

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

March 14, 2023

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator Forrest Dunbar
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator James Kaufman, Vice Chair
Senator Löki Tobin

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

Commissioner Department of Family and Community Services
Kim Kovol - Anchorage

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

KIM KOVOL, Commissioner-Designee
Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the Commissioner-Designee for the Department of Family and Community Services

DAVID IGUELL, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns about the appointment of Commissioner-Designee Kovol.

JEANNIE MONK, Senior Vice President
Alaska Hospital and Healthcare Association
Juneau Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the appointment of Commissioner-Designee Kovol.

CHRIS KOLEROK, Director
Public Policy
Cook Inlet Housing Authority
Anchorage, Alaska- Designee Kovol.

JASMINE BOYLE, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the appointment of Commissioner-Designee Kovol.

BILL GALIC, representing self
Indiana

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the appointment of Commissioner-Designee Kovol.

DONNA AGUINIGA, Ph.D., representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the appointment of Commissioner-Designee Kovol.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:04 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Giessel, Dunbar, and Chair Wilson.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

[3:30:33 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced the consideration of the confirmation hearing for Kim Kovol as the commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). He asked Commissioner-Designee Kovol to give an overview of her experience and her vision for the department.

[3:31:28 PM](#)

KIM KOVOL, Commissioner-Designee, Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), Anchorage, Alaska, provided the following prepared testimony:

Thank you for this time to share with you a little bit about myself and my vision and priorities for DFCS.

I have been in the role of Acting Commissioner since July 1, 2022, when the Department of Health and Social Services reorganized into the Department of Family and Community Services and the Department of Health (DOH). Prior to this current role, I served as Governor Dunleavy's Special Assistant with an extensive social services portfolio focusing on domestic violence/sexual assault, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons, human and sex trafficking, homelessness, foster/child/elder care, opioids/fentanyl, and suicide prevention.

3:32:12 PM

While I am newer to government service, I have over 25 years of experience in the private and non-profit sectors to include executive leadership, management, licensed facilities administration, organizational development and restructure, logistics, and working in the human and social services realm with youth and adults. From large capacity expansion of youth services and licensed child-care facilities to addressing food insecurities and homelessness to working with municipal, state, and federal government agencies and business leaders in the environmental field, I have worked with numerous individuals, coalitions, and communities, established strong partnerships, and emphasized a high standard of performance within my organizations' unique work cultures. I am known for my "lovingly firm" leadership style which means I will listen, I will validate, and I will learn, then insist on training, education, data, collaboration, and solutions to address challenging systems and situations.

A little bit about my life: I grew up in a traditional military family in my younger years; we moved nationally and internationally quite often. My father retired from the US Navy as an E9 Command Master Chief, and my mother devoted her entire adult life to civil service with naval active-duty members and their families. During the Viet Nam War era, my parents helped thousands of refugees during Operation New Life on Grande Island, Subic Bay Philippines, with my mother being one of four translators for nearly 50,000

Vietnamese refugees. It was my parents intense and unwavering focus to help families - especially those experiencing intense trauma - that developed my heart of service.

[3:33:51 PM](#)

Growing up, I loved school and I always wanted to be a teacher. I graduated from San Diego State University with my bachelor's in liberal arts and studies, or more commonly known as K-8 Education. I especially loved working with the youngest of children and pursued administrative certification/qualifying credits in Early Childhood Education, which I did concurrently with my bachelor's degree. I returned to higher education after a long gap, attending the University of Alaska Anchorage and earned my master's in social work and designation as a LEND Fellow - it took me 27 years to cross that finish line, but it goes to show you that it's never too late to pursue higher learning and I do not give up when I want to accomplish a goal. For those who do not know, LEND stands for Leadership, Education in Neurodevelopmental and related Disabilities, and my focus as a LEND Fellow was identifying service access and availability, and systemic navigation for individuals and families living with Autism.

On that note, Autism is a major part of what defines me. Two of my three children were diagnosed with Autism in their preschool years. Their unique and complex health, medical, behavioral, educational, and workforce needs have been interwoven into my life as their mother, advocate, and biggest cheerleader. I am the legal guardian of my 23-year-old son, who requires 24-hour care and supervision. I shared the story of my son and our family's journey at the Alaska Mental Health Trust Improving Lives conference this past fall; this was a risk to reveal something so incredibly personal, but I felt it was critical for my colleagues, fellow health professionals, social workers, and educators to truly hear that in this role, I understand the challenges our families face and that I am earnest to collaborate with stakeholders to examine our current policies and systems, and address the needs of youth, adults, and families struggling to find resources, especially in instances of complex care and placement.

3:35:54 PM

I am honored and excited about the prospects and opportunities that this new department presents; it is important to note that these divisions are not new, but this reorganization effectively promised and pledged to Alaskans that an intensive and meaningful level of engagement, focus, attention, redress, and corrections will occur, and I can confidently say has been occurring. Within my first 100 plus days, I visited nearly all our division sites statewide to listen to staff, stakeholders, partners, and constituents - with a handful of sites still left to visit this spring and summer. I want to recognize our resilient staff who acknowledge the workforce crisis we are all experiencing, and how we can implement their suggestions on employee wellness and to recognize their efforts. A moment that resonates with me occurred while visiting with our Bethel OCS staff. One case worker described to me their routine to plan, pack, and travel to remote sites to assist families and children - both by plane and by boat. This case worker told me they were exhausted, but picked up that monster backpack again and again because it was their calling. I also want to acknowledge the numerous personal talks and correspondence I have had with residents and patients in our homes and facilities, from quiet interactions and one on one conversations to spontaneous mini town halls. The youth and families from our child welfare agency contacts have been emotional, enlightening, constructive in critiques, and extremely moving.

My vision for DFCS is to be person focused and this applies to our youth, adults, elders, their families, and our staff. Ensuring we have the highest standard of care, engagement and service to our clients, residents and patients is a priority for me, as well as addressing the needs of our staff and workforce in wellness, trainings, wages, and retention. In addition, addressing the needs of youth and adults in our care with high acuity and complex placements is an absolute priority that requires both the public and private sectors working together. We need to be brave and innovative to try creative solutions and reflect with our partners on what works for their communities and what does not.

3:38:00 PM

With this reorganization, I have received feedback reinforcing my observations that our divisions and partners have had more opportunities to collaborate and focus on delivery services and exchanges, establish both divisional and departmental cross programming opportunities, encourage more mentorships, internships and practicum placements with our local university and educational systems, and examine our role in the child welfare and elder care systems in our state. I want to stress that social determinants of health such as adequate housing, access to nutrition and health care, safe childhood experiences and relationships, and educational opportunities are part of the overall system for healthy children, elders, families, and communities where our collective attention and investment should be leveraged. Addressing poverty, food insecurity and substance abuse is not an area that one division or department can be expected to solve through our direct services in response to individuals or families in crisis. We all play a role in ensuring our families and our communities are safe and able to thrive.

3:38:59 PM

I want to wrap up on our guiding principles that we created recently, as I take great pride in the direction that our leadership team and staff strive for:

We will:

- Strengthen lives through meaningful connections with families, communities, Tribes, and providers.
- Provide safe, person-centered care with integrity and dignity to the Alaskans we serve.
- Advance an agency culture that prioritizes the well-being of our workforce.
- Mobilize innovative solutions to complex challenges.

Again, thank you for this opportunity.

3:39:35 PM

SENATOR GIESSEL asked her to talk about staffing at the Alaska Pioneer Homes.

[3:39:59 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER KOVOL replied that staffing challenges vary depending on the position, but the Pioneer Homes need more well-trained nurses and support staff because of the rising number of residents with unique conditions and needs. The percentage of residents with diseases related to dementia has increased from a low of 53 percent to as high as 79 percent.

[3:40:37 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL asked if it would be helpful if licensure for certified nurse aids required specialized dementia training.

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL replied that she always supports more training and education for staff, but before adding a new requirement for training she would need to know more about what the time commitment and cost would be for the current and future staff.

[3:41:48 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON observed that the four divisions that fall under DFCS support vulnerable Alaskans. He asked what her vision was for communicating and interacting with the public about what's happening in those four divisions and how they are fulfilling their mission.

He mentioned the specific purpose for and difficult decisions made by the Office of Children's Services and serious maintenance issues at the Fairbanks Pioneer Homes that serve very vulnerable adults

[3:43:23 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL replied that DFCS has a communication plan to educate the public about their roles and statutory duties. There are sensitive topics that they cannot discuss because of HIPAA and ongoing litigation, but they can share information about the roles staff play, opportunities in the community for interaction, and how the public can participate in statutory and regulatory changes. Educating the public about DFCS services is top priority. She acknowledged that there were negative stories about the divisions and said she was committed to working hard to educate citizens about their roles and share stories of successes.

[3:45:09 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked her to talk about increasing the number of beds at API or reducing the demand.

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL replied that API is licensed for 80 beds and between 70 and 76 beds are filled. One wing has dual beds that are permanently attached and for safety reasons both beds may not be filled. Ten beds are for youth, ten are for forensics, and the remaining beds are for adults. She said short of adding another building or floor, the department was looking at community- and jail-based programs for individuals who need help but don't need to be institutionalized.

[3:46:19 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked whether the department was looking seriously at adding a building or a third floor to the existing facility. If not, he asked the extent to which the community-based and jail-based programming option was reflected in the department's budget request and what challenges had been identified to standing up those programs.

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL confirmed that the department had submitted a budget request for the community- and jail-based programs. To the question about expanding the existing facility, she opined that it was up to the state to make a decision about treatment options for adults and youth, and whether that was adding another building or using partners and leveraging those existing programs.

SENATOR DUNBAR asked which direction she preferred.

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL articulated a preference for community-based programs so adults and children are able to receive needed services that are close to their homes and community. She said institutions serve a purpose but too much effort is put into the notion that a building will solve the problem. The community has to be involved.

CHAIR WILSON said he was pleased to hear her response.

[3:49:05 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON opened public testimony on the appointment of Kim Kovol as commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS).

[3:49:33 PM](#)

DAVID IGUELL, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, stated that he is a forensic journalist whose mission is to speak up for people who need an advocate. He cited Proverbs 31:8. He related that in recent months he'd written three stories about the Office of

Children's Services (OCS) and the children that OCS had taken from their mothers. He's come to believe that people involved in the OCS system are reluctant to speak up out of fear of retaliation. He said Commissioner-Designee Kovol seems nice, but he looks at actions and results, not words. During her tenure he had seen neither. He identified four trouble areas one of which was removing children from their homes and transferring them repeatedly. In one instance, autistic children were transferred 57 times. He said \$450 million passes through OCS and he was concerned about who was getting that money. Former Representative Tammie Wilson raised questions about OCS's finances in 2016 and there was never an investigation. He charged that big business was involved. He mentioned the class action lawsuit that the department is trying to get dismissed and the grand jury investigation into OCS that was stopped by Supreme Court order in 1993. He also pointed out that 65 percent of the foster children in the OCS system are Alaska Native.

CHAIR WILSON suggested he submit his testimony in writing and it would be uploaded to BASIS as part of the record.

[3:54:31 PM](#)

JEANNIE MONK, Senior Vice President, Alaska Hospital and Healthcare Association (AHHA), Juneau, stated that, on behalf of AHHA, she was pleased to testify that Kim Kovol is the best possible choice for commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). She is actively collaborating and has initiated monthly meetings with the CEO of AHHA. Her education and work experience make her well suited for the role. Importantly, she brings heart to her work. She is committed to improving life for Alaskan children, adults, and families. She has a long history of advocacy and unwavering support for the homeless, people experiencing domestic violence, children in foster care, and children with autism. She will do everything in her power to make the new department effective and ensure services meet the needs of Alaskans. Commissioner-Designee Kovol has AHHA's full support.

[3:56:32 PM](#)

CHRIS KOLEROK, Director, Public Policy, Cook Inlet Housing Authority, Anchorage, Alaska, stated support for Kim Kovol as commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). He said he could talk about her exemplary qualifications but instead he would talk about her dedication. Two decades ago she forsook higher pay to serve people whose lives were measured not in sales but in completed high school diplomas; not in bonuses but in safe hours after school; and not in corporate

salaries but in hungry mouths fed. Her dedication is evidenced by long hours in social services. He said their politics don't always align but their humanity is never out of tune. He urged support for her speedy confirmation.

[3:58:44 PM](#)

JASMINE BOYLE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, stated support for Kim Kovol as Commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). For context, she shared that she has more than 20 years of executive experience in the care of vulnerable people. She has worked with Commissioner-designee Kovol for more than five years both professionally and in volunteer efforts that relate to the work for which she will be responsible. While their political views are not aligned, they have a shared commitment to the most vulnerable of Alaskans. They share the belief that it is possible to build systems with a budget rooted in reality and a heart committed to the people of Alaska. Working together on projects, she demonstrated thoughtfulness, partnership, pragmatism, and commitment. She is open to innovation, committed to staff, and unwaveringly supportive of vulnerable people. She opined that Commissioner-designee Kovol has the requisite skills, dedication, and commitment to build the new department to benefit Alaskans for years to come.

[4:01:34 PM](#)

BILL GALIC, representing self, Indiana, stated that he was a retired frontline supervisor in the Kenai OCS office and a former professor of social work who had Commissioner-designee Kovol in several master's-level courses, including social policy. Before returning to school, she had a full career in the social service field. She also has a background in private sector business management. She understands both the need for and cost of providing services. The governor was quick to identify her skills. Beyond her professional experience, she has both the personality and work ethic to successfully fill this important leadership position. Since assuming this role, she has actively reached out to the department, employees, community members, and community providers throughout the state. She sees the big picture and has a perspective that balances the possibilities and the limitations of what the state can achieve in its work with clients. Nobody can solve all the problems the department faces, but Commissioner-designee Kovol is certainly well prepared for this appointment. He recommended the committee support her confirmation.

[4:04:06 PM](#)

DONNA AGUINIGA, Ph.D., representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that she is an associate professor in the School of Social Work and has a master's and Ph.D. in social work. She is speaking as a professional in support of the appointment of Kim Kovol as the commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). While serving together on the UAA Center for Community Engagement and Learning Advisory Council, she witnessed Commissioner-designee Kovol's efforts to strengthen the connection between the university and the community and create opportunities for students to collaborate and develop their advocacy and fundraising skills to fight hunger within the community. Another collaborative effort allowed social work students to develop their professional intervening and listening skills. This volunteer work led to Ms. Kovol applying to the Master of Social Work program and earning her MSW degree. She cares deeply about improving social services in Alaska, is empathetic to the voices and concerns of people and organizations, and understands the value of research and data in formulating public policy. They don't share the same political views but Commissioner-designee Kovol excels at bridging differences. She brings that key skill to this position.

[4:06:46 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON closed public testimony and asked Commissioner-designee if she had any closing comments.

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNEE KOVOL said she appreciates both the kind and critical words.

CHAIR WILSON solicited a motion to forward the name of the appointee from committee.

[4:07:43 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL moved to forward the following name to a joint session for consideration:

Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services
Kim Kovol - Anchorage, Alaska

Signing the reports regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[4:08:01 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON found no objection and the name was forwarded.

4:08:09 PM

At ease.

CHAIR WILSON reconvened the meeting and made committee announcements.

4:09:13 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wilson adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 4:09 p.m.