

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 26, 2024

3:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 215

"An Act relating to teacher incentive payments for national board certification; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED CSSB 215 (EDC) OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 17

Urging the United States Congress to extend the deadline for the state to obligate American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief - Homeless Children and Youth funds.

- MOVED SJR 17 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PRESENTATION: GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON CHILD CARE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 215

SHORT TITLE: TEACHERS: BOARD CERTIFICATION INCENTIVE

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) BJORKMAN

01/31/24	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/31/24	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/14/24	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/14/24	(S)	Heard & Held
02/14/24	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)

02/19/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/19/24 (S) Heard & Held
02/19/24 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
02/26/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SJR 17

SHORT TITLE: EXTEND DEADLINE FOR ARP-HCY FUNDS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) TOBIN

02/19/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/19/24 (S) EDC
02/26/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHAEL MASON, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided an explanation of changes for SB 215 from version S to U.

MACKENZIE POPE, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SJR 17.

BARBARA DUFFIELD, Executive Director
SchoolHouse Connection
Washington D.C.

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony for SJR17.

HEIDI HEDBERG, Commissioner
Department of Health (DOH)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the presentation Governor's Task Force on Child Care.

LEAH VAN KIRK, Deputy Director
Healthcare Policy Advisor
Department of Health
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the presentation Governor's Task Force on Child Care.

STEPHANIE BERGLAND, CEO

Thread

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the presentation Governor's Task Force on Child Care.

KATIE CAPOZZI, Member

Governor's Task Force on Child Care

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered to answer questions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:31:45 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin.

SB 215-TEACHERS: BOARD CERTIFICATION INCENTIVE

[3:32:47 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 215 "An Act relating to teacher incentive payments for national board certification; and providing for an effective date."

[3:32:56 PM](#)

At ease

[3:33:32 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting.

[3:33:58 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, Provided an explanation of changes for SB 215 from version S to U:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Senate Bill 215 - Teachers: Board Certification Incentive

Summary of Changes: Version S to Version U

Section 1 - Amends AS 14.20, which is the statute that governs teacher certification, by adding a new section, AS 14.20.225, to authorize teacher incentive payments for national board certification.

Version U adds a new subsection B, which directs a school district or the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development to reimburse employed teachers for costs incurred in pursuing the national board certification. Cost shall be reimbursed on an ongoing basis not later than 60 days after the teacher makes a request for reimbursement.

Version U re-letters the other subsections accordingly.

Section 2 - Amends the uncodified law of the State of Alaska to stipulate that the Act applies to a contract or collective bargaining agreement.

Version U adds a new subsection B, which clarifies that the applicability language extends to the cost reimbursement payments called for in subsection B of Section 1.

[3:35:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[3:35:38 PM](#)

At ease.

[3:36:01 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and solicited a motion.

[3:36:05 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON moved to adopt the committee substitute (CS) for SB 215, 33-LS1070\U, as the working document.

[3:36:18 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 215 was adopted as the working document.

[3:36:36 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN thanked the committee for hearing SB 215.

[3:36:51 PM](#)

At ease

[3:36:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and solicited the will of the committee.

[3:37:00 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON moved to report CSSB 215, work order number 33-LS1070\U, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[3:37:12 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 215(EDC) was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[3:37:26 PM](#)

At ease

SJR 17-EXTEND DEADLINE FOR ARP-HCY FUNDS

[3:38:51 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 17 Urging the United States Congress to extend the deadline for the state to obligate American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief - Homeless Children and Youth funds.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that on January 29, 2024, the Senate Education Standing Committee held a meeting that focused on youth homelessness and education. Discussion with colleagues following the meeting led to the creation of SJR 17.

[3:39:50 PM](#)

MACKENZIE POPE, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced SJR 17:

SJR 17 asks Alaska's federal level delegation and their colleagues to extend the deadline to obligate the remaining American rescue plan homeless child and youth (ARP HCY) funds to at least September 2025. In Alaska, we have seen a 14 percent increase in the number of students experiencing homelessness, and of the \$2.3 million dedicated to the state of Alaska in the ARP HCY funds, approximately 40 percent, or \$800,080, of those funds remain to be obligated, and this additional time will give the school districts ample time to plan and apply for those grants from the state of Alaska. As you heard in this committee on January 29, these funds have already been used to support students experiencing homelessness in the

Anchorage School District, among others, by funding English language learning support positions in each of the largest high schools, two social service coordinators in the classroom nested within Covenant House, a youth shelter in Anchorage, smartphones for students who needed them to coordinate school work, rides, other support services, Wi Fi hotspots for students who required them, and even car repairs for families who needed that vehicle to get their student to and from the school. These are just a few examples of how the Anchorage School District used these funds to improve outcomes for these housing insecure students. Supporting this resolution will show Alaska's congressional delegation that you would like to give our schools more time to invest in these much needed interventions.

[3:41:49 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced invited testimony for SJR 17.

[3:42:18 PM](#)

BARBARA DUFFIELD, Executive Director, SchoolHouse Connection, Washington D.C., said she has worked in partnerships with school districts nationwide for nearly 30 years. She provided the following testimony on SJR 17:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- SchoolHouse Connection strongly supports Senate Joint Resolution 17, which calls on Alaska's Congressional delegation to advocate for a one-year extension in the obligation date for American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth funds (ARP-HCY).
- ARP-HCY funds were the result of a bipartisan amendment supported by both of Alaska's US Senators. They have been incredibly impactful and can be used to directly remove the barriers to regular school attendance and academic success created by homelessness - everything from transportation to school supplies to mentoring. ARP-HCY funds are needed now more than ever because child and youth homelessness is worse now than it was during the pandemic. In fact, the number of homeless students identified by Alaskan schools is 14 percent higher than it was in the school year before the pandemic.
- Unfortunately, administrative restrictions, delays in federal guidance, lack of staff capacity, and staff

turnover have created barriers to using ARP-HCY funds. In addition, our many educational agencies have prioritized spending the much larger ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds, at the expense of a focus on APR-HCY dollars.

- An additional year costs nothing, but allows local school district homeless liaisons to be good stewards of these funds. It means that rather than just spending for the sake of spending to meet an arbitrary deadline, schools can use the funds as needs arise in their communities - as cars break down, as children need shoes, as an emergency placement in a motel is necessary for school stability.
- An additional year also gives the school districts time to plan for sustaining their efforts, including how to fund staff positions or community partnerships that have been impactful.
- In sum, we urge swift passage of Senate Joint Resolution 17 to help ensure that we are maximizing every federal dollar so that today's homeless children do not become tomorrow's homeless adults.

[3:45:08 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN concluded invited testimony and opened public testimony on SJR 17; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[3:45:55 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[3:45:58 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON moved to report SJR 17, work order 33-LS1382\B, from committee with individual recommendations and attached zero fiscal note(s).

[3:46:12 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and SJR 17 was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[3:46:28 PM](#)

At ease

PRESENTATION: GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON CHILD CARE

[3:47:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of the presentation Governor's Task Force on Child Care.

[3:48:31 PM](#)

HEIDI HEDBERG, Commissioner, Department of Health (DOH), Juneau, Alaska, Co-presented the presentation Governor's Task Force on Child Care.

[3:48:46 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 2 and said the presentation address the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

1. Relief Funds and Grants Update
2. Task Force Purpose
3. Summary of Efforts
4. Initial Report Recommendations
5. Moving Forward

[3:49:23 PM](#)

LEAH VAN KIRK, Deputy Director, Healthcare Policy Advisor, Department of Health, Juneau, Alaska, moved to slide 3 and said the state of Alaska received over \$99 million to help child care programs remain open and able to care for children during the pandemic. The state received the following funds and used them in various ways:

[Original punctuation provided.]

CARES Act	2020	\$6,489,103
CRRSA	2020-2023	\$18,899,904
ARPA: Stabilization	2021-2023	\$45,336,010
ARPA: Supplemental	2021-2024	\$28,345,643

- Lowered costs for working families
- Kept current child care providers open
- Supported the opening of more child care businesses
- Served an increasing number of children over time
- Helped providers to cover the largest business expense categories - personnel and mortgage/rent
- Supported recruitment and retention of skilled child care professionals

MS. VAN KIRK noted that American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) stabilization funding was distributed in three phases during the pandemic. She turned the explanation of how the funds were utilized over to Ms. Bergland.

[3:50:48 PM](#)

STEPHANIE BERGLAND, CEO, Thread, Anchorage, Alaska, expressed pride in the funding allocated to child care from federal, state, and philanthropic sources. She highlighted that the largest support over recent years came from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) stabilization grants. There were three rounds of child care stabilization grants, each followed by a survey conducted with the McKinley Group to track spending and trends in the sector. The top spending category was personnel costs at 46 percent, followed by facility costs at 33 percent. Over 90 percent of respondents indicated that the grants were essential to avoid closure. However, child care businesses continue to face challenges, as they currently have 33 percent less enrollment than desired due to severe staffing shortages. Less than half of the programs reported having adequate staff to operate fully. Overall, the surveys indicated that the grant resources were critical for the sector's survival.

[3:53:23 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN shared that in his community, he has heard conversations and seen instances where child care facilities, particularly those serving non-preschool-age children, received COVID funds and then either transitioned into preschool facilities or closed after receiving ARPA stabilization payments. He asked if anything could be done to encourage facilities that closed—despite not appearing to have staffing issues—to reenter the child care space or to encourage others to take their place.

[3:54:55 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK noted that despite receiving additional funding, many child care facilities still struggled to maintain a sustainable business plan and keep their doors open. She explained that in some cases, the issue was not the amount of funding but the availability of staff to consistently come to work. Workforce challenges were a significant factor in facilities closing. As the Department of Health (DOH) administers grants, these factors are taken into consideration. She added that if there are specific instances the department needs to address, they are open to continuing the conversation.

[3:55:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked Ms. Van Kirk to elaborate on the 2024 date related to the ARPA supplemental funds.

[3:56:08 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND explained that ARPA supplemental funds have been allocated in various ways and are now in the final stages of spending. She highlighted an upcoming opportunity, the Focus Grant, which is the last large-scale, noncompetitive grant available to child care programs. She anticipates that \$12-13 million will be available. The application deadline was the weekend [February 24-26, 2024]. She added that 92 percent of eligible child care programs applied, and the resources will be processed this spring, with all funds spent by June.

CHAIR TOBIN asked if the June deadline refers to expending, allocating, or obligating the funds.

[3:57:16 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG stated her belief that supplemental ARPA funds federally expire September 30, 2024.

[3:57:32 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK moved to slide 4 thanked the committee for the workforce stabilization appropriations that supported the childcare workforce this year. She provided an update on the progress of the funding, noting that over 1,700 applications were received from childcare providers enrolled in the Early Education Development system. The application period ran from November to January, and payments under the Retaining Our Outstanding Teachers (ROOTS) Award will be processed and distributed next month. She emphasized that the Community Innovation Grant played a key role in increasing access to childcare in Alaska.

[3:58:45 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND expressed appreciation for the urban stabilization grants and the one-time funding allocation, reaffirming the commitment to childcare. She highlighted the Community Innovation Grant, which provided competitive opportunities to increase and sustain affordable, high-quality childcare across Alaska. A total of 68 applications were received, and 17 community projects were awarded \$14 million. Projects include workforce capacity building, infrastructure development, and expanding access to affordable childcare. Examples include a worker-owned cooperative childcare in Anchorage, the first

licensed childcare centers in Kotzebue and Hoonah, and a resource grant for an early educator apprenticeship program in Juneau. All projects have two years to utilize the funds and submitted sustainability plans when required.

[4:006 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 5 and provided context regarding the childcare landscape in Alaska, noting that much of the current work is guided by two primary plans: the Alaska Child Care Development Fund plan and the goals established in Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025. Both plans focus on access, affordability, and quality of care.

MS. BERGLAND referenced a recent McKinley Group study, which showed that access to childcare is becoming more difficult, with 51 percent of working families in Alaska facing challenges due to lack of childcare. The state has seen 20 percent of licensed childcare programs close in the past four years, leaving a 60 percent gap in available licensed spaces compared to the demand. Of the 388 remaining licensed programs, many cannot operate at full capacity due to workforce shortages, contributing to broader workforce issues across industries as businesses struggle with recruitment and retention.

[4:02:57 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND said affordability is another concern, as families are now paying an average of 15 percent of their income on childcare, with some paying even more. For families with two or more children, childcare often exceeds housing costs. Prices continue to rise, especially with pandemic relief funds expiring, causing many programs to increase costs, leading to a third consecutive year where childcare prices have outpaced inflation.

MS. BERGLAND emphasized the importance of quality in childcare, with only 33 percent of children entering kindergarten in Alaska considered prepared. Focusing on high-quality care is essential for early development, especially before age five, and contributes to a strong start in school. The speaker highlighted that only 10 percent of early educators in Alaska have more than a high school diploma, stressing the need for workforce development in the sector. The Governor's Child Care Taskforce is exploring policy recommendations to address these ongoing trends.

[4:04:58 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG acknowledged that the childcare landscape has shifted significantly before, during, and after the

pandemic. She emphasized the need to transition to the work of the task force, which recognizes the importance of a robust childcare system in supporting healthy families and students. This system not only benefits students but also helps parents re-enter the workforce. She noted that the business sector has made it clear that the scarcity of childcare remains a top concern, negatively affecting their ability to retain staff. Absenteeism and staff turnover, linked to the lack of childcare, are key reasons for the workforce shortages impacting businesses.

[4:06:27 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG explained that the business sector recognizes the importance of addressing issues related to preparing children for school and stabilizing the childcare sector. This understanding contributed to the governor signing an administrative order in April 2023, aimed at developing a plan for affordable, high-quality childcare.

[4:07:13 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 5 and said the task force identified childcare needs from birth to age 13, focusing on key areas that impact the sector. The task force includes 13 voting members, representing a broad range of stakeholders, including three state agencies (Health, Labor, and Education), local government, nonprofits, parents, the business sector, organized labor, Department of Defense, and tribal entities. In addition to subject matter experts, Senator Tobin and Representative Coulombe, who serve as ex officio members, have actively participated in the meetings. The structure and focus areas of the task force allow for an in-depth analysis of childcare needs across the state:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Governor's Task Force on Child Care

Administrative Order 346

Purpose

- Develop a plan to improve availability and affordability of quality child care
- Consult existing resources
- Develop policy recommendations

Focus Areas

- Background Checks
- Workforce
- Licensing
- Access
- Quality
- Subsidy

Structure

- Eleven voting members
- Representatives from across the state

[4:08:38 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 6 and discussed the levers available to the task force to improve systems, focusing on opportunities for public-private partnerships, addressing workforce and affordability in childcare. She highlighted the development of solutions to incentivize employer-sponsored childcare, as well as policy recommendations targeting recruitment, retention, compensation, and benefits. She also noted the need to review and update regulations, acknowledging that the Department of Health has already begun addressing identified regulatory issues. She emphasized the importance of innovative, out-of-the-box solutions, referencing presentations from national organizations and other states as sources of ideas applicable to Alaska. Lastly, she mentioned that Alaska currently has fewer than ten employer-sponsored childcare facilities, including some in the banking sector, hospitals, and one at the University of Alaska Fairbanks:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Improving Systems

Public-Private Partnerships
 Employer - Sponsored
 Policy
 Regulations
 Other Innovative Solutions

[4:10:39 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 7 and said the task force contracted new studies across four areas to better inform the task force's recommendations. She explained that the task force contracted with the Stellar Group to conduct an updated

workforce study, which is now publicly available. The study involved interviews with childcare workers and employers across Alaska to identify key findings and recommendations. Additionally, she highlighted a contract with Agnew Beck to conduct intentional focus groups—11 with families, 10 with providers, and 5 with employers—engaging 130 participants. These focus groups aimed to identify barriers and solutions, aligning with the task force's discussions, and she noted strong synergy between both efforts. She also discussed the market rate survey, which the Child Care Program Office sends out every two years to providers, gathering data on rates charged by age group and waitlists. She acknowledged that while this survey informs subsidy rates, it does not provide a complete picture, prompting a shift to the cost-of-care study. The cost-of-care study, conducted by McKinley, examines start-up and operational costs, including geographical differences between rural and urban areas. The study is expected to be completed by the end of July.

[4:14:01 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN raised concerns about the challenges businesses face in providing childcare, citing a facility in his community built for daycare that has not served any children in ten years. He noted that many former employees of closed facilities are now offering home-based childcare at much lower costs than licensed centers. He wondered how the department factors informal childcare arrangements into the cost of care. He mentioned that facilities can require parents to pay for days of service that they do not need. He asked if there is any interest in regulating this practice.

[4:16:18 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK responded that a regulatory approach may not address the concerns, as childcare providers manage their own businesses and set their own policies. She emphasized the importance of encouraging innovation within the childcare sector, citing the Anchorage pilot program, which operates as a cooperative model. She mentioned that the cost-of-care study will consider these factors, particularly in relation to the childcare subsidy. She noted that over the next several months, the governor's task force will focus on subsidies and the Childcare Assistance Program, factoring in federal requirements related to attendance versus enrollment. She appreciated the questions and acknowledged that multiple approaches could be considered moving forward.

[4:18:01 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG added that the feedback from the public suggests a need for additional license types for childcare. She noted that the cost-of-care study will incorporate various models and a new methodology, which will evaluate expenses beyond just what providers charge. This includes considering the license type and the full spectrum of costs involved. She expressed confidence that the study will help address some of the concerns raised.

[4:18:49 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked when the information from the cost-of-care study would be available.

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG stated that the cost-of-care study will be completed by the end of July 2024. She noted that the task force will meet after the study's completion to evaluate the findings and make recommendations.

[4:19:18 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved slide 8 and provided a summary of Task Force meetings:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- 14 meetings
- 33 recommendations
- 2 public comment hearings
- 1 public comment period
- Final report submitted to Governor in December 2023

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG shared that the administrative order was signed in April, and after an initial organizational meeting, the task force began meeting twice a month with deep engagement. She noted that most meetings were virtual, with a couple in-person, and attendance ranged between 32 - 80 participants. She emphasized the diverse participation, referring to the "five P's": providers, childcare workers, parents, policymakers, and the press. This broad involvement helped ensure the public was informed and able to contribute to the process. She reflected on key insights and learning moments throughout the task force's work. She reaffirmed her commitment to maintaining a transparent process as chair, mentioning two public comment hearings and substantial feedback on the draft report. The final report was submitted to the governor in December, following public input.

[4:21:40 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON thanked the task force members and expressed her appreciation for the establishment of the task force. She then inquired about the contractors hired for the study and asked whether any funding was attached to the task force.

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG confirmed that federal relief funds were used to pay for the four contracts related to the cost-of-care study, market rate surveys, workforce analysis, and focus groups.

[4:22:22 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked where the public can access the recorded meetings and the final report.

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG replied that the public can Google "Task Force on Child Care Alaska," which will direct them to the Denali Daniels website. There, individuals can register to participate and access all meetings, resources, and reports that have been discussed, including the final report.

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether it is anticipated that the information will eventually be moved to a state website for archiving.

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG replied yes, eventually.

[4:23:05 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 9 and discussed public comment input. She stated the amount of public interest was impressive. Seventy-six individuals provided written comments, most of whom commented on all 33 topics. Twenty-six individuals provided either in person or virtual testimony. The statewide wide themes from public comments were:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Support of the Recommendations
- Workforce Support
- Wage Increases
- Recognition/Professionalization
- Child Care Access and Affordability
- Licensing and Requirements
- Education and Training
- Background Checks
- Funding and Sustainability
- Collaboration and Municipal Involvement
- Zoning Challenges

[4:23:50 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG moved to slide 10 and reiterated that the task force has been focused on learning, listening, and discussing key topics, including background checks, licensing, and workforce. As discussions progressed, it became clear that two additional areas—employers and tribal authority—needed to be included. The 33 recommendations from the task force are concentrated on these five areas. She stated that Ms. Van Kirk and Ms. Bergland would provide an overview of these areas and the corresponding recommendations.

[4:24:35 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK moved to slide 11 and explained that she would highlight significant recommendations made by the task force on the five focus areas. She noted that the governor's task force report is available online and proceeded to discuss in more detail the following recommendations:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Background Checks

Vision: Increase **timely, efficient, and affordable** background checks.

- Implement Livescan digital fingerprinting at State office buildings
- Expand access to mobile Livescan digital fingerprinting to increase accessibility for rural communities without a state office
- Establish a secure online portal for submitting background check applications to eliminate whitelisting requirements

[4:27:57 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL said he was glad to see progress on fingerprinting and asked whether the live scan system would be available to in-home direct care workers and others who have been waiting for improvements to the background check process since before the department split.

MS. VAN KIRK responded that the focus is on developing a pilot process for live scan fingerprinting that can be replicated across different sectors. She acknowledged that many sectors in

the state still rely on the manual fingerprinting process and expressed hope that the pilot program will lead to broader adoption and improvements in those areas as well.

[4:28:44 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if there were any benchmarks or goals to determine when the pilot would be deemed successful and whether it could be scaled up.

MS. VAN KIRK stated that the department plans to purchase the live scan machines and have them available within the next six to eight weeks. She added that within six months, there should be sufficient data to evaluate the program's effectiveness and determine how well it is working.

[4:29:21 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK on slide 11 discussed the establishment of a secure online portal, noting that additional security requirements were implemented following a cyberattack a few years ago. The department collaborated with the Office of Information Technology (OIT) to create this secure portal. In January, the department was able to remove the whitelisting requirement, simplifying the process for all childcare providers needing to submit applications through the portal.

[4:30:13 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked what whitelisting is.

MS. VAN KIRK explained that due to the cyberattack, it was necessary to ensure that when providers uploaded documents, they were coming from a secure environment. This requirement led to the need for a static IP address, meaning providers had to contact their internet service providers and pay for that service to meet the state's whitelisting requirements for approval.

[4:30:58 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK moved to slide 12 and discussed task force recommendations for licensing:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Licensing

Vision: Training for child care licensing staff to support consistent **technical assistance** and **accountability** to meet child care regulations.

- Navigation services
- Online application process
- Web-based forms
- Remove the Child Care Associate requirement

[4:34:46 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 13 and discussed task force recommendations on workforce:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Workforce

Vision: Elevate a professionally paid and supported workforce ensuring access to **benefits, professional development, and pathways to advancement.**

- Occupational endorsement for Administrator qualifications
- Build apprenticeship programs to support the educational pipeline for early childhood education
- Update child care assistance regulations to remove diploma or GED requirement for relative and in-home care

[4:38:10 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND on slide 13:

- Update regulations to allow Administrators to delegate authority to appropriate staff in their absence
- Provide Infant Early Childhood Mental Health services to build early educator skills to address challenging behaviors

[4:39:46 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification regarding the removal of the requirement for a diploma or GED, specifically how it affects eligibility for the program.

[4:40:06 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK explained that there are two different types of regulations: childcare assistance regulations and licensing

regulations. Licensing regulations do not require childcare staff to have a GED or diploma, although there are requirements for administrators. The childcare assistance program focuses on whether childcare centers are eligible to receive subsidies for families who qualify. The regulation in question removes the requirement that a childcare provider must have a diploma or GED to care for a child eligible for a subsidy and receive payment for providing that care.

SENATOR KIEHL asked for the minimum level of required education or training.

[4:41:19 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK clarified that the regulation applies specifically to approved relative providers, such as grandparents or other relatives of the child. For these providers, there would not be any formal educational requirements to care for the child.

SENATOR KIEHL acknowledged that the explanation was helpful but raised concerns about the balance between removing educational requirements and maintaining quality in childcare. He referenced Ms. Bergland's earlier statement that the number one indicator of childcare quality is the training of teachers. While apprenticeship programs and other skill-building approaches are valuable, he expressed unease about removing requirements such as having someone with a Child Development Associate (CDA) certification or even a GED or diploma. He asked how the focus on quality is maintained when these requirements are removed.

[4:42:41 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND explained that the current regulations, requiring proof of a high school diploma or GED, create an unintended barrier to accessing the childcare assistance subsidy, particularly for certain populations like immigrants or refugees who may have received formal education but lack the necessary documentation. She emphasized that there are other requirements in place for administrators, with multiple pathways to meet those qualifications, and noted that all teachers, including administrators, must complete annual professional development training to maintain and enhance the quality of care.

[4:43:43 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked for further explanation on providing infant and early childhood mental health services.

MS. VAN KIRK explained that there is a growing national recognition of the increased need for infant and early childhood

mental health services, particularly as more children in early childhood and school settings struggle with behavioral health issues. This has contributed to higher rates of burnout among providers. Early childhood mental health is an established field, offering support to both providers and children, particularly those who qualify for subsidies. Over the next six months, the task force will focus on improving access and affordability for children with behavioral health challenges or special needs and ensuring the workforce is prepared to care for them.

[4:45:16 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 14 and continued discussion of task force recommendations for the workforce:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Workforce

Benefits

- Create a sustainable state-funded wage subsidy for licensed child care professionals to support a living wage in Alaska
- Develop an option for child care professionals to become part of a health insurance network
- Establish a subsidy for licensed child care employees

Recognition

- Recognize child care professionals as essential workers in Alaska
- Recognize child care as a profession and adopt best practice language when referring to the child care sector

[4:46:02 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked what it means to recognize people as essential workers.

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG explained that recognizing childcare workers as essential means that during events or disasters that

overwhelm the community, parents rely on these workers to take care of their children. In practical terms, it acknowledges the critical role of the childcare sector. She emphasized the need to respect the profession by using appropriate terminology, suggesting that instead of calling it "daycare," it should be referred to as "child development" or "early childhood development." This shift in language is something she advocates for in presentations, regulations, and communication moving forward.

[4:47:09 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN referred to an earlier slide showing how some of the regulatory reforms align with federal program requirements, such as Head Start and Early Head Start. She asked if the removal of education requirements, similar to Senator Kiehl's question, intersects with those federal standards or how they fit together.

[4:47:35 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK said she appreciates the committee's focus on educational requirements for childcare providers, emphasizing the importance of maintaining quality. She clarified that while the regulations related to childcare assistance may remove certain barriers, they do not eliminate other critical qualifying components. For example, program administrators are still required to have 12 credits in specified areas, complete additional and annual training, and pass background checks. None of these administrative requirements have been changed or diminished.

MS. VAN KIRK also noted that federal guidelines influence how state regulations can be updated or changed, impacting the state's ability to use federal funding.

[4:48:52 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said [like] Head Start.

MS. VAN KIRK said yes. She explained that Alaska has a "Learn & Grow" system focused on building quality within early childhood education programs, including Head Start and childcare providers. She noted that while federal requirements related to quality may differ, Alaska, through its partnership with Thread and the quality improvement system, aims to create consistency across all programs by considering those various requirements and aligning them within the state's framework.

[4:49:40 PM](#)

Late CHAIR TOBIN expressed curiosity about how some of the state programs align with federal requirements for initiatives like Early Head Start and Parents as Teachers.

[4:49:54 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK said the department would follow up later.

[4:49:58 PM](#)

MS. BERGLAND moved to slide 15 and discussed task force recommendations on employer-based programs:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Employer-Based Programs

- Vision: Increase **collaboration** between the business sector and state government to design a child care system that meets the needs of Alaska's current and potential workforce.
- Consider tax credits/incentives to encourage the private sector to transform existing spaces into child care facilities
- Establish a position or contractor to assist employers and/or businesses with technical assistance to provide on-site or near-site child care
- Consider capital funding options for remodeling spaces to meet child care health and safety requirements for employer programs

[4:51:26 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER HEDBERG highlighted SB 237, the Alaska Affordability Act, which includes provisions related to childcare, allowing corporations to receive up to a 50 percent tax credit for investing in childcare. She noted that this aligns with the task force's first recommendation, encouraging corporate investment in childcare.

[4:51:52 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK moved to slide 16 and discussed some final recommendations that are really important in Alaska. On the task force there is representation from tribal child care facilities, which has helped navigate the difference between some tribal and state programs:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Recommendations: Tribal Authority

Vision: **Recognize Tribal authority** and create pathways for tribal providers and parents to access state subsidies.

Tribal Coordination

- Accept tribally approved health and safety standards; authorization to license facilities; creating pathways for tribal providers and parents to access state and federal subsidies.
- Work with federal partners to recognize tribally approved background check processes.

[4:53:46 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK moved to slide 18 and discussed subsidy, access and affordability, and quality. She expressed excitement about the next six months, during which the task force will focus on understanding and improving the childcare subsidy system. She explained that Alaska receives approximately \$22 million annually from the Administration for Children and Families, with 70 percent of that required to support the state's childcare subsidy programs, totaling around \$17 million per year. In the February meeting, the task force began examining the levers that impact subsidies: income eligibility requirements, state rates set by the market rate survey, and the family copay percentage.

[4:54:56 PM](#)

MS. VAN KIRK mentioned that the task force will also explore innovative models from other states, such as Michigan's Tri-Share model, to improve the system. She noted that only 7 percent of the childcare system utilizes subsidies, highlighting the need to innovate for the many families who are not accessing this support. Additionally, the task force will focus on increasing access for children with special needs and supporting behavioral health services for children.

[4:56:04 PM](#)

KATIE CAPOZZI, Member, Governor's Task Force on Child Care, Anchorage, Alaska, said the three testifiers gave a fantastic presentation. She offered to answer committee member's questions.

CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenters and said she looked forward to hearing more about the task force's final report and recommendations.

[4:57:19 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 3:30 p.m.