

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

February 20, 2025

9:14 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair
Representative Donna Mears, Co-Chair
Representative Carolyn Hall
Representative Ky Holland
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Justin Ruffridge

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Senator Robert Myers

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 35

"An Act relating to the use and possession of electronic devices by prisoners."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 35

SHORT TITLE: PRISONERS: ELECTRONIC DEVICE ACCESS/USE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) HIMSCHOOT

01/22/25	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(H)	CRA, STA
02/20/25	(H)	CRA AT 9:00 AM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

ELLA LUBIN, Staff
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Alaska State Legislature

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for HB 35 on behalf of Representative Himschoot, prime sponsor.

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Corrections
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 35.

BRANDON JONES, Superintendent
Highland Mountain Detention Center
Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about the tablet pilot program during the hearing on HB 35.

TERI TIBBETT, Coordinator
Alaska Reentry Partnership;
Co-Chair, Juneau Reentry Coalition
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HB 35.

MARSHA OSS, Coordinator
Fairbanks Reentry Coalition
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HB 35.

DON HABEGER, Coalition Coordinator
Juneau Reentry Coalition
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HB 35.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:14:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DONNA MEARS called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:14 a.m. Representatives Hall, Holland, Prax, Ruffridge, Himschoot, and Mears were present at the call to order. Also present was Senator Myers.

HB 35-PRISONERS: ELECTRONIC DEVICE ACCESS/USE

[9:15:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 35, "An Act relating to the use and possession of electronic devices by prisoners."

[9:16:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT, as prime sponsor, presented HB 35. She paraphrased the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 35 recognizes the functionality of 21st century technology and the role it can play in reforming Alaska's correctional system. Current Alaska statute does not include guidelines on prisoner use of electronic devices, making it difficult for the Department of Corrections (DOC) to provide devices to prisoners. HB 35 specifies the access a prisoner is allowed under DOC supervision in an effort to improve rehabilitation and assist with reentry.

Tablets and computers are not a luxury. Instead, they are tools that are extremely helpful with the rehabilitation process. They allow prisoners to access educational materials, gain experience with workplace technology, and improve connectivity to telehealth. Electronic devices also offer supplemental online visitation as a solution to Alaska's geographic vastness. Perhaps most importantly, HB 35 will introduce prisoners to common electronic devices and programs that are now ubiquitous within our society.

Alaska is one of the last states in the nation to introduce devices into prisons. Many other states have implemented similar legislation in an effort to enhance prison conditions and reduce contraband brought into correctional facilities. These programs have resulted in improvements in prisoner behavior and initiative and have successfully decreased the disparity between prison and reentry exposure to everyday technology.

Device access has the capability of reducing recidivism. Ninety-five percent of Alaska's current incarcerated population will eventually be released. Incarcerated individuals who are released without any support or plan in place are all-too often hit with

the harsh conditions that they were living I when they were initially arrested, and it is common for those individuals to relapse back into substance abuse or reoffend. Unfortunately, the support programs that are currently in place to assist with reentry (such as those facilitated through DOC, the Department of Health (DOH), and non-profit organizations) do not have the capacity to reach every single inmate before they are released, and electronic devices can supplement in-person "inreach" [sic] to prisoners while they plan for reentry.

Allowing prisoners to use specific programs and have limited access to information and services on electronic devices will enhance public safety and help ensure that Alaska's incarcerated population is better prepared for reentry.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT emphasized that the tablets are not a luxury and would serve as critical access to the bill's four objectives: increased opportunity for education, telehealth, visitation, and preparation for reentry. She added that the tablets' internet access is restricted through the vendor.

[9:19:40 AM](#)

ELLA LUBIN, Staff, Representative Rebecca Himschoot, on behalf of Co-Chair Himschoot, prime sponsor, presented the sectional analysis for HB 35 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1:

Adds an exemption (I) to the prohibition against electronic devices for prisoners. It also adds television show ratings to the list of banned movie ratings.

Subparagraph (I) adds additional accepted uses for electronic devices including use for rehabilitative and case plan purposes, legal material access, health care access, or another purpose identified by the commissioner in regulation.

Subparagraph (4) adds language that prohibits correctional centers from charging fees for electronic device use.

Section 2:

States that electronic device services are meant to supplement existing services, not replace them, to the extent practicable. Electronic devices may not be used to replace in-person visitation.

Section 3:

Adds clarifying language regarding the applicability of the effective date.

[9:21:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND sought clarification on the change in subparagraph (A) that, by his understanding, would allow telephone use in a prisoner's cell. He asked how the telephone use would be monitored.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT clarified that subparagraph (A) [on page 2, line 8] lists prohibited items.

[9:23:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX inquired about the fiscal note for HB 35.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT stated that the bill is policy only and the cost and deployment of the devices would be addressed separately in the Fiscal Year 2026 (FY 26) or FY 27 budget.

[9:24:06 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease at 9:24 a.m.

[9:24:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT clarified that the forthcoming fiscal note is a zero fiscal note.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX opined that bill is a good idea, but the benefit of the bill should be measurable.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked the Department of Corrections (DOC) to speak to the pilot program.

[9:26:17 AM](#)

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Corrections (DOC), said the department's intent is to issue a zero fiscal note, finish the pilot program, and make any necessary financial changes through the budget process. With the changes in the legislation, the goal is to identify efficiencies that would help offset the cost of implementation. Currently, there is a cost of \$249,000 specific to the Highland Mountain Correctional Center (HMCC) project that is associated with existing legislative restrictions in statute. With passage of HB 35 and the expansion of the pilot program, the goal is to offset the future cost of full implementation.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX commented on perceived skepticism about the legislation and said it would be helpful to quantify the expected results.

MS. WILKERSON said the department sees the program as a public safety measure and reentry support for the population as it would expand the use of telehealth resulting in fewer individuals being transported outside the facilities into the community. It would also reduce the cost of transportation if more individuals were serviced in custody. Utilizing the tablets for commissary and visitation could produce measurable outcomes, she said.

[9:29:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked for the cost of one tablet.

MS. WILKERSON stated that the monthly fee is \$50 per account.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE sought to verify that one company would provide the service and charge a monthly fee for its use and security features.

MS. WILKERSON answered yes, the state entered into an agreement with a corrections grade tablet on which the vendor deployed its own network. She added that the vendor operates the security and the infrastructure within that closed network.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked whether the vendor charges a fee for setup in addition to the monthly cost.

MS. WILKERSON said the department paid the vendor for the infrastructure of the initial pilot program. With passage of HB 35, the state would issue a request for proposal (RFP) to expand the program, the cost of which would be negotiated through the contract.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE inquired as to the initial cost of the pilot program.

MS. WILKERSON responded that the cost of setting up the infrastructure for the pilot program in FY 24 was \$300,000.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked whether HMCC allows tablet use inside the cells.

MS. WILKERSON explained that currently, tablet use is limited to outside the cells. However, she shared her understanding that current language would accommodate their use within the cells if it were for a DOC approved item.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked whether a written case plan would be required to use the tablet.

MS. WILKERSON said the tablets would be available to all incarcerated individuals, not only those with a case plan.

[9:34:50 AM](#)

BRANDON JONES, Superintendent, Highland Mountain Detention Center (HMCC), reiterated that the vendor limits network access to common areas throughout the facility. However, the network could be adjusted with a change in language.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether broadening the bill language would provide the department with more flexibility as things evolve.

MR. JONES responded yes, it would allow DOC to work with individual offenders and meet them where they're at, as not all of them have access to common areas and community centers.

[9:36:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE, restated his question, asking whether compliance with a case plan is required to use the tablets.

MR. JONES reiterated that the tablets are not linked to a case plan.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE cited subparagraph (I) [on page 3, lines 10-17] line, and stated that [the reference to a reentry or case plan] seems clear.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT pointed out that the Constitution of the State of Alaska includes a right to rehabilitation.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE agreed; however, he pointed out that the reference to AS 33.30.011 in the subparagraph ties it to specific language regarding reentry plans and case plans.

[9:39:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked how the bill would affect pre-sentenced individuals and whether they would have access to the tablets.

MS. WILKERSON said the current pilot program is available to the unsentenced population. In response to Representative Ruffridge, she explained that individuals would be eligible to use the tablets for any of the areas identified within the section in question, regardless of whether they are sentenced or unsentenced.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked whether there is objective data from the pilot program that "undergirds" the aspirational goals of the bill.

MS. WILKERSON explained that tablets were deployed in March of 2024 for limited use, including access to the digital law library and the handbook, and professional attorney client visits. Since then, the grievance process was deployed on the tablets and DOC continues to work with the vendor on deploying the request for information (RFP) process. She said the actual data on achieved efficiencies is not available to present to the committee today, but it would be available at a later date as the program expands.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked whether the current vendor is an Alaska provider.

MS. WILKERSON answered no; however, they have an Alaska business and are on the National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO) contract. She added that the department would

pursue an RFP to expand the program into other facilities with preference given to Alaska businesses.

[9:44:07 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked how many tablets were deployed at HMCC.

MS. WILKERSON said between 350-400 were requested based on the facility's population capacity. As many as 390 accounts were created with a low of 318 since July [2024].

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE sought to confirm that each incarcerated individual would receive their own tablet.

MS. WILKERSON deferred to Mr. Jones.

[9:45:46 AM](#)

MR. JONES responded yes; each individual is issued a tablet upon arrival with a unique identifier.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT stated that the bill would allow the department to set the guidelines and regulations on how the tablets are used.

CO-CHAIR MEARS opened invited testimony.

[9:47:38 AM](#)

TERI TIBBETT, Coordinator, Alaska Reentry Partnership; Co-Chair, Juneau Reentry Coalition, gave background information on the Alaska Reentry Partnership and expressed its support for HB 35. She stated that the tablets would expand rehabilitative programming, such as vocational training, education, treatment and recovery, reentry planning, access to housing, employment assistance, telehealth, peer support, faith-based, Tribal visitation, and more, all of which have been shown to improve the likelihood of success after leaving incarceration and reducing recidivism. She noted the importance of digital literacy in today's world and expressed support for improving DOC's digital infrastructure within the facilities.

[9:51:01 AM](#)

MARSHA OSS, Coordinator, Fairbanks Reentry Coalition, shared her personal story and professional background. She focused on two

items related to HB 35: creating a plan before reentry and the effects of access to educational material on inmates. Another benefit of digital technology is the ability to develop skills to address complications related to learning disabilities and traumatic brain injuries (TBI). She said the bill would ease the impact on corrections staff and create safer facilities. She shared her understanding that DOC staff supports increased access to digital technology.

[9:57:14 AM](#)

DON HABEGER, Coalition Coordinator, Juneau Reentry Coalition, spoke to the risk, need, response (RNR) principle, which is one of the founding principles of the coalition. He explained that "beginning before release" is an important tailored intervention to the delivery of reentry case management. He mentioned two recent challenges that access to digital technology could improve: firstly, incidents of visitation prohibitions due to DOC security needs; secondly, calls from incarcerated individuals to a reentry unit. He detailed the success of the Last Mile program in California and shared his belief that access to digital technology would improve reentry success and continue the state's efforts of reducing overall recidivism.

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that HB 35 would be held over.

[10:01:01 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:01 a.m.