

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE
JANUARY 27, 2026
3:30 P.M.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel, Vice Chair
Senator Matt Claman
Senator Löki Tobin
Senator Robert Myers

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES
LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

TRACY DOMPELING, Acting Commissioner
Department of Family and Community Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented a legislative overview for the
Department of Family and Community Services.

KEN COLE, Chief Executive Officer
Alaska Psychiatric Institute
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions regarding the
legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community
Services.

MATT DAVIDSON, Director
Division of Juvenile Justice
Office of Children's Services

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions.

KIM GUAY, Director
Office of Children's Services
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented a legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community Services.

MARIAN SWEET, Assistant Commissioner
Department of Family and Community Services
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:32 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Myers, Giessel, and Chair Dunbar. Senator Tobin and Claman arrived immediately thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S): DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY and COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

[3:31:08 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR announced that the Department of Family and Community Services would offer a Legislative Overview.

[3:32:17 PM](#)

TRACY DOMPELING, Acting Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services, Juneau, Alaska, co-presented a legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community Services. She introduced herself and people available to testify. She moved to slide 2 and reviewed the mission statement of the department:

[Original punctuation provided.]

To provide support, safety, and personal well-being for vulnerable Alaskans.

- Alaska Pioneer Homes
- Alaska Psychiatric Institute
- Division of Juvenile Justice
- Office of Children's Services

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ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 3, Organizational Leadership Chart, she said it maps the organizational structure of DFCS. It includes the Office of the Commissioner and individual divisions. It reflects key positions in the organization.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 4, Alaska Pioneer Homes (AKPH), and introduced the new director Dr. McGinley. She discussed occupancy rates, services provided, locations, and budget. Last year the department reported that 58 percent of residents in pioneer homes had dementia related diseases. This year the number is 62 percent.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission: Providing elder Alaskans a home and community, celebrating life through its final breath.

Locations: Sitka - 1913

Anchorage - 1977

Fairbanks - 1967

Ketchikan - 1981

Palmer - 1971

Juneau - 1988

Staff: 427 full-time positions

Capacity: 506 residents

FY2027 Budget: \$117,975.1

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CHAIR DUNBAR mentioned that Mr. McGinley had been the principal of King Tech High School and Alaska Middle College.

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CHAIR TOBIN commented that her uncle was in the Fairbanks Pioneer Home and there is a unit that is closed. She asked what the department intends to do over the next several months to address issues that the pioneer homes are facing.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that she has visited the Fairbanks pioneer home and seen the closed unit. She said there are vacancies for certified nursing assistants (CNAs). To fill vacancies the department hires CNAs that travel, which partially explains turnover. She said later in the presentation she would discuss a CNA to LPN program.

SENATOR CLAMAN said he appreciated the historical perspective of the six pioneer homes. He asked for the approximate population of each home.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING provided the following populations for the six pioneer homes:

Anchorage	162 residents	177 capacity
Palmer (Veterans)	73 residents	79 capacity
Fairbanks	58 residents	91 capacity
Juneau	47 residents	49 capacity
Ketchikan	42 residents	45 capacity
Sitka	63 residents	65 capacity

SENATOR CLAMAN asked if the department is trying to run the homes at 92 - 96 percent capacity.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the department would like 100 percent capacity. However, there is turnaround time for when rooms become vacant. People on the waitlist need time to prepare to enter. She said her goal is 95 percent capacity. She said the Veteran's home has specific requirements. Also, there are male and female considerations when placing residents in rooms with a shared bathroom space.

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SENATOR CLAMAN praised the department for the capacity rates.

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SENATOR MYERS said that looking forward, the population of Alaska is getting older, and he assumed more people would want services in the coming years. He noted there was already a waitlist and asked whether staffing was the primary factor limiting capacity or whether facilities or other issues were also contributing.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that staffing was primarily the limiting factor. She added that there had been a flooring upgrade throughout the home, which required residents to move temporarily. She said that may have been the disruption Senator Tobin referenced earlier. She noted that the new floors in the homes are beautiful and were much needed.

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SENATOR MYERS clarified that his question was regarding all homes not just Fairbanks. He asked what other challenges the pioneer homes face would if they were to increase capacity.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that the primary issue is staffing.

SENATOR GIESSEL commented that her mother lived in the Anchorage pioneer home for nine years. Most of the nursing assistants were Filipino. She wondered how the state's immigration policies might affect staffing.

[3:42:26 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 5, Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) and introduced the Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Cole. She discussed the mission statement, capacity, and staffing of API:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission: Providing compassionate health care to support Alaskans in living their best possible lives.

Capacity and Staff:

- 5 inpatient units
 - Civil (3)
 - Youth (1)
 - Forensic (1)
- 80 licensed beds
- 321 full-time positions

FY2027 Budget: \$66,963.6

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said that in 2025 API provided restoration services to 75 individuals, with 73 days being the average length of stay.

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SENATOR TOBIN commented that she had the opportunity to tour API. She said the facility has areas for court proceedings and a Chilkat unit for youth. She asked the department to share its vision for increasing bed capacity and its vision for the Chilkat unit.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the jail-based restoration program has taken some pressure off API. She said she and Mr. Cole have discussed whether additional community space could be used to establish a second satellite API facility. She noted Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and Joint Commission requirements would need to be considered and said space at API is limited. She said the department is exploring options to expand services for Alaskans in need.

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SENATOR TOBIN asked for discussion on the Chilkat unit.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that the Chilkat Unit has had openings in recent months, despite a previous period of significant backlog. She said that when she visited a few months earlier, only three or four youth were in the unit. She noted the unit remains another pressure point and said the department has spoken with a community partner about whether nearby space might be available to relocate the Chilkat Unit while still allowing access to API psychiatric support staff and needed services.

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SENATOR GIESSEL asked whether API has become more stable since governance changes were made approximately eight years ago in response to concerns about the institute.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that the situation at API has stabilized. She said the culture among staff and residents has improved and noted a strong leadership team has been developed under Mr. Cole. She said the Alaska Hospital and Healthcare Association funded extensive leadership training for staff and that leadership has held listening sessions to hear staff concerns. She said transparency has increased and she expressed confidence that API is moving in the right direction.

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SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether the Chilkat Unit is the youth unit and asked how many beds are in the various units at API.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that the Chilkat Unit is the youth unit and has 10 beds. She said she believed the forensic unit also has 10 beds and that the remaining beds are in the civil unit, totaling approximately 60 beds.

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SENATOR CLAMAN asked about the typical length of stay for patients in the adult civil unit.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied that she did not have that information but would provide it. She noted that under Mr. Cole's leadership the facility has strengthened its data collection and reporting, allowing that information to be readily obtained.

CHAIR DUNBAR asked Mr. Cole if he knew the answer.

[3:48:48 PM](#)

KEN COLE, Chief Executive Officer, Alaska Psychiatric Institute, Anchorage, Alaska, answered questions regarding the legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community Services. He replied that he did not have the average length of stay for civil patients available but would obtain the information and provide it to the committee.

[3:49:16 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 6, Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). She introduced the director, Mr. Davidson, and discussed the division's mission, facilities, offices, staff, and budget:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission:

- Hold juvenile offenders accountable for their behavior.
- Promote the safety and restoration of victims and communities.
- Assist offenders and their families in developing skills to prevent crime.

Facilities / Offices / Staff:

- 6 youth facilities
- 13 probation offices
- 421 full-time positions
- FY2027 Budget: \$72,840.9

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SENATOR TOBIN asked about recidivism rates for youth from the region served by the Nome youth facility, which she said closed during her first year in the legislature. She said she has

heard anecdotal reports that youth from that region may be reoffending at higher rates and staying in custody longer when placed away from their home communities and families. She asked whether the department has data addressing those outcomes.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the department would need to follow up with the requested information.

[3:51:06 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR asked about planned improvements to the courtroom intake area at the McLaughlin Youth Center (MYC), noting he had toured the facility about two years earlier and recalled discussion of a potential capital improvement project to renovate the area where youth initially appear before being taken into the facility. He asked whether the improvements had been completed or whether funding was included in the governor's budget.

[3:52:32 PM](#)

MATT DAVIDSON, Director, Division of Juvenile Justice, Office of Children's Services, Juneau, Alaska, answered questions. He replied that during the previous legislative session funds were reappropriated from another project to support renovation of the detention court unit at MYC. He said planning for the renovation is underway and that staff are looking forward to improvements to the space, although construction has not yet begun.

CHAIR DUNBAR asked about the projected timeline for completion of the renovations.

MR. DAVIDSON replied that he could not provide a specific timeline but said the project is tied to funding previously appropriated through the Facilities Council for roof work in the same area. He said the project will likely take a couple of years to complete.

CHAIR DUNBAR said he was pleased to hear the project has funding and is moving forward. He noted that McLaughlin Youth Center is a large facility located near the University of Alaska Anchorage and the hospital.

[3:54:16 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 7, Office of Children's Services (OCS), and said it is the department's

child welfare agency. She shared the mission statement and information about offices, staff, and budget:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission: Ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children by strengthening families, engaging communities, and partnering with Tribes.

Offices and Staff:

- 5 regions with 21 offices statewide
- 608 full-time positions

FY2027 Budget: \$211,123.8

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SENATOR TOBIN referenced the 2024 audit of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and noted concerns about implementation of certain legislation. She asked about the training program "Knowing Who You Are," developed by the Casey Family Foundation, which she said had previously strengthened partnerships with foster families and tribes but had not been offered for several years. She asked whether there are plans to restore that or similar programs and how the department intends to support high-quality training that helps families care for children in foster placements.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the training had been impactful and said MS. Guay could provide additional detail regarding the program. She said her priorities include reducing the length of time to permanency, increasing engagement with families, and ensuring consistent contact with children in out-of-home placements. She noted the Office of Children's Services previously implemented an initiative called "Back to Basics" to strengthen core services but said the effort was not producing the desired outcomes. She said the department is reassessing the initiative and working with leadership to develop new strategies for improvement.

[3:58:23 PM](#)

KIM GUAY, Director, Office of Children's Services, Anchorage, Alaska, co-presented a legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community Services. She said the "Knowing Who You Are" training was discontinued by Casey Family Programs several years ago. She said Alaska attempted to adapt the program internally but determined it was not meeting the intended goals for staff training. She said OCS has since adopted a revised

training model focused on helping staff understand personal bias, identity, and effective engagement with youth and families. She explained the new approach uses shorter training sessions over time rather than a single multi-day course. She added that OCS is working with tribes on training efforts and has implemented exercises such as the "blanket exercise" to strengthen cultural understanding. She said the department continues to evaluate and improve its training programs.

4:00:25 PM

SENATOR TOBIN said she would welcome an opportunity for further discussion through the Alaska Children's Caucus or the Senate Health and Social Services Committee to hear more about OCS's work with parents and tribal partners to support children placed in care and the families serving them.

4:01:03 PM

CHAIR DUNBAR asked whether the Office of Children's Services (OCS) has interacted with a youth council associated with Covenant House Alaska that includes formerly homeless youth. He said the group had raised several policy concerns, including the accessibility of government forms and whether more forms could be provided digitally rather than on paper.

MS. GUAY said she was not certain which specific group was referenced but noted that OCS frequently collaborates with individuals with lived experience and community partners. She said OCS works with groups such as Facing Foster Care in Alaska advisory group, a resource family advisory board, and tribal partners. She added that OCS recently began developing a parents advisory committee. She said OCS is interested in modernizing technology and improving digital accessibility of forms but noted that improvements will require additional funding.

4:03:41 PM

CHAIR DUNBAR said he would provide the name of the group and asked about progress addressing the shortage of foster families.

MS. GUAY replied that she did not have the current number of foster homes available but said OCS has prioritized placements with relatives and kin. She said the department has seen an increase in relative and kin placements and continues to conduct recruitment efforts to encourage additional foster homes.

[4:04:56 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN asked about recruitment and retention within OCS, noting that the division has many positions within the department.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said she would address recruitment and retention later in the presentation.

[4:05:28 PM](#)

MARIAN SWEET, Assistant Commissioner, Department of Family and Community Services, Juneau, Alaska, co-presented a legislative overview for the Department of Family and Community Services. She moved to slide 8 and introduced the Departmental Support Services division:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission: To provide quality administrative services in support of the department's mission.

Staff: 90 full-time positions

Division Highlights:

- Talent Acquisition Team
- Technology innovations
- Administrative consolidation

FY2027 Budget: \$42,285.5

MS. SWEET said the division provides administrative support across the department, including leadership support, public information and outreach, budget and finance, information technology, human resources, and facilities management.

[4:06:45 PM](#)

MS. SWEET moved to slide 9, Coordinated Health and Complex Care Unit, and said the unit oversees complex cases involving individuals in DFCS custody or those at risk of entering custody and works with the Department of Health to address system barriers and improve outcomes for Alaskans with complex needs. She said the data presented reflected a snapshot from the second quarter of the current fiscal year and noted that since its creation the team has worked on approximately 150 unique cases. She added that the unit consists of six staff members and is led by Deputy Director Makayla Viray:

Coordinated Health and Complex Care Unit

Works with the Department of Health to provide a coordinated system that delivers compassionate, timely, and person-centered care for the most vulnerable and complex Alaskans.

FY26 Q2 CHCCU Case Count by Division

Division / Department	Number of Cases	Currently Open Cases	Cases Closed at End of Quarter
API	15	10	5
OCS	24	17	7
DJJ	2*	2	0
AKPH	2	1	1
DOH(SDS)	1	0	1

*Current DJJ cases overlap with OCS. These cases are not included in the OCS case count.

Most common diagnoses, by order of occurrence

Adults

- Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders
- Neurocognitive disorders
- Medical diagnosis
- Neurodevelopmental disorder

Youth

- Neurodevelopmental disorders (ADHD, autism, intellectual disability)
- Trauma and stressor related disorders
- Disruptive, impulse control, and conduct disorders
- Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders
- Personality disorders
- Neurocognitive disorders

[4:08:22 PM](#)

MS. SWEET moved to slide 10, At DFCS We Are, and said the department's guiding value is a vision of "service first," emphasizing decisions and partnerships focused on the needs of Alaskans. She said department leadership developed a strategic framework titled SPAM, which emphasizes person-centered care, workforce well-being, and innovative solutions to complex challenges:

[Original punctuation provided.]

At DFCS, we are:

- **S**trengthening lives through meaningful connections with families, communities, Tribes, and providers
- **P**roviding safe, person-centered care with integrity and dignity to the Alaskans we serve
- **A**dvancing an agency culture that prioritizes the well-being of our workforce
- **M**obilizing innovative solutions to complex challenges

[4:09:33 PM](#)

MS. SWEET moved to slide 11, Updates on Ongoing Department Initiatives:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Updates on ongoing department initiatives

Renovations at our facilities and homes

Technological improvements

Continued emphasis on workforce well-being

Talent acquisition team Cross-agency collaborations

MS. SWEET provided updates on several facility improvement projects. She said the roof replacement at the Palmer Veterans Pioneer Home is nearing completion with funding largely provided through a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. She said the Fairbanks Pioneer Home flooring project is also nearing completion, allowing the wing to reopen for residents. She said the Wasilla field office expansion is nearly complete and noted that the Division of Juvenile Justice is planning renovations to the detention and court unit at the McLaughlin Youth Center and improvements at the Fairbanks Youth Facility.

[4:10:50 PM](#)

MS. SWEET discussed technology improvements within the department. She said the department has implemented Smartsheet, a cloud-based project management tool used to track facility projects, support budget projections and spending plans, and assist with strategic planning. She said the department has expanded use of the ImageSource system and created an online tracking system for Title 47 involuntary commitment patients to improve statewide monitoring. She added that the department has created an online application for the Mental Health Treatment Assistance Program and is upgrading Wi-Fi systems in Pioneer Homes to support the INTRAC safety monitoring system used to track resident safety and improve staff responsiveness.

[4:12:58 PM](#)

MS. SWEET discussed workforce well-being initiatives across the department. She said the Division of Juvenile Justice operates an employee-led wellness committee that organizes morale activities, and the Alaska Psychiatric Institute maintains an employee committee and a peer-based critical incident stress management team. She said Pioneer Homes monitor staff well-being to prevent burnout and recognize service excellence, while the Office of Children's Services has implemented a wellness and resiliency officer who conducts audits across offices to support workforce improvements.

[4:14:21 PM](#)

MS. SWEET said the department has established a talent acquisition team to create standardized hiring practices and improve recruitment processes. She said the team is currently piloting the program within the Office of Children's Services and Departmental Support Services and reported that in calendar year 2025 the department interviewed 391 candidates and hired 105 new staff.

[4:14:57 PM](#)

MS. SWEET said the department continues cross-agency collaboration with the Department of Health on the Behavioral Health Roadmap and the Alaska Integrated Comprehensive Plan. She said the plan informs the department's strategic planning and noted continued collaboration with the Department of Corrections on the jail-based competency restoration program.

[4:15:34 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked whether the department has considered using artificial intelligence tools in hiring processes or other technological improvements.

[4:16:01 PM](#)

MS. SWEET replied that the department has not yet discussed using artificial intelligence in hiring practices but said the idea was intriguing. She noted there is interest in exploring AI tools for data analysis within existing departmental systems.

[4:16:53 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 12, 2025 Accomplishments, and shared the following highlights:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Alaska Pioneer Homes

Launched a new online application process
Residential enrollment has increased

Office of Children's Services

Number of children in care is decreasing
Family reunifications are rising

Division of Juvenile Justice

Medicaid for justice-involved youth
Staffing improvements

Alaska Psychiatric Institute

Expanded jail-based competency restoration in
partnership with the Department of Corrections
Success utilizing conditional release

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said there are currently 7,462 individuals on the waitlist compared with slightly more than 7,000 six months earlier. She said the Office of Children's Services has seen a decline in the number of youth in out-of-home care, decreasing from 2,923 children in 2021 to 2,363 children in 2025. She said family reunifications have increased, noting that in 2025 approximately 60 percent of closed cases resulted in reunification, compared with 55 percent in 2024 and 51 percent in 2022. She added that reunifications for Alaska Native children increased from 53 percent in 2024 to 58 percent in 2025.

[4:18:18 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR asked what factors contributed to the improvement in reunification rates and whether the change was due to policy changes or other factors.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING deferred the question.

[4:18:48 PM](#)

MS. GUAY said the improvement is likely due to multiple initiatives and partnerships implemented by the agency. She credited the work of Tribal organizations that have partnered with the department. The department has also focused on training and tracking to reduce re-entry. She said the state of Alaska keeps children in care longer due to the Indian Child Welfare Act, giving parents more time to work on changing behavior.

[4:20:42 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING continuing discussion of slide 12, Division of Juvenile Justice, said DJJ facilities now have Medicaid activated for youth, allowing individuals to become eligible for Medicaid services 30 days prior to release and 30 days after release from facilities. She said the change improves connections to medical, behavioral health, and dental providers in home communities and allows screenings and assessments to occur through telehealth prior to release.

[4:21:09 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING reported improvements in DJJ staffing levels. She said the overall vacancy rate declined from 14.9 percent in FY24 to 11.4 percent in FY25. She said frontline facility staff vacancies declined from 21 percent in FY24 to 14 percent in FY25. She said vacancy rates for juvenile justice counselor positions declined from 21 percent before a July 2023 pay increase to approximately 11 percent about a year and a half later. She highlighted improvements at the Fairbanks Youth Facility, where frontline vacancies declined from approximately 52 percent in FY24 to 22 percent in FY25.

[4:22:25 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING discussed collaboration between the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) and the Department of Corrections on jail-based competency restoration services. She said the Department of Corrections provides housing and security for up to 10 male participants at the Anchorage Correctional Complex and up to 10 female participants at the Highland Mountain Correctional Center, while API staff provide mental health treatment and competency restoration education.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said when restoration to competency is unsuccessful, patients are often placed under civil commitment and may become "conversion patients." She said some conversion patients are conditionally released into the community, typically to assisted living homes that provide additional supervision and support. She said the court must approve the conditional release, and there are currently nine such patients in the Anchorage area. She said those patients must comply with release conditions and attend monthly outpatient appointments at API or they may be returned to the facility. She said API has also developed a public dashboard under Mr. Cole's leadership that reports data including civil and forensic waitlists, patient census, seclusion and restraint use, and average length of stay to increase transparency.

[4:24:47 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 13, 2026 Focus Areas, and discussed departmental priorities for 2026. She said the Coordinated Health and Complex Care Unit is working with the Department of Health to expand community-based placements and reduce reliance on institutional care:

[Original punctuation provided.]

2026 Focus Areas

Complex Care

Expand community-based alternatives for complex individuals Advance complex care system reform

Pioneer Homes

Apprenticeship program
Health and well-being focus
Expanding behavioral health supports

Alaska Psychiatric Institute

Increase capacity in the competency restoration program Onboarding of new electronic health record system

Children's Services

Recruitment and retention
Improving practice
Expanding use of relatives and kin as resource families

Juvenile Justice

Juvenile facility infrastructure
Juvenile probation service enhancements

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said development of a Complex Care residential home license is intended to expand treatment options for individuals with complex needs and support regulatory reform and sustainable funding for these services.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the Alaska Pioneer Homes are developing a CNA-to-LPN apprenticeship program to address workforce shortages. She said the program is being developed in partnership with the Alaska Vocational Technical Center and the Department of Labor, has been approved by the Alaska Board of Nursing, and is supported by grant funding. She said the curriculum is being developed and will require approval from

the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing and the Alaska Board of Nursing before implementation.

[4:26:51 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked whether the department has considered seeking funding through the Rural Health Transformation Fund, noting that workforce development was included in the state's application.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the department is reviewing opportunities across the focus areas identified by the Alaska Department of Health and prioritizing potential proposals for funding.

CHAIR DUNBAR said hearing on the Rural Health Transformation Fund (RHTF) would begin on Thursday and he expects RHTF to be a major focus of the committee this legislative session.

[4:27:44 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said there are plans for Alaska Pioneer Homes to lead a health and wellness initiative focused on elders experiencing substance use and behavioral health challenges associated with aging. She said the initiative will involve collaboration with medical professionals and behavioral health providers and will include development of a network of dementia-informed clinical counselors to support families, caregivers, and staff.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API), in partnership with the Alaska Department of Corrections, is exploring expansion of the jail-based competency restoration program from 10 to 24 participants. She also said API is implementing a new electronic health records system that will connect with the state health information exchange to improve care coordination.

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CHAIR DUNBAR asked about the cost and implementation timeline for the new electronic health records system.

[4:29:27 PM](#)

MR. COLE deferred the cost portion of the question to Ms. Sweet. He said the system is scheduled to be deployed May 1 and that user acceptance testing will begin soon.

[4:30:14 PM](#)

MS. SWEET said approximately \$1.6 million has been encumbered for the system. She said additional costs have occurred due to integration with a Pyxis medication distribution system but noted the project has not experienced the significant cost increases often associated with large IT implementations.

CHAIR DUNBAR asked whether the electronic health records system is new to API or whether it replaces an existing system.

[4:30:58 PM](#)

MR. COLE said the system will replace the long-used Meditech platform with the Avatar NX electronic health record system developed by Netsmart Technologies.

CHAIR DUNBAR said everyone on the committee supports API. There were negative reports on API in the past and so the committee is glad to hear improvements are going well.

[4:32:30 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING continued at slide 13 and discussed initiatives within the Office of Children's Services (OCS). She said staff turnover declined from 52 percent in 2023 to 32 percent in 2025 due to improved hiring practices, mentoring, phased case assignments, wellness assessments, and reflective supervision. She noted recruitment remains challenging and said the division currently has 99 vacant positions. She said OCS will focus on strengthening investigations and assessments statewide and will implement a permanency review at the nine- to ten-month mark for children in out-of-home care. She added that Alaska continues to maintain one of the highest rates of relative placement in the country, emphasizing placements with extended family when appropriate.

[4:34:11 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR asked whether the department would continue following the principles of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) if the law were repealed.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING replied yes.

SENATOR TOBIN asked how the department is preparing for potential federal policy changes affecting foster youth aging out of care, including possible changes to Medicaid and SNAP eligibility.

[4:35:28 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the department has not conducted a detailed analysis of the issue. She deferred to Ms. Guay.

[4:35:36 PM](#)

MS. GUAY said OCS continues to work with youth who choose to remain in care into adulthood as well as those who exit the system, providing support services to help them transition to independence.

[4:36:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said she would welcome further discussion and noted that other states, including Utah, have implemented programs to support youth aging out of foster care.

MS. GUAY said she would welcome the opportunity.

SENATOR CLAMAN said he appreciated the information on recruitment and retention but noted the division still has a vacancy rate of nearly one in six positions. He asked whether wages for Office of Children's Services (OCS) positions are competitive given the challenging nature of the work.

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said a previous classification study found wages for protective services specialists to be generally comparable with national standards. She said the department is also exploring additional incentives and support for staff, including addressing challenges such as on-call responsibilities and identifying factors contributing to staff turnover.

[4:38:29 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN said he remained concerned about the high vacancy rate despite improvements and noted the department has made progress but still faces significant staffing challenges.

[4:39:32 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING said the department continues to focus on improvements within the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). She said the division is enhancing telehealth infrastructure to better connect youth leaving secure facilities with community providers. She said DJJ is also upgrading wireless infrastructure and implementing HIPAA-compliant devices to improve privacy and electronic health record access. She noted these efforts are supported in part through the federal Promoting Continuity of Care Following Incarceration grant administered through the Alaska Department

of Health. She added that DJJ is working to fully implement juvenile probation service enhancements, including standardized probation success planning, supervisory case reviews, and greater casework flexibility to address staffing shortages, particularly in rural areas.

[4:41:00 PM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER DOMPELING moved to slide 14 and concluded the presentation by stating the department is making progress in workforce stability, service delivery, and the use of data-driven practices. She said efforts across the department include improving outcomes for children and families through the Office of Children's Services, strengthening programs within the Division of Juvenile Justice, expanding services at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, and enhancing wellness and behavioral health supports at the Alaska Pioneer Homes. She said the department is prioritizing early intervention, community partnerships, and least-restrictive care models to reduce system bottlenecks and improve outcomes for Alaskans.

[4:42:40 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR found no further questions and thanked the department for the presentation.

[4:43:02 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Dunbar adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 4:43 p.m.