



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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April 2, 2015

The Honorable Kevin Meyer, Senate President
Alaska State Capitol, Room 111
Juneau, Alaska 99811-1182

Subject: Alaska Senior Programs & Services (CSHB 72 & CSHB 73, Operating Budget)

Dear Senator Meyer:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) extends our sincere thanks and appreciation for the Senate's support of funding for programs serving older Alaskans, especially the core senior grant-funded services administered by the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services that help seniors to live independently with dignity for as long as possible. We also appreciate the restoration of funding for the WWAMI Medical School Program (Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho) to increase the pool of qualified doctors in Alaska. The restored funding for the WWAMI will help Alaska to continue to grow its health care workforce and have doctors available for seniors and other Alaskans when and where they need them.

Alaska has experienced a shortage of health care professionals, especially doctors and nurses, for a number of years – particularly in rural communities where physician vacancy rates can run as high as 25%. For many doctors in Alaska, retirement is just around the corner and replacing those experienced medical providers with newly trained doctors is a priority for all Alaskans and serves a critical need for Alaska's seniors. As the senior population increases and people are living longer with chronic health conditions, more Alaskans will need health care services.

The Commission is concerned about reduced funding for the Alaska Senior Benefits Program which provides a critical safety net for Alaskans age 65 and older who live on small fixed incomes to help pay for food, fuel, housing, prescribed medications and other life necessities. More than 11,000 older Alaskans receive these benefits statewide. The average age of recipients is 75 years, with the oldest person being 104 years. The majority of recipients are women across all age categories, many of whom may be widowed.

CSHB 72 proposes a 25.4% reduction that will affect approximately 10,000 seniors with household incomes between 75% and 175% FPL. The budget reduction will lower the monthly payments for seniors in the affected income groups by \$35 and \$25 respectively – which does not sound like a significant reduction, but for a person on a fixed income that money can make a huge difference in the purchase of nutritious food, like fresh fruits and vegetables; being able to afford medication in the prescribed amounts; and keeping the thermostat at a comfortable level. Senior Benefits helps many older Alaskans who might not be able to afford to remain in Alaska.

Thank you for your commitment and dedication serving Alaskans!

Sincerely,

Mary E. Shields
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,

Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: The Honorable Pete Kelly, Co-Chair Senior Finance Committee
The Honorable Anna MacKinnon, Co-Chair Senate Finance Committee