

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
March 14, 2025
1:32 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Josephson called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair
Representative Andy Josephson, Co-Chair
Representative Calvin Schrage, Co-Chair
Representative Jamie Allard (via teleconference)
Representative Jeremy Bynum
Representative Alyse Galvin
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie
Representative DeLena Johnson
Representative Will Stapp
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

ALSO PRESENT

Jackie Pata, First Vice President, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska and Alaska Regional Coalition, Juneau; Niamh Dardis, Director, REACH Infant Learning Program, Juneau; Robert Barr, Deputy City Manager, City and Borough of Juneau and Board Member, THREAD, Juneau; Brian Wilson, Executive Director, Alaska Coalition of Housing and Homelessness, Juneau; Lena Merrell, Self, Juneau; Emily Ferry, Self, Juneau; Jim Scholl, Reach Inc., Juneau; Hillary Landers, Reach Inc., Juneau.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Kari Sagel, Self, Sitka; Matthew Calhoun, Executive Director, ANSEP, University of Alaska Anchorage, Homer; Dr.

Victoria Kildal, Alaska Behavioral Health Association, Kodiak; Pat Branson, Mayor, City of Kodiak, Kodiak; Meg Mitchell, Self, Homer; Landa Baily, Self, Homer; Patrick Reinhart, Director, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, Anchor Point; Moses Wiseman, Self, Anchorage; Tracey Schaeffer, Self, Kotzebue; Queen Parker, Self, Sterling; Maxwell Mercer, Deputy Director, Community Connections, Ketchikan; Tony Wilson, Director, Education and Community Outreach, Alaska EXCEL, Wasilla; Pamela Samash, Self, Nenana; Reilly McCue, Self, Anchorage; Abigail Harver, UAA, Anchorage; Rachael Posey, Self, Anchorage; Ralph Mackie, Board Member, Community Connections, Craig; Lance Ceness, Self, Anchorage; Jackie Timothy, Self, Juneau; Craig Fredeen, Self, Anchorage; Tiffany Mills, Executive Director, Helping Ourselves Prevent Emergencies, Craig; Waynette Coleman, Self, Ninilchik; Josh Morales, Self, Anchorage; Karen Millstein, Kodiak Area Native Association Advocacy Center, Kodiak; Daniel Parks, Manager, Southeast Alaska Food Bank, Juneau; Carol Wilson, Executive Director, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Lisa Johnson, School District, KWRCC, Kodiak; Kelsey Lellig, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Carlene Liesh, Lead Instructor, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Sarah Pulcino, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Jessica Forsyth, Self, Palmer; Debra Denton, Self, Nikiski; Alistair Dunbar, Instructor, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Steven Arlow, Contracted Employee, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage; Joan Corr, Self, Soldotna; Sally Dybdahl, Self, Hoonah; Jessica Noble, Self, Anchorage; Barbara Haynes, Self, Homer; Elayne Hunter, Self, Anchorage; Michelle Chase, Board President, Valdez Food Bank, Valdez.

SUMMARY

HB 53 APPROP: OPERATING BUDGET; CAP; SUPP

HB 53 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 55 APPROP: MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET

HB 55 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Josephson reviewed the meeting agenda. The committee would hear public testimony on the operating and mental health budgets. He reviewed public testimony protocol.

#hb53

#hb55

HOUSE BILL NO. 53

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and loan program expenses of state government and for certain programs; capitalizing funds; amending appropriations; making supplemental appropriations; making reappropriations; making appropriations under art. IX, sec. 17(c), Constitution of the State of Alaska, from the constitutional budget reserve fund; and providing for an effective date."

HOUSE BILL NO. 55

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and capital expenses of the state's integrated comprehensive mental health program; and providing for an effective date."

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Co-Chair Josephson remarked that the committee would hear public testimony past 3:30 p.m. if there were still individuals waiting to testify at that time.

Representative Bynum thought he heard the co-chair say 6:00 p.m.

Co-Chair Josephson confirmed that he had initially said 6:00 p.m. but had subsequently made a correction to the time. He noted there were currently 22 individuals waiting to testify.

Representative Bynum clarified that he would stay until 6:00 p.m. if there were still individuals waiting to testify.

Representative Johnson wondered if it would be possible to get a list of all of the people calling in.

Co-Chair Josephson responded affirmatively.

^PUBLIC TESTIMONY: JUNEAU, SITKA, PETERSBURG, DELTA
JUNCTION, DILLINGHAM, GLENNALLEN, VALDEZ, WRANGELL, HOMER,
KETCHIKAN, KODIAK, SEWARD, TOK, OFFNETS

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JACKIE PATA, FIRST VICE PRESIDENT, CENTRAL COUNCIL OF TLINGIT AND HAIDA INDIAN TRIBES OF ALASKA AND ALASKA REGIONAL COALITION, JUNEAU, she shared information about Tlingit and Haida, which was a member of the Alaska Regional Coalition (ARC), a consensus based coalition of four regional tribal nonprofit service providers and two regional tribes including the Tanana Chiefs, Maniilaq, Inupiaq communities of the Arctic Slope. Collectively, the coalition represented 109 communities and 70,000 people. She detailed that ARC member organizations provided critical medical, social services, public safety, and workforce development on behalf of the State of Alaska through contracts and grants administrating federal health and tribal governance and social services on behalf of the Indian Health Services (IHS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and Department of Justice. The ARC sought equity in budget decisions and rural Alaska was very much a part of the economies and many tribal organizations were the top employers in their regions. She underscored that rural Alaskans must not bear disproportionate cuts; equal protection was a constitutional right for all Alaskans.

Ms. Pata stressed that schools were the heart of the state's communities. The organization applauded the House for advancing Base Student Allocation (BSA) funding in the base budget. The consequences of insufficient BSA funds included the reduction of support of staff, increased class sizes, which was negatively impacting students scoring. She emphasized that the state could and had to do better and the House's efforts earlier in the week had moved Alaska in the right direction. She shared that many ARC nonprofits were tribal health organizations providing services to all communities, which were not limited to Alaska Natives. The ARC supported the committee's material increase for behavioral health. Additionally, ARC supported increments in support of the Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) and public radio in rural Alaska. She underscored that public safety was a major issue for all communities and ARC supported the governor's proposal to fund additional VPSOs. She expressed support for public broadcasting and radio

stations in communities under 20,000 people. She thanked the committee.

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Representative Hannan asked Ms. Pata to describe Tlingit and Haida's role in the emergency response in the Wrangell landside and how public radio assisted an organization doing emergency response.

Ms. Pata replied Wrangell, Haines, Juneau, and other communities experienced tremendous need for emergency response. She stated that Tlingit and Haida had a state of the art emergency response center. She relayed that the state had used the tribe's facilities to locate people when dealing with some of the emergency response. The ability to be able to use public broadcasting in radio was essential in order to keep people informed and it was a way to share information on a large scale when there was not necessarily personal contact or cell phone services. She had recently been in Wrangell and the tribe was putting in its own cell tower to try to bolster internet services in the community. She noted that many communities suffered from cell outages.

Co-Chair Josephson thanked Representative Andi Story for being present.

[1:41:52 PM](#)

NIAMH DARDIS, DIRECTOR, REACH INFANT LEARNING PROGRAM, JUNEAU, shared that the Reach Infant Learning Program was based in Juneau and provided services to additional communities in Southeast. She expressed gratitude and strong support for the \$5.7 million increase to the Alaska Infant Learning Program in the budget. She highlighted that infant learning programs (ILP) had endured 11 years of flat funding. The increment would ensure that ILP could continue delivering essential early intervention services throughout Alaska. The increment would also allow for expansion of ILP eligibility by lowering the developmental delay threshold from 50 percent to 25 percent, allowing more children to receive early intervention services and shifting Alaska's position as one of the most restrictive states in the nation for accessing intervention services for the zero to three population. She relayed that investing in ILP services was beneficial for children and families and was fiscally responsible. She highlighted that the National

Early Intervention Longitudinal Study showed that 46 percent of children receiving early intervention no longer needed special education beyond kindergarten. The expansion of ILP eligibility would give 77 percent more children access to services, which could yield an estimated \$34 million in annual savings. She added that Alaska was experiencing a rapidly aging population, making it crucial to retain young families in communities. She urged the committee to prioritize the \$5.72 million in the final operating budget. She reviewed the benefits of ILP. She thanked the committee.

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Representative Hannan asked Ms. Dardis for a concrete example of a 25 percent delay versus a 50 percent delay.

Ms. Dardis responded that the 50 percent delay was a child at the age of two who was functioning at the level of a one year old. For example, they may not yet be walking or verbally communicating.

Representative Hannan asked about an example of a 25 percent delay.

Ms. Dardis replied that it would mean catching children experiencing a delay earlier so that families would not have to wait as long for services. She explained that often there were physicians who may refer children and families came in for an evaluation. She elaborated that the child may be experiencing a 30 percent delay including some delays in language, mobility, and social emotional regulation. Often times, the organization had to tell families it was not equipped, or the child's delay was not substantial enough. She explained that once the child turned three, if they were enrolled in ILP services, the organization would facilitate transition to the school district to integrate pre-school services. Often times children were falling through cracks and classrooms were not equipped to meet their needs, which further delayed evaluation and connecting them with therapeutic resources. She explained they were missing the small, critical window of brain development where 80 percent of neurons had formed by the age of three.

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ROBERT BARR, DEPUTY CITY MANAGER, CITY AND BOROUGH OF JUNEAU (CBJ) AND BOARD MEMBER, THREAD, JUNEAU, thanked the legislature for including the childcare sector in the budget the past year and for including childcare grants in the FY 26 budget. He shared that the business model for local, private childcare did not work without external support. The support came from a variety of sources and including grants in the current budget was a big part of that. He highlighted that in a broad economic sense, businesses needed predictability and stability to grow and thrive. He requested including the childcare grants in a sustainable and ongoing way in order for businesses to plan. He relayed that CBJ was projected to spend about \$1.8 million in local money in the current year that was very similar to what the legislature had been doing. He shared that Juneau did not see facility closures seen elsewhere in the state and country during and immediately after the pandemic. Juneau was starting to see its childcare employers get on financial footings that enable them to think about growth, which the economy desperately needed.

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BRIAN WILSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA COALITION OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS, JUNEAU, relayed that over 15,000 Alaskans experienced homelessness annually. He explained that when adding in populations living in severely overcrowded situations, the number was much higher. He stated that special needs housing grants helped fund programs that solved homelessness. Data showed that 95 percent of the people housed in permanent supportive housing did not return to homelessness in two years. The grant was currently funded at \$1.95 million with mental health and unrestricted general fund dollars. He relayed that the existing funding did not reach all of the programs around the state. Many programs were struggling to keep their doors open. He highlighted the Homeless Assistance Program funding in the mental health bill. He stressed it was a vital program that gave communities flexible funding to stand up supports that may not exist from other funding streams. Often the money came in the form of homelessness prevention funding. The cheapest way to address homelessness was to prevent it from happening again. He explained that having to spend money to fix a car one month and ending up being unable to pay rent should not be a reason someone fell into homelessness. He asked the committee to support the Homeless Assistance Program

funding in the governor's budget and a slight raise in the special needs housing grant consistent with the trust's recommendations.

Representative Stapp asked if Mr. Wilson was aware of a program called General Relief Rent and Utility Assistance.

Mr. Wilson responded affirmatively. He noted that the coalition did not manage the program.

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LENA MERRELL, SELF, JUNEAU, shared that she had two children in the Juneau School District. She relayed that her children's school building was closed due to the consolidation the school district went through the previous year. She thanked everyone who voted in favor of HB 69 earlier in the week and for making education a priority. She understood it was easy to say one supported kids and education, but it was harder for legislators to make the budgeting choices to pay for it. She asked legislators to think of children as the future of the state and to admit the disservice that had been done to educators for many years with the flat funding. She was heartbroken listening to legislators who did not vote to override the governor's veto and to hear them speak about education like a business. She stressed that children were not a business and she saw education as a civil service, which was written into the Alaska Constitution. She did not think the body had been funding education adequately for many years. She stated that a woefully underfunded business did not thrive. She stated the legislature was expecting teachers and educators to show results, but they were not being adequately compensated. She believed the state had been giving away far too much to corporations for far too long. She hoped the body had some creative ideas to keep money in the state in order to fund the future.

Co-Chair Josephson admitted the disservice.

Representative Hannan thanked Ms. Merrell, her former student. She stated that Ms. Merrell and her husband were homegrown Alaskans who had chosen to stay in the community and contribute.

[1:55:36 PM](#)

EMILY FERRY, SELF, JUNEAU, testified in support of funding for education. She thanked the House for passing HB 69 and encouraged the committee for continued support of funding education. She stated that education had been flat funded over the past decade or so. She noted that some of the funding had been replaced with federal funding and with a lot of funds from her pocket. She had three kids in high school who were all very active. One would be heading south for the National Robotics competitions, and she was very grateful. The dollars she contributed for public education opportunities were in the thousands. She stated it tended towards inequity because not everyone had those opportunities due to the way the state had chosen to underfund education. She noted that one-time funding helped, but without an increase to the BSA and with an upcoming loss in federal funding, schools would suffer. She was willing to contribute more to the functioning of the state. She asked the legislature to tax her.

[1:58:05 PM](#)

JIM SCHOLL, REACH INC., JUNEAU, testified in support of infant learning programs. He relayed that REACH provided services to individuals with developmental disabilities in Southeast Alaska. The board strongly supported expanding eligibility to include more infants in ILPs. He stated that it would improve early child outcomes and reduce future special education needs. The board supported increased funding for ILPs, especially in light of flat funding in recent years. He shared that he had a good friend in high school who did not need special education services, but he had been in Reach's ILP program when he was an infant. He believed it helped and it reduced costs.

[2:00:25 PM](#)

KARI SAGEL, SELF, SITKA (via teleconference), spoke in support of increased funding and expanded eligibility for the infant learning program. The ILP provided direct services to children and families for infants with developmental delays and physical and cognitive concerns. She stressed it was money well spent. Addressing concerns earlier would result in healthier children, stronger families, and fewer gaps when children started more formal education, all saving money later on. She stated that ILP had not seen an increase for a very long time, and it was time for an increase.

2:01:45 PM

MATTHEW CALHOUN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA NATIVE SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING PROGRAM (ANSEP), UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE, HOMER (via teleconference), testified in support of ANSEP. He shared that he was an ANSEP alum and would not have been able to get a Ph.D. without ANSEP. He shared that he was the only Alaska Native to earn a Ph.D. in civil engineering ever. He was working with a student who was about to get their Ph.D. in civil engineering. He provided information about the program. He highlighted a dual credit option for students. He relayed that students attending ANSEP tended to stay and work in Alaska. He stated that it was helping the brain drain from the state. On average, students had earned an associate degree by high school graduation. He emphasized that a student would be going to medical school after they graduated high school. The program was in the planning stages for potential 2026 sites. Each program could be implemented at any location with a University of Alaska campus. He asked the committee to restore the cut to the program in the bill.

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DR. VICTORIA KILDAL, CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER, ALASKA BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION, KODIAK (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for the Alaska Behavioral Health Association and behavioral health services. She shared that she was a lifelong Alaskan and had dedicated her career to the behavioral health field. She applauded the subcommittee for including \$13.7 million in the budget for behavioral health clinic and rehabilitation services. She urged the committee to maintain the funding. She highlighted that Alaska's behavioral health system was in crisis and the state often led the nation in suicide, overdose, anxiety, trauma, and depression rates. The behavioral health workforce was doing its best to stem the tide, but it was increasingly difficult. The system had adapted, consolidated services, cut costs, and asked staff to do more than was sustainable. Persistent financial shortfalls had led to various problems including the difficulty of hiring and retaining providers. When behavioral health services were not available people showed up in emergency rooms, jails, and foster care. She stressed the importance of the \$13.7 million for lifesaving services.

2:07:20 PM

PAT BRANSON, MAYOR, CITY OF KODIAK, KODIAK (via teleconference), testified in support of \$3 million for senior grants. She shared that home and community based grants kept people at home with cost efficient services. She listed the various services provided to keep people living at home. She pointed out that it saved money. The only way many seniors could go into long-term care was via Medicaid funding. She wanted to keep seniors living where they chose to live and part of the community. She requested to keep the senior grants intact.

2:08:51 PM

MEG MITCHELL, SELF, HOMER (via teleconference), shared that she had lived in Alaska for more than 40 years and worked in behavioral health services. She stated that the governor had proclaimed March to be developmental disabilities awareness month. There were 11,600 Alaskan children, adults, and families experiencing disabilities. She believed the community of individuals with developmental disabilities in Alaska shared the vision for a future where each person directed their own supports based on needs. She stated that public knowledge and understanding were the most effective strategies for addressing the challenges associated with developmental disability. The state needed to be more proactive in maximizing direct service training and development. She spoke to the need to promote human service jobs at the high school and college levels. She highlighted the importance of promoting a stronger workforce in the state. The state's population was aging, and more developmental disabilities were emerging. Additionally, the waitlist for services was increasing. She stated more leadership and planning was needed. She appreciated the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA). She supported the \$13 million in the budget for mental health.

2:12:19 PM

LANDA BAILY, SELF, HOMER (via teleconference), shared that she was born and raised in Alaska. She read from Article 1, Section 1 of the state constitution. She asked the legislature to consider a full review of the mining tax structure and supported changing the rates for new mines in

order for the taxes to pay for all of the infrastructure that impacted Alaska and that brought money into the Permanent Fund. She asked the committee to consider a comprehensive change to the oil tax structure. She stated that increased taxes oil companies paid may be the only taxes they paid because of the huge tax relief most corporations enjoyed at the federal level. A revised structure should optimize the amount that could be deposited in the Permanent Fund. She supported a statutory revision to Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA) so that AIDEA's budget and projects were reviewed and approved by the legislature. She did not support the Juneau Access Road project. She asked the committee to insist the governor release the state salary review that was paid for with public funds. She supported Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) and public education.

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Representative Stapp remarked that Ms. Baily was one of the most informed people he had heard testify before the committee on state operations and fund sources. He thanked her.

Ms. Baily thanked Representative Stapp.

[2:16:46 PM](#)

PATRICK REINHART, DIRECTOR, GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION, ANCHOR POINT (via teleconference), thanked the committee for considering increases for the Infant Learning Program, which was the council's top priority in the current year to make up for 10 years of lost revenue from inflation and to expand the program to include infants and toddlers with a delay down to 25 percent. The changes would provide savings to the state in the long run. He asked for \$480,000 for the Special Education Service Agency (SESA). The agency was funded by a formula, and it appeared the formula was not sufficient to serve all of the kids with low incident disabilities across the state. The funding would be a temporary fix until the formula funding could be looked at. He asked for funding for the Deaf Navigator Program grant of \$75,000. The council supported a functional needs coordinator in the emergency operation center. He stressed it was important for people in state government to be set up to address people with disabilities.

2:19:24 PM

HILLARY LANDERS, REACH INC., JUNEAU, shared that she was in support of the \$5.72 million for the Alaska Infant Learning Program. There was strong research supporting the importance of early intervention in children experiencing developmental delays. Evidence showed it improved the outcomes and reduced the need for special education services later on in a child's life. She shared that REACH billed insurance when applicable, but the organization often did not get reimbursed due to high deductibles or lack of reimbursement for pediatric habilitative care. Per state requirements, REACH was not allowed to pass cost along to the family; therefore, the organization provided significant family service coordination that was not billable for families with private insurance. She listed examples. The grant funding allowed the organization to continue to provide services. She stressed that all of the costs had gone up significantly due to inflation including rent, air travel, cost of food and lodging, gas, and more. The organization was only allowed to use grant funding for children with a 50 percent delay or more. She provided additional detail. Children under that percentage were not eligible for services until pre-school. She thanked the committee.

Co-Chair Josephson recognized Representative Mia Costello in the room.

2:22:15 PM

MOSES WISEMAN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of education funding and Alaska EXCEL. He detailed that the program was open to all rural school districts in Alaska it supported students in earning valuable academic and career certifications preparing students for postsecondary education and the workforce. He elaborated that students graduated with the necessary skills to enter the workforce and go to college. He shared his personal story and success with the EXCEL program. He spoke to the benefits of the program. He highlighted that 92 percent of the program's alumni lived in the state to attend college or work. He added that in the past three years the program implemented a social emotional curriculum addressing the high rate of suicide, substance abuse and alcohol. He urged the committee to fund the program.

Representative Jimmie spoke to Mr. Wiseman in Yup'ik.

Mr. Wiseman replied.

[2:25:25 PM](#)

TRACEY SCHAEFFER, SELF, KOTZEBUE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for education. She asked the committee to protect the \$7.725 million in childcare grants in the budget. She ran one of the two licensed childcare facilities in the offroad system in Kotzebue. She shared that it was almost impossible to operate in the region due to the costs. She relayed that it was an incredibly crucial part to recruit people to live in the area. The facility worked closely with the Infant Learning Program. She supported childcare funding, infant learning programs and the BSA. She highlighted that giving children solid opportunities from birth to five meant they were more likely to be successful in school.

[2:27:39 PM](#)

QUEEN PARKER, SELF, STERLING (via teleconference), supported a full PFD. She asked if Co-Chair Foster, Senator Cronk, and Representative Tomaszewski voted in support of a full PFD.

Co-Chair Josephson replied that no one had voted yet. The budget currently included a full PFD.

Ms. Parker stated that she supported a full PFD.

[2:28:45 PM](#)

MAXWELL MERCER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, KETCHIKAN (via teleconference), thanked the committee for the inclusion of \$13.7 million for behavioral health services. He shared that at the current funding level, Community Connections was not able to meet the needs of youth and families with behavioral health needs. The organization was currently overwhelmed with referrals from parents, state social workers, residential treatment centers, and other at-risk kids. The best outcomes for kids happened when they received behavioral health services in their home communities. The organization's services included therapeutic foster care, counseling, and direct

care. The organization was working hard to keep kids in their communities and out of restrictive institutions. They were currently only able to serve under 50 percent of the kids who were referred. The organization needed to grow and growth cost money to recruit, retain, and train staff. He stressed that the organization was a major employer with almost 200 employees. He provided additional information about the organization. He pointed out that failing to fund behavioral health shifted costs to the state. He noted that the sister organization, Residential Youth Care, also wanted to be present, but they were unable to do so. His remarks applied to them as well.

[2:32:16 PM](#)

TONY WILSON, DIRECTOR, EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH, ALASKA EXCEL, WASILLA (via teleconference), spoke in support of Alaska EXCEL. He stated it was a life changing opportunity and provided Alaska Native youth with hands on career focused education. The program primarily worked with students in rural Alaska. The program brought students from rural communities to Anchorage and provided them with unparalleled exposure to high demand career pathways such as aviation, welding, health sciences, construction, culinary arts, and public safety. Students earned high school and college credits, certifications, and practical experience. For many of the students, the program was the only access to career and technical education aligning with Alaska's workforce needs. He shared that one of the students had received his pilot certificate prior to graduating from high school. He stressed that the program's return on investment was undeniable. He continued to speak about the benefits of the program. He urged maintained funding for the program.

[2:34:38 PM](#)

PAMELA SAMASH, SELF, NENANA (via teleconference), testified in support for a full PFD. She believed it would benefit everyone. She asked for a 15 percent increase to senior grants. She stated that when seniors were able to remain at home and in the community, they were benefitted because they were able to see family and community members. She believed seniors were beautiful and wise people. She asked the committee to think about seniors during the budget process.

[2:36:48 PM](#)

REILLY MCCUE, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that she is a volleyball student athlete at University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). She was from Ketchikan felt blessed to represent her small hometown and the state. She provided details about her personal education path. She was grateful for the support. She asked the committee to support funding for UAA athletics in the budget.

[2:38:13 PM](#)

ABIGAIL HARVER, UAA, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that she is a track and cross country student athlete at UAA. She detailed that she grew up mostly in Kodiak. She provided information about her personal story. She asked for support in the budget for funding for UAA athletics. She was honored to be a part of the program and how the athletics program had an impact on her and the community. She gave additional details about her experience.

Co-Chair Josephson asked what her sport was.

Ms. Harver answered track and field and cross country.

[2:41:53 PM](#)

RACHAEL POSEY, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support for education funding in the state budget. She thanked legislators who recently voted in favor of HB 69 to increase BSA funding. She asked the committee to prioritize education. She stated that if the BSA did not increase by at least \$1,000 there would not be enough funding for the swim and dive program and extracurricular activities. She highlighted there was data showing a strong correlation between participation in high school sports and student attendance and graduation rates. She spoke to the importance of having teachers in schools. She detailed that each year, the University system graduated fewer teachers than the district needed to hire. As a result, Alaska was recruiting and competing to hire teachers from outside the state. She stressed the importance of stable, consistent funding for education. She supported a BSA increase to improve educational outcomes. She spoke to other benefits an increase to the BSA would bring.

Representative Allard asked if Ms. Posey paid a sports fee for her child to participate.

Ms. Posey answered that every middle school student paid a sports fee of \$110. She believed the high school sports fee was \$225. There was an opportunity for students with financial hardships to file an application to have the fee waived. She was not certain what the process was. Her family paid sports fees.

Representative Allard asked if it was per child or a family maximum.

Ms. Posey answered that the maximum per high school student was \$675 per year. She currently only had one high school student. There was a maximum in middle school where once a family had paid for three sports for a student any additional sport was free for that student.

[2:45:33 PM](#)

Co-Chair Josephson asked if the following testifier had testified in a previous public testimony meeting that week.

RALPH MACKIE, BOARD MEMBER, COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, CRAIG (via teleconference), replied that he had testified the previous day.

Co-Chair Josephson noted that individuals were provided one opportunity to testify.

Mr. Mackie supported early learning.

[2:46:35 PM](#)

LANCE CENESS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for UAA athletics. He was a member of the track and field team and a biology major. He shared that he had grown up in Homer. He provided information about his personal story. He was grateful for the hard work that brought him to his current location. He planned to remain to work in Alaska after graduation. He thanked the committee.

Co-Chair Josephson asked for Mr. Ceness's event.

Mr. Ceness replied that he ran the 800.

[2:48:16 PM](#)

JACKIE TIMOTHY, SELF, JUNEAU (via teleconference), testified in support of the state's home modification and upgrade program to enable disabled individuals to remain in their homes. She shared that she is a retired fisheries biologist and when she retired, she had fostered a little boy for a temporary time, but she had ended up adopting him. She elaborated that he had been born healthy and his mother had battered him until he became quadriplegic, blind, epileptic, and suffered from cerebral palsy. She explained that every possible thing that could go wrong for the little child had. She stated that the program allowed bathroom modifications, doorways widened, and other related modifications were incredibly helpful to children in her adopted son's situation, who through no fault of their own had ended up totally dependent on others. She hoped the legislature was able to renew the program and provide supports to agencies for the services to enable kids to stay in home.

Co-Chair Josephson replied that Ms. Timothy's request was touching. He believed the item was also known as environmental modifications or e-mods. He asked if that was correct.

Ms. Timothy replied affirmatively.

Representative Hannan commended Ms. Timothy for her commitment, passion, and love for her children and for her long journey of caring for people in the community. She thanked her for loving another child who needed her.

Ms. Timothy thanked Ms. Hannan for her words.

[2:51:49 PM](#)

CRAIG FREDEEN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of the \$1,000 BSA increase. He provided a quote associated with Confucius: "If your plan is for one year plant rice. If your plan is for ten years plant trees. If your plan is for one hundred years educate children." He thanked the House for passing HB 69 and for planning for the state's future.

[2:52:57 PM](#)

TIFFANY MILLS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HELPING OURSELVES PREVENT EMERGENCIES (HOPE), CRAIG (via teleconference), relayed that HOPE offered sexual assault and domestic violence victim advocacy, food, homeless, and legal assistance, transportation, and other services to individuals in need. She thanked the committee keeping victim services flat funding the past year by funding the \$3.7 million. She thanked the Department of Public Safety finance subcommittee for keeping the funding level the same in the FY 26 budget. She highlighted that the prices of goods and services had risen substantially, and HOPE employees were taking a loss in salaries due to flat funding. She relayed that without additional funding, the organization may be forced to discontinue health insurance for employees. The current cost for health insurance was about \$4,500 per month for two employees. She highlighted that even with flat funding the organization had helped 75 survivors on Prince of Wales with victim services and basic needs the previous year. In FY 27, the organization would see a loss of \$4.2 million in federal funding. If the state did not allocate additional funding for victim services, many agencies would need to close, leaving victims in some areas of Alaska unsafe. The organization agreed that funding for education, behavioral health, and child advocacy centers should be a priority in the FY 26 budget because they were all essential to have healthy communities. She asked the committee to keep domestic violence and sexual assault in mind in the FY 27 budget in order to keep the essential services operational.

[2:55:08 PM](#)

WAYNETTE COLEMAN, SELF, NINILCHIK (via teleconference), testified in support of the full PFD. She shared that money from the PFD went back into the state economy. She detailed that she had purchased many new tires over the years. She stated that residents knew how to spend their own money. She did not support the BSA increase at the current time. She thought schools needed to be held accountable in terms of communicating what the funding would be spent on.

JOSH MORALES, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), called in support for the \$1,000 BSA. He had hoped there would be an \$1,800 BSA increase, but he would take what they could get. He noted that even with a \$1,000 increase it appeared the vast majority of the state's school districts would

need to cut positions. He quoted from the Alaska Constitution specifying that the legislature shall establish and maintain a system of public schools for all children in the state. He asked the legislature to keep the requirement in mind during the budget process. He noted that it had come to light there was a shortage in funds to maintain school infrastructure. He thanked the committee.

[2:59:12 PM](#)

KAREN MILLSTEIN, KODIAK AREA NATIVE ASSOCIATION ADVOCACY CENTER, KODIAK (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for child advocacy centers. She shared that child advocacy centers investigated child abuse cases. She had worked as a physician's assistant for 31 years and had spent a significant portion of her career treating adults for childhood trauma. She highlighted that research showed that children suffering trauma were more likely to suffer from substance abuse, mental health disorders, and medical problems later on. Research also showed that giving children and families help greatly improved long-term outcomes and decreased personal trauma and the medical burden on public health. She strongly encouraged the committee to support funding for community advocacy centers.

[3:00:50 PM](#)

DANIEL PARKS, MANAGER, SOUTHEAST ALASKA FOOD BANK, JUNEAU (via teleconference), thanked the committee for supporting HB 344 and 168 to expand broad based categorical eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to create an online SNAP application the previous session. He thanked legislators for their support of \$3 million allocated for direct food purchasing throughout the state. Hunger continued to be an increasing issue impacting approximately one in eight Alaskans and one in six children. The number was close to 100,000 in Alaska. The Juneau organization provided food for 400 to 500 people per week, and it provided food to over 30 agencies in Southeast Alaska. He noted that all of the member agencies were reporting an increase in demand. He urged the legislature to continue prioritizing funding for direct food purchasing programs such as the food security grant from the Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development and a food bank and pantry relief grant through the Department of Health. He implored the committee to

continue funding programs that fed the state's children. He noted that individuals experiencing food insecurity experienced increased risk for housing instability, negative mental health outcomes, and lower attendance in schools. He supported HB 12 and SB 13 for programs like free and reduced school meals. In many cases kids only had access to a hot meal at school. He urged the committee to make sure Alaskans were well fed.

Co-Chair Foster shared the priority. He detailed there was a food bank in his community of Nome. He asked if the Juneau Food Bank worked to get food to smaller local communities. He relayed that the Nome Food Bank worked to get food out to surrounding areas. He understood the need was great and he supported whatever could be done to get food out to small villages. He asked how it worked in Southeast.

Mr. Parks replied that it was a very difficult process in Alaska due to its large size and remote, rural communities off the road system. The Southeast Alaska Food Bank in Juneau had member agencies spread throughout the region and the organization serviced agencies in Haines, Petersburg, Hoonah, Pelican, Kake, and more. He stated it was very challenging to distribute food to the communities. The organization often sent teachers back to communities on Alaska Airlines with 50 pound boxes they could check for free in order to have something to put in local pantries. Sometimes fishermen would load up their boats with whatever they could take back to communities. He shared that it was his personal priority to improve the organization's reach and access to remote communities. Likewise, it was a priority for the Food Bank of Alaska and other organizations throughout the state.

Co-Chair Foster stated it sounded like the challenges were mutual. He thanked Mr. Parks for calling in.

[3:07:07 PM](#)

CAROL WILSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of Alaska EXCEL funding. She explained that EXCEL was dedicated to supporting underserved students in remote regions of Alaska, especially those located off of the road system. She provided additional detail about the program that would be moving to Palmer in June. She listed career programs

offered by the program. The program had successfully served nearly 3,000 middle and high school students since its establishment in 2014. She provided additional detail about the students served by the program. The program currently operated without any state funding. She asked the committee to consider providing funding in the operating budget.

[3:09:39 PM](#)

LISA JOHNSON, KODIAK SCHOOL DISTRICT, KWRCC, KODIAK (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for the Kodiak Women's Resource Center where she worked part time. She also worked full-time at the Kodiak School District. She spoke about the connection between the women's domestic violence center and schools. She noted that violence seemed to be increasing and children were reaching out for help every day. She detailed that the women's center had a location where families could get donations and it reached out through schools. Additionally, the center had a teen line where kids could call or text anonymously to talk about anything they wanted. She thanked the committee for funding \$3.7 million to keep domestic violence and sexual assault services flat funded. She stated that more federal dollars would be lost in FY 27, estimated at \$4.2 million. She noted that the difficulty with flat funding was that the organization had to supplement it somehow. She noted that one of the communities' middle schools would be closing due to a lack of funding. She asked for support for a \$1,000 BSA increase.

[3:13:42 PM](#)

KELSEY LELLIG, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of funding for Alaska EXCEL. She underscored that in addition to helping students, the program directly benefitted the state's workforce. She provided details about the program. She stated that 70 percent of EXCEL graduates remained in rural Alaska and 92 percent continued to live in Alaska. She discussed benefits of the program. She noted that without the program, many students may not have the opportunity. She urged the committee to include the program in the budget.

[3:15:58 PM](#)

CARLENE LIESH, LEAD INSTRUCTOR, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of the Alaska EXCEL program. She was a former student about the program and was passionate about her job. She shared a personal story related to her experience with the EXCEL program. She stated it was a vital program for youth in rural Alaska. She asked for state funding for the program.

[3:19:17 PM](#)

SARAH PULCINO, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of the Alaska EXCEL program. She shared information about sharing her passion for photography with students. She had witnessed a powerful transformation in students attending the program. She shared that her grandmother was from St. Lawrence Island and did not have the opportunity to go to school. She noted that seeing her grandmother's struggles was a reminder of the importance of education. The program was designed to give students the skills and practical knowledge to succeed in various areas. In addition to teaching vital skills, the students earned high school credits and were able to keep moving forward in their education while gaining hands on experience. The program empowered students to dream bigger academically. She stated that for the program to continue and grow, state support was needed. She noted that without the support many of the students may lose access to the program.

[3:22:40 PM](#)

JESSICA FORSYTH, SELF, PALMER (via teleconference), testified in support of Alaska EXCEL funding in the budget. She stated that the impact of the program on students was undeniable. She spoke to the benefits of the program for students. She stated that an investment in the program was an investment in Alaska's youth, rural communities, and the state's future. She urged the committee to include the funding.

[3:24:04 PM](#)

DEBRA DENTON, SELF, NIKISKI (via teleconference), spoke in support of a full PFD. She thanked the committee for listening to the people.

[3:24:31 PM](#)

ALISTAIR DUNBAR, INSTRUCTOR, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of Alaska EXCEL. The program was important for youth in rural Alaska. He was raised in Utqiagvik and wished there had been a program like Alaska EXCEL available to him. He highlighted the difficulty of transitioning to life outside of the village. The program prepared students for that transition through career and technical education, life skills on budgeting, and more. He discussed the benefits and services of the program. He urged the committee to include funding for the program in the budget.

STEVEN ARLOW, CONTRACTED EMPLOYEE, ALASKA EXCEL, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that he is a retired Alaska State Trooper. He relayed that he developed a public safety program at the end of his career to try to get recruitment into the public safety profession. Additionally, he developed a public safety program within Alaska EXCEL. He had incorporated several agencies to help with the program including the U.S. Coast Guard, Alaska Court System, the state crime lab, VPSO program, the Department of Fish and Game, and boating safety. All of the agencies had committed resources and personnel to administer a public safety program. He stated that the school system was severely broken and challenged and Alaska EXCEL offered an opportunity for young rural students to gain work and survival skills for use in villages. He highly recommended the state provide some funding for the program that previously had received zero state support. He appreciated the committee's time.

Co-Chair Josephson thanked Mr. Arlow to his commitment to public safety throughout his career.

[3:29:06 PM](#)

JOAN CORR, SELF, SOLDOTNA (via teleconference), spoke in support of a full PFD. She did not support an increase to the BSA because until student scores increased. She wanted to see scores increase before more money went to education. She stated that the teachers she had talked with shared that most of the money did not make it to teachers or into classrooms.

[3:30:48 PM](#)

SALLY DYBDAHL, SELF, HOONAH (via teleconference), shared that her nine-year-old autistic grandson attended school in Hoonah. She asked for increased funding for education. She asked for funding increase for SESA. She relayed that due to an increase in SESA's caseload, services were stretched to the maximum. She noted that the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education understood the benefits of the services. She stated that the program allowed her family to access various materials unavailable in Hoonah to use at home and school to help students. She listed benefits of the program. She asked the committee to increase the formula funding rate for SESA. She thanked the committee.

[3:32:06 PM](#)

JESSICA NOBLE, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of education funding beginning with the \$1,000 BSA increase in HB 69. She supported increasing the amount up to \$1,800 in the future. She stated that test scores were not the only success indicators. There were many children that did not test in home schooling correspondence programs and public schools. She remarked that the better indicator was teacher-student ratios. She wanted to see education funding inflation proofed. She had heard a lot of testimony about accountability. She reminded those testifiers that all school boards had budgets that were hundreds of pages long that were very detailed about where the money was allocated. She wished the governor would make the legislature's job easier without starting with a deficit. She stated that the PFD was meant to be given after all of the services were provided. She wanted her children to be able to raise their children in Alaska.

[3:35:07 PM](#)

BARBARA HAYNES, SELF, HOMER (via teleconference), shared that she was speaking as a 75-year-old grandmother with three great grandchildren and is a retired public school teacher. She emphatically asked the legislature to remember that the state's children were more important than the PFD. She asked for forward funding of education to keep public schools open and operating at an effective level.

[3:36:03 PM](#)

ELAYNE HUNTER, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), shared that she is a retired elementary school counselor and mental health social worker. She spoke in support of early education, which reduced crime and incarceration later on. She would prefer to see money spent on early education. She believed it would be necessary at some point to contribute to the services as responsible individuals in the form of an income tax. She understood it was very difficult politically. She stated that developing human resources and having strong communities was essential to the future. She did not think the state had recovered from COVID. She supported the \$1,000 BSA increase.

[3:38:37 PM](#)

MICHELLE CHASE, BOARD PRESIDENT, VALDEZ FOOD BANK, VALDEZ (via teleconference), testified in support for direct food purchasing programs including summer food programs and school meal programs. She detailed that there were about 125 families that used the Valdez Food Bank biweekly (about 5 to 10 percent of the community's population). Individuals utilized the distribution and delivery services 4,951 times in the past year. There was an increase in utilization of about 30 percent in the past several years. She stated that all people needed to eat in order to thrive. They were neighbors helping neighbors in communities. She pointed out that no one knew when they would be on the receiving end of safety net programs such as the food bank. She urged the committee to provide funding for essential food programs. She thanked the committee.

Co-Chair Josephson thanked all of the testifiers for participating in the process.

HB 53 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 55 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Josephson reviewed the schedule for the following meeting.

#

ADJOURNMENT

[3:41:18 PM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 3:41 p.m.