

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

March 8, 2023

3:07 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair
Representative Sarah Vance
Representative Josiah Patkotak
Representative Jamie Allard
Representative Maxine Dibert
Representative Jennie Armstrong

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Ben Carpenter

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 26

"An Act renaming the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council as the Council for Alaska Native Languages; and relating to the Council for Alaska Native Languages."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 26

SHORT TITLE: COUNCIL FOR ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGES

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STORY

01/19/23	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/23
01/19/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/19/23	(H)	EDC, FIN
02/10/23	(H)	TRB REPLACES EDC REFERRAL
02/10/23	(H)	BILL REPRINTED
03/08/23	(H)	TRB AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY

Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As the prime sponsor, introduced HB 26.

MIRANDA WORL, Staff
Representative Andi Story
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for HB 26, on behalf of Representative Story, prime sponsor.

X'UNEI LANCE TWITCHELL, PhD, Chair; Professor
Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council;
Alaska Native Languages
University of Alaska Southeast
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on HB 26.

YAAYUK BERNADETTE ALVANNA-STIMPFLE, Director
Eskimo Heritage Program
Kawerak, Inc.
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on HB 26.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR CJ MCCORMICK called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 3:07 p.m. Representatives Vance, Allard, Dibert, Armstrong, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representative Patkotak arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 26 OFFICIAL LANG; COUNCIL FOR AK NATIVE LANG

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CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 26, "An Act renaming the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council as the Council for Alaska Native Languages; and relating to the Council for Alaska Native Languages."

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REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, Alaska State Legislature, introduced HB 26 to the committee, as the prime sponsor. She stated that HB 26 would address two things that the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council (ANLPAC) have requested: shorten its name and expand its membership. She said ANLPAC provides recommendations and advice to the legislature and the governor on programs, policies, and projects, with the mission to advocate for the survival and revitalization of Alaska Native languages. She said that ANLPAC was formed in the 27th Alaska State Legislature and is comprised of seven members: five voting members appointed by the governor who are language experts and representatives of regions in Alaska; one non-voting member appointed by the Senate president; and one non-voting member appointed by the speaker of the House of Representatives. She added that she is the House member appointed to the council.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY said that HB 26 would simplify the name of the council from "Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council" to "Council for Alaska Native Languages." She stated that it would also add two voting members to the council to create more inclusivity of Alaska Native languages.

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MIRANDA WORL, Staff, Representative Andi Story, on behalf of Representative Story, prime sponsor, presented the sectional analysis for HB 26, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: Amends AS 44.33.520(a) to simplify the name of the Council from "Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council" to "Council for Alaska Native Languages."

Section 2: Amends AS 44.33.520(c) by changing voting members from "five" to "seven."

MS. WORL added there is a fiscal note of \$10,000 from the Department of Community, Commerce, and Economic Development (DCCED) to cover two trips per year to meet in person for the additional committee members. She added that ANLPAC's 2022 Biennial Report to the Governor and the Legislature has been sent to the committee, and this outlines ANLPAC's recommendations.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE pointed out that ANLPAC has existed for several years, and she questioned the need for reorganization of the programs.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY deferred the question to the invited testifiers. In response to a follow-up question concerning how the qualifications for a language expert would be determined, she stated that an alternative certificate for a language expert would need to be approved by local school boards.

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REPRESENTATIVE ALLARD expressed support for the expanded membership. She requested an explanation of the areas represented by each of the current five members and the proposed two new members of the council.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY deferred the question to invited testifiers.

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X'UNEI LANCE TWITCHELL, PhD, Chair, Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, Professor of Alaska Native Languages, University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), provided invited testimony on HB 26. He stated that he would be representing himself during the hearing. He stated that Alaska is home to 23 known Indigenous languages and research from ANLPAC shows none of these languages are safe. He explained that since 2014 these languages have been designated the official languages of Alaska, and HB 26 would be supportive of the preservation, revitalization, and reclamation work towards this. He stated that preservation would involve documentation of current speakers, while revitalization would involve protecting current speakers and making sure the languages have power. He stated that reclamation would make sure the language is used in a wide variety of social and physical spaces.

DR. TWITCHELL pointed out the banishment of Indigenous languages, stating that because of this the languages are facing "an unnecessary and often silent death march." He suggested that the new name for the council would better fit the diverse range of work the council is doing. He added that new members would be needed because having 23 different languages require more voting members. He also recommended revising the official list of languages, which is in statute, to include three omitted languages. He offered to supply supporting documents for this.

DR. TWITCHELL asserted that Indigenous language should be a high priority for the state. He questioned whether significant action has been taken since the 2014 state of emergency was declared concerning the languages. He emphasized the priorities given in the two-year report from ANLPAC, which include the standardization of Native languages in the public education system, with official pathways for teachers to become certified. He added that all teachers in Alaska should have knowledge of Native languages. He mentioned that shortly after the council was established, the budget was cut in half. He pointed out that this does not justify [Native languages] as a priority, as this funding only supports a single staff member.

DR. TWITCHELL, addressing the previous question, pointed out that representation of Native languages is missing from the center of the map and the Interior of Alaska. He suggested that people are needed who can work actively in these missing languages. Addressing the question concerning the requirements of a language expert, he stated that being a language expert would not concern whether a teacher is certified.

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REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT spoke to her Native Alaska name and its meaning. She expressed gratitude to learn about ANLPAC and expressed support for the proposed legislation. She stated that her family is from the Interior, and her father is one of the last fluent speakers of Koyukon, but his ability to speak the language has diminished. She stated that he has reinforced to her the need for her to work at learning the language.

DR. TWITCHELL advised that the council sees the need for a more substantial analysis of the health of Native languages; however, more staff is needed. He suggested that partnerships could help.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE questioned the meaning of the word "reorganization" in the proposed legislation.

DR. TWITCHELL stated that he was not present for the crafting of the bill; however, he recognized that sometimes new language programs are needed, and sometimes existing programs would need reorganization. He pointed out that this could be because programs or languages have been dormant. He suggested that this

word was used to honor that programs do exist by addressing their approach and structure.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE questioned the activity of ANLPAC and how it interfaces with the education communities. She mentioned other dormant languages worldwide and pointed out Hebrew was dormant for a very long time. She stated that now it is taught in school and very alive. She questioned what the council is doing to make sure the languages do not die.

DR. TWITCHELL pointed out that the work of the language scholar, Joshua Fishman, has been replicated around the world. He suggested that of the 7,000 languages around the world there will be only 50 in 100 years. He expressed the opinion that, unless things change, only 2 or 3 of Alaska Native languages could survive in the next 100 years. He stated that the council's 5 volunteers and 1 employee can analyze the situation and have widely publicized public meetings to share ideas and determine needs and convey these recommendations to the legislature or to the governor; however, he warned that without a substantial shift, at this rate 1 Native language will be lost every 5 to 10 years. He added that this is a path to language destruction. He stated that there are now conversations on what including Native languages "naturally" would look like, because now schools operate with "natural" omission of the languages. He expressed the opinion that there should be an Indigenous language learning requirement to graduate from high school. He stated that ANLPAC's primary focus is creating the biennial report [which contains the summary of recommendations] and making sure the legislature knows this document; because he suggested that the status of Native languages could easily be overlooked. He continued that part of the role of ANLPAC is to advocate for this. He suggested that if every high school graduate in the state is required to take one semester of Native language, there would be a positive shift.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE asked whether the council has given recommendations for families, such as languages spoken at home, as this is what "sticks." She suggested that in the past Native Elders were encouraged not to speak their language. She questioned whether this has changed.

DR. TWITCHELL shared the story of a 92-year-old woman in Juneau who was told she could not speak Tlingit at school. He stated that at that time all the Tlingit children spoke the Tlingit language, and when she spoke that language at school, she was physically and mentally abused. He pointed out that this level of suppression is "unbelievable," and it has been under analyzed. He discussed his study at the College of Hawaiian Languages where he learned when the children are taught to speak [the Native language], this would ease trauma and nervousness at home. He stated that Hawaii's models of language "nests" and early education programs are being used in parts of Alaska. He suggested that education in the state does not have to be just one model, and there could be language and cultural immersion programs, which would introduce teaching through the language, not about it. He suggested that an Alaskan Native language school consortium be formed, as this would be a school board for the Native languages, and it would create unity. He pointed out that under the current system there is competition and dependence on "soft" money. He noted that education has been the destruction of Native language; however, it could be reformed with pathways to bring the languages back into the homes, because there it is safe. He stated that the council is also addressing how to help individuals recover from the trauma of language "genocide."

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REPRESENTATIVE ARMSTRONG requested an explanation of the summary of recommendations from ANLPAC.

DR. TWITCHELL stated that the priorities were arranged to not overwhelm people with a huge list. He listed that the first priority would be a commitment to language equity, restoration, and use. To do this, one recommendation is that an annual day be acknowledged for Alaska Native languages, as this would emphasize the declared state of emergency of Native languages. He also suggested that funding to the council be restored for more staff and travel for outreach to more villages. He stated that the second priority would recognize that Alaska Native people have the right to be educated in their languages, so that education in Alaska would be decolonized. A recommendation concerning this priority would be to create an Alaska Native teacher's certification, but without it being considered "alternative." He reiterated the recommendation of an Alaska Native school consortium, along with the inclusion of state standards for Native languages. He continued that there is a zero-credit, zero-dollar method for Native language learners at

UAS. He stated that other recommendations include the creation of statewide language immersion programs, a funded annual language-teacher conference, and the clarification of the ANLPAC's governing statute.

DR. TWITCHELL stated that the third priority is to normalize Native languages in physical and social spaces. He stated that the recommendations to do this would include restoring Alaska Native place names, having Alaska Native languages in state offices by creating signage, and having Native languages in workplace documents. He added that another recommendation would be to increase the use of languages in the public media. He stated that the fourth priority would be to address language suppression and intergenerational trauma. The recommendations for this priority would be to survey the health of Alaska Native languages to help inform policy and planning. He stated that another recommendation would be to create a series of language listening sessions to document the historical traumas, offer an apology for past suppression, and commit to overcoming historical traumas from forced assimilation.

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CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked the testifier and recognized the critical work being done.

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YAAYUK BERNADETTE ALVANNA-STIMPFLE, Director, Eskimo Heritage Program, Kawerak, Inc., provided invited testimony on HB 26. She highlighted the council's recommendations of focusing on preservation, restoration, and revitalization. She shared that she has been an Alaska Native educator for 23 years. She stated that she began her career as an Inupiaq language and culture teacher, and then she became an English as a second language teacher. She shared that when she began school, she did not know English and her mother did not know English. She stated that her mother would not enter the school because she did not know English. She expressed difficulty in learning English, as it was not the language, she used in the other parts of her life. She emphasized that children learn quickly, and this understanding, along with her childhood experiences, led her to her profession. She expressed understanding at how children feel when having to learn different languages.

MS. ALVANNA-STIMPFLE addressed preservation. [Testimony was indiscernible.] She noted that in Nome there are three

different languages, and it has been difficult to obtain teaching materials on all of these. She stated that people have shared what works in their communities and this is part of establishing programs. She expressed the opinion that learning how to speak Native languages in communities would create wellness for adults and help them let go of the past treatment in learning how to speak, as this has created post-traumatic disorder for the next generation. She noted that young people have been looking for information on traditional dancing and interviewing Elders who speak Yupik. She stated that cultural activities are more understood once the youth learn the language, as there is meaning behind the activities. She addressed restoration of Native languages, which allows the people to reclaim who they are from thousands of years of surviving and thriving the harsh environments, as the language comes from the land, the sea, and its resources. She continued that now is the time for rebirth and renaissance of Alaska Native languages. She commented that ANLPAC is helping to normalize these languages throughout the state; however, while travelling to many villages for work, she stated that she does not hear Native languages being spoken in many of the public places. She observed that while traveling in Native communities in Canada, she did hear many different Native languages being spoken.

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MS. ALVANNA-STIMPFLER, addressing revitalization, stated that Indigenous identity can be built by being surrounded by the Native language. She observed that learning in the language would reinforce where Native Alaskans come from and how they live, creating the ultimate result of cultural wellness. She stated that she has seen young people's identity change in this process. She described that initially she taught with just one "little" Native word a day, as she did not have time to teach more. She stated that when the students brought the one word into their homes, this inspired the Native Elders to want to hear more. In regard to the proposed addition of more members to the council, she advised that people need to hear from a wider section of the Native people, as advocates make for a stronger network.

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REPRESENTATIVE STORY referred to the ANLPAC's 2022 Biennial Report to the Governor and the Legislature, as [it was sent digitally to committee members]. She pointed out that on page 7

through 9 are the recommendations discussed by the testifiers. She reiterated the proposed legislation's focus, as seen in the report. She suggested there be an amendment to HB 26 to add three Native languages that were not initially included. She suggested that the committee members read the report, as there are many things to learn. She pointed out the letter from the council to the governor and the legislature concerning the loss of Indigenous Elders and language speakers to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE, looking at the fiscal note, pointed out that it is modest, and it asks for two additional members from the legislature. She expressed the understanding that the funding would be from the general fund and DCCED. She questioned why this is not coming from the legislative budget, since this would involve members of the legislature.

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REPRESENTATIVE STORY stated that as a council member, there are no funds available for her to travel to meetings. She noted that the council has not been able to travel for a few years, and the fiscal note would only be the cost to add new people to the council. She stated that the funding is under DCCED because the proposed legislation would be considered community development.

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CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that HB 26 was held over.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 3:58 p.m.