

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 27, 2023

3:30 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Jesse Kiehl  
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION ALASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

- HEARD

PRESENTATION CHILDCARE THEN~ NOW~ NEXT

- HEARD

PRESENTATION THE STATE OF ALASKA'S CHILDREN ALASKA KIDS COUNT  
OVERVIEW

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF, Executive Director  
All Alaska Pediatric Partnership  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided the presentation Alaska Early  
Childhood Environmental Scan.

STEPHANIE BERGLAND, Chief Executive Officer  
Thread Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided the presentation Childcare Then, Now, Next.

TREVOR STORRS, Chief Executive Officer

Alaska Children's Trust

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided the Presentation The State of Alaska's Children Alaska KIDS Count Overview.

JONATHAN KING, Consulting Economist

Halcyon Consulting

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions on The State of Alaska's Children presentation.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:30:47 PM](#)

**CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, Stevens, and Chair Tobin.

#### **PRESENTATION**

#### **ALASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

[3:32:00 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of the presentation Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan.

[3:32:21 PM](#)

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF, Executive Director, All Alaska Pediatric Partnership, Anchorage, Alaska, said she would share information from the Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan and additional data from Help Me Grow to provide a more current view of early childhood in Alaska.

[3:33:24 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF turned to slide 2 and provided the mission statement of the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2) as follows:

[Original punctuation provided.]

A2P2 transforms systems of care and increases equitable access to health care and related services

to ensure all Alaska's children reach their full potential.

[3:33:41 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF said A2P2, at its inception, was a collaborative space for Alaska's major hospitals and public health leaders to share information and work towards solutions in pediatric health services. However, to improve the health of Alaska's children, the organization needed to expand into all areas that affect a child's health and life course.

[3:34:34 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF advanced to slide 4 and said the Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan (AECES) was published in 2020, before the Covid pandemic. The data in the scan is from 2018 and can be used as a pre-pandemic baseline to evaluate against current data. She said slides 4 and 5 now vary but are still relevant to the status and landscape of Alaska's childhood system.

MS. BEN-YOUSEF said the wheel graphic illustrates the components that make up an early childhood system. The components are:

- Governance and Leadership
- Funding
- Workforce and Professional Development
- Quality Standards
- Data Systems
- Family Engagement and Outreach

States may have different names for the components but agree that children with high-quality experiences early in life are more likely to do better in school, be employed, and be healthy. Three standard indicators evaluate the strength and effectiveness of early childhood systems. They are Healthy Moms and Children, Safe Children and Supported Families, and School Readiness and Success. Each indicator reflects the variety of experiences children are exposed to from inception. The goal of the presentation is to encourage consistent consideration of the education continuum as Birth - Grade 12 instead of PreK - 12. Solutions that do not consider the first four years of a child's life will be less effective.

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MS. BEN-YOUSEF turned to slide 5, Early Childhood Funding Analysis, and said the dollar amounts are from 2018, but the funding streams are mostly the same. The map represents a

preliminary look at reoccurring state and federal investments in Alaska that directly target programs for young children and pregnant or postpartum women. It does not include Medicaid or child welfare. Twenty other states recognize that patchwork childhood programs are less efficient and effective.

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MS. BEN-YOUSEF moved to slide 6 and said he took the remaining slides from the Help Me Grow Alaska database. Help Me Grow is the largest program at A2P2 and has a call center staffed by family support specialists who share resources with anyone who calls. The call center serves individuals who are prenatal to 26 years of age.

[3:39:23 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF advanced to slide 7 and said the call center hired three additional support specialists to meet the growing needs of the call center. She provided the following call center case information:

November 2022	100 cases opened
January 2023	139 cases opened
Last 30 Days	131 cases opened
Cases Year to Date	2,373 total cases

MS. BEN -YOUSEF said the square on the bottom left of the graphic illustrates all cases by the primary reason for the call. About 31 percent of calls are for mental health. She stated that the call center has noticed an increase in calls related to mental health. The call center works with families to help them identify and prioritize concerns and needs. Fifteen percent of calls are for communication-related referrals, for example, speech therapy. Neuropsychological evaluation referrals are the third most prominent reason for calls.

[3:42:16 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF said slides 8-9 show the distribution of referrals to services for children ages 0-7 over the last four years. There was a high need for adaptive, communication, and behavioral services in 2020. She said she inserted the wrong information for 2021, but the trend continued. In 2022 and 2023, adaptive, communication, and behavioral needs continued to be high, but there was also an increase in neuropsychological evaluations, mental health services, health, and gross motor skills. Slides 8 - 9 illustrate the importance of looking at children and their development before they are school-age. A

child's early years impact their third-grade readiness and general trajectory in life.

[3:44:40 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF moved to slide 10 and said the bar graph shows a distribution of community resources by type and borough. The call center's statewide directory has over 1,800 resources. It is a comprehensive directory with a vetting process. Anchorage and Mat-Su have the most resources. She said it is important to consider the resources available to communities statewide when looking at solutions for early childhood issues.

### **PRESENTATION CHILDCARE THEN, NOW, NEXT**

[3:46:55 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of the presentation Childcare Then, Now, Next.

[3:47:22 PM](#)

STEPHANIE BERGLAND, Chief Executive Officer, Thread Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, began at slide 2 and said Thread is a private non-profit childcare resource and referral organization formed 38 years ago. It promotes quality early childhood education with a specific focus on childcare. She provided the vision, mission, and core values of the Thread organization as follows:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### VISION

All early care & learning is accessible, affordable, high-quality to support positive outcomes for children & families.

#### MISSION

Advance the quality of early education and child development by empowering parents, educating child care professionals, and collaborating with our communities.

#### CORE VALUES

- Empowerment • Access • Children's Rights
- Child Care Professionalism • Innovation

[3:48:31 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 3 and spoke about the direct services Thread provides:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### FAMILIES

- Child Care Referrals
- Tools & resources
- Parenting information

#### EARLY EDUCATORS & PROGRAMS

- Training
- Technical assistance
- Financial support
- Alaska SEED
- Learn & Grow

#### COMMUNITY/ BUSINESS

- Workplace presentation, consultation
- Research & data, trends
- Advocacy

[3:50:10 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 4 and said the three pillars needed for a strong childhood sector are access, affordability, and quality. She stated that the presentation would impart information on the three pillars from the perspectives of then, now, and next.

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MS. BERGLAND turned to slide 5 and said Thread conducted the most recent early care and learning economic impact report in 2020. The report shows that childcare has had many challenges, such as:

- Families reported that difficulty accessing services had increased since 2015, making getting to work, school, and training more difficult.
- The lack of childcare in Alaska inhibited 1 in 5 working families from participating in the workforce and accepting additional work hours.
- There is roughly half of the licensed and regulated spaces needed to meet the childcare demands of families.

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MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 6 and said 61 percent of the state needs childcare access. The crisis is called a desert, which she defined as an area with more than 50 children younger than five

that either has no providers or so few options that the children outnumber providers 3 to 1.

[3:51:44 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND advanced to slide 7 and said affordability is also a problem. In 2019, 17 percent of a family's household income went to childcare. The percentage is higher for single parents. The average childcare payment for families with two children was the family's largest expense and exceeded the cost of housing for most. The price of childcare in 2020 averaged almost \$12,000 for infants and \$11,000 for preschool children annually. Childcare in Alaska costs more than college tuition and is an expense that generally comes at the start of parents' earning potential.

[3:52:32 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 8 and stated that while parents cannot afford to pay more for childcare, childcare businesses barely make ends meet when they rely solely on family tuition. Businesses that need more revenue to cover the cost of quality care often face cutting personnel because it is the business's most expensive line item. In turn, laying off personnel affects quality care. Early childhood educators receive low wages, which affects skill level and turnover. Slide 8 provided the following information:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Average annual wage in childcare: \$26,720 (40 percent of the average statewide annual wage)
- Turnover is approximately 46 percent
- Programs spend 70 percent of budget on personnel
- 10 percent of early childhood teachers have above a high school diploma

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MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 9 and said programs want to pay teachers more but cannot because of the current business model. Parents shoulder most of the cost of childcare. More public and private investment is needed:

[Original punctuation provided.]

\$223 million Household  
\$84 million Federal Government  
\$36 million State Government  
\$? million Local Government

\$? Private Sector

Alaska's early care and learning sector accounts for \$343 million + in annual spending.

Note: This estimate of spending is conservative as it does not account for investment by local government, including school districts, and the private sector.

[3:53:32 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND turned to slide 10 and said childcare was in crisis before the Covid pandemic but has become more fragile over the last three years. Many programs served fewer children during the pandemic and were mitigating Covid, which can still cause multi-day closures. Thread has been monitoring the demand for childcare and how trends affect supply needs. During Covid, there was a shift in families leaving employment or having reduced hours, which made childcare more unaffordable. Thread hears from families almost daily because they cannot find childcare. Some providers have closed, and others cannot serve fully due to staff shortages. While families struggle to afford childcare, childcare prices have exceeded inflation for a third consecutive year.

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MS. BERGLAND turned to slide 11 and said 1 out of 5 childcare programs have closed over the last three years. New programs have opened, but not at the same pre-Covid rate. The new openings do not offset the number of closures, which results in a net loss of available childcare. Most of the current 431 licensed childcare providers are open but cannot serve more children due to a workforce shortage. The number one indicator of quality education is the teacher. It is the same for early childhood education. Teachers are exhausted and burned out. According to a December study by the National Association for the Education of Young Children of childcare programs surveyed in Alaska, over 88 percent indicated that burnout and exhaustion contribute to problems retaining their teachers. Burnout and low pay lead to teacher stress, resulting in high turnover and low continuity of care for young children.

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MS. BERGLAND slide 12 and stated that with reduced access to childcare, there is slower economic growth for the state now and in the long term. A reduced labor force with slow economic growth is bad for all Alaskans. In 2021, the state chamber and Thread conducted a US Chamber of Commerce survey to better

understand the intersection of business and childcare. Seventy-seven percent of parents surveyed over three months reported missing work due to childcare issues. Thirty-six percent of families are postponing higher education and training due to the lack of childcare. Interruptions at work lead to a loss of productivity and a lower sense of job satisfaction. Stopping or delaying higher education decreases a person's earning potential over time. Ultimately, the study found that Alaska's economy has an untapped potential due to the inability to meet family childcare needs. Childcare issues result in an estimated \$165 million loss for Alaska's economy annually.

[3:57:11 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 13 and said Thread has proudly partnered with the Alaska Department of Health's Child Program Office and philanthropy partners to deliver childcare stabilization grants. Since 2020, over \$50 million has been awarded to childcare programs and early education since 2020 through federal funding and philanthropy. Most of the funding was from Covid relief funds earmarked for childcare. These resources were critical in keeping childcare services open statewide. However, the childcare supply crisis continues, and childcare is unaffordable for many Alaskans. Federal aid will soon sunset, and Thread is concerned about the childcare sector.

[3:58:16 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 14 and said there is only opportunity to support childcare. Thread invites the legislature to seek bold policies to help working families and early education programs that strengthen education overall.

[3:58:36 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 15 and said childcare is the starting sector of a child's education pipeline. Yet, it is underfunded and needs more public investment. The first five years of a child's life is when the brain develops the fastest, and key social, emotional, and academic skills necessary for kindergarten and positive educational outcomes are learned. High-quality early learning programs are crucial in setting children up for success in school, college, training, and beyond. The quality of childcare also matters when looking at the cost of PreK-12 education and how everyone can support children doing better in school. Only 33 percent of Alaska's children are prepared to enter Kindergarten. Strengthening the childcare system is part of an education solution. Investing in early childcare creates savings from reduced grade retention and

costs associated with special education and remedial education services.

[3:59:45 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND turned to slide 17 and said Thread aims to align the early childhood education system and support families and quality care through a mixed delivery system. A mixed delivery system means serving more children and offering families more early care and education choices by aligning birth through kindergarten standards, programs, funding, and policies. A mixed delivery model ensures that more children receive high-quality care regardless of setting. Thread sees great potential to align childcare with the greater education system, including the Alaska Reads Act.

[4:00:27 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 17 and said early childcare is complex. Federal funding earmarked through Covid was impactful, but it is ending. She spoke about the following needs of early childcare:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Targeted investment to keep early care and education system stable
- Recognize the early childhood workforce and invest in them as professionals with livable wages/benefits
- Support working families with:
  - Affordable access to care
  - Choices for care and education
- Ensure policies and programs support mixed delivery and alignment of early childhood programs

[4:03:47 PM](#)

At ease.

#### PRESENTATION

#### THE STATE OF ALASKA'S CHILDREN ALASKA KIDS COUNT OVERVIEW

[4:04:13 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of the presentation The State of Alaska's Children Alaska KIDS Count Overview.

[4:04:34 PM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, Chief Executive Officer, Alaska Children's Trust, Anchorage, Alaska, said Alaska Children's Trust (ACT) is the statewide lead organization focused on preventing child abuse and neglect. It is also the state affiliate for KIDS COUNT, a national Annie E. Casey Foundation program. The presentation will discuss key data points relevant to discussions happening in Alaskan communities and the legislature. ACT partners with the Alaska Department of Health, section of Epidemiology. This section maintains and shares information from its centralized database. KIDS COUNT is a national and state-by-state effort to track the well-being of children, youth, and families. The organization focuses on education, health, economic well-being, and family and community. The data KIDS COUNT collects is used to answer the question, "How are Alaska's children doing?"

[4:06:45 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 3 and said Alaska ranks 41st in the nation for overall child well-being, up from 45th in 2019 but down from 27th in 2015. Alaska continually ranks in the bottom half, if not the bottom third, for overall well-being nationally. Four predetermined indicators decide the ranking.

[4:08:03 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 4 and said the presentation would view children holistically and not just from an educational standpoint because when kids are thriving, they will succeed in education. Alaska has ranked 49th in Education for three consecutive years. He opined that while some people view the low ranking as a reason to cut funding, that is not what the data is about. The data indicates there needs to be more investment in education. "When you are choking somebody, it is not a surprise that they don't get a full breath."

[4:09:00 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 5 and said Alaska had progressed in two of the four core indicators in the past decade. Young children not in school and high school students not graduating on time have decreased. However, 4th-grade reading, and 8th-grade math proficiency has worsened.

[4:09:37 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 6 and said it is important to celebrate success. Alaska has made significant progress in reducing the percentage of high school students not graduating on time. This percentage declined from 29 percent in 2013 - 2014 to 20 percent in 2018 - 2019. The improvement is partially

attributed to programs like Anchorage's "90 by 2020" initiative. This program increased the number of students graduating from high school on time from 60 percent to 84 percent from 2005 to 2019.

[4:10:47 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slides 7 - 8 and said children need a good start in life. Statewide, only 31 percent of kindergarteners were school-ready. The percentage was two percent lower in 2018 -2019 and 2021 - 2022. This increase is significant when considering the reading and math proficiency indicators. Only one-third of 4th-graders are proficient in reading and math. He opined that there is a correlation. When children enter kindergarten and are not ready, it impacts future learning.

[4:12:05 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 9 and said developmental screening also impacts student performance. Overall, the percentage of three-year-olds receiving developmental screens in Alaska saw a mild increase from 77 to 79 percent. However, numbers vary widely across racial/ethnic groups and geographically, with screens in northern and southwest regions far below the state average, at 57 percent and 42 percent, respectively. The category Alaska Native is low due to southwest variation. People would see correlations if they drilled down into the data and compared kindergarten readiness, reading, math, and developmental screenings. The Alaska Children's Trust (ACT) wants upstream investment, and developmental screening is needed for it to occur. Educational budgets show that special education constantly increases. It is one of the most costly aspects of school districts. Part of the reason for the increase is a lack of developmental screenings to catch challenges early.

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CHAIR TOBIN asked him to describe developmental screening.

MR. STORRS replied that developmental screenings occur over three years. Doctors meet with children, ask parents questions, and note benchmarks. A2P2 is familiar with screening and tracking. Screening reveals where a child is developmentally, alerts parents to any delays a child may have, and refers them to Help Me Grow.

[4:14:26 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slides 10-11 and said Alaska ranks 44th nationwide in the health category. The four core indicators that determine the ranking are:

- Low Birth Weight Babies
- Children Without Health Insurance
- Child and Teen Deaths per 100,000
- Children Who Are Overweight or Obese

Over the past decade, the only indicator that improved was Children Without Health Insurance. Alaska is 5th in the nation for Children Without Insurance. It was not long ago that Alaska was last. Mr. Storrs stated that even though Alaska is doing worse, it does not mean Alaska is doing poorly overall. Alaska experienced an increase in the Low Birth Weight Babies indicator, which is still better than the national average. Through a partnership with the Department of Health, ACT knows Alaska is one of the top states recognized for addressing low birth rates. However, conversations and corrections begin when there is a slip in numbers.

[4:16:07 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked why Alaska is the worst for Child and Teen Deaths in the nation.

MR. STORRS answered that he did not prepare data to answer the question, but suicide is a factor. The Child and Teen Deaths indicator is a broad conversation he will touch on when discussing suicide.

[4:17:31 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said Ms. Ben-Yousef had a comment.

[4:17:39 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOUSEF said development screening is a standardized set of questions about a child's abilities, including language, movement, thinking, behavior, and emotions. A2P2 recommends screening children at 9, 18, 24 - 30 months, or whenever a caregiver is concerned. She stressed that developmental screening is for monitoring children, not diagnosing. Understanding child development is considered a protective factor to help parents engage with their children in developmentally appropriate ways. It is also a way to achieve early identification of developmental concerns or delays over time.

[4:19:23 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 12 and said an area of health often talked about in Alaska is teen alcohol and drug misuse. Since 2009, Alaska has made notable progress in reducing the

"portions" of teens drinking alcohol, binge drinking, and using tobacco. In recent years, teen alcohol and drug misuse has largely flattened, except for tobacco smoking, which continues to decline. The newest issue facing teens is vaping. Only two regions of Alaska have data available from 2019. In Anchorage, vaping increased from 18 to 25 percent. Mat-Su rose from 17 to 32 percent. The ACT recommends implementing similar utilization strategies for alcohol and tobacco to address vaping. He opined that manufacturers should make substances less attractive to children and that products should be taxed.

MR. STORRS moved to slide 13 and said child maltreatment cases have increased to levels not seen since 2009. In 2020, there were 3,190 confirmed cases of child maltreatment in Alaska. While there may be a drop in cases following the Covid pandemic, ACT suspects there is still a lot of child abuse and neglect occurring. Alaska should look for the social determinants that impact families to learn what it is doing wrong.

[4:22:04 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 14, a graphic that depicts the percentage by age group of children maltreated from 2016 to 2020, as confirmed by Child Protective Services. He said just over 40 percent of cases are between 0 and 4 years of age. One of the most incredibly stressful times for adults is being a new parent due to the high dependence of children from ages 0 - 4 years old. Most people start families in their early 20s, generally when they have the least earnings and the highest stress for spending.

[4:22:55 PM](#)

MR. STORRS asked whether there were any questions.

SENATOR STEVENS asked for specifics about the shift in the age of adults becoming parents.

MR. STORRS replied that he did not have the statistics on people's age when having children. He said education, socioeconomics, and access to family planning services play a role. A high percentage of children are born to parents ages 18 - 25 years old. He will provide the data to the committee.

[4:24:23 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 16 and said the four economic indicators for well-being are:

- Children in Poverty

- Children Whose Parents Lack Secure Employment
- Children Living in Households with a High Housing Cost Burden
- Teens Not in School and Not Working

Alaska is 44th nationally for Economic Well-Being. Although Alaska improved in three areas, other states improved more. Teens Not in School and Not Working increased.

[4:25:02 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 17 and said children growing up in poverty is a major barrier to healthy child development and increases the likelihood of poor academics, cognitive, and health outcomes. The federal poverty level is a threshold for the least income a person or family needs to meet their basic needs. In 2021, the Alaska poverty threshold for a family of four was just over \$33,000. In 2022, it was \$34,700. The percentage of children in poverty decreased from 16 percent in 2014 to 12 percent in 2021. Alaska is consistently under the national average; it is one area that Alaska is doing well.

[4:26:11 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 18 and said the cost of housing is important to consider since people with young children are generally at the start of their careers and earning potential. Housing is the largest household expense. The federal government defines the housing cost burden as more than 30 percent of a family's monthly income spent on rent, mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, and related expenses. In Alaska since 2009, this is a variable within the percentage of Children Living in Households with a High Housing Cost Burden that fluctuates between one-quarter and one-third.

MR. STORRS said that in 2021, 30 percent of Alaska's children lived in a household burdened by high housing costs, up from 25 percent two years ago but holding steady from 2019 and comparable to rates seen over the prior decade. The 2019 high housing cost burden rate of 57 percent for children in low-income households is within the ten-year range of 51 percent to 64 percent. In short, while a smaller proportion of children live in homes with high housing cost burdens, this trend does not seem to extend to low-income households. Life is like an elastic band that snaps when too much stress from a lack of knowledge, skills, and resources is placed on it. The breaking point is when children are at risk of child abuse, neglect, death, and suicide. The work of everyone is to help prevent or lessen stress.

[4:28:48 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 19 and said another basic need is food insecurity. It is an issue the state has discussed a lot due to problems with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Children in food-insecure households experience poorer health, increased hospitalizations, higher developmental risks, and more behavior problems. All these factors contribute to lower educational performance. In Alaska, 11 percent of children lived in homes that experienced food insecurity at some point between 2019 - 2021. It is a vast improvement compared to 2009 - 2011. Federal aid during the Covid pandemic likely helped lower food insecurity in 2020. The state rate for food insecurity has been dropping since 2015. ACT is concerned about the problems SNAP experienced and expects a spike in homes that experience food insecurity if the Department of Health does not address issues with SNAP.

[4:30:14 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said she knows that in Anchorage, a living wage is about \$64,000 for a family of four living in a two-bedroom house. However, the poverty threshold for a family of four in Alaska is \$34,000. She asked how the state handles the difference in income so people can access assistance.

[4:30:54 PM](#)

MR. STORRS replied that earning a living wage is the target to avoid stressors. A person who earns \$65,000 is not in poverty. Wealth allows people better access to the knowledge, skills, support, and resources to deal with stressors. If a person earns \$65,000, they can afford to see a doctor, understand the system and how to access it, and can afford educational attainment. The person can build their ability and wealth and attend parenting classes. A person working two jobs does not have time to think about how to be the best parent possible. Money allows people to reduce stressors.

[4:32:22 PM](#)

JONATHAN KING, Consulting Economist, Halcyon Consulting, Anchorage, Alaska, said there is a big difference between not being in poverty and earning a living wage. A living wage is when a person can afford a two-bedroom apartment, food without assistance, and transportation, which differs from living at the federal poverty level. A gap exists between earning a living wage and the federal poverty level. People may not be in poverty, but that does not mean they can comfortably make ends meet or save for emergencies.

[4:33:06 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked him to name social determinants besides housing.

[4:33:19 PM](#)

MR. STORRS replied that other social determinants are access to food, childcare, health care, developmental screenings, and education. There are a vast number of social determinants.

[4:33:56 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 20 and said Alaska ranked 22nd in Family and Community. Alaska scores well in this category. It takes a parent to raise a child and a community to uplift and support parents. The four core indicators for Family and Community are:

- Children in Single-Parent Families
- Children in Families Where the Household Head Lacks a High School Diploma
- Children Living in High-Poverty Areas
- Teen Births Per 1,000

Alaska has improved in three of the four areas. Children Living in High-Poverty Areas grew worse by 4 percent from 2009-2013 to 2016-2020.

[4:34:24 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 21, Teen Births, and said he likes to begin positively and celebrate. Alaska has made great strides in reducing teen births. Teen birth rates have fallen from 38 births per 1,000 in 2010 to 18 per 1,000 in 2020, a decline of 53 percent over 11 years. Alaska narrowed the gap between the state and national teen birth rates but remained 20 percent higher than the national rate in 2020. Teenage childbearing can have long-term adverse effects for both the mother and child. Babies born to teens are far more likely to be born preterm and at a low birth weight. They will also likely be born into families with limited educational attainment and economic resources, undermining their future success. The rate of teen births is the number of births to females between ages 15 - 19 per 1,000.

[4:34:44 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 22 and said teen birth rates have fallen in every region of Alaska over the last decade. However, the regional variation in rates is extraordinary. From 2016 -

2020, the rate in the region with the highest teen birth rate was 460 percent higher than in the region with the lowest. The Anchorage, Southeast, Gulf Coast, and Mat-Su regions all had teen birth rates below the statewide average. The Interior region was 12 percent higher than the statewide average. The rates for the Southwest and Northern regions are 225 percent and 250 percent higher than the statewide average. Breaking down teen births by regions illustrates the importance of evaluating data to understand better what is happening and where the state should focus energy and resources.

[4:37:16 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 24 and said child maltreatment can lead to children in foster care. In 2020, 16 out of every 1,000 Alaska children were in foster care. This rate is 220 percent higher than the national rate of 5 children per 1,000. The rate in Alaska has increased 60 percent over the past decade from 10 per 1,000. Alaska has a huge issue that correlates with a major increase in child maltreatment. He opined that conversations about support, resources, and economic well-being must occur to effect change.

[4:38:21 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 25 and said American Indian, Alaska Native, non-Hispanic White, and children from multiple ethnic groups comprise 89 percent of Alaska's foster care population. Native Alaska and American Indian children comprise 47 percent of all children in foster care; this is a reduction of 10 percent over the last decade. He said ACT would like to explore the reason for the reduction. He noted that the number of foster care children from multiple ethnic backgrounds has more than doubled; he expects some of this population identified as Alaska Native and another race. A lot of energy has gone into providing community support. Thoughts and ideas, like child welfare compacting, will transform the statistics.

[4:39:37 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 26 and said afterschool programs can support social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development. Afterschool programs are part of the upstream work to transform statistics. From 2009 to 2019, over half of Alaska high school students participated in afterschool activities, totaling 57 percent in 2019. Almost one-third participated in activities three or more days per week in 2017. There is no data available for 2019. These proportions have remained largely stable over the last decade. Alaska's youth are future adults and parents. Giving them knowledge, skills, support, and resources at a young

age strengthens them as adults and lessens stress when they become parents.

[4:40:53 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slides 27 - 28 and said residents are aware of the high teen suicide rate in Alaska. Conversations about teen suicide are difficult. The suicide of a loved one or friend is a devastating traumatic event accompanied by feelings of shock, anger, confusion, and depression. Individuals exposed to suicide have double the lifetime risk of depression and anxiety compared to those who have never been exposed to suicide. Alaska's teen suicide rate increased from 24 per 100,000 in 2008 - 2012 to 36 per 100,000 in 2016 -2020. He stated that looking at the data by region increases understanding. Rates vary by region. There is a 747 percent difference between the regions with the highest and lowest rates. Overall rates in Alaska range from a high of 161 per 100,000 in southwest Alaska in 2016-2020 and 150 per 100,000 in the northern region to a low of 19 per 100,000 in Anchorage. This data tells us where suicides happen and where to focus attention.

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MR. STORRS moved to slide 29 and said that in 2019, 22 percent of Alaska high school students planned a suicide attempt in the past 12 months. This portion includes 27 percent of females and 16 percent of males. Over the last decade, planning rates for males increased 100 percent and for females 80 percent. Alaska needs to give attention to the issue. He opined that social media and isolation play a part in the increase, but Alaska needs to see that the data points discussed in the presentation are connected and add stress to a child's life. Suicide prevention needs to occur upstream.

[4:44:10 PM](#)

MR. STORRS turned to slide 30 and said that in 2019, the portion of high school students who planned a suicide attempt was highest for American Indian and Alaska Native students, which correlates to them also being the group that experiences the highest poverty, and has the least access to knowledge, skills, and resources. He stated Alaska needs to figure out how to support these students. Alaska Native students were 24 percent of high school students who planned a suicide attempt in 2019, followed by white students at 20 percent and Hispanic or Latino students at 18 percent. He stated that the portion of students who reported planning a suicide attempt increased among each racial/ethnic group since 2009.

[4:45:07 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 31 and said before people reach the point of suicide, they have feelings of sadness and hopelessness, which is a broad mental health gauge. It measures the proportion of high school students who felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks, so much so that they stopped doing some usual activities. In the last decade, the proportion of Alaska high school students feeling sad and hopeless has increased 52 percent, with a growing racial/ethnic disparity. He stated he is aware that a legislative bill focuses on talking to students about mental illness. He opined that more needs to be done. The Mental Health Trust has been looking at how to get funding to schools for counselors. The Hospital Association has done an analysis to address reducing suicide. Groups must be brought together to devise and fund a plan to reduce suicides.

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MR. STORRS moved to slide 32 and said caring adults are critical to the healthy development of youth. Parental caring is always the first choice, but grandparents, teachers, neighbors, coaches, faith leaders, or mentors can assume the role of a caring adult. In Alaska, the two primary measures of whether children feel they have a caring adult around them or whether students feel they have a teacher who cares about them are if they have three or more adults, other than parents, from whom they are comfortable seeking help. In 2019, 6 out of 10 Alaska high schoolers reported feeling their teachers care about and encourage them, the same portion that reported this feeling in 2009. In 2019, 49 percent of high school students said they had three or more adults other than their parents whom they would feel comfortable going to for help.

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MR. STORRS moved to slide 33 and said teachers are essential not only for the subjects they teach but also as a caring adult. Connectivity with students occurs when a teacher stays at a school for 2 - 5 years. Teachers who perceive their job does not invest in them leave rather than invest in the community. When students feel sad and hopeless and do not have adults to speak with, they move closer to the edge of suicide. The base student allocation is an important conversation regarding the role of schools. He opined that the bond between teachers and students is phenomenal. Many people can recall teachers that positively impacted their lives. He said that caring adult/teacher data, when broken down by region, shows the portion of students reporting they feel their teachers care about and encourage them

was highest in the northern region, at 67 percent, and southeast region at 66 percent, and lowest in the Interior at 58 percent. He opined that if the state can increase the percentages, a ripple effect would occur to increase other data he discussed.

[4:50:08 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said it is interesting that the southwest region has low percentages on other charts in the presentation, such as suicide and teen pregnancy. However, for caring adult/teachers the percentage for the region is 65 percent. He asked whether the percentage was accurate.

[4:50:22 PM](#)

MR. STORRS replied yes that it was a great surprise. He stated he does not know why there is such a strong connection. He opined that having a supportive teacher is a great protective factor, but so many other strains are placed on the students that they still snap.

[4:51:01 PM](#)

MR. KING said he supposes teachers are more important to rural than urban communities because students interact with fewer adults.

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MR. STORRS said that regarding a previous question from Senator Stevens, teen deaths are driven by accidents, homicides, and suicides. The data is not broken down by category. However, suicide numbers are probably much higher than homicides and accidents. The rate per 100,000 is 45 nationwide and 80 in Alaska. He opined that suicide adds to the difference.

[4:52:54 PM](#)

MR. STORRS moved to slide 34 and said the indicators discussed are only a handful of the child wellness indicators available through the Alaska KIDS Count data books. The information is also available on the KIDS Count website. He opined that when the well-being of Alaska's children increases, society's long-term costs decrease. Alaska needs to invest in children early to have a sustainable budget. As leaders debate the future of our state, ACT is devoted to supporting informed policy decisions and ensuring children are at the center of the conversation. He stated he would like a commission focused on the future of Alaska's children rather than discussions about money. Alaska needs to talk about the future and then figure out how to invest in it as a team.

4:55:27 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:55 p.m.