanent fund.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked why it is necessary for the PFD online application to indicate a separate box for investing.

[3:18:08 PM](#)

MS. WILTERDINK answered that the types of accounts, including checking, savings, and investment accounts, must be indicated to prevent technical errors.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked for confirmation that the changes to the application would be minor enough to not incur extra costs.

MS. WILTERDINK reiterated that the bill received a zero fiscal note. Small changes made to the PFD application would be absorbed.

CHAIR SHAW commented about using the PFD for college fund accounts.

[3:20:34 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER commented about the Alaska 529 plan.

[3:21:26 PM](#)

CHAIR SHAW announced that HB 245 was held over.

**SB 103-PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING PROGRAM**

3:21:30 PM

CHAIR SHAW announced that the final order of business would be SENATE BILL NO. 103, "An Act relating to peer support counseling programs for law enforcement agencies, emergency service providers, and the Department of Corrections."

3:21:48 PM

SENATOR FOREST DUNBAR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, paraphrased the sponsor statement for SB 103 [copy included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

SB 103 PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING PROGRAM establishes the ability for law enforcement officers and first responders to seek mental health counseling rfrom [sic] trained peer counselors while protecting their identity. Under current law, public safety officers are extremely limited in their options to discuss stressful and traumatic events that occur in their workplace because they are often, by their nature, related to criminal investigations. SB 103 addresses the critical need to de-stigmatize mental health issues that affect many public safety officers by providing a safe and confidential way for them to talk about emotionally intense aspects of their work. The confidentiality created by the peer counseling program does not apply to any threats made by the participant, nor does it apply to admission of criminal conduct. SB 103 allows existing agencies to establish a peer support counseling program without mandating changes to those agencies. A law enforcement agency, emergency service provider, or the Department of Corrections will have the opportunity to designate an existing employee as a peer counselor if they have prior counseling training. Any participant who seeks counseling from their designated peer is guaranteed confidentiality in those communications. Confidential space for participants to discuss emotionally traumatic events is key for creating effective Critical Incident Stress Management debriefs, which the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration recognizes as crucial for preventing and mitigating the effects of trauma. SB 103 will ultimately provide emotional relief and a path to

healing for the Alaskans who bear the burden of protecting the public. I urge you to support SB 103.

SENATOR DUNBAR explained that 30 percent of first responders develop depression and post traumatic stress disorder. Police officers and fire fighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty

[3:23:35 PM](#)

CHAIR SHAW noted that Commissioner Cockrell and representatives from the Anchorage Police Department were available for questions.

[3:24:14 PM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[3:24:24 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked to hear invited testimony from Commissioner Cockrell.

[3:24:39 PM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety, stated that the Department of Public Safety supports SB 103. He described the accumulation of traumatic events that people who work in law enforcement experience. He noted the stigma of seeking help to work through trauma and the success of peer counseling efforts throughout the department. He emphasized the importance of confidentiality and how it is critical to a prosperous peer counseling system. He reported that throughout 2023, 1,900 peer support contacts were made throughout the department. A law that guarantees confidentiality would help to safeguard the trust that first responders put into the peer counselling program.

[3:27:33 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK asked about the use of the word "counselor" in SB 103 and the parameters of counselor training.

[3:28:19 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR acknowledged that there are medical professionals who are called counselors and that peer support counselors are not licensed counselors.

[3:28:54 PM](#)

SERGEANT KELLY HUSTON, Peer Support Team Coordinator, Anchorage Police Department, explained that peer counselors receive training and certification through a 40-hour course with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation. She said peer counselors do not have advanced degrees.

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK noted that the semantics between "counselor" and "peer counselor" may be misleading for people who may need additional support from professional licensed counselors.

[3:30:51 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR said the term that should be utilized is "peer counselor" and stated his understanding that peer counseling is not a substitute for therapy or medical treatment.

[3:31:17 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked about confidentiality and whether it would apply to an admission of criminal conduct in a peer counseling session.

[3:32:10 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL stated that training empowers peer counselors to discontinue peer support in the event the crimes are admitted to during a counseling session. Peer counselors are required to report any criminal offenses.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL explained that if the needs of a public safety employee are beyond the help of what a peer counselor can provide, professional help can be sought elsewhere.

[3:33:45 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ALLARD asked about confidentiality safeguards.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said the department has strict guidelines about confidentiality. If confidentiality were in question, an

internal investigation would occur, and discipline would be given in accordance with the level of violation.

SENATOR DUNBAR asked to hear Seargent Huston's point of view regarding confidentiality.

[3:35:33 PM](#)

SERGEANT HUSTON said that members of the peer support team are required to sign a confidentiality agreement. She noted that peer counselors are volunteers and are selected through internal recommendation. Confidentiality has yet to be a significant issue within the program. There would be an internal personnel process if confidentiality complaints came to light.

[3:37:42 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked if the term "counselor" should be changed to "peer counselor" throughout the bill to ensure clarity.

[3:38:35 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that he is not opposed to a clarifying amendment.

CHAIR SHAW announced that SB 103 was held over.

[3:39:08 PM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House State Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at [3:39] p.m.