

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 5, 2024

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator David Wilson, Chair  
Senator James Kaufman, Vice Chair  
Senator Löki Tobin  
Senator Forrest Dunbar  
Senator Cathy Giessel

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :

**State Medical Board**

David Barnes - Palmer  
David Wilson - Palmer

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

**Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees**

Brent Fisher - Anchorage  
John Sturgeon - Anchorage

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

SENATE BILL NO. 241

"An Act relating to medical assistance demonstration projects established by the Department of Health."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DAVID BARNES, Appointee

State Medical Board  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the State Medical Board.

DAVID WILSON, Appointee  
State Medical Board  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the State Medical Board.

BRENT FISHER, Appointee  
Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees.

JOHN STURGEON, Appointee  
Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:31:21 PM](#)

**CHAIR DAVID WILSON** called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Tobin, Kaufman, Dunbar, Giessel, and Chair Wilson.

CHAIR WILSON turned the gavel over to Vice Chair Kaufman.

At ease

#### **CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :** **STATE MEDICAL BOARD**

[3:32:53 PM](#)

**VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN** reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of governor's appointees David Barnes and David Wilson to the State Medical Board.

[3:33:14 PM](#)

DAVID BARNES, Appointee, State Medical Board, Palmer, Alaska, testified as the governor's appointee to the State Medical Board. He provided an overview of his education and work history, noting he completed his internal medicine residency in

Denver in 1999 and worked for major hospitals there before moving to Alaska in 2003. He has worked extensively in inpatient and outpatient medicine and has served on the medical board for a year, expressing a desire to continue. His goal is to regulate via the statutes the safe practice of medicine while ensuring physicians have the freedom to practice appropriately, recognizing Alaska's unique challenges, particularly the difficulty in recruiting and retaining physicians due to its remoteness. Barnes expressed concern about telemedicine, stating that while it has helped, it also raises issues with out-of-state physicians providing remote care without being connected to Alaska.

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SENATOR TOBIN thanked Mr. Barnes for his comments, particularly regarding ensuring physicians have the freedom to practice as trained. She asked for his thoughts on the recent process happening to physician assistants (PAs) that is within the medical board's purview, specifically regarding a regulation that was propagated. She inquired about the amount of feedback received and Mr. Barnes' thoughts on the regulations and the process. She expressed hope that everyone trained to provide medical care would feel supported by the medical board.

[3:37:35 PM](#)

DR. BARNES explained that the issue began before his time on the board, and he viewed it as a learning experience. Initially, there was a push to increase the qualifications and hours required for physician assistants (PAs), which seemed beneficial but, in practice, exceeded the requirements for other professionals like nurse practitioners. He noted that this approach would have restricted access to care in remote locations. After reviewing public testimony, the board recognized it was not a good idea. Barnes believes the current consensus is that if PAs are qualified and have reasonable experience, they should be able to practice. He added that there is supervision for PAs with the doctor / PA relationship.

[3:38:49 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN expressed appreciation for Dr. Barnes' insights and found it helpful, noting that efforts are also underway to ensure physician assistants can practice independently if they have the necessary background and credentials along with having received the adequate oversight that is available.

SENATOR TOBIN asked for insight into the current workload of the medical board. She inquired about the main issues the board is facing.

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DR. BARNES responded that the board handles numerous physician complaints, which require significant review and has been the biggest workload issue. He noted that the volume of cases is variable, sometimes overwhelming but at other times lighter, similar to his own work experience. Barnes mentioned that while there are moments when he wishes for more board members, at other times the current number feels sufficient.

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VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN found no further questions for Dr. Barnes and asked Mr. Wilson to begin his testimony.

[3:40:35 PM](#)

DAVID WILSON, Appointee, State Medical Board, Palmer, Alaska, testified as the governor's appointee to the State Medical Board. He provided a brief overview of his work history, stating he is a pilot for Alaska Airlines and has lived in rural Alaska, where he experienced the healthcare challenges native communities face. He said his time flying residents around Kodiak and also from St. Mary's to Bethel and transporting Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation medical staff to villages helped him appreciate the resilience and resourcefulness of Native people and the commitment of healthcare professionals serving them. Since moving to Palmer in 2000, Wilson's family has benefited from excellent local medical care.

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MR. WILSON stated that his interest in serving on the State Medical Board stems from a desire to give back to the medical community. He sees the role of a public member as representing two perspectives: first, the patient's perspective, particularly from rural Alaska where logistical challenges in healthcare access are significant; and second, his experience in human factors analysis and aviation safety. He drew parallels between the State Medical Board and the Professional Standards Board he currently serves on. He highlighted the importance of unbiased professionals pursuing truth with integrity, as both aviation and medicine demand high levels of responsibility and life-altering decision-making under pressure.

[3:46:17 PM](#)

MR. WILSON warned of the dangers of non-compliance, which he has seen in aviation, often beginning early in a career and sometimes being overlooked due to high demand for talent. He emphasized that professionalism and non-compliance are contagious, with the latter leading to confusion and distrust. Wilson believes that behavioral deviations in regulated industries like medicine and aviation are often driven by external pressures, and addressing the root causes is essential for meaningful improvement. He aims to bring his experience in helping pilots resolve underlying issues to the Alaska State Medical Board to foster professionalism and compliance.

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SENATOR TOBIN said his volunteer work is commendable. She asked for his insights concerning PAs interactions with the medical board, the regulatory process they face, and their ability to work independently, especially in rural Alaska where medical providers are needed.

[3:49:06 PM](#)

MR. WILSON explained that the issue of PA regulation was new to him, and he approached it from an educational perspective, without a strong opinion. He emphasized that, coming from a rural Alaska Native community, his primary concern is ensuring that care is not compromised. He noted that much of the public feedback highlighted a shortage of PAs, which was driving the push to change regulations.

MR. WILSON sought further information and learned that few PAs are coming out of school, which he found concerning. He suggested exploring solutions similar to the aviation industry, where airlines have invested in flight schools to increase the pilot supply through funding and grants. Additionally, after speaking with organizations like the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC), he found that staffing needs often exceed available funding, which could also be a barrier.

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MR. WILSON further explained that, in aviation, regulations are often shaped by the insurance underwriting community more than by regulations. He gave an example of how minimum experience levels for pilots, though set by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), are often raised by insurers due to high premiums for less-experienced pilots. He suggested that if PA supervision and oversight are removed, the medical underwriting community might respond similarly, making malpractice insurance prohibitively expensive for PAs.

[3:53:59 PM](#)

MR. WILSON concluded by stating that responsible regulatory limits are essential, as without them, the insurance industry may intervene and impose high premiums or exclusions, making it difficult for PAs to practice in rural areas due to perceived risks.

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SENATOR TOBIN asked whether the State Medical Board would provide oversight of PAs, whether they practice collaboratively or untethered.

[3:54:43 PM](#)

MR. WILSON stated his belief that oversight would continue in either instance, unless PAs decided to create their own board.

[3:55:09 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN opened public testimony on the confirmation of Dr. Barnes and Mr. Wilson to the State Medical Board; finding none, he closed public testimony.

**ALASKA MENTAL HEALTH TRUST AUTHORITY BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

[3:55:47 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN announced the consideration of governor's appointees Brent Fisher and John Sturgeon to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.

[3:56:06 PM](#)

BRENT FISHER, Appointee, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees, Anchorage, Alaska, he stated he has served on the board for three years and is seeking reappointment. He currently serves as vice chair and has previously held the positions of secretary and finance committee chair. Fisher provided a brief history of his military service and education, noting that he has 30 years of experience in various healthcare sub-industries. He has also served on the board of directors for several associations, is a Fellow in three medical groups, and has published articles on various healthcare-related topics.

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MR. FISHER expressed that he has enjoyed his past three years on the Trust Board and would like to continue serving, as several projects are still in progress. He highlighted efforts to create more transparency within the Trust, particularly regarding operations and financial matters. One of the board's biggest

projects has been the Crisis Now initiative, which provides mental health counseling and suicide prevention services. This project aims to replace the traditional involvement of police and troopers with crisis management teams. He noted that the initiative has been growing across Alaska and will eventually provide telephonic counseling services to all areas, including remote villages. The Trust is also funding local crisis management teams where possible.

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MR. FISHER emphasized the importance of collaborating with community providers to support those with mental health disorders and to offer preemptive assistance to children in foster care before they require more intensive services. He praised the current Board of Trustees and their collaboration with staff to make these initiatives a reality and expressed his desire to continue this work for another five-year term.

[4:00:11 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN invited Mr. Sturgeon to testify.

[4:00:26 PM](#)

JOHN STURGEON, Appointee, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees, Anchorage, Alaska, shared that he has lived in Alaska for 54 years. He served in the U.S. Navy and completed two tours in Vietnam. He shared his education and work history in forestry. He has also been a member of the Mental Health Trust for the past five years. Additionally, he served on the Board of Directors for Pacific Northwest Medical University, which focuses on training doctors to work in rural and underserved areas.

MR. STURGEON said that as chair of the Natural Resource Committee for the Mental Health Trust, he has worked closely with the Mental Health Land Trust Office to generate funds through timber, mining, leases, and other resources, noting that the Trust must earn all its revenue without government support. He highlighted the Trust's focus on prevention programs, such as Crisis Now and the foster care initiative, to which their efforts added a couple million funded dollars. He expressed his desire to continue serving on the Trust for another five years.

[4:03:43 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN opened public testimony on the appointments of Mr. Fisher and Mr. Sturgeon to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees; finding none, he closed public testimony.

[4:04:11 PM](#)

At ease

[4:04:20 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN reconvened the meeting.

[4:04:22 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:04:46 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN moved that the following appointees be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

**State Medical Board**

David Barnes - Palmer

David Wilson - Palmer

**Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees**

Brent Fisher - Anchorage

John Sturgeon - Anchorage

SENATOR TOBIN reminded members that signing the report(s) 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.

[4:04:52 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN found no objection and in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee forwarded the appointments to a joint session for consideration.

[4:04:55 PM](#)

At ease

[4:06:12 PM](#)

VICE-CHAIR KAUFMAN reconvened the meeting.

[4:06:39 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Vice Chair Kaufman adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 4:06 p.m.