

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

March 2, 2023

1:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Donald Olson, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 16

"An Act establishing September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 16

SHORT TITLE: AK COMMUNITY HEALTH AIDE APPRECIATION DAY

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) KAWASAKI

01/18/23	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/23
01/18/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/18/23	(S)	CRA
03/02/23	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

JOE HAYES, Staff
Senator Scott Kawasaki
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sponsor statement for SB 16.

GRIFFEN SUKKAEW, Staff
Senator Scott Kawasaki
Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis and slideshow on SB 16.

JACOLINE BERGSTROM, Executive Director

Health Services

Tanana Chiefs Conference

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on SB 16.

CRYSTAL STORDAHL, Director

Community Health Aide Program

Tanana Chiefs Conference

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on SB 16.

MARC KILMAN-BURNHAM, Director

National Governmental Affairs

Global Medical Response

Portland, Oregon

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on SB 16.

ALBERTA UNOK, President and Chief Executive Officer

Alaska Native Health Board (ANHB)

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on SB 16.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:30:12 PM](#)

CHAIR FORREST DUNBAR called the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Giessel, Bjorkman, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Dunbar.

SB 16-AK COMMUNITY HEALTH AIDE APPRECIATION DAY

[1:30:40 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 16 "An Act establishing September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day."

CHAIR DUNBAR said this is the introductory hearing for SB 16. He invited Mr. Hayes to put himself on the record and introduce the bill.

[1:31:43 PM](#)

JOE HAYES, Staff, Senator Scott Kawasaki, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented SB 16 on behalf of the sponsor:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SB 16
Sponsor Statement

"An Act establishing September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day."

Senate Bill 16 aims to recognize and honor the exemplary work of Community Health Aides by proclaiming September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day. This date was chosen to commemorate the first Planning and Advisory Committee meeting for Health Aide Programs in Alaska, which took place on September 10, 1973.

The work of the Community Health Aide is tireless. In the communities they serve, they act as round-the-clock first responders, clinicians, travel coordinators, hospitalists, tribal liaisons, and are often role models within their home regions. Since before statehood, Health Aides have organized and played an integral role in maintaining tribal health and community safety. They are often related to or close to their patients and bring to their positions an abiding respect for traditional knowledge and culture.

Recently, Community Health Aides have been on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19 in rural Alaska and have been key to ensuring the success of vaccination efforts in remote communities that lack advanced healthcare services. It is more important than ever that we acknowledge our Community Health Aides for their broad scope of practice and selfless contributions to their communities, regions, and the state. For these reasons, I urge the passage of Senate Bill 16.

[1:33:28 PM](#)

MR. HAYES indicated that Mr. Griffin Sukkaew is available to present the sectional analysis.

[1:33:39 PM](#)

GRIFFEN SUKKAEW, Intern, Senator Scott Kawasaki, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented the following sectional analysis for SB 16:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SB 16
Sectional Analysis

"An Act Establishing September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day"

Section 1: Proposes an amendment to AS 44.12 adding September 10th as Community Health Aide Appreciation Day each year. Alaska Community Health Aide Day can be observed by the suitable observances and exercises by civic groups and the public.

[1:34:07 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR opened the meeting up for questions; finding no questions, he moved down the agenda to invited testimony.

MR. HAYES requested permission to present the slide presentation before invited testimony.

CHAIR DUNBAR agreed and invited Mr. Sukkaew to proceed.

[1:34:30 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW reviewed slide 1, Establishing Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day, stating Alaska is a land of extremes in size, weather, and geography. Eighty percent of the state does not have a road system, which means much of the state depends on air travel. Inclement or dangerous weather conditions affect air travel and accessibility to hospitals. The Alaska Community Health Aide Program was born out of necessity to bring care as close to home as possible.

[1:35:15 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW advanced to slide 2, stating community health aides provide a sustainable, successful, and culturally relevant healthcare delivery system. They are part of a regional team to assess and deliver emergent, acute, and chronic medical care in remote Alaska communities. He said that communities select the providers who participate in four training sessions, each lasting three to four weeks. Health aides deliver quality care

in rural environments with this highly focused training. Slide 2 reads:

**The Community Health Aide (CHA)
Profession is Unique to Alaska**

- CHAs work under the supervision of a physician.
- Because CHAs live and work in remote areas, they communicate regularly with physicians by video call, telephone, e-mail or radio.
- CHAs also coordinate the appointments of other visiting health care professionals, including public health nurses, dentists, and doctors.

[1:35:55 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW advanced to slide 3, stating the history of the community health aide program dates back to before statehood. He reviewed slide 3:

Evolution of the CHA Program

1950's: During the tuberculosis epidemic in Alaska, trained local villagers helped ensure that their neighbors received their medications regularly.

1956: Dr. Walter Johnson, staff physician at Bethel ANS Hospital proposed training of village medical aides.

1968: Alaska Area Native Health Service [ANHS] initiated formal Community Health Aide training efforts. CHA/Ps received formal federal recognition and congressional funding in 1968.

1973: On September 10, the first Planning and Advisory Committee meeting for Health Aide Programs in Alaska was held.

MR. SUKKAEW said SB 16 proposes establishing Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day on September 10 in honor of this historic event.

1976: Twenty additional CHA position were approved by the U.S. Congress in the ANHS Budget, increasing these

from the original 185 positions in 157 villages to 205 positions in 185 villages.

1998: Community Health Aide Program Certification Board (CHAPCB) created by the federal government and charged with formalizing the process for maintaining community health aides/practitioners, dental health aides, and behavioral health aides/practitioners training and practice standards and policies.

2001: \$3 million in federal funding received to increase dental health and behavioral health aide numbers.

2003: Dental Health Aides Certified.

2009: Behavioral Health Aides Certified.

[1:37:02 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW reviewed slide 4, stating community health aides are the backbone of the health system in rural Alaska. CHAs are part of a regional team to assess and provide emergent, acute, and chronic medical care in remote Alaska communities.

[1:37:07 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW advanced to a map on slide 5, which showed the locations of Community Health Aide Program (CHAP) training centers and village clinics. He said Alaska has about 550 health aides and practitioners in more than 170 communities. CHAP training centers are in Anchorage, Nome, Bethel, and Fairbanks.

[1:37:24 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW reviewed slide 6, stating community health aides help people of all ages and backgrounds with a wide range of healthcare needs. Health aides incorporate local and traditional knowledge into their care. The Alaska Tribal Health System (ATHS) strives to increase access to care by making services available in local communities; CHAs constitute the frontline in villages. Approximately 37 tribes or tribal health organizations comprise ATHS, with signed agreements to manage healthcare facilities under Alaska Area Native Health Service, Indian Health Services.

[1:38:09 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW advanced to slide 7, which shows tribal healthcare referral patterns overlaying a map of the United States. The image illustrates Alaska's vast referral system compared to the

size of the United States. AHS employs a "hub and spoke" model for its care referrals. The "hub and spoke" referral pattern aims to keep care close to home. He said that the center of a referral pattern represents the largest regional hubs, which contain hospital services, mid-level practitioners, and physicians. Spokes radiate out from the regional hub to individual communities and sub-regional clinics.

[1:38:49 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW reviewed slide 8, stating that CHAs worked tirelessly and at great personal risk to keep their communities as safe and healthy as possible throughout the COVID-19 health pandemic. They set up test sites and conducted broad COVID-19 testing. CHAs were key in ensuring the success of vaccine distribution statewide. He related one incredible example of this in the Yukon Delta, an area with the highest COVID-19 case rate in the nation at one point.

[1:40:10 PM](#)

MR. SUKKAEW reviewed slide 9:

It is more important than ever that we acknowledge our Community Health Aides for their broad scope of practice and selfless contributions to their communities, regions, and the state.

We hope you'll join us in showing your support by establishing September 10 as Alaska Community Health Aide Appreciation Day!

Mr. Sukkaew said recognition for these amazing healthcare workers is long overdue.

[1:40:33 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR invited committee members to ask questions; finding none, he moved down the agenda to invited testimony. He asked Ms. Bergstrom of Tanana Chiefs Conference to put herself on the record and begin her testimony.

[1:40:53 PM](#)

JACOLINE BERGSTROM, Executive Director of Health Services, Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC), Fairbanks, Alaska, stated that TCC is a large tribal health and social services consortium that serves the Interior. TCC has forty-plus rural communities in its region, many of which are only accessible by air or river waterways. She said that CHAs often function as the sole providers in their communities, caring for immediate family

members and friends. Providers in urban and larger hubs provide support via telehealth, but the health aides are on the ground and respond to medical emergencies. Those CHAs who are the sole providers in their communities are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They are the first to respond to a medical emergency. TCC has examples of community health aides who have performed life-saving interventions with limited resources. CHAs are the backbone of the tribal health system. She quoted Chief Medical Officer Dr. Zinc as saying, "Tribal health is public health." She noted that community health aides are their communities' public health providers, which became evident during the pandemic response.

MS. BERGSTROM said that CHAP was born out of Alaska's tuberculosis pandemic in the 1950s. It evolved significantly in the last 60-plus years to keep pace with advances in the healthcare industry. Indian Health Services is in the process of introducing the CHAP model throughout the Lower 48. Many medical and clinical professions have a special day of acknowledgment, for example, National Nurses Day, Doctor's Day, National Pharmacy Week, and many others. She said that the Alaska State Legislature has a unique opportunity to show appreciation for a remarkable group of providers who are unique to Alaska and often undervalued. She noted that SB 16 has a zero fiscal note. She thanked members and indicated that she is available to answer questions.

[1:43:51 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR advanced to the next invited testifier, Ms. Stordahl of Tanana Chiefs Conference.

[1:44:10 PM](#)

CRYSTAL STORDAHL, Director, Community Health Aide Program, Tanana Chiefs Conference, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of SB 16. She said the Community Health Aide Program continues to be the answer to medical care access challenges in rural Alaska. The need for CHAs has not diminished. The medical health aide model, which grows its trained workers within its community, was established on September 10. The model worked so well that it expanded to include behavioral and dental health disciplines. It was and still is the solution for getting care to the underserved in rural areas. She said it is exciting to work with Indian Health Services and discuss how the CHAP model might help areas in the Lower 48 with their healthcare challenges. She said that recognizing Alaska's group of community health aides is a welcome gesture. There would be no care in many rural communities without CHAs. The U.S. produces

an insufficient number of providers to supply enough healthcare workers in this nation, and of those, few want to work in underserved areas. This means that the need for the Community Health Aide Program is critical statewide.

[1:46:29 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR thanked both testifiers for the work Tanana Chiefs Conference does. He invited Mr. Kilman-Burnham to put himself on the record and begin his testimony.

[1:47:10 PM](#)

MARC KILMAN-BURNHAM, Director, National Governmental Affairs, Global Medical Response, Portland, Oregon, stated that he represents the nation's largest emergency medical service provider. Global Medical Response provides air ambulance services under the Guardian Flight Alaska brand. He said that he is testifying in support of SB 16.

MR. KILMAN-BURNHAM explained how Jessica Hyatt, a Guardian Flight development specialist, initiated and sought to recognize Alaska community health aides. Everyone thinks the Guardian Flight team is made up of heroes, but the flight team would be at a loss without Alaska community health aides. CHAs are the frontline healthcare providers throughout rural Alaska and the true Alaskan heroes. He said that he did some research after Ms. Hyatt told him about CHAs. Communities select their CHAs. He surmised that it must be an honor to be chosen by one's community to perform such a noble task. He said aides are Guardian Flight's eyes and ears. CHAs are on the ground helping the Guardian Flight team and know what teams need on arrival. He expressed enthusiasm that Guardian Flight was part of bringing SB 16 to fruition. He encouraged the committee to support the bill, announcing "North to the Future."

[1:49:42 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR invited Ms. Unok to put herself on the record and begin her testimony.

[1:49:52 PM](#)

ALBERTA UNOK, President and Chief Executive Officer, Alaska Native Health Board (ANHB), Anchorage, Alaska, stated that ANHB is the statewide voice for the Alaska Tribal Health System. She testified in support of SB 16. Community health aides and practitioners are the backbone of tribal health care. CHAs are strongly connected, respected, and essential members of their communities, the foundation of the Alaska Tribal Health System. Community health aides tirelessly provided life-saving services

during the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that CHAP has created a tribally driven international model of success. The program's success has expanded to community-level therapists, including behavioral health aides, dental health aides, and dental health aide therapists. Nationally, federal statute authorizes the program. The Indian Health Service adopted the CHAP model to help deliver health care in the Lower 48, where providers are hard to recruit and train. Alaska's community health aides are an example of dedicated health providers who serve on the frontline. She said that ANHB urges the committee to support SB 16. She thanked the committee for the opportunity to testify.

[1:52:20 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR opened public testimony; finding none, he closed public testimony and held SB 16 in committee.

[1:53:17 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Dunbar adjourned the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 1:53 p.m.