

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE
February 25, 2025
9:12 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

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
02/20/25	(H)	Heard & Held
02/20/25	(H)	MINUTE (CRA)
02/25/25	(H)	CRA AT 9:00 AM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

ELLA LUBIN, Staff
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented an explanation of changes to 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.

BARBARA MONGAR, Matsu Regional Coordinator
Alaska Reentry Partnership
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 35.

BOBBY DORTON, Consultant
Healing Homes
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 35.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:12:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR REBECCA HIMSCHOOT called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:12 a.m. Representatives Ruffridge, Prax, Holland, Hall, Mears, and Himschoot were present at the call to order.

HB 35-PRISONERS: ELECTRONIC DEVICE ACCESS/USE

[9:13:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT 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."

[9:13:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 35, Version 34-LS0355\I, C. Radford, 2/22/25, as the working document.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT objected for the purpose of discussion.

[9:14:16 AM](#)

ELLA LUBIN, Staff, Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Alaska State Legislature, presented the changes in Version I from the written explanation of changes [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

In the CS relating to the use of electronic devices for HB 35, page 3 lines 12 -17 have been modified to clarify the justifications behind allowable electronic device use. Use of electronic devices is not restricted for access relating to rehabilitation or compliance with reentry and case plans. Otherwise, HB 35 remains unchanged.

HB 35 version I includes three revisions:

- Specifies compliance with a reentry plan or case plan as one of the allowable uses. This clarifies that prisoner's rehabilitation is included as one of the other allowable uses along with many others, like access to legal reference materials, telehealth services, and visitation opportunities, etc.
- "Only" is removed in order to clarify intent and broaden acceptable reasons for electronic device usage.
- "And may not be used for another purpose" (page 3, line 17) is removed, allowing devices to be used for other purposes not specified.

[9:16:50 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:16 a.m. to 9:19 a.m.

[9:19:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT sought questions from members of the committee.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked whether the new language had been reviewed by the department.

[9:20:19 AM](#)

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Corrections (DOC), responded yes, and said the new language would allow DOC through regulations to implement the intended efficiencies of the tablet program.

[9:20:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE suggested removing subparagraph (I) [on page 3 of the bill] entirely.

MS. WILKERSON said that would be a policy call.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND shared his understanding that removing subparagraph I would require further clarification of paragraph (3) [on page 2]. He said he was happy with the flexibility offered by Version I.

[9:22:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether the change in DOC regulation would require public notification.

MS. WILKERSON answered yes, the department would follow the normal regulation process. In response to a follow up comment, she said DOC works with the Department of Law (DOL) on a regular basis on regulation updates.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT removed her objection.

[9:24:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX objected.

[9:25:17 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease at 9:25 a.m.

[9:25:57 AM](#)

A roll call vote was taken. Representatives Hall, Holland, Himschoot, and Mears voted in favor of adopting Version I as the working document. Representatives Prax and Ruffridge voted against it. Therefore, Version I was adopted by a vote of 4-2.

[9:26:42 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease 9:26 a.m.

[Co-Chair Himschoot passed the gavel to Co-Chair Mears.]

[9:27:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said Version I would clarify language that seemingly tied the use of the tablets to a reentry plan. The current version of the bill would give more latitude to the DOC commissioner and allow individuals without a reentry plan and those on pretrial to use the tablets for visitation, telehealth, reentry plans, and education, thereby broadening their use.

[9:28:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE said he had hoped that tablet use would be contingent upon a reentry plan. He asked whether the bill would allow for open use of tablets inside an inmate's individual cell, including for entertainment purposes, such as movies, TV shows, and music.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared her understanding that none of the tablets are allowed to be used in the cells. She asked him to repeat the question.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE, referring to sub-subparagraph (ii), contended that the bill would allow the use of computers or electronic tablets inside the prisoner's cell as long as it's used for the purposes approved under subparagraph (I).

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT agreed. She clarified that the bill was never intended [to allow for tablets to be used for entertainment purposes in the individual cells].

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE questioned the requirements of the pilot program at the Highland Mountain Correctional Center (HMCC).

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT deferred to Ms. Wilkerson.

[9:32:41 AM](#)

MS. WILKERSON explained that the pilot program allows for professional visitation and access to the digital law library and the inmate handbook, as well as a platform specific to the Alaska Court System (ACS), which has not been utilized. The tablets are also used to deploy communications from the superintendent to the prison population. Requests for information (RFI), grievances, and other inquiries can also be made on the tablets. She added that movies, games, and music are not available on the tablets at this time.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE sought to confirm that the tablets are not currently used for video visitation.

MS. WILKERSON said that is correct, as Alaska statutes do not allow for video visitation. She added that education and telehealth are also being considered on a limited basis.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked why inmates would choose to use the tablets if they only provide access to [the digital law library], the inmate handbook, or RFIs and grievance submissions.

MS. WILKERSON did not know the answer.

[9:38:17 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease at 9:38 a.m.

[Co-Chair Mears passed the gavel back to Co-Chair Himschoot.]

[9:39:14 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT opened public testimony on HB 35.

[9:39:49 AM](#)

BARBARA MONGAR, Matsu Regional Coordinator, Alaska Reentry Partnership, shared background on the Alaska Reentry Partnership. She said the bill would help to remove barriers that restrict inmates from using electronic devices for improved access to rehabilitative programming and activities. She expressed further support for DOC's efforts to expand access to digital technology. She said early access to services would improve the likelihood of successful reintegration into the community.

[9:42:45 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked how these tablets would help someone reintegrate into the community.

MS. MONGAR said they would help with treatment, vocational classes, and to facilitate contact with case managers prior to release.

[9:44:24 AM](#)

BOBBY DORTON, Consultant, Healing Homes, shared his personal story and recounted his experience with the justice system. He shared his professional background after releasing from prison and said the tablets would allow individuals to find a career while in prison. He said the tablets would have furthered his education significantly and would help people find their purpose.

[9:50:10 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT gave closing remarks.

[HB 35 was held over.]

[9:50:42 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:50 a.m.