

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
JOINT ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

May 15, 2025

8:07 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Andrew Gray, Co-Chair  
Senator Scott Kawasaki, Co-Chair  
Representative Maxine Dibert  
Representative Ky Holland  
Representative David Nelson  
Senator Kelly Merrick  
Senator Forrest Dunbar

**PUBLIC MEMBERS PRESENT**

Colonel George Vakalis, retired - Anchorage (via teleconference)  
Brigadier General Julio Banez - Anchorage (via teleconference)

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Louise Stutes  
Senator Bill Wielechowski  
Senator Mike Shower

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): CURRENT STATUS OF THE ARMED FORCES IN ALASKA

- HEARD

BRIEFING: JOINT ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE PROJECTS

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

CRAIG CHRISTENSON, Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Military & Veterans Affairs  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented an update on the status of the armed forces in Alaska.

KYLE JOHANSEN, Staff  
Representative Andrew Gray  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a briefing on Joint Armed Services Committee Interim Projects.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:07:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR GRAY called the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting to order at 8:07 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Dunbar, Merrick, and Co-Chair Kawasaki; and Representatives present at the call to order were Representatives Dibert, Holland, Nelson, and Co-Chair Gray. Public members present via teleconference were Colonel George Vakalis, Brigadier General Julio Banez.

**PRESENTATION(S): CURRENT STATUS OF THE ARMED FORCES IN ALASKA**

[8:08:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR GRAY announced an update on the current status of the armed forces in Alaska.

[8:08:48 AM](#)

CRAIG CHRISTENSON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Military & Veterans Affairs, Anchorage, Alaska, Presented an update on the status of the armed forces in Alaska. He moved to slide 2, DMVA Mission:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**DMVA Mission**

**Mission:**

- Provide military forces to accomplish missions in the state and around the world
- Provide homeland security/ defense; emergency preparedness, response, and recovery
- Provide services to veterans
- Provide military style education and training to youth at risk of not graduating

**Sources:**

- Alaska Statute 44.35.020

- Alaska Statute Title 26
- Mission, Vision, and Core Values:  
<https://dmva.alaska.gov/>

[8:09:32 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 3, Organization, and said the Department of Military and Veteran's Affairs (DMVA) is a federal and state partnership. Alaska is one of seven states where the Adjutant General also serves as commissioner over a state department. This position is referred to in the National Guard as a "Super Tag" and in Alaska is held by Major General Torrence Saxe. The Alaska Organized Militia is organized within DMVA. He briefly described other divisions within DVMA:

Veterans Affairs - Alaska has 70,000 veterans.

Alaska Military Youth Academy - free, quasi military structure serving 15.5 - 18 year old students at risk of not graduating.

Homeland Security and Emergency Management - assist Alaskan communities with disasters and emergencies.

Alaska Airspace Corporation - a national strategic asset that administratively is under DMVA and is one of only four vertical launch facilities in the United States.

Alaska Wing of the Civil Air patrol - receives grant funds from but is not technically part of DVMA.

[8:11:35 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 4, and said the Alaska Organized Militia is comprised of the Alaska Air National Guard, Alaska Army National Guard, Alaska Naval Militia, and the Alaska State Defense Force.

[8:11:53 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 5, and stated that the area of operations covers all of Alaska using a hub-and-spoke model for military operations, exercises, disasters, and emergencies. He explained that supplies are stored in central hubs for easier access by military aircraft and transported to outlying areas when needed. He noted that the Army National Guard has 124 members deployed to Poland, Kuwait, Mongolia, Iraq, and various U.S. states. He added that the Air National Guard has 83 members deployed to Europe and Southwest Asia.

[8:12:57 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 6, and explained that the Alaska National Guard operates differently than most National Guards in the Lower 48. Alaska's National Guard is among the most operational in the country, conducting numerous 24/7 alert missions. He highlighted the 176th Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER), which manages combat search and rescue, strategic and tactical airlift, and air defense—missions critical to national security. At Eielson Air Force Base, the 168th Wing performs air refueling, which supports fighter aircraft responding to Russian and Chinese incursions near [Alaska's] borders. He also noted Clear Space Force Station's role in missile warning and space surveillance. He listed Alaska Air National Guard aircraft, including the C-17, C-130, Pave Hawk Helicopter, and KC-135 refuelers. He stated the unit is acquiring four additional refuelers.

[8:14:25 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 7 and stated that the Alaska Army National Guard operates the Ballistic Missile Defense system at Fort Greely, which plays a critical role in national security. He explained that when potential incoming missiles are identified by Air Guard members at Clear Space Force Station, Army National Guard personnel at Fort Greely are responsible for intercepting them. He added that the Alaska Army National Guard also includes aviation, infantry, military police, engineers, public affairs, and medical [support units].

[8:15:04 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 8 and explained that Alaska is one of the few states with a naval militia, which primarily provides manpower and technical support to the National Guard. The naval militia does not have its own boats. He stated that the militia has about 50 members, most of whom are Marine Corps or Navy reservists, with a few retirees contributing their expertise. He noted that the naval militia mainly assists during disasters. He cited their involvement in the Mendenhall floods in Juneau, where they helped with debris removal, shelter support, and communications.

[8:16:00 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 9 and stated that the Alaska State Defense Force is statutorily authorized and includes approximately 225 members located in 25 communities across the state. He explained that the Defense Force supports both the Air and Army National Guard during disasters. Recent deployments have included responses to landslides, wildfires, the Murbach typhoon, COVID-19, flooding, winter storms, and an earthquake.

He listed their duties as traffic control, debris removal, sandbag placement, snow shoveling, assisting the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at airports during COVID-19, providing administrative support, and helping with sheltering and communications.

[8:16:58 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 10 and said he would touch on highlights.

CO-CHAIR GRAY asked Mr. Christenson to give the number of members participating in each organization.

[8:17:36 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON replied that there are approximately 52 members in the Alaska Naval Militia, 225 members in the Alaska State Defense Force, and about 4,000 members in the Alaska National Guard. He specified that the National Guard includes 1,500 to 1,600 Army National Guard members and around 2,200 Air National Guard members.

[8:18:08 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON continued slide 10 and shared highlights:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Highlights**

- State Emergency Operations Center responded to 140 incidents, 12 state disasters, and three federal disasters
- AMYA graduated 244 cadets; 94 GED, eight HS diplomas, 26 GED and HS diplomas
- Processed 4,160 new disability claims through the VA; over \$100M in disability payments to Alaskan veterans annually
- Fairbanks Veterans Cemetery grant opportunity

[8:19:57 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 11 and continued sharing highlights:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Highlights**

- AI<NG performed 148 Search and Rescue missions with 199 saves
- AI<AN G Air Refueling scrambled 750 launches, refueling 1,100 individual receivers, transferring 10 million pounds of fuel
- AI<AN G maintained a high operational pace, enabling global mobility, airlifting over 20 million pounds of cargo and 6,453 passengers
- Air Defense Squadron successfully onboarded the first in the Pacific, Agile Operations

[8:21:31 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide [12] sharing more highlights:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Highlights**

- Alaska Army National Guard 2-211th General Support Aviation Battalion, participated with Special Operations Forces Arctic Medic 2025 exercise (SOFAM 25) near Fairbanks, Alaska
- Alaska Army National Guard 207th Aviation Troop Command stationed a UH-60L Black Hawk helicopter in Juneau to support training and mission requirements across Southeast.
- Radio communications testing done across the state with Civil Air Patrol partners
- Bison Company, 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment performed training in an austere environment for arctic warfare preparation outside of Bethel

[8:22:47 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 13 and continued with highlights:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Highlights**

Vigilant Guard 24 exercise simulated a massive 9.2 magnitude earthquake with the epicenter in Southcentral Alaska bringing together approximately 350 participants from local, state, and federal organizations in a joint, interagency environment

- 168th Wing air refueling services support Red Flag-Alaska, a PACAF led exercise
- Exercise Gobi Wolf 2024 as part of the Pacific Resilience Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange program coordinated by SPP Mongolian National Emergency Management Agency and US Army Pacific
- 69th Year of Operation Santa Claus in the communities of Circle, Crooked Creek, and Yakutat

[8:23:50 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 14 and discussed Innovative Readiness Training (IRT). The program allows organizations and communities to submit requests for projects to be completed by military units. He provided examples of various projects completed by units:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Types of IRT Missions:

- Medical
- Civil Engineering
- Cybersecurity
- Transportation

Who Can Apply:

- Government Entities
- Youth and Charitable Organizations
- Communities

[8:26:02 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR GRAY said he recommends IRT to community councils in his district. It is a way to get assistance with non-state funded projects such as trail renovations and toxic waste clean-up.

8:27:06 AM

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 15 and said many people do not know about the Alaska National Guard Counterdrug Program. He provided information about the program and examples of support:

[Original punctuation provided.]

FFY2024 AK Counterdrug Support

18 Soldiers & Airmen

- Embedded Support to 5 LEAs
- 59 Flight Hours-CD Aviation
- 25 Fentanyl/Opioid Cases
- 43,000 Naloxone Kits distributed
- Drug Prevention for 4,347 Alaskans

SUPPORTED INTERDICTION:

- 814,491K Fentanyl User Doses  
(*\$10.SM Street Value*)
- 121,177K Meth User Doses  
(*\$2M Street Value*)
- 419,310K of Cocaine User Doses  
(*\$4.JM Street Value*)
- \$652,000 Illicit Currency

8:29:27 AM

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 16 and discussed the State of Alaska's 22-year partnership program with Mongolia. Once a year the National Guard participates in a large-scale activity with Mongolia. Last year senior leaders from Mongolia visited the National Guard.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Through the State Partnership Program, the National Guard conducts military-to-military engagements in support of defense security goals but also leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary

engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres.

[8:30:34 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON moved to slide 17 and shared the following headlines:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **What's On the Horizon?**

- May 2025 - Will China Escalate? Despite Short-Term Stability, the Risk of Military Crisis Is Rising
- April 2025 - China's Military Buildup Threatens Indo-Pacific Region Security
- Oct 2024 - US Sends War ships To Meet China, Russia Presence Near Alaska
- July 2024 - Russia and China Carry Out First Joint Bomber Patrol Near Alaska
- July 2024 - Russian and Chinese Bombers Intercepted Off Coast of Alaska

MR. CHRISTENSON stated that Major General Saxe has focused primarily on war preparedness over the past year. He cited rising tensions with China, particularly regarding Taiwan, as a significant concern, noting the possibility of conflict within the next one to two years. He emphasized that the hub-and-spoke model, statewide outreach, joint exercises with agencies, active-duty military, and international partners, along with increasing refueling capacity at Eielson, all support this readiness. He added that Major General Saxe has held direct discussions with senior military leaders, including commanders from U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), to align on military war plans.

[8:32:09 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON concluded the presentation and asked if there were questions.

[8:32:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON inquired about the deployment of the Lakota [helicopters] to the southern border of the United States.

MR. CHRISTENSON replied that the mission to the southwestern United States has been ongoing for many years, and Alaska has periodically participated as part of a rotation. He stated that currently 20 personnel are assigned, likely in New Mexico, along with two Lakota helicopters. He clarified that their role is to support federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The mission focuses on aerial surveillance rather than direct apprehension.

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON asked for an update on the Black Hawk helicopter station in Juneau. He referenced a previous mention of the project and noted that some committee members attended the unveiling. He requested a timeline for when the station would be fully operational and what the future plans entail.

[8:33:51 AM](#)

MR. CHRISTENSON replied that the Black Hawk station in Juneau is fully operational and has been conducting training missions. He stated that the unit is fully prepared to respond to search and rescue or other operational missions as needed.

[8:34:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT thanked Mr. Christenson for providing a high-level overview of military operations in Alaska. She stated that she represents Fairbanks and asked about the status of the veterans cemetery in Salcha. She inquired whether legislators could assist in facilitating the final stages of breaking ground for the project.

MR. CHRISTENSON expressed appreciation for the offer of support and stated that most major timeline steps for the Salcha veterans cemetery have been completed. He reported that the project is at 65 percent design, which qualifies it for grant consideration by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). He added that environmental and archaeological studies are nearly complete, and the final application is being prepared for submission. He noted that Director of Veteran Services Bertie Bowen has strong connections with federal VA officials in Washington, D.C., and all indications suggest the project is progressing toward breaking ground.

[8:35:49 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that the National Guard co-owns and manages a large armory facility in Juneau with the University of Alaska Southeast. He noted that the facility once supported a larger soldier presence, which has since declined. He questioned whether any long-term plans or changes in status are being considered for the facility given the reduced military presence.

MR. CHRISTENSON replied that long-term plans include continued joint use of the facility by the National Guard and the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). He stated that recruitment efforts in the area are ongoing to strengthen the National Guard's presence. He acknowledged that while there are fewer full-time soldiers, the facility is used for M-Day drills and training. Also, state employees have offices in the facility. He confirmed that no changes are planned for the facility.

8:37:29 AM

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON asked for an update on National Guard recruitment and retention, noting that nationwide recruitment numbers for the active-duty Army have improved. He requested specific information on whether the National Guard is experiencing a similar trend over the past year. He also inquired about current retention rates and how well the Guard is maintaining soldier satisfaction.

8:38:03 AM

MR. CHRISTENSON stated that the Alaska Army National Guard is currently experiencing a positive trend in both recruitment and retention. He noted that while the state ranked low in these areas a year or so ago, it now ranks fourth nationally. He attributed the improvement to strong leadership, particularly praising Major General Saxe, and emphasized that high morale has contributed to increased retention and positive word-of-mouth recruitment. He acknowledged that he did not have exact figures but offered to provide the data to the committee.

8:39:19 AM

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON asked whether the positive recruitment and retention trends also apply to rural communities. He referenced the longstanding focus by The Adjutant General (TAG) on increasing outreach and recruitment efforts in those areas.

MR. CHRISTENSON stated that efforts to increase National Guard participation in rural communities are ongoing and emphasized the importance of community involvement. He encouraged local schools to invite recruiters and suggested that community events and festivals serve as valuable opportunities for outreach. He

also highlighted the role of veterans in promoting military service and noted that programs like Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) and disaster response efforts help build visibility and trust. He acknowledged existing challenges but expressed confidence in the positive momentum.

CO-CHAIR GRAY found public members had no comments and thanked the presenter for the update.

[8:41:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR GRAY stated that updates from military policy staff representing each federal delegation were tentatively scheduled but, due to scheduling conflicts, the staff will instead submit written documents to the committee.

**BRIEFING: JOINT ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE PROJECTS**

[8:42:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR GRAY announced a briefing on Joint Armed Services Committee interim projects and a meeting of the whole committee that will also occur during the interim somewhere on the railbelt.

[8:42:28 AM](#)

KYLE JOHANSEN, Staff, Representative Andrew Gray, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, Provided a briefing on Joint Armed Services Committee Interim Projects. He stated that Representative Gray tasked him with clarifying the statutory authority and capabilities of the committee. He said that in his review, he found that the governing statute, is largely focused on Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) language. He noted that BRAC was a major initiative approximately 15 to 20 years ago and emphasized its significant impact on Alaska.

MR. JOHANSEN explained that the BRAC process officially closed in 2015 and now requires explicit congressional approval to restart. He noted that although the committee's authorizing statute is heavily focused on BRAC, reflecting its past impact on Alaska, the chair believes the statute does not need to include initiative-specific language. He shared that in a recent offline discussion, Colonel Vakalis advised remaining vigilant about BRAC, as it could return. He also mentioned that the statute was updated last year to add language related to the Space Force during the development of a Military and Veterans Affairs Commission bill. Although there was a minor tweak to the statute it was not reviewed in full.

MR. JOHANASAN stated that, after reviewing the committee's statutory authority and discussing his findings, Co-Chair Gray concluded it was time to reevaluate the statute governing the Joint Armed Services Committee (JASC). He explained that while JASC was originally formed during the BRAC era, today's military-related issues have broadened significantly and are not reflected in the current statute. Topics such as cyber warfare, counter-drug operations, recruitment challenges, facility use, veterans cemeteries, military housing, childcare, and the effects of military compacts on families are now central to military-community interaction in Alaska. Co-Chair Gray stated his belief that these areas fall within the committee's potential influence.

[8:46:34 AM](#)

MR. JOHANASAN shared that over the interim, the Legislative Affairs Agency, which serves as staff for JASC under Legislative Council authority, will lead a process to brainstorm legislation aimed at updating and modernizing the committee's powers and duties. The plan is to draft legislation for introduction next session through the Rules Committee, with the goal of refreshing and restructuring JASC. He emphasized that today's meeting was more business-oriented than previous JASC meetings and was intended to outline the summer work plan and invite member participation.

MR. JOHANASAN also noted structural inefficiencies in tracking public and committee members over time. He reported that discussions are ongoing with the [Executive Director of the Legislative Affairs Agency] to improve recordkeeping and ensure continuity as committee leadership changes. He acknowledged the efforts of past chairs, including Representative Shaw, Senator Claman, Representative Saddler, and Senator Shower, to recover historical records.

MR. JOHANASAN commended Representative Stapp for revitalizing the Medal of Honor recognition project, which seeks to locate and honor recipients' families using modern tools, including social media. He expressed optimism that current technology will allow greater success.

[8:49:45 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that he will be unavailable to participate in the project over the interim but expressed strong support for the effort. He remarked that the current statute is notably misaligned with the committee's actual activities and priorities. He highlighted the National Guard as the area where

the legislature has the most direct connection, noting its absence from the statute is surprising, especially given the legislature's involvement through the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) finance subcommittee. He also emphasized the long-standing challenge of recruiting and retaining Guard members in rural Alaska, an issue dating back to the loss of additional federal funding after the Cold War. He commended the project and expressed interest in the outcomes.

[8:51:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT thanked the committee for outlining the plan moving forward and shared feedback from constituents in downtown Fairbanks. She emphasized that childcare and housing are major concerns for military families, noting that the absence of universal preschool in Alaska places additional strain on parents. She explained that many families are forced to choose between employment and caregiving, often while also facing housing insecurity. She expressed hope that the committee will support or at least discuss the universal preschool bill currently before the legislature.

[8:52:21 AM](#)

MR. JOHANSEN emphasized that the committee's focus will continue to support the core mission of the military and its role in national defense. However, he noted that the [co-]chair has directed an effort to broaden the committee's scope to reflect the wide-ranging impact of the military on daily life in Alaska. He acknowledged issues such as childcare as part of that broader focus. He clarified that this expansion is not meant to shift attention away from current priorities but to more actively address interconnected concerns.

[8:53:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON noted that this year marks the Army's 250th birthday and highlighted related events occurring in his district. He stated that Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) will host several activities throughout June, which is traditionally a key month for military outreach. He specifically mentioned a celebration on June 12 hosted by the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) and the Army, featuring Major General Hilbert of the 11th Airborne Division. He encouraged committee members and the public to attend and offered to help connect interested individuals.

[8:54:06 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Gray adjourned the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting at 8:54 a.m.