

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

March 30, 2023

3:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Scott Kawasaki, Chair
Senator Matt Claman, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator Kelly Merrick

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ALASKA STATE DEFENSE FORCE

- HEARD

SENATE BILL NO. 71

"An Act relating to pay for the Alaska State Defense Force; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 71

SHORT TITLE: PAY FOR AK DEFENSE FORCE

SPONSOR(S): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

02/15/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/15/23	(S)	STA, FIN
03/30/23	(S)	STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

DR. CRAIG CHRISTENSON, Deputy Commissioner
Military and Veterans Affairs
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in the overview of the Alaska State Defense Force and introduced SB 71.

BRIGADIER GENERAL SIMON BROWN
Alaska Defense Force
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in the overview of the Alaska State Defense Force and the introduction of SB 71.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:31:49 PM](#)

CHAIR SCOTT KAWASAKI called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Claman, Wielechowski, Merrick, and Chair Kawasaki. Senator Bjorkman arrived during the course of the meeting.

OVERVIEW: ALASKA STATE DEFENSE FORCE **SB 71-PAY FOR AK DEFENSE FORCE**

[The ASDF overview and SB 71 are listed at two separate agenda items but they were conflated in this meeting.]

[3:32:40 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI announced an overview of the Alaska State Defense Force.

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At ease

[3:34:13 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI reconvened the meeting.

[3:34:30 PM](#)

DR. CRAIG CHRISTENSEN, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska, began the presentation with a chart that shows the DMVA organization. He pointed to the dotted line within which are the Air National Guard, the Army National Guard, the Alaska State Defense Force, and the Alaska Naval Militia. They are identified by statute as the Alaska Organized Militia and all but the Alaska State Defense Force are federally commissioned members of the United States Armed Forces under the Department of Defense (DoD).

The Alaska State Defense Force is a state organization and the members are volunteers. When there is a declared disaster, ASDF members are called to state active duty on paid status. However, if they are called to state active duty to do specific training, they are called under unpaid status. He noted that [SB 71] seeks to change this provision in statute. If the bill were to pass, volunteer ASDF members who are called to state active duty for training would be called under paid status.

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BRIGADIER GENERAL SIMON BROWN, Alaska State Defense Force, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska, continued the overview of the Alaska State Defense Force, speaking to the motto of the Alaska State Defense Force.

Closest to Home and Ready to Serve
200+ Members in 23 Detachments across Alaska

The Alaska State Defense Force (ASDF) is established under AS 26.05.100 as a component of the Alaska Organized Militia, as a volunteer force. Their role is to augment and compliment the Alaska National Guard and Alaska Naval Militia during state activations.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN turned to slide 4 to discuss the mission statement of the Alaska State Defense Force.

Mission

The Alaska State Defense Force collaborates with citizens, communities, native corporations, nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies to train an organized state military reserve to prepare, plan, respond, mitigate, and recover from natural and man-made disasters.

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BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN displayed the picture on slide 5 of five members of the Alaska State Defense Force and spoke to the following:

Membership consists of

- Current and former credentialed law enforcement personnel members

- Civilian Professionals who enhance engineering, HAZMAT, cyber, medical, and communication operations
- Military veterans who enhance domain awareness, survival skills, leadership, and adaptability
- Teammates with diverse educational backgrounds

All members are dedicated to the safety and security of the communities and state they live in.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN turned to slide 6 that has a picture of Alaska State Defense Force members carrying flags down a street as community members follow. He highlighted that these members train to support Alaska in the following ways.

- Community Outreach and Participation
- Rural Alaska Resiliency Partnership
- Emergency Response and Support
- Support of Civil Authority
- Domain Awareness
- Communications Operations
- Medical Station Support

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BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN advanced to slide 7 that has two pictures of ASDF members who responded to a community in need. He highlighted ASDF's recent responses:

- Typhoon Merbok (SEPT 2022)
- COVID-19 Pandemic (FEB 2020 - DEC 2021)
- Wildland Fire Season (Summer 2019)
- South Central Earthquake (DEC 2018 - FEB 2019)

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN continued to slide 8, "Valuable Assets to their Families, Communities, & Alaska."

Benefits to Members:

- Discipline
- Ethics
- Pride in work, community, state
- Health and welfare
- Technical & educational skills
- Networking Opportunities

Benefits to Employers:

- Better trained employee
- Improved self-motivation
- Improved technical skills
- Promotes working as a team

Benefits to Community:

- Often "first on scene" in communities affected by disasters because members stay in their communities
- Incident Command trained members available during emergency response
- May be more readily available to respond to incidents that do not rise to the level of a state emergency

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DR. CHRISTENSEN explained that when the Alaska State Defense Force is activated, the members work under the National Guard structure. He described the help communities received quickly when the Alaska State Defense Force was activated to respond after Typhoon Merbok.

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SENATOR MERRICK asked whether members of the Alaska State Defense Force were authorized to carry weapons.

DR. CHRISTENSEN said no, but DMVA is working on a policy to allow members to carry weapons if they have had significant training and are under orders from the governor or adjutant general. The standards would be the same as Alaska State Troopers.

SENATOR MERRICK asked who covers the cost if a member is injured during training or while they're activated.

DR. CHRISTENSEN replied that injuries would be paid by Workers' Compensation.

SENATOR MERRICK referenced backup materials in members' packets and asked how DMVA planned to recruit up to 300 people in rural communities throughout Alaska that are not on the road system.

[3:45:14 PM](#)

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN advised that several communities had already reached out asking for a local detachment. He continued that DMVA staff were currently recruiting to start detachments

in the communities of Gambell and Savoonga. He relayed his goal to establish five-person teams in as many communities as possible. Each team would have a communications specialist, a domain awareness specialists, a person with medical training, and a leader.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN joined the committee.

SENATOR MERRICK asked him to follow up with the number of responders to each of the disasters listed on slide 7.

DR. CHRISTENSEN agreed to provide the information. He continued to discuss the expansion efforts this year in rural areas to increase awareness and elicit interest in ASDF. He acknowledged that the goal of increasing membership to 500 might take two years.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked what happens if a member who has not been activated fails to follow an order.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN responded that ASDF follows the Alaska Military Code of Justice, but there has never been an ASDF member who has refused or indicated they didn't want to do what they were asked to do. Wanting to help others is the ethical background recruiters are looking for.

DR. CHRISTENSEN clarified that ASDF members are volunteers so they're asked to help; what they've found is that when a call goes out, there is an overwhelming response from these volunteers.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN said his organizational rule is to look at family needs first, then whether the volunteer is a civilian employer, and finally the defense force.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN wondered whether activating ASDF members would save money for the state.

DR. CHRISTENSEN said he views ASDF as an insurance policy to ensure that somebody is going to be available to help if disaster strikes a community. DMVA believes that the people best suited to do this work are the people who live in the community and are part of the ASDF.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN highlighted that the Alaska State Defense Force trained for about 2,700 hours last year and the time was all volunteer. He said he believes that it's a savings to the state to have trained people available to respond in the event of an emergency.

SENATOR BJORKMAN referenced the zero fiscal note [for SB 71] and asked what the anticipated appropriation would be in the future.

DR. CHRISTENSEN responded that DMVA is not requesting any money to cover drill training. DMVA is seeking authorization to pay ASDF members who are called to state active duty to do specific training. He described the three-day training to operate water purification systems that can be moved into a community in need of clean water as an example of the specific type of training for which DMVA would like to bring ASDF teams onto paid active duty. Bringing a five-member team to a site for that training costs from \$3,000 to \$3,500.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what he expects the governor's request for \$2.5 million to be used for relative to SB 71.

DR. CHRISTENSEN returned attention to the organization chart on slide 2 and explained that part of the \$2.1 million request is to stand up ASDF as a division under the Alaska Organized Militia. This would involve training and equipping the existing 200 members and the anticipated 300 additional members. The commander would serve as the director of the division, which is the existing model for the Air National Guard and the Army National Guard.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked Brigadier General Brown if he was a volunteer.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN nodded in the affirmative.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked who paid for his uniform.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN said he paid for it.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether all the volunteers had uniforms.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BROWN said yes, but cold weather survival gear is in short supply so part of the \$2.1 million request would be used for that equipment.

SB 71-PAY FOR AK DEFENSE FORCE

[3:58:23 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 71 "An Act relating to pay for the Alaska State Defense Force; and providing for an effective date."

[3:58:38 PM](#)

DR. CRAIG CHRISTENSEN, Deputy Commissioner Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska, explained that SB 71 proposes to amend AS 26.05.260(i) such that members of the Alaska State Defense Force will be on paid active duty status for specific training. In these specific circumstances, ASDF members would be paid the same as other members of the Alaska Organized Militia [and under the same conditions as provided for state officials and employees under AS 39.20.110-39.20.170]. The bill also removes the last sentence in subsection (i) that prohibits pay or allowances for ASDF members for training or community service activities. He cited the example that was given during the presentation about ASDF members traveling to receive three-day training to learn how to operate a mobile water purification system that can be moved into a community after a disaster. He continued that an official request from a governmental agency to help during the upcoming Arctic Winter Games is an example of community service work that would be paid if the bill were to pass.

Section 1 of SB 71 read as follows:

* Section 1. AS 26.05.260(i) is amended to read:
(i) When active state service is authorized by the governor or by the adjutant general as the governor's designee, members of the organized militia are entitled to receive, for each day of active service under AS 26.05.070, allowances to the same extent, in the same manner, and under the same conditions as provided for state officials and employees under AS 39.20.110 - 39.20.170. [HOWEVER, PAY OR ALLOWANCES ARE NOT AUTHORIZED FOR TRAINING OR COMMUNITY SERVICE ACTIVITIES OF MEMBERS OF THE ALASKA STATE DEFENSE FORCE.]

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CHAIR KAWASAKI clarified that AS 39.20.110 relates to per diem, mileage allowance, travel costs and travel outside the state for public officers and employees.

4:01:05 PM

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether SB 71 would authorize the members to be paid when they gather for two-day or quarterly trainings.

DR. CHRISTENSEN answered yes, but there is no intention to pay ASDF members for routine drill exercises. The idea is to pay per diem, travel costs, and lodging when members are brought on for specific training.

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SENATOR MERRICK asked what the pay range is for ASDF members.

DR. CHRISTENSEN replied that the statute provides that state active duty pay for members of the Alaska Organized Militia follows the military pay scale. He added that he didn't have the pay scale roster with him, but he could provide examples of pay for several different ranks.

SENATOR MERRICK asked how a volunteer's rank is determined.

BRIGADIER GENERAL SIMON BROWN Alaska State Defense Force, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska, explained that ASDF rankings start with private and continue through general, just like the Army. The ranking for an individual is based on their time in service, military background, and experience.

DR. CHRISTENSEN added that the Alaska State Defense Force mirrors the Army rank structure, so someone who leaves the US Armed Forces at a certain rank would enter the ASDF at that same rank. People who weren't in the service but have a special skill are given an equivalent rank. If not, they start at the lowest rank.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI opened public testimony on SB 71; finding none, he closed public testimony.

SENATOR CLAMAN questioned the reason that the fiscal note indicates no fiscal impact when the point of the bill is to periodically allow payment for training.

DR. CHRISTENSEN said the first step is to receive authorization. After that, there would be a budget request for significant training, but a lot of the training would still be absorbed in

the existing budget, which is \$400,000. He didn't anticipate a request for additional funding specifically for SB 71.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI held SB 71 in committee for future consideration.

[4:07:59 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kawasaki adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 4:07 p.m.