

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 8, 2024

1:34 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

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

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Donald Olson, Vice Chair  
Senator Cathy Giessel

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 207

"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: SB 207

SHORT TITLE: MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY HELP DESK

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) KAWASAKI

01/26/24	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/26/24	(S)	CRA, FIN
02/08/24	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

**WITNESS REGISTER**

SENATOR SCOTT KAWASAKI, District P  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Sponsor of SB 207.

RILEY VON BORSTEL, Staff  
Senator Scott Kawasaki  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented background information and the sectional analysis on SB 207.

TAMMIE PERREAULT, Regional Liaison  
State and Liaison Office  
United States Department of Defense  
Washington, D.C.

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 207.

LISA SLABA, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 207.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

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**CHAIR FORREST DUNBAR** called the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:34 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, and Chair Dunbar.

#### **SB 207-MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY HELP DESK**

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CHAIR DUNBAR announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 207 "An Act creating the military and veteran family help desk in the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; and providing for an effective date."

This is the introductory hearing of SB 207.

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SENATOR SCOTT KAWASAKI, District P, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 207, stated that he represents Fort Wainwright, the City of Fairbanks, and surrounding areas. He said, like many Alaskan legislators, his constituents include veterans and family members of military personnel. SB 207 would create a military help desk for military service members and their families to learn about the services Alaska has to offer. This would be a one-stop shop.

SENATOR KAWASAKI said that transitioning to Alaska has challenges all on its own, as does serving in the military. SB 207 would save our military families time and reduce stress by streamlining service delivery. If passed, Alaska would follow Washington and Virginia to offer this service. This legislation seeks to ease the transition for military personnel and their

families to Alaska and increase retention rates, as the military industry is a vital part of our state's economy. He concluded his comments, stating, "We want to help serve those who serve us."

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RILEY VON BORSTEL, Staff, Senator Scott Kawasaki, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented the following background information on SB 207:

A key group that would benefit from this bill is the spouses of military members. Over fifty percent of military spouses participate in the labor market, and about a third of them work in occupations that require licenses. Occupational licensing varies state by state. This legislation would create a one-stop shop to provide military spouses with information in advance on how licensing works in Alaska. Additionally, the desk would give information regarding enrollment at the University of Alaska, childcare, education, shopping, and day-to-day life as an Alaskan.

In addition to the aid that this legislation provides to military spouses and dependents, the bill also aims to make it easier for our veterans and former military members to return to Alaska should they choose to do so.

This bill has a fiscal note of \$94,500. Virginia and Washington, both of which have higher populations, have already shown this valuable service can be delivered with a single employee.

MS. VON BORSTEL presented the following sectional analysis on SB 207:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### Section 1

- Amends AS 44.35 to add Section .025; subsection (a) creates the help desk, subsection (b) outlines the duties of the help desk, and subsection (c) provides a definition of "family member" regarding who may access this service.

#### Section 2

- Provides an immediate effective date for changes proposed in this legislation.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked about the differences between SB 207 and the legislation passed in Washington and Virginia.

MS. VON BORSTEL replied the primary difference is that SB 207 is more inclusive of family members beyond the spouse. The legislation in Washington and Virginia primarily focused on military spouses, whereas this legislation is more expansive and includes veterans and their family members.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN asked whether one of the functions of the military help desk would include facilitating improved customer service for veterans seeking help from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in his district. He explained that multiple constituents have expressed frustration with ineffective call centers and a lack of direct agent access. He wondered if one function of the military help desk would be to help veterans navigate this problem. He also inquired if other legislators have heard similar frustrations.

SENATOR KAWASAKI confirmed that he receives numerous calls from veterans who are seeking help. He shared his experience with the VA's complex 800-number call routing system, which is difficult to navigate. He said that he wished there was someone from the VA to provide more information. The military help desk is intended as a one-stop shop, with SB 207 aiming to ensure that a single call connects veterans to the right person for assistance.

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CHAIR DUNBAR said there is an incredible need for these types of connective services.

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CHAIR DUNBAR announced invited testimony on SB 207.

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TAMMIE PERREAULT, Regional Liaison, State Liaison Office, United States Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., stated her office operates under the direction of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. The State Liaison Office focuses on issues impacting military families.

MS. PERREAULT said Alaska is one of the top three states per capita for military populations, having over 7,800 active-duty spouses and nearly 14,000 active-duty children. A military help desk would greatly benefit military members. She said those stats do not include veterans who live in Alaska. States provide resources beyond those of the federal government, and this help desk would connect military families to resources, such as licensing, education, expanded employment services, and access to higher education to name a few.

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MS. PERRAULT stated that Washington and Virginia have successfully piloted the military help desk model. She asserted this small investment would significantly benefit Alaska and its military families, making Alaska feel like home rather than just a duty station. This helps service members who stay briefly or settle in Alaska after service.

Ms. Perreault urged the committee to support SB 207, which would assist military members, families, and veterans. She thanked the bill sponsor and his staff for their diligent work on the legislation.

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LISA SLABA, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of SB 207, stating she works as a military project manager for the Fairbanks Economic Development Corporation. However, she clarified her testimony reflects her personal views as a military spouse living and working in Alaska. She expressed strong support for SB 207, highlighting that it would showcase Alaska's resources and services for both short- and long-term residents.

MS. SLABA recounted that she had a permanent change of station (PCS) to Alaska. She stated that military spouses often research their new duty location to assess how it might affect their quality of life, family, children, work opportunities, educational opportunities, and available services. The military help desk would have access to this information and help in their PCS transition. She reiterated that as an active-duty family member who is living and working in Alaska, she fully supports SB 207.

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CHAIR DUNBAR opened public testimony on SB 207; finding none, he closed public testimony.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON thanked the bill sponsor for bringing this legislation forward and expressed surprise that such a service does not already exist.

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At ease.

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CHAIR DUNBAR reconvened the meeting and held SB 207 in committee.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Dunbar adjourned the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 1:50 p.m.