

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 31, 2024

3:42 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: STATE POLICY CHOICES AFFECT HEALTHY CHILD
DEVELOPMENT

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: ALL ALASKA PEDIATRIC PARTNERSHIP (A2P2)

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: ALASKA HEAD START PROGRAM

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: SOUTHEAST ALASKA ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF
YOUNG CHILDREN

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: THREAD

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: ALASKA CHILDREN'S TRUST

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

CYNTHIA OSBORNE, Executive Director
Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center Alaska
Nashville, Tennessee

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered the presentation State Policy Choices Affect Healthy Child Development.

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF, Executive Director
All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2).

MARK LACKEY, Executive Director
Chugiak Children's Services
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on the Alaska Head Start Program.

NICK MOE, Public Policy Manager
Thread
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on Thread.

NICCI LOVE, Creative Director
Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-offered a presentation on the Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children.

EMILY THOMPSON, Program Manager
Parents as Teachers (PAT)
Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-offered a presentation on the Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children.

TREVOR STORRS, President
Alaska Children's Trust
Anchorage Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on Alaska Children's Trust.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:42:58 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:42 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Gray-Jackson, Kiehl, Bjorkman and Chair Tobin.

PRESENTATION:

STATE POLICY CHOICES AFFECT HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

[3:44:32 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of the presentation State Policy Choices Affect Healthy Child Development by Prenatal-to-3 Impact Center and Prenatal - to 3 Stakeholders.

[3:45:06 PM](#)

CYNTHIA OSBORNE, Executive Director, Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center Alaska, Nashville, Tennessee, Offered the presentation State Policy Choices Affect Healthy Child Development.

[3:45:49 PM](#)

At ease

[3:46:21 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting.

[3:46:33 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 2 and stated that the purpose of the Policy Impact Center is to serve as a resource for state leaders working to improve the lives of all children from birth onward:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Who We Are

We are a nonpartisan research center at Vanderbilt University. We focus on the rigorous evidence connecting brain science with state policies and programs.

What We Do

We work with state lawmakers, agency officials, advocates, and academics to navigate the evidence on effective and equitable state policy solutions that ensure all children thrive from the start -while also leading to a thriving economy, strong families, a proficient workforce, and safe communities.

[3:47:21 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slides 3-5 and explained that the center's work is rooted in scientific research emphasizing the importance of the first three years of life for a child's development. During this period, more than a million neural connections are made per second. Children exposed to safe, stable, and nurturing environments early on are set on a path toward health and well-being, while those exposed to high levels of stress can suffer brain and body system damage with lifelong consequences. Key to healthy brain and body development are secure attachments between caregiver and child, known as serve-and-return interactions. Resource-rich environments lead to healthy brain development in the prefrontal cortex, which aids in delayed gratification and critical thinking. Although children have similar levels of frontal gray matter in their earliest months, socioeconomic status influences brain development over the first three years. Chronic adversity early in life results in lifelong health consequences. The more adverse experiences a child has, the more likely they are to encounter poor health behaviors and outcomes. The center aims to explore how states can promote the healthy development of all children from birth.

[3:50:09 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 6 and said the center operationalizes scientific research into eight prenatal-to-three policy goals, defining the conditions children need to thrive from the start. By creating these conditions, children can be set up for success both at school entry and throughout their lives. Key elements include ensuring families have access to resources they are eligible for, enabling parents to work and care for their children, and providing sufficient resources like food security, housing stability, and economic security. The goals also focus on babies being born healthy, addressing both the physical and mental health of children and parents, and ensuring parents have the knowledge and skills to understand child development and engage in nurturing and responsive relationships. Additionally, children should experience nurturing relationships in childcare and other settings when not with their parents, and any developmental delays should be identified and addressed as early as possible to support healthy development. The center aims to understand how children are faring across each state by identifying 20 outcome measures to evaluate progress on these eight policy goals.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Eight Prenatal-to-3 Policy Goals

Access to Needed Services - Families have access to necessary services through expanded eligibility, reduced administrative burden and fewer barriers to services, and identification of needs and connection to services.

Parents' Ability to Work - Parents have the skills and incentives for employment and the resources they need to balance working and parenting.

Sufficient Household Resources - Parents have the financial and material resources they need to provide for their families.

Healthy and Equitable Births - Children are born healthy to healthy parents, and pregnancy experiences and birth outcomes are equitable.

Parental Health and Emotional Wellbeing - Parents are mentally and physically healthy, with particular attention paid to the perinatal period.

Nurturing and Responsive Child-Parent Relationships - Children experience warm, nurturing, stimulating interactions with their parents that promote healthy development.

Nurturing and Responsive Child Care in Safe Settings - When children are not with their parents, they are in high-quality, nurturing, and safe environments.

Optimal Child Health and Development - Children's emotional, physical, and cognitive development is on track, and delays are identified and addressed early.

[3:51:58 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 7 and highlighted a subset of the 20 outcome measures where Alaska's children and families are not thriving compared to those in other states. The chart provided percentages of for Alaska, the worst state, and the best state. She noted that this information is useful for states to prioritize their goals. She explained that the center aims to provide the most rigorous evidence available on how to achieve these goals. For example, if the focus is on helping parents get to work or reducing infant mortality, the center offers evidence on the most effective policies to improve these outcomes. Their

approach involved conducting comprehensive reviews of dozens of state-level policies, summarizing findings from thousands of documents and papers, and hundreds of the most rigorous studies to identify policies with strong evidence that, if implemented, could lead to positive changes in outcomes. The outcomes measures selected for the subset:

- Low-income Women Uninsured
- Births to Women Not Receiving Adequate Prenatal Care
- Children <3 Without Any Full-Time Working Parent
- Children <3 Living in Crowded Households
- Number of Infant Deaths per 1,000 Births
- Children <3 Not Up to Date on Immunizations
- Maltreatment Rate per 1,000 Children <3

[3:52:55 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 8 and stated that the center's four primary findings from their research highlight policy choices that can empower parents and lead to healthier child development. They identified 12 effective policies, emphasizing that states must understand that no policy focuses solely on children. Instead, policies that lead to better outcomes for children involve caring for the caregivers, such as parents, childcare providers, and visitors. She stressed the importance of supporting caregivers to enable them to care for their children effectively. Another key finding is that no single policy or program can achieve all desired outcomes. A combination of broad-based economic and family support, along with targeted interventions, is necessary to create a support system where children and their parents can thrive in the earliest years. Lastly, she mentioned that the center not only identified the most effective policies but also examined their implementation across all 50 states and Washington, D.C. They found a patchwork of benefits and services for children, indicating that the greatest predictor of resources available to families for raising children is the state in which they live.

[3:54:38 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 9, which shows the relationship between goal setting, policymaking, and outcomes. She stated she would share all 12 policies and strategies that have a strong evidence base but began with those that Alaska is working on this legislative session. Four broad-based economic family support policies that significantly impact multiple Prenatal-to-3 (PN-3) policy goals include ensuring families have access to health insurance, providing paid leave after birth or adopting a

foster a child, establishing a state minimum wage of \$10 per hour, and implementing tax credits to promote greater work and increased family resources, leading to healthier birth and other outcomes. She emphasized that these broad-based economic and family supports are fundamental for the well-being of families and should be combined with more targeted interventions.

[3:55:39 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slides 10-12 and explained that she began identifying specific strategies states are implementing that have evidence of impacting various policy goals. She said she reviewed these strategies to assess Alaska's progress and slide 11 shows a total of eight strategies. She stated that a roadmap was created for each state and slide 12 summarizes Alaska's roadmap information. The summary highlights that Alaska is one of 30 states that have expanded the Affordable Care Act, allowing families with incomes up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level to access health insurance. This is crucial for mothers during the prenatal period, ensuring they can obtain health insurance early and throughout their pregnancy. Alaska is also among 46 states that have expanded 12 months of postpartum coverage for mothers, instead of cutting off at 60 days.

MS. OSBORNE noted however, Alaska does not currently have a statewide paid family leave program. There is pending legislation considering paid leave for state employees and an opt-in paid leave program for businesses or individuals. She said when the roadmap was produced in October, Alaska's minimum wage was \$10.85, but as of January 1, it has increased to \$11.73. Although Alaska does not have a state income tax, many states are considering a working tax credit similar to a state earned income tax credit to encourage families to work. Washington, for example, does not have a state income tax but has an equivalent policy, and seven states are considering similar measures.

[3:59:35 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 13 and said the center aimed to identify not just effective strategies, but also specific policy levers states can implement to make these strategies more widely available, equitable, and effective. For example, while childcare subsidies help families work and access preferred care, the center also sought to guide states on implementing these strategies more broadly.

MS. OSBORNE said one key policy lever is reducing administrative burdens so families can more easily access eligible benefits.

Alaska recently made its Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application available online, simplifying the 27-page process and significantly helping families in need. Comprehensive screening and connection programs, such as Family Connects or Healthy Steps, are effective strategies states can implement. These programs screen all children and families, connecting them to resources that meet their specific needs.

MS. OSBORNE stated that other effective strategies include childcare subsidies, group prenatal care—which reduces social isolation during pregnancy and improves outcomes—and community-based doulas. Alaska's state-sponsored doula program helps improve outcomes during the prenatal period, labor, and the early postpartum period. Evidence-based home visiting programs and Early Head Start, supported by Alaska as one of 23 states providing direct state support, are also crucial. Although the level of support has been stagnant, it remains essential. Early intervention services are another evidence-based strategy to help children achieve optimal development.

MS. OSBORNE said these are the 12 policies identified by the center and that these policies intersect to provide resources for parents.

[4:02:24 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 14 and explained that the center created a simulation of a stylized family to analyze the level of resources available across all states to family based on state policy choices. The mother in this stylized family is Lina, who has an infant and a toddler, works full-time year-round, and earns the state's minimum wage. Lina applies for and receives all the benefits she is eligible for, which is not the case for all families in her position. After giving birth, she took 12 weeks of leave, protected under the Federal Family Medical Leave Act. To work, she sends her children to center-based childcare that charges the 75th percentile of the market rate, which the federal government considers the equal access target. This rate means that 75 percent of all childcare providers charge less than this amount. This setup allows for a consistent comparison across all states.

[4:04:10 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE moved to slide 15 and stated it shows the variation in resources Lina's family experiences based on where she lives. Lina has over \$47,000 a year in resources if she lives in the District of Columbia, compared to just over \$20,000 in resources if she lives in Georgia, despite her doing the exact same

things: working full time and sending her children to care. Good state policy choices make a big difference. In Alaska, Lina has about \$42,700 in resources each year.

[4:04:58 PM](#)

MS. OSBOURNE moved to slide 16 and said Alaska ranked number 10. Although Alaska's cost of living is higher, its rank doesn't change much after cost-of-living adjustments. The chart shows that if Lina works full time at the state's minimum wage and takes three months off, she has about \$17,000 in income. After paying for childcare, her income is reduced by about \$2,000 a year. She receives another \$23,000 in SNAP and WIC benefits, federal Earned Income Tax Credits, and Child Tax Credits, plus close to \$4,000 from the Permanent Dividend Fund. This reflects the family resources in Alaska today, though the recent minimum wage increase that began in January needs to be updated.

[4:06:35 PM](#)

MS. OSBOURNE moved to slides 21-22 and said the level of benefit for paid family leave (PFL) varies substantially across the country. However, if Alaska were to implement the least generous PFL program and apply it to Lina's situation, she would have around \$19,000 in wages, increasing her overall resources each year by about \$1,800. This change would move Alaska's ranking from ten to seven.

[4:07:38 PM](#)

MS. OSBOURNE moved to slides 26-27 and said the market rate for childcare in Alaska is lower than in Washington or Oregon but higher than in Montana. Out-of-pocket childcare expenses, shown in navy and teal on the graph, are a substantial burden on families' finances. She explained that if Alaska increased reimbursement rates to the 75th percentile of the market rate, which is now common among states, Lina's family would benefit by almost \$1,400 a year. This increase would enable Lina to work more, likely remain in the workforce, send her children to higher quality care, and boost her household resources.

[4:09:02 PM](#)

MS. OSBOURNE moved to slide 28 and stated that if Alaska implemented both the Paid Family Leave (PFL) program and childcare subsidies to the 75th percentile, Lina would have almost \$46,000 in resources, significantly improving her children's well-being. She added that the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center has many more resources to share.

[4:10:00 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked about the difference between chronic versus single episode adversity. She mentioned hearing from some National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) partners about redefining Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) scores. She noted that experiences like the death of a family member or a divorce might contribute to a single episode of adversity, which is different from chronic adversity. She requested further explanation of this difference.

[4:10:30 PM](#)

MS. OSBORNE replied that there are three different types of stress to consider. One is normal stress, which is healthy for development. Children learn boundaries and understand that they can't always get what they want, which is important for healthy growth. The second type is tolerable stress, such as losing a family member or moving to a new place and losing connections. With the support of a loving, caring adult, children can cope with this stress without long-term negative consequences. The third type is chronic stress, which includes ongoing issues like poverty or having a parent with mental illness. This stress, especially without the presence of a supportive adult, is called toxic stress. Toxic stress can negatively affect brain and body development, leading to long-term adverse outcomes and lifelong consequences.

CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenter for a presentation grounded in policy and research.

PRESENTATION:
ALL ALASKA PEDIATRIC PARTNERSHIP (A2P2)

[4:12:25 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN introduced Alaska Pediatric Partnership, a Prenatal -to- 3 Stakeholder.

[4:12:44 PM](#)

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF, Executive Director, All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2), Anchorage, Alaska, offered the following testimony on the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2):

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on how Alaska can better support its population of mothers and young children. The Alaska Pediatric Partnership is a statewide nonprofit dedicated to the health and wellness of Alaska's children and the families that care for them. Our organization has been working in collaboration with partners and stakeholders

statewide, from public and private entities to communities and tribal health entities, since 1995 to find innovative solutions and drive transformations to the systems of care for children and their families, so that every Alaskan child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

[4:13:34 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOSEF continued:

Thank you for that excellent presentation from the Prenatal-to-Three Policy Impact Center. We heard some stark examples of where we stand as a state in both best practice policies and strategies related to the prenatal and pediatric population. In our state, we've seen a negative growth rate for the last decade, and we're feeling it heavily in Alaska's ability to recruit medical providers and military families who need services for their families and dependents. So, what will it take to make Alaska a great place to raise children? The good thing is that we already have a lot of what we need. We don't need to recreate the wheel. Everything required to make measurable change exists in several well-crafted documents developed by a diverse group of Alaskans who have been engaged in prenatal and early childhood work for years, some of whom are sitting right here in the room.

In 2019, through several federal funding opportunities, including the Birth through Five Preschool Development Grant, a joint task force conducted a statewide needs assessment and analyzed numerous other documents and data that informed the development of the Alaska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. This plan has been adopted and endorsed by the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), which is co-chaired by the Department of Education and the Department of Health. I'm glad to say that the strategies recommended in the presentation from the Prenatal-to-Three Policy Impact Center are included in the Early Childhood Strategic Plan throughout the written objectives. Another resource that informed the strategic plan is the Alaska Mental Health Trust Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program Plan, and both documents are linked in the slide. These documents lay a firm foundation for actionable

strategies that will move the needle on outcomes for children.

[4:15:20 PM](#)

MS. BEN-YOSEF continued:

What we don't have is the architecture or the infrastructure to support the execution of these plans. For years, Alaska has managed its programs and services for children and families using a reactionary approach that leans on individualized solutions and initiatives to target some of its biggest challenges related to education and children's health. Picking single efforts or projects lifted up by individual stakeholder groups will not move the needle on outcomes and has led to the situation we find ourselves in today. What we need to do is work together on a comprehensive approach in the Early Childhood Strategic Plan that has been agreed to and ratified by both education and health sector experts and has been informed by the communities where the changes need to take place. The planning has already been done. We need to partner with each other, with you all, and with the Children's Caucus for the hard work of implementing the mapped-out strategies that we know will work, and I look forward to doing that work with you all.

The strategies these plans lay out represent work traditionally found in several sectors, such as health, education, and other departments that intersect with children and families. However, families don't approach these as separate systems. They are simply looking to get what they need for their children and find ways to help their families be in a position to support their children so that they can be ready to learn when they arrive at school. The more coordinated the system, the better the outcomes will be for the families, for their children, and for our state.

PRESENTATION:
ALASKA HEAD START PROGRAM

[4:17:30 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation by Chugiak Children's Services.

4:17:53 PM

MARK LACKEY, Executive Director, Chugiak Children's Services, Wasilla, Alaska, stated he is an active member of the Alaska Head Start Association. He provided the following testimony:

Head Start is the safety net of our nation when it comes to early childhood. We have an almost 60-year history of providing services across the country and in Alaska as well. My own agency is one of 17 grantees in the state of Alaska. We provide services in the Mat-Su Borough and serve over 3,000 children across the state in more than 100 communities. In many rural villages throughout Alaska, where there is no licensed childcare program, Head Start programs fulfill the need for the entire community.

4:19:08 PM

MR. LACKEY continued:

Every year, \$62 million of Alaska's federal tax dollars flow back into the state for operational funds, not accounting for capital funds. There is significant capital investment in Alaska that comes from your tax dollars, specifically for Head Start programs and early childhood education. In my program alone, in the Mat-Su, we have built three facilities over the past six years, bringing approximately \$14 million into our community for capital projects, serving children and families.

Federal grants require a 20 percent match, and the state of Alaska committed to help grantees meet that federal match until 2010. As our previous speaker noted, funding stopped increasing even though costs continued to rise and federal funding increased with the cost of living. Programs expanded to meet community needs. Currently, the state match is down to 11 percent, which has consequences for individual communities.

4:20:46 PM

MR. LACKEY continued:

In my own community, my board of directors recently decided to close a school. We have waiting lists a mile long, and the need has only increased in the Mat-Su. Many children and families qualify for our

services. Our services are provided to the families who are most at risk and vulnerable, such as very low-income families, families with children in foster care, and families experiencing homelessness. In our program, half of the children we serve are either in foster care or homeless. By closing that school, we will serve about 60 fewer children next fall, half of whom will be in foster care or homeless. These children will be unserved, leading to increased costs for the state in providing care, special education, OCS involvement, and criminal justice.

Early Head Start and Head Start are foundational pieces in our state's early childhood system, especially for children from zero to three. The federal investment will continue to grow in this realm, but we must protect and nurture this investment. Otherwise, our tax dollars will support services in other states.

CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenter.

PRESENTATION:
THREAD

[4:23:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated Mr. Moe would provide a presentation on Thread.

[4:23:35 PM](#)

NICK MOE, Public Policy Manager, Thread, Anchorage, Alaska, Offered the following presentation on Thread:

Thread is Alaska's Childcare Resource and Referral organization. We serve around 10,000 Alaskan families across more than 400 childcare and infant learning programs. We offer direct services to 2,000 early educators across the state. We have recently partnered with the state to help administer COVID relief funds to centers across Alaska and recent one-time funding from the state to help support the early education workforce.

Infant and toddler care for the zero to three age group is the largest age group in Alaska that needs quality childcare. More than 60 percent of Thread's childcare referrals for families are from those

needing infant and toddler care. Unfortunately, and mostly due to costs, we've seen programs offer less and less infant and toddler care over the last five years. Recognizing that this care is difficult to find, I want to emphasize that Thread supports paid family leave policies, which are even more important given the lack of supply. We support this policy and recognize that parents are the child's first and most important teachers.

[4:25:12 PM](#)

MR. MOE continued:

I appreciate today's presentation and comments. I thought I would offer a broader perspective and discuss some of the challenges and solutions for increasing infant learning and toddler opportunities in Alaska. The COVID relief funds and one-time funding from the state have been absolutely essential to keep programs open and childcare providers employed. What we desperately need now is sustainable funding from the state.

We can't expect the small business owners and entrepreneurs who run many of these programs to make long-term decisions and adjustments like hiring staff and modifying physical spaces with only one-time funding. We can't expect our early educators and childcare providers to forego better career opportunities with better benefits based on a one-time award or bonus that might not be available next year. We can't expect Alaskan families to commit to full-time employment or enter the workforce without certainty about childcare costs.

We need to offer stability to the childcare and infant learning sector in Alaska so that long-term investments and improvements that are desperately needed can be made. Specifically, we need to increase the childcare program office's operating budget line item to support small businesses, Alaskan families, and early educators who make infant learning possible. This would help match the federal funding already received, allow local control to support more programs and families than are currently funded, and help grow opportunities for more children in our state.

[4:27:06 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked about the \$7.5 million appropriated by the legislature and signed by the governor for the current fiscal year. He inquired how these funds are being distributed and if Thread had observed any impacts from the funds.

[4:27:34 PM](#)

MR. MOE replied that there was an enormous response to the program. He explained that Thread typically runs the award program Retaining Our Outstanding Teachers (ROOTS) for six months but had to condense it to six weeks between November and January. Despite this, Thread received more than 1,700 applicants and is currently processing these applications and distributing the funds. He expressed excitement about continuing the program and the desire to make it a sustainable initiative offered to early educators every year.

[4:28:17 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked what proportion the 1,700 applicants represent out of the total number of potential applicants; how many would Thread like to see apply.

MR. MOE replied that Thread would like to see 100 percent participation but recognizes that early educators are often overworked, stressed, and unable to handle additional paperwork, even though the application is very streamlined. He stated that the program has still seen a lot of participation.

[4:28:56 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked what percentage of early educators is 1700.

[4:29:05 PM](#)

MR. MOE replied that early estimates by Thread previously indicated there were about 3,000 early educators, but there has been almost a 20 percent reduction in childcare centers since 2019. The current number is closer to 2,000. He opined that Thread is reaching more than 75 percent of the early educators in licensed centers around the state.

CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenter.

[4:29:39 PM](#)

At ease

PRESENTATION:
SOUTHEAST ALASKA ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN

4:30:14 PM

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced a presentation by representatives from the Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children.

4:30:50 PM

NICCI LOVE, Creative Director, Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children, Juneau, Alaska, stated she is proud to say the Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children (SEAAEYC) has been operating in Southeast Alaska for 40 years.

MS. LOVE gave the following testimony:

I just want to share some recommendations that we've come up with, starting with the shortage of quality childcare, especially for infants and toddlers. As we've heard, in Alaska, this poses significant challenges for families. Parents are struggling with limited choices, resulting in compromised work-life balance, increased stress, and hindered economic productivity. Recognizing the importance of early childhood development, families must have access to various childcare options to meet their unique needs. Infants and toddlers require specialized care that is responsive to their developmental milestones. The lack of diverse childcare options impacts both working parents and our youngest members.

To address the shortage effectively, it's crucial to consider policies and initiatives that support the creation and sustainability of quality childcare facilities catering to the needs of all our children. Among the following recommendations, several have already been implemented by our agency, and we have had, in some cases, several years of success. One recommendation is to explore opportunities to provide financial incentives and support for childcare providers specializing in infant and toddler care to promote the establishment of more facilities and spaces for these children. Another recommendation is investing in training and certification programs for providers focused on infant and toddler care, ensuring these workers have the necessary skills and knowledge to promote healthy development during these crucial years.

[4:32:48 PM](#)

MS. LOVE continued:

Additionally, collaboration between government, local communities, and private sector entities is essential to collectively address the shortage of care and create networks of reliability and stability. Flexible funding models that support a range of childcare options, including home-based care, center-based care, and community-based initiatives, should also be considered to cater to diverse needs. By addressing the shortage of care, we not only support the well-being of Alaska's families but also lay the groundwork for future success.

[4:33:25 PM](#)

MS. LOVE continued:

Our agency has noted that it is very difficult for families to access childcare, especially in the future. While increasing subsidies is fantastic, there often will be no care available. Thus, we need to incentivize the workforce. Our agency has worked with COVID funding, but even prior to that, we developed a program called HEARTS, which stands for Hiring, Educating, and Training Teachers. This was implemented with support through the city and borough in 2012. It was on that foundation and through those relationships that we built a strong and robust program, which allowed us to bring in COVID dollars to increase wages in the last two years. The average wage for a childcare worker in Juneau has gone from \$12 an hour up to \$18 and \$20 an hour. Consequently, we've seen very few program closures; I think only one closed during COVID, and we are now seeing more programs open. We have been very fortunate and unique in our state by fostering relationships between private and government entities.

[4:34:47 PM](#)

EMILY THOMPSON, Program Manager, Parents as Teachers (PAT), Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children, Juneau, Alaska provided the following testimony on the Parents as Teachers program:

I am the program manager for Parents as Teachers, one of the programs housed within the Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC). We are actually the largest PAT program in the state. We serve Juneau and some of the outlying southeast areas as well. PAT is an evidence-based home visiting program and one of the strategies you heard about in the presentation from the Prenatal-to-Three Policy Group this morning.

[4:35:10 PM](#)

MS. THOMPSON continued:

Parents as Teachers serves as a lifeline to Alaska families, offering crucial resources and support to pre- and postpartum parents during the critical early years of a child's development. The program empowers parents to be their child's first and best teacher, providing guidance and resources that foster healthy development and early learning. Children do not arrive at kindergarten as empty vessels; all development is sequential, meaning one skill is built upon another. For instance, to learn to read, a child first has to regulate emotions and engage in serve-and-return interactions, the dance of the wiring of the brain. All that work takes place during infancy, and PAT helps parents understand the importance of those early years and use brain development knowledge to make choices about how to raise their children.

[4:35:56 PM](#)

MS. THOMPSON continued:

With its unique geographical challenges, Alaska can significantly benefit from programs like PAT. Many of our families are far from extended families down south and find themselves struggling in their new roles as parents. When parents struggle, children struggle. PAT works to build the relationship between the trained home visitor and the family so parents have a lifeline of information and support. With over 40 years of experience, PAT is an evidence-based program that reduces child abuse and neglect, increases school readiness, and helps support families during the vulnerable first three years.

[4:36:23 PM](#)

MS. THOMPSON continued:

While the road to adequate support for prenatal care seems long and difficult, the PAT program can be an easy win for Alaska. We already have a structure in place to provide PAT services in many regions of the state, but we need more funding. I cannot speak to the other programs, but within our Southeast program, we have a waitlist of over 50 families. It is a highly effective and in-demand program. If the state is serious about boosting school readiness skills and supporting birth to three development, increasing funding for Parents as Teachers is a tried-and-true solution.

CHAIR TOBIN noted that the PAT program had expired but was reauthorized in the Alaska Reads Act, but funding did not meet the level of need.

PRESENTATION:
ALASKA CHILDREN'S TRUST

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CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation on the Alaska Children's Trust.

CHAIR TOBIN asked that Mr. Storrs touch upon the connection between the Prenatal-to-Three System of Care and primary and secondary performance.

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TREVOR STORRS, President, Alaska Children's Trust, Anchorage Alaska, replied that a child, family, and community cannot be looked in pieces. He mentioned research, like the Heckman report, that shows that the return on investment is much higher when consideration of brain development starts at an early age. When families start off on the right foot, it positively impacts all aspects, whether K through 12, post-secondary, or preparing kids for trade systems. Starting early enables them to generate the income needed to thrive and support their families in Alaska, rather than in other states, which is a significant issue.

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MR. STORRS provided the following testimony:

One of the things we were asked to address is what we can do here in Alaska to set roots. To build on the previous discussion, home visiting is really

important. The federal government is expanding Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding. We get the dollars, but they will require a match. Home visiting is an essential program that helps new families or parents start off right in raising their children by providing necessary supports. The exact amount Alaska will receive is still being determined, but a 75 to 25 percent match will be required. This expansion could enhance our home visiting efforts and extend to our tribal partners, fostering strong relationships by not expecting them to find the match on their own.

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MR. STORRS continued:

Another topic currently being discussed in our legislature is paid family leave. It's crucial for allowing families to be with their children. For instance, the Children's Trust has instituted a policy allowing family members up to 12 paid weeks of leave. Many other countries offer up to a year. This time is critical for child development, particularly from birth to three years, providing bonding opportunities and promoting economic stability. A key to preventing not just child abuse and neglect but other issues that families deal with is about economics. Concrete supports, such as housing and food security, significantly reduce family stress and prevent issues like child abuse, neglect, homelessness, and diabetes.

We want to make it easier for families who need support to get out of poverty or other situations. One strategy to support families is making it easier for them to access necessary supports, like in South Carolina's First Five centralized system. This system allows families to input their information once and access food stamps, Medicaid, Head Start, and other services, eliminating silos and reducing the time and complexity involved. Streamlining these processes removes barriers and frustration, making it less likely for families to give up or resort to unsafe childcare options.

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MR. STORRS continued:

Investing in our state's systems is crucial, particularly given current technological challenges. Clear direction to the department on implementing a system like First Five would significantly benefit our state.

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CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenter and noted that Iceland has paid family leave for six months and adoption by men is 90 percent which a chief factor in closing the country's gender pay gap.

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MR. STORRS commented that Iceland allocates much less money to jails and tertiary care. After visiting Iceland with the Mat-Su Health Foundation, he learned they prioritize upstream investment over expanding jails. He emphasized that this prioritization is a key difference.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:44 p.m.