



THE STATE
of ALASKA
GOVERNOR MICHAEL J. DUNLEAVY

Department of Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

P.O. Box 110693
Juneau, AK 99811-0693
Main: 907.465.3250
Fax: 907.465.1398

April 3, 2019

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
House Community and Regional Affairs
Alaska State Capitol, Room 108
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Representative Sara Hannan, Co-Chair
House Community and Regional Affairs
Alaska State Capitol, Room 403
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Subject: HB 60, Letter of Concern

Dear Chair Drummond, Chair Hannan, and House Community and Regional Affairs Members:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA and "the Commission") is concerned about the proposed elimination of the Senior Benefits Payment as requested by HB 60. Since 2007, the *needs-based* Senior Benefits program has provided an invaluable resource for older Alaskans, age 65+, who live on limited fixed incomes to afford basic life necessities – food, housing, heating fuel, prescription medications, and transportation – to maintain good health, safety, and independence. Reauthorized overwhelmingly by the Legislature last year, Senior Benefits provides cash assistance to approximately 11,600 older Alaskans ranging from \$76 to \$250 a month based on three levels of income eligibility with their assigned cash benefits (Division of Public Assistance, December 2018 counts).

The Alaska Commission on Aging, a Governor-appointed board within the Department of Health and Social Services, exists specifically to ensure the dignity and independence of all older Alaskans. The Commission is responsible for planning services for seniors, educating Alaskans about senior issues, and making recommendations directly to elected officials regarding policy and budget items that affect Alaska's seniors.

We believe that Senior Benefits, a critical component of the Senior Safety Net, supports older Alaskans who are the most financially fragile by providing direct cash assistance to eligible seniors who cannot afford to pay for basic necessities, let alone cover emergency needs like a boiler repair during the dead of winter.

Over the years, growth in the number of seniors participating in the Senior Benefits program has been modest. Since 2007 when the program was established, the annual enrollment figures have increased about an average of 1.5% statewide even though the population of people age 65 and older has increased approximately 4.5% annually during the same time period.

The risk of living in poverty increases with age, along with worry about financial security, as older people spend down their assets on health care and living expenses. The Commission fully supports retaining the Senior Benefits Program in statute and therefore does not support passage of HB 60. We believe that the Senior Benefits program is important for low-income elders because not having enough food to eat, a warm place to live, or losing one's home due to economic hardship means losing independence, self-determination,

and inevitably translates into a higher cost to the family and to the state in the need for expensive medical treatment and long-term care.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Please contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's Executive Director, at 465-4879 or denise.daniello@alaska.gov for further information about our position.

Sincerely,



Gordon Glaser
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Mary Shields
Vice Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Cc: Representative Matt Claman, Member
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, Member
Representative Steve Thompson, Member
Representative Sharon Jackson, Member
Representative Josh Revak, Member