

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE JUDICIARY STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 19, 2025

3:01 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Andrew Gray, Chair  
Representative Chuck Kopp, Vice Chair  
Representative Ted Eischeid  
Representative Genevieve Mina  
Representative Sarah Vance  
Representative Jubilee Underwood

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Mia Costello

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): IMMIGRATION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

MARA KIMMEL, Executive Director  
Alaska Civil Liberties Union  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

ANNA TAYLOR, Deputy Director  
Alaska Institute for Justice  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

ISSA SPATRISANO, Alaska State Refugee Coordinator  
Catholic Social Services  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

KIRK ROSE, Executive Director  
Anchorage Community Land Trust  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

TETYANA ROBBINS, Executive Director  
Project Alaska  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

DEEPIKA RAMESH PERUMAL, Executive Director  
Alaska Literacy Program  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-offered the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:01:35 PM](#)

**CHAIR ANDREW GRAY** called the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:01 p.m. Representatives Eischeid, Kopp, and Gray were present at the call to order. Representatives Underwood, Mina, and Vance arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **PRESENTATION(S): Immigration in Alaska**

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CHAIR GRAY announced that the only order of business would be the Immigration in Alaska presentation.

[3:03:24 PM](#)

MARA KIMMEL, Executive Director, Alaska Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), gave to a PowerPoint presentation on the ACLU Alaska [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She gave an overview of the ACLU and the communities it serves in Alaska, as well as their spending power and their economic contributions to the state. In response to a series of committee questions, she explained that if an individual is residing in the U.S. lawfully and can apply for lawful permanent residence, citizenship can be applied for after 5 years; however, the process is complicated

and fraught with many obstacles and costs and is only available to a small number of people who seek entry. She explained that people who are born in American Samoa are "U.S. Nationals," meaning they can remain here indefinitely, live and work here, but are not U.S. citizens. She reported that Alaska's rate of naturalization ranks fourth highest in the country, which speaks to peoples' commitment to becoming Alaskans. She resumed the presentation with a breakdown of immigration status in Alaska by the numbers and outlined the complicated process of obtaining a green card.

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ANNA TAYLOR, Deputy Director, Alaska Institute for Justice (AIJ), gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Victims of Crime in Alaska" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She offered background information on the AIJ and described a pyramid table of immigration status. She explained how undocumented immigrants are more vulnerable to victimization and said immigration status can affect a person's work authorization, driver's license, social security number, housing, and fear of law enforcement. She described the Immigrant Power and Control Wheel graphic, which shows the ways in which immigrants may be victimized and coerced based on their status. She discussed the roadmap to obtaining U.S. citizenship and outlined the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Self Petitions, T Visas, and U Visas.

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MS. TAYLOR, in response to a series of committee questions, said Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ASLC) works with immigrants but not on immigration applications; U Visas are capped at 10,000 per year with a wait list of 200,000, and T Visas are capped at 5,000 per year. She offered that making the path to citizenship easier to understand and improving safety and justice for everyone may be two solutions to the immigration issue. With regard to the demand for services, she said federal grants allow AIJ to offer free services to victims of crime. If someone does not qualify, they are charged on a sliding scale based on their income and the difficulty of the case. She acknowledged that demand is higher than supply and that AIJ is the only nonprofit that offers immigration legal services. She estimated that there are less than 15 immigration lawyers in Alaska. Ms. Taylor explained that the same methods of power and control that make people vulnerable to domestic violence make

them vulnerable to human trafficking and the two are often correlated.

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ISSA SPATRISANO, Alaska State Refugee Coordinator, Catholic Social Services (CSS), gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Building Belonging: Welcoming Our Newest Alaskans Through Refugee Resettlement Across the State" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She listed the populations served by CSS, noting that Ukrainian humanitarian parolees do not have a pathway to permanent status; however, they are the largest arrival group since Fiscal Year 2022 (FY 22). She shared the current caseload demographics by city and outlined the Alaska Office for Refugees sub-awardees. She described the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) eligible client job skills, explaining that more than 800 workers bring 40 plus skillsets to Alaska's workforce and an overall net benefit to the economy. She summarized federal FY 24 employment outcomes and shared an anecdotal example and discussed "brain waste," which she described as individuals working in jobs that don't match their skillset. She added that an increase in job training programs could help combat the brain waste, which would economically benefit the state.

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MS. SPATRISANO, in response to a series of committee questions, clarified that while the Refugee Resettlement Program provides some resources, refugees arrive in the country in debt from the travel loan for their flight. Some cash assistance programs offer help for the first 90 days, but its not enough to pay for their rent. She relayed that people are becoming employed relatively quickly because they are heavily motivated to find employment after spending 17 years on average in displacement. She said no one wants to be a refugee, as they were forced to flee their home country. She explained that these people are grateful; however, it is not what they hoped for their families. She said CSS tries to invest in projects that match the diverse needs of each community, such as the VFW in the Mat-Su. She spoke to career paths in trucking and the health care industry and said many states are reconsidering credentialing to lower the barrier to entry in certain fields. Beyond credentialing, employers may want to rethink the traditional job applications and interview processes, which may not be the best determinant. She said there's more than one way to assess whether a person can do the job, and encouraged employers to think creatively

about the way they hire. She said Fresh International Gardens (FIG) plays an essential role in ensuring that these individuals are learning English, gaining experience, and learning skills in a place where their kids can be present. She said it's more than just a job training program because workers are paid \$11 per hour. She shared an anecdotal example.

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KIRK ROSE, Executive Director, Anchorage Community Land Trust (ACLT), offered the following prepared remarks [original punctuation provided]:

I'm Kirk Rose, CEO of Anchorage Community Land Trust or ACLT. We are a 501c3 non-profit that for over 20 years has been partnering with communities to bring concentrated opportunity and investment to low-income neighborhoods in Anchorage through a toolkit of real estate, advocacy, community infrastructure improvements, and targeted programming.

Our place-based approach creates community wealth, local jobs, resident leadership, and economic opportunity for families. We work with hundreds of neighborhood businesses and entrepreneurs through our program Set Up Shop, which provides a line of training, resources and support to entrepreneurs and business owners in historically underserved communities. Set Up Shop is designed to catalyze community revitalization by empowering entrepreneurs, typically those who have been historically underserved like women and Alaska Natives, to open the business of their dreams and in turn build community prosperity from within.

In Alaska, some of the biggest economic headwinds we face are population-related. They are about people. The data and headlines affirm it - outmigration and labor shortages resulting in the highest levels of out-of-state hiring our state has experienced, with more than one in five workers being nonresidents. These challenges pose real threats to the strength and sustainability of Alaska's economy.

Today, I'm going to tell you about:

- The economic impact of new Alaskans in small business ownership, entrepreneurship and workforce participation
- The community connectedness we experience from better integrating New Alaskans
- Models from the State of Michigan about how the economic impact of New Americans changed the trajectory of their state economy.

Economic Impact of New Alaskans (how define):

From our decades of experience working in neighborhoods that host our city's highest percentages of foreign-born residents, we have seen what happens when we invest in new Alaskans- it strengthens our community and economy from within.

There are roughly 56,000 foreign-born residents in our State. In Anchorage, 11.1% of New Alaskans were self-employed or worked for their own businesses. This compares to 7.7% of the U.S. born population. Alaska's numbers are even higher than the national average. Nationally, foreign born residents are 28% more likely to be self-employed or work for their own business than native-born citizens.

New Alaskans contribute over \$1.4B in spending power to the State paying over \$300M in state, local and federal taxes.

In 2014, the nearly 3,000 foreign-born business owners in Alaska generated \$58.5 million in business income, making them an impactful economic force. 10 years later, we know these numbers have only grown.

While New Alaskans made up 8.5% of Anchorage's total population, immigrants made up 14.2%, or approximately one in seven, of Anchorage's small business owners. Foreign-born residents are more likely to start new businesses. In addition to starting businesses, data shows that New Alaskans have significant spending power to support small businesses too.

In addition, New Alaskans who are working age are 39% more likely to work than Alaskans. These folks are filling in crucial roles in food entrepreneurship - our restaurants and meal services; hospitality and tourism, childcare, nursing and of course - construction.

If Talent attraction and population growth are top issues for business and community vitality, and simply put, they are, then we need to ensure we maintain and grow our New Alaskan communities. Immigration is a critical source to our state's economic prosperity and our future growth.

Many of our Set Up Shop clients come from refugee and immigrant communities. Through a partnership with Catholic Social Services and New Chance, we have 1 New Americans in Anchorage: A Snapshot of the Demographic and Economic Contributions of Immigrants in the City of Anchorage (no date) New American Economy. Available at:

<https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/02/nae-ct-report.pdf> (Accessed: 14 February 2025).

graduated over 20 entrepreneurs and business owners from the Ukrainian refugee community through small business trainings taught in Ukrainian. These are New Alaskan residents whose lives were upended due to a global tragedy, who had to pick up and start from scratch in their new home. Nearly every graduate of the trainings had a story of entrepreneurship back in Ukraine and wanted to rebuild their businesses here in Alaska. One entrepreneur had a construction business in Ukraine that employed over 200 people, who has been in the process of launching his new Alaskan construction business here so that he can become an employer in his new home. Another graduate was operating a mobile nail service with such strong demand for her services that she has now opened a brick and mortar nail salon and hired her first employee. Another entrepreneur has launched a home repair and handyman business that has grown so rapidly that he is about to hire his first employees. These are just some of so many stories of New Alaskans strengthening our economy and community from the moment they arrive.

We also feel that in community connectedness. I wanted to highlight one such example for the record because it's truly a model and framework for the country – Grow North Farm, a partnership between CSS and ACLT where refugee and immigrant families have planted the seeds of self-sufficiency, generational wealth and

well-being. Over 20 farmers and food business owners from refugee and immigrant communities grow and operate their businesses in a 28,000 square foot urban farm in Mountain View, with locally grown produce sold on-site to customers. A once vacant parking lot has become a treasured community gathering space and bright spot in our community. It's the best place to be a kid in the city. Participating vendors have brought in over \$500,000 in sales since the Farm's launch in 2019, empowering them to build prosperity at the same time. The refugee and immigrant families in our neighborhood truly make Mountain View a richer place. -

Global Detroit as a Case Study

Finally, I want to talk about Michigan. Remember when Detroit went from 3M to 600,000 people. This community, once struggling with population decline and disinvestment, has seen remarkable improvements by welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees into the community and have inspired change across the state of Michigan that goes beyond just Detroit.

This success is not an anomaly. Across the country, cities AND STATES embracing immigrant inclusion see tangible benefits—more vibrant local economies, stronger housing markets, and improved quality of life for all residents. Policies that support immigrant entrepreneurs and homeowners provide stability in disinvested neighborhoods and create lasting prosperity. The evidence is clear: when we invest in people, we invest in the future of our communities. Let's take this case study as inspiration and build policies that ensure opportunity for all.

So, as we think about this work moving forward, I want to highlight a quote from a former Michigan congressman and Executive Director of Global Detroit and the Michigan Global Talent Coalition, Steve Tobocman. Steve Tobocman, Executive Director of Global Detroit, a member organization of the Michigan Global Talent Coalition. "Immigration has been the single biggest driver of population growth in Michigan for 30 years, and all of the prior research on this topic acknowledges that reality. It's absolutely imperative for policy leaders to invest in what has proven to be our strongest asset in fighting population loss and economic stagnation—our immigrant workforce.

In Michigan in 2023, Government created the nation's first Chief Growth Officer within state government to focus efforts to grow Michigan's population, economy, and reputation as the best place to live, work, raise a family, and start a business. They also commissioned the Growing Michigan Together Council to tackle these issues. When they made immigration a priority, it has paid major dividends. 57.7 percent of the state's population growth over the last decade is attributable to New Americans. In conclusion, Immigrants can help the state meet crucial labor force demands. In Michigan, immigrants represented 18.6 percent of Michigan's workers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, despite only comprising 6.9 percent of the state's total population.

The same strategy that's worked in Michigan is the right strategy for Alaska too. Immigrants help us build stronger communities and invest deeply in their new homes. Immigrants launch businesses that create jobs and contribute innovation to our economy. Alaska is facing largescale economic challenges that the Legislature is tasked with solving. We are all here with you today to be willing partners in helping you strategize a roadmap forward. We will build, support and hone State to build a more vibrant economy for Alaskans regardless of place of birth. We stand ready to support.

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TETYANA ROBBINS, Executive Director, Project Alaska, presented a PowerPoint on Project Alaska [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She provided background on why so many Ukrainians have migrated to Alaska, how Project Alaska was created, and the effort to bring them to Alaska. Airfare was covered by volunteers who helped with housing during the resettlement effort. Since spring 2022, over 300 Ukrainian families have arrived in Alaska. She highlighted the difference between refugees and immigrants. She acknowledged that the huge increase in numbers has put strain on services. Nonetheless, she said she considers Ukrainians nontraditional refugees because they come in with nontraditional skillsets. She described the services offered by Project Alaska and characterized Ukrainians as breaking the refugee stereotypes due

to their unique skillsets and high qualifications. She addressed the Wes Diploma Evaluation and touched on the numerous community partners in Alaska that help navigate educational, financial, and training opportunities. She discussed advocacy at the federal, state, and local level for the elimination of barriers and the expansion of support systems.

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DEEPIKA RAMESH PERUMAL, Executive Director, Alaska Literacy Program (ALP), gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Alaska Literacy Program [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She gave an overview of the program and its importance to immigrants. She said ALP offers assistance in English, workplace, digital, health, finances, family, and test preparation. The average student age is 41 and 88 percent are working or available to work. She highlighted one student's journey who came to the program in 2016 and by 2025, began working at a state support agency. She noted ALP's growth, explaining that until 2021, ALP averaged 350 students per year, which has grown to 600 students per quarter.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 5:08 p.m.