



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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March 20, 2015

Representative Steve Thompson
Alaska Capitol, Room 515
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182

Regarding: Support HB 77, Training Regarding Non-Apparent Disabilities & Voluntary Disability Designations on State Identification Cards and Driver's License

Dear Representative Thompson:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to express our support for HB 77, as authored by you and co-sponsored by Representatives Gara, Kawasaki, Kito, Saddler, and Vazquez to (1) establish a training program for public safety officers to know how to recognize and interact appropriately with a person who has a non-apparent disability, and (2) implement a voluntary identification system for persons with such disabilities on their state identification cards and driver's license. Although this legislation addresses the needs of all Alaskans with non-apparent disabilities, the ACoA will focus on the "safety" benefits we perceive for older Alaskans from this legislation.

Older people who experience concealed disabilities are often impacted by the manner in which they respond to sensory stimuli and process information. This behavior can sometimes be misunderstood as resulting from being under the influence of an intoxicant or as purposefully disruptive. For example, hearing loss can result in problems understanding the spoken language and performing complex tasks. Those with anxiety disorders have a tendency to selectively focus and interpret even ambiguous events in a highly threatening way – which can be observed as disruptive behavior. Wandering outside unattended and unprotected is a significant personal safety risk for persons with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. Not only can these disabling conditions affect an individual's personal safety, they may impact the outcome of an encounter with a public safety officer.

The Commission agrees that personal safety and dignity of persons with concealed disabilities could be greatly improved by having trained public safety officers able to recognize the signs of their disabilities and appropriately, respectfully interact with these individuals. The Commission also recommends that disability awareness training be offered to all first responders, including fire fighters and paramedics, who are typically the first to arrive on the scene of an emergency and provide help to vulnerable persons. Finally, we recommend that disability awareness training would help to further implement the "silver alert" system by promoting greater awareness among public safety officers about the needs of Alaskans with Alzheimer's disease and other cognitive impairments who have a tendency to wander and become lost, sometimes finding themselves in life-threatening situations. Public safety officers trained

in disability awareness would be better able to recognize the signs of a person with dementia in the community and respond appropriately to bring that person to safety.

Thank you for your leadership on HB 77 to enhance public safety awareness, improve communication, and increase protection for vulnerable Alaskans with hidden disabilities.

Sincerely,

Mary E. Shields
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Cc: Representative Les Gara
Representative Scott Kawasaki
Representative Sam Kito
Representative Dan Saddler
Representative Liz Vazquez

Sincerely,

Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Louise Stutes
Representative Tammie Wilson
Representative Adam Wool